



George Washington hated to leave his wife, Martha, but he believed in the cause of freedom. So he agreed to lead the colonial war effort.

## George Washington: A Warrior Spirit and a Caring Heart

Everyone knows stories about George Washington. From chopping down the cherry tree to helping the nation win independence, the stories make Washington sound larger than life. Washington's writings reveal a more complex person. Behind his strong public presence was a man of many sentiments. He balanced a deep love of his family with a commitment to fighting for his country. He coupled bravery with concern, caution, and compassion.

In 1775, the Continental Congress asked George Washington to lead the colonial army. Washington was living on his estate at Mount Vernon, Virginia, at the time. He had proven his military skills in the French and Indian War. And he had the added benefit of coming from the South. If he were to command the army, Congress thought, he might tie the Southern Colonies more firmly to the cause.

Washington believed deeply in that cause. Still, he had his doubts about taking on the important job Congress offered. Young soldiers like Joseph Plumb Martin, a Connecticut farm boy, looked forward to going to war. But Washington was 43 years old and had fought in wars before. He knew it would be hard to leave his home and family. In a letter to his wife, Martha, he said, "I should enjoy more real happiness in one month with you at home, than I have the most distant prospect of finding abroad [away from home] if my stay were to be seven times seven years."

Eventually, Washington did lead the colonists to victory, but in 1775, he was not sure he would be able to do so. He worried he would not be clever enough to ensure that the colonists would win the war. He thanked Congress for the honor of being asked to lead. He told them about his concerns, but said he would do everything he could to help the colonists reach their goal. In a speech to Congress, he said,

*I feel great distress from a consciousness that my abilities and military experience may not be equal to the extensive and important trust. However, as the Congress desire it, I will enter upon the momentous duty, and exert every power I possess in their service and for the support of the glorious cause.*

### The Man's Compassion

Washington was a general, but he understood the hardships his soldiers faced. At the top of the list was low pay. He felt bad that his men had to do so much hard work for so little money. He also knew that low pay kept some men from enlisting. A soldier "cannot ruin himself and family to serve his country," he told Congress.

Washington witnessed the terrible shortages his soldiers lived with. Joseph Plumb Martin felt the sting of the shortages. He went for days without food and made simple moccasins to keep his feet off the ice. Years later, Martin wrote in his *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier* (1830) that it was ironic that soldiers for a noble cause were so poorly equipped. He described the soldiers marching through Princeton, New Jersey.

*The young ladies of the town . . . had collected and were sitting in the stoops and at the windows to see the noble exhibition of a thousand half-starved and three-quarters naked soldiers pass in review before them.*

The soldiers' suffering upset Washington. He repeatedly asked for more supplies. During the harsh winter at Valley Forge, he wrote to Congress. In a letter dated December 23, 1777, he accused the congressmen of not understanding what his soldiers went through.

*I can assure those gentlemen that it is a much easier and less distressing thing to draw remonstrances [listen to protests] in a comfortable room by a good fireside, than to occupy a cold, bleak hill, and sleep under frost and snow, without clothes or blankets. However, although they seem to have little feeling for the naked and distressed soldiers, I feel superabundantly for them, and, from my soul, I pity those miseries, which it is neither in my power to relieve or prevent.*

George Washington cared about his soldiers' suffering. Here he is shown visiting wounded men at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777–78.







Washington expected his soldiers to fight well. But early in the war, he had to lead their retreat from a battle at Long Island, New York.

### The General's Concerns

George Washington balanced sympathy for his soldiers with his responsibility as their leader. For example, he knew that soldiers did not want to leave home any more than he did. But his sympathy only went so far. When it came down to it, Washington worried that homesick men made poor soldiers. They threatened his mission. They threatened the colonists' success. "Men just dragged from the tender scenes of domestic life," he wrote, were easily scared by the hard life of a soldier. Such soldiers might desert the army and encourage others to desert, too.

The compassionate Washington wanted his soldiers to get paid more. But he still expected them to fight, and fight hard. He scorned their lack of discipline. He was horrified by what happened at the Battle of New York, in 1776.

