

**George Washington
and the Origins of the
American Presidency**

EDITED BY
Mark J. Rozell,
William D. Pederson,
AND Frank J. Williams

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

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Introduction

George Washington and the Origins of the American Presidency

MARK J. ROZELL

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 formally created the American presidency. George Washington put the office into effect. Indeed, Washington was very cognizant of the fact that his actions as president would establish the office and have consequences for his successors. The first president's own words evidenced how conscious he was of the crucial role he played in determining the makeup of the office of the presidency. He had written to James Madison, "As the first of everything, *in our situation will serve to establish a precedent*, it is devoutly wished on my part that these precedents be fixed on true principles."¹ In May 1789 Washington wrote, "Many things which appear of little importance in themselves and at the beginning, may have great and durable consequences from their having been established at the commencement of a new general government."²

All presidents experience the burdens of the office. Washington's burdens were unique in that only he had the responsibility to establish the office in practice. The costs of misjudgments to the future of the presidency were great. The parameters of the president's powers remained vague when Washington took office. The executive article of the Constitution (Article II) lacked the specificity of the legislative article (Article I), leaving the first occupant of the presidency imperfect guidance on the scope and limits of his authority. Indeed, it may very well have been because Washington was the obvious choice of first occupant of the office that the Constitutional Convention officers left many of the powers of the presidency vague. Willard Sterne Randall writes, "No doubt no other president would have been trusted with such latitude."³ Acutely aware of his burdens, Washington set out to exercise his powers prudently yet firmly when necessary.

Perhaps Washington's greatest legacy to the presidency was his substantial

success in establishing the office for the future. He was a model for the office at a time when that was most needed. Indeed, as the historian Forrest McDonald has written, “[T]he office of president of the United States could scarcely have been created had George Washington not been available to become its first occupant.”⁴

Washington was a reluctant first occupant of the office of the presidency. He loved private life and wished to fulfill his days tending to the business of agriculture at Mount Vernon. But duty had called on the nation’s most famous and admired citizen in the past, and he had answered the calls. He had sworn off attending the Constitutional Convention, but when others had placed his name as a participant and implored him to go, he did so. Although he had misgivings about certain provisions of the Constitution, he lent his support to the document, understanding that his say carried enormous clout and that the furtherance of the nation depended on a strong government. He expressed his wish that some other qualified person come forward to assume the presidency, but there was no other who had the nearly universal esteem of his people, and he knew it. Washington left the private life he desired to answer the call of duty. He determined that the well-being of the young nation had to override his personal preference for the comforts of private life.

Although Washington was careful to distinguish his own political interests from those of the nation, he recognized that for many Americans he personally embodied the office of the presidency. He traveled throughout much of the young nation so that the people could see their president, and this action fostered the notion of democratic governance. He resisted calls for elaborate titles and ill-founded advice that he close himself off to the people and remain aloof except to a select few. He opened the doors to the White House during selected hours to meet with regular citizens, and although he found the exercise at times exasperating, he continued it. On the one hand, Washington wanted to be a people’s president. On the other hand, he understood the need to imbue the office of the presidency with dignity.

Throughout his two terms Washington took care to exercise his powers properly. He deferred to Congress where appropriate, but he was not at all reluctant to protect the powers of his office. He took some of his constitutionally based powers quite literally, as when he went to the Senate in person to seek the “advice and consent” of its members on a proposed treaty. He learned from this experience that perhaps the Constitution need not be interpreted so precisely, as he found the meeting with the senators a counterproductive one at which he became visibly angry and reportedly left the room, saying that he would be “damned” if he ever returned. Washington never repeated the experience of personally visiting the Senate to seek advice or consent prior to making such a decision. No president since has gone to the Senate chamber to seek either advice or consent on a treaty or an appointment. In this action, Washington helped establish the inde-

pendent power of the president to act in foreign affairs *before* seeking the legislative input.

On a host of matters Washington, in a sense, “filled in the blanks” of Article II. He established the presidential power to remove executive branch officials, a position that some attacked as an intrusion on the legislative authority. If the president has to seek advice and consent to appoint, some reasoned, then he should not have the unilateral power to remove officials. During a lengthy House debate on the issue in May 1789 some members argued that the necessary and proper clause of Article I of the Constitution empowered the legislative to carry into execution all departments and officers. Yet both houses of the Congress ultimately sided with Washington’s interpretation of exclusive presidential power to fire top-level executive branch officers.⁵ Washington’s action also helped to establish in practice the principle of an independent executive branch of the government.

