



George Washington & the Classics

Intended Grade Level: High School

Lesson Purpose: The intent of this lesson is to familiarize students with the similarities and differences in the views of classical philosophers and George Washington. The lesson will also increase student understanding and achievement in world history and U.S. government by exploring a global perspective of the influence of classicism on the founding principles of the U.S. government.

Lesson Objectives:

- To define Classicism.
- Identify and compare key philosophies held by Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and George Washington.
- Draw connections between Classical philosophies and their influence on the persona of George Washington.

National Standards:

NSS-USH.9-12.3 THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES: DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND VALUES AND THE PEOPLE FROM MANY CULTURES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO ITS CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL HERITAGE

- Understands how democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events, and symbols
- Understands the causes and nature of movements of large groups of people into and within the United States, now and long ago
- Understands the folklore and other cultural contributions from various regions of the United States and how they helped to form a national heritage

NSS-C.9-12.2 VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

What are the Basic Values and Principles of American Democracy?

- What are the most important values and principles of American democracy?
- What are some important beliefs Americans have about themselves and their government?
- Why is it important for Americans to share certain values, principles, and beliefs?
- What are the benefits of diversity in the United States?
- How should conflicts about diversity be prevented or managed?



- How can people work together to promote the values and principles of American democracy?

NL-ENG.K-12.1 READING FOR PERSPECTIVE

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

NL-ENG.K-12.2 UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

Timeframe: Approximately two 50-minute class sessions

Procedures:

1. Students should work in groups of three or four to define the following terms using dictionaries.
 - Classicism
 - Legalism
 - Democracy
 - Republic
 - Civility
2. Ask students what definitions they found and if all the definitions were the same.
3. Present the key ideas of classical philosophers, such as Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato to the class. The following outline may be useful for this lecture.
 - A. Aristotle
 - a. Questioned nature of the world and human belief thought, and knowledge
 - b. Invented arguing according to rules of logic
 - c. Applied methods to the study of psychology, physics, and biology
 - d. Questioning is basis of scientific method
 - B. Socrates:
 - a. Absolute standards for truth and justice do exist
 - b. Question yourself and moral character



- c. Examine yourself
- C. Plato:
 - a. Wrote *The Republic*, which set forth a vision of a perfectly governed society; said it was not a democracy
 - b. Said all citizens fall naturally into three basic groups: farmers & artisans, warriors, and ruling class
 - c. The person with the greatest insight or intellect from ruler class would be chosen as the philosopher-king
4. With students back in groups, distribute excerpts of documents written by Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato to each group (included below). Give students 15-20 minutes to read over each document. For each document, have students cite a specific statement that reflects the key ideas of that philosopher and be prepared to explain their choice.
5. Conduct a class discussion based on the students' choices and their reasoning behind each citation. Were certain citations more common than others?
6. Introduce George Washington through a short lecture; a great resource for this lecture would be Caroline Winterer's book, *The Mirror of Antiquity*. The key point of this lecture should be that George Washington never went to college, but educated himself by reading classical philosophers, as well as the Bible, to form his ideas on civic virtue.
7. Distribute George Washington's, *Circular to the States* (included below) for student groups to read. Have students consider which classical philosopher (Aristotle, Socrates, or Plato) they think had the most influence on Washington. How were George Washington's opinions on the government and education influenced by classical philosophers?
8. Use the following chart to conduct a class discussion about if or how the vocabulary terms defined at the beginning of the class have changed in meaning through time. Discuss whether the terms have the same relevance to society today that they had in the past.



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	Classicism	Legalism	Democracy	Republic	Civility
Classical Philosophers					
George Washington					
Modern U.S. Government					



*This has been adapted from a lesson by Laura Richards,
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Transcription: Democracy in the Politics of Aristotle

Passages: Defining the System of Government

To seek out what is the best system of government, it is first necessary to define what is the most desirable life.

Living happily, whether for human beings it comes from enjoyment or from excellence or from both, exists for those persons excessively adorned with character and purpose but moderate in the acquisition of external goods.

