George Washington: Our First President

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

The new government of the United States under the new Constitution got underway in the first week of April 1789 when the new Congress achieved its first quorum. Their initial duty was to pass the Bill of Rights, as promised.

Earlier that year, on January 7th, electors were chosen for the first Presidential election in United States history. The electors, chosen by the eligible voters in the various states, were free to cast their ballots for whomever they wished. On February 4th, they cast their ballots as follows: 69 for Washington; 34 for John Adams, who therefore became Vice President. This method of selecting a Vice President was changed by the 12th Amendment in 1804.

On April 6th, the ballots were counted in the Senate, and George Washington was informed that he had been elected the First President of the United States. The inauguration took place on April 30th in the Senate Chamber of Federal Hall, New York City, the temporary capital of the nation.

Washington immediately got to work organizing his administration, which would set precedents for future Presidents. He would demonstrate that the new government under the new Constitution would be what the citizens hoped it would be: a prudent and benevolent instrument of governmental power in keeping with the precepts of the Declaration of Independence and strictly limited in its powers.

In September, Washington appointed Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury, General Henry Knox as Secretary of War, Edmund Randolph as Attorney General and Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State.

As in any organization that is new, every step had to be taken in strict conformity to the guidelines set out in the Constitution. On September 29th, the United States Army was created, consisting of the forces already on hand during the final months of the Confederation. In all, it consisted of only 1,000 men.

On November 26th, President Washington proclaimed the nation's first Thanksgiving Day, in humble recognition of the great blessings that God had bestowed on the new nation.

The year 1790 saw the first Census of the United States, as called for by the Constitution. There were 4,000,000 inhabitants in all thirteen states. Negro slaves accounted for 19.3 percent of the total population. Many of the Founding Fathers hoped that slavery would be abolished, but the economics of the South made that impossible. A West Jersey Quaker wrote: "This trade of

importing slaves is dark gloominess hanging over the land; the consequences will be grievous to posterity."

Patrick Henry stated in 1773, "A serious view of this subject gives a gloomy prospect to future times." And Jefferson wrote: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever."

Madison held that where slavery exists "the republican theory becomes fallacious. Slavery is the greatest evil under which the nation labors—a portentous evil—an evil, moral, political, and economical—a blot on our free country."

It had been Washington's hope that Virginia should remove slavery by a public act; and as the prospects of a general emancipation grew more and more dim, he, in utter hopelessness of the action of the State, did all that he could by bequeathing freedom to his own slaves.

In August 1790, the Capital was moved from New York to Philadelphia. In June Hamilton had convinced Congress that the Federal Government should assume the states' debts. He won the support of the Southern States by promising to move the nation's capital to the South. It demonstrated how compromise and promises would become major tools in crafting and enacting legislation.

In 1791, two major philosophies of government began to emerge, polarized around Hamilton and Jefferson, which set the stage for the creation of political parties. The Hamilton faction, known as the Federalists, advocated a strong central government and the development of industry. Jefferson's followers, the Democratic-Republican faction, favored a weaker central government and stronger local control befitting a democratic agrarian society.

The Hamilton-Jefferson debates became the fodder of rival newspapers, which became either pro Federalist or pro Democratic-Republican. Thus, one can say, that the two-party system got a very early start in our political history. Of course, President Washington remained above the fray, maintaining the upmost cordiality among his cabinet members. He was more of a referee than a partisan.

On April 2, 1792 Congress passed the Coinage Act, authorizing the establishment of a mint and prescribing a decimal system of coinage. The U.S. dollar was to contain 24.75 grains of gold or 371.25 grains of silver, in a fixed legal-tender ratio of 15 to 1.

On August 21, 1792 the Federal government levied an excise tax on whiskey and on stills, which provoked strong protest in Western Pennsylvania. Whiskey was the chief transportable and barterable Western product. The Whiskey Rebellion was the most serious insurrection to face the newly established Federal government. In 1794, President Washington was finally forced to

call up the militia army to end it. The result of the insurrection was simply to strengthen the political power of Hamilton and the Federalists.

Washington's Second Administration began on March 4, 1793. We shall devote our next column to the Second Term of our First President.

John Adams: Our 2nd President

John Adams (1735-1826), our second President, was the first to live in the White House after Washington, D.C., had become the nation's capital. He was the nation's first one-term President. As a Federalist, he had served eight years as Washington's vice-president, and during that time had become fully knowledgeable of the workings of the new government and of its national problems.

