

Historical events have patterns that seem to repeat, regardless of the country, time, or place. Regarding revolutions, it is the same. At first, rebels rise against the government and claim to want to throw out a strong, overpowering regime. A strong man emerges, who completely takes over, and refuses to relinquish power. A fight for leadership ensues. There is bloodshed, and the initial reason the rebels had in overthrowing the strong government disappears. Yet, the American Revolution shattered this pattern, in large part because of the character and actions of George Washington.

In 1789, the year Washington became president, America was faced with many challenges. The country was small, divided by state loyalties, attacked by outside countries, threatened by neighbors in all directions, and in huge debt from a war it had just barely won. On top of this, the United States of America was trying out a form of government that had not existed on Earth for 1,800 years, and trying this out in a large territory. The actions of Washington and his advisors established the framework that the new country could build on over the next centuries.

Federalists and Republicans

From the very beginning, American leaders were split into two main factions, or ways of thinking, about how government should look and operate. Though Washington disliked political parties and tried to dissuade others from beginning or joining them, they naturally formed during his two terms. One party became known as the Federalists, and the other party the Republicans.

(Please note: The names of the political parties of the 1790s are not the same names as the political parties of our times. Though the Republicans of the 1790s called themselves Republicans, some modern textbook authors call this party the “Democratic-Republicans” or the “Jeffersonian Republicans.” This book will call the parties the name they called themselves, the “Republicans” and the “Federalists.”)

The main point these two sides argued about was the size and power of the federal government. The Federalists wanted a stronger central government, and the Republicans wanted the states to be stronger. The Federalists thought that with a stronger central (or federal) government, the country would be better defended from foreign enemies, stronger to build a growing economy, and it would be united. The Republicans thought that with stronger states, Americans would enjoy more liberty, be free to live as they choose, and build healthy families and strong farms. The graph below roughly shows which Americans were attracted to the two parties and what the parties stood for. Of course, there were exceptions.

Republicans

Jefferson, Monroe
Farmers
Planters
Agrarian
South and West
Smaller Government

Federalists

Hamilton, J. Adams, Washington, Marshall
Merchants and Bankers
Tradesmen
Cosmopolitan
Northeast
Expansive Government

Weak Army and Navy
Bill of Rights
Tended to be Pro-Slavery
Pro-Expansion

Strong Army and Navy
Distrusted Common People
Tended to be Anti-Slavery
Reluctant Expansionists

Even though these parties formed during Washington's presidency, they were nothing like they are today. Partly because of George Washington, politicians attempted to work together, were united in their defeat of the British, and were interested in seeing the new American republic succeed. However, by 1796, many of the Founding Fathers were not on speaking terms.

Banking Policy

Washington established the cabinet in one of his first actions. The cabinet is a group of advisers to the president, who are also in charge of executive departments. Cabinet members are in charge of foreign affairs (Secretary of State), war (Secretary of War), finance (Secretary of the Treasury), and other executive departments. The president is in charge of his cabinet members, and he directs them. The cabinet is not a part of the Constitution, but Washington created it, and every president since has had a cabinet. Through the cabinet, the president enacts his policies. Washington chose the best leaders of the day, and he chose men who had strongly differing views. Though Washington knew he was not the smartest man in the room, he was not afraid to choose more intelligent men to advise him. This display of courage and humility helped the new country in many ways.

Two of Washington's cabinet members – Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson – became bitter political enemies. Hamilton wanted a strong, central government that would support a thriving business class, and he wanted the wealthy to become directly involved with the success of the republic. Jefferson wanted a weak central government so that the states and individuals would be free to enjoy their lives. In many ways, George Washington favored the ideas of Alexander Hamilton.

Hamilton proposed policies that Washington promoted, and these became the economic policies of the young United States of America. As a result, America quickly became a respected country in the world and Americans benefitted greatly. Hamilton proposed the following actions taken by the American government:

1. The federal government assumed all debt of the states and paid it back 100%. During the American Revolution, states borrowed money from Americans and from foreign countries, and it was difficult for the states to pay it back. Because the federal government paid back the debt, America gained respect from foreign countries, and American merchants could do business overseas. It also placed the states under the power of the federal government.
2. The federal government sold bonds to Americans and gave wealthier Americans a stake in the success of the new country. When someone buys a government bond, the government promises to pay back the bond at a later date with more money. People who bought American bonds gave the country a loan, and the health of the country determined

if it could pay back the bonds. Selling bonds to Americans made wealthy Americans work toward strengthening the country because they wanted to have their bonds paid off.

3. In selling bonds, the federal government created a new national debt. Alexander Hamilton stated, “A national debt is a national blessing.”
4. The federal government established a National Bank that was 80% owned by private investors. This bank printed money, helped the government pay its workers, and was a source of credit for people and businesses to borrow money.

Hamilton’s banking policies upset James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. They did not like that wealthy Americans were given favors by the federal government, and they thought it was unfair to states that had paid their debt, that now everyone had to pay the debt of other states. James Madison eventually moved to the party of Jefferson, the Republicans.

