

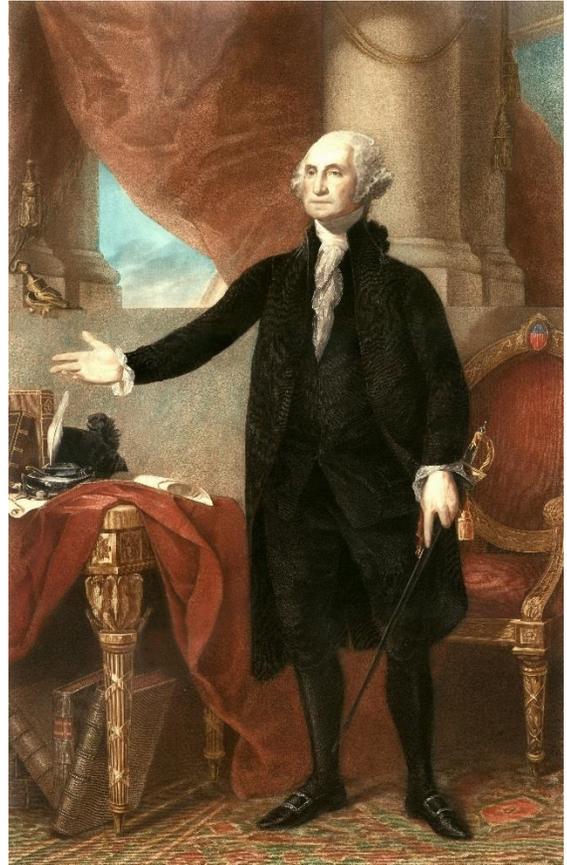
The Presidency of George Washington

George Washington, the most influential and popular figure of the time, was elected the first President of the United States. He would serve as president from 1789-1797. There was no clear understanding of how the office of the president would operate. The Constitution created the office, but there was not really a guideline for conducting the executive branch of the government. George Washington was challenged to chart the course for himself and future presidents. He often remarked, “I walk on untrodden ground.” During his two terms in office, George Washington set many precedents for the position that remain accepted procedure. Washington’s leadership and understanding of the critical role he played in shaping the future of the United States created the foundation for success in the new republic.

A **precedent** is an action that sets a basis for similar situations as they arise in the future. George Washington established important patterns, or precedents, for future presidents to follow. Some of the critical precedents Washington established for the presidency include forming a cabinet, using the modest title of “Mr. President,” establishing the constitutional authority to enforce laws, and retiring after two terms in office.

One key development associated with Washington was the creation of the **cabinet system**. Washington called on Thomas Jefferson to be his Secretary of State and Alexander Hamilton to be his Secretary of the Treasury. For all of the new president’s experience in leading the military and participating in the various Continental Congresses and Constitutional Convention, Washington understood that others might have more expertise in some critical areas related to government policy. As a result, Washington created the cabinet system to surround himself with experts in various fields in order to better craft critical decisions in the best interest of the country. The appointment of Jefferson to Secretary of State is a prime example of this approach. Thomas Jefferson had spent the majority of the Revolutionary War period in Europe negotiating with world leaders for an alliance to help the Patriot cause. He was fluent in speaking and/or reading six different languages. Washington was a great military leader but did not possess Jefferson’s international experience. Some leaders might have felt threatened by giving positions of authority to other highly acclaimed individuals. Washington, however, understood the importance of making the best possible decisions for the new United States, and viewed the other leaders of his cabinet as an asset and not a threat to his own power.

The cabinet is a precedent that has been maintained even through today’s modern presidencies. Today, the President’s cabinet is traditionally made up of the Vice President and the heads of the fifteen different executive departments. There may be other key advisors to the President who



function in a cabinet role. During George Washington's presidency, the cabinet was made up of four individuals. Washington's cabinet members did not always agree on the advice being given to the president. Heated arguments erupted between Hamilton and Jefferson in cabinet meetings over the expanding power of the federal government and what side the United States should take in the war that erupted between France and Great Britain. The challenging debates within Washington's private cabinet meetings helped him to formulate the policy direction for issues critical to the development of the United States. Not all precedents set by Washington were as policy driven as establishing the cabinet.

The proper title for addressing the new President of the United States was not established by the Constitution. Much discussion and debate centered on this seemingly trivial issue. Some believed the office needed to project a proper level of reverence and dignity. Others, including George Washington, believed a more simplistic title reflected the true republican nature of the new government. There was great care taken to distinguish the office of President from resembling anything similar to a monarchy. George Washington emphasized this standard when the precedent was set during his term of office for addressing the chief executive as simply, "Mr. President." There would be no lofty title of "majesty" or "excellency" or "exalted."

During the early years of George Washington's presidency, considerable tension existed between the United States, France, and Great Britain. The onset of war between revolutionary France and monarchical Great Britain in 1793 firmly divided American opinion. Most at issue was whether the Treaty of Alliance of 1778 required the United States to support France in its war against Great Britain. George Washington favored non-intervention to avoid siding with France against Great Britain. Secretary of State Jefferson believed it highly unlikely that the French would call upon the Americans to honor the 1778 treaty; the administration should simply wait and see. But Alexander Hamilton argued that so great was the danger of American involvement in the war that Washington should immediately suspend the treaty. Hamilton and his nationalist supporters believed in the necessity of maintaining close ties with Britain, the most important trading partner of the U.S. and the world's greatest naval power. In 1794, John Jay, now Chief Justice of the United States, was sent to London to arrange a settlement with Britain. **Jay's Treaty** settled several ongoing disputes with Britain. The United States persuaded Britain to forgive many pre-Revolutionary debts, withdraw British troops from American soil by 1796, and to drop certain restrictions on U.S. trade to the colonies Britain still held in the Americas. This ushered in an era of booming trade with Britain.