Born in Braintree, Massachusetts, a descendant of early Puritan settlers, he was trained as a lawyer and early on became an active supporter of the cause of independence. When the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in 1774, he was Massachusetts' delegate and took part in the committee to draw up the Declaration of Independence. Two years later, the Congress sent him to France to gain French support for the Revolutionary War. After the war, he became the first American minister to Great Britain.

In 1796, when Washington announced that he would retire after serving two terms as President, the election campaign for the next president became a heated contest between the two philosophies of government. When the Electoral College vote in 1796 left Adams and Jefferson ranked as one and two, the new President and Vice-President belonged to two different parties, the Federalists and Republican-Democrats.

In his Inaugural Address, Adams praised the new government, which he saw operating so felicitously: "Can authority be more amiable and respectable … than when it springs fresh from the hearts and judgments of an honest and enlightened people? For it is the people only that are represented: it is their power and majesty that is reflected, and only for their good …. The existence of such a government as ours, for any length of time, is a full proof of a general dissemination of knowledge and virtue throughout the whole body of the people."

He then closed his address with these words: "[P]ledged to support the constitution of the United States, I entertain no doubt of its continuance in all its energy, and my mind is prepared, without hesitation, to lay myself under the most solemn obligations to support it to the utmost of my power." He then ended with this prayer:

"And may that Being who is supreme over all, the Patron of order, the Fountain of justice, and the Protector, in all ages of the world, of virtuous liberty, continue his blessing upon this nation and its government, and give it all possible success and duration consistent with the ends of his providence."

Foreign affairs turned out to be the most difficult problem facing the new administration. The French Revolution had divided Americans into those who supported the revolution and those who opposed it. When France declared war against Great Britain, Adams was determined to maintain American neutrality.

In May 1797, Adams called a special session of Congress to debate the French-American crisis. He had to deal with French naval aggressions, against which Federalists in his cabinet urged a declaration of war, which Adams rejected. What ensued, however, was an undeclared naval war.

In November, Adams gave his First Annual Address to Congress, and he explained why good treaties with foreign nations were so important. He said: "The commerce of the United States is essential, if not to their existence, at least to their comfort, their growth, prosperity, and happiness…. commerce has made this country what it is, and it cannot be destroyed or neglected without involving the people in poverty and distress."

On July 6, the Federalist-controlled Congress passed the Alien Enemies Art, authorizing the President to arrest and imprison aliens in time of war, and on July 14, the Sedition Act was passed, providing for the arrest and imprisonment of anyone who wrote or spoke against the President, Congress, or the Government. The passage of these acts not only created opposition from the Jeffersonians but also dissension among Federalists who rejected such heavy-handed curtailment of freedom.

In 1798, a rift developed between President Adams and Alexander Hamilton who has become an aggressive nationalist. By the end of Adams's first term, the rift among Federalists had become so deep that they would never again gain control of Congress.

In the election of 1800, Adams was defeated and Jefferson became the third American President. Meanwhile, the Census of 1800 showed a 35 percent increase in the population to about 5,300,000, of whom more than one million were Africans.

Adams left Washington before Jefferson's inauguration and lived in retirement in Quincy, Massachusetts. His beloved wife, Abigail, died in 1818, but he lived to see his son, John Quincy Adams, become President in 1825. Adams died on July 4, 1856, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Dear Mary,

My impression was that you wanted the series on the Presidents to be a commentary on the Presidency and how the men who exercised it influenced our government. That is why I showed how both Washington and Adams were determined to adhere to the new Constitution and prove that the new government could work. The development of political parties was one of the most important developments in those early days, and I think I made that clear.

While I got basic factual information from history books, my source for the Inaugural addresses, messages to Congress, and Farewell addresses was a book published in 1844 which printed the full texts of these addresses. In the case of Washington's famous Farewell Address, I emphasized his concern with preserving the Union, which, of course, fell apart sixty years later. With Adams, I quoted his great encouragement of commerce--or capitalism--as the source of future prosperity and happiness. But I also quoted what both men had to say about religion.

If you would like me to write about the men who become Presidents instead of the Presidency, I can certainly shift gears. However, I believe that the Adams article is a very good one-pager summing up the Adams Presidency and will whet the appetite of any young homeschooling historian who wants to know more.

As for being politically correct or incorrect, facts are facts and it's impossible to write history without them. That's why I quote their words directly. However, I would appreciate a more detailed idea of what you want these articles to be.

With best regards,

Sam