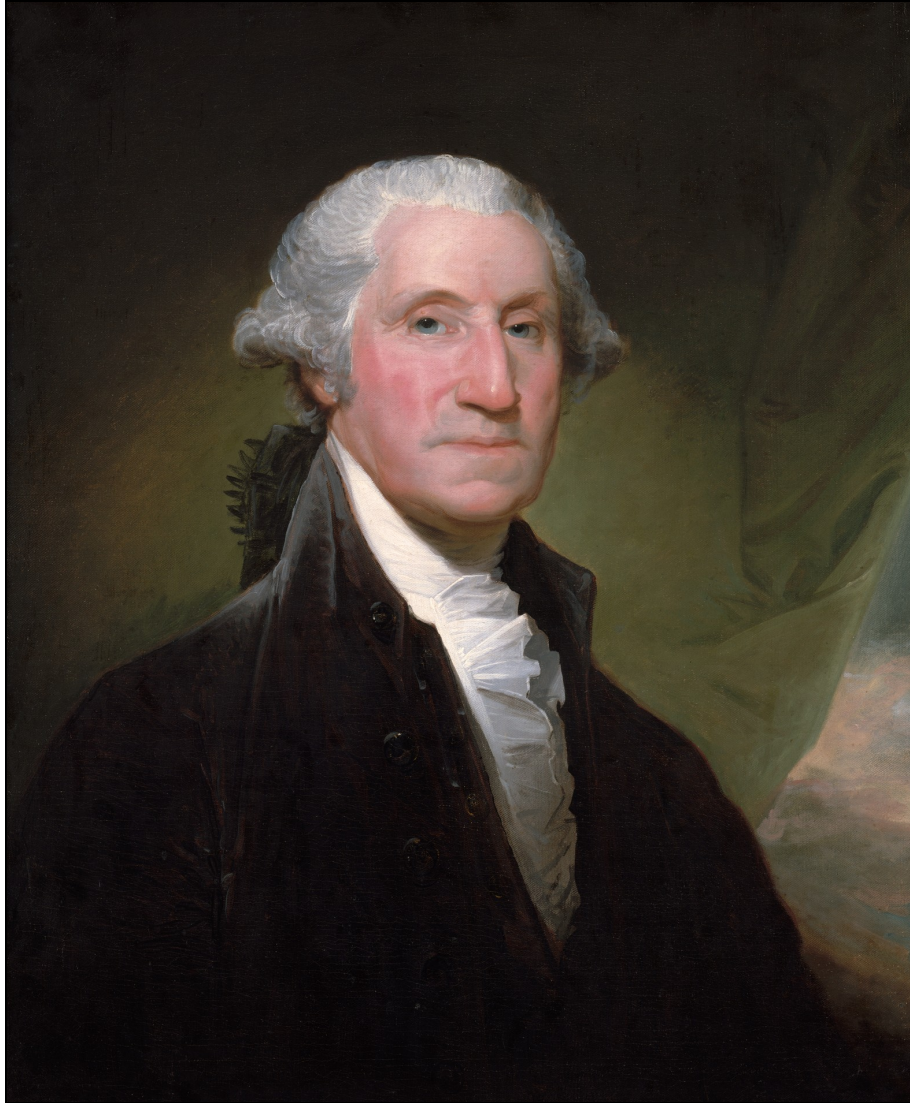


# George Washington and the Gift of Silence

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**I**n December 2009, a letter written by George Washington in November of 1787 to his nephew Bushrod Washington was auctioned for \$3.2 million, the highest price ever paid for a letter written by our first president. In the letter, Washington urges Bushrod to support the newly-written Constitution, then under consideration for ratification by the states. To most historians, this is probably the more interesting part of the letter. But the personal advice that Washington gives his nephew, who had just been elected to Virginia's House of Delegates, at the letter's conclusion provides a window on a key aspect of George Washington's character. Washington tells Bushrod:

"Rise but seldom—let this be on important matters—and then make yourself thoroughly acquainted with the subject. Never be agitated by more than a decent warmth, & offer your sentiments with modest diffidence—opinions thus given, are listened to with more attention than when delivered in a dictatorial stile. The latter, if attended to at all, although they may force conviction, is sure to convey disgust also."<sup>1</sup>

"Rise but seldom" (to speak, that is)—words Washington seemed to live by. After all, he never spoke in debate at the Constitutional Convention, over which he presided. He was not and did not pretend to be a great orator. He was not and did not pretend to be a great writer. He did not have a way with words, and he knew it. In fact, there are few, if any, quotations of Washington that are remembered today.

