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GEORGE
WASHINGTON

1732 - 1799

George Washington was born in 1732, in Wakefield, Virginia. The son of a wealthy planter, he inherited a substantial estate when he was twenty years old. From 1753 to 1758, Washington served in the army, taking an active part in the French and Indian War, and gaining military experience and prestige. He returned to Virginia in late 1758, and resigned his commission. Shortly thereafter, he married Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow with two children. (He had no children of his own.)

Washington spent the next fifteen years managing his estates, and did so in a very capable fashion. By 1774, when he was chosen as a delegate from Virginia to the First Continental Congress, he was one of the richest men in the colonies. Washington had not been an early advocate of independence; nevertheless, in June 1775, the Second Continental Congress (of which he was also a member) unanimously chose him to command the Continental armies. His military experience; his wealth and reputation; physical appearance (he was a well-built man, 6'2" in height) and tough constitution; his administrative talents; and, above all, his determination and strength of character made him the logical choice for that position. Throughout the war, he served without pay, and with exemplary dedication.

Washington's most significant achievements were accomplished between June 1775, when he took command of the Continental armies, and March 1797, when his second term as President ended. He died at his home in Mount Vernon, Virginia, in December 1799.

Washington's position as the predominant figure in the establishment of the United States of America derives from three important roles which he played.

First, he was the successful military leader in the American War of Independence. It is true that Washington was by no means a military genius. Certainly, he was not remotely in the class of generals such as Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar, and his ultimate success seems to have been due at least as much to the astonishing incompetence of the British commanders who opposed him as to his own abilities. Nevertheless, it should be

remembered that several other American commanders were severely defeated, while Washington, though he suffered several small defeats, managed to prosecute the war to a successful conclusion.

Second, Washington was the president of the Constitutional Convention. Although Washington's ideas did not play a major role in shaping the American Constitution, his support, and the prestige of his name, played a major role in the ratification of that document by the state governments. There was, at the time, considerable opposition to the new Constitution, and had it not been for Washington's influence, it is far from certain that it would have been adopted.

In the third place, Washington was the first President of the United States of America. The United States was fortunate indeed in having as its first president a man of the caliber and character of George Washington. As can be seen from the history of many South American and African nations, it is all too easy for a new nation—even if it starts out with a democratic constitution—to soon degenerate into a military dictatorship. While Washington was a firm enough leader to keep the new nation from disintegrating, he had no ambition to hold power indefinitely. He did not wish to be either a king or a dictator, and he set a precedent for the peaceful relinquishment of power—a precedent which has been followed in the United States to this day.

George Washington was not as original and incisive a thinker as some of the other American leaders of the day, such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin. Nevertheless, he was far more important than any of those more brilliant men; for Washington, both in war and in peace, supplied the vital ingredient of executive leadership, without which no political movement can succeed. Madison's contribution to the formation of the United States of America was important; Washington's was well-nigh indispensable.

George Washington's place on this list depends to a large ex-

tent on one's view of the historical importance of the United States of America. An impartial estimate of that importance is naturally difficult for a contemporary American to make. Although the United States attained, in the mid-twentieth century, a position of military strength and political influence even greater than that possessed by the Roman Empire at its height, its political power may not endure as long as Rome's did. On the other hand, it seems clear that several of the technological developments achieved in the United States will be considered of great significance by other cultures and in other times. The invention of the airplane, for example, and the landing of men on the moon represent achievements that past ages have dreamed about, and it seems inconceivable that the invention of nuclear weapons will ever be deemed an unimportant development.

Since George Washington is the American political figure who roughly corresponds to Augustus Caesar in Rome, it seems reasonable to rank him fairly close to Augustus on this list. If Washington has been ranked somewhat lower, it is principally because the period of his leadership was so much briefer than that of Augustus, and because so many other men (such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison) also played important roles in the formation of the United States of America. However, Washington ranks higher than such figures as Alexander the Great and Napoleon because his accomplishments have been so much more enduring.