Similarly, Washington established in practice the independent power of the president to act in foreign policy when he issued the controversial Neutrality Proclamation. Congress had been in the midst of a debate over the proper U.S. position in the war between France and Great Britain. By acting alone and issuing the proclamation, the president had settled the issue. Although many in Congress protested, the legislative lacked the authority to challenge Washington’s action. Many presidents since have claimed that the executive holds the upper hand in the making of foreign policy, and the courts generally have sided with presidents in such disputes (i.e., in those cases where the courts have decided rather than declared such disputes political questions).

Washington established a British-style system of cabinet government with appointed secretaries (with Senate approval) leading the departments of State, War, and Treasury. The Senate gave wide deference to the president to have the cabinet secretaries of his own choosing, which established another long-standing precedent. The practice of “senatorial courtesy” also originated with Washington when he appointed an officer to command a Georgian naval port, and the state’s two senators protested. Washington deferred to the senators and withdrew the appointment. Hence, he established the precedent that for federal appointments within a state the president must consult the state’s senators (in the modern era of party competition that practice is modified to include the senior senator of the president’s own party within the state).

Not every precedent that Washington established succeeded or stood the test of time. He believed that Congress properly was the chief lawmaking branch of the government and that the executive did not share the legislative power. Consequently, he would veto legislation only on Constitutional grounds, a practice that presidents mostly followed until the Jackson era. Today, of course, the veto is a policy instrument allowing the executive to share in a part of the legislative power.

In appointing officials to government posts, Washington generally applied merit-based criteria. Constitutional scholar Henry Abraham praises the first president for using merit as the primary criterion for nominations to the Supreme Court and the strict avoidance of the pernicious modern practice of various litmus tests.⁶ Although admirable, that precedent did not last long.

Washington similarly appointed cabinet secretaries and key presidential advisers based on their qualifications. He perhaps created the only truly bipartisan and merit-based cabinet. And in choosing Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison as his three leading aides, he brought together three prodigious and independent minds destined to do battle with one another over policy. Scholars Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson praise the lineup as generally successful despite the acrimony, but the experiment in merit selection did not appeal to Washington's successors.⁷ Washington of course had warned against the establishment of party competition in the United States, and the nation did not long heed that call. The political scientist Woodrow Wilson would later characterize the dual roles of the president as head of the nation and head of a political party as not altogether compatible. Although modern presidents occasionally invite a member of the other party into their cabinet (President Bill Clinton's choice of William Cohen as defense secretary is the most recent example), the established practice is far from Washington's precedent.

Perhaps Washington's best-known precedent was the two-term limit—an informal practice broken only once in our history but then later foolishly amended into the Constitution. Washington surely could have served a third term. The Constitutional Convention delegates had ultimately favored indefinite re-eligibility for the president, in part because of the widespread expectation that Washington would hold the office. In this case the well-being of the young Republic and Washington's personal wishes converged. It is not clear that Washington actually acted in this case out of concern for establishing a good precedent. Edward S. Corwin wrote that Washington made this decision "purely on grounds of personal preference." But as Corwin correctly added, the effect was the same: Jefferson followed in Washington's footsteps, and in so doing he emphasized Washington's precedent.⁸

Although not all of Washington's precedents lasted, many important ones did, and the success of the office is due in large part to the prudent actions of the first occupant of the office. It is unfortunate that Washington does not receive the respect and attention of contemporary presidential scholars and students who are wedded to a model of the office derived from idealized interpretations of the first "modern" president, Franklin Roosevelt. This state of affairs led Milkis and Nelson to lament that the academic community in presidency studies treats 1933 "as the year 1 A.D. of presidential history."⁹ The largest-selling and most influential presidency text in the history of the

profession begins with the FDR years and makes only a single passing reference to George Washington.¹⁰

Yet there is evidence of the beginning of a resurgence of interest in the Washington presidency. Political scientist David K. Nichols inaugurated a healthy scholarly debate when he suggested that many of the origins of the modern presidency generally associated with FDR reside instead with the Washington administration.¹¹ Journalist Richard Brookhiser's more recent volume on George Washington attracted wide reviewing interest in journals of opinion, scholarly recognition, and substantially stronger sales than most works of political history.¹² In 1998 and 1999 two academic conferences on the Washington presidency together attracted well over 100 scholarly papers.¹³

The chapters in this volume represent a portion of the growing academic inquiry into the importance of Washington to our understanding of the presidency. This volume is largely the outcome of the September 17–19, 1998, conference on the Washington Legacy sponsored by the American Studies Program at the Louisiana State University in Shreveport. Eight of the following 10 chapters originally were presented at that conference. The other two chapters were specially commissioned for this volume. A major grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities funded the conference and made this volume possible.

