3 Reasons to Be Proud of George Washington

By Dr. Burt Folsom

Few Americans know much about George Washington, our first and greatest President. For a generation now, the one thing most students have learned about Washington is that he owned slaves. Previous generations, however, have admired and celebrated Washington for his unique brilliance in leading and unifying a unique country built on the principles of natural rights and individual liberty.

Perhaps we need to learn again why Washington towers above all leaders in American history. Three reasons to be proud of Washington are: (1) his indispensable leadership in securing American independence; (2) his equally indispensable leadership as America's first President; and (3) his commitment to liberty, his personal integrity, and his skillful use of power. Washington became the role model for American Presidents.

1. Washington was the "indispensable man" in winning America's war for independence from England.

George Washington was the commander-in-chief who led America to a startling victory over the strongest nation in the world, Great Britain. Students often study the American Revolution as an "episode in U.S. history." But it is more than that! America's Declaration of Independence triggered the greatest political revolution in human history.

Before 1776, very few people in the world had lived with a government

limited by law. Most people wanted kings who governed with absolute authority. Force and conquest were the rules by which nations had always lived.

The United States, by contrast, was founded on an idea—that people could govern themselves and prosper in an atmosphere of freedom. "No taxation without representation" was the American battle cry because Britain, like other countries, insisted it could tax and dictate policies to all of its colonies. When Americans shockingly said, "No," their war for independence became necessary.

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It is one thing to declare independence; it is another thing to earn it. George Washington was the man chosen unanimously by leaders from America's 13 colonies to challenge their British rulers.

Who was George Washington? And why was he trusted with such overwhelming responsibility?

Washington was neither wealthy nor from a prominent family. True, his father owned land, but he died when George was 11. Young Washington had no chance to attend college or receive formal military training. He grew to be 6'3" and handsome, but his first proposal of marriage was rejected by the daughter of a prominent Virginia landowner and politician.

The year after his failed courtship, Washington, at age 21, had his first taste of battle in the French and Indian War. He served under a careless British

FRONT COVER IMAGE CREDIT: *The Prayer at Valley Forge*, a 1975 painting of George Washington in prayer at Valley Forge by Arnold Friberg.

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general who was ambushed and defeated near Pittsburgh. With the British forces in retreat, Washington courageously led them to safety; he had two horses shot from under him and had four bullet holes in his uniform, but he maneuvered his troops out of danger.

That courage under pressure helped persuade the next generation of American politicians to choose Washington to lead America to independence from Britain in 1775.

In organizing America's army, Washington faced challenges so overwhelming that few thought he could survive even one year of fighting the strongest nation in the world. Britain had a large, well-trained army seasoned in warfare, a talented navy of more than 100 ships, and the wealth to feed, pay, and support over 10,000 soldiers for many years.

Washington, by contrast, had a volunteer army with short-term enlistments, no navy, and no cash on hand for food, supplies, uniforms, or weapons. What's more, as noted in *The Founding Fathers on Leadership* (Donald Phillips, 1997, p. 51), Washington discovered that "confusion and disorder reign in every department." When the two armies finally clashed, the British overwhelmed the untrained Americans and chased them out of New York City.

Washington's genius as a commanding general was his ability to hold his army together, find a way to inspire them, find a way to persuade civilians to invest in the American cause, and eventually find a way to beat the British. After losing New York City, for example, his soldiers were demoralized and

In the above painting, Washington Crossing the Delaware, *by Emanuel Leutze, c. 1851, George Washington is shown doing the unthinkable. In the dead of winter, when armies rested, he mobilized 2,000 men for a surprise Christmas attack on two British outposts in New Jersey. Steering his ships through large chunks of ice floating on the Delaware River, Washington led his men through blizzard conditions on land and sea to stun and overpower the unsuspecting troops the British had stationed in Trenton and Princeton.*

few civilians supported the American cause. To refocus Americans' thinking, therefore, Washington did the unthinkable. In the dead of winter, when armies rested, he mobilized 2,000 men for a surprise Christmas attack on two British outposts in New Jersey. Steering his ships through large chunks of ice floating on the Delaware River, Washington led his men through blizzard conditions on land and sea to stun and overpower the unsuspecting troops the British had stationed in Trenton and Princeton. These victories improved morale and spurred more civilians to finance the patriots for another year.

