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Introduction

What Our Founding Fathers Looked for in a Potential President

At the Constitutional Convention, in their deliberations concerning the newly created office of the presidency, the Founding Fathers listed only two qualities a president should have: *experience* and *fortitude*.¹ In the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay describe the ideal candidate as having *experience*. (The word appears no fewer than ninety-one times.)² In their view, truths are taught and corroborated by experience. They speak of “unequivocal” lessons from experience and the “accumulated experience of ages.” “Experience is the parent of wisdom,” declares Hamilton, and Madison is in total agreement: “Let us consult experience, the guide that ought always to be followed whenever it can be found.” In sum, the primary qualification for president is “the best oracle of wisdom”: deep experience.³

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention defined *fortitude* as a combination of courage, steadfastness, firmness, trustworthiness, and integrity. Most were thoroughly educated in religion and the classics and had read St. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Catholic theologian who taught that prudence and justice are the virtues with which we decide what needs to be done, and fortitude gives us the strength to do it. A great president would combine experience with fortitude.

There was a third qualification the Founding Fathers hoped a
candidate would meet, though it was never recorded in writing: he mustn’t display any desire to become a king. Here they were most fortunate: in the first go-round they had a candidate, a man of experience and fortitude, who had no sons—clearly a sign of divine providence. So they slept well at night, knowing that in creating the presidential office they were not creating a hereditary dynasty. There would be no string of Washingtons to follow.

There had never been a job like the presidency of the United States. All other countries were ruled by kings, queens, emperors, emirs, or other monarchs. Yet there would be no catalogue of presidential qualifications in the U.S. Constitution for the simple reason that “it was impossible to make a complete one,” asserted John Dickinson, who went on to say that the job would require “great Talents, Firmness and Abilities”—whatever they may be.⁴

“The first man at the helm,” said Benjamin Franklin, “will be a good one. Nobody knows what sort may come afterwards.” Everyone in the meeting room of the Constitutional Convention knew who he was talking about; the Convention’s chairman,
Gen. George Washington, was sitting at a table in the front, facing everyone. Franklin continued: “The Executive will be always increasing here, as elsewhere, till it ends in a monarchy.”⁵ Despite objections that they were creating a government that would some day consist “only of an emperor and a few lordlings, surrounded by thousands of blood-suckers and cringing sycophants,” the delegates went ahead and ratified the new job position.⁶

In Federalist 69, Hamilton insisted there was nothing to worry about: “Executive authority, with few exceptions, is to be vested in a single magistrate. This will scarcely, however, be considered as a point upon which any comparison can be grounded; for if, in this particular, there is to be a resemblance to the king of Great Britain, there is not less a resemblance to the Grand Seignior, to the khan of Tartary, to the Man of the Seven Mountains, or to the governor of New York.”⁷

Forget the governor of New York: the job of president eventually became much more akin to the job of grand seignior. During the Civil War Secretary of State William Seward offered this job description: “We elect a king for four years and give him absolute power within certain limits, which after all he can interpret for himself.”⁸ After World War II the job expanded even more, to “leader of the free world” (though most citizens of the free world never voted for him).

The job description may change over the years, but traits of great leadership do not. Bookshelves groan under the weight of books on leadership and so-called secrets of effective people. What makes a great leader? Intellect, character, charisma, accomplishment, leadership, courage, wisdom, judgment . . . the list goes on and on. It’s impossible to list all the traits because we can’t know what future challenges the president will face and what particular strengths and skills will be called on. Every decision, every act of leadership takes place in context. The kind of leadership needed in times of crisis or great peril is different from the kind is needed in times of peace and economic prosperity. When choosing a president should we be looking for a rebel or someone who will maintain the present course? Do we go for a “Black
Swan” risk taker, recognizing the possibility of failure, or do look for a more predictable executive? Every choice demands trade-offs.

Leadership is notoriously difficult to define and comes in many shapes and forms, and all great leaders are exceptions to any single rule. But there are certain qualifications we can pretty much agree a president of the United States should have, regardless of his political views. The most obvious one is accomplishment. The candidate should be a repeat high achiever, not a one-shot lucky wonder. Repeated success is a reasonable assurance that he can handle whatever surprise or unforeseen crisis may come his way as president. And his list of achievements (whatever they may be—career, political, financial, overcoming a personal handicap or near-death encounter) should include one that is of the magnitude he is sure to face in the Oval Office. It’s the difficult decisions he had better be good at. The easy ones rarely make it all the way to the president’s desk; they get solved by others.

A candidate with good judgment possesses the imagination to anticipate emerging issues and address them before they escalate into a crisis. He makes difficult decisions at just the right moment: not too soon, not too late. Just as fear and greed are the enemies of sound investing, they have no place in the presidency. A worthy candidate is not fearful of making a decision lest he be proven wrong, nor is he so greedy for the glory of appearing decisive that he acts without thorough consideration. (A third alternative—doing nothing—can sometimes be the best decision.)

Also important are the intangibles. To overcome the gridlock that characterizes Washington today, it is not enough to exhort others to be bipartisan; a president must demonstrate bipartisanship himself. This requires integrity. The best candidate combines personal humility with intense determination. By being incorruptible and honorable, he gains the respect and admiration of politicians on the other side of the aisle. He communicates his political goals with clarity: he is straightforward when need be and avoids being a flip-flopper. And he loves the give-and-take of politics, building personal relationships, and working with others to cut a deal. He has what is called “a fascination
for the process”—an appreciation of the small details one must have in order to do a job well.

In his 1888 book *The American Commonwealth*, the British jurist and later ambassador to the United States James Bryce argued that aside from the heroes of the Revolution, the only president to display stellar qualities was Lincoln. Then Bryce asked a brilliant question: Would we know Lincoln today if he had not become president? No, he said. Of the eighteen presidents from James Monroe to Grover Cleveland, there was only one man who would still be remembered if he had never been president: Gen. Ulysses Grant, the war hero and most famous man of the nineteenth century.

