

Understanding George Washington's Use of Power

According to Edmund S. Morgan “Washington’s genius lay in his understanding of power—military and political.” Washington was not the most brilliant general but he was constantly working to manage an underequipped and undertrained army in the War for Independence. He used every skill, social, managerial, tactical, political and his own personality to keep pulling an army together. In politics he worked ceaselessly to bring differing factions together and listened to his constituents while constantly analyzing the situation to bring it to the best possible conclusion. While he wished to have power and influence, it was as a gentleman and a person of noble stature through serving his country.

When Washington wrote to Alexander Hamilton that “The army...is a dangerous instrument to play with” he was speaking from sore experience with continental army who ran, deserted, refused to obey—“it takes you two or three months to bring new men to any tolerable view of their duty.” So he used a combination of strict rules, offering extra, instilling pride, showing patience and appealing to men’s higher instincts to bring order and discipline to the troops. He knew that to lead and hold power and influence over an army that arbitrary rules were ineffective. While other generals may have been more brilliant and won more battles, Washington’s brilliance shone in working to keep gathering everyone in the fold of the new army.

To John Hancock he wrote “I have no lust after power.” Washington very much sought power and a good name in his own time and from posterity. But he was strongly influenced by a gentleman’s code of honor as well as by the noble Roman virtues displayed in Cato. Power, influence and a good name came to those who served the public faithfully, exercised moral responsibility, practiced denial of self. Beginning with the rules of civility Washington sought to live a balanced thoughtful life so that the power and influence he achieved was a natural consequence of such behavior.

“The consciousness of having discharged that duty which we owe to our country is superior to all other considerations.” Any man concerned with position and influence in politics or the military came with a high sense of duty. No matter what, a man would do his duty. When Washington happily retired to Mount Vernon, he envisioned a pleasant retirement for his older years but he left personal considerations with a sense of sacrifice but seeing that the higher good was in serving his country one again. As stressed in his favorite play Cato, he knew that men could not command glory but they do more, “they could deserve it.”

To Bushrod Washington, he wrote “Representatives ought to be the mouths of their constituents. “This could apply to any representative office as far he was concerned. While he was often frustrated in his dealings with the Continental Congress during the war, he knew and respected the fact that they were the civil authorities over him and he was accountable to them. Power was never unilateral but shared and balanced. When he was making battle plans he also held councils of war with his officers so that everyone had a voice.

“A small knowledge of human nature will convince us that, with the far greatest part of mankind, interest is the governing principle and that almost every man is more or less under its influence. Written to the Continental Congress from Valley Forge Washington was well aware of the power of self interest of men, groups and nations. Intensely

concerned about reputation and the power that went with it during his life he knew that good reputation came as a result of sterling character, devotion to duty and constant balancing of self interest while serving his country.

Powerful leaders like Napoleon and George III paid tribute to Washington's remarkable sense of power and his renouncing of it after he retired from the Presidency in his second term, meaning that he would not die in office. Not only did he know when to step in as duty repeatedly called but he knew how and when to step out. After years of service, patience, volumes of letters to constituents, self denial and being a very pattern of noble citizen and and a gentleman's gentleman George Washington certainly deserved every honor.

Louise Neale
Quotations