But, alas, during that next year of fighting, the British knocked Washington—and Congress—out of the capital city of Philadelphia. He retreated with his demoralized army 17 miles northwest of Philadelphia to an encampment they called Valley Forge. These were the darkest days of the war for Washington. His troops had almost no money for food and supplies—and mere scraps of clothing to last them through the cold winter.

In the above painting, The March to Valley Forge, *by William B.T. Trego, c. 1883, George Washington leads the demoralized Continental Army into their winter encampment at Valley Forge on December 19, 1777. Defeat seemed certain, but Washington persisted in building up the spirits of his troops. For his rank-and-file soldiers, Washington inspired them by telling them again and again that their sacrifice, courage, and heroism served a major purpose in world history. They would persevere, win the war, and show the world that a new self-governing nation was possible.*

Defeat seemed certain, but Washington persisted in building up the spirits of his troops. Unlike other generals, Washington made great efforts to connect with his men and inspire them. First, he used his great physical strength to help them chop wood and build cabins. He then met with his field officers almost every day at 3:00 p.m. to listen to their suggestions, ask for their advice, and form plans for success. "A dictatorial style," he wrote, "though it may carry conviction, is always accompanied with disgust."

For his rank-and-file soldiers, Washington inspired them by telling them again and again that their sacrifice, courage, and heroism served a major purpose in world history. They would persevere, win the war, and show the world that a new self-governing nation was possible. He had regular public readings of the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration described a goal of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." On British tyranny, the Declaration stated "that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it."

Washington also had public readings of the book *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine, who had recently arrived in America from England and was excited by the patriots' cause. "The present time," Paine wrote, "is that peculiar time that never comes to a nation but once. The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. . . . We have it in our power to begin the world all over again."

Valley Forge, Paine believed, was not a disaster but an opportunity. "These are the times that try men's souls," Paine wrote. "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country." But not the American troops. "We have the consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

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Washington always implanted in his soldiers' minds the idea that they were a freedom brigade, a part of a great story in human history, guided by God with eternal purpose at just this moment in time. Thomas Paine was often quoted: "Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom has been hunted around the globe. . . . In time, [our new nation] will be an asylum for the world."

In order for his men to fulfill their destiny, Washington challenged them to sacrifice. First, they had to train diligently to defeat the experienced British soldiers. Washington enlisted Baron Von Steuben, who arrived at Valley Forge from Germany, to train and discipline Americans daily in the art of war.

Second, Washington insisted that his troops hunt wild game for food rather than raid nearby American homes, as Congress had urged Washington

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to do. Only a general who had established himself with his men would have dared ask them to endure such hardship.

According to historian James T. Flexner, "Washington believed that what was morally most desirable was likely to be politically most valuable. Since the future liberty of the soldiers themselves would be secured by ultimate victory, let the American army earn gratitude by suffering deprivation while the British . . . . earned hatred by stripping the countryside."

True, the ordeal at Valley Forge led to thousands of deaths and desertions, but those who survived were more united, more inspired, and readier to face the British army. Shortly after the American army left Valley Forge, they confronted the British in the Battle of Monmouth. Most historians describe the battle as a tie, but for Americans it was a triumph. They held their own against the British, who retreated to New York City. The British then dispatched about half of their army to the southern colonies to rally pro-British loyalists to their side.

But Washington exploited a new advantage. The French, who hated Britain, sent over funds and troops. With French support, Washington planned a daring attack on the British army under General Cornwallis that was roaming the South.

Washington moved his army quickly down to Virginia and surprised the British troops. With help from the French army and navy, Washington trapped Cornwallis at Yorktown. After a three-week siege, Cornwallis surrendered. Washington's ragtag freedom brigade had beaten the seemingly invincible British army.