“Why are great men not chosen president?” Bryce asked. His answer: “Great men have not often been chosen, first because great men are rare in politics; secondly, because the method of choice does not bring them to the top; thirdly, because they are not, in quiet times, absolutely needed.” He went on to explain what a president does and what we should look for:

A president need not be a man of brilliant intellectual gifts. His main duties are to be prompt and firm in securing the due execution of the laws and maintaining the public peace, careful and upright in the choice of the executive officials of the country. . . . Four-fifths of his work is the same in kind as that which devolves on the chairman of a commercial company or the manager of a railway, the work of choosing good subordinates, seeing that they attend to their business, and taking a sound practical view of such administrative questions as require his decision. Firmness, common cause, and most of all, honesty, an honesty above all suspicion of personal interest, are the qualities which the country chiefly needs in its first magistrate.⁹

More than a century later this is still an accurate statement. The best candidate will bring to the office a record of proven experience and fortitude. He must be strong, as the Founding Fathers noted, lest he become “but the minion of the Senate,” yet not abuse his power so that we end up in “a monarchy.”¹⁰ He will have demonstrated his strength either by overcoming adversity or by occupying a position of high power responsibly. The can-
candidate will have proven his executive ability and leadership skills and have had experience in politics running for elective office. He will have the confidence borne of success, tempered by modesty and knowing that “no man could be found so far above all the rest in wisdom.”¹¹ He will be a person of action, capable of “vigorous execution.”¹² And, not least, he will conduct himself in a manner consistent with the symbolic importance of his office, evoking “dignity and respect.”¹³

Impossible to find such a candidate in the current population? Hardly. There were 3.9 million people in the United States in 1789, and 85 percent of them were ineligible to vote (voting being restricted to white males owning property). Today there are over 320 million people, and the great majority can vote. Out of such a vast pool, is it not reasonable to expect great presidents?

Using history as a guide, let us now examine the qualifications of major candidates for our nation’s highest office.
George Washington, 1789

Here is a job description for the newly created position of chief executive of the United States.

**Title**

President of the United States

**Mission**

Establish strong central government to overcome the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.

**Description of Organization**

The United States is a small, newly formed country located on the eastern seaboard of a large, unexplored continent. The country consists of a loose confederation of thirteen states (two of which have failed to qualify for voting in this election). It is surrounded by enemies in the north and the west and could be invaded at any moment in the east by a major European power. The population is three million. The economy is in a shambles, and the government treasury is virtually bankrupt. There is no assurance the country will survive.
Specific Job Functions

- Uphold and protect the Constitution of the United States.
- Ensure that the laws are faithfully followed.
- Review laws passed by Congress and veto if desired (subject to congressional override).
- Nominate ambassadors, judges of the Supreme Court, cabinet members, and other senior officials (subject to approval by the Senate).
- Make treaties (subject to two-thirds approval by the Senate).
- Grant pardons.
- Deliver, from time to time, a State of the Union address to Congress.
- Convene Congress on extraordinary occasions.
- Serve as commander-in-chief of the military.

Reporting Relationships

- Candidate shall serve at the pleasure of the American voters.
- Candidate shall respect the prerogatives of the legislature and the judiciary.
- Candidate may be impeached and removed from office by vote of Congress for “high crimes and misdemeanors.”

Term

- Four years, with possibility of additional terms (subject to a national election).

Requirements

- Candidate must be at least thirty-five years old.
- Candidate must be a U.S.-born citizen and have resided in the United States for fourteen years.

There are no requirements related to education level, prior accomplishments, or prior experience.
Although not mentioned in Section 2 of the Constitution, the annual salary is $25,000, and housing will be provided in suitable quarters in New York City, along with servants, an elegant carriage, and a stable of horses and a liveryman. A small stipend for personal expenses will be provided, though it is expected that the president himself will pay for the expenses of hiring staff and entertaining dignitaries.

The process of electing our first president began on January 7, when sixty-nine electors were chosen by 38,818 people casting votes out of a population of approximately three million. Ten out of thirteen states are represented in this historic vote: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. New York missed out because the state legislature failed to appoint its electors in time, and North Carolina and Rhode Island because they had not yet ratified the Constitution and therefore were not eligible.

Eleven candidates have been nominated for this new position:

- John Adams of Massachusetts, the former minister to Great Britain
- James Armstrong of Georgia
- George Clinton, the governor of New York
- John Hancock, the governor of Massachusetts and a former president of the United States in Congress Assembled under the Articles of Confederation
- Robert Harrison of Maryland
- Samuel Huntington, the governor of Connecticut and the first president under the Articles of Confederation
- Benjamin Lincoln, the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts
- John Milton, the secretary of state of Georgia
- John Rutledge, the former governor of South Carolina
- Edward Telfair, the former governor of Georgia
- George Washington, the recent president of the Constitutional Convention and retired commander in chief of the Continental Army
On February 4 the sixty-nine electors will vote for two of these nominees. The man with the highest number of votes becomes president; the man with the second-highest becomes vice president.
GEORGE WASHINGTON

6-foot-2, 210 pounds  Home address: Mount Vernon
Excellent health  Arlington, Virginia
Age: fifty-seven

MISSION STATEMENT

“To extricate my country from the embarrassments in which it is entangled, through want of credit; and to establish a general system of policy which if pursued will insure permanent felicity to the Commonwealth. I think I see a path as clear and as direct as a ray of light, which leads to the attainment of that object. Nothing but harmony, honesty, industry and frugality are necessary to make us a great and happy people.”

SUMMARY OF QUALIFICATIONS

Over forty years of political, military, and business experience in positions of increasing leadership.

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Constitutional Convention, 1787
Represented Virginia as a delegate. By unanimous vote elected president of the Convention. Supervised proceedings and mediated disputes to ensure a sensible compromise document for a national Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation. Document ratified by eleven of thirteen states, 1788.