Spain was also at war with revolutionary France and had suffered a humiliating defeat. Fearing the loss of its American empire, Spain suddenly found it expedient to settle the ongoing dispute with the United States over control of the Mississippi River. In 1795, American envoy Thomas Pinckney negotiated a treaty with Spain in which the Mississippi would be opened to American shipping the following year. **Pinckney's Treaty** fit in with Jefferson's vision of an American empire, and his supporters, mostly representative of the agrarian South and West who were looking forward to American expansion, were delighted. These



two treaties established American sovereignty over the land west of the Appalachian Mountains and opened to American commerce a vast market.

Domestic policy under Washington included the establishment of a federal judicial system under the Judiciary Act of 1789 and the implementation of a fiscal program to manage the massive national debt contracted during the Revolutionary War. As Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton established the **Bank of the United States** in order to have the federal government assume the Revolutionary War debts of the several states, pay off the war debts, raise money for the new government, and create a common currency.

Washington's new government encouraged Congress to pass taxes on liquor to help pay the states' debt from the Revolutionary War. The **whiskey tax** hit the small whiskey-makers in western settlements particularly hard because they made liquor using excess crops of grain in order to make it easier to transport. They even used whiskey as a medium of exchange. The **Whiskey Rebellion** resulted in Western Pennsylvania when armed violence broke out as farmers frightened and attacked federal tax collectors. George Washington led a large militia force into the western counties and put down the rebellion. Washington's response set a critical precedent for presidential authority to enforce the law.



An important precedent George Washington set at the end of his second term as President of the United States was to not seek a third term. There is no provision in the original Constitution limiting a President to two terms in office. It was not until the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1951 that the President became strictly limited to two terms as chief executive. The precedent Washington set for this voluntary limit was followed by every president until Franklin Roosevelt was elected four times in the 1930s-1940s.

George Washington, as President of the United States, was very popular among all classes of people in all regions of the country. This popularity would have likely given him another victory in the election of 1796 – if he had sought the office. Instead of running for a third term, Washington chose to step away from national politics and retire to his home at Mount Vernon in Virginia. His reasoning included a personal desire for retirement. He also wanted to demonstrate to the world that the transfer of power could be achieved peacefully under the United States' new form of government. George Washington wanted to emphasize that he was not a king and that the republican system was effective. The voluntary two term precedent set by Washington lasted for many years.

There were a few other important precedents and policy perspectives George Washington felt very strongly about that did not survive beyond his administration. Washington was very concerned about emerging political factions in the United States during the early years of the republic. He also

strongly opposed tying the United States to other countries through formal alliances. Both of these issues were addressed by Washington in his famous **Farewell Address** to the nation as he was leaving office. In the speech, Washington warned the nation would be in jeopardy if political parties formed. He warned political parties would put “a small but artful and enterprising minority... in the place of the delegated will of the nation.” Concerning the involvement of the United States with other nations, Washington encouraged commercial trade relationships but wanted to maintain “as little political connection as possible.” The **political parties** Washington feared formalized right after his presidency ended and the international entanglements he warned against also emerged over time. These were issues in which Washington unsuccessfully sought to establish precedent.

Political parties had their origin in the differences of opinion between Washington’s Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, and Secretary of Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Both felt very differently about the organization of the new nation and how the nation should be run, including the constitutionality of a national bank. Hamilton and his political supporters later became known as Federalists. They wanted to expand the power of the government to stabilize the nation and its economy. Jefferson’s supporters came to be known as the Democratic-Republicans and believed that the national government must limit its power to only those areas described by the Constitution. Within the foundations of these two groups is the two-party system that began to control United States politics after Washington’s presidency. Washington’s warning against parties was not heeded and when his retirement was announced, Hamilton, Jefferson, and their supporters attacked one another and competed to replace him.

George Washington’s presidency was challenging in that he was creating the office of the chief executive while he governed. The leadership demonstrated by the first President led to his popularity that spanned the nation and crossed the political divisions that were beginning to emerge. George Washington was a leader who understood the importance of the precedents he was setting in order that the new republic endure. The voluntary retirement of George Washington after two terms as President was a sharp contrast to the traditional monarchical rule common in Europe. The establishment of this peaceful transfer of power is an enduring precedent among the many that George Washington set as the United States’ first chief executive.

Differences Between the First Political Parties	
Federalists	Democratic-Republicans
Leader: Alexander Hamilton	Leader: Thomas Jefferson
Favored:	Favored:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rule by the wealthy class • Strong federal government • Emphasis on manufacturing • Loose interpretation of the Constitution • British alliance • National bank • Protective tariffs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rule by the people • Strong state governments • Emphasis on agriculture • Strict interpretation of the Constitution • French alliance • State banks • Free trade

Understanding Charts

Analyzing Information

Which leader would American business owners favor? Why?