The battle of Yorktown gave Washington credibility, but half the British army remained in New York safe from assault. For the next two years,

The above painting, Surrender of Lord Cornwallis, *by John Trumbull, c. 1820, is on display in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol. The painting depicts the surrender of General Cornwallis and the British army to George Washington and the Continental Army at Yorktown, Virginia, on October 19, 1781. This surrender ended the last major campaign of the Revolutionary War.*

Washington's fellow leaders Ben Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay negotiated a treaty to end the war. But in the meantime, many American officers continued to serve with little or no pay. Congress still refused much help. With the war seemingly endless, some officers scheduled a meeting in Newburgh, New York, with plans to march on Congress, demand their wages, and possibly take over the government.

Washington sympathized with his officers, who were indeed being mistreated. But he could never endorse treason. Instead, he scheduled a meeting of his own with the officers. As Washington began to speak, he saw hostile expressions from the men he had led for so many years, men who had served so long for so little. He pleaded with them to follow the course of freedom to its end, that "despite the slowness inherent in deliberative

bodies," Congress would do its part to pay the officers fully for their courage and bravery.

Washington had preached the goal of liberty to his troops so many times. Could he do so again? Don't "deluge our rising empire in blood," Washington urged, but wait for justice and show "the world . . . . the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining."

A few officers softened. But many still fixed a rigid gaze on their leader. Then, Washington, with elegant timing, made one last effort to stop the insurrection. He pulled out a letter to read. But he paused for several seconds. Then he fumbled through his pocket and pulled out a pair of eyeglasses. "Gentlemen," Washington said slowly, "you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." Then Washington left the room, uncertain whether or not he had saved his country.

What happened next was startling. His simple gesture, and his final sentence, had tapped into all of his officers' shared struggles and dreams. He had broken the resistance of even his most hardened soldiers, whose hearts held more love and respect for Washington than for their pay. The "Newburgh Conspiracy" ended that day, and so did the war six months later with a peace treaty signed in Paris. The new nation, conceived in liberty, would come into existence—thanks to George Washington.

2. Washington was a great President—and the indispensable man to making America's experiment in self-government a success.

Winning independence was only the first step in Washington's goal of a self-governing nation. Would America win the peace as well as the war? "We are a young nation," he said, "and have a character to establish. It behooves us therefore to set out right for first impressions will be lasting."

Many Americans, with more love of Washington than of liberty, wanted him to be king. To Washington, that view was noxious; it defeated the purpose of the war for independence. Many "friends" urged Washington to become king. To one, Washington retorted, "You could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable." Washington later declared, "I would rather live out my days forever on a farm than be the emperor of the world."

But he could not live peacefully on his farm unless his country created the institutions of government to establish liberty. Something had to be done. America was suffering from inaction. The existing government, under the Articles of Confederation, required a unanimous vote by Congress to make a law. And many members of Congress, representing all 13 states, hated the idea of voting for a tax to pay debts. But how could Americans fully pay their soldiers, fully pay the Americans who loaned cash and supplies to Washington's army, and fully pay France for its desperately needed help if Congress would not vote for a tax to raise the money?

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By 1787, four years after the war, Washington and several dozen leaders from the 13 states agreed to meet in Philadelphia and hammer out a solution. They insisted that Washington preside over this Constitutional Convention, and he reluctantly spent the summer of 1787 doing so.

The resulting Constitution was a unique document. The Founders created a government limited in power but strong enough to create laws to pay debts and guide foreign policy. Although the delegates often clashed, Washington was the glue that unified the many factions present. The new Constitution separated the powers of government among a President, a Congress (House and Senate), and a Supreme Court. Almost all states ratified the Constitution within one year, and Washington encouraged a national debate on that subject. "The friends of the Constitution," he wrote, wanted "the public to be possessed of everything that might be presented on both sides of the question."

Once the Constitution was ratified, the first President needed to be elected. Almost every influential American believed that Washington was indispensable as the first President if the American experiment in self-government was to survive. Washington was reluctant, but he accepted the job after winning a unanimous vote from the electoral college. He knew that history had made him a key player in the drama of republican government. He was determined to refute the theory held for centuries that people were "unequal to the task of governing themselves and therefore made for a master."

