

# George Washington: A leader's diligence

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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George Washington was a reluctant leader. He was reluctant in 1775 to assume command of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. In 1787, he was reluctant to be a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, over which he was chosen to preside. In 1789, Washington was reluctant to become president of the United States of America.

Once General Washington took these jobs, he showed no reluctance. He did them to the best of his ability -- as he had approached most tasks since his youth. "Powerful Virginia elders, who saw much loose living and indolence around them," wrote Washington biographer Douglas Southall Freeman, "found stimulation and reassurance in a young man of unassailed morals and of mature, sound judgment, who was full of energetic vigor and was devoted to the defense of a people slow and slothful in defending themselves."

Virtually his entire life, Washington was highly conscious of the uniquely American model he was creating. After his congressional appointment in 1775, the general wrote his wife: "It has been determined in Congress that the whole army raised for the defence of the American cause shall be put under my care and that it is necessary for me to proceed immediately to Boston to take upon me the command of it. You may believe me, my dear Patcy, when I assure you, in the most solemn manner that, so far from seeking this appointment I have used every endeavour in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the family, but from a consciousness of its being a trust too great for my capacity, and that I should enjoy more real happiness and felicity in one month with you, at home, than I have my most distant prospect of reaping abroad, if my stay was to be seven times seven years."

One of Washington's most under-appreciated characteristics was his extraordinary diligence. In the eight years of the American Revolution, Washington never took a vacation, never applied for a furlough. He got home to Mount Vernon in the fall of 1781 - - more than six years after he had left -- stopping there on the way to Yorktown to plan strategy with French officers. The general returned after the British surrender at Yorktown -- to comfort his wife after his beloved stepson Jacky died.

"I give in to no kind of amusement myself. So those around me can have none," Washington observed.

During the four months of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, in the steamy summer of 1787, Washington showed up every day. Other delegates came and went. Not

Washington, who served as the convention's president. He was in his presiding chair every day -- helping to prevent the convention's dissolution.

As America's first elected president, Washington defined the guidelines for his administration: "Let me, in a friendly way, impress the following maxims upon the executive officers. In all important matters, to deliberate maturely, but to execute promptly and vigourously. And not to put things off until the Morrow which can be done, and require to be done today. Without an adherence to these rules, business will never be well done, or done in an easy manner: but will always be in arrear, with one thing treading upon the heels of another."

Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton took these instructions most literally. The French statesman Talleyrand once saw the Secretary of the Treasury at work through the window of his Philadelphia home. "I have seen a man who made the fortune of a nation, laboring all night to support his family."

As president, Washington was well aware he and his subordinates were setting a precedent. He wrote his confidant, Congressman James Madison: "As the first of everything, in our situation will serve to establish a Precedent, it is devoutly wished on my part, that these precedents may be fixed on true principles."

Until his death in 1799, Washington remained diligent. Washington's demise was brought on by his decision to inspect his far-flung farming empire despite a snow and hail storm in which he spent five hours in the saddle. Washington was diligent unto death.

Lewis E. Lehrman, of Greenwich, is co-founder of the [Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](#) and author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point" (Stackpole Books, 2008).