George Washington’s Finest Hour: The Newburgh Conspiracy and Identity

Full Lesson Plan

COMPPELLING QUESTION

To what extent are you cultivating the identity necessary to achieve worthy goals such as enhancing freedom in the lives of yourself and others? Would you have given up the opportunity to be king?

VIRTUE

Identity

DEFINITION

Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will evaluate George Washington’s actions to understand his approach to the principle of identity.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand how George Washington’s identity resulted in lasting benefits for the nation he helped create.
- Students will analyze their own goals and ambitions to determine how identity contributes to achievement of worthy goals.
- Students identify a situation in which a flawed sense of identity resulted in failure to meet some personal or group goal.
In 1781, the Continental Army won the Battle of Yorktown, the last major battle against the British. The Americans had won the Revolutionary War, despite the fact that the Congress could rarely supply the army adequately, the states often looked out for their own interests rather than the common good, and civilians frequently failed to support the war effort. By late 1782, military operations had largely ended, but the army remained mobilized at its main garrison in New York in case of a major British attack.

Officers and soldiers went unpaid for long stretches because the Articles of Confederation had created a weak national congress that could not collect taxes from the states. The United States, with no formal independence, risked collapse into military rule as many republics such as ancient Rome had done.

VOCABULARY

- Articles of Confederation
- Caesar
- Cincinnatus
- Scathing
- Banish
- Disgruntled
- Incessant
- Sully
- Conspiracy
- Concurrence
- Exigencies
- Avert
- Deference

INTRODUCE TEXT

Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Compelling Question” in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

WALK-IN-THE-SHOES QUESTIONS

- As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
  - What challenges are you facing?
  - What fears or concerns might you have?
  - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

- What was the likelihood of the soldiers in the American Continental Army being paid regularly and how did they feel about that? Why did the Continental Congress have insufficient funds to pay the soldiers?
- When Lewis Nicola encouraged Washington to overthrow Congress and become king, Washington replied, “You could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable.” What did this response reveal about Washington’s opinion of the kind of leader the country needed at that time in order to preserve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?
- In what ways did George Washington have unique opportunities to contribute to liberty for others?
- How did George Washington prove his commitment to use his liberty to ensure the rights of others?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss the following questions with your students.
- What is the historical context of the narrative?
- What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
- How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
- How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
- How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
- What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
- Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
- How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- George Washington’s Mount Vernon http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/
In 1781, the Continental Army won the Battle of Yorktown, the last major battle against the British. The Americans had won the Revolutionary War, despite the fact that the Congress could rarely supply the army adequately, the states often looked out for their own interests rather than the common good, and civilians frequently failed to support the war effort. By late 1782, military operations had largely ended, but the army remained mobilized at its main garrison in New York in case of a major British attack.

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In late 1782, Americans awaited news on whether or not a preliminary peace treaty had been signed in France. General George Washington was with his troops encamped at Newburgh, NY, watching the remaining British troops that had occupied New York since 1776. Although his army had won the war with the victory at Yorktown, Washington would soon face a crisis that would test his character and dedication to the cause for liberty. He would have to choose whether he was a Caesar who would overthrow the republic or a Cincinnatus who would defend the republic and surrender power.

Earlier that year, Washington demonstrated that he identified with the American republican cause of liberty when he exchanged letters with a young officer named Lewis Nicola. Nicola, frustrated by the civilian authorities' negative impact on the war effort, encouraged Washington to overthrow the Congress and become king. In Nicola’s reasoning, only a military dictatorship could bring the requisite order and stability necessary to govern the country.

Washington wrote Nicola a scathing letter that sternly rebuked his suggestion. The general was greatly pained that “such ideas exist[ed] in the army” and could not understand how his conduct “could have given encouragement to an address which to me seems big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall [America].” Washington went on, asserting, “You could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable.” He warned that any opposition to Congress must be expressed “in a constitutional way” and advised Nicola to “banish these thoughts from your mind.”

