

Washington's Journal

- 1. Read the article about George Washington's first 100 days as President.**
- 2. Imagine you are George Washington and you have just finished your first day as President of the United States. Write a journal entry recounting the way you felt, problems you faced, people you met, and discussions you had.**
- 3. Write a follow-up journal expressing your thoughts about creating a cabinet.**

The First 100 Days: George Washington Set the Standard for All Future Presidents

By **KENNETH T. WALSH**

Before the concept of a "first 100 days" entered the popular imagination, there was George Washington, the original precedent setter for the American presidency. He took over the reins of government as the nation's first chief executive in an atmosphere of enormous uncertainty because many Americans wondered if the new nation could survive. And while his agenda wasn't nearly as extensive as modern presidents', Washington's first 100 days were important because everything he did set a standard for his successors and for the country at large.

Washington was the only person who was seriously considered by the founders to be the new nation's leader. He was overwhelmingly popular in every corner of the new and fragile republic as a military leader, the former commander of the Continental Army that had defeated the British after six arduous years. The Electoral College unanimously elected him president in 1789, and from then on, he essentially invented the job. He certainly looked the part of a strong, imposing leader. He was 6 foot 2 and weighed more than 200 pounds, with a powerful physique and perfect posture.

He had hoped to retire to his beloved plantation at Mount Vernon, Va. Instead, he felt compelled by his sense of duty to take on this enormous new burden of leadership. "I fear I must bid adieu to happiness," he confided to a friend shortly before taking office, "for I see nothing but clouds and darkness before me; and I call God to witness that the day which shall carry me again into public life will be a more distressing one than any I have ever yet known."

The Constitution called for an office of president but didn't specify many details of what the chief executive was supposed to do. And Washington, 57, was well aware of his historic role. "I walk on untrodden ground," he said shortly after assuming power. "There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent."

There was an immediate debate over what to call him. Among the suggestions were "His Elective Majesty," "His Highness," "The President of the United States and Protector of the Rights of Same," and "His Mightiness." Washington had a less pretentious title: "President of the United States." And his simple appellation is the one that stuck.

Among the problems he faced were the different economies and agendas of the individual states, how to pay down the debt from the Revolution, and the military threats from Britain and other foreign powers. In his inaugural speech on April 30, 1789, Washington acknowledged the challenges ahead as he made "a fervent supplication to the Almighty Being"—a prayer that he and his 4 million fellow citizens would somehow find their way.

"Revered for his honor, a virtue seldom invoked today outside military circles, his peerless standing was based less on his words—he was challenged as a writer and public speaker—than his deeds," writes author Mark Updegrove in *Baptism by Fire*. "As president, he remained above partisan fray and popular opinion, always acting in what he saw as the best interest of the country. His cabinet contained a mix of Federalists and Anti-Federalists (or Republicans), whose major disagreement was how much power should be given to the national government and how much reserved for the states." America's leaders have been debating the same issues ever since.

Adds historian Gil Troy in *Leading From the Center*: "Washington was a muscular moderate, far shrewder than many acknowledged. Emotionally disciplined, philosophically faithful to an enlightened, democratic 'empire' of reason, Washington passionately advocated political moderation. Acknowledging his own shortcomings as a human being, he tolerated and welcomed others' views. He realized that others might reasonably reach different conclusions about important issues. Washington's idea of democratic politics was to seek common ground and blaze a centrist trail."

Washington's approach was to try to balance all the competing forces—regional, ideological, and geographic—rather than allow divisions to get out of hand and threaten the union. He named the two most powerful thinkers among the founders to his cabinet and tried to keep their differences under control. As treasury secretary, Washington chose Alexander Hamilton of New York, a lawyer and leader of the Federalist faction who favored a strong, active federal government catering to urban interests. As secretary of state, he named Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, a plantation owner who favored decentralized government and sided with agricultural interests.

He made some tough decisions. Guided by Hamilton, Washington persuaded Congress to approve excise taxes on local governments in order to bring in needed revenue and reduce the war debt to France, the Netherlands, and other lenders. He also sided with

Hamilton and had the federal government assume the states' wartime debts.

Writes Updegrove: "Washington was the one man in American history who was bigger than the government itself; the hero of the Revolution could have been emperor of the state he, more than any other, helped found. Instead, he ensured that government would remain in the hands of the people. In doing so, he set his most important precedent, leaving office after two terms in office and exemplifying a fundamental democratic ideal ... Washington *made* the presidency. Everyone who comes after him is subject to his standard. He was the first."

For all this, Washington has been consistently rated by historians as one of America's greatest presidents.