The volume is divided into three parts, beginning with “Washington’s Leadership and Legacy.” Political scientist Byron W. Daynes opens with the central question of this entire endeavor: in essence, whether the study of George Washington is germane to the study of the modern presidency. Like Nichols and others before him, Daynes demonstrates the enormous impact that Washington’s actions had on the development of the presidency. Daynes builds his summary of Washington’s accomplishments and impact around the themes of the president as chief executive, chief diplomat, Commander in Chief, and opinion/party leader. He ultimately differs with those who have argued that Washington’s impact largely was an accident of timing—that is, anyone who first served as president would have been ultimately judged as the premier precedent-setter. Daynes finds that Washington’s character and competence properly established the presidency and that the nation indeed benefited from the actions of its first occupant of the highest office. Daynes concludes that “yes, political scientists would do well to study carefully the Washington presidency.”

Political theorist Thomas Engeman and political scientist Raymond Tatalovich directly challenge the Nichols thesis that George Washington was the first “modern” president.¹¹ Their chapter offers first a description of the Nichols thesis and the evidence for his argument. They counter with their own theory “that the ‘modern’ understanding of the presidency originates not with the Constitutional Founding but from the Second American Constitution beginning with the Progressive critique and culminating in the

mid-twentieth century.” The authors conclude with the presentation of their own empirical support for that theory. Engeman and Tatalovich concede that Nichols is correct about Washington’s impact on the president’s diplomatic role. But ultimately, it is inaccurate, they maintain, to characterize the Constitutional Framers or Washington as the originators of most of the elements of the modern presidency.

Political psychologist Elizabeth W. Marvick sees Washington as one of the few truly transforming leaders in the history of the West. Washington had dreamed of a newly independent nation characterized by liberty and order, and he “strove to transform that dream into reality.” One could identify fewer than a handful of other leaders of the modern Western world who fit that description: perhaps de Gaulle of France, Kunal of Turkey, or Mandela of South Africa. “But,” as Marvick adds, “among American leaders Washington stands alone.” Yet for historians there has long been a greater fascination with the character of Abraham Lincoln than of Washington. Whereas the former is known to us for his earlier failures, insecurities, triumphs, and then martyrdom, the latter is treated as an icon. Marvick delves into the family background and learning experiences that framed Washington’s character. She presents a more complex picture of the man than offered by some of the reverential studies of the first president.

Part II of the volume examines “Presidential Powers and the Washington Administration.” It begins with political scientist Malcolm L. Cross’ analysis of one of Washington’s major precedents: the president as chief of state and the government’s active chief executive. For the former, the president is a symbol and the ceremonial leader of the country. For the latter, the president staffs and supervises the executive branch. Washington set out “to make the American presidency both efficient and dignified,” writes Cross. We assume these two roles for the presidency today. Yet the Constitution did not mandate these roles. It was Washington who perceived the dual role of the presidency, and his closest adviser, Alexander Hamilton, urged the first president to adopt such a vision for the office. Washington and Hamilton are in large part responsible for the creation of the dignified-efficient presidency.

Historian John W. Kuehl examines the debate over the controversial Jay Treaty, focusing on the contending arguments advanced by Washington and James Madison. Washington initially was conflicted about the treaty, but he ultimately believed its ratification was necessary to avoid war with Great Britain. Once Washington took a stand, he defended it as proper, despite public disapproval and the opposition efforts led by Madison. In refusing congressional requests for all papers related to the treaty negotiations, Washington created the important precedent of the president’s independent role in establishing treaties. Kuehl evaluates the impact that Washington’s actions had on establishing this precedent and the development of the executive’s predominant role in foreign policy.

