"Washington as President"

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[This lecture was delivered at Historic Mount Vernon on October 18, 2007
as part of the Beneath the Surface Lecture Series]

I'm very pleased to be back for my second lecture. For those of you who were not here in July for my previous lecture, I'll offer a sentence or two about what I discussed. My topic was the world view – the mentality– of Washington's world. I discussed how localized the Revolutionary world was, and how thinking about things on a national level was new and unfamiliar, an idea that will appear in another form in this evening's lecture. I also discussed how self-conscious the American founding was – how people knew that they were founding a country, an exciting and terrifying realization. <u>Anything</u> could happen, positive or negative, good or bad. Perhaps America would be a new sort of republican nation. Or, perhaps it would collapse into tyranny or anarchy. This idea will reappear in this evening's lecture as well.

America as a new nation and America as a fragile nation: both ideas had an enormous shaping influence during Washington's presidency, a period of his career that, oddly, doesn't usually receive much attention. I think that in the minds of most Americans, when the Revolution ends and George Washington is no longer a general, he somehow becomes a block of marble at the head of our government – the ultimate figurehead – not really doing much and certainly not feeling much as a real human being.

Yet in fact, Washington as president could be a very savvy political player, and he certainly had a whole host of feelings and reactions as a very real person in a very difficult situation. He wasn't always sure how to handle things; he sometimes made mistakes. He was sometimes awkward, embarrassed, or nervous. Just listen to this account of his first address to Congress just after taking the oath of office in 1789, as witnessed by Senator William Maclay. Maclay writes:

> this great Man was agitated and embarrassed more than ever he was by the levelled Cannon or pointed Musket. [H]e trembled, and several times could scarce make out to read, tho it must be supposed he had often read it before . . . When he came to the Words all the World, he made a flourish with his right hand, which left rather an ungainly impression. I sincerely, for my part, wished all set ceremony in the hands of the dancing Masters, and that this first of Men, had read off, his address, in the plainest Manner without ever taking his Eyes From . . ..the paper[,] for I felt hurt, that he was not first in every thing.

As I'll discuss this evening, Washington did not have an easy time of it as president for a number of reasons.

One of his main challenges – and indeed, an obvious one – was that in many ways, Washington had to create the presidency. Of course, the Constitution sketched the outlines of the position – its powers and limitations – but the actual nature of the job (the tone of the office; the ways in which the president would interact with other national officeholders or with the people of the United States; the workings of the cabinet) were up for grabs. The United States was an experimental government, led by a new, experimental type of executive officer. There was no precedent for this office in a world

full of kings, leaving Washington the monumental task of figuring out how to act like a president.

It was a challenge with potentially enormous consequences, because everyone assumed –- including Washington – that if he failed at this task, he could potentially bring the entire experiment in government crashing to ruin. There was no modern model for a republic, and ancient republics had been extremely fragile, apt to collapse into monarchy or tyranny. And, America had just divorced itself from its own monarchical past; many people assumed that the fragile new nation would probably – eventually – fall back into what it had known before: monarchy. Of course, this backsliding would probably start with the president, with the slow conversion of the national executive into something increasingly monarchical. In a sense, Washington was the new nation's political fault-line and all eyes were watching for the first sign of slippage.

One way that he addressed this problem was in carefully tending to the style of presidential governance, well aware that the style of governance could shape the new nation as much as its constitutional framework. According to the logic of the time, if national leaders dressed and behaved like aristocrats, the government would take on an aristocratic tone, the American people would adopt it, vote more such people into office, and in no time, the republic would fall. This may sound extreme, but looking back in hindsight, it is easy to overlook how experimental the new American government was. People truly believed that one wrong decision – one bad policy – might destroy the entire

enterprise and bring the republic crashing to ruin, at which point it would probably be swallowed by England or France.

So, there was good reason to worry about whether Washington specifically, or the new national government generally, was too aristocratic. But it was one thing to assert that America shouldn't be too aristocratic or too monarchical, and quite another to define precisely what monarchical or aristocratic actually meant. People could generally agree that American political leaders should be more egalitarian, more public-minded, more simple and straightforward than their European equivalents. They were supposed to be a natural elite of the talented and worthy who lived modestly, dressed practically, and behaved in a spirit of compromise. Yet, though most public men agreed upon generalities like "simplicity," "virtue," and "public-mindedness," they had no precise meaning; they were meaningful in comparison with European luxury and corruption but had no specific meaning in and of themselves.

How did a political leader in a republic dress? How much finery was too much? Should a republican politician own a carriage, and if so, how many horses seemed excessive? These questions may sound trivial and even ridiculous to us, but they were very real to national politicians who were self-consciously creating a style of governance and hoping to shape a new national character, questions important enough to provoke the criticism and comments of gentlemen throughout the nation.