Whiskey Rebellion

In 1794, George Washington led a force of 13,000 soldiers to crush a rebellion by western Pennsylvania farmers, known as the Whiskey Rebellion. West of the Appalachian Mountains, many farmers brought their produce to market by putting crops onto boats and sailing down the Mississippi River. Alternately, they used poor roads. Because corn is heavy and challenging to transport, and because Americans liked to drink whiskey, farmers turned the corn into whiskey and sold the liquor. The federal government placed a tax on whiskey, which was proposed by Hamilton to help pay the Revolutionary war debt. The farmers protested, created an army, and threatened to kill tax collectors and government officials.

The Whiskey Rebellion greatly disturbed President Washington. He said, “If the laws are to be trampled upon with impunity, then there is an end put, with one stroke, to republican government.” Washington’s soldiers quelled the protesters without a fight and the leaders were tried and sentenced to death, then Washington pardoned and freed the leaders. Jefferson despised the use of American soldiers against Americans.

Foreign Policy

The foreign policy problems of the young United States of America were existential. This means that each of the challenges to the United States from abroad threatened the existence of the young and relatively weak country.

In 1789, the French Revolution began, and for the next 26 years, America faced a resulting gauntlet of challenges that nearly destroyed our country. Revolutionary Frenchmen wanted to overthrow their king, establish a republic, and spread revolution to all of Europe. They wanted Americans to help them. But the French Revolution became bloody, destructive, and dangerous. When Napoleon Bonaparte took over France in 1799, he wanted to take over Europe, and wanted the U.S. to help in defeating Great Britain. But Great Britain wanted America’s help in defeating the French.

President George Washington wanted America to stay clear of the French Revolution and France's war against the British. He issued the Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793. Washington's proclamation made it clear that America would not support Great Britain or France in the war. However, the British attacked American ships at sea, and impressed, or kidnapped, American sailors and forced them to work on British naval ships for years. Also, the French attacked American ships at sea, destroying American property and killing American sailors. Washington knew America was not strong enough to go to war against France or against Great Britain.

Thomas Jefferson strenuously objected to the Proclamation of Neutrality because he wanted the U.S.A. to support France. As the Secretary of State, Jefferson thought that he was unable to support the policies of President Washington, and thus he resigned.

In 1795, Washington succeeded in having Great Britain and Spain agree to treaties that opened the West for settlement and made the seas safer for Americans. In Jay's Treaty, the British promised to evacuate its forts on American soil in the West and to allow American ships safe passage on the seas. In Pinckney's Treaty, Spain promised to allow Americans safe travel on the Mississippi River. Many Americans were angry at Washington because they wanted their country to go to war against Great Britain, but he thought America was too weak to win another war, and he wanted to give America time to get stronger.

In the West, Americans streamed in over the Appalachian Mountains into the Northwest Territory. Indians who had lived there for centuries, like the Miami, the Shawnee, and the Delaware, fought back. After American forces lost under General Saint Claire, Washington ordered General "Mad" Anthony Wayne to fight, and he defeated the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Wayne negotiated a treaty with the Indians, the Treaty of Greenville (1795), which allowed for safe immigration of Americans to the West.

In northern Africa, a number of Muslim countries believed that their religion gave them authority to capture and enslave Americans. In 1786, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams asked Tripoli's ambassador Sidi Haji Abdrahaman why Tripoli was making war on nations who had not harmed it. The ambassador replied, "It was written in their Koran, that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet [Muhammad] were sinners, whom it was the right and duty of the faithful to plunder and enslave; and that every mussulman [Muslim] who was slain in this warfare was sure to go to paradise." The young America was not yet strong enough to challenge the Muslims, thus America paid \$1 million every year for approximately 15 years as "tribute" so the Muslim nations of Africa would not attack Americans at sea. Washington created a navy in 1794, but it remained weak its first few years.

Farewell Address

George Washington refused to serve a third term as president. He thought that it was time for a new leader, and for him to go back to his farm at Mount Vernon. This act of relinquishing power did not have a modern equivalent. In addition, Washington did this twice, in 1783 and 1798.

Nowhere on Earth in the modern world was there another person who had done this. Washington had done all he could to establish a republic where changes of power would happen peacefully.

In his farewell address, Washington stated that Americans required God and religion to maintain a republic. He wrote, "Religion and morality are indispensable supports." He also wrote that Americans would not have "security for property, for reputation, for life if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths" of officeholders. Without religion, Washington believed that the best possible plan of government, the Constitution, would not stand.

Regarding foreign policy, Washington urged the young country to be patient as it gained in strength and military prowess before entering into a war. He wrote, "Twenty years peace with such an increase of population and resources as we have a right to expect; added to our remote situation from the jarring powers, will in all probability enable us in a just cause to bid defiance to any power on earth." Incredibly, it appears that Washington was correct. In about 20 years, America joined the world as one of the stronger powers to be reckoned with.

Legacy of George Washington

Congress commissioned Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee to write a eulogy for Washington after he died in 1799. Lee captured what all thought of Washington, and how Washington would be perceived by future historians. He wrote, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life; pious, just, humane, temperate and sincere; uniform, dignified and commanding, his example was as edifying to all around him, as were the effects of that example lasting."

Washington is the measure by which all presidents are judged. The cabinet system he created still exists in its basic form and purpose. At the country's founding and for many years afterward, Americans demanded high moral principles from their presidents. All presidents, except one, have served a maximum of two terms. Americans generally want their presidents to be unifiers and not engage in rough and tumble politics. The United States of America was both lucky and blessed to have as their first president the greatest man in the world.

