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Washington Quotations