CLOSE-READING WASHINGTON IN HOUDON’S ART

Analyze key elements of this statue to answer the questions below and on the following page.

1. Describe Washington’s posture.

2. Look at his hands and feet. Describe the gestures indicated by the hands.

3. What does the placement of his feet indicate about him?

4. Describe his facial expression. Where is his gaze directed in relation to the statue itself?

What might the sculptor have been indicating about Washington in sculpting his face in this way?
5. Neoclassical sculptures of Houdon’s and Washington’s time typically depicted their subjects wearing the garments antiquity. Washington wanted to be shown in contemporary clothing and is shown in military garb. What does this communicate about his personality, temperament, and what he valued?

6. Washington’s left arm, as well as his cape and a sword, are resting on a fasces (a symbol of power). He is wearing his military uniform. What does this communicate about Washington?

7. Behind Washington, visible through his legs, is a plow. In his right hand is a cane. What does this communicate about him?

8. Taken as a whole, the imagery alludes to the ancient Roman, Cincinnatus.* Based on what you know about both Cincinnatus and Washington, what is the sculptor conveying to the viewer about Washington’s priorities and his character?

9. How might the imagery of both military and farm life reference Washington’s self-governance?

*Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was an ancient Roman soldier and statesman who worked on his own farm until, during an invasion, he was asked to serve as dictator of Rome. He did so, and after the Roman victory over the invaders, he relinquished his power in order to return to his farm.
CLOSE-READING WASHINGTON IN TRUMBULL’S ART

Directions  Analyze key elements of the painting to answer the questions below and on the following page.

*General George Washington Resigning His Commission, oil on canvas by John Trumbull, U.S. Capitol.*

1. Describe Washington’s posture.

Describe the posture of the others in the room.

2. How did the artist use light, color, and line to create a focal point?

What is the focal point of the painting?
3. Describe the gestures indicated by Washington's hands and feet.

What is he doing with each hand? What is he holding in his right hand, and what is he doing with it? What is the artist highlighting about Washington?

4. Look at the faces of the other people in the room. At what is their attention directed?

How many people are looking elsewhere?

What does this communicate about their attitudes about Washington and what is occurring?

5. Describe Washington's facial expression.

Where are his eyes directed?

What might Trumbull have been indicating about Washington in depicting his facial expression in this way?

6. An empty chair is behind Washington. A regal-looking cloak is resting on it. What reference is Trumbull making about what Washington is doing in this painting?

What statement does this make about Washington, power, and self-restraint?
It was 1783, and George Washington's troops were stationed at Newburgh, New York. At this late stage of the conflict, Congress was flat-out broke, and the army had not been paid for months. On March 10, an anonymous address from a “fellow soldier” (most likely Major John Armstrong) circulated through camp, calling the officers to meet the next day to answer “a country that tramples upon your rights, disdains your cries, and insults your distress.” The announcement suggested that the army should, under Washington’s leadership, defy Congress and launch a military coup. At this moment the Revolution could have spun out of control, ending in tyranny. Resistant to the allure of power, Washington determined to quell the incipient uprising.

Recognizing that the army’s patience had worn thin and that its grievances were legitimate, Washington knew he could neither cancel the meeting nor allow it to take place. Instead he shrewdly called his own substitute gathering on March 15, hoping somehow to mollify the men and avert a coup. He would meet his disgruntled officers in person, face-to-face, either to stand them down or be deposed.

On the fifteenth, a “visibly agitated” Washington (according to an eye witness) spoke to a tense, restive audience in an over-crowded assembly hall known as “The Temple of Virtue.” He begged the officers not to take a step that would bury their reputations in infamy. “My God,” he asked, what evil could the author of the anonymous address have been up to? “Can he be a friend to the Country? Rather is he not an insidious foe,” perhaps even an enemy agent “sowing the seeds of discord & seperation between the Civil and Military power of the Continent?”

