

PART I



*Leadership  
Lessons*



# *Leadership Lesson 1*



## A Leader Has Vision

*The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision.*

—THEODORE HESBURGH

**M**any Americans associate George Washington with strong and steady leadership. He bravely led the Continental Army in the War of Independence, and he then accepted the call to be first president of our new nation. But there was much more to Washington's leadership. In fact, very few people perceive of Washington as the creative, big-thinking, inspiring, visionary leader he actually was.

Reverend Richard C. Stazesky, in a February 2000 lecture at the George Washington Club in Wilmington, Delaware, discussed the three key traits of the "visionary leader"—he or she has a far-reaching view, is meticulously organized, and is personally persuasive.<sup>1</sup>

George Washington was a visionary leader of the highest degree, and his personal charisma and the staggeringly high level of respect and love felt for him were the tools he employed to implement his vision.

Perhaps Washington was fortunate (and we are even *more* fortunate) that he never visited Europe and also never

completely understood the life of classic European nobility. Washington thought like an “American” before anyone actually knew what that really meant. He believed deeply in a republican form of government, and he similarly believed that what he described as our “great experiment” would really work. In a letter to Catherine Macaulay Graham, Washington wrote, “The establishment of our new Government seemed to be the last great experiment for promoting human happiness by reasonable compact in civil Society.”<sup>2</sup>

He also understood that what we call a “free enterprise system”—emphasis on the word “free”—would be a powerful, motivational engine for our new country, a self-directed system that would provide new incentives for rapid growth. If properly nurtured, this system would reward Americans with higher and higher standards of living, as well as a greater sense of long-term security.

***The Idea—and Ideal—of True Independence*** Washington’s fundamental vision was of a United States free from foreign control. This idealized vision of a free America as put forth by Washington and the other Founders essentially established our cherished right to privacy. As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said two centuries later, “They conferred, as against the government, the right to be let alone—the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued by civilized men.”<sup>3</sup> This is the essence of big-picture thinking: As the colonies desired to be “let alone” by Britain, so individual Americans desired to be left alone by their government, to pursue wealth and happiness on their own terms. Washington recognized the practical side of this vision—that a central government would be necessary to hold the whole thing together—but he never lost sight of the importance of an overriding vision for a free America.

***Putting a System in Place*** Washington's willingness to serve as president of the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia is evidence of his far-reaching understanding of the need for structure and organization. Ideals like those expressed in the Declaration of Independence were relatively easy to agree upon, but Washington understood the need to translate this vision into practical terms. He knew that one of the first rules of business is "get it in writing." In modern times, this may be a cliché, perhaps most frequently associated with used-car salespeople and some fast-talking real estate agents. But as is often the case with hoary old adages, this cliché boasts a great deal of truth. Washington knew that the only way for his new country to survive and prosper was to establish a clear set of written rules that all 13 states would agree to follow. He argued that compromises were essential, and he used his tremendous influence to force people to the bargaining table.

Interestingly, Washington wanted to remove some of the ambiguities that still exist today in the final document—that's the kind of detail-oriented thinker he was. Others recognized, however, that leaving some issues open to interpretation was a positive, not a negative, particularly in terms of the document's longevity. Washington was the first to admit that the written document formulated under his leadership was far from perfect—in his typical fashion, Washington wanted to keep people's expectations on a modest level. Still, this magnificent document has never been eclipsed as a road map for democracy. It has Washington's stamp on it—it's got vision, but it also works on a practical level.

***Investing in an Uncertain Future*** Washington ultimately acquired almost 70,000 acres of land in what would today be seven different states because he believed in America's future.

He did not know exactly how fast our nation would expand, nor did he know precisely in which direction growth would occur. But he was absolutely certain that America *would* expand, and he wanted to be at the forefront of this evolution by becoming a major landowner.

As an example of Washington's far-reaching thinking, in his will, he listed many parcels of his land, often emphasizing his belief in their future value. When talking about 373 acres in what would become the town of Nansemond, Virginia, he wrote that he had purchased the tracts "on full conviction that they would become valuable."<sup>4</sup> The acres were on a river that could facilitate commerce, and he described them as "capable of great improvement; and from its situation must become extremely valuable." Washington was thinking like a businessman, and he recognized that land would become America's second most important resource. In first place, of course, were our people—creative, hardworking, and eager to move forward.

