George Washington and Civic Virtue

At the end of The Federalist 55, James Madison observed that “republican government presupposes the existence of [civic virtue] in a higher degree than any other form.” The American Founders understood that political freedom requires a limited government—that is, government should leave people alone, for the most part, in their private associations such as family, religion, and business. But the Founders also understood that limited government is risky: When people are left alone, they might use that freedom to violate the rights of others; or they might simply live irresponsibly, depending on others with money and resources to care for them. Thus limited government requires certain kinds of civic virtue, no less than political freedom requires limited government.

George Washington in many ways was, and remains, the model of what it means to be an American citizen. He embodied the civic virtues that Madison described as indispensable for a self-governing republic. These virtues can be divided into four categories:

1. Civic Knowledge
2. Self-restraint
3. Self-assertion
4. Self-reliance

1. Civic Knowledge

The American Founders built into the Constitution of 1787 a number of mechanisms that would curb the power of the national government, making it difficult for government to violate the liberties and rights of citizens. These were things such as separation of powers, checks and balances between the three branches, staggered elections and varying terms of office, and federalism. As important as these improvements were over past governments, however, they were at best "auxiliary precautions," according to James Madison. As Madison wrote in Federalist 51. "A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government.” The primary responsibility for keeping American government within the confines of the Constitution, and therefore protecting the liberty of the American people, belongs to the American people themselves. Or, as Ben Franklin once quipped, the Americans have been blessed with a wise and free republican form of government, “if they can keep it!”

Citizens have a number of ways to maintain control over the government. The most obvious way is voting into office candidates who will defend the Constitution. But citizens can also influence those officials already in office by writing them letters or e-mails, or calling them on the telephone. Also, citizens can run for office themselves, and challenge in the next election those who currently hold office. And, finally, if a government persists in violating the rights of citizens, and there is no peaceful way (such as free elections) for citizens to redress their grievances, citizens might choose to exercise their natural right of revolution, overthrowing the current government and replacing it with a government more likely to protect their rights. With all these options, and so many ways of exercising each of them, how is a person supposed to know what he should do? How, for example, should he vote in an upcoming election, or what kind of letter should he write to his Representative or Senator? Questions such as these point to the first kind of civic virtue, civic knowledge.

First and foremost, citizens must understand what the Constitution says about how the government works, and what the government is supposed to do and what it is not to do. We must understand the basis of our responsibilities as citizens, no less than our rights. We must be able to recognize when the government or another citizen infringes upon our rights. This civic knowledge was to form the core of education for young people. In the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, for example--the first federal law governing the western territories—it was stated that, “religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

In his First Annual Address to Congress, President George Washington said that the people must be taught to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority…to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness – cherishing the first, avoiding the last; and uniting a speedy but temperate vigilance against encroachments, with inviolable respect to the laws.

In his Farewell Address, delivered at the end of his second term of office, President Washington said, "Promote then as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.” Washington knew that republican government required the participation of enlightened citizens to survive. In his First Inaugural, he described what was, and still is, at stake: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps as deeply, perhaps as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”
2. Self-restraint

Washington and the other founders knew that for citizens to live in a free society with limited government, each citizen must be able to control or restrain himself; otherwise, we would need a police state—that is, a large, unlimited government—to maintain safety and order.

When he was sixteen years old, Washington copied a list of “Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior” into his school notebook. Most of these 110 rules deal with common etiquette. The last rule reads: “Labor to keep alive in your breast the little spark of celestial fire called conscience.” By “conscience” he meant our ability to understand and reason about moral right and wrong. In his First Inaugural Address, Washington said, “the foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality....” He continued by saying, “there is no truth more thoroughly established that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness.” In other words, to be truly happy requires one to be a virtuous or moral person. The “happiness” that comes from doing things that are wrong—such as ingesting drugs, stealing from others, or engaging in reckless or irresponsible behavior—is really not true happiness at all, but is merely temporary physical pleasure. If a person continues to engage in such behavior, he will not discover happiness, but more likely misery: He will probably end up in jail, or sick, or friendless. From the point of view of Washington's First Inaugural Address, individual or private morality and virtue are necessary for the country to prosper: “The propitious smiles of heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of right and order, which heaven itself has ordained....” Given all the freedom that comes with a limited government, a people that live rightly and virtuously will probably end up living happily with all the goods, material and otherwise, that make the difference between living and living well. If a people violate the “rules of right and order which heaven has ordained,” they will probably end up living unhappily, with little to ease their misery.

Washington demonstrated self-restraint in his private and public life. The most dramatic examples of his self-restraint can be seen when he commanded the Continental Army in the American Revolutionary War. Although he had the power of the army behind him, Washington always deferred to the authority of the civilian government—the Continental Congress—that was often unresponsive to the needs of his army. When one of his officers, Lewis Nicola, suggested that the army disregard the civil authority and make Washington a king, Washington was filled with anger. But he exercised great restraint over his own temper. He wrote a letter—reasoned and even-handed—rebuking Nicola.

Later, when Washington’s unpaid troops at Newburgh, New York again contemplated overthrowing or abandoning the civilian authorities, Washington urged restraint on the part of the army. He called on the army to seek justice in a lawful, constitutional manner.

Washington’s self-restraint was again displayed at the end of the Revolutionary War. Instead of asking for a high office or political power, Washington relinquished power as Commander in Chief of the army. He wrote a circular letter to the state governments, and asked only that he be allowed to return to his private life at Mount Vernon.