Like the best life, the best system of government is conducted in accordance with excellence. If excellence is the mean, as argued in the *Nicomachean Ethics* then a life and a system of government that is “in the middle” is best. A city-state has three elements in its population: the rich, the poor, and those in the middle. The political partnership that is constituted from those in the middle is the best.

In addition to the four systems of government that [other] people usually bring up in discussing systems of government (namely, monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and aristocracy), there is a fifth one called polity (politeia), which is also the term used to mean “system of government” in general or in a generic sense. This fifth system of government is sometimes overlooked in discussions of the types of systems of government since it does not come into existence very often.

As was established previously in the first book of the *Politics*, there are three “straight” or “upright” [and therefore correct and good] systems of government (orthai politeiai): kingship, aristocracy, and polity.

The system of government called polity is midway between democracy and oligarchy.

Polity is, to put it simply, a mixture of oligarchy and democracy. The kinds of polities that tend towards democracy are customarily referred to by the name of polity, while those that tend towards oligarchy are called aristocracies.

The systems of government inclining more toward oligarchy are called aristocracies, while those inclining more toward the multitude (plethos) [which can also mean “democracy”] are called polities.



As city-states increased in size and grew stronger in the heavy-infantry [hoplite] section of the citizen body, more men gained a share in the system of government. For this reason what are now called polities were previously called democracies.

When the multitude governs according to the common advantage, then this system of government is called by the term also used to designate systems of government in general, namely, polity.

The multitude suitable for a polity is one capable of military service that has the natural ability to rule and be ruled in accordance with law that distributes offices to wealthier citizens on the basis of merit.

Polities and aristocracies are undone by diverging from that which constitutes justice in the two different systems of government, [which is not necessarily the same thing in each system]. The starting point in a polity is when democracy and oligarchy have been not mixed appropriately [literally, “finely”].

Diverging and erroneous systems of government are necessarily subsequent, not prior to correct [straight] systems.

There are three systems of government diverging from the three “straight” systems: tyranny diverging from kingship, oligarchy diverging from aristocracy, and democracy diverging from polity. Each diverging system (*parekbasis*) is structured to operate to the advantage of the ruler(s); for example, democracy is rule to the advantage of the poor. None of the diverging systems aims at the profit of every type of citizen in common.

Of these three diverging systems of government, tyranny is the worst (which is to say the furthest from polity), oligarchy the next worst, and democracy the most moderate.

While straight systems of government are concerned with the common advantage according to what is quite simply just, diverging forms of government are those that in error serve the interest of the ruler(s). Diverging forms of government tend to have an element of despotism, because a city-state is a partnership of the free.

Some people claim that, just as there are two main kinds of wind or of musical harmonies, and the other winds and harmonies are regarded as divergences from these, there are also two sorts of systems of government, rule by the people and oligarchy. On this view, the, polity diverges from democracy and aristocracy diverges from oligarchy.



But it is better to postulate instead that there are “straight” systems of government and systems of government diverging from them.

The rule that a husband has over his wife, a free person, is the same sort of rule that exists over free persons in a polity. Since the male is more fit to rule by nature, he will rule continuously in the household, unless he is somehow unnatural. In contrast, when citizens are equals and do not differ, then the roles of ruler and ruled will alternate.

For those who are alike, the fine and the just is [to rule and be ruled] in turn, for this is equal and alike.

Since laws align with the system of government, the laws of straight systems of government are necessarily just, but those of diverging systems are necessarily not just.

Justice and the excellence associated with it are not the same in different systems of government.

Diverging types of government fail to pay attention to the middle. Institutions suitable to a certain type of government can be the downfall of that type of government if they become too extreme. Just as a nose [on a statue] can still be appealing to look at if it diverges from the straightness that is beautiful but can become not even a nose if an artist pushes it too far in the direction of the extremes, so, too, a system of government such as democracy that diverges from the best system can still be adequate if it is not pushed to an extreme.

There is no such thing as a person being naturally fitted for any of the diverging systems of governments, for they have come into being contrary to nature (physis).

http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_aristotle_democracy?page=7&greekEncoding



Transcription: Socrates, The Divided Line (*The Republic*, Book VI)

Socrates

You have to imagine, then, that there are two ruling powers, and that one of them is set over the intellectual world, the other over the visible. I do not say heaven, lest you should fancy that I am playing upon the name. May I suppose that you have this distinction of the visible and intelligible fixed in your mind?

