

# Interview

## An Exclusive Interview with The Honorable George Washington

First President of the United States of America

**EDITORS' NOTE** *What would George Washington, the first president of the United States who died in 1799, answer if he were asked about the problems in the world today? We asked Freeman Klopott, recent graduate of St. Louis's Washington University, and Briana Young, recent graduate of Minneapolis's Augsburg College, to research Washington's speeches and writings and to ask today's questions to see what his answers might be, taken from his own words over 200 years ago. They did a remarkable job and should be commended. It goes to show that if you act like a leader and speak and write like a leader, your reputation in history stands well the test of time.*

*Born on February 22, 1732, in Westmoreland County, Virginia, George Washington was elected to the First Continental Congress in 1774 and the Second Continental Congress in 1775, and was unanimously elected general and commander-in-chief of the Continental Army by the Continental Congress on June 15, 1775. In 1787 Washington joined the Constitutional Convention as its president, and upon the ratification of the Constitution of the United States in June 1788, he was elected president of the United States. Washington took the oath of office on April 30, 1789, and served as president of the United States until his retirement in 1797. He died of a throat infection in 1799.*

### **What will the success of the American experiment bring to the world?**

The happiness of the people of these states, under the auspices of liberty, may be made complete, by so careful a preservation and so prudent a use of this blessing as will acquire to them the glory of recommending it to the applause, the affection, and adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it.

### **What does it mean to you to be patriotic?**

Your union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty, and that the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other.

### **What is one of the major flaws you see in our system of democracy?**

It is one of the evils of democratical governments, that the people, not always seeing and frequently misled, must often feel before they can act right; but then evils of this nature seldom fail to work their own cure. It is to be lamented, nevertheless, that the remedies are so slow, and that those, who may wish to apply them are not attended to before they suffer in person, in interest, and in reputation.

### **And what do you see as being a redeeming factor of this shortcoming? What has the United States implemented to keep this potential problem with democracy in check?**

The federal Constitution.

### **Is every American entitled to religious freedom?**

If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny, and every species of religious persecution. I have often expressed my sentiment, that every man, conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience.

### **How do you feel about Constitutional amendments?**

It will be found that what would be a favorite object with one state, is the very thing which is strenuously opposed by another; the truth is, men are too apt to be swayed by local prejudices and those who are so fond of amendments which have the particular interest of their own states in view cannot extend their ideas to the general welfare of the Union; they do not consider that for every sacrifice which they make, they receive an ample compensation by the sacrifices which are made by other states for their benefit; and

that those very things which they give up, operate to their advantage through the medium of the general interest.

### **How do you feel about the press? Does the press interfere too much with the political system?**

If the government and the officers of it are to be the constant theme for newspaper abuse, and this too without condescending to investigate the motives or the facts, it will be impossible, I conceive, for any man living to manage the helm, or to keep the machine together.

### **What role do you think the president should play in the election of representatives?**

The rule I had prescribed to myself, and which I had invariably observed, of not interfering directly, or indirectly with the suffrages of the people, in the choice of their representatives.

### **If you were to attend a debate between presidential candidates, what question would you ask them?**

Why should either of you be so tenacious of your opinion as to make no allowances for those of the other?

### **Where do you stand on party politics?**

Let me now warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party, generally. This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but in those of the popular form it is seen in its greatest rankness and is truly their worst enemy. The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries, which result, gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual. And sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction more able or

more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty. The spirit of party serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one party against the other, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions.

Without more charity for the opinions and acts of one another in governmental matters, or some more infallible criterion by which the truth of speculative opinions [can be discerned], I believe it will be difficult, if not impractical, to manage the reigns of government or to keep the parts of it together.

**What do you consider to be a “healthy” amount of dissent between the parties?**

Differences in political opinions are as unavoidable as, to a certain point, they may, perhaps, be necessary; but it is exceedingly to be regretted that subjects cannot be discussed with temper on the one hand, for decisions submitted to without having the motives which led to them improperly implicated on the other; and this regret borders chagrin when we find that men of abilities, zealous patriots, having the same general objects in view, and the same upright intentions to prosecute them, will not exercise more charity in deciding on the opinions and actions of one another.

**Do you feel the dissent between the parties leads them to undermine their own productivity?**

I would feign hope that liberal allowances will be made for the political opinions of each other; and instead of those wounding suspicions and irritating charges, that there might be mutual forbearances and temporizing yielding on all sides. Without these, I do not see how the reigns of government are to be managed, or how the union or the states can be much longer reserved.

