



## Establishing the Presidency

**Intended Grade Level:** Middle School

**Lesson Purpose:** This lesson plan facilitates discussion with students about the challenges that faced George Washington as the first President of the United States.

**Lesson Objectives:**

- Students will discuss the challenges of being the first president of the United States.
- Students will analyze primary documents in order to identify key points.
- Students will present their findings to the class.

**National Standards:**

### **NSS-C.5-8.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

**What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?**

- What is citizenship?
- What are the rights of citizens?
- What are the responsibilities of citizens?
- What dispositions or traits of character are important to the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy?
- How can citizens take part in civic life?

### **NL-ENG.K-12.3 EVALUATION STRATEGIES**

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

### **NL-ENG.K-12.5 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

**Background:** As first president of the United States of America, George Washington was establishing an office unique in world history with no precedent or guidelines to follow. While today we study the political events that shaped the early years of government, we tend to overlook the importance placed on “being presidential”.



Washington was aware that every act would set a precedent. Early in his first administration he wrote to British historian Catherine McCauley Graham that he walked on “*untrod ground.*” The United States had just fought a long war to escape the tyranny of monarchy. Washington wanted to ensure that every aspect of the president’s policies and lifestyle conformed to the ideals of republican government. His salary of \$25,000 a year had to cover both his personal household expenses as well as all official entertaining.

The decisions of presidential etiquette created the first controversy in the new government. Over the years, it would cause great personal distress to George Washington who was always sensitive to public opinion and criticism. The explosive power of arguments concerning Washington's social life --even over personal behavior and tastes -- grew out of the fact that the new government had no traditional focus. There was nothing concrete nor established that the people could visualize when thinking of their nation, except for George Washington and, through him, the office of President. Washington was sometimes criticized for assuming “monarchical trappings.” Discussion ranged from what to call the President to how many horses should pull the presidential carriage. No detail was too mundane when considering how the President would appear in the eyes of Americans and the world.

Shortly after taking office, Washington sent letters to trusted friends and advisors soliciting their opinions regarding the conduct of the President. In this letter he submitted a list of queries. Vice President John Adams had strong opinions on the conduct of the President and sent a detailed reply to Washington.

### Procedure:

1. Distribute the letter written by George Washington to James Madison (included below) for students to read. Explain that Washington sent a similar letter to members of his cabinet and other friends. As a class, define the primary concerns expressed by George Washington.
2. Distribute Washington’s queries on presidential conduct (included below) for students to read. Note: You may want to select excerpts or divide the document into segments to be distributed separately to groups. After reading the queries, each group should discuss and identify the key points of the document.



3. Keeping in mind the historical precedent of Washington's presidency, have students take on the role of one of Washington's advisors and write a letter answering George Washington's queries.
4. Each group will assign one "reporter" who will present their answers to the presidential queries and explain their decision-making process. Ask students if they think that George Washington had reason to be concerned over public perception of the actions of the President? If yes, do they believe similar concerns exist today?
5. Distribute the Vice President's Answers to General Washington's queries (included below). As a class, compare John Adams's ideas of presidential conduct with those defined by your students. In what areas were their ideas similar? Different?

### Extension Activities:

- In May, 1789, President and Mrs. Washington inaugurated their weekly levees. Ask your students to write a first hand account of attending an afternoon function at the Presidential Mansion.
- A great deal of discussion took place over what to call the President. Eventually, with Washington's urging, the form of address was simply "Mr. President." As a class, brainstorm other titles that might have been used for the first President in the 18th century. What are the strong points for each? What are the drawbacks?



**Transcription:** *George Washington to James Madison, May 12, 1789*

To James Madison

New York, 12 May, 1789.

My Dear Sir,

To draw such a line for the conduct of the President as will please everybody, I know is impossible, but to mark out and follow one which, by being consonant with reason, will meet general approbation, may be as practicable as it is desirable. The true medium I conceive must lie in pursuing such a course as will allow him time for all the official duties of his station. This should be the primary object. The next to avoid as much as may be the charge of superciliousness and seclusion from information by too much reserve and too great a withdrawal of himself from company on the one hand and the inconveniences as well as a diminution of respectability, from too free an intercourse and too much familiarity on the other.

Under these impressions I have submitted the enclosed queries to your consideration and would thank you for your sentiments there-on, with the return of the paper. For the remarks which it contains it is necessary that some plan should be adopted by the President for his mode of living that the pecuniary estimates for the department may have an eye thereof; and though secondary, it is a motive for my bringing the matter before you at this time. I am your affectionate friend, &c.

G. Washington



**Transcription: Queries by the President, Respecting the System of Conduct to be Adopted by him in his Private Intercourse**

**Queries**

1. Whether a line of conduct equally distant from an association with all kinds of company on the one hand, and from a total seclusion from society on the other ought to be adopted by him? And in that case how is it to be done?
2. What will be the least exceptionable method of bringing any system, which may be adopted on this subject before the public and into use?
3. Whether, after a little time, one day in every week will not be sufficient for receiving visits of compliment?
4. Whether it would tend to prompt impertinent applications and involve disagreeable consequences, to have it known that the President will, every morning at eight o'clock, be at leisure to give audience to persons who may have business with him?
5. Whether when it shall have been understood, that the President is not to give general entertainments in the manner the presidents of Congress have formerly done, it will be practicable to draw such a line of discrimination, in regard to persons, as that six, eight or ten official characters, including in rotation the members of both Houses of Congress may be invited informally, or otherwise to dine with him on the days fixed for receiving company without exciting clamors in the rest of the community?



