

The first presidential administration in the United States

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Image 1. George Washington (center) arrives at Congress Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 4, 1793, for his inauguration as the first president of the United States in this painting by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris. Image from Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

In 1783, the Revolutionary War was over. General George Washington left his job in the military. He was ready to retire to his farm in Virginia.

But Washington would soon be called on to lead the country again. This time it would be not in war, but in peace. He would become the nation's first president.

Washington's Role In Writing The Constitution

The 1780s were an important period for the new United States. Privately, Washington was worried. The Articles of Confederation were the new governing documents of the country. They called for a weak central government. Washington believed that this would not be good for the long-term health of the nation.

He supported the call to hold a Constitutional Convention. He attended as a delegate. There, he was elected to oversee the writing of the U.S. Constitution.

However, he did not join in the debate much. He did not publicly say that he supported the Constitution.

Washington knew he would likely become the first president. As a person, Washington also had a reserved, quiet manner. He did not want to seem self-serving by giving the Constitution a thumbs-up in public.

Forming The First Working U.S. Government

The first presidential government under the Constitution was very important. The U.S. Constitution provided a bare outline for how the federal government would be formed. However, how it would actually come together was not clear. The standard set by the first president would be huge.

Washington was generally very careful. Some things did not change from the way they were under the Articles of Confederation. For example, Washington decided to keep the three departments of the government that had existed before the Constitution was written.



However, Washington was a Nationalist. He favored a stronger central government. Washington made sure that executive power was independent of the control of the legislature.

For example, Washington picked his own leaders for his government. The legislature could only accept or reject each choice. Washington identified the three leaders as his personal "Cabinet" of advisers. These moves demonstrated the president's powers for years to come.

Thomas Jefferson was his secretary of state. Alexander Hamilton was chosen to lead the treasury. Henry Knox was the secretary of war.

Second-Term Stumbles

George Washington's first term as president lasted from 1789-1792. At the time, the federal government was brand new. It was even a little shaky. However, Washington made the federal government seem more solid and valid. He enjoyed huge popularity. People trusted him.

Unfortunately for the president, events in his second term somewhat clouded his unbelievable success. For one, his own Cabinet split apart. Thomas Jefferson increasingly disagreed with the economic ideas proposed by Alexander Hamilton. Washington tended to agree with Hamilton.

Even more disturbing to Washington was the birth of opposing political parties. These are now a key piece of modern democracy, of course. However, Washington and many others thought that organized opposition to the government was treason. In other words, he saw them as traitors.

Washington's Legacy Of A Powerful Democracy

So, there were clouds at the end of Washington's public career. These clouds remind us that even this Founding Father did not always have it easy. He faced disagreements.

Washington was very skilled and impressed many. Still, his qualities could not appeal to all of the people all of the time.

Some of his personal qualities made him extremely effective. Interestingly, these are also qualities that might make him very unpopular today.

Washington purposely kept a distance from the public. He was private and reserved. He was a bit of a loner. Washington was a curious mix of qualities. He was a dignified republican. He disliked democratic ways of reaching a bit too far. This helped to give life, power and respect to the young nation.

The United States became the world's first modern democracy. This is in large part due to the course that President George Washington set in motion.

Quiz

1 Finish the sentence below.

One main idea of the article is that _____.

- (A) George Washington wanted to work on his farm after the Revolutionary War was over
- (B) George Washington helped shape the government when he became the first U.S. president
- (C) George Washington chose a man named Thomas Jefferson to be his secretary of state
- (D) George Washington often agreed with Alexander Hamilton more than Thomas Jefferson

2 Read the following paragraph from section "Second Term Stumbles."

George Washington's first term as president lasted from 1789-1792. At the time, the federal government was brand new. It was even a little shaky. However, Washington made the federal government seem more solid and valid. He enjoyed huge popularity. People trusted him.

What is the main idea of this paragraph?

- (A) The federal government was brand new and Washington did not know if he wanted to be president.
- (B) Washington became the first president because he was very popular with all Americans and a very good president.
- (C) The federal government was a little shaky because Washington was the first president and didn't know what he was doing.
- (D) When Washington became president, people liked and trusted him and began to accept the new government.

3 Why did Washington attend the Constitutional Convention?

- (A) He wanted to help write the Articles of Confederation because he was worried about the U.S. Constitution.
- (B) He wanted the public to know that he supported the U.S. Constitution so that they would elect him president.
- (C) He wanted to support a new U.S. Constitution because he was worried about the Articles of Confederation.
- (D) He wanted to get rid of everything in the Articles of Confederation because they would not allow him to be president.

4 Why did Washington want a strong central government?

- (A) He thought it would be good for the country if the president had more power.
- (B) He did not like or trust the members of the legislature and they did not trust him.
- (C) He was worried that members of his cabinet would fight with each other.
- (D) He wanted to be president for a very long time, and he needed power to do this.