Continental Army, 1775–1783
Commander in chief. Assumed command of undisciplined, untrained militia in struggle against well-trained British troops and Hessian mercenaries. Won initial engagements and forced the British to leave Boston, but lost New York. Using daring and bold tactics, crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Day 1776.
and defeated superior British forces at Trenton and Princeton. Lost battles at Brandywine and Germantown, summer 1777. Spent winter of 1777–78 at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where, despite deplorable conditions, managed to maintain morale and avoid any mutinies or mass desertions. Emerged from Valley Forge with a revitalized army and the confidence of France that the American forces could win; French military support forthcoming. Waged an extensive war of attrition over 1,500 miles of territory stretching from the Carolinas to upper New York State. In 1781 defeated Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown and secured the surrender of British forces. Moved army headquarters to Newburgh, New York, and led effort to rout the British from their remaining strongholds in Savannah, Charleston, Wilmington, and New York. Successfully negotiated with army officers and quelled pending rebellion of soldiers over unpaid back pay. Retired in November 1783, two months after the signing of a peace treaty with Great Britain.

**BUSINESS AND PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE**

**Self-employed, 1783–present, 1752–1775**

1. Planter. Took over family plantation and diversified farming activities beyond tobacco to include wheat, oats, corn, alfalfa, and peaches. Developed a dairy, a whiskey mill, three flour mills, and a herring fishery. Unlike most plantation owners, who lost money, succeeded in running Mount Vernon on a break-even basis.

2. Landowner and investor. Acquired and managed almost forty thousand acres of property in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Cofounder and managing partner of several land development companies, all successful and profitable.

**Continental Congress, 1774–1775**

Delegate from Virginia to the First and Second Continental Congresses in Philadelphia. By unanimous vote elected general and commander in chief of newly authorized Continental Army.
House of Burgesses, Colony of Virginia, 1759–1774
Representative. Gained firsthand experience in legislative government and political affairs.

Militia, Colony of Virginia, 1752–1758
Colonel. Enrolled as a major at age twenty and joined the British in the French and Indian Wars. Promoted to lieutenant colonel, 1754. Forced to surrender Fort Necessity to the French. Engaged the French again in losing campaign of Gen. Edward Braddock, 1755. Awarded $1,500 by the House of Burgesses for gallant services at the Battle of Monongahela. Promoted to colonel and regimental commander responsible for frontier defenses. Resigned from the militia after election to the House of Burgesses.

Culpepper County, Colony of Virginia, 1748–1752
Surveyor. Carried out surveys of land in northern Virginia. Saved $20,000 from earnings over five years and used money to purchase 1,400 acres.

PERSONAL
Assessment of Qualifications

The candidate for our nation’s first president has the appearance and demeanor of a leader. At 6-foot-2 and powerfully built, he towers over people (especially when he stands next to his diminutive 5-foot-tall wife). He is always impeccably well-dressed and has a flair for the dramatic, with his saber, silk sash, and high boots. He is wealthy, sociable, well-liked, and renowned for his lavish dinner parties at Mount Vernon. He is widely respected as a man of upstanding character.

When the electors cast their votes next month, it is widely expected that Washington will emerge as the winner. Everything about this man—his charm, his achievements, his wealth—connotes success. He is respected to an extraordinary degree, almost to the point of adulation; some people go so far as to say he deserves to be king. Says one, “I shall not call it a Miracle if George Washington is seen living in Philadelphia as Emperor of America in a few years.”²

There is not a man in America who can match his stature. He has been unanimously chosen by his peers for the two highest positions in America (even more powerful than the presidency under the Articles of Confederation): commander in chief of the Continental Army and president of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. This newly created position, president of the United States, will be the most powerful position of all.

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK FOR IN A PRESIDENT?

Last year’s March 5 issue of the Pennsylvania Gazette carried an essay titled “To the people of America” by a political writer who goes by the name of “Modestus.” Modestus suggests six criteria we should look for in our first president:

1. Has no son “to obtain the succession.”
2. Has “already rejected the alluring temptations” of “ambition and opportunity.”
3. Has evidenced no “vindictive spirit.”
4. Will not abuse his position for the benefit of his friends.
5. Is not a man of extreme wealth nor in love with “ostentatious living.”

6. Has “a candid generous temper” and “an observing and reflecting turn of mind.”³

It is interesting to note that none of these criteria has anything to do with accomplishments or job skills. The emphasis is solely on personality and character, answering the question: Is this a man who can be trusted with power?

In the March 26, 1788, issue of the Massachusetts Centinel there appeared another article on presidential criteria, again focusing on personality and character:

There is a man, in the United States, who must present himself to the consideration of every freeman thereof, as a candidate for the important station of president of the United States. He is known: As disinterested—and therefore it is certain that he will not fleece us.

As having voluntarily laid down his former power—and therefore that he will not abuse those he may receive hereafter. As having no son—and therefore not exposing to the danger of a hereditary successor. As being of a most amiable temper—and therefore that he will not be vindictive or persecuting. His character, in short, is a tissue of virtues, and as there are some of our countrymen who doubt the safety of the proposed government, it is happy for us that we have such an approved and faithful citizen to employ in the experiment.⁴

It doesn’t take a genius to discern that the writer is referring to George Washington, a man with no sons and who voluntarily gave up his power as general of the army.

The candidate has had illustrious careers as a businessman, a general, and a patriot. In all three he has demonstrated a high degree of vision and rectitude.

**Career in Business**

While he is best known for his military exploits, Washington has spent the vast bulk of his career in business (thirty years out of forty-one). It therefore behooves us to examine this in detail.
At the early age of sixteen he chose to become a surveyor so he could get first crack at identifying and buying good land. He saved all his wages in order to invest in property; by the time he was twenty-one he had accumulated over 1,400 acres in the lower Shenandoah Valley. Over the next six years he acquired several thousand more acres through marriage and inheritance. (He married one of the richest women in Virginia, and he inherited Mount Vernon and various other properties upon the death of his late half-brother’s widow.)