***Growth*** The final pages of this book will reveal that Washington was an extraordinary farmer. He was constantly experimenting with crop rotations, improved equipment, and soil enhancements. He wholeheartedly believed that America's farmers would be the world's best, and that we would become "a storehouse and granary to the world."<sup>5</sup> And he was right.

***Washington's Unavoidable Regret*** As a slaveholder, Washington evolved morally to the point where he believed that slavery as an institution could not coexist with a true republican form of government. Hence, his long-term vision for America did not include slavery. He recognized its inhumanity, and even when his slaves were part and parcel of the operations of Mount Vernon, Washington's behavior illustrated

his broader understanding of the regrettable institution. Washington once wrote to a visiting Englishman, “I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union.”<sup>6</sup>

Washington expressed an intuitive, heartfelt concern for his slaves and he worked diligently to treat them humanely. He made sure they were fed properly, recognized slave marriages, and was loath to break up slave families. Later in life, he stopped buying and selling slaves altogether. Although it took him quite a while to warm up to the idea, he saw to it that blacks served in the Continental Army. He scolded his overseers for thinking of slaves as “they do a draft horse or ox.”<sup>7</sup> He enlisted doctors to treat the wounds and illnesses of his slaves. He allowed them to grow their own produce, which Washington sometimes purchased, and he trusted individual slaves to travel to nearby towns and plantations.<sup>8</sup>

As has been said many times, Washington’s attitudes and actions regarding slavery must be judged within the context of his times, not ours. And for all his (oftentimes reluctant) acceptance of the institution, it is clear that he held in his heart a future vision of a time when slavery would be outlawed on American soil. He can be criticized for not making the elimination of slavery a presidential priority, although many scholars agree with Washington’s opinion that the issue of slavery, if addressed head-on, would have destroyed the fragile Union. Given the choice between eliminating slavery or saving the Union, Washington really was between a rock and a hard place. He probably felt he had no choice—he picked the Union.

***The First “Mr. President”*** “I walk on untrodden ground,” Washington wrote to Catherine Macaulay Graham on January 9, 1790. “There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent.”<sup>9</sup>

Washington instinctively understood that everything he did as president was monumental in its long-term significance and meaning. With every act, he was establishing traditions and precedents for the future, so he always attempted to act “presidential.”

He fully recognized the importance and weight of the presidency, and he knew that future presidents would look to his deeds and words for inspiration and guidance. “Many things which appear of little importance in themselves,” Washington wrote to John Jay, Hamilton, Madison, and John Adams shortly after his inauguration “may have great and durable consequences from their having been established at the commencement of a new general government.”<sup>10</sup>

By refusing a third term, Washington looked ahead to the future of our government and insisted on the peaceful transfer of power to a new generation of leaders. By doing so, not only did he follow through on his promise to the people, he also ensured that our future leaders would be chosen on merit—rather than on bloodlines or military rank. They would truly be chosen by the people. Washington trusted the people and the system, and he envisioned a nation that could fulfill a greater promise and potential than any nation in history.

***Designing for the Future*** Washington helped to select the site for our nation’s capital, and he enlisted a very creative and controversial architect—Pierre L’Enfant—who shared with Washington a “think big and bold” approach to the design of the city. In his mind, Washington was creating a capital that would last for centuries, not decades, and the city he envisioned was destined to be world class. Washington outmaneuvered the naysayers (including Thomas Jefferson) who felt the plans were far too grandiose, far too reminiscent of the royal courts of Europe. As the National Register of Historic Places explains on its web site, “In the context of the United



States, a plan as grand as the 200-year old city of Washington, DC, stands alone in its magnificence and scale. But as the capital of a new nation, its position and appearance had to surpass the social, economic and cultural balance of a mere city: it was intended as the model for American city planning and a symbol of governmental power to be seen by other nations. The remarkable aspect of Washington, is that by definition of built-out blocks and unobstructed open space, the plan conceived by L'Enfant is little changed today.”<sup>11</sup> This is a testimony to Washington’s vision—and the fact that he had the power and influence to back it up.

***At Home*** George Washington’s architecture at Mount Vernon boasts elegant, classical themes, but it is also fresh and full of new ideas. For his beloved home, Washington embraced and incorporated elements that were distinctly American, ultimately creating a hybrid design that honors the past while looking to the future.

