

Why George Washington was the Most Trusted Man in America

By Robert Porter Lynch

In world history, George Washington still remains unique among leaders. The pains and frustrations he endured during the American Revolution would be enough to crumble a battalion of normal heroes. His composure under stress is greater than legendary. At the end of the Revolution, the country was deeply divided: A third of the nation supported the new regime, a third was neutral, and a third still remained loyal to the King. Who could lead a divided country? Only someone whose integrity was impeccable. That was Washington.

While Washington was well known as aloof, almost to the point of seeming cold, his distance was always tempered by humility, never self-righteousness. His unwavering commitment to the principles of a democratic republic and his aversion to tyrannical monarchies always prevailed over his personal interests or gain. In all affairs he always exercised restraint – unlike the typical European monarchs.

The use or abuse of power is the perfect example of how he balanced his own self interest with the greater good of the people. As historian Edmund Morgan has observed:

Washington's genius lay in his understanding of power, both military power and political power, an understanding unmatched by that of any of his contemporaries ... showing itself in the ability to take command ... concentrating his forces to strike efficiently when the opportunity presented ... always bent on winning.

He understood the political basis of power ... which ultimately depended upon public opinion, which was as fickle then as now... Although Washington's complaints to Congress [for failure to adequately fund his struggling army] were fruitless, he never appealed over the heads of Congress to their constituents. The republic owed much in the end to the wisdom of men who understood the interests of the people better than their elected representatives did.

Washington had none of the range [of talents] of the brilliant men around him, but in his understanding of power he left them all behind.

While none of us are ever going to be George Washington, the self-discipline he used to achieve this greatness can be practiced by every leader in business, government, or the neighborhood. Lost to most who study our history, Washington was a practicing "stoic." What does this mean? Perhaps a little historic background will shed some light on this.

The ideals of principled leadership were brought into crystal clarity by the publication in 1776 of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Copies were immediately shipped to America and its lessons were readily absorbed by Jefferson, Madison, and Washington.

The author, Edward Gibbon, was a realist well acquainted with Machiavelli; but his primary question centered on how an empire so powerful as Rome could fall into ruin.

He pointed to the deep virtues espoused by Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, whose book "*Meditations*" had been widely published. After death of this principled leader, the empire spiraled into ever-accelerating decay as civic virtue was replaced by greed, self interest, and corruption that depleted the empire of its values and spirit.

If it is not right do not do it;
if it is not true do not say it.
-- Marcus Aurelius

Washington admired Aurelius' stoic quest for wisdom, virtue, self-restraint, tolerance, the dignity of all men. He controlled his fiery temper by practicing stoicism religiously, living by a simple premise: *What matters most is a man's behavior, not his ideas*. Calmness and the ardent refusal to display hate or rage were essential to prevent the distortion of rationality, morality, and good judgment. That's what made him the "Most Trusted Man in America."