Managing all these properties has been an enormous responsibility. Washington divided Mount Vernon into five farms, each a separate profit center with its own manager, responsible for giving the owner minutely detailed weekly progress reports. Seeing how tobacco exhausted the soil, he became the first Virginia planter to practice crop rotation. Diversifying into wheat, he soon generated record yields of grain. Then, when the wheat trade declined, he started a flour mill to convert his wheat crops into flour; within three years he became the largest flour producer in the colonies. His “Class A” flour was of such good quality that the bags passed through Caribbean ports without inspection when marked “George Washington, Mount Vernon.” No other planter in the colonies enjoys such a reputation for the quality of his products.

Further innovations include breeding superior working mules, devising a new plow, and starting a tannery, a weaving loom, and a candle factory. Always on the lookout for new methods and inventions, he was the first planter to use Oliver Evans’s milling separator to turn wheat into flour, increasing his flour output tenfold.

This man is always coming up with new ideas. Asked where he got this trait, he points to his life in the wilderness. Coming from a comfortable life growing up on Virginia plantations and then suddenly having to go into the Blue Ridge Mountains, where few men had ventured before, he had to learn to rough it to stay alive. There is a big difference between living on a plantation and having to survive in the woods on your own wits, especially when you’re fighting Indians. He learned to handle hardship and to think quickly and think ahead.
As is to be expected of a surveyor, he pays close attention to detail. He runs his plantation the way he measured land: every transaction and crop yield is recorded. Ask him a question about the profitability of wheat on the third farm last summer, or the price of flour in Jamaica in March 1784, or the optimum allocation of resources to devote to his new candle business, and he can quickly look it up and tell you the answer (if he doesn’t already have it in his head).

It appears that Washington has a difficult time keeping Mount Vernon afloat. It has poor soil, so no matter how much he cuts operating costs or rotates crops, his plantation barely makes money. To generate additional income, he has resumed his original avocation in his spare time: pursuing land investments. Using his vast knowledge of frontier lands, he has put together investment syndicates to acquire substantial property tracts with little money of his own up front. In all these ventures he insists on being personally involved in evaluating the property, designating subdivision rights, and collecting the rental income. Not a single one of his land deals has failed—a tribute to his vision and hard work.

Performance as General of the Continental Army

As a general his record is mixed. His won-lost record before Yorktown was 2-5-1: he won Trenton and Princeton; lost Long Island, Fort Washington, White Plains, Brandywine, and Germantown; and fought to a draw at Monmouth.

At Yorktown the British general Lord Charles Cornwallis had foolishly assembled his troops on a peninsula at a time when he had no backup from the British naval fleet, as most of the ships were in New York shipyards being repaired. When a French armada suddenly appeared on the scene, Washington saw his opportunity and quickly moved in. Cornwallis had no escape. It was a miracle that stunned the world. (When Cornwallis surrendered, the British Army played the song “The World Turned Upside Down.”)

Washington is modest in attributing his last-minute success mostly to luck—or, as he gracefully puts it, “the invisible workings of Providence.” The war was won, he says, “by a concatenation of
causes” never occurring before and “which in all probability at no time, or any Circumstance, will combine again.” Pressed further, he points to the perseverance of his officers and soldiers, who made great sacrifices. Fair enough, but what about the determination, cunning, adaptability, and perseverance of the man at the top? Washington was the only general who could have won this war. To his credit he is very low-key about it.

In evaluating a man we look at the magnitude of the challenges he faced. In Washington’s case they were momentous: he had a ragtag, inexperienced army facing the most powerful army and navy in the world.

Now being a victorious general is not the same as being a president. History is full of examples of generals who let success go to their head and became tyrants. Four aspects of Washington’s military performance should give us comfort:

1. Led a Volunteer Army
Washington was no militarist with a professional army at his disposal. To the contrary, all he had was a collection of state militias, all underpaid and ill fed. Every year many of his soldiers’ enlistments would expire, and he would have to train the new volunteers coming in, plus keep them equipped and fed. It was a fractious medley of men he commanded, always squabbling and bickering. Connecticut men mocked the soldiers from Maryland as “ploughboys,” who in turn taunted the Connecticut men as “fops” and “dandies.” Washington’s job as head of this army, said John Adams, required “more serenity of command, a deeper understanding and more courage than fell to the lot of Marlborough to ride in this whirlwind.” Through sheer force of will and persuasion Washington managed to keep his ragtag army together and ensured a continuous supply of troops.

2. Had Good Relations with Congress
Washington, a man who spent sixteen years in Virginia’s colonial legislature and two terms in the Continental Congress, maintained good political relations with the congressmen he
reported to. Unlike many of them, he understood that more important than capturing territory is capturing the other side's army; it is not necessary to win every battle or defend every city. In letting New York and Philadelphia be occupied by the British, he took a serious political risk and made sure to communicate his strategy to the representatives of the Continental Congress so he could retain their support. (None of them wanted to see their hometown or sea ports left unprotected.) No matter how frustrated he was with the Continental Congress and state legislatures for failing to send enough money and troops, he continued fighting with whatever resources he had. Even during the harsh winter at Valley Forge he maintained his respect for civilian authority.

3. Winning the Peace
Ask Washington what was the biggest challenge he faced during the war, and he will tell you it was the two years after he won at Yorktown. Everyone was celebrating as though the war was over, but the British had yet to sign a treaty. The French navy quickly left for the West Indies; a number of states stopped paying taxes; and many members of Congress went home, often leaving the remaining congressmen unable to do business for lack of a quorum. It was a nightmare: soldiers were owed back pay and threatened to take over Congress. Washington almost single-handedly kept military pressure on the British and persuaded his soldiers not to desert or rebel against Congress. It was his finest performance as a general, at a critical moment when America almost squandered everything it had gained.

