

The First Presidential Inauguration and the Dedication of America

State of the Union:

The Constitution of the United States is a plan of action. Many had written about and discussed the idea of a democracy, of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom from fear of government. However, for all of the writing and thinking, no one knew or dared outline how it would be done. The Founding Fathers became the most radical men of their day when they took an idea and made it a reality. The United States of America became the "Great Experiment"

Writing and ratifying the United States Constitution was easy compared to implementing it! Now, all the major questions had to be answered: Who, What, When, Where, How. Of those questions, "Who?" was the most important. The person who took the Office of President had to be fearless. Nothing like this had ever been done before. There was no precedent to follow. There was no one to give advice or direction who had been President before. Take everything you know about the President, all of your expectations, and throw them away. They do not exist. Now, just exactly what does it mean to be President? How will the President be addressed? What is the President going to do? What power does he have? When is the President going to do these things? Where will the President live? The job as the first President of the United States was overwhelming and everyone knew it. Even more daunting, the man everyone knew could do the job, didn't want the job.

State of George Washington:

As the commander of the Revolutionary Army and with a major victory in his hand, General George Washington could have easily assumed control of the weak, central government. He could have been King of America. However, General Washington did an amazing thing: he resigned his military command at the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783. He was happy to return to Mount Vernon and his family. His resignation stunned England! When King George heard about this he could not believe it! He asked the American painter, Benjamin West, 'What will Washington do after winning independence?' West replied, "They say he will return to his farm." "If he does that," the King said, "he will be the greatest man in the world."¹

General Washington remained active in politics, carefully watching the Article of Confederation in play. He supported the Constitutional Convention because it was plain to see that change was needed. He agreed to go as a delegate but when he was elected as presiding officer he took a very neutral stance on all subjects.

George Washington did attend several dinners hosted by Ben Franklin and there he discussed politics. But as Presiding Officer he felt his role was to keep the delegate on task not to voice his opinions.

With the Constitution written and ratified, George Washington stunned everyone for a second time by walking away from power and retiring to Mt. Vernon in June 1788. George Washington felt he had served his country well and now was his time to be with his family and his farm. However, retirement was short lived.

The Election:

While Washington was beginning his retirement, the Electoral College was busy electing the first president. On February 4, 1789, the 69 men unanimously selected Washington as the first President of the United States. Due to bad roads, Congress could not muster a quorum to make an official count of the votes or an official announcement until April of 1789. When they counted the votes, they were excited! Congress was sure they had elected the right man for the job! They were not certain that the right man would accept the results or be excited.

Even in 1789, political news traveled fast! Although Congress could not meet and make the vote official until April, news of his new appointment reached George Washington in Mt. Vernon in March. Washington was not excited. He felt the delay was more of a 'reprieve'. He confided as much in a letter to his friend, Henry Knox:

' [My] feelings (are) not unlike those of a culprit who is going to the place of his execution: so unwilling am I, in the evening of a life nearly consumed in public cares, to quit a peaceful abode for an Ocean of difficulties, without that competency of political skill, abilities and inclination which is necessary to manage the helm.'

Charles Thomson, the Secretary of Congress, was sent to Mount Vernon, Virginia with the official announcement. Thomson arrived at Mount Vernon on April 14, 1789. He was nervous that General Washington might not welcome him or accept the position. Washington did neither. He graciously greeted his old friend and colleague. After greetings, Thomson read from a prepared statement:

"I am honored with the commands of the Senate to wait upon your Excellency with the information of your being elected to the office of President of the United States of America".

George Washington had also prepared statement. He wondered if he was really qualified for this job. This new post had never been done before and it was overwhelming. Washington could only commit to do his best. He replied:

"While I realize the arduous nature of the task which is conferred on me and feel my inability to perform it, I wish there may not be reason for regretting the choice. All I can promise is only that which can be accomplished by an honest zeal."