Glaucou

I have.

Socrates

Now take a line which has been cut into two unequal parts and divide each of them again in the same proportion, and suppose the two main divisions to answer, one to the visible and the other to the intelligible, and then compare the subdivisions in respect of their clearness and want of clearness, and you will find that the first section in the sphere of the visible consists of images. And by images I mean, in the first place, shadows, and in the second place, reflections in water and in solid, smooth and polished bodies and the like: Do you understand?

Glaucou

Yes, I understand.

Socrates

Imagine, now, the other section, of which this is only the resemblance, to include the animals which we see, and everything that grows or is made.

Glaucou

Very good.

Socrates

Would you not admit that both the sections of this division have different degrees of truth, and that the copy is to the original as the sphere of opinion is to the sphere of knowledge?

Glaucou

Most undoubtedly.

Socrates

Next proceed to consider the manner in which the sphere of the intellectual is to be divided.

Glaucou

In what manner?

Socrates

Thus: There are two subdivisions, in the lower of which the soul uses the figures given by the former division as images; the enquiry can only be hypothetical, and instead of going upwards to a principle descends to the other end; in the higher of the two, the soul passes out of hypotheses, and goes up to a principle which is above hypotheses, making no use of images as in the former case, but proceeding only in and through the ideas themselves.

Glaucou

I do not quite understand your meaning.

Socrates

Then I will try again; you will understand me better when I have made some preliminary remarks. You are aware that students of geometry, arithmetic, and the kindred sciences assume the



odd and the even and the figures and three kinds of angles and the like in their several branches of science; these are their hypotheses, which they and everybody are supposed to know, and therefore they do not deign to give any account of them either to themselves or others; but they begin with them, and go on until they arrive at last, and in a consistent manner, at their conclusions?

Glaucon

Yes, I know.

Socrates

And do you not know also that although they make use of the visible forms and reason about them, they are thinking not of these, but of the ideas which they resemble; not of the figures which they draw, but of the absolute square and the absolute diameter, and so on, the forms which they draw or make, and which have shadows and reflections in water of their own, are converted by them into images, but they are really seeking to behold the things themselves, which can only be seen with the eye of the mind?

Glaucon

That is true.

Socrates

And of this kind I spoke as the intelligible, although in the search after it the soul is compelled to use hypotheses; not ascending to a first principle, because she is unable to rise above the region of hypothesis, but employing the objects of which the shadows below are resemblances in their turn as images, they having in relation to the shadows and reflections of them a greater distinctness, and therefore a higher value.

Glaucon

I understand that you are speaking of the province of geometry and the sister arts.

Socrates

And when I speak of the other division of the intelligible, you will understand me to speak of that other sort of knowledge which reason herself attains by the power of dialectic, using the hypotheses not as first principles, but openly as hypotheses, that is to say, as steps and points of departure into a world which is above hypotheses, in order that one may soar beyond them to the first principle of the whole; and clinging to this and then to that which depends on this, by successive steps she descends again without the aid of any sensible object, from ideas through ideas and in ideas one ends. . . .

And now, corresponding to these four divisions, let there be four faculties in the soul, intelligence answering to the highest, reason to the second, belief (or conviction) to the third, and perception of shadows or illusion to the last, and let there be a scale of them, and let us suppose that the several faculties have clearness in the same degree that their objects have truth.

Glaucon

I understand and give my assent, and accept your argument.