What are the best-known quotations of Washington? "A slender acquaintance with the world must convince every man that actions, not words, are the true criterion of the attachment of friends." "Arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of liberty abused to licentiousness." "The hour is fast approaching, on which the Honor and Success of this army, and the safety of our bleeding Country depend. Remember officers and Soldiers, that you are free men, fighting for the blessings of Liberty — that slavery will be your portion, and that of your posterity, if you do not acquit yourselves like men."

Not bad, but not pithy, nor memorable—hardly as memorable as Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death!"; Nathan Hale's "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country"; Benjamin Franklin's "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." Even the quotation Washington is probably best known for, about bewareng "entangling alliances," is misattributed to him. It was actually said by Thomas Jefferson.

In his old age, John Adams wrote to Benjamin Rush and said of Washington, that he possessed "the gift of silence."<sup>2</sup> (A gift that Adams most certainly did not possess, it might be noted.) It is this trait that provides the key to understanding Washington, who was as much an ancient Roman Stoic as he was a new American.

In the letter to Bushrod, Washington equates intemperance in speech with the character of a tyrant: "Never be agitated by more than a decent warmth, & offer your sentiments with modest diffidence," Washington writes. "Opinions thus given, are listened to with more attention than when delivered in a dictatorial stile." Here Washington is drawing on the tradition of Roman oratory and specifically Stoic oratory. The foremost Roman orator was Cicero, who advised in his great work, *De Oratore*, that the speech-giver, while seeking to move the emotions

of his audience, must nevertheless himself be characterized by “grace” and “a refined decorum and urbanity.”<sup>3</sup> Such a tradition of speech-giving contrasted with the histrionic manner of other notables of the time, such as Patrick Henry, and even more so with the overt emotionalism of preachers of the Second Great Awakening.

Like the vast majority of Americans at the time, Washington knew Roman history. Though he did not know Latin and Greek — which was a requirement for *entrance* into college in eighteenth-century America—Washington read in translation the writings of Cicero, the histories of Tacitus, and the poetry of Virgil. It is well-known that in laying aside his sword after the Revolution, he consciously emulated the legendary Cincinnatus, who returned humbly to the life of the farmer after leading his fellow Romans to victory in a war that threatened his country’s very independence.

Washington staged for his troops on dozens of occasions Joseph Addison’s play, *Cato*, which depicted the great Roman hero who defied the tyranny of Caesar. Scholars have noted how the events of the play mirror actual events in Washington’s career, including Cato’s confrontation with his mutinous soldiers, which in some respects, was replayed when Washington refused at Newburgh to lead a military coup against the Continental Congress. Less appreciated, however, is the clue that the play *Cato* gives about Washington’s own character.

In this scene from *Cato*, Prince Juba—with whom young Washington once explicitly identified himself—tells Syphax:

Honour’s a sacred tie, the law of king,  
The noble mind’s distinguishing perfection,  
That aids and strengthens virtue where it meets her,  
And imitates her actions, where she is not.

In other words, honor is an aid to virtue but it can also be a substitute for it when virtue is absent. As Addison says elsewhere, “The religious man *fears*, the man of honour *scorns* to do an ill action.”<sup>4</sup> The Roman stoics—Seneca, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius—believed that what was important for the public man was not his personal virtue but his honor, defined as the esteem in which others held him. It is better to appear good, than to be good, to put it starkly. Now, appearing good most often meant being good—but not necessarily.

