

From VOA Learning English, welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in Special English. I'm Steve Ember. This week in our series, we tell the story of America's first president, George Washington.



The United States declared its independence from Britain on July 4, 1776. At first the new nation was a loosely formed alliance governed under the Articles of Confederation. As we described in previous programs, all this changed when a new plan of government, the Constitution, went into effect on March 4, 1789. There was much to be done to make it work. The machinery of government was untested. Strong leadership was needed, and Washington was the man chosen to provide it.

Many historians believe there would never have been a United



States without George Washington. He led the American people to victory in the war for independence from Britain. He kept the new nation united in the dangerous first years.

Dorothy Moss is the assistant curator of painting and sculpture at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington. She says the painting known as the "Lansdowne Portrait" shows the way many people thought of Washington.

It was painted in 1796, as Washington was finishing his presidency. In it, he is standing with one arm extended, as if he is speaking to a large group of people. His hair is gray, and he is beginning to go bald. The former general wears formal clothes, but not the uniform of a soldier. Washington was tall but thin. In the portrait, he looks bigger than he was in real life.

Curator Dorothy Moss says in some ways the portrait shows Washington like a king. But in other ways, she says, he appears like a neighbor, or someone you could talk to.

"He's shown with a serious expression, a determined look. People at the time commented on his broad jaw, which actually looks that way because he was wearing false teeth. His mouth is clenched, yet he projects a gentle spirit."

During his lifetime, Washington was honored for his courage and wisdom. After his death in 1799, he became almost god-like in the way people respected him.

Dorothy Moss says even people in England thought there was something unusually special about George Washington. The British owner of the "Lansdowne Portrait" kept the painting of the American president in his house.

"The Marquis of Lansdowne commented that visitors to his house would stop in reverence to it when they would pass by -- that people were stopped in their tracks by it."

"And in the United States?"

"The same reaction."

George Washington represented the spirit of America -- what was best about the country. For well over one hundred years, Americans found it difficult to criticize him.

Modern historians, however, have painted a more realistic picture of Washington. They write about his weaknesses, as well as his strengths. Yet this has not reduced his greatness and importance in the making of the nation.

The force of Washington's personality, and his influence, was extremely important at the Philadelphia convention that wrote the Constitution. Some say the convention would not have been held had he not agreed to attend. Later, as the first president, he gave the nation a good start.

Washington was able to control political disputes in the new government. He would not let them damage the nation's unity.

Washington often thought of the future. He wanted the first government to take the right steps.

Some things may not seem important in the beginning, he said, but later, they may have bad permanent results. It would be better, he felt, to start his administration right than to try to correct mistakes later, when it might be too late. He hoped to act in such a way that future presidents could continue to build on what he began.

Washington had clear, firm ideas about what was right and what was wrong. He loved justice. He also loved the republican form of government.

Some people had difficulty seeing this part of the man.

Washington looked like an aristocrat. And, at times, he seemed to act like one. He attended many ceremonies. He often rode through the streets in a carriage pulled by six horses. His critics called him "king."

Washington opposed rule by kings and dictators. He was shocked that some people talked of having a monarchy in America. He was even more shocked that they did not understand the harm they were doing.

Washington warned that this loose talk could lead to an attempt to establish a monarchy in the United States. A monarchy, he said, would be a great victory for the enemies of the United States. It would prove that Americans could not govern themselves.

As president, Washington decided to do everything in his power to prevent the country from ever being ruled by a king or dictator. He wanted the people to have as much self-government as possible.

Such a government, Washington felt, meant a life of personal freedom and equal justice for the people.

The 18th century has been described as an age of reason and enlightenment. Washington was a man of his times. He said no one could feel a greater interest in the happiness of mankind than he did. He said it was his greatest hope that the policies of that time would bring to everyone those blessings which should be theirs.

Washington was especially happy and proud that the United States would protect people against oppression for their religious beliefs.

He did not care which god people worshipped. He felt that religious freedom was a right of every person. Good men, he said, are found all over the world. They can be followers of any religion, or no religion at all.

Washington's feelings about racial oppression were as strong as his feelings about religious oppression. Like others of his time, he owned African slaves. But he expressed a hatred of slavery.

There was not a man alive, he said, who wished more truly than he did to see an end to slavery. By his order, all his slaves were freed when he died.

From the beginning, George Washington was careful to establish a good working relationship with the Congress. He did not attempt to take away any powers given to the Congress by the Constitution. By his actions, he confirmed the separation of powers of the three branches of the government, as described in the Constitution.

The Congress, too, was ready to cooperate. It did not attempt to take away any powers given to the president by the Constitution. The Congress, for example, agreed that President Washington had the right to appoint members of his administration. But Congress had the right to approve them.

Washington asked some of the nation's wisest and most able men to serve in the new government.

For secretary of state, he chose Thomas Jefferson. At the time, Jefferson was America's representative to France.

While Congress was considering Jefferson's nomination, Washington heard of threatening events in France. He learned that a mob had captured the old prison called the Bastille. Washington was worried. The United States had depended on France for help during its war for independence. And it still needed French help. A crisis in France could be bad for America. The information Jefferson brought home would prove valuable if the situation in France got worse. Washington also thought Jefferson's advice would be useful in general, not just on French developments.

For secretary of the treasury, Washington chose Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton had served as one of Washington's aides during the Revolutionary War.

For chief justice of the United States, he chose John Jay. Jay helped write the Federalist Papers. These are considered the best explanation of the Constitution ever written. Two delegates to the constitutional convention were named associate justices of the Supreme Court: James Wilson and John Rutledge.

For attorney general, Washington wanted a good lawyer and someone who supported the Constitution. The attorney general is the nation's top law enforcement official. For that job, Washington chose Edmund Randolph of Virginia.

It was Randolph who proposed the Virginia Plan to the Philadelphia convention. The plan became the basis for the Constitution. Randolph refused to sign the Constitution, because he did not believe it could be approved. But later he worked to help win Virginia's approval of the Constitution.

President Washington nominated his cabinet members, and the Congress approved them. The president was ready to begin work on the nation's urgent problems. And there were many.

One problem was Spain's control of the lower part of the Mississippi River. American farmers needed to use the river to transport their crops to market. But the Spanish governor in Louisiana closed the Mississippi to American boats.

There also were problems with Britain. The United States had no commercial treaty with Britain. And Britain had sent no representative to the new American government.

Equally urgent were the new nation's economic problems. Two major issues had to be settled. One was repayment of loans made to support the American army during the revolution. The other was the creation of a national financial system. Both issues needed quick action.

Finding solutions to these issues would be the job of President Washington's treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton. That will be our story next time.



I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us each week here at VOA Learning English for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.