The above painting by Ramón de Elorriaga, c. 1899, depicts George Washington delivering his inaugural address in New York on April 30, 1789. Almost every influential American believed that Washington was indispensable as the first President if the American experiment in self-government was to survive. Washington was reluctant, but he accepted the job after winning a unanimous vote from the electoral college.

After his election, Washington traveled from Mt. Vernon to the new capital in New York. "My movements to the chair of government," he wrote, "will be accompanied by feelings not unlike those of a culprit who is going to the place of his execution."

Foreign policy and the national debt were the two most important problems Washington faced. He had two goals: keep an honorable peace with all European powers, and put the nation's debts and revenue on a sound financial basis. Washington appointed two brilliant men, Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State and Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury. As John Adams, his vice president, said, Washington "seeks information from all quarters and judges more independently than any man I ever knew."

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The United States owed $11 million to France (and Holland) and $40 million to fellow Americans. Hamilton crafted a plan to have Congress pass a tariff on imports and a tax on whiskey to raise the cash needed to pay the debts over time. Washington supported Hamilton, but as President, he took the "separation of powers" so seriously that he would not interfere with Congress as it debated Hamilton's plan. It passed the House and Senate, and Washington signed it into law. In the coming decades, the U.S. gradually paid off its entire national debt and earned a superb credit rating that attracted investment from around the world.

In foreign policy, the British had promised to vacate all land east of the Mississippi River. Instead, they remained to trade furs and sometimes to stir up resentment among Indians toward the United States. Also, American shipping was stifled in the West because Spain controlled the mouth of the Mississippi River. Washington appointed John Jay and Thomas Pinkney to go to England and Spain, and they negotiated treaties that improved American trade and kept the peace.

Washington refused to run for a third term as President. He would leave office on March 4, 1797, "after which no consideration under heaven that I can foresee shall again draw me from the walks of private life." Washington's decision to stop at two terms became a 150-year tradition that guided the next 29 Presidents and was later made a constitutional amendment.

Pictured above is the Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington as President, *a painting by Gilbert Stuart, c. 1796. It is on display in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.*

3. Washington's commitment to liberty, his personal integrity, and his skillful use of power make him possibly the greatest leader any country has ever had.

Washington was an extraordinary leader who made everyone around him more effective. Professor Edmund Morgan of Yale University has observed, "It would be hard to find in all the rest of American history more than two or three men to rank with Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, or John Adams." True, but Washington was the energy that helped place these men in positions where their brilliance could shine. And he was the glue that made the Constitutional Convention a success. During the day, at this historic convention, he was quiet in the public debates. But at night, he would organize dinners and meetings where the great minds like Madison, Hamilton, and Franklin would discuss ideas and work toward solutions.

Washington understood political power—how to use it and when to use it. As general of the army he had a big title but no power to force Congress to raise the cash to feed his soldiers. One option, which many urged him to take, was to shame Congress or threaten them if they failed to supply the army trying to defend them. But Washington never did that. Why? Because any attack on Congress would advertise to Britain how weak the Americans were. Also, he always wanted his troops to envision the future of self-government and embrace it even when it hurt: In a republic, the army is always under the authority of Congress.

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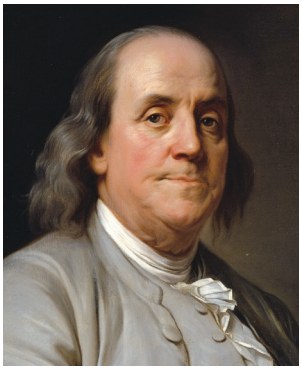
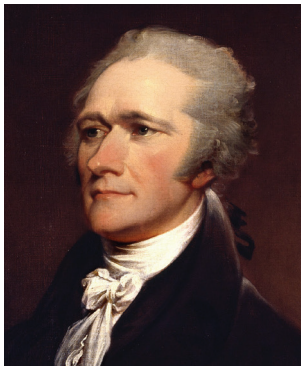
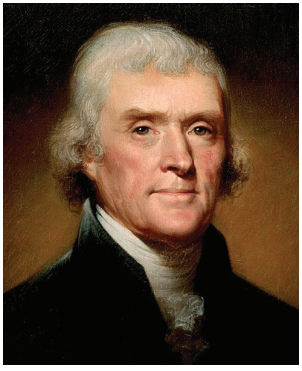