Fervent Patriot
Most men of great wealth played it safe and sided with the Loyalists or very quietly with the revolutionaries. Not Washington: by accepting the post of commanding general, he knew that if the British won he would be a marked man, sure to lose everything and be hunted down and hanged from the gibbet (as the British delicately put it, have his “neck lengthened”).
In 1781, when Washington was away at war, a British warship came up the Potomac River and stopped at Mount Vernon. Washington’s younger brother sent provisions to the British sea captain, who promised not to attack. The moment he heard about it, Washington wrote his brother, “It would have been a less painful circumstance to me to have heard that in consequence of your non-compliance with their request, they had burnt my House, and laid the Plantation in ruins.”

This is a man committed to total war. He is driven by a strong sense of patriotic zeal. At the end of the war he voluntarily retired from the military and returned to his plantation. Everyone was amazed, especially King George III, who said it was remarkable that America had such a man, a Cincinnatus. “If he does that [retire to his plantation], he will be the greatest man in the world,” said the king.

He is acutely sensitive to appearing greedy for power. Initially he didn’t want to participate in the Constitutional Convention (assembled to create a stronger government), lest it look like power-grabbing on his part. Persuaded to attend, he pushed aggressively for serious reform. In a letter to James Madison he wrote, “My wish is, that the Convention may adopt no temporising expedient, but probe the defects of the Constitution to the bottom, and provide radical cures, whether they are agreed to or not.”

No halfway measures for this man; he is bold and decisive. Stiff and formal in manner and not given to bombastic words, he commands respect. Some people say leadership fits him like bark fits a tree. Observes Gouverneur Morris in a letter urging him to accept the presidency of the Constitutional Convention, “No Constitution is the same on Paper and in Life. The exercise of authority depends on personal Character. . . . Your cool steady Temper is indispensably necessary to give a firm and manly Tone to the new Government.”

As president of the Convention Washington guided the proceedings with discretion and firmness. But he did more: after the Convention was over, there remained the messy struggle of getting the Constitution ratified. Once again, to avoid any accu-
sation of power-grabbing Washington stayed away from the rati-
fication debate even though he had presided over the Convention.
A smart move.

Washington has a keen understanding of the dynamics of power
and leadership that will serve him well should he become president.
Asked how a general maintains his leadership, he responded, “Be
easy and condescending in your deportment to your officers, but
not too familiar, lest you subject yourself to a want of that respect,
which is necessary to support a proper command.”¹³

**EXTRAVAGANT LIFESTYLE**

Some people criticize Washington for being ostentatious and
extravagant. For a man who values formality and lavish ceremony,
he is unusually careful with money. At Mount Vernon his man-
ner of living is actually quite simple: the food is hearty, not excep-
tional, and there is no heavy drinking. During the Revolutionary
War he had his wife visit him; they spent the winter together,
with ample food and wine. He rejected a $25,000 annual salary
from Congress for his military services—earning him widespread
respect—but when the war was over he submitted a bill for out-
of-pocket expenses of $449,221 (much of it accounted for by the
collapse of the continental currency).¹⁴ After going over all the
accounts, the government auditors found that Washington’s fig-
ures were off by less than one dollar.

**HEALTH**

Because we need a strong and vigorous president for our new
form of government it is vital that our first president not die dur-
ing his term in office.

Some people are concerned about Washington’s age: at fifty-
seven he is far older than the average life expectancy of forty-five
for males. But this observation is based on a simplistic under-
standing of life expectancy statistics, which include the high
rate of infant mortality. Men at birth may live to only forty-five,
but men who make it to age thirty live to around sixty-four.
Washington is a very athletic and strong man. There is no rea-
son why he won’t live through the entire four-year term—plus another if need be.

Washington has had health problems that probably would have killed a lesser man. When he was nineteen he had a terrible bout with smallpox, and just in the past twenty years he has suffered influenza, tubercular pleurisy, typhoid, dysentery, and malaria. He appears to be in good health now, though he has aged considerably as a result of strain and overwork during the war. He admitted that just before the Constitutional Convention he was “so much afflicted with a rheumatic complaint in his shoulder that at times he could barely raise his hand to his head, or turn over in bed.”¹⁵

His eyesight is failing, and he has to wear glasses (which he refuses to do in public). His dental problems have gotten progressively worse, to the point where he now has only one tooth left and uses false teeth made of hippopotamus ivory (not the more comfortable wooden model). These teeth are so cumbersome that he has to clench his face muscles and keep his jaw shut to prevent them from falling out; hence his frown. This physical handicap is a major inconvenience for a public figure and prevents him from giving a lengthy speech. (Who knows, that might even be a blessing!) Most important of all, the general is suffering from a progressive loss of hearing so that he cannot carry on a normal conversation; therefore most of his conferences will have to be small or even one-on-one discussions. We can only hope his inner circle will include one or two strong-minded people not afraid to give him the kind of contrary advice every president occasionally needs.

**PERSONAL INTERVIEW**

At one moment in the French and Indian War General Washington said he enjoyed the sound of bullets whistling by—“There was something charming in the sound”—to which King George II allegedly retorted, “He would not say so, if he had been used to hear many.”¹⁶ Washington now admits it was a foolish comment, an indiscretion of youth, a mistake he will never make again. When asked about his first election, when he ran for the
Virginia House of Burgesses in 1757, he confesses he won it the good old-fashion way: he provided twenty-eight gallons of rum, fifty gallons of rum punch, thirty-four gallons of wine, forty-six gallons of beer, and two gallons of cider for the 391 voters. However, every victory since then, he maintains, has been won fair and square. Which, of course, doesn’t mean he won’t do whatever it takes to get people’s attention. In 1774, as a delegate to the Continental Congress, he showed up wearing his full military uniform—obviously hinting to his fellow delegates, “Vote for me!” Clearly this is an ambitious man.