**Do you feel it is the role of the American president to release any and all information about his decisions to the American public?**

The nature of foreign negotiations requires caution; and their success must often depend on secrecy. And even when brought to a conclusion, a full disclosure of all the measures, demands, or eventual concessions, which may have been proposed or contemplated, would be extremely impolitic. For this might have a pernicious influence on future negotiations, or produce immediate inconveniences, perhaps danger and mischief, in relation to other powers.

I have no disposition to withhold any information which the duty of my station

will permit, or the public good shall require to be disclosed.

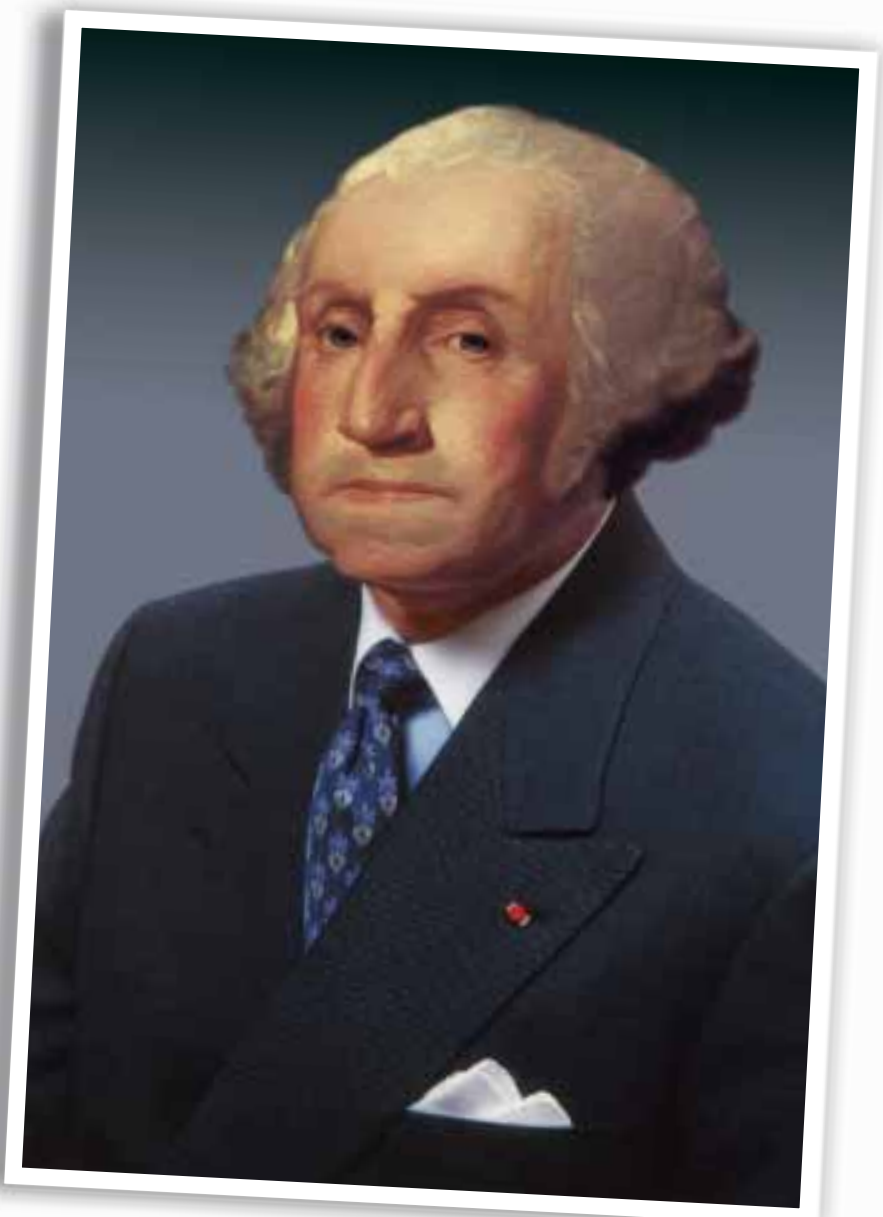
**What do you hope is the outcome of any conflict between the United States and a foreign country?**

I would pledge myself, that the government and people of the United States will meet them heart and hand at fair negotiation, having no wish more ardent than to live in peace with all the world, provided they are suffered to remain undisturbed in their just rights.

Vain will it be to look for peace and happiness, or for the security of liberty or

**How do you feel about public debt? What role should the people of the country play in preventing over-taxing or over-spending?**

As a very important source of strength and security cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible: avoiding occasions of experience by cultivating peace, but remembering also that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently proven much greater disbursements to repel it; avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt, not only by shun-



property, if civil discourse should ensue. The views of men can only be known or guessed at, by their words or actions.

