

“Pomp and Circumstance” Political Cartoon Background Information

The storm over presidential etiquette created the first controversy in the new government. Over the years, it would cause great personal distress to George Washington who was always sensitive to public opinion and criticism. The explosive power of arguments concerning Washington’s social life—even over personal behavior and tastes that might have seemed nobody’s business but his own—grew out of the fact that the new government had no traditional focus at all, nothing concrete and established that the people could visualize when thinking of their nation, except George Washington and, through him, the Office of President.

Upon his selection as commander-in-chief during the Revolutionary War, Washington became the symbol of national unity. James Madison wrote that Washington was the only aspect of the government which had really caught the imagination of the people. However, while his popularity made Washington a great symbol for the nation, it also invested him with incredible power. While few believed that Washington would seize and hold power, his extraordinary influence over the people and his power to establish precedents was awe-inspiring. Apart from his own personal behavior, many wondered how Washington’s choices for Presidential behavior would affect his successors. There was a genuine fear that though Washington was himself above reproach, his creation of a powerful presidency might make the office susceptible to future occupation by a tyrant with sinister intentions. Washington was eager to meet the country’s expectations for the behavior of a President, but how to do so was no simple matter. Every American had an individual notion or preference for Presidential behavior which was tied to political, regional, aesthetic, and moral considerations.

In establishing the protocols of the office, Washington consulted with a group of close advisors including John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison. They understood that to establish a new government it was essential to secure the respect and acceptance of the people. The lessons of history and existing European example demonstrated that popular support was often gained through titles and trappings which externalized the position of rulers to command and be obeyed. No one knew for sure whether or not this was a critical aspect of leadership. Adams argued forcefully that outward symbols of leadership and

distinction were critically necessary to establish the legitimacy of the government. Madison responded that Americans would equate pomp and circumstance, overt manifestations of wealth and power, with tyranny. Americans were familiar with European traditions and titles; importing these practices might better legitimate the new government in the eyes of the world but many feared that they would lead to decay and corruption.

The first debate to occupy the new government was the question of titles, ceremony, and official etiquette. The clash began in the Senate over how to address government officials. Vice-President Adams, as the president of the Senate, asked the body to appoint a committee to confer with the House on “what styles or titles it will be proper to annex to the office of President and Vice President of the United States,” in preparation for the upcoming inauguration. The committee’s first recommendation for the presidential address was “His Highness the President of the United States of America, and Protector of their Liberties.” In conference committee, the House of Representatives refused to consider formal titles. They voted that the proper address would be “To the President of the United States” with no additional title. Washington expressed his relief that the matter was resolved in so simple and straightforward a manner. However, Adams suffered lasting consequences as he was forever labeled a monarchist and many suspected he wished to succeed Washington as a king.

In taking office, Washington discovered immediately that he was expected to be available to every citizen in the land. “From the time I had done breakfast and thence till dinner and afterwards till bedtime I could not get relieved from the ceremony of one visit before I had to attend to another.” Every American felt he had a right to come in and stare, assess the furnishing of the house to see whether it was too grandly aristocratic or too squalidly republican, to compliment himself as well as Washington with expressions of admiration and congratulation, and then assess Washington’s reply

While the official title was “Mr. President”, Washington was almost invariably called “General Washington” in direct address. Seeking some method of escape that would not only preserve his sanity but enable him to get some work done, Washington hoped to find precedents for self-protection in the behavior of his partial predecessors, the Presidents of Congress. He learned that, far from disentangling themselves, they had become entrapped to such an extent that they had no opportunity to accomplish their work.

Two days after his inauguration, Washington published in the newspapers that he would receive “visits of compliment” only between the hours of two and three on Tuesdays and Fridays. Furthermore, Washington would return no visits nor accept invitations to entertainments. This enraged those who believed that the people should have more unfettered access to the President. Washington consulted with Madison, Hamilton, Adams and Jay as to the “line of conduct most eligible to be pursued by the President of the United States.” The precedents he now established, Washington noted, might continue for a long time, materially affecting not only the popularity but the nature of the government. The first requisite, of course, was for the President to get his work done. He needed, in addition, to avoid “the inconveniences as well as reduction of respectability by too free an intercourse and too much familiarity.” On the other hand, it was essential that he avoid giving the impression of “an ostentatious show of mimicry of sovereignty.”

Though Adams and Hamilton both recommended even more withdrawn behavior than Washington ultimately chose, his choice was to remain more cloistered than the most egalitarian of the Republicans, such as Jefferson and Madison, would have liked. Washington established two occasions a week when any respectably dressed person could, without introduction, invitation, or any prearrangement call upon the President. The first was the President’s levee for men only, every Tuesday from three to four. The other was Mrs. Washington’s tea party, for men and women, held on Friday evenings. Washington would also stage invitation-only dinners on Thursdays at four o’clock in the afternoon. To avoid charges of favoritism or contests for invitations, only officials and their families would be asked to the dinners, and these in an orderly system of rotation.

The levees became well-known as stiff, formal occasions. Washington dressed in a formal, black velvet suit with sword at his side. As gentlemen entered, Washington greeted each of them with a bow. The large numbers of visitors and small number of chairs made for an uncomfortable and awkward experience. The sheer numbers of guests rendered it impossible for Washington to engage in discussion with individuals. Unfortunately, Washington’s clear discomfort led to further accusations of his being haughty, aristocratic, and unapproachable.

Mrs. Washington’s tea parties were criticized for being too “splendid.” Arriving guests were announced at the door and the ladies escorted to Mrs. Washington who would be seated on a

low dais at the front of the room, often with the vice-president's wife, Abigail Adams, at her side. After making a curtsy and engaging in a moment of conversation, each lady was conducted to a chair where she would sit until the President approached her. After being welcomed by President Washington, the lady was then free to go into the other room to enjoy the refreshments.

Throughout his time in the presidency, Washington continued to shun outside social engagements; however, rather than barricading himself in the executive mansion he and his family frequently engaged in public pursuits. The Washingtons enjoyed driving and riding about town, attending church, and going to the theater. These outings provided many average Americans with an opportunity to “see” the Washingtons. Moreover, while Washington tried to walk the fine line between republican squalor and aristocratic grandeur, he was a wealthy man and enjoyed the best quality goods. For example, Washington's coach, decorated with paintings of the four seasons on the front and back doors, was instantly recognizable. It was drawn by six matched, cream-colored horses— whose hooves were blackened before leaving the stable—and attended by four slaves in livery. When Washington rode horseback it was on one of two white horses outfitted with a silver-mounted saddle resting atop a leopard skin saddle blanket and decorated with seven yards of gold braiding. Undoubtedly, Washington understood the power of appearance.

The appearance of the presidency was one of the most critical factors to resolve before the fledgling Federal Government could convince the American people that this new, never-before-tried form of government could be trusted. While Washington was the most admired and trusted man in America—and respected around the world for his character— his behavior in office would be an indicator for the wisdom of republican government. People carefully observed Washington for signs that the vast power of the office was a corrupting influence. After all, if Washington could not resist the power going to his head, then no future president could either. However, if Washington was able to establish the presidency as a uniquely American institution, responsive to the people and careful of the prerogatives of government, then this new form of government just might succeed.