

George Washington's Finest Hour: The Newburgh Conspiracy and Identity

- **Compelling Question**
 - To what extent are you cultivating the identity necessary to achieve worthy goals such as enhancing freedom in the lives of yourself and others? Would you have given up the opportunity to be king?
- **Virtue:** Identity
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will evaluate George Washington's actions to understand his approach to the principle of identity.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will understand how George Washington's identity resulted in lasting benefits for the nation he helped create.
 - Students will analyze their own goals and ambitions to determine how identity contributes to achievement of worthy goals.
 - Students identify a situation in which a flawed sense of identity resulted in failure to meet some personal or group goal.
- **Background**
 - In 1781, the Continental Army had won the Battle of Yorktown, which ensured American independence. The Americans had won the Revolutionary War despite the fact that the Congress could rarely supply the army adequately, the states often looked out for their own interests rather than the common good, and civilians also failed frequently to support the war effort. By late 1782, military operations had largely ended, but the army remained mobilized in case of a major British attack from its main garrison in New York. Meanwhile, the Articles of Confederation had created a weak national congress that could not collect taxes from the states. Therefore, the officers and soldiers of the army went unpaid for long stretches and were increasingly discontented. The country had not even won formal independence yet and could collapse into military rule as had so many republics in history, most notably, ancient Rome.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Articles of Confederation
 - Caesar
 - Cincinnatus
 - Audacity
 - Scathing
 - Banish
 - Posterity
 - Disgruntled
 - Incessant
 - Sully
 - Conspiracy
 - Concurrence
 - Exigencies
 - Avert
 - Deference
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**

- What was the likelihood of the soldiers in the American Continental Army being paid regularly and how did they feel about that? Why did the Continental Congress have insufficient funds to pay the soldiers?
- When Lewis Nicola encouraged Washington to overthrow Congress and become king, Washington replied, “You could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable.” What did this response reveal about Washington’s opinion of the kind of leader the country needed at that time in order to preserve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?
- In what ways did George Washington have unique opportunities to contribute to liberty for others?
- How did George Washington prove his commitment to use his liberty to ensure the rights of others?

- **Discussion Questions**

- Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**

- Ellis, Joseph J. *His Excellency: George Washington*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.
- Transcript of Washington’s commission
<http://www.virginiamemory.com/docs/GWCommission.pdf>
- George Washington’s Mount Vernon <http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/>
- General George Washington Resigning His Commission—John Trumbull Painting
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/historic-rotunda-paintings/general-george-washington-resigning-his-commission>
- Leibiger, Stuart. *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic*: University of Virginia Press, 1999.

Handout A: George Washington's Finest Hour: The Newburgh Conspiracy and Identity

Background

In 1781, the Continental Army had won the Battle of Yorktown, which ensured American independence. The Americans had won the Revolutionary War despite the fact that the Congress could rarely supply the army adequately, the states often looked out for their own interests rather than the common good, and civilians also failed frequently to support the war effort. By late 1782, military operations had largely ended, but the army remained mobilized in case of a major British attack from its main garrison in New York. Meanwhile, the Articles of Confederation had created a weak national congress that could not collect taxes from the states. Therefore, the officers and soldiers of the army went unpaid for long stretches and were increasingly discontented. The country had not even won formal independence yet and could collapse into military rule as had so many republics in history, most notably, ancient Rome.

Narrative

In late 1782, Americans awaited news from France that a preliminary peace treaty had been signed. General George Washington was with his troops encamped at Newburgh, New York, watching the British army that had occupied New York since 1776. Although his army had won the Revolutionary War with the victory at Yorktown, Washington faced one of the greatest crises of the American Revolution that would test his character and dedication to the cause for liberty. He would have to choose whether he was a Caesar who would overthrow the republic or a Cincinnatus who would defend the republic and surrender power.

Earlier that year, Washington had an opportunity to prove that he wholly identified with the American republican cause of liberty when he exchanged letters with a young officer, Lewis Nicola. Nicola had the audacity to encourage Washington to overthrow the Congress and become king due to the continued frustrations of the war effort by the civilian authorities. In Nicola's reasoning, only a military dictatorship could bring the requisite order and stability necessary to govern the country. In reply, Washington wrote Nicola a scathing letter that sternly rebuked his suggestion. Washington was greatly pained that "such ideas exist[ed] in the army." Knowing the virtue of his own character, he was "at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to an address which to me seems big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my country . . . You could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable." He warned that any opposition to Congress must be expressed "in a constitutional way." He finished his letter with advice to "banish these thoughts from your mind" if Nicola had any "regard for your country, concern for yourself or posterity, or respect for me."