*GW*

6. Whether it would be satisfactory to the public for the President to make about four great entertainments in a year on such great occasions as the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence the, alliance with France, the peace with Great Britain, the organization of the general government; and whether arrangements of these two last kinds could be in danger of diverting too much of the President's time from business or of producing the evils, which it was intended to avoid by his living more recluse than the presidents of Congress have heretofore lived?

7. Whether there would be any impropriety in the President's making informal visits; that is to say in his calling upon his acquaintances or public characters, for the purpose of sociability or civility? And what as to the form of doing it, might evince these visits to have been made in his private character, so as that they may not be construed into visits from the President of the United States? And in what light would his appearance rarely at tea-parties be considered?

8. Whether, during the recess of congress it would be advantageous to the interests of the Union for the President to make the tour of the United States in order to become better acquainted with their Principal characters and internal circumstances, as well as to be more accessible to numbers of well informed persons who might give him useful information and advice on Political subjects?

9. If there is a probability, that either of the arrangements may take place which will eventually cause additional expenses whether it would not be proper that those ideas should come into contemplation at the time when Congress shall make a permanent provision for the support of the executive?



*GW*

Remarks. On the one side no augmentation can be effected in the pecuniary establishment, which shall be made in the first instance for the support of the executive. On the other all moneys destined to that purpose beyond the actual expenditures will be left in the treasury of the United States or sacredly applied to the promotion of some national objects.

Many things, which appear of little importance in themselves and at the beginning, may have great and durable consequences from their having been established at the commencement of a new general government. It will be much easier to commence the administration upon a well-adjusted system, built on tenable grounds, than to correct errors or alter inconveniences, after they shall have been confirmed by habit. The President in all matters of business and etiquette, can have no object but to demean himself in his public character in such a manner as to maintain the dignity of his office, without subjection himself to the imputation of superciliousness or unnecessary reserve. Under these impressions, he asks for your candid and undisguised opinion."



*GW*

## **Transcription: John Adams's Response to George Washington on Queries of Presidential Conduct**

### THE VICE-PRESIDENT'S ANSWER

1. That an association with all kind of company and a total seclusion from society are extremes which, in the actual circumstances of this country, and under your form of government, may be properly avoided.
2. The system of the President will gradually develop itself in practice, without any formal communication to the legislature or publication from the press. Paragraphs in the public prints may however appear from time to time, without any formal authority that may lead and reconcile the public mind.
3. Considering the number of strangers from many countries and of citizens from various States, who will resort to the seat of government, it is doubted whether two days in a week will not be indispensable for visits of compliment. A little experience, however, will elucidate this point.
4. Under the fourth head it is submitted to consideration whether all personal applications ought not to be made in the first instance to a minister of state. Yet an appeal should be open by petition to the President, who if he judges the subject worthy of it, may admit the party to a personal interview. Access to the supreme magistrate ought not to be rigorously denied in any case that is worthy of his consideration. Nevertheless, in every case, the name, quality, and, when these are not sufficient to raise a presumption in their favor, their business ought to be communicated to a



chamberlain, or gentleman in waiting, who should judge whom to admit, and whom to exclude. Some limitation of time may be necessary, too, as for example from eight to nine or ten; for without it the whole forenoon, or the whole day may be taken up.

5. There is no doubt that the President may invite what official characters, members of Congress, strangers, or citizens of distinction he pleases in small parties without exciting clamors; but this should always be done without formality.

6. The entertainments mentioned in this article would much more properly be made by a minister of state for foreign or domestic affairs, or some other minister of state, or the Vice-President either of whom upon such occasions the President in his private character, might honor with his presence. But in no case whatever can I conceive it proper for the President to make any formal public entertainment.

7. There can be no impropriety in the President's making or receiving informal visits among his friends or acquaintances at his pleasure. Undress and few attendants will sufficiently show that such visits are made as a man and a citizen, a friend or acquaintance. But in no case whatever should a visit be made or returned in form by the President; at least unless an emperor of Germany, or some other sovereign, should travel to this country. The President's pleasure should absolutely decide concerning his attendance at tea-parties in a private character; and no gentleman or lady ought ever to complain, if he never or rarely attends. The President's private life should be at his own discretion and the world should respectfully acquiesce; but as President he should have no intercourse with society, but upon public business, or at his levees. This distinction, it is with submission apprehended, ought to govern the whole conduct.



8. A tour might no doubt be made with great advantage to the public, if the time can be spared; but it will naturally be considered, as foreign affairs arrive every day and the business of the executive and judicial departments will require constant attention, whether the President's residence will not necessarily be confined to one place.

### Observations

The civil list ought to provide for the President's household. What number of chamberlains, aides-de-camp, secretaries, masters of ceremonies, &c. will become necessary, it is difficult to foresee; but should not all such establishments be distinct from the allowance to the president for his services, which is mentioned in the constitution? In all events the provision for the President and his household ought to be large and ample. The office, by its legal authority defined in the constitution, has no equal in the world, excepting those only which to be compared to it. The royal office in Poland is a mere shadow in comparison with it. The Dogeship in Venice, and the Stadtholdership in Holland, are not so much. Neither dignity nor authority can be supported in human minds, collected into nations or any great numbers, without a splendor and majesty in some degree proportioned to them. The sending and receiving of ambassadors is one of the most splendid and important prerogatives of sovereigns absolute or limited; and this in our constitution is in the President. If the state and Pomp essential to this great department are not preserved, it will be in vain for America to hope for consideration with foreign powers.

These observations are submitted, after all with diffidence; conscious that my long residence abroad may have impressed me with views of things incompatible with the present temper and feeling of our fellow-citizens; and with a perfect disposition to acquiesce in whatever may be the result of the superior wisdom of the President.



(Editorial Note: The compensation of the President was fixed by a law passed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 1789, at twenty-five thousand dollars a year and the use of the furniture and other effects of the house in which he then lived.)