Constitutional scholars Henry J. Abraham and Barbara A. Perry characterize Washington, not President Franklin D. Roosevelt, as truly the nation's first "court-packer." The four-times-elected FDR appointed nine members of the Supreme Court. His ill-conceived attempt to pack the Court failed and became a blot on his legacy. Washington nominated 14 individuals to the Court during his two terms, and 11 of those persons actually served. More importantly, Washington established criteria for selection to the Court, some of which exist today, including "support and advocacy of the Constitution," prior judicial experience, and geographic suitability, among others. More than any other president he was "directly involved in identifying and choosing his nominees." Washington never resorted to the kinds of "litmus tests" on issues that have generated so much controversy in the modern era. Washington was concerned first and foremost with creating a strong, independent judicial branch staffed by qualified individuals who revered the Constitution and had a deep commitment to public service.

Part II closes with an analysis of one of Washington's lesser-known, yet important, precedents: the creation of what is today called "executive privilege." Although that phrase was an invention of the Eisenhower era, all presidents since Washington have exercised some form of what we call executive privilege: the right of the president and high-level White House officers to withhold information from Congress, the courts, and ultimately the public. Washington did not exercise this authority lightly. Indeed, his actions set the ultimate standards for the future—that presidents withhold information only when it is absolutely necessary to do so to protect the national security or the public interest. Washington showed by example that he did not equate his own political interests with those of the nation, a lesson that has been truly lost on some of his successors in the modern era.

Part III examines "Washington and the Press." Historian Carol Sue Humphrey shows that Washington was not immune to the fickle nature of press coverage of presidents, often thought to be a modern phenomenon. His coverage ranged from hero worship to outright hostility and contemptuousness. Washington understood the utility of newspapers to his various causes. As general, Washington encouraged favorable reporting of the Revolutionary War, and he wrote angrily about negative reports that he felt potentially compromised the American cause. As president he encouraged a free and informative press, although he disapproved of much of his own coverage. He particularly detested the development of the partisan press as unfavorable to the nation's stature and a poor means of informing the governed about the issues. Humphrey notes that although Washington was ultimately disappointed in the press' performance, his own reputation survived despite some harsh treatment by editorialists.

Historian Frank E. Dunkle examines the earlier roots of the Washington legend by examining coverage of him in the Boston newspapers in the mid-to-late 1750s. As a young man, Washington had achieved fame in the

Boston newspapers because of his role in a conflict between France and Britain for control of the Ohio River valley that led to the French and Indian War. As a young officer, Washington's actions received wide and favorable coverage in the New England newspapers, despite the fact that he had suffered more defeats than he had achieved victories. In part, the newspapers were promoting support for the war and therefore exaggerating the achievements of the British American soldiers. Washington "was cast in the role of a hero." The chapter's analysis of the content of the early newspaper coverage shows how Washington achieved early recognition that would later play an important role in his selection to lead the fight for independence.

Political scientist Graham G. Dodds examines Washington's precedents in establishing relations between presidents and the press. Among those was the first presidential "honeymoon" with the press, followed by growing contentiousness over time. Dodds reviews the important role that the partisan press of the time played in the deteriorating relationship between Washington and the newspapers. During Washington's administration domestic coverage of events for the first time played an important role in influencing foreign policy. Washington was also the first president to have to deal with government leaks to the press. Furthermore, like modern presidents, Washington was acutely aware of the importance of press coverage and a presidential image to achieving his goals. He was not reluctant to use the press to promote himself and his goals, as he did when he leaked his Farewell Address to a friendly printer. Yet Washington, unlike some of the modern presidents, did not engage in open battle with the press when he received unfavorable coverage. Dodds reports that Washington generally did not engage the press in feuds, except when he responded through his aides—a practice very common in the modern era. Despite his reservations about the quality of press coverage at times, Washington respected the need for a free press and did not advocate suppressing information.

The sum total of these chapters is a portrait of the nation's first president as a man who was very conscious of his potential place in history and who sought to fulfill his role in a manner that would best serve future generations. Yet Washington himself was not certain that the new Republic would long survive. His legacy in large part is that he established the presidency in practice, and that institution has survived to this day, as Rossiter once wrote, as "one of the few truly successful institutions created by men in their endless quest for the blessings of free government."¹⁴

NOTES

1. George Washington, letter to James Madison, May 5, 1789, quoted in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 39 vols. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), 30:311.