Benjamin Franklin

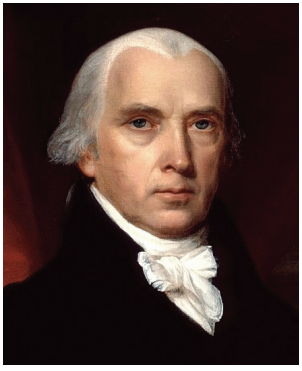
George Washington



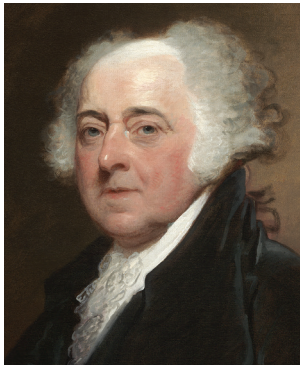
Alexander Hamilton



Thomas Jefferson



James Madison



John Adams

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As President, Washington had more power. He used it wisely by insisting on neutrality: avoid wars until the nation's free economy made it a force in the world. By contrast, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison—talented as they were—wanted America to align with one of the powerful countries now at war—England or France. "Men are very apt," Washington wrote, "to run

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into extremes; hatred to England may carry some into an excess of confidence in France." Avoid entangling alliances, Washington insisted. "No nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest."

On squabbles within the U.S., Washington was more willing to use power to achieve results. Some rebels in Pittsburgh, for example, refused to pay the new whiskey tax; they brutally assaulted federal agents assigned to collect the tax. That disturbance provoked Washington to immediate action. Congress had passed a whiskey tax. For the country to endure, Washington believed, Americans had to obey that law. Therefore, he supported creating a huge army, bigger than any he had ever led, and sending it into tiny Pittsburgh to establish law and order. That task was easily accomplished, and when two of the whiskey rebels were sentenced to death, Washington pardoned them. He had made his point—now was the time for mercy, not justice.

With the Native Americans, Washington's policy was to sign treaties when possible and avoid wars. The Treaty of New York (1790), for example, divided up land in Alabama and Georgia between the U.S. and the Creek Indians. To get this treaty, Washington had to persuade Hobo-Hili-Miko, the most powerful Creek leader, to organize dozens of other chiefs to sign the treaty. In payment, the U.S. gave him more than $100,000—a fortune in 1790—for his efforts. Hobo-Mili-Miko used his riches to buy three plantations and 60 slaves.

On the issue of slavery, Washington was trending one way and the Indians were going the other way. Washington hated slavery. "Nothing but the rooting out of slavery," he wrote, "can perpetuate the existence of our union by consolidating it in a common bond of principle." He even said privately that if America should divide between North and South, he would side with the North.

But Washington was practical. He believed that if he freed his slaves, most of them would starve to death. Other plantation owners would never hire free blacks to work with their slaves. And if he freed his slaves, he would only be able to offer jobs to fewer than half of them because he had so many slaves either too young to work or too old and infirm to help with their labor.

Washington's solution was to retain his slaves until after his death. In his will, he then provided freedom for all his slaves and pensions for those who could not find employment. Those pensions were paid out of Washington's estate for more than 30 years after his death.

Many American Indians, by contrast, like Hobo-Hili-Miko, eagerly bought slaves. For example, all of the five major Indian tribes in Oklahoma owned slaves. Even more remarkable than Indians owning slaves, thousands of free blacks in America also bought slaves, sometimes more than 50 slaves. In fact, so many free blacks owned slaves that historian Larry Koger could focus only on one state in his book, *Black Slave Owners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*.