George Washington was many things. He was a war hero. He could command thousands of men and accomplish strategic victories. He was an impressive general, a man of honor, purpose and integrity. He was a family man. He had a wife and children whom he loved dearly but did not see much during the Revolutionary War. To be home with them was a pleasure. He was a farmer and a businessman with personal goals he wanted to accomplish. He was an ordinary man who understood that the task of being the first American President was a monumental task, one that was greater than any one man could do. Fortunately, Washington was also a man of prayer. Unsure of what he could do, he was sure that God had appointed him for this job. From his own writings, we know that George Washington found direction, wisdom, and strength from Almighty God.

Return to Public Life:

There had already been many delays to the implementation of the Constitution and Washington did not wish to add any more. Two days after receiving the official word from Congress, Washington left for New York on April 16, 1789. He left by carriage and was accompanied by Charles Thomson and his personal aide, David Humphreys. Martha and his family would join him in mid-May.

In an effort to travel quickly, Washington and his friends set out each day at sunrise and spent the entire day on the road. He traveled through Alexandria, Virginia, Baltimore, Maryland, Wilmington, Delaware, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Trenton, New Jersey. At Alexandria, however, it became clear that traveling quickly would be a challenge. Shouts of "Long Live George Washington!" from crowds of well-wishers lining the streets greeted him there and in every city through which he passed. There was a dinner and the customary 13 toast that followed. So it was in every city. Each prepared with a welcome for the new President. This slowed his progress considerably but to all who greeted him he returned their kindness with thanksgiving. It took him eight days to make the trip to New York. Although encouraged by the well-wishes, he hoped and even asked the governor of New York to grant an 'inconspicuous' entry. New York City had saved the grandest celebration for last.

Upon arriving in Elizabethtown, New Jersey on April 23, 1789, President-elect Washington could see a barge, fresh with white paint waiting to take him into New York. The barge had an awning of red curtains and a crew of 13 oarsmen dressed in all white uniforms. All hope for a quiet entry was gone; President-elect Washington boarded the vessel, graciously. As he crossed the Hudson River, ships

in the harbor raised flags and cannon fired led by the Spanish warship *Galveston* with a 13 cannon salute. He arrived at the foot of Wall Street, where he was greeted by Mayor Clinton and others. A special military escort was provided to lead George Washington to his home at 3 Cherry Street. It took him 30 minutes to walk the short distance due to thousands of people lining the streets and shouting "Long Live George Washington!" As Washington walked along the streets and listened, he began to let himself appreciate the celebratory atmosphere.

Washington spent the next week resting and preparing for the oath of office. Congress was busy ironing out details for the first Inauguration. It had to be formal but not like the coronation of a king as people were accustomed. It had to reflect the new Republican ideals on which the Constitution had been written.

The First Inauguration of George Washington:

Having never been done before, planning a Presidential Inauguration was a daunting task. It had to be formal. It had to convey the importance of the event. It should encourage the people. It could not resemble a coronation or transfer of absolute power as had been done in the past. The event was planned by three groups of people: Congress, George Washington and the people of New York.

Congress determined the order of events. It would take place on Thursday, April 30, 1789 at Federal Hall at 12:30 p.m. At 9:00 a.m. church bells would call the people to their respective house of worship to pray for the new President. George Washington would come by way of coach and arrive at Federal Hall shortly after 12:00. The Vice-President, John Adams, would instruct Washington on the finer points of the event. The oath would be administered by the chancellor of the State of New York, Robert R. Livingston. A Bible would be provided for Washington when he took the oath on the balcony of Federal Hall in front of all the people. Congress would escort Mr. Washington to Federal Hall. These details seemed to be simple but formal enough for the occasion and without the fanfare of a coronation for a king.

