

What Ivy League Professors Could Learn from George Washington

Back in 2005, *The Washington Post* [reported](#) on a Gallup poll asking Americans which U.S. president was the greatest. At the time, men like Reagan, Clinton, and Lincoln led the pack. America's first president, however, had only five percent support for top slot, leading the *WaPo* to quip that George Washington would "find it necessary to hire an image consultant" were he running for president today.

But while time has dimmed the American memory of Washington to the point where he is no longer revered, such was not the case in the early years of the country. He was, as Henry Lee [eulogized](#), "first in the hearts of his countrymen."

But why was this the case? Why did Washington make such a profound impression upon his contemporaries and many generations following?

There are likely many ways and characteristics which can serve as an answer to those questions. The all-encompassing one, however, seems to be his attitude toward life and others: he was unpretentious.

This unpretentiousness stemmed largely from Washington's upbringing. His father, August Washington, trained young George in the ways of a farmer. As records from August Washington's death indicate, those on the Washington family farm lived quite simply and were not surrounded by trappings of wealth.

Perhaps it was because of this simplistic lifestyle that Washington's father taught him to treat all social classes with equal respect and dignity. This attitude was evident in

later years when, as biographer William Wilbur [explains](#), Washington listened to the insights of humble men with as much attention as he did those of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

Writings of Washington's contemporaries underscore the simplicity with which he approached life. As the previously mentioned eulogy [states](#), "he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life." Patrick Henry [explained](#) that although Washington was not a man of eloquent speech, he was one of "solid information and sound judgment." And as Thomas Jefferson [noted](#), Washington routinely incorporated simplicity into his speech and writing:

"[A]ltho' in the circle of his friends, where he might be unreserved with safety, he took a free share in conversation, his colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas, nor fluency of words. ... [H]e wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy & correct style. [T]his he had acquired by conversation with the world for his education was merely reading, writing, and common arithmetic, to which he added surveying at a later day."

According to Steven Pinker, the simplicity with which Washington communicated and conducted his business is something that many of today's Americans have forgotten. The Harvard psychologist recently explained the following to CNBC:

"[T]he chief impediment to clear communication is a phenomenon called the 'curse of knowledge.'

This cognitive bias basically means that 'when you know something, it's extraordinarily difficult to know what it's like not to know it... Your own knowledge seems so obvious that you're apt to think that everyone else knows it, too.'

The problem with that, he says, is that you're more likely to use jargon that most people don't understand, to skip steps

and explanations, and to rely on abstractions instead of describing things in concrete terms.”

Whether we realize it or not, this disconnect is taking place all across society, and might explain some of the dissension which characterizes current politics and culture. Professor Charles Murray explains this phenomenon in his book, [*Coming Apart*](#):

“Many of the members of the new upper class are balkanized. Furthermore, their ignorance about other Americans is more problematic than the ignorance of other Americans about them. It is not a problem if truck drivers cannot empathize with the priorities of Yale professors. It is a problem if Yale professors, or producers of network news programs, or CEOs of great corporations, or presidential advisers cannot empathize with the priorities of truck drivers. It is inevitable that people have large areas of ignorance about how others live, but that makes it all the more important that the members of the new upper class be aware of the breadth and depth of their ignorance.”

In essence, many of the elites in D.C. and academia have failed to follow Washington’s example of listening to the ideas of both the common American and the highly knowledgeable. Instead of speaking with straightforward simplicity, they use confusing jargon and tell the average individual to trust the government has their best interest at heart.

If we are going to find our way forward toward cultural unity, do we need to adopt Washington’s approach to life? Must we approach life with a less pretentious, more simplistic, common sense viewpoint?

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