<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/GREECE/ALLEGORY.HTM>



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Transcription: Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*

Socrates: How you, O Athenians, have been affected by my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that they almost made me forget who I was, so persuasively did they speak; and yet they have hardly uttered a word of truth. But of the many falsehoods told by them, there was one which quite amazed me; I mean when they said that you should be upon your guard and not allow yourselves to be deceived by the force of my eloquence. To say this, when they were certain to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and proved myself to be anything but a great speaker, did indeed appear to me most shameless, unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for if such is their meaning, I admit that I am eloquent. But in how different a way from theirs! Well, as I was saying, they have scarcely spoken the truth at all; but from me you shall hear the whole truth: not, however, delivered after their manner in a set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases. No, by heaven! but I shall use the words and arguments which occur to me at the moment; for I am confident in the justice of my cause: at my time of life I ought not to be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator, let no one expect it of me. And I must beg of you to grant me a favor; If I defend myself in my accustomed manner, and you hear me using the words which I have been in the habit of using in the agora, at the tables of the money-changers, or anywhere else, I would ask you not to be surprised, and not to interrupt me on this account. For I am more than seventy years of age, and appearing now for the first time in a court of law, I am quite a stranger to the language of the place; and therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a stranger, whom you would accuse if he spoke in his native tongue, and after the fashion of his country; Am I making an unfair request of you? Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the truth of my words, and give heed to that: let the speaker speak truly and the judge decide justly.

And first, I have to reply to the older charges and to my first accusers, and then I will go on to the later ones. For of old I have had many accusers, who have accused me falsely to you during many years; and I am more afraid of them than of Anytus and his associates, who are dangerous, too, in their own way. But far more dangerous are the others, who began when you were children, and took possession of your minds with their falsehoods, telling of one Socrates, a wise man, who speculated about the heaven above, and searched into the earth beneath, and made the worse appear the better cause. The disseminators of this tale are the accusers whom I dread; for their hearers are apt to fancy that such inquirers do not believe in the existence of the gods. And they are many, and their charges against me are of ancient date, and they were made by them in the days when you were more impressionable than you are now, in childhood, or it may have been in youth, and the cause when heard went by default, for there was none to answer. And hardest of all, I do not know and cannot tell the names of my accusers; unless in the chance case of a Comic poet. All who from envy and malice have persuaded you, some of them having first convinced themselves, all this class of men are most difficult to deal with; for I cannot have them up here, and cross-examine them, and therefore I must simply fight with



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shadows in my own defense, and argue when there is no one who answers. I will ask you then to assume with me, as I was saying, that my opponents are of two kinds; one recent, the other ancient: and I hope that you will see the propriety of my answering the latter first, for these accusations you heard long before the others, and much oftener.

<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/GREECE/APOLOGY.HTM>



Transcription: George Washington, *Circular to the States*, 8 June 1783

When we consider the magnitude of the prize we contended for, the doubtful nature of the contest, and the favorable manner in which it has terminated, we shall find the greatest possible reason for gratitude and rejoicing; this is a theme that will afford infinite delight to every benevolent and liberal mind, whether the event in contemplation, be considered as the source of present enjoyment or the parent of future happiness; and we shall have equal occasion to felicitate ourselves on the lot which Providence has assigned us, whether we view it in a natural, a political or moral point of light.

The Citizens of America, placed in the most enviable condition, as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a vast Tract of Continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniencies of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification, acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independency; They are, from this period, to be considered as the Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity; Here, they are not only surrounded with every thing which can contribute to the completion of private and domestic enjoyment, but Heaven has crowned all its other blessings, by giving a fairer opportunity for political happiness, than any other Nation has ever been favored with. Nothing can illustrate these observations more forcibly, than a recollection of the happy conjuncture of times and circumstances, under which our Republic assumed its rank among the Nations; The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition, but at an Epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period, the researches of the human mind, after social happiness, have been carried to a great extent, the Treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labours of Philosophers, Sages and Legislatures, through a long succession of years, are laid open for our use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the Establishment of our forms of Government; the free cultivation of Letters, the unbounded extension of Commerce, the progressive refinement of Manners, the growing liberality of sentiment, and above all, the pure and benign light of Revelation, have had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of Society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be intirely their own.

Such is our situation, and such are our prospects: but notwithstanding the cup of blessing is thus reached out to us, notwithstanding happiness is ours, if we have a disposition to seize the occasion and make it our own; yet, it appears to me there is an option still left to the United States of America, that it is in their choice, and depends upon their conduct, whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptable and miserable as a Nation; This is the time of their political probation, this is the moment when the eyes of the whole World are turned upon them, this is the moment to establish or ruin their national Character forever, this is the favorable moment to give such a tone to our Federal Government, as will enable it to answer the



ends of its institution, or this may be the ill-fated moment for relaxing the powers of the Union, annihilating the cement of the Confederation, and exposing us to become the sport of European politics, which may play one State against another to prevent their growing importance, and to serve their own interested purposes. For, according to the system of Policy the States shall adopt at this moment, they will stand or fall, and by their confirmation or lapse, it is yet to be decided, whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse: a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn Millions be involved.

