

Contest held July 5th, 2009 in Atlanta, Georgia

Last summer I had the opportunity to travel to Mt. Vernon, the Virginia home of our first President, George Washington. As I walked the grounds I was struck at how the personality of Washington was evident in every aspect of the plantation. You had the prestigious head of state evident in the immense gardens and lavish mansion, but also the simple farmer in the plain study and unadorned barns. The desire for independence was clearly seen in his efforts to make Mt. Vernon itself self-sufficient, and his pious nature was evident in the chapel. Washington, the Lord of Mt. Vernon, was without a doubt firmly rooted in his principles and values, and because of his lifework the nation he has founded has become the strongest in the world. George Washington's impact is immeasurable, from his work as a Commander-In-Chief, first President of the United States, and his lasting legacy today.

Washington without a doubt adhered firmly to the founding principles. When called upon he left his beloved Mt. Vernon estate to travel to the second continental congress as a delegate. By this time the first shots at Lexington and Concord had been fired and the British held Boston. Washington appeared at the congress in his military uniform, to demonstrate his readiness to fight for freedom. He was even reported as saying, "...I am prepared to raise 1000 men, subsist them at my own expense, and march to the relief of Boston." The statement embodies the qualities that had Washington unanimously confirmed as Commander-In-Chief of the Continental Army, a post he held for eight years, enduring hardships, setbacks, privations, but ultimately, through his fortitude, victory. When I read Bruce Chadwick's biography, *George Washington's War*, I was moved by the account of a British warship that sailed up the Potomac River past Mt. Vernon. George Washington's servant in charge of the estate sent the British Commander numerous provisions and supplies as a way to ensure that Mt. Vernon remains untouched. Upon hearing this George Washington became enraged, so fervent was his adherence to freedom's cause that he said it would have been better for the British to have burned Mt. Vernon to the ground and decimated his livelihood than to have the forces of tyranny aided by his own purse. To further demonstrate his devotion to freedom's principles, he surrendered his commission back to Congress, rejecting the opportunity numerous times to be a military dictator. He was so dedicated to the founding principles that he would not accept a salary for his services, seeing them as a duty to his country. After the war he was unanimously selected to lead the Constitutional Convention, ensuring that the form of government the nation created adhered to the founding principles, and as President he held this nation together through a tumultuous time, enduring the nation remained united and that freedom did not falter.

As President, Washington had to draw on the skills he had used to hold the Army together as Commander in Chief in order to hold the fragile new Nation together. The idea of a national identity to the people was as foreign to them as being a "citizen of the United Nations" is to Americans today. Isn't that a scary thought? The disparate backgrounds of the states caused an understandable mistrust of each other. Washington faced the task of uniting all the different peoples and States together under

one government, a task no one else could have done. Washington had to keep thirteen sovereign nations together and meld them into one. What is even more remarkable was that he did it without firing a shot. When the Whiskey rebellion threatened the stability of the new nation, Washington personally led the federal troops to suppress the rebels. Upon hearing the name of Washington, they disbanded without any conflict. It was not through strength of arms, but through the strength of his character that Washington held the nation together.

Washington set many precedents that still have an impact on our lives today. The practice of a military subordinate to the civilian authority was firmly rooted in the new Republic during the rebellion, when Washington, often to his misfortune, allowed Congress and the states ultimate control of the military, saying, "when we take up the soldier, we do not lay aside the citizen". The Presidency also bears the echoes of Washington's character. At the Constitutional Convention, the delegates crafted the office with one man in mind, and that man was Washington. As President, everything Washington did would become precedent, from his two-term example to the notion of a Cabinet to civilian heads of all executive departments. But one of Washington's most lasting legacies, and one that future Presidents would strive to uphold, was his contribution to the morale center of the Presidency and nation. On taking the oath of office, Washington added spontaneously to the oath, "so help me God," a phrase that all subsequent presidents have also said, affirming the nation's reliance on the protection of divine providence. Washington supplied the support morally that a new nation needed, offering an example of the decency of Americans to the world, and reaffirming the importance of the nation's values to Americans themselves. As he said in his first inaugural, "let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair."

When I was in the second grade my class had a mock election to determine who the students believed was the greatest President. From that day through the time I visited Mt. Vernon I have always campaigned for George Washington. George Washington was vital to our nation's founding. HE realized our principles of constitutional government, republican ideals, and a free and independent citizenry. Because he shaped those principles, fought for those principles, and embodied those principles. In modern times the Presidency gives dignity to the man, but when Washington was elected he gave the dignity to the Presidency. He truly is, "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."