So, for good reason, Washington worried about things like his carriage, his clothing, and his dinner table, and he knew that other people watched such things as well. As he himself put it, he aimed for "simplicity of dress, and every thing which can tend to support propriety of character without partaking of the follies of luxury and ostentation." Just look at how carefully he dressed upon assuming office. For his inauguration, he chose what he clearly assumed to be an ensemble of republican balance. He wore a suit made of plain, American-made cloth –- obvious symbolism here – but he had gilt buttons and diamond buckles on his shoes. Not monarchical, but grander than an average citizen; after all, he did have to hold his own on the international stage alongside Old World monarchs. His presidential "uniform" – a dignified blue or black suit, ceremonial sword, and hat – embodied a similar compromise. With it, he was <u>President</u> Washington. Without it, he was <u>General</u> Washington, a distinction that even the newspapers acknowledged.

Unfortunately for Washington, this kind of hyper-self consciousness was exhausting, as you can well imagine. Whenever he was in public, he was always on display, a living symbol of the new republic whose every word and gesture had deep meaning. Every once in awhile the mask slipped. For example, every Thursday Washington had a public dinner with various members of the government, but he didn't really enjoy this type of public socializing. At several dinners, he was seen at the head of the dinner table looking off into space with a tired expression on his face, absentmindedly banging a piece of silverware against the table.

Of course, Washington was not only focused on matters of political style. He was also constructing the institutional workings of the presidency. In such an untried, new government, every precedent could have an enormous impact. For example, listen to the debate in the Senate about Washington's inauguration ceremony. On "the great important day," as Senator Maclay put it, both houses of Congress would receive the president-elect in the Senate chamber, a seemingly simple ceremony that raised a multitude of questions. When the president arrived in the Senate chamber, should the senators rise in respect to a superior or sit as before an equal? The answer risked casting the president as a monarch or the Senate as a House of Lords, prompting an extended debate. One senator testified that during the king's speech, the House of Lords sat and the House of Commons stood, an observation that seemed to have deep political significance until another senator made "this discovery, that the Commons stood because they had no seats to sit on" [because they were in the House of Lords]. An interruption from the House clerk sparked yet another discussion; how should the clerk be received? Should the Sergeant at Arms (complete with ceremonial mace) receive his communication at the door? It was, Maclay sighed, "an Endless business."

In this charged environment, Washington often proved himself to be a skilled politician. In fact, he had more political savvy than he is usually given credit for. We simply do not envision him as a "politician," yet, if you think about it, to survive amidst all of this hyper-observation, he had to be savvy. For example, Washington was skilled at securing support in Congress. He often sent members of his administrative staff – men like David Humphreys or William Jackson – to "chat" with congressmen in the

president's name, particularly when an important bill was under debate. When the location of the national capital was under debate (and of course, we know that Washington had rather strong feelings about where it should be), Humphreys and Jackson were positioned in front of Congress Hall to "chat" with members about the pending vote. As Maclay put it, the three men, standing in from of Congress Hall, seemed to form "a standing Committee [pun intended] to catch the Members as they went in or came out." Washington's cabinet sometimes did the same thing, as in April of 1792 when, as Jefferson notes, they agreed "to speak separately to the members [of a congressional committee], and bring them by persuasion into the right channel."

Washington was also skilled at sounding out public opinion about his presidency and policies. Without modern contrivances like public opinion polls, public opinion was a rather nebulous thing. To figure out what the public thought, politicians and their friends had to resort to rather indirect methods. They sat in taverns and listened to what people were discussing. They knocked on farmhouse doors to see whether there was a Federalist or a Republican newspaper on the mantle. They asked their friends to report the talk of the town. Washington did the same. On several occasions, he sent members of his staff into the countryside to determine public opinion, as he did in 1792 when he asked his secretary Tobias Lear to find out if the public wanted him for a second term. As Jefferson reported, Washington asked Lear "to find out from conversations, without appearing to make the enquiry, whether any other person would be desired by any body" for the presidency. Shortly thereafter, Lear reported to the president that "it was the universal desire he should continue."

Washington could also be very skilled in dealing with his cabinet, managing them in almost the same way that he had consulted with his staff of generals during the Revolution. He solicited each person's opinion, opposed as they might be, considered his options, and made a decision. Differences of opinion didn't concern him. They could even be useful, until he came to realize (in 1792), the very personal nature of the differences between two of his cabinet members: Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

Of course, when he selected them for his cabinet, he didn't know that they would become enemies. At first, they got along: Hamilton occasionally asked for Jefferson's opinions, and Jefferson nominated Hamilton for membership in the American Philosophical Society. It wasn't until Hamilton's economic policy began to take shape in late 1791 and 1792 that each man took a closer look at the other and began to wonder about what he saw.

This is one area in which Washington created some of his own trouble. Eager to convince Jefferson and Hamilton to accept their offices, Washington was a bit too expansive in his descriptions of both jobs. In essence, he led each man to assume that <u>his</u> position was the most important position in the cabinet. Hamilton became Secretary of the Treasury convinced that he was a sort of Prime Minister; he often referred to "my administration." And Jefferson, as he boasted to Madison, believed that he was being put in charge of <u>all</u> of the domestic affairs of the nation. Obviously, this led each man to

view the other as an intrusive busy-body consistently reaching beyond the bounds of his office.