Washington was indeed keenly sensitive as to how his countrymen viewed him. In the mid-1780s, the legislatures of Maryland and Virginia chartered a canal company to expand part of the Potomac River westward. Washington had agreed to serve without pay as an advisor on the project (he was an experienced surveyor), but when the company voted to give Washington shares of the revenue, he was presented with a dilemma. He feared that turning down the income would be “too ostentatious a display of disinterestedness.”<sup>5</sup> He agonized for a while, and then finally accepted the shares but donated income to found a college (modern-day Washington College in Maryland).

Washington’s daily conduct reflected this code of Roman stoicism, more so than traditional Christian ethics. This is not to say that Washington was not a Christian, as some have argued. Washington did make occasional references to his belief in Jesus Christ in his writings and attended Episcopal services with some regularity.<sup>6</sup> Though he most often exercised his

“gift of silence” in private conversation when it came to religion, Washington publicly called upon Heaven’s intervention numerous times as general and as president. During his first term in office, for instance, Washington famously issued the Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789, in which he announced it to be “the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor.”<sup>7</sup>

Washington, like so many of the leading Americans of his era, comfortably blended his Christianity with elements of Enlightenment rationalism, ancient Stoicism, and contemporary Freemasonry. Numerous prominent figures on both sides of the Atlantic did so during the eighteenth century, seemingly without inner conflict. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, for instance, was both a Mass-going Roman Catholic and an enthusiastic Mason, even though his church condemned the brotherhood. (It is the tendency of intellectual historians to try to impose intellectual consistency upon their subjects. This is a mistake, for the human soul is a complicated thing.)

Stoicism has commonalities with Enlightened thought, Freemasonry, and indeed with Christianity, in, among other things, its championing of the brotherhood of all men. Seneca counseled his fellow Romans to treat their slaves generously: “Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies.”<sup>8</sup> Though Washington at times could give voice to his adopted planter class’s attitude of superiority, he did hold to a distinct belief in a fraternal kinship among men, including perhaps even Africans.<sup>9</sup>

Concomitant with this belief was an adherence to the doctrine of religious toleration, a principle shared by the Stoics, the thinkers of the Enlightenment, and the Freemasons. Washington embraced religious toleration not only as a proper doctrine in principle, but also as a necessary doctrine in a nation that embraced a multiplicity of religious sects. America in the eighteenth century was a religiously diverse nation. There were Calvinists of several varieties in New England, Catholics in Maryland and the seaport towns of New Orleans, Mobile, and Charleston, Quakers in Pennsylvania, Lutherans in the mid-west, Methodists across the mid-Atlantic. In Washington’s Virginia, the established Anglican had to deal with a slew of troublesome Baptists, whose numbers swelled during the Second Great Awakening beginning in the 1790s.

The result was the gradual building of a consensus in America for the idea of religious toleration, at least to some degree. (It should be noted that both established churches—in the case of Massachusetts—and Test Acts for office-holding—in the case of North Carolina—lasted into the 1830s in the United States.) In Virginia, Washington’s associates, James Madison and Jefferson, led the fight for toleration, which came to fruition in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom of 1786.

Washington clearly imbibed the spirit of toleration at least as early as the 1770s. While commanding the Continental Army, he issued an order prohibiting the celebration of “Pope’s Day,” an annual festival in which Protestants burned effigies of the Pope in commemoration of Guy Fawkes’ attempt to blow up Parliament. Washington indeed abhorred religious strife. In a letter of 1792 to Edward Newenham, Washington wrote: “Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by a difference of sentiments in religion ap-

pear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated. I was in hopes, that the enlightened and liberal policy, which has marked the present age, would at least have reconciled Christians of every denomination so far, that we should never again see religious disputes carried to such a pitch as to endanger the peace of Society.”<sup>10</sup>

All this is not to say that Washington wanted to put a damper on religious belief in America. Washington did see the value of religion among the people in promoting virtue, which he, like most, believed was necessary to liberty and republican government. In his Farewell Address, for example, Washington admonished his fellow countrymen about the importance of religion: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” Washington also advises Americans to “observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct.” And he asked: “Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue?”<sup>11</sup>

Virtue was necessary for the masses, but it was not the key to a happy life in the Stoic Washington’s view. In Stoicism, wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance are the foundations of a contented life. The Stoic understands that reason underlies all of nature and that one can avoid unhappiness by accepting without emotion the happenings of this world. As Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Roman emperor wrote: “Outward things cannot touch the soul, not in the least degree; nor have they admission to the soul, nor can they turn or move the soul; but the soul turns and moves itself alone.”