His favorite pet is his greyhound dog, named Cornwallis after the defeated British general at the Battle of Yorktown. He takes great pleasure in ordering the dog to do his bidding: “Come here, Cornwallis! Jump! Sit!” Washington is a formal man, but he does have a mischievous sense of humor. His horse is named Nelson, after the great British admiral. The name he called his Ohio Valley land venture when he was raising money from investors? The Dismal Swamp Land Company.

About John Adams he tells an amusing story of a dinner where Adams, who apparently owns forty acres, went on and on for hours about the secrets of good farming, not knowing that the man he was talking to owns forty thousand. They had a wonderful time, said Washington: Adams likes to talk, and he himself likes to listen.

He is a serious student of the theater. His favorite play is Addison’s Cato, in which the Roman statesman announces, “What pity is it that we can die but once to serve our country.” And the most influential book he has ever read? The 1745 English version of the Jesuit book Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior, given to him by a traveling tutor when he was fifteen. He read it carefully and had to write out by hand all 110 maxims. He says this exercise shaped his character and conduct for the rest of his life. How so? He must strive to be a model of self-restraint and rectitude and never lose his temper.

He had a difficult childhood: he grew up with no father and a mother he didn’t like, had no formal education, and had no
money when he started out at age sixteen to earn a living. But he was incredibly ambitious and determined to make something of himself. Over the years he has acquired a massive collection of more than nine hundred books, most of which he has read. It is, he says proudly, one of the largest private collections in America.

The man never slows down; he is always trying to improve himself. Even in retirement since 1783 he keeps a busy schedule managing his plantation and writing letters. He subscribes to ten daily newspapers and keeps himself extremely well-informed. His Mount Vernon dinners every night with friends and strangers have provided him with a multitude of observations and insights that make him extremely knowledgeable about public affairs. He
doesn’t say much, but he asks lots of questions. Because of his military fame his house has become something like a well-visited tavern; in the three years since he came home from the war and then left for the Constitutional Convention, he has had dinner with his wife alone only once. It was on June 30, 1785, he says; that’s how easy it is for him to remember.

Knowing so many people and having so many friends will be useful to him in his new position.

HOME LIFE

He is happily married to the former Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow who owned a plantation called the White House. Washington proposed to her on their second date; she accepted. They have no children of their own; she had two children from her previous marriage, one of them now deceased. Their home is constantly filled with relatives and young children, many of them supported financially by Washington. A very generous man, even when he was away during the war, his instructions to his staff were to maintain the hospitality of Mount Vernon and extend a welcome to whoever showed up at the front door. He directed that should there be general distress caused by the hardships of war, poor persons in the neighborhood should get help from his kitchen or his granaries.

He has a remarkable lack of ego, almost never talking about himself. This austerity makes him a hard man to get to know. To those meeting him for the first time he comes across as stiff and severe. With friends he is warm and friendly. Says the noted businessman and farmer Elkanah Watson, “He soon put me at ease by unbending, in a free and affable conversation. The cautious reserve, which wisdom and policy dictated, was evidently the result of consummate prudence, and not characteristic of his nature.”¹⁹

CONCLUSION

From the time the Revolutionary War began in 1775, General Washington has been the most influential man in America. For his successful service as head of the army and as head of the Con-
stitutional Convention, he has earned the sobriquet “two-time savior of our country.”

A man who, as a victorious general, gave up enormous power is a man who can be trusted with even greater power. Throughout the Revolution and the Constitutional Convention he demonstrated that he is a true patriot and not a man out for himself. Being wealthy, he is beholden to no one. Already as a private citizen he has a much nicer house than any presidential mansion the government may come up with. At Mount Vernon he has busts of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charles XII of Sweden, Frederick the Great, the Duke of Marlborough, and Prince Eugene of Savoy. Does this suggest a man fascinated with military dictators or with patriotic leadership? Everything in Washington’s record suggests the latter.

Some fear Washington’s fame will go to his head and he will want to serve for life. The Marquis de Lafayette, the French aristocrat who served as a major general in the Continental Army, is certain this will not happen. He quotes a letter written to him by Washington last year: “The Presidency . . . has no enticing charms and no fascinating allusions for me.”²⁰ There is every reason to accept this statement at face value. Likewise Washington told Alexander Hamilton he hopes that “at a convenient and an early period my services might be dispensed with and that I might be permitted once more to retire.”²¹ The sooner he can return to his beloved Mount Vernon, the better. He is too old to want to make a career of being president. He has no sons to start a monarchy. He will not be corrupted by power because he has had so much of it already.

There is no formal job description for the position Washington has been nominated for, other than a few sentences in the Constitution. It is self-evident, however, that it is a position requiring a grand strategist, a politician, the head of a start-up enterprise—precisely the breadth of skills that makes Washington a good fit. In this first trial it is crucial to fill the position with a man capable of meeting every contingency. Washington, a proven survivor and innovator, is well-suited for an open-ended job.
A second important trait is his vision: he can see the big picture. Back in 1783 when he was retiring from the military to private life, on his own initiative he gave Congress a four-thousand-word “Circular to the States” calling for payment of all state and national debts, establishment of a permanent military force, and the creation of “an indissoluble Union of the States under one Federal Head.”²² This is a man who thinks ahead, who understands that the primary mission of this new office is to unify a nation of thirteen disparate states.

The first president will face the following major tasks:

• Define the duties and role of the president.
• Ensure that Congress adds a Bill of Rights to the Constitution.
• Establish a national currency to replace the local state currencies.
• Set up a taxation mechanism to fund the national government.
• Maintain good relations with England and France.

