

FREEDOM

STORIES

George Washington

February 22, 1732



Sacred Fire

Historical Spotlight

There are men in history whose presence reshapes the landscape of their times so decisively that the nation seems forever marked by the contours of their character. George Washington stands among them in a category nearly his own, for he understood liberty not just as a political achievement but as a moral inheritance entrusted by God to a people capable of sustaining it.

He believed, as he later wrote, that “human rights can only be assured among a virtuous people,” and this conviction guided him long before he ever commanded an army or presided over a nation.

His birthday, and our celebration of so great a man, is not an exercise in patriotic nostalgia. It is an opportunity to examine how one man’s devotion to virtue helped secure the foundations of a republic that still depends on those same foundations today.

Washington’s leadership was surprisingly not shaped by theatrical rhetoric. His steady discipline of a life ordered toward honor, duty, and reverence for Providence set him apart long before he was asked to direct



the Continental Army. His officers repeatedly observed him move through the bitter years of the Revolution with a remarkable steadiness, a steadiness shaped not by stoicism but by the inward habits of a man who understood that freedom could never flourish where chaos or emotion reigned in the human heart.

His own Rules of Civility remain a dear and humbling reminder of how much he regarded order, dignity and service to those around him. The stories of him praying on his knees at Valley Forge in the snow endure because they communicate something we understand but rarely witness. Washington believed that a cause rooted in liberty required the blessing of the Author of liberty, and he governed himself

accordingly, refusing to allow fear, anger, or ambition to master him.

The clearest test of this inner strength came not during the hardship of war but in the intoxicating aura of victory. In 1782 he reacted with visible grief when informed that certain officers desired to make him king.

*America in the Making:
George Washington at Yorktown
Newell Convers Wyeth, 193/39*

“Human rights can only be assured among a virtuous people. The general government... can never be in danger of degenerating into a monarchy, an oligarchy, an aristocracy, or any despotic or oppressive form so long as there is virtue in the body of the people.”

- George Washington, Draft of First Inaugural Address, 1789

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When he accepted the presidency, he did so with an almost pastoral clarity about the moral demands of the office. His Farewell Address remains one of the most perceptive analyses of the American experiment ever penned. “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,” he warned, “religion and morality are indispensable supports.” This was not a private theological musing but a sober declaration that the republic itself stood upon the character of its citizens. Os Guinness warns us in *A Free People’s Suicide* that “the greatest enemy of freedom is freedom unrestrained, for freedom requires virtue or it will self-destruct,” a truth that Washington lived before anyone had articulated it so succinctly.



It is difficult to read Washington’s warnings without sensing how sharply they speak into our own times. A nation that strains under the weight of cynicism, polarization, and moral exhaustion may search for structural solutions, yet Washington would remind us that the fate of the republic rests not first upon institutions but upon the inner condition of the people who inhabit it. Guinness notes in *Last Call for Liberty* that “the founders knew that the ultimate threat to freedom lies not in the state but in the character of the citizens themselves,” and Washington stands as the most vivid embodiment of that insight.

To celebrate his birthday is therefore to confront a choice. We may admire Washington’s portrait while ignoring his principles, or we may allow his life to instruct ours. He governed with humility long after he possessed the power to do otherwise, he refused a crown when the world expected him to seize it, and he anchored his public service in the belief that Providence guides nations that submit themselves to its keeping.

What this means to us

His example calls us, as urgently now as it did then, to recover the virtues that allow the sacred fire of liberty not only to survive but to flourish.

Before we look for another leader like George Washington, we must first be a people who learn to love the “Holy Cause of Liberty.”

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” - Galatians 5:1

Please visit our Resources Paper Trail of Liberty, and download our republished Washington’s Farewell Address and Rules of Civility in its entirety.

Siege of Yorktown, 1781
Auguste Couder, 1836

“Washington demonstrated the character politics requires but rarely produces. His refusal of power remains one of the most important lessons in the entire history of the republic.”

- Os Guinness, *A Free People’s Suicide*, p. 104.