Washington was not always the perfect exemplar of Stoicism in practice. He famously had a temper, which he struggled to control—with varying degrees of success—throughout his life. Of the young Washington, Lord Fairfax wrote in 1748: “I wish I could say that he governs his temper. He is subject to attacks of anger on provocation, sometimes without just cause.” At the Battle of Monmouth in 1778 Washington unleashed a series of profanities in the direction of General Charles Lee and others. One of Washington’s aides said that the great man “swore that day till the leaves shook on the trees. Charming! Delightful! Never have I enjoyed such swearing before or since.”<sup>12</sup> In 1789, attempting to follow the Constitution’s requirement that the President seek the advice of the Senate in making treaties, Washington became frustrated when the Senate referred the treaty to a committee. “This defeats every purpose of my being here!” Washington thundered as he left the Senate chambers.<sup>13</sup>

Washington on occasion also got himself into trouble through intemperate written remarks. Upon taking charge of the Continental Army in 1776, he described the New England soldiers under his command as “an exceeding dirty and nasty people.” These comments were included in a letter to a congressman; the letter became public, and Washington was embarrassed.<sup>14</sup> Washington’s temper could also be his own worst enemy in the arena of personal relationships. He and Alexander Hamilton, who described Washington in private correspondence as “a most horrid swearer and blasphemer,” exchanged words over a minor incident of manners during the Revolutionary War, and their relationship—which to Washington at least was a fatherly one—was never fully repaired.

Despite his personal failings, Washington strove to embody the ideal of the Roman Stoic in his public actions. Believing all men to be brothers, he embraced the role of father of his country as president, avoiding partisanship in politics as he had sectarianism in religion.

Thus Washington refused to identify himself with a party, even as they formed around his cabinet secretaries, Jefferson and Hamilton. He sought conciliation on even controversial issues, like Jay's Treaty and the First Bank of the United States. Though his sympathies certainly seemed to lie more with the Hamiltonian Federalists than with the Jeffersonians, Washington was careful to keep himself removed from petty partisanship. One instance of this was his refusal to use presidential powers for partisan purposes. He declined to exercise the presidential veto power for policy reasons, believing that the veto should only be used to check unconstitutional laws.

Washington was acutely aware that every action he took as the nation's first president would set a precedent for future generations. Witness his very republican example of stepping down after two terms in office, a tradition that lasted until the mid-twentieth century. In this action, as in his humble return to his plantation after the Revolutionary War—an act which caused George III himself to call Washington “the greatest man in the world”—Washington was concerned about what posterity would think of him.

For honor had to be won not just among one's contemporaries, but for all time. The Roman Stoicism of Washington and many of the Founders intensified this desire to seek immortality in the secular realm. From Plutarch in the Roman world to Machiavelli in early modern Italy to David Hume and Francis Bacon in the English-speaking world of Washington's era, the seeking of fame was seen as a motivator of human action, and the most sure way to earn a place in one's country's eternal memory was to achieve the status of, as Bacon put it, “founders of states and commonwealths.”<sup>15</sup> Washington and his founding brothers were fully conscious of their role as modern-day Solons and Lycurguses, founders and law-givers to their nation and to posterity.<sup>16</sup> Fame—distinct from infamy—is simply honor across time.

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In 1811, John Adams said of Washington, “He was the best actor of the presidency that we have ever had.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed Washington understood that acting was about actions—thus the term itself—not simply about words.

In March of 1783, Washington's army was encamped near Newburgh, New York. The war not yet over, though victory was within reach. Washington's men became restive, as the Continental Congress had not paid them in months. Washington himself had pleaded with Congress over the course of the war, asking for more food, supplies, men. He must have shared his men's frustration when a letter circulated among the officers calling for a meeting to discuss a march on Philadelphia to overthrow the government and institute military rule.

