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# The Leadership Secrets of George Washington

*Biographer Ron Chernow says America's first president understood a stubborn truth: People 'don't need to like you—much less love you—but they need to respect you.'*

By BRIAN BOLDUC

*New York*

In the 19 Republican presidential debates held so far, the candidates have invoked their beau ideal, Ronald Reagan, 124 times. Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, has garnered nine mentions; Thomas Jefferson, the pen of the Revolution, five. George Washington—the first president, the father of his country—has received one.

Politicians seldom cite Washington because—unlike the jovial Reagan—he seems distant and cold. "Now we admire people for their authenticity, in terms of how quickly they open up and bear their emotions," says Ron Chernow, whose biography of Washington won the Pulitzer Prize last year. Our national patriarch, by contrast, "had an old-fashioned belief that silence was strength and that you only very gradually let people enter your private thoughts and emotions."

We could learn from the stodgy Washington's style of leadership, Mr. Chernow argues: "He realized that a leader should be neither too remote nor too familiar." And he understood a stubborn truth about people: "They don't need to like you—much less love you—but they need to respect you."

Mr. Chernow and I are sitting in the kitchen of his red-brick town house in Brooklyn Heights. Through the tall, broad windows behind him, sunlight illuminates the white wisps of hair atop his head. The 62-year-old bespectacled author is soft-spoken, often looking to the side as he talks. But he loves his subject. When he unveils an insight into Washington's character, he clasps his hands, leans forward and grins widely.



Zina Saunders

He decided to write about Washington while writing a biography of Alexander Hamilton 10 years ago. During the Revolutionary War, Hamilton served as an aide-de-camp to Washington. In February 1781, he quarreled with the commander in chief over Washington's reluctance to grant him a field command. Resigning his position in protest, Hamilton wrote to a friend that the great man would "for once at least, repent his ill-humour."

"I was really quite startled by that statement," Mr. Chernow remembers, "because it made the ill-humor sound habitual. I said to myself, 'Is Hamilton saying the father of our country is this moody, irritable boss?'"

He was. Washington, in fact, had "a colossal temper." He largely tamed it by the time he became president in April 1789, but on occasion it slipped the leash. In August 1793, for

instance, Washington went wild when, in the midst of his attempt to keep America neutral in a war between Great Britain and France, he saw a pro-French newspaper cartoon of him being guillotined like Louis XVI.

Jefferson, who observed the resultant bedlam, recorded that the president "got into one of those passions when he cannot command himself" and shouted "by God he had rather be in his grave than in his present situation."

Washington's temper "was a tip-off to his personality," Mr. Chernow contends. It "showed just how much emotion was bottled up." "The outward man was stoical," he says, circling his hand before his face for emphasis. "The inner man was extremely sensitive to criticism."

But Washington concealed his inner self. In conversation, he was polite and cordial; in dress, meticulous and proud. "You never find any reference to Washington having been dressed in a casual or slovenly way," Mr. Chernow notes. When he went on trips, "he always brought along one or two white parade horses." Our first president "had a magnificent sense of stagecraft."

If Washington hadn't mastered this self-restraint, he might never have become president. "The fact that he had this discreet and circumspect personality made people feel that he was not going to become intoxicated with power," Mr. Chernow says.

And because he rarely acted on his immediate emotions—because he was "inauthentic," in a way—Washington exercised power wisely. On most issues, his method was to canvass his Cabinet, weigh his options, and then make a decision.

"Once he made a decision, he would not back down," Mr. Chernow says. "There was nothing wishy-washy about Washington." But he also "would almost always make some concession to the defeated party. He thought it was important that your defeated opponent be able to save face."

Consider his treatment of Citizen Genet, the ambassador of Revolutionary France who demanded an audience with Washington in May 1793. A month earlier, Washington had declared the country's neutrality between Britain and France—to the dismay of his Francophile secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson. Meanwhile, his Anglophile secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton, hoped he would refuse to see the upstart ambassador.

Washington forged a compromise: "He would receive Genet, to please Jefferson, but without 'too much warmth or cordiality,' to satisfy Hamilton," Mr. Chernow recounts in "Washington: A Life."

"It's this kind of face-saving measure that I think gives a tone of civility to politics," Mr. Chernow argues. Nowadays, politicians are "out for blood. It's a take-no-prisoners kind of atmosphere." Yet Washington's example proves "you can be decisive and civil at the same time."

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National Review editorial associate Brian Bolduc on his interview with Pulitzer Prize winning biographer Ron Chernow.

Also independent. Despite some historians' portrayal of Washington as "a dim-witted tool in the nimble hands of Hamilton," he was "a hands-on personality." And his aloof manner maintained his power "because he didn't allow people to become too comfortable." His advisers "were always vying for his approval," Mr. Chernow says. "It kept people a bit off balance, and this, I think, was another one of his secrets of leadership."

Notwithstanding voters' demand for casualness in their candidates—a Mitt Romney who wears jeans, a Barack Obama who cracks jokes—they too expect the president to possess a certain amount of dignity. Comedian Jon Stewart raised eyebrows when he called President Obama "dude" in an

interview. In 2000, George W. Bush promised voters that he'd "restore honor and dignity to the White House" after Bill Clinton's shenanigans.

Washington imbued the presidency itself with a detached dignity. He eschewed invitations from private individuals, limiting public appearances to appointed times only, though he did so mostly for reasons of self-preservation.

At the beginning of his presidency, "he couldn't seem to sit down for dinner without 20 people being there—strangers sponging off his generosity, eating his food, drinking his wine," Mr. Chernow says. "Washington had to create barricades if he was going to be able to function as president. . . . He saw that he needed to carve out some kind of zone of sanity or privacy just so that he could work without constant interruptions."

Of course, it was easy for Washington to remain so dignified. He didn't have to campaign. "He didn't have to press the flesh or kiss babies or eat ethnic food on the campaign trail," Mr. Chernow says, chuckling as he thinks of more examples. "Now it's reached the point where campaign and governance have really become indistinguishable."

Mr. Chernow began his career as a free-lance journalist. His first book, "The House of Morgan," won the National Book Award in 1990. Eight years later followed "Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.," which the Times of London crowned "one of the great American biographies." And in 2004 came the Hamilton biography that led him to Washington.

"I have a strong belief, shared by my editor and agent, that books should have a natural relationship to each other," Mr. Chernow explains. "One book should flow out of another in some interesting way so that you're kind of carrying the reader along on this journey."

Mr. Chernow's next subject is Ulysses S. Grant, who "seemed like an interesting sequel to the extent that he was the towering general of the Civil War. . . . I've gone from tycoons and industrialists to generals and presidents."

The biographer's advice for the men (and women) who wish to occupy the White House? "Every president should read presidential biographies. Because they will learn every single president in American history thought that he was the most maligned person who had ever held the office, suffered the most vitriolic press attacks, and had to deal with the most ferocious partisanship of any [era]."

In other words, bring your game face: "No matter how good a president you are, you're going to leave office feeling less loved."

Mr. Chernow also has some advice for the voters, who sometimes grow impatient with leaders who seem aloof. They, too, can learn from our Founding Father. "You don't have to be the brightest or the most original mind on the block" to be a good president, he concludes. "But what Washington's life shows is the importance of clarity of vision, of tenacity of purpose and character, and how much can be accomplished in life if you keep your sights set on your ultimate goals."

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