George Washington made some plans of his own for the inauguration. He had James Monroe help him write an inauguration speech. A speech was not required by the Constitution but he felt he should thank and encourage the people for trusting him with the office of President. Washington also chose his clothes for the Inauguration with care. He chose a full suit of dark brown cloth made in America, not England, with metal buttons with eagles. White silk stockings and brown shoes with silver shoe-buckles completed his attire. He also carried a steel-hilted dress-sword. He felt this best represented the new office of President. He would ride in a coach of state followed by his aide-de-camp Colonel Humphreys and his secretary Mr. Lear. No escort needed. It was simple but formal.

The people of New York also made plans for the Inauguration. City troops would arrive at Washington's home shortly before noon and escort Mr. Washington to Federal Hall. They would be followed by foreign ministers and a long train of citizens and merchants. Troops would line both sides of the entry to Federal Hall and Washington would pass through them. Crowds could also line the streets and join the procession as soon as the President-elect passed by. It was a simple celebration by the people.

So, what really happened? At 9:00 a.m. the church bells rang out and people made their way to their churches and prayed for the new nation and for the new President. Just before noon, troops arrived at George Washington's home. Congress arrived as well. Townspeople lined the streets and cheered. At 12:30 p.m. troops arrived at Federal Hall followed by Congress and heads of departments in their carriages. Behind them was Washington, then his aide-de-camp, his secretary and finally foreign ministers and citizens. It was a simple parade! Just before the Federal Hall, Washington alighted from his carriage and passed through troops and cheering crowds lining the entrance. The plans simply intertwined and created a new institution!

Vice President John Adams led Washington to the second floor of Federal Hall and explained that everything was prepared for him to take the oath of office. To the utter horror of Congress, the Bible had not been brought for the oath. A nearby Masonic Lodge quickly provided one and saved the ceremony. John Adams led George Washington out to the balcony where he was greeted by cheers from the crowds below. It so overwhelmed Mr. Washington that he had to take a seat near the table. After a few minutes, he stood again and approached the Chancellor of the State, Robert R. Livingston. As the chancellor began to administer the oath, Mr. Otis, Secretary of State, raised the Bible on its crimson cushion. The oath was read slowly while Washington laid his hand on the open Bible. Upon conclusion, George Washington replied, "I swear – so help me God!" The people cheered as President Washington and the rest returned to the Senate chamber.

The First Inaugural Address:

President George Washington returned to the Senate chamber to deliver his inaugural address. Congress rose when he entered but then took their seats after Washington bowed in response. In England, the Congress stood when addressed by the king. By sitting, they expressed the idea that they were equal with the President. President Washington appeared very nervous in delivering the address. He spoke very softly and quickly. He moved very little and seemed very relieved when it was all over.

The speech was short and addressed the political issues of the day in broad terms. However, two points were very clear and specific. The first specific of his speech reminded everyone that he felt inadequate and unprepared to be President but with the help of the Almighty he would do his best. The second specific stated what he would do first as President. He acknowledged the hand of the Almighty in bringing the United States of America into being. He made it known that only with the help of Almighty God would he be able to complete the task ahead of him.

Closing Ceremonies/First Official Presidential Act:

After his speech, President Washington closed the inauguration and began his presidency with the same act. He led the Congress to St. Paul's Church. As his first presidential act, he led with a prayer dedicating America to God. (Only two nations in history have done this, the other nation being Israel.) His prayer was simple:

"Almighty God; We make our earnest prayer that Thou wilt keep the United States in Thy holy protection; that Thou wilt incline the hearts of the citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government; and entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another and for their fellow citizens of the United States at large.

And finally that Thou wilt most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without a humble imitation of whose example in these things we can never hope to be a happy nation. Grant our supplication, we beseech Thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

1. Boaz, David. *The Man Who Would Not Be King*. February 20, 2006.
<http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/man-who-would-not-be-king>

Resources:

"The Inauguration of George Washington, 1789," EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2005).

<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/revolutionary-war/general/inauguration-george-washington.htm>

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/george-washington-the-reluctant-president-49492/>

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