The United States today may be free and independent, but we are virtually bankrupt, with a huge debt from the Revolutionary War. The euphoria of victory over Britain has long since worn off; already citizens are grumbling that taxes are 10 percent higher than they were during the British occupation. We have already had one internal rebellion (Shays’), and there is the pressing danger a state may try to secede from the nation. Our president must therefore have a firm grasp of military matters should there be war with one of the states. This man should be a doer, a man of action, and not get bogged down in local, petty politics. He should have experience managing money and budgets to ensure a stable currency. As president of the entire country he should be familiar with all four regions: New England, the middle colonies, the southern colonies, and western Appalachia.

We live in tempestuous and dangerous times. We need a conservative president, a recognized leader who promises stability as we endeavor on our “great experiment.” While we have concerns about George Washington’s elegant lifestyle and the possibility that he will let his enormous popularity go to his head,
we feel this possibility is remote given his stature and financial independence. We are confident he can handle adulation, govern with sagacity and circumspection, and brighten the path of our national felicity.

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1789

No champagne would be opened on the night of America’s first presidential election. It was the middle of winter, February 4, and Congress was not in session. Because of all the snow and ice another two months would go by as congressmen struggled to get back to the nation’s temporary capital. Finally, on April 6, there were enough members in New York to constitute a quorum, and the certificates were opened.

As expected, Washington won the vote in the Electoral College, making him the first elected president of any country in the world. Most remarkably he had run against ten opponents, yet not a single one of them got a vote. Four years later he ran for a second term and again was elected unanimously. For a nation that had gone through ten ceremonial presidents of the Continental Congress from 1781 to 1789, his eight years of service provided much-needed stability. Many predicted the new office would work no better than the previous presidency under the Articles of Confederation. Some went so far as to predict Americans would become weary of self-rule and go begging to King George III to take them back into the British Empire.

Imperial and energetic, Washington went to work quickly. A relatively old man, he had impressive stamina and sought men who could keep up with him; as a result his four cabinet officers were young (thirty, thirty-one, thirty-six, and forty-six). In all his presidential appointments he looked for people who were staunchly nationalistic. When he interviewed potential candidates for the Supreme Court, for example, his key question was: What do you think in general terms about the new government and its desired
future? Candidates whose answers were pro-state or pro-region were quickly shown the door. Washington wanted no intrastate squabbles; he would be president of a country.

He thought like a politician in choosing his cabinet. Robert Morris was more experienced in finance than Hamilton; John Adams was more experienced in foreign affairs than Jefferson. Yet Washington chose Hamilton and Jefferson for his cabinet because they were the heads of the two great political factions.

He showed no favoritism, going so far as to select for attorney general not James Madison, who helped write the Constitution, but the equally esteemed Edmund Randolph, who refused to sign it. When a close personal friend and a political enemy were under consideration for the same position, Washington selected the enemy. “My friend I receive with cordial welcome to my house and welcome to my heart, but, with all his good qualities, he is not a man of business,” Washington explained. “His opponent is, with all his politics so hostile to me, a man of business; my private feelings have nothing to do in this case. I am not George Washington, but President of the United States.”²³

One of his first tasks was to visit every state in New England, then visit all the other states two years later, in those days a very time-consuming undertaking. In contrast to his luxury living at Mount Vernon, the president of the United States traveled with only two secretaries and six servants—no large entourage for him. His trips were important, he said, to establish a personal bond and garner support for the new government. The Gazette of the United States agreed, declaring, “The time to pull down, and destroy, is now past.” It was time “to build up, strengthen and support” the Constitution.²⁴

On his two tours he refused to stay overnight in people’s homes lest there be a lot of “George Washington slept here” signs floating around afterward. He was president: nothing must cheapen or demean the presidential office.

He got the Bill of Rights passed in late 1791. He established the authority of his office vis-à-vis the legislature in a meeting with senators who had the temerity to suggest they refer a peace treaty
to a committee. A committee? “No bloody way!” he must have said as he stormed out of the room, leaving the senators shocked. Never again would he return to Congress. He would consult with the Senate only after treaties were made—a prerogative of the presidential office that has lasted to this day.

His cabinet meetings were stormy affairs that make today’s large gatherings seem positively somnolent. Leading his pro-Federalist forces was the young Turk and his former military chief of staff, the thirty-year-old Alexander Hamilton. Leading the opposition forces of agrarian Republicans was the more diplomatic and experienced Thomas Jefferson, forty-six. It was Washington’s job to control disputes and keep the various factions together. This he was able to do, marshaling his enormous popularity and his experience chairing the Constitutional Convention. Though eager to retire after one term, he stayed on for a second term because he knew he was the only person who could maintain unity and harmony among the states. His major task was to get the central government sufficiently established so it could impose unpopular taxes to pay off some of its debts. When he left office in 1796, the new nation had a strong central government, a strong currency, and a strong credit rating for international trade. Most important of all he left behind a country, not a collection of thirteen squabbling republics.

Unlike later presidents who engaged in a flurry of activities to establish their administrations (now known as “the Hundred Days”), Washington never confused boldness with leadership. He, who came to the presidency as the sole proprietor and owner of Mount Vernon, a larger organization than the U.S. Government,²⁵ had no illusions about presidential power—though he had the power of an emperor. Commented Abigail Adams in an early 1790 letter about Washington, “If he was not really one of the best intentioned men in the world, he might be a very dangerous one.”²⁶ Washington was serving as president only out of a sense of civic duty. His ambition was to put the new government on a sound footing, then get out and retire to his beloved plantation.

Famous for being a general, Washington was actually more a
businessman. He believed no new government could be put on a sound footing unless it had financial security. As a citizen he was fabulously wealthy, considered one of the ten richest men in the America at the time of his death, but his presidency constantly suffered cash-flow problems due to inflation. After the experience of the Continental currency, he determined that America should have a sound currency and strong credit. He directed Hamilton to get the job done. Observes George Schultz, a former Treasury secretary and secretary of state under Ronald Reagan, “Alexander Hamilton redeemed all of the Revolutionary War debt at par value, and he said the ‘full faith and credit’ of the United States must be inviolate, among other reasons because it will be necessary in a crisis to be able to borrow. And we saw ourselves through the Civil War because we were able to borrow. We saw ourselves able to defeat the Nazis and the Japanese because we were able to borrow.”²⁷ In the twenty-first century excessive government spending makes borrowing difficult; in contrast, in our first two hundred years we were able to pay for two world wars because of our sound currency, inaugurated by a businessman in the White House.

