



Shaping the Presidency: A Teachers' Guide

"Perhaps there never was another man, whose personal character and conduct exercised an influence, so powerful and so beneficial, on the destiny of a great nation."

James Grahame
(Scottish poet and author, 1765 – 1811)

On October 14, 2008, the Mount Vernon Education Department and the Fairfax Network taped a distance learning broadcast called *Shaping the Presidency*, which looked back at the profound impact George Washington had on defining the office of the president. The panelists discussed how campaigning, the election process and the role of the media affected early presidential candidacies, and how those influences have evolved.

The panelists included Joseph J. Ellis, the Ford Foundation Professor of History at Mount Holyoke College and award-winning author of the Pulitzer Prize winning *Founding Brothers* and the National Book Award winner for *American Sphinx*. He was joined by Cokie Roberts, author of the best-selling book *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation* and *Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation*, and John P. Riley, former historian at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estates and Gardens and present director of education and scholarship programs at the White House Historical Association.

This program was produced in partnership with the Fairfax Network, through a generous grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.

Educators can request a complimentary DVD by contacting the Fairfax Network at 4414 Holborn Avenue, Annandale, VA 22003, or 800.633.4290, or FFXNetwork@fcps.edu, or www.fcps.edu/fairfaxnetwork.

The Mount Vernon Education Department has compiled a series of lesson plans for teachers, which focuses on Washington's remarkable accomplishments in building a nation that within 200 years of its founding became the most powerful country in the world. The democratic principles that guided Washington left an indelible mark on his



legacy. Through a compilation of lesson plans based on primary documents and the distance learning broadcast, *Shaping the Presidency*, this unit is designed to enrich your students' understanding of Washington's impact on the founding of our nation and his insight into world affairs.

Unit Objectives:

- Understand that George Washington's accomplishments in the Revolutionary War, the Constitutional Convention, and as first President of the United States led to international recognition and acclaim.
- Understand that Washington became a symbol of the United States in the eyes of his countrymen and on the world stage.
- Discuss Washington's vision for the future of America.
- Understand and discuss the main issues and challenges facing Washington as the first president of a new country.
- Read and interpret primary source documents and images.
- Apply historical research, analysis, and discussion to completing projects that explore and analyze 18th century situations, challenges, or events.
- Effectively work within collegial groups to complete assigned tasks and discussion topics.

Curriculum Applications:

This unit addresses both content and thinking standards. Students will discuss the major issues of establishing a viable government and discuss the role of George Washington in the founding of our nation. The lesson and accompanying activities meet standards for chronological thinking, historical comprehension, and analysis and interpretation skills. Students will also utilize their reading, geography, art, and writing abilities.

Lesson Plans:

The *Shaping the Presidency* unit includes four lesson plans, each of which include primary documents or images and background information for teachers and students.



Exploring George Washington's Leadership - This high school lesson plan uses primary documents to explore the relationship between the many roles in Washington's life and his leadership characteristics.

Centerpiece of a Nation - This middle school lesson plan has students use primary images as a model for creating their own "display" of states and choosing a "centerpiece" that defines our nation today.

Establishing the Presidency - This middle school lesson plan has students analyze primary documents in order to discuss the challenges that George Washington faced as the first president of a new country.

Who Are Our Greatest Presidents - This high school lesson plan will provide students with a systematic analytical method to compare past presidents and current or potential future presidents and to determine their own research-based ranking system.

Shaping the Presidency: Background Information

When George Washington was sworn in as President of the United States, the country was a young nation experimenting with a new and untried form of government. To many, success or failure depended on the first president. Aware of the expectations of his countrymen and the world, Washington carefully guided the nation through its early turbulent years. One of his primary goals was the development of a "national character" free of sectional differences. Over the course of his two terms in office, Washington worked to establish his vision of a politically strong, economically independent nation that was respected in the eyes of the world.

