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George Washington, the Greatest Man

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George Washington, the Greatest Man

Why Did King George III think Washington was the greatest man in the world?

Because in the eighteenth century it was true. George Washington earned the respect of his former enemy by doing something exceedingly rare in history: When he had the chance to increase personal power, he decreased it -- not once, not twice, but repeatedly.

During the American Revolution, Washington put service before self. His personal example was his greatest gift to the nation. It has often been said the "Father of our country" was less eloquent than Jefferson; less educated than Madison; less experienced than Franklin; less talented than Hamilton. Yet all these leaders looked to Washington to lead them because they trusted him with power. He did not need power.

Washington knew that the bold American experiment in self government under the rule of law could survive only if leaders exercised self restraint and accepted institutional limits on executive power. He believed leading virtuously was more important than anything he could write or say. This is why Washington has been compared to two great republicans of Ancient Rome -- Cincinnatus, who traded his sword for a plow, and Cato the Younger, who died defending the republic against the tyranny of Julius Caesar.

Consider all the times Washington put service before self.

In 1775 when he accepted command of the Continental Army, he promised Congress he would resign his commission when the war was over. Once the British withdrew, he was true to his word. In a moving scene before Congress meeting in Annapolis on December 23, 1783, Washington pledged loyalty to the civilian government he had served. The General returned his commission to Congress and was once again simply George Washington, Esq. He thereby established the principle that our nation's military would always be under civilian rule.

Earlier in the 1780s, Washington had been approached twice by the officers who promised their support if he decided to seize civilian power. In one famous incident in 1782, Col. Lewis Nicola wrote a letter urging Washington to overthrow Congress and become America's king. The commanding general scolded Nicola the very same day.

Then in 1783, Washington caught wind of officers wanting to stage a coup d'état against Congress. The so-called Newburgh Conspirators were frustrated that Congress was not paying them what had been promised when the nation desperately needed their sacrifice. Washington would not be moved. On the Ides of March -- a date rich in irony for its association with the tyranny and assassination of Julius Caesar -- he called the men together and sternly reprimanded them for losing faith in the idea of America. The new nation had a chance to succeed only if its leaders and military adhered to the rule of law. This was the non-negotiable foundation of a free republic.

When King George III heard Washington would resign his commission to a powerless Congress, he told the painter Benjamin West: "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world."

Washington returned home to Mount Vernon on Christmas Eve 1783. Like Cincinnatus, he put down his sword and took up his plow. This simple act made him the most trusted man in America. A few years later, delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 selected him to preside over their gathering, knowing he would not abuse his position to aggrandize himself. And a grateful nation unanimously elected him president of the United States in 1789 and again in 1792, because they knew he would devote all his energies to serving the new nation.

Washington, when convinced that he had done all he could to help the country, retired after two terms as president. True to principle, he relinquished the power that was his for the taking. It was an example of service to the republic, to the *res publica*, to our valued public things as a nation. George Washington's example of selfless leadership would inspire Americans and the world to this day.

(Question from Jennifer Morningstar, senior nursing major, Grand Valley State)



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