In what amounts to a one-sentence job description of the presidency, he said, “In every act of my administration, I have sought the happiness of my fellow citizens” by ignoring “personal, local and partial consideration” in favor of the “permanent interests of our country” and the “dictates of my conscience.”²⁸ With a mandate such as he had, he didn’t have to worry about popular opinion or what newspaper editors wrote about him.

Though it rarely appears on any executive recruiter’s list of criteria, one of the most difficult tasks of any leader is to gauge and maximize his or her available power to achieve objectives. Most leaders do too much or too little. It’s a delicate balance, knowing when to push ahead and when to wait. Washington got it right. Like a general fighting a much bigger army, he knew the limits of his power. He moved with caution, careful not to over-
step. Whereas a more impatient man might have embarked on aggressive actions to subdue the Indians in the Northwest Territory, resume hostilities with Great Britain, and expand the federal government, Washington relied on diplomacy and compromise to postpone these inevitable conflicts until the nation was better prepared. “With me,” he said in his Farewell Address, “a predominant motive has been to endeavor to gain time to our country to settle and mature its yet recent institutions, and to progress without interruption to that degree of strength and consistency, which is necessary to give it, humanely speaking, the command of its own fortunes.”²⁹ It was almost an exact repetition of how he had fought the war: one step at a time, waiting for opportune moments to strike.

He appreciated the symbolic importance of his role. In crafting his Farewell Address, he relied on Madison and Hamilton to get his message down pat, and he ended up producing a masterful document that resonates to this day. Setting forth the tenets of Americans’ relations with each other and with the rest of the world, his Farewell Address ranks with the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address as the most honored of American political discourses. It was read aloud in Congress on February 22 every year until the 1970s.

Washington’s sense of perspective applied also to himself. He insisted on fancy living and a presidential carriage to communicate the dignity of the office, but he did not abuse it. As president he had only fourteen household staff—fewer than at Mount Vernon (and paid for out of his own salary). He insisted on formality, but he scorned regal titles. He rejected the architect Pierre L’Enfant’s plan for a huge presidential mansion and gardens covering ten acres, insisting it be a fraction of the size.³⁰ When Adams, presiding over the Senate, proposed that the new executive be known as “His Highness, the President of the United States of America and Protector of their Liberties,” Washington retorted that “Mr. President” would do. The only use of his name Washington allowed by during his lifetime was for the new city that would serve as the nation’s capital. After he died, however, he became the “god-

George Washington is revered throughout the world as our best president. But here in the United States, we give that honor to Lincoln. This disparity says something about ourselves as a nation and what we look for in our leaders.

Unlike Lincoln, who had to fight a civil war while in office, was only narrowly reelected, and then was assassinated, Washington was a demigod during his lifetime. He left office in 1796 widely admired and respected as a conciliator, a leader, a superb administrator, “the father of his country,” a man who had saved his country not once, not twice, but three times: as a general, the Constitutional Convention president, and the nation’s president.

Yet it was this unusual man, the most aristocratic of our presidents, who made the new constitution and republic work. For the final word on his performance as president, we should probably turn to a man normally expected to be highly critical: Jefferson, the opposition leader. After he had become president himself, Jefferson offered this assessment of his former boss: “He was always in accurate possession of all facts and proceedings in every part of the Union . . . formed a central point for the different branches, preserved a unity of object and action among them . . . and met himself the due responsibility for whatever was done.” Other nations, especially Third World nations that have modeled their anticolonialist manifestos after our own Declaration of Independence, respect this. Travel abroad and one sees that it is Washington the doer, the man who was practical, not Lincoln the emancipator, who is revered. Except in London there are no statues of Lincoln outside the United States.

In this country recent history has not been kind to Washington. Unlike Lincoln, who is immortalized in countless photographs and a magnificent statue in Washington DC, our first president is represented by an impersonal obelisk in the nation’s capital and by the
stern, forbidding figure glaring from several portraits by Gilbert Stuart. Washington and Stuart never liked each other. Allowing his prejudices to affect his perceptions, Stuart exaggerated Washington's dental disfigurement and reddened his cheeks. There is no grandeur, no twinkle in the eye, no humanity in the George Washington of Gilbert Stuart. Compare this with the younger, magnificent general painted by Charles Wilson Peale: a totally different man, not a patrician but a dashing leader.

When Washington relinquished the reins in 1796, the British monarchy was stunned—for the second time. The future William IV of England called him “the greatest man who ever lived,” echoing what his father, King George III, had predicted back in 1783: “He will be the greatest man in the world.” The father-king spoke of the future (“will be”); the son-king spoke of the past (“who ever lived”). How many people start out as “the greatest” and end up thirteen years later still called “the greatest”?

For the final word on his legacy, let us return to Jefferson, who raised the question most people feared to ask: What will happen after Washington’s presidency? Jefferson’s answer: “After him inferior characters may perhaps succeed and awaken us to the danger which his merit has led us into.”

In 1906 Harvard president Charles W. Eliot gave a series of guest lectures on great American leaders. In trying to explain what made Washington so special, he hit on a point that should resonate with many Americans today, more than a century later. “Washington’s mind dealt very little on rights and very much on duties,” said Eliot. “For him, patriotism was a duty; good citizenship was a duty.” Then came the punch line: “We think more about our rights than our duties. He thought more about his duties than his rights.” Today, as Americans squabble over Social Security, medical care, and other entitlements from a government that racks up more and more debts for our grandchildren to pay, is this not a powerful message? Should we not be thinking more about our duties than our rights?