George Washington's Advice

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The man who is known to all Americans as "*first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen*," gave us much sound advice on how to keep our independence and freedom. George Washington's advice is part of our American heritage that should be known to all our citizens.

#1 **RELY ON GOD**

When George Washington took the oath as first President of the United States on April 30, 1789, he added this four-word prayer of his own: "*So help me God*."

These words are still used in official oaths by Americans talking public office, in courts of justice, and in other legal proceedings. Washington's words show that he was a man who believed in asking God's help in every part of our private and public lives.

During the terrible times of the Revolutionary War, Washington repeatedly counseled his troops to put their faith and trust in God. Here is one of his messages:

*"The time is now near at hand which must probably determine, whether Americans are to be, freeman or slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call their own .... The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army .... Let us therefore rely on the goodness of the cause and the aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hands victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble actions."*

In his first Inaugural Address as President of the United States, Washington reverently acknowledged our country's dependence on Almighty God:

*"It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe - who presides in the council of nations - and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States, a government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes."*

After serving as our President during probably the most important two terms in our history, Washington advised us again that religion and morality are necessary for good government. In his Farewell Address on September 19, 1796, he clearly said: "*Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."*

#2 **HONESTY**

George Washington was a man of great personal honesty. The famous story about Washington chopping down the cherry tree, and admitting it to his father with the words, "I cannot tell a lie," perfectly illustrates the character of the Father of Our Country. In his Farewell Address, Washington, having served our country in war and peace, gave his advice that we as a nation should be bound by the same rules of honor and honesty that should bind individuals. He said: *"I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs that honesty is always the best policy."*

As part of his belief that our nation should practice honesty, Washington urged that our Government always be honorable in money matters. He urged our country to borrow as little money as necessary and to avoid piling up a big debt. He realized that emergencies, such as unavoidable wars, would require us to borrow from time to time; but he urged that these debts be paid off as rapidly as possible. Washington said that failure to do this means we will be making our children pay the debts we ourselves should pay. Here are his words from his Farewell Address:

*"Avoid likewise the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertions in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear."*

#3 **RESIST POLITICAL PRESSURES**

Washington was well aware of how politicians are subjected to political and economic pressures which may persuade them to give up their principles, or to favor one group over another. In the midst of such pressures from all sides, Washington stood like a rock of strength and advised us how to keep to a standard of truth and justice. As President of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Washington gave this advice to his fellow Delegates:

*"If to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterwards defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair; the event is in the hand of God."*

The men who followed Washington's Advice produced the United States Constitution, which has properly been called "the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man."

#4 **FORMULA FOR PEACE**

George Washington was not only "first in war," but also "first in peace." He developed the best formula for keeping the peace that has ever been devised by man: the formula of discouraging the enemy from attack by making sure that he knows beforehand that America is ready for war. In his Fifth Annual Address to Congress, given in Philadelphia on December 3, 1793, Washington said:

*"There is a rank due to the United States among nations, which will be withheld, if not absolutely lost, by the reputation of weakness. If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it; if we desire to secure the peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war."*

Washington's advice on how best to keep the peace is thus in two parts: (1) we must be ready for war, and (2) just as important, the enemy must know we are ready.

#5 **PRESERVE THE CONSTITUTION**

Washington realized that as our country grew, there would be "bad guys" who would try to seize powers they shouldn't have and change the wonderful plan for American freedom and independence set up by the Founding Fathers. On the other hand, he knew that some changes in the Constitution would be necessary from time to time. Washington advised us that these changes should be made only in the way the Constitution provides - and not in any other way. He said in his Farewell Address:

*"If in the opinion of the people the distribution or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this in one instance may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed."*

Washington thus advised that we should be alert to protect the freedom of the people against men who try to take too much power in an unconstitutional way. Washington believed that *"Government is like fire - a good servant, but a dangerous master."*

#6 **LIBERTY MUST INCLUDE RESPONSIBILITY**

As a schoolboy, Washington wrote in his copybook: *"Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire - conscience."*

Washington had risked everything he had in the Revolutionary struggle for liberty. But he knew that "liberty" does not mean license to do anything without restrictions. True liberty must include responsibility to conscience - to God and to country. In his Farewell Address, he advised us to give full support to our new Government:

*"Respect for its authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty."*

#7 **AVOID FOREIGN INFLUENCE**

Washington knew that European nations had been constantly involved in one war after another. He knew that their political and economic interests were not the same as ours. He knew also that various foreign nations would try constantly to extend their influence over the American Government and people. Washington believed that the only way for the United States to grow strong and keep her hard-won independence was to remain free from European wars, problems, and influence. In his Farewell Address, he said:

*"History and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government."*

Washington predicted that foreign propaganda would operate inside and outside our Government. He warned that 'foreign influence' in our Government would even trick Americans about whom we can trust. He said in his Farewell Address:

*"Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people to surrender their interests."*

#8 **DON'T EXPECT FAVORS FROM NATIONS**

In advising us against becoming entangled with foreign problems, Washington warned us against giving favors to other nations in the hope of receiving favors in return. He warned that we will be "reproached with ingratitude for not giving them more," and we will have to "pay with a portion of our independence" for placing ourselves in such a position. He said in his Farewell Address:

*"There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation. It is an illusion which experience must cure, which a just pride ought to discard."*

#9 **PATRIOTISM**

Washington was one of our greatest American patriots, and he demanded patriotism in the men who served with him in war and peace. Legend tells us that the night he crossed the Delaware, he gave the famous command: "Put none but Americans on guard tonight." Even though we cannot find this quotation in his published writings, it accurately represents his thinking. In his Farewell Address he advised all our citizens:

*"The name of AMERICAN, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation."*

#10 **THANKSGIVING TO GOD**

Washington advised Americans to set aside a day of public Thanksgiving to God for the great favors He has bestowed on our nation. On October 3, 1789 Washington proclaimed the first Thanksgiving Day - the first of a long series of presidential orders that have remained part of American life down to the present:

*"Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor, and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint committee requested me to commend to the people of United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness, now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next, to be devoted to the service of that great and glorious Being, Who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or will be."*