Things were not made any easier by their obvious differences in personality, which became more apparent over time as their conflicting world views and policy choices came to the fore. Hamilton was many things that Jefferson was not: aggressive, confrontational, openly ambitious. The same holds true in reverse. Jefferson was many things that Hamilton was not: indirect, somewhat retiring, apt to work behind the scenes. Hamilton thus saw Jefferson as sneaky and hypocritical, someone with wild ambition who was very good at masking it. And Jefferson saw Hamilton as a wildly ambitious attack dog who would hammer his way into getting what he wanted. Their own notes and letters offer an insider's view of what it might have been like to have the two of them together in a cabinet meeting. Jefferson's notes contain complaints about yet <u>another</u> of what Jefferson called Hamilton's forty-five minute jury speeches. And on the opposite side, Hamilton, as he noted in a letter to Washington, couldn't bear the fact that whenever something didn't go Hamilton's way, he could see Jefferson across the table smirking at him.

Matters weren't helped by Hamilton's habit of speaking frankly – usually, too frankly – about his political views. Luckily for historians (though, not so luckily for Hamilton), Jefferson often recorded such moments for potential future use. For example, as Jefferson recounted in a note to a friend, one evening in 1791, Secretary of State Jefferson, Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton, Secretary of War Henry Knox, and Vice

President John Adams were dining together at Jefferson's home. When dinner was over and the cloth was removed (as they put it in the eighteenth century), the conversation strayed into the subject of the British constitution. As Jefferson recalled it, Adams said, "'[P]urge that constitution of its corruption, and give to its popular branch equality of representation, and it would be the most perfect constitution ever devised by the wit of man.'" At this point, "Hamilton paused," Jefferson wrote dramatically, "and said, '[P]urge it of its corruption, and give to its popular branch equality of representation, and it would become an <u>impracticable</u> government: as it stands at present, with all its supposed defects, it is the most perfect government which ever existed.'"

To Jefferson, this story held the key to Hamilton's politics. "Hamilton was not only a monarchist," he wrote, "but for a monarchy bottomed on corruption." It was Hamilton's corruption—-defined by Jefferson as his ability to sway Congress to his will—that most disturbed Jefferson. As he complained to Washington in 1792, Hamilton had at his disposal a "squadron devoted to the nod of the treasury." Out of the public eye and able to serve their own interests, such men would "form the most corrupt government on earth." To Jefferson, it was Hamilton and his self-interested friends, not the people, who reigned supreme.

Jefferson himself, he proclaimed repeatedly, had determined "to intermeddle not at all with the legislature. . . If it has been supposed that I ever intrigued among the members of the legislature to defeat the plans of the Secretary of the Treasury, it is contrary to all truth." As he explained it, he was guilty only of enunciating his

“sentiments in conversation, and chiefly among those who, expressing the same sentiments, drew mine from me." In Jefferson’s mind, such innocent conversations could scarcely be considered congressional intrigue. Jefferson’s protestations are convincing until we look more closely at the unfolding of some of his innocent dinner parties, which were sometimes deliberate attempts to test and reinforce the sympathies of potential supporters in the House.

Somehow, Washington had to rein in these two men and enable them to work towards some kind of common good – no easy task. In 1792, when he seems to have first realized the depth of the two men’s hatred for each other, he wrote almost identical letters to them, pleading with them to try to get along. As he wrote in his letter to Jefferson,

> How unfortunate, and how much is it to be regretted . . . that whilst we are encompassed on all sides with avowed enemies and insidious friends, that internal dissentions should be harrowing and tearing our vitals. The last, to me, is the most serious – the most alarming – and the most afflicting of the two. And without more charity for the opinions and acts of one another in Governmental matters . . . I believe it will be difficult, if not impracticable, to manage the Reins of Government or to keep the parts of it together: for if, instead of laying our shoulders to the machine after measures are decided on, one pulls this way and another that, before the utility of the thing is fairly tried, it must inevitably be torn asunder – And, in my opinion the fairest prospect of happiness and prosperity that ever was presented to man, will be lost – perhaps for ever!

Washington said essentially the same thing to Hamilton in a letter written three days later, writing in both letters a wonderfully unambiguous but diplomatic sentence assuring each man that the other one was getting scolded as well. “I do not mean to apply this advice to measures which are passed, or to any character in particular,” he wrote. “I have given it in the same general terms to other Officers of the Government.”

Things became somewhat easier when Jefferson retired in 1793, but on other counts they became more difficult because during Washington’s second term the newspapers became much more aggressively willing to criticize him for his policies and their implications. Washington did not deal well with criticism. So, while he may not have been juggling Hamilton and Jefferson during his second term, he was still struggling through difficult political times.

Clearly, Washington deserves a good deal of credit for his skill as a president and a politician. As the precedent-setting first president, he faced a number of unique challenges and he rose to the task. Although we don’t often think of “President George Washington” as a real person, in fact, he was a very real person in a difficult situation who struggled throughout his presidency to steer the right course.