*I found the troops . . . retreating [as fast as possible], and those ordered to support them . . . flying in every direction and in the greatest confusion . . . I used every means in my power to rally and get them into some order, but my attempts were . . . ineffectual . . . On the appearance of a small party of the enemy . . . their disorder increased and they ran away in the greatest confusion without firing a single shot.*

The general knew that such chaos would never win the war. He did everything he could to see to it that soldiers who neglected their duties were punished.

Similarly, while Washington sympathized with his soldiers being hungry, as general he prohibited them from stealing food. His reason was practical as much as it was moral. Too often, people killed soldiers who tried to steal from them. He wrote to one of his colonels,

*Every attempt of the men to plunder houses, orchards, gardens, etc., [should] be discouraged, not only for the preservation of property and sake of good order, but for the prevention of those fatal consequences which usually follow such diabolical practices.*

Of course, the general's rules were not always obeyed. During the winter at Valley Forge, an officer ordered Joseph Plumb Martin to steal to help keep the soldiers from starving. The work was "not altogether unpleasant," Martin wrote in *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier*, but it was definitely stealing. He described it this way.

*I had to travel far and near . . . and at all times to run the risk of abuse, if not injury, from the inhabitants when plundering them of their property, (for I could not, while in the very act of taking their cattle, hay, corn and grain from them against their wills, consider it a whit better than plundering—sheer privateering) [stealing under the authority of a government].*

### Worry and Praise, Courage and Kindness

George Washington worried about his reputation. He wanted people to respect him. But if the colonies lost the war, Washington knew that people would think less of him. That worry gave even the great general cause for concern. He once wrote to his cousin that "I never was in such an unhappy, divided state since I was born." To a confidant, he wrote that his army service was "one continued round of annoyance and fatigue."

Nonetheless, Washington kept fighting for the cause of freedom. As the war dragged on, he praised his soldiers for putting up such a good fight against the British, the most powerful army in the world. In a letter, he wrote,

*Without arrogance . . . it may be said that no history . . . can furnish an instance of an army's suffering such uncommon hardships as ours have done, and bearing them with the same patience and fortitude.*

When the war was over, Washington did everything he could to see that the soldiers received fair pay from the new government.

When he said goodbye to his officers, George Washington again balanced courage and kindness. The commander in chief, one general reported, was "suffused in tears." He could not speak because he had such strong feelings for his men. In the final goodbye, Washington revealed both his warrior spirit and his caring heart.

George Washington bid an emotional farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern in New York in 1783. The tavern owner, Samuel Fraunces, was a free black man of French and African descent. He would become chief steward at President Washington's house in Philadelphia.



The Granger Collection, New York



## READING FURTHER

**Preparing to Write: Choosing Descriptive Words**

For all of his fame, George Washington shared many qualities and emotions that we all have. Write five sentences describing George Washington. Use at least one word from the Word Bank in each sentence.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

**Word Bank**

cautious  
compassion  
concern  
emotional  
homesick  
proud  
strict  
uncertain  
worried

**Writing a Personal Letter**

Soldier Joseph Plumb Martin and General George Washington were in the same place a number of times: the Battle of Long Island (1776), Valley Forge (1777-78), the Battle of Monmouth (1778), and the Battle of Yorktown (1781).

At Yorktown, a stranger stopped to talk with Martin and some other soldiers. Martin realized only later that the stranger was the great General Washington. "Had we dared," Martin wrote, "we might have cautioned him for exposing himself so carelessly to danger at such a time."

Suppose you had been Joseph Plumb Martin at Yorktown. What would you like to have told General Washington about your experiences in the war? What emotions would you have shared with him? Express your ideas in a short letter that the soldier might have written to the general. Your letter should clearly describe experiences and emotions related to the war. Be sure to use correct letter format and correct spelling and grammar.

Use this rubric to evaluate your letter. Make changes in your letter if you need to.

Score	Description
3	The letter clearly describes experiences and emotions related to the war. It has correct letter format. There are no spelling or grammar errors.
2	The letter describes experiences and emotions related to the war. It has correct letter format. There are some spelling or grammar errors.
1	The letter does not describe experiences and emotions related to the war. It does not have correct letter format. There are many spelling or grammar errors.