However, the problem was larger than the thoughts of one disgruntled officer. Officers and soldiers in the Continental Army had not been paid in months, some for years. They sent a
NARRATIVE

delegation from their encampment in Newburgh to Congress in January 1783 with a
threatening petition that read, “We have borne all that men can bear – our property is
expended – our private resources are at an end, and our friends are wearied and disgusted with
our incessant applications.” They warned, “Any further experiments on [our] patience may
have fatal effects,” and hinted at an overthrow of Congress and civilian government.

A few members of Congress used the pressure to push for greater national powers. For
example, financier Robert Morris threatened to resign if Congress did not pass a tax to collect
revenue to pay the soldiers. Despite the woeful financial situation, Washington did not stand
alone in his support of Congress. His trusted friend and general of the artillery, Henry Knox, was
a patriot who refused to take the bait of his fellow officers to become involved. Knox told the
officers, “I consider the reputation of the American Army as one of the most immaculate things
on earth. We should even suffer wrongs and injuries to the utmost verge of toleration rather
than sully it in the least degree.”

In February, Alexander Hamilton, then serving in Congress, tried to persuade Washington
to harness the discontent of the army to pressure Congress to adopt a stronger federal
government. Hamilton wrote, “The claims of the army urged with moderation, but with
firmness, may operate on those weak minds . . . so as to produce a concurrence in the measures
which the exigencies of affairs demand.” Washington responded that the consequences of a
general mutiny “would at this day be productive of civil commotions and end in blood. Unhappy
situation this! God forbid we should be involved in it.” He cautioned Hamilton that, “the army is
a dangerous instrument to play with.”

In mid-March, General Horatio Gates, the hero of the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga
in 1777, joined the conspiracy. Gates’ aide penned an address to American soldiers that fanned
their anger towards Congress: “Faith has its limits, as well as temper; and there are points
beyond which neither can be stretched.” Gates called the officers to a meeting scheduled in a
few days.

The rebellion against the government was averted by the character of George Washington,
who dedicated himself to the republican principle of military deference to the civilian
government. He demonstrated that he identified with Cincinnatus, not with Caesar. He learned
about the Newburgh conspiracy and ended the impending rebellion by addressing his troops
assembled at their new building, the Temple of Virtue, on March 15. In the Newburgh Address,
he called on his soldiers to stop those who would “overturn the liberties of our country, and who
wickedly attempt to open the flood gates of civil discord.”

He also made a dramatic appeal by pulling out his glasses while stating, “Gentlemen, you will
permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind, in the
service of my country.” Most of the men present had never seen their general use eyeglasses;
this simple action reminded the officers that Washington, like the men he led, had made great
sacrifices for the cause of liberty. The men renounced their intent to overthrow Congress and
pledged their support for the republican government.
In 1775, George Washington had chosen to go to war and lead the Continental Army because of his identification with what many called the “sacred cause of liberty:” the desire to win independence and self-government. In 1783, with the fighting over and his goals achieved, Washington’s faith in that cause was put to the test. He never wavered and was never tempted to turn from his devotion to the American republic. Washington unfailingly demonstrated that his historic reputation as the American Cincinnatus would forever be identified with the liberties of America.
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Handout B: Journal Prompts

Answer the following questions in your journal, as you prepare to voluntarily share some of your responses in a class discussion.

1. To what extent did Washington’s performance align with his identity and purpose? How did Washington’s understanding of his identity make it possible for him to contribute to freedom?

2. To what extent and in what ways do your unique characteristics enable your pursuit of a life that is on track to achieve your purpose?

3. To what extent and in what ways does your performance align with your identity and purpose? What are you doing this very day to cultivate skills and interests that will connect today’s purposes with your long-term opportunity to enhance and protect the life and liberty of others?

4. How significant to the establishment of the early republic was Washington’s understanding of his identity? What might have resulted if Washington had understood differently his role in contributing to the advancement of liberty?

5. In your own experience or the experience of someone about whom you have learned, think of an example of flawed or misdirected sense of identity. What were some results of the person’s flawed approach and what advice would you give him? For instance, if your friend were a gifted leader but did not use those skills in ways that bring about good for himself and others, how would you advise him?

6. If presented with a similar opportunity to establish a military dictatorship, what would you have done?