**How important is it to establish a nation’s reputation and credibility?**

We now have a national character to establish; and it is of the utmost importance to stamp favorable impressions upon it; let justice then be one of its characteristics, and gratitude another.

ning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertions in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear. The execution of these maxims belongs to your representatives, but it is necessary that public opinion should cooperate. To facilitate to them the performance of their

duty, it is essential that you should practically bear in mind, that towards the payment of debts there must be revenue; that to have revenue there must be taxes; that not taxes can be devised which are not more or less inconvenient and unpleasant.

**What are your views on nation building and the establishment of democracy?**

However necessary it may appear in the eyes of the more discerning, my opinion is, that it cannot be effected without great contention and much confusion. It is among the evils, and perhaps not the smallest, of democratical governments, the people must feel, before they will see. When this happens, they are roused to action – hence it is that this form of government is so slow.

**Is it necessary to maintain amicable relationships with foreign powers?**

Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all.

**What risks are involved with forming alliances with other countries?**

Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and seem to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots, who may resist the intrigues of the favorite, are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people to surrender their interests.

The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. Let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation.

The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred, or a habitual fondness, is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection. Hence frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests.

**So an alliance can backfire.**

It makes the animosity of the nation subservient to projects of hostility instigated by pride, ambition, and other sinister and pernicious motives. The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations has been the victim.

**And does this rule apply to foreign trade as well? To what extent do you endorse foreign trade?**

Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand: neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences; consulting the natural course of things; diffusing and diversifying by gentle means the streams of commerce, but forcing nothing; establishing with powers so disposed in order to give to trade a stable course, to define the rights of our merchants, and to enable the government to support them; conventional rules of intercourse, the best that present circumstances and mutual opinion will permit, but temporary, and liable to be from time to time abandoned or varied, as experience and circumstances shall dictate; constantly keeping in view, that 'tis folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another; that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character; that by such acceptance, it may place itself in the condition of having given equivalents for nominal favors and yet of being reproached with ingratitude for not giving more. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation.

Whether foreign commerce is of real advantage to a country; that is, whether the luxury, the effeminacy, and corruptions which are introduced along with it; are counterbalanced by the convenience and wealth which it brings with it; but the decision of this question is of very little importance to us; we have abundant reason to be convinced that the spirit for trade which pervades these stages is not to be restrained; it behooves us then to establish just principles.

**How can a leader keep a nation united under strain?**

In contemplating the causes which may disturb our union, it occurs as matter of serious concern, that any ground should have been furnished for characterizing parties by geographical discriminations: Northern and Southern, Atlantic and Western, whence designating men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interest and views.

**Are you a proponent of using physical force to end a conflict with another nation?**

Arms should be the last resource; the denier resort.

**In your opinion, is a strong military ultimately the key to peace?**

If we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war.

**Is it then necessary to allot a large amount of money to the military forces of a nation?**

Who will grudge to yield a very little of his property to support the common interest of society, and ensure the protec-

tion of the government? Who does not remember, the frequent declarations, at the commencement of the war, that we should be completely satisfied, if at the expense of one half, we could defend the remainder of our possessions?

**And what should the American people be entitled to if they are willing to make such sacrifice?**

A state of absolute freedom and perfect security.

**How should a leader of a nation – in your case, a president – act?**

The president, in all matters of business and etiquette, can have no object but to demean himself in his public character, in such a manner as to maintain the dignity of office, without subjecting himself to the imputation of superciliousness or unnecessary reserve.

**What does it mean to you to be president of the United States of America?**

In these honorable qualifications I behold the surest pledges that as on one side no local prejudices, or attachments; no separate views, nor party animosities, will misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great assemblage of communities and interests: so, on another, that the foundations of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality; and the pre-eminence of free government, be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its citizens, and command the respect of the world.

**What rules do you live by, both in your public and private life?**

It is an old adage that “honesty is the best policy”; this applies to public as well as to private life; to states as well as to individuals.

**Is it possible for the world to be a truly peaceful place?**

I consider how mankind may be connected like one great family in fraternal ties. I indulge a fond, perhaps an enthusiastic idea, that as the world is evidently much less barbarous than it has been, its melioration must still be progressive; that nations are becoming more humanized in their policy, that the subjects of ambition and causes for hostility are daily diminishing, and, *in fine*, that the period is not very remote, when the benefits of a liberal and free commerce will, pretty generally, succeed to the devastations and horrors of war.

**Even in the face of adversity, is there always hope for better times ahead?**

The great Governor of the Universe has led us too long and too far on the road to happiness and glory, to forsake us in the midst of it. By folly and improper conduct, proceeding from a variety of causes, we may now and then get bewildered; but I hope and trust that there is good sense and virtue enough left to recover the right path before we shall be entirely lost. ●