Nevertheless, the problem was larger than the thoughts of one disgruntled officer. The officers and soldiers of the Continental Army were discontented that they had not been paid in months or years. From their quarters at Newburgh, New York, they sent a delegation to Congress that arrived in January, 1783, with a threatening petition that read: "We have borne all that men can bear – our property is expended – our private resources are at an end, and our friends are wearied and disgusted with our incessant applications." They warned, "Any further experiments on their patience may have fatal effects." They hinted at an overthrow of Congress and civilian government.

The officers won the support of a few members of Congress who used the army threats to persuade that body to assume greater national powers. There were shadowy maneuvers behind the scenes in Philadelphia, and the conspirators increased the pressure. For example, financier Robert Morris, threatened to resign if Congress did not pass a tax to collect revenue to pay the soldiers. Nevertheless, others remained determined to protect republican government. Washington's trusted friend and general of the artillery, Henry Knox, was a patriot who refused to take the bait of his fellow officers to become involved. Knox told the officers, "I consider the reputation of the American Army as one of the most immaculate things on earth. We should even suffer wrongs and injuries to the utmost verge of toleration rather than sully it in the least degree."

In February, Alexander Hamilton, a congressman and former Washington aide, tried to persuade Washington to lead the conspiracy. Hamilton wrote, "The claims of the army urged with moderation, but with firmness, may operate on those weak minds . . . so as to produce a concurrence in the measures which the exigencies of affairs demand." Washington responded that the consequences of a general mutiny "would at this day be productive of civil commotions and end in blood. Unhappy situation this! God forbid we should be involved in it." He cautioned Hamilton that, "the army is a dangerous instrument to play with."

In mid-March, General Horatio Gates, the hero of the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, constantly sought his own glory and readily joined the conspiracy. Gates' aide penned an address to the men that encouraged their anger at Congress: "Faith has its limits, as well as temper; and there are points beyond which neither can be stretched." Gates called the officers to a meeting scheduled in a few days.

The rebellion against the republican government was averted by the character of George Washington, who dedicated himself to the republican principle of military deference to the civilian government. He demonstrated that he identified with Cincinnatus, not with Caesar. General Washington had caught wind of the Newburgh conspiracy. He ended the impending rebellion by addressing his troops assembled at their new building, the Temple of Virtue, on March 15, the Ides of March, which was the symbolically important day when the Roman dictator, Julius Caesar, was assassinated. He called on them to prevent those who would "overturn the liberties of our country, and who wickedly attempt to open the flood gates of civil discord." He also made a dramatic appeal by pulling out his glasses while muttering, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind, in the service of my country." Most of the men present had never seen their General use eyeglasses. This simple action reminded the officers that Washington, like the men he led, had made great sacrifices for the cause of liberty, and inspired them to be patient. The men renounced their intent to overthrow Congress on the spot and pledged their support for the republican government.

In 1775, George Washington had chosen to go to war and lead the Continental Army because of his identification with what many called the "sacred cause of liberty" to win independence and self-government. In 1783, with the fighting ended and his goals achieved, Washington's faith in that cause was put to the test. He never wavered and was never tempted to turn from his devotion to the American republic. Washington unfailingly demonstrated that his historic reputation as the American Cincinnatus would be identified with the liberties of America.

Handout B: Journal Prompts

Answer the following questions in your journal, as you prepare to voluntarily share some of your responses in a class discussion.

1. To what extent did Washington's performance align with his identity and purpose? How did Washington's understanding of his identity make it possible for him to contribute to freedom?
2. To what extent and in what ways do your unique characteristics enable your pursuit of a life that is on track to achieve your purpose?
3. To what extent and in what ways does your performance align with your identity and purpose? What are you doing this very day to cultivate skills and interests that will connect today's purposes with your long-term opportunity to enhance and protect the life and liberty of others?
4. How significant to the establishment of the early republic was Washington's understanding of his identity? What might have resulted if Washington had understood differently his role in contributing to the advancement of liberty?
5. In your own experience or the experience of someone about whom you have learned, think of an example of flawed or misdirected sense of identity. What were some results of the person's flawed approach and what advice would you give him? For instance, if your friend were a gifted leader but did not use those skills in ways that bring about good for himself and others, how would you advise him?
6. If presented with a similar opportunity to establish a military dictatorship, what would you have done?