3. Self-assertion

Self-assertion means that citizens must be jealous of their rights, and have the courage to stand up in public and defend their rights. Sometimes a government may usurp the very rights that it was created to protect. In such cases, Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, “it is the right of the people to alter or abolish” that government. George Washington asserted himself in the American struggle against the British government. As a young man Washington had served in the British army and considered himself a loyal British subject, yet later he became convinced of the need to end British rule of the American colonies. Although at first reluctant to take up arms against the British, Washington boldly wore his military uniform to the First Continental Congress where he was selected as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. As the Second Continental Congress finished its work on the Declaration of Independence in July 1776, Washington was in the field with his army. He challenged his men to assert themselves in defense of liberty against their British enemy:

"Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us no choice but a brave resistance, or the most abject submission. This is all we can expect. We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die. Our own country's honor, all call upon us for a vigorous and manly exertion, and if we now shamefully fail, we shall become infamous to the whole world... Let us therefore animate and encourage each other, and show the world, that a freeman contending for liberty on his own ground is superior to any slavish mercenary on earth."

After the Revolutionary War, as the new nation languished under the weak Articles of Confederation, Washington stepped forward to preside at the Constitutional Convention and assured ratification of the new Constitution with his endorsement. He then left a comfortable retirement at his beloved Mt. Vernon to serve for eight years as the nation’s first president. When the Whiskey Rebellion threatened the stability of the young republic, Washington
asserted his authority as president to raise an army and preserve the rule of law. Both in war and peace, George Washington repeatedly demonstrated the civic virtue of self-assertion in the service of his country.

4. Self-reliance

In addition to civic knowledge, self-restraint, and self-assertion, citizens must possess the civic virtue of self-reliance. In order to be truly free, citizens must be able to provide the basic necessities of life for themselves and their families. Citizens who cannot provide for themselves will need a large government to take care of them. And as soon as citizens become dependent on government for their basic needs, the people are no longer in a position to demand that government stay limited within the confines of the Constitution. Self-reliant citizens are free citizens in the sense that they are not dependent on others for their basic needs. They do not need a large provider-government, which has the potential to become an intrusive or oppressive government, to meet those needs.

George Washington understood the need for citizens to be self-reliant. In a letter to a recent immigrant, Washington wrote of the benefits available in America to self-reliant, virtuous citizens: “This country certainly promises greater advantages, than almost any other, to persons of moderate property, who are determined to be sober, industrious, and virtuous members of society.” Washington knew, and our national experience has shown, that only a strong self-reliant citizenry is able to fully enjoy the blessings of liberty.

Discussion Questions:

Why did Washington and the other founders believe that citizens must possess civic virtue?

Why do citizens need civic knowledge?

What results when citizens do not have self-restraint or self-control?

How did Washington show his self-restraint during the Revolutionary War

When must citizens be self-assertive?

What is the relationship between self-reliance and freedom?
1st Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

2d When in Company, put not your Hands to any Part of the Body, not usuaely Discovered.

3d Shew Nothing to your Freind that may affright him.

4 In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.

5th If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh, or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put Your handkercheif or Hand before your face and turn aside.

6th Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others Stop.

7th Put not off your Cloths in the presence of Others, nor go out your Chamber half Drest.

8th At Play and at Fire its Good manners to Give Place to the last Commer, and affect not to Speak Louder than Ordinary.

9th Spit not in the Fire, nor Stoop low before it neither Put your Hands into the Flames to warm them, nor Set your Feet upon the Fire especially if there be meat before it.

10th When you Sit down, Keep your Feet firm and Even, without putting one on the other or Crossing them.

11th Shift not yourself in the Sight of others nor Gnaw your nails.

12th Shake not the head, Feet, or Legs rowl not the Eys lift not one eyebrow higher than the other wry not the mouth, and bedew no mans face with your Spittle, by approaching too near him when you Speak.

13th Kill no Vermin as Fleas, lice ticks &c in the Sight of Others, if you See any filth or thick Spittle put your foot Dexteriously upon it if it be upon the Cloths of your Companions, Put it off privately, and if it be upon your own Cloths return Thanks to him who puts it off.

14th Turn not your Back to others especially in Speaking, Jog not the Table or Desk on which Another reads or
writes, lean not upon any one.

15th Keep your Nails clean and Short, also your Hands and Teeth Clean yet without Shewing any great Concern for them.

16th Do not Puff up the Cheeks, Loll not out the tongue rub the Hands, or beard, thrust out the lips, or bite them or keep the Lips too open or too Close.

17th Be no Flatterer, neither Play with any that delights not to be Play'd Withal.

18th Read no Letters, Books, or Papers in Company but when there is a Necessity for the doing of it you must ask leave: come not near the Books or Writings of Another so as to read them unless desired or give your opinion of them unask'd also look not nigh when another is writing a Letter.

19th let your Countenance be pleasant but in Serious Matters Somewhat grave.

20th The Gestures of the Body must be Suited to the discourse you are upon.

21st Reproach none for the Infirmities of Nature, nor Delight to Put them that have in mind thereof.

22d Shew not yourself glad at the Misfortune of another though he were your enemy.

23 d When you see a Crime punished, you may be inwardly Pleased; but always shew Pity to the Suffering Offender.

24th Do not laugh too loud or too much at any Publick Spectacle.

25th Superfluous Complements and all Affectation of Ceremonie are to be avoided, yet where due they are not to be Neglected.

26th In Pulling off your Hat to Persons of Distinction, as Noblemen, Justices, Churchmen &c make a Reverence, bowing more or less according to the Custom of the Better Bred, and Quality of the Person. Amongst your equals expect not always that they Should begin with you first, but to Pull off the Hat when there is no need is Affectation, in the Manner of Saluting and resaluting in words keep to the most usual Custom.