

Faith of our Founding Fathers – George Washington

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The stern and determined face on Mount Rushmore accurately portrays the temperament and personality of George Washington, America's first president. Washington was amiable, modest and ambitious. His legendary self-control, silence in the face of criticism and aloofness were actually psychological tactics to control his temper and deep emotional passions.

As a general in battle, president of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and first President of the United States of America, he was composed, relentless, learned from his mistakes and was obsessed with order.

Washington's religious views fit his temperament. Like his emotions, he kept his religious views largely to himself. And, all who try to conscript *his* personal faith for *their* theological or political ends, whether evangelical religious right or ACLU, will be sorely disappointed!

Born, raised, and married in the Anglican/Episcopalian state church of Virginia, Washington, like his father, was a vestryman in his parish church, a responsible leader. In this role he helped collect taxes that supported both the church and priest's salary.

He rarely partook of Holy Communion, a central point of Anglican/Episcopalian worship. He spoke of God in abstract rather than personal terms – providence, Grand Architect, Governor of the Universe, Supreme Ruler or Great Creator. He left almost no record about his personal faith. James Madison, close adviser to Washington in his first administration and future president, said Washington was not interested in the theological particulars of the Christian faith. He merely took his religion as he found it. Clergymen who knew him were widely contradictory in their assessment of his religious commitment. Some said he was a committed Christian, others barely committed, and others that he was not a Christian at all!

Despite often using the language of Deism, a theological and philosophical view that affirms God created the world and then chose to be inaccessible to it, he was no Deist. He often thanked God for God's aid during the Revolution. Washington attributed victory in battle to God. He credited the successful founding of America to God's blessing, providence and direct intervention.

Although Washington was the most reticent of all founders on the subject of religion, his actions had far-reaching consequences. He believed that vital religion, as he wrote to the Bishops of the Methodist and Episcopal Church in May 1789, was essential to democracy and social morality. Washington urged the Continental Congress to appoint chaplains and pay them more than captains in his army. Throughout the war, he insisted all officers and soldiers attend Sunday worship services unless on duty.

At a time when Protestants dominated American society, Washington, a Protestant himself, rejected and banned anti-Catholic bashing. His general order of Nov. 9, 1775, virtually ended the American tradition

of “Pope’s Day,” a Halloween-like festival of anti-Catholic revelry featuring the burning of the Pope in effigy.

Washington appointed and later refused to fire Rhode Island chaplain, John Murray. Evangelical chaplains sought his ouster on theological grounds. As a Universalist, Murray did not believe in hell.

Washington used the power of his position to affirm, for the first time in colonial history, the intermingling of several religious traditions on an equal basis. Religious freedom and tolerance was experienced throughout the war by those who fought it. Washington saw clearly the futility and hypocrisy of fighting for political rights while denying soldiers religious freedom.

At the end of the war many officers thought so highly of Washington that they put forth what historians call the “Newburgh Conspiracy.” They advocated that Washington should declare himself king. When the King of England, George III, heard about this conspiracy he said if Washington resisted the monarchical mantle he would be “...the greatest man in the world.” As history notes, Washington refused becoming king but was elected president and retired to Mount Vernon after two terms. His personal influence lasted for several generations. Much of the political leadership of America after his death in 1799 came from the officer’s corps and soldiers of the Revolutionary War. The taste of religious freedom they experienced in war was later demanded in peace for all Americans.

Revolutionary War officer and Virginia native, Henry Lee, said of George Washington “he was first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen.” But history suggests another affirmation to this famous testimonial. At a critical time in American and modern history, Washington was one of the first to affirm the importance of religious freedom.