Washington learned of the meeting and showed up without an invitation to confront the some 500 mutinous officers. After telling the men that Congress was doing everything in its power to pay the army, and urging the officers to exercise patience, Washington took from his pocket a letter from a congressmen promising Washington that the men would be fairly compensated. In Addison's play, when Cato confronts the mutineers, he reminds them of their shared travails:

Have you forgotten Libya's burning waste,  
Its barren rocks, parched earth, and hills of sand,  
Its tainted air, and all its broods of poison?

Who was the first to explore the untrodden path,  
When life was hazarded in every step?  
Or, fainting in the long, laborious march,  
When on the banks of an unlooked-for stream  
You sunk the river with repeated draughts,  
Who was the last in all your host that thirsted?<sup>18</sup>

At Newburgh, Washington looked at the congressman's letter, squinted, and then removed a pair of spectacles from his pocket. Only his aides had ever seen him wear these, a sign of unmanliness among soldiers. There was stunned silence in the hall, and Washington paused, looked at his men, and said: "Forgive me, but I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." The officers began to weep openly—a sign of manliness in the eighteenth century—and the mutiny was ended then and there. Addison might have penned the scene.

And so indeed Addison did. Washington, the great actor, was playing his part in a great drama, not just for the officers at Newburgh, but for you and me. Washington, the Stoic, used his "gift of silence" shrewdly, and surely it is his actions more than his words that echo down to us today.

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#### Notes

1. George Washington to Bushrod Washington, November 9, 1787, *The George Washington Papers*, The University of Virginia, <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/constitution/1787/washington.html>, accessed March 9, 2010.
2. John Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807, quoted in John A. Schutz and Douglas Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 230.
3. Cicero, *De Oratore*, Book I
4. From an essay by Joseph Addison, quoted by Forrest McDonald in *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 198.
5. George Washington to Nathanael Greene, 20 May 1785, *The Papers of George Washington: Confederation Series*, 3: 4-6, <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/project/volumes/confederation/essay3.html>, accessed March 9, 2010.
6. In his "Speech to the Delaware Chiefs," Washington advises the Native American tribes: "You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ." See George Washington, "Speech to the Delaware Chiefs," May 12, 1779, in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis, 1988), Document 45, Liberty Fund's Online Library of Liberty, <http://>

oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%  
3Ftitle=848&chapter=101782&layout=html&Itemid=27, accessed March 9, 2010.

In his "Circular to the States" of 1783, President Washington calls on Americans "to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation." See George Washington, "Circular to the States," June 14, 1783, in *George Washington: A Collection*, Document 86, Liberty Fund's Online Library of Liberty, [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=848&chapter=101874&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=848&chapter=101874&layout=html&Itemid=27), accessed March 9, 2010.

7. Washington, *Thanksgiving Proclamation*, 1789. Liberty Fund's Online Library of Liberty, Document 183, [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=848&chapter=102090&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=848&chapter=102090&layout=html&Itemid=27), accessed March 9, 2010.

8. Seneca, *Epistles*, xlvii. 10.

9. On Washington's views on race and racial equality, see Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2000), 158.

10. George Washington to Edward Newenham, 20 October 1792, *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Russell, Shattuck, and Williams, and Hilliard, Gray, and Co., 1836) Vol. 10, 309-310.

11. George Washington, *Farewell Address*, 1796. The Avalon Project at Yale University, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp), accessed March 9, 2010.

12. Quoted in Edward G. Lengel, *General George Washington: A Military Life* (reprint, New York: Random House, 2007), 300.

13. Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of George Washington* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1974), 28.

14. Quoted in Lengel, 108.

15. McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, 190.

16. See Douglas Adair, "Fame and the Founding Fathers," in *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays* by Douglas Adair (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998).

17. Adams to Benjamin Rush, June 21, 1811, in Schutz and Adair, 181.

18. Addison, *Cato*, Act III, Scene V.