Conclusion

As President, how does Washington's leadership compare with those of other heads of new countries? The French, for example, had a revolution against their king while Washington was President. France issued a "Declaration of the Rights of Man" and promised freedom under the slogan of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." But France gave power to Maximillian Robespierre, not George Washington. Robespierre helped create a huge, coercive state that confiscated massive amounts of property, heavily regulated the daily lives of French citizens, and then executed 20,000 Frenchmen, often by guillotine, in a "reign of terror." Napoleon came in to restore order but became both dictator and a bloodthirsty general who forced his country to fight a long, unsuccessful war against Britain. Under Robespierre and Napoleon, France declined sharply as a world power.

"All of these examples vividly contrast with the unique abilities of George Washington. We must never forget the liberty he remarkably won for all of us on the battlefield and as President."

Shortly after the French Revolution, Mexico achieved independence from Spain. Mexican leaders copied much of the American constitution. They had two parties and began electing Presidents every four years. General Santa Anna, however, was no George Washington. He used the army to overturn election results. Santa Anna became de facto President and leader of Mexico off and on for more than two decades—losing wars, imposing dictatorship, and exploiting his nation's wealth for personal gain.

Finally, in Africa, Ghana in 1957 became the first British colony after World War II to win independence. Two centuries earlier, King George III had fought to keep America a colony, but Queen Elizabeth gladly helped Ghana

secure a peaceful, successful independence. The first President, popularly elected, was Kwame Nkrumah, who some compared to George Washington. Nkrumah himself said, "We must set an example to all Africa." He promised, "Ghana will be free forever." But once in office, Nkrumah quickly usurped power. He became a dictator, banning political parties, censoring news, and controlling "any part of the functions" of Ghana's major corporations. Finally, he was ousted, but a cycle of authoritarian rule in Ghana would long endure.

All of these examples vividly contrast with the unique abilities of George Washington. We must never forget the liberty he remarkably won for all of us on the battlefield and as President.

About Dr. Burt Folsom

BURTON W. FOLSOM, JR., is a distinguished fellow at Hillsdale College in Michigan. There he served as Charles Kline professor of history and management from 2003 to 2017. Folsom received his Ph.D. in American history from the University of Pittsburgh and has taught at the University of Nebraska, University of Pittsburgh, Northwood University, and Murray State University. He has also been a senior fellow at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Michigan, and historian-in-residence at the Center for the American Idea in Houston, Texas.

Professor Folsom's first book was *Urban Capitalists* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981; second ed., University of Scranton Press, 2001). His later books include *Empire Builders* (Rhodes and Easton, 1998); *New Deal or Raw Deal?* (Simon & Schuster, 2008); *The Myth of the Robber Barons,* (eighth ed.; Young America's Foundation, 2018). The following three books Folsom co-authored with his wife, Anita Folsom: *FDR Goes to War* (Simon & Schuster, 2011); *Uncle Sam Can't Count: A History of Failed Government Investments, from Beaver Pelts to Green Energy* (HarperCollins, 2014); and *Death on Hold* (Thomas Nelson, 2015).

His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Southern History, Business History Review, Pacific Historical Review, Journal of American Studies, Great Plains Quarterly, American Spectator,* and *Wall Street Journal*. He is a frequent guest on Fox News, where Neil Cavuto has said, "If you teach as well as you perform on air, you must be one fantastic professor."

About Young America's Foundation

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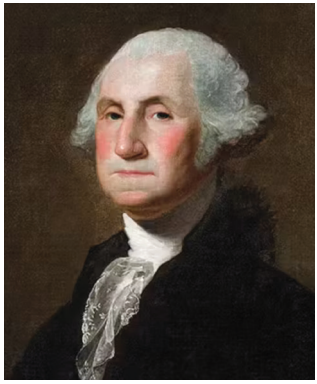

"A primary object should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing than communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?"

— George Washington

YOUNG AMERICA'S FOUNDATION

www.yaf.org

National Headquarters
11480 Commerce Park Drive
Sixth Floor
Reston, Virginia 20191
800-USA-1776

William & Berniece Grewcock
Capitol Hill Townhouse
428 3rd Street Northeast
Washington, D.C. 20002
800-USA-1776

Reagan Ranch
217 State Street
Santa Barbara, California 93101
888-USA-1776

Ronald Reagan Boyhood Home
810 S. Hennepin Avenue
Dixon, Illinois 61021
815-288-5176