Despite an eloquent and impassioned speech, Washington’s arguments for forbearance fell on deaf ears. As hostile murmurs welled up in the audience, he miraculously subdued the malcontents with a dramatic gesture: Washington pulled out his glasses. No one had ever seen him wear them in public before. Donning them, he remarked, “Gentlemen, you must excuse me. Not only have I gone gray, but I have also grown blind in the service of my country.” That poignant moment, that admission of weakness, that selfless dedication to duty, shattered the mutiny and left the officers in tears. After Washington left the room, the assemblage unanimously rejected a military coup in favor of peaceful negotiations with Congress. The new nation had survived its brush with despotism.

Indeed, the American Revolution is unusual among modern world revolutions because it did not end in a dictatorship, like the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions.

That the new nation instead ended up a republic had a lot to do with Washington’s careful use of power. Once the war was over and independence won, his job complete, Washington resigned as Commander in Chief and retired back to his Mount Vernon plantation. The iron-
ny is that by never abusing power, and by giving it back to people, he became more and more powerful. Washington won the trust of his countrymen, who repeatedly called for his services, not only as Commander in Chief, but also as president of the 1787 Constitutional Convention, and finally as President of the U.S. for two terms, from 1789 to 1797. On four separate occasions the American people or their representatives thus unanimously elected Washington to lead them.

Washington’s contemporaries well understood his virtue. Consider the statue sculpted by the eighteenth-century French artist Jean Antoine Houdon. Instead of depicting one of Washington’s military victories, the statue shows Washington retiring from the army, hanging up his military cloak and sword, and going back to his plow. Similarly, artist John Trumbull’s painting that hangs in the U.S. Capitol rotunda shows Washington resigning his military commission back to Congress and becoming an ordinary citizen again.

Washington always did the virtuous thing because he wanted “secular immortality.” Some men seek spiritual immortality—everlasting life in heaven. But Washington wanted a different type of immortality. He wanted to live forever in the pages of history books, and in the hearts and minds of the American people. He wanted to be a leader unlike any other in modern world history—greatest of them all. To do that, he had to walk away from power, unlike other leaders.

Washington kept answering the call of his country because he became the only one who could. Not until the nation gained maturity could another leader hold it together. As Thomas Jefferson admonished him, “North and South will only hang together if they have you to hang onto.” By accepting two terms as President, Washington put his cherished reputation at stake. Had he died in office (his greatest fear was dying in office) he would have died holding power instead of giving it up, and his prized reputation would have been shot. Not until he retired for good did he secure his secular immortality once and for all. Without an “Indispensable Man” like Washington, the American experiment in republican government could never have succeeded, or become a model and inspiration to the world.

—Stuart Leibiger
LaSalle University

Defining Civic Virtues: Self-Governance
To be self-controlled, avoiding extremes, and to not be excessively influenced or controlled by others.
Discussion Guide

Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. What were George Washington’s troops considering doing in 1783?
2. Do you think Washington was tempted to seize power and become a dictator? Explain.
3. Why might Washington, while addressing the troops, have paused to put on his glasses and admit his eyesight was failing?
4. Self-governance requires officials to moderate the “passions” of the people, i.e., to serve as a check against the tyranny of the majority, or against mob violence. What are some ways that Washington accomplished this?
5. Self-governance also requires individuals to moderate their own passions, i.e., to put the public good ahead of their own self-interest. What are some ways Washington accomplished this?
6. Washington never abused the military power given to him as commander in chief of the continental army. He resisted the temptation to use the army as his personal bodyguard, to make himself a dictator, to become a Caesar, a Napoleon, or a Hitler. Instead, to what principles did Washington remain faithful?
7. Historian Stuart Leibiger notes the irony that by never abusing power, and by giving it back to people, Washington became more and more powerful. Why do you think this came about?
8. Think of other examples from history where individuals have voluntarily given up great power. Are they easy to find? In what ways can a leader demonstrate power by giving it up?
9. Why do you think Washington’s greatest fear was that he would die in office? How does this evidence his putting the public good ahead of his own interest?
10. Why does self-government at a societal level require self-governance on an individual level?
11. Moments after taking the oath of office for the first time, President Washington addressed the new nation, stating, “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the republican model of government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.” Discuss how you personally uphold the virtue of self-governance and ensure the success of this experiment.
Optional Extension: Read the following excerpt from Federalist No. 55 and respond to the question that follows.

