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It's Washington's Birthday, Not Presidents' Day

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

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It's Washington's Birthday, Not Presidents' Day

The Republic should go back to publicly celebrating the American Cincinnatus.

People ask why a few of us presidential junkies would like to see Presidents' Day changed back to Washington's Birthday. The technical explanation has to do with a misguided law called HR 15951 that was passed in 1968 to make federal holidays less complicated. The real answer is simply this: George Washington is our greatest president, and too few American children know why.

George Washington earned the respect even of his former enemy, King George III, 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 that 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 didn't 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 that 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 that Washington put service before self.

In 1775, when he accepted command of the Continental Army, he promised Congress that he would resign his commission when the war was over. Once the British withdrew, he was true to his word, and surrendered command of an army fiercely loyal to him. In a moving scene before Congress on December 23, 1783 (then assembled in Annapolis, Maryland), Washington pledged loyalty to the civilian government he had served. 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 army 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.

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 — that die would not be cast. On the Ides of March, 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.

When King George III heard that 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 in December 1783. Like Cincinnatus, he put down his sword and took up his plow, making him the most trusted man in America. Delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 selected him to be their president, 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 selfless leadership that inspires Americans and the world to this day. Why don't more American children know that?

— *Gleaves Whitney is director of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University.*