

What Modern Day Leaders Can Learn From George Washington



by Chris Horvilleur

George Washington is arguably the most important person in American History. He was an extremely accomplished man and highly competent leader across multiple domains. In fact, he defined what an American leader should look like. [Historian Joseph Ellis](#) would state “It

seemed to me that Benjamin Franklin was wiser than Washington; Alexander Hamilton was more brilliant; John Adams was better read; Thomas Jefferson was more intellectually sophisticated; James Madison was more politically astute. Yet each of these prominent figures acknowledged that Washington was their unquestioned superior.”

George Washington was a generalist, he never gave up, he avoided yes-men, maintained a passion for lifelong learning, and was self-aware of his own flaws.

Be a Generalist

George Washington was Commanding General of the Revolutionary Army and the first American President; however, if you asked him his occupation, he most certainly would have said “Planter.” George Washington balanced multiple career streams throughout his entire life. He started his military career at a very young age in the militia and quickly became a Colonel. Prior to joining the Army, he was hoping to build a successful career as a Surveyor in the vast western wilderness of Virginia. In 1758 during his final year of Colonial Military Service, Washington was elected to Virginia’s assembly, the House of Burgesses, beginning his political career. Throughout his life, he managed his beloved plantation of Mount Vernon and pursued a myriad of other financial investments. Through trial and tribulation, his hard-learned lessons on the western frontier proved invaluable as he rose to the anointed leader of the Continental Army and unanimously elected as the first American President.

David Epstein, throughout his book [Range](#), advocates for the benefits of having many skills and keeping multiple career streams open. He writes “Scientists and members of the general public are about equally likely to have artistic hobbies, but scientists inducted into the highest academies are much more likely to have avocations outside of their vocation.” The Army Officer Corps encourages generalists. The Army provides a variety of broadening assignments and Functional Areas as well as opportunities for advanced degrees in any discipline. The Army realizes the need for diverse skill sets across the Officer Corps. Reservists and National Guardsmen have a distinct advantage as generalists. Reservists are actively balancing two careers simultaneously, validating the saying “Twice the Citizen”.

Never Give Up.

During all the [battles and skirmishes](#) of the Revolutionary War in which Washington was personally involved — he won 6, lost 7, and four ended in a draw. Washington was driven

out of Long Island and had to abandon New York City in the middle of the night. During the turmoil his resolve never faltered. Washington not only had his hands full fighting the most impressive military in the world, he also had to worry about self-serving and treasonous officers in his own ranks. According to Historian [Ron Chernow](#), Washington admired Benedict Arnold and was astonished by the exposure of his massive treachery. Benedict Arnold was revered by many in the Continental Army for his bravery and his competence as a battlefield commander. His treasonous acts of trying to deliver West Point to the British, giving them control of the Hudson River, and earned him the title of greatest traitor in American History. Arnold was the worst case in the Continental ranks but certainly was not the only cause for concern by Washington. General Horacio Gates, the hero of Saratoga, routinely advocated Washington's position, knowing full well the leader of the Army could emerge as the leader of a new nation. Gates removed himself from consideration after his abysmal performance at the Battle of Camden.

While most of us are not leading the Continental Army against the British or dealing with traitors such as Benedict Arnold, all of us do experience setbacks and betrayals at work. Washington would never accept defeat, and neither should any great leader.

Avoid Yes-Men.

George Washington saw the value in diversity of thought among his "Military Family" which is how he referred to his inner circle. In his Military Family he had a young noble Frenchman, the Marquis De Lafayette, whom he ended up viewing as a son. The brilliant Alexander Hamilton, from Barbados, made enormous contributions to the founding of America including its financial system. Washington entrusted a Prussian drill master Baron von Steuben, who turned a rag-tag band of amateurs to a professional well drilled Army. He appointed a book-seller from Boston named Henry Knox as his chief of artillery. Washington's most reliable general was a quaker from Rhode Island, Nathaniel Greene. As President, he continued to surround himself with broad perspectives. Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson despised each other and rarely agreed on anything. Washington valued Hamilton and Jefferson's different viewpoints and kept them in his cabinet. During this era of history, Commanders generally wanted Officers from the same high social class, Washington truly broke precedent with his inner circle.

Former Navy Seal Commander and leadership consultant Jocko Willink wrote in his book [Leadership Strategy and Tactics](#) "As a leader you should not want to be surrounded by yes-men-people who agree with everything you say. As a subordinate you should not be a yes-man; you should speak up when something doesn't make sense." Washington would absolutely agree with Jocko. Washington did not surround himself with fellow members of

the Southern Gentry Class and instead built his “Military Family” of members with vastly different backgrounds and experiences.

Life-Long Learner

George Washington is one of the best examples of a life-long learner. He had many hobbies and pursuits and regardless of his age he constantly obtained new interests to learn. He was a highly skilled horseback rider, ballroom dancer, and became a patron of the arts. Washington’s formal education was severely lacking compared to many of the founding fathers. He did not graduate from a prestigious British University like his older half-brothers or speak multiple languages like many of the founding fathers. However, Washington was an avid reader. The executive director of Mount Vernon, [James C. Rees](#), would say “He graduated summa cum laude from the school of hard knocks, but he equally appreciated how great literature and a knowledge of history can inform a leader’s decisions.

Former Secretary of Defense [James Mattis](#) writes in his book, “If you haven’t read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent, because your personal experiences alone aren’t broad enough to sustain you. Any Commander who claims he is ‘too busy to read’ is going to fill body bags with his troops as he learns the hard way.” Most CEO’s on average read [4-5 books a month](#) demonstrating that Washington and Mattis belief in the need for voracious reading holds true for leaders across multiple disciplines.

No One is Perfect.

George Washington was a flawed leader who fortunately learned from his mistakes. He made many horrible blunders as a military officer such as firing on the wrong party, contributing to the start of the French and Indian War. He also made many tactical mistakes while commanding the Continental Army, most noticeably his blunders on Long Island which ultimately handed New York City to the British. He also participated in the most wretched institution in American History, slavery. Washington inherited his first slave when he was 11 years old and continued in the institution until his death. Washington however did evolve in his thinking most likely due to the many abolitionists in his Military Family as well as his cabinet as President. [James C. Rees](#) said in his book “I truly believe Washington would have tried to eliminate the institution of slavery when he was president if he had felt he could have done so without tearing apart the nation.” Washington was the only founding father to free his slaves in his will upon his wife’s death. Washington is proof that anyone could survive “career-ending” mistakes and change one’s character for the better.

Washington has many admirable leadership attributes such as being a generalist, never quitting, avoiding yes-men, continuing to seek self-improvement, and evolving character flaws. Generals and Presidents continue to find inspiration from our first president. Countless articles and books have been written about George Washington and his leadership and countless more will continue to be written. One can find new inspiration from every book one reads on the Father of America.

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