“As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form. Were the pictures which have been drawn by the political jealousy of some among us faithful likenesses of the human character, the inference would be, that there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government; and that nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.”

—James Madison, Federalist No. 55

What could happen in a self-governing society if citizens don’t have self-restraint? If elected leaders, and those they appoint, don’t have self-restraint?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Virtue In Action: Class Activity

With your partner(s), highlight the section of the Farewell Address that your teacher assigns to you. Then, read and discuss that section and answer the questions at the end of the handout. Be prepared to report on your responses to those questions.

**Excerpts from Washington's Farewell Address (1796)**

The period for a new election of a citizen to administer the executive government of the United States being not far distant… it appears to me proper, especially as it may conduce to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now apprise you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being considered among the number of those out of whom a choice is to be made.

…be assured that this resolution has not been taken without a strict regard to all the considerations appertaining to the relation which binds a dutiful citizen to his country; and that in withdrawing the tender of service, which silence in my situation might imply, I am influenced by no diminution of zeal for your future interest, no deficiency of grateful respect for your past kindness, but am supported by a full conviction that the step is compatible with both.

…The impressions with which I first undertook the arduous trust were explained on the proper occasion. In the discharge of this trust, I will only say that I have, with good intentions, contributed towards the organization and administration of the government the best exertions of which a very fallible judgment was capable. …Satisfied that if any circumstances have given peculiar value to my services, they were temporary, I have the consolation to believe that, while choice and prudence invite me to quit the political scene, patriotism does not forbid it.

In looking forward to the moment which is intended to terminate the career of my public life, my feelings do not permit me to suspend the deep acknowledgment of that debt of gratitude which I owe to my beloved country for the many honors it has conferred upon me; still more for the steadfast confidence with which it has supported me; and for the opportunities I have thence enjoyed of manifesting

**Notes on Washington's Farewell Address (1796)**

Washington delivers the Farewell Address to tell the American people that he would not seek a third term as president.

Although he is leaving he still has the nation's future interest in mind.

He contributed to the organization and administration of the government with the best judgment possible even though he felt his qualifications were inferior.

His services were temporary.

He believes he that he owes a debt of gratitude to the country and the honors and confidence it bestowed upon him.
my inviolable attachment, by services faithful and persevering, though in usefulness unequal to my zeal.

... The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together; the independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint counsels, and joint efforts of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.

... Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian. It is, indeed, little else than a name, where the government is too feeble to withstand the enterprises of faction, to confine each member of the society within the limits prescribed by the laws, and to maintain all in the secure and tranquil enjoyment of the rights of person and property.

... Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally. ... This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension... is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction... turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty. ... the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.

... It is important, likewise, that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution in those entrusted with its administration, to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres, avoiding in the exercise of the powers of one

Americans must have pride in patriotism despite differences in religion, manners, habits, and political principles.

Liberty will be protected in a government with divided powers. The government needs to be able to withstand the whims of factions, the people need to be limited by the prescribe laws, and security and tranquility must be maintained in order to protect the rights of people and property.

All types of governments must deal with the passions of the human mind.

Problems will increase and men will seek security in the absolute power of one individual.

It is the interest and duty of the people to discourage and restrain these issues.

Government officials should confine themselves to their constitutional powers and avoid overstepping into other departments.
department to encroach upon another. The spirit of encroachment
tends to consolidate the powers of all the departments in one, and
thus to create, whatever the form of government, a real despotism.
A just estimate of that love of power, and proneness to abuse it,
which predominates in the human heart, is sufficient to satisfy us
of the truth of this position. The necessity of reciprocal checks in
the exercise of political power, by dividing and distributing it into
different depositaries, and constituting each the guardian of the
public weal against invasions by the others, has been evinced by
experiments ancient and modern; some of them in our country
and under our own eyes. To preserve them must be as necessary as
to institute them.

...Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political
prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain
would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to
subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props
of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with
the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them... Whatever
may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds
of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to
expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious
principle.

It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary
spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with
more or less force to every species of free government.

...In offering you, my countrymen, these counsels of an old and
affectionate friend, I dare not hope they will make the strong and
lasting impression I could wish; that they will control the usual
current of the passions, or prevent our nation from running the
course which has hitherto marked the destiny of nations. But, if I
may even flatter myself that they may be productive of some partial
benefit, some occasional good; that they may now and then recur
to moderate the fury of party spirit, to warn against the mischiefs
of foreign intrigue, to guard against the impostures of pretended
patriotism; this hope will be a full recompense for the solicitude for
your welfare, by which they have been dictated.

...How far in the discharge of my official duties I have been
guided by the principles which have been delineated, the public
records and other evidences of my conduct must witness to you
and to the world. To myself, the assurance of my own conscience
is, that I have at least believed myself to be guided by them.

If not, the powers may end up being consolidated into one department,
causing despotism.

Checks on the exercise of political power by dividing it and distributing it among
many departments are necessary. The people should be cautious and prevent
encroachments on power between the departments of government.

Religion and morality are crucial in
protecting political prosperity. People
cannot be true patriots if they try to
subvert human happiness.

All people (including politicians) should respect these habits.
Even without religion, morality can prevail through education, reason, and
experience.

He does believe that his recommend-
ations will be beneficial to moderate
factions or parties, warn against foreign
powers, warn against false patriotism
and protect the welfare of the people.

Washington believes that he has been
guided by principles.
## Critical Thinking Questions

1. Write a 1 to 3 sentence summary explaining your assigned section of the Farewell Address.

2. What does this section reveal about George Washington's character? Which of the civic virtues (listed below) is reflected in it?

3. Washington believed that virtue is essential to a republic and was himself a model of self-governance. Below, circle the civic virtue and the constitutional principle most apparent in the section of the Farewell Address that you read and discussed, then answer the question at bottom.

### Civic Virtues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civic Virtues</th>
<th>Contribution</th>
<th>Courage</th>
<th>Humility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
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### Constitutional Principles

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<tr>
<th>Constitutional Principles</th>
<th>Checks and balances</th>
<th>Limited government</th>
<th>Individual liberty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federalism</td>
<td></td>
<td>Consent of the governed</td>
<td>Separation of powers</td>
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</table>

In what way is this civic virtue an important part of maintaining a form of government based, in part, on that particular constitutional principle?
Virtue In Action: Individual Activities

All citizens must play a role for self-government to succeed. For the next month, make a special effort to be aware of and act in ways that promote your own self-governance.

- Write a personal mission statement and a plan for living it out.
- If you start or lead a club, a business, or any new initiative, find ways to ensure it can continue to endure without you there.
- If you play a team sport, be aware of your chance to work with teammates. Instead of trying to make every shot, pass the ball to others who are better positioned.
- Thomas Paine said, “Moderation in temper is always a virtue; but moderation in principle is always a vice.” Draft a written response to Paine’s statement, identifying areas where you find it applicable in your own life.

Sources & Further Reading

Washington, George. “Farewell Address.” September 19, 1796

Virtue Across the Curriculum

Below are corresponding literature and film suggestions to help you teach this virtue across the curriculum. A sample prompt has been provided for the key corresponding work, and you are encouraged to create your own prompts for other suggested works.

“If” by Rudyard Kipling
How does the author define manhood? Are these qualities important only for men?

OTHER WORKS

Emma by Jane Austen
“Go Forth to Life” by Samuel Longfellow
Henry IV, part 1 by William Shakespeare
Little Women by Louisa May Alcott
Rediscovering George Washington directed by Michael Pack, narrated by Richard Brookhiser
Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen
Directions  Self-governance integrates self-reliance and moderation. What relationship do you see between individual self-governance and political self-government? In what ways can you govern yourself to ensure the success of American self-government?

“Moderation in temper is always a virtue; but moderation in principle is always a vice.”

–THOMAS PAINE