2. "Queries on a Line of Conduct," May 10, 1789, quoted in Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington*, 30:321.
3. Willard Sterne Randall, *George Washington: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 435.
4. Forrest McDonald, "Presidential Character: The Example of George Washington," in Philip G. Henderson, ed., *The Presidency: Then and Now* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 1.
5. See Charles E. Morganston, *The Appointment and Removal Power of the President of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1929).
6. See Henry J. Abraham, *Justices and Presidents: A Political History of Appointments to the Supreme Court*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Henry J. Abraham, *Justices, Presidents, and Senators* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).
7. Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1990), p. 75.
8. Edward S. Corwin, *The President, Office and Powers: 1787–1957* (New York: New York University Press, 1957).
9. Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, p. xii.
The original "classic" version is Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960). This book has now sold over 1 million copies
10. and remains a standard in presidency courses. An editor consulted me several years ago about the value of putting Professor Clinton Rossiter's classic presidency text back into print. I enthusiastically endorsed the idea. My editor has since told me that the book barely sells about 400 copies a year.
11. David K. Nichols, *The Myth of the Modern Presidency* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
12. Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
13. The American Studies Program at Louisiana State University in Shreveport sponsored the 1998 conference. The Heritage Foundation and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute cosponsored the 1999 conference.
14. Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 1.

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Part I

Washington's Leadership and Legacy

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Chapter 1

George Washington: Reluctant Occupant, Uncertain Model for the Presidency

BYRON W. DAYNES

INTRODUCTION

In looking at the presidency of George Washington, the one question that needs to be asked by political scientists is, *Can we learn anything about the modern presidency by examining the presidency of George Washington, or will the net effect be negligible?*

The answer, as one might expect, is unclear. Evidence from the records of the Constitutional Convention and other early documents is imprecise. While the Framers respected Washington as an outstanding leader among them, his leadership attributes were highly unusual. For example, he appeared uncomfortable in possession of power,¹ wished to remain out of the focus of attention,² and did not seek position³; in fact, he even resisted attending the Constitutional Convention because of conflicting loyalties he felt as a leader in the Society of Cincinnati—an elite society of retired revolutionary officers—that was meeting in Philadelphia at the same time. He came to the convention only at the insistence of Edmund Randolph, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison, who recognized Washington’s importance and prominence among his political peers. Once there, he was appointed by his colleagues to preside over the convention, despite his initial hesitation. While he said very little in the debates and discussions and made a point of giving up his position whenever the convention broke into a “committee of the whole,” his mere presence was extremely important, as he became the acknowledged *model* for what an exemplary president might become.⁴

Those same persons who saw Washington as an eminent presidential model, however, structured Article II of the Constitution in such a way

as to accommodate the “*non-Washingtons*” who might succeed him as president, recognizing that “George Washingtons” were rare and would not be available very often. Thus, the delegates, rather than writing Article II in such a way as to attract *other* “Washingtons,” followed the suggestions of Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist* No. 72. They made the presidency attractive to the most egregious among us, rewarding the occupant with *fame*, with *power*, and with a substantial *salary* in case the presidential aspirant was ambitious or avaricious.⁵ One might reasonably argue, therefore, that the presidency of George Washington was unique and “uncertain” as a model for those who would follow and that an examination of his presidency might add little to our understanding of the presidency today.

Examining the evidence of political scientists regarding the worth of the Washington *model* only adds to the confusion. Some presidential scholars agree that we can learn little, if anything, about the modern presidency by looking at eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century presidents. Those taking this position would begin their examination of the modern presidency with an assessment of the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt,⁶ while others would see Dwight Eisenhower as the first modern president.⁷ Countering these views, David K. Nichols, in his book *The Myth of the Modern Presidency*, sees comparable leadership characteristics in George Washington and the other early presidents that he finds in modern presidents. These common attributes found in those early presidents, Nichols argues, include “legislative leadership, administrative control, the exercise of unilateral authority, and popular symbolic leadership.”⁸

Such conclusions about the importance of the early presidents seem to be sustained in the presidential scholarly ratings that have been published over the years that find George Washington consistently rated among the top two or three great presidents. In the Arthur Schlesinger Sr. polls of 1948 and 1962, for example, Washington placed second only to Abraham Lincoln.⁹ Washington rated second to Lincoln in the 1970 Maranell–Dodder poll as well.¹⁰ But in the 1982 Murray–Blessing poll and the latest (1996) Arthur Schlesinger Jr. poll, Washington ranked third behind Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt.¹¹ Thus, in these five surveys from 1948 through 1996, Washington has repeatedly ranked as one of the exceptional leaders of all times among scholars.¹²

Other students of the presidency, however, acknowledge Washington’s great character traits but still think of him in a much less admired category, as did James David Barber, who saw Washington’s character as reflecting traits of “dignity, judiciousness, . . . reserve and dedication to duty” but labeled him a *passive-negative* president, a president who failed to be innovative in his presidency.¹³

METHODS

It is unclear as to the impact Washington has had on the presidency. I therefore examine his presidency from the perspective of the following five presidential roles.