To his countrymen, Washington was the natural choice to serve as our nation's first President. By the mid-1770s he had, in effect, become a symbol of independence and an emerging national identity. He gained international fame through his unswerving determination as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and images of him (many largely fictitious) were sold not only in America but throughout Europe as well. His birthday was cause for celebration and commemoration across the country before the War's end. The confidence and the expectations of his country and the curiosity of the world lay squarely on his shoulders.



As the war drew to a close, Washington expressed his vision for his nation in a letter to each of nation's 13 governors. This Circular Letter, written in 1783, detailed the "Four Pillars of Republican Government", which Washington believed were essential elements for the future success of the nation. The letter was also published and widely distributed as a broadside entitled "His Excellency General Washington's LAST LEGACY." Many modern historians believe this is one of the most important articles Washington produced in his long career. Months before, Washington had quelled a potential rebellion among officers in the Army in his famous Newburg Address calling upon his officers *in the name of our common country – as you value your own sacred honor – as you respect the rights of humanity; as you regard the military & national character of America, to express your utmost horror & detestation of the man who wishes, under any specious pretences, to overturn the liberties of our country, & who wickedly attempts to open the flood gates of civil discord, & deluge our rising empire in blood.*

On December 23, 1783, Washington shocked much of the world when he resigned his commission to Congress in Annapolis. The artist Benjamin West wrote that upon hearing the news King George III of England stated if it were true then Washington would be "the greatest man in the world." The voluntary relinquishment of power was rare in the 18th-century world; however, Washington had done what his country had asked of him and wanted to return to his life at Mount Vernon. He believed his public service was over.

Four years later, Washington reluctantly agreed to attend the Constitutional Convention. He did not want to be viewed as having broken his oath, given to Congress in 1783, not to reenter public life. Washington eventually agreed to attend the Convention in the summer of 1787 and presided over the proceedings which established a new instrument of government for the United States.

Two years later, on April 30, 1789, Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States. His two terms were tumultuous as he struggled to guide the nation through the early years of government. His guiding charter was the Constitution, and he worked to establish the efficacy and authority of the document throughout his administration. He invoked Constitutional precedent in three major instances: the Neutrality Proclamation in 1793; the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794; and the Jay Treaty in 1794. In addition to international and internal threats to the nation's stability, Washington was tasked with lowering national debt, establishing a viable banking system, appointing the Supreme Court, establishing treaties with Indians that would



open the west for American expansion, and a myriad of other duties necessary to securely establish a viable form of government.

At the end of his first term in office, Washington informed his cabinet and close friends that he wished to retire. Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, who were strong political adversaries, united in their belief that Washington must serve a second term. Both wrote to encourage him to reconsider. In his letter, which reminded Washington of the still fragile state of the nation, Jefferson told Washington *"the north and south will hang together if they have you to hang on."* Jefferson went on to remind Washington, *"To the inducements urged from a view of our domestic affairs, I will add a bare mention...that weighty motives for continuance are to be found in our foreign affairs."* His advisors and the nation considered his role indispensable. Reluctantly, George Washington agreed to serve a second term.

In 1797, Washington left office and returned to Mount Vernon. For the next two and a half years until his death in 1799, he enjoyed the life of a gentleman farmer and welcomed hundreds and hundreds of guests each year – many of whom had traveled from Europe to meet him. His fame and reputation was truly international. His correspondence on subjects ranging from farming to industry to government was far flung with correspondents in America, England, Ireland, Germany, Spain – even the Emperor of Morocco wrote to solicit Washington's opinion.

As an ambitious young man struggling to gain a reputation, in all likelihood, George Washington never dreamed of the international acclaim he would achieve. Despite his desire to retire to private life and "domestic ease", he found himself called again and again to serve his country. Through his actions and character, he became a lasting icon of his nation in the eyes of the world. Today, two centuries after his death, Washington's legacy remains a relevant symbol of Independence and the ideals of a democratic nation.