With this conviction of the importance of the present Crisis, silence in me would be a crime; I will therefore speak to your Excellency, the language of freedom and of sincerity, without disguise; I am aware, however, that those who differ from me in political sentiment, may perhaps remark, I am stepping out of the proper line of my duty, and they may possibly ascribe to arrogance or ostentation, what I know is alone the result of the purest intention, but the rectitude of my own heart, which disdains such unworthy motives, the part I have hitherto acted in life, the determination I have formed, of not taking any share in public business hereafter, the ardent desire I feel, and shall continue to manifest, of quietly enjoying in private life, after all the toils of War, the benefits of a wise and liberal Government, will, I flatter myself, sooner or later convince my Countrymen, that I could have no sinister views in delivering with so little reserve, the opinions contained in this Address.

There are four things, which I humbly conceive, are essential to the well being, I may even venture to say, to the existence of the United States as an Independent Power:

1st. An indissoluble Union of the States under one Federal Head.

2dly. A Sacred regard to Public Justice.

3dly. The adoption of a proper Peace Establishment, and

4thly. The prevalence of that pacific and friendly Disposition, among the People of the United States, which will induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and in some instances, to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the Community.

These are the Pillars on which the glorious Fabrick of our Independency and National Character must be supported; Liberty is the Basis, and whoever would dare to sap the foundation, or overturn the Structure, under whatever specious pretexts he may attempt it, will merit the bitterest execration, and the severest punishment which can be inflicted by his injured Country.

On the three first Articles I will make a few observations, leaving the last to the good sense and serious consideration of those immediately concerned.



Under the first head, altho' it may not be necessary or proper for me in this place to enter into a particular disquisition of the principles of the Union, and to take up the great question which has been frequently agitated, whether it be expedient and requisite for the States to delegate a larger proportion of Power to Congress, or not, Yet it will be a part of my duty, and that of every true Patriot, to assert without reserve, and to insist upon the following positions, That unless the States will suffer Congress to exercise those prerogatives, they are undoubtedly invested with by the Constitution, every thing must very rapidly tend to Anarchy and confusion, That it is indispensable to the happiness of the individual States, that there should be lodged somewhere, a Supreme Power to regulate and govern the general concerns of the Confederated Republic, without which the Union cannot be of long duration. That there must be a faithfull and pointed compliance on the part of every State, with the late proposals and demands of Congress, or the most fatal consequences will ensue, That whatever measures have a tendency to dissolve the Union, or contribute to violate or lessen the Sovereign Authority, ought to be considered as hostile to the Liberty and Independency of America, and the Authors of them treated accordingly, and lastly, that unless we can be enabled by the concurrence of the States, to participate of the fruits of the Revolution, and enjoy the essential benefits of Civil Society, under a form of Government so free and uncorrupted, so happily guarded against the danger of oppression, as has been devised and adopted by the Articles of Confederation, it will be a subject of regret, that so much blood and treasure have been lavished for no purpose, that so many sufferings have been encountered without a compensation, and that so many sacrifices have been made in vain. Many other considerations might here be adduced to prove, that without an entire conformity to the Spirit of the Union, we cannot exist as an Independent Power; it will be sufficient for my purpose to mention but one or two which seem to me of the greatest importance. It is only in our united Character as an Empire, that our Independence is acknowledged, that our power can be regarded, or our Credit supported among Foreign Nations. The Treaties of the European Powers with the United States of America, will have no validity on a dissolution of the Union. We shall be left nearly in a state of Nature, or we may find by our own unhappy experience, that there is a natural and necessary progression, from the extreme of anarchy to the extreme of Tyranny; and that arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of Liberty abused to licentiousness.

Writings 26:484 – 89

<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch7s5.html>