1. *Opinion/Party Leader*—a combined role suggesting a president's relationship to party and public opinion.
2. *Legislative Leader*—a role suggesting a president's relationship with the Congress.
3. *Chief Executive*—a role involving a president's relationship with the cabinet, administrative staff, and bureaucracy.
4. *Chief Diplomat*—the role that relates the president to other nations.
5. *Commander in Chief*—a role referring to a president as the nation's highest military leader.¹⁴

One probably will notice from the description of these five roles that they are not equally powerful. Under normal circumstances, a president acting as Commander in Chief is in a more powerful position than a president who has assumed the role of opinion/party leader. A president using his Commander in Chief role has access to more *legal authority*, can have an increased dominance in *decision making*, is increasingly protected from interfering *organized interests*, is of greater interest to *public opinion*, and has an ability to rally the nation behind him in a *crisis*. These five roles may thus be arranged on a power continuum with Commander in Chief ranked as the most powerful presidential role, followed by chief diplomat, chief executive, and legislative leader, with opinion/party leader the president's weakest role. It is this power arrangement among the roles that I assume in this study of Washington.¹⁵

THE ROLES

Opinion/Party Leader

This composite role suggests the direct relationship the president has with the people through the political party and public opinion. Unfortunately for any president, this role is generally the president's weakest. Its effective use by a president depends on individual skill and not on the number of resources or substantial authority available to him.¹⁶ Thus, few presidents have dominated this role, and Washington was no exception. He was cautious about how he should interact with others as president. He even wrote to John Adams in 1789 asking for advice as to whether it would be improper for a president to make

informal visits; that is to say, in his calling upon his Acquaintances or public Characters for the purposes of sociability or civility: and what (as to the form of doing it) might evince these visits to have been made in his private character, so as that they may not be constructed into visits from the President of the United States.¹⁷

The people were very important to Washington, and he was willing to make the effort to reach out to them, but it often would involve long, tiring days. As he stated: “From the time I had done breakfast and thence till dinner and afterwards till bedtime I could not get relieved from the ceremony of one visit before I had to attend to another.”¹⁸

Maintaining Contact with the People

Although Washington gave few formal speeches in public and held no “press conference-like” sessions where he could use the press as an instrument to communicate with the people, he did make an effort to reach out and make social contact with the citizens through a number of contact points:

The Socials. If a person was “respectably dressed,” Washington’s rule stated, men could join the president at one of his regularly scheduled “levees” held every Tuesday from three to four in the afternoon, while men and women were hosted by Martha Washington at her many tea parties, held on Friday evenings. The Washingtons also staged dinners on Thursdays at four o’clock in the afternoon, inviting only “official characters and strangers of distinction.”¹⁹ To avoid any allegations of favoritism, government workers and officials and their families would be asked to the dinners on a regular rotation.²⁰ These social hours helped to make the presidency more visible to the people as well as allowed the president to procure needed information from sources he might not otherwise seek out.

Travels. Washington also, on the advice of Hamilton, Adams, Madison, Jay, and Knox, visited every section of the country. He did this to become acquainted with his fellow citizens and to encourage support for and discourage opposition to the federal government. Washington told Alexander Hamilton that he wanted to visit the eastern states “to acquire knowledge of the face of the Country, the growth and agriculture thereof, and the temper and disposition of the inhabitants towards the new government.”²¹

The president made four official tours. On October 15, 1789, Washington began his monthlong visit to New England, traveling to each of the states except Rhode Island and Vermont, which were not yet in the federal system. He visited Long Island on April 20, 1790, and Rhode Island in August of that same year. The next year George Washington left on April 7, 1791, for a three-month tour of the South that covered 1,816 miles, spending most of his time in North and South Carolina and Georgia.²² In reaching out to each section of the nation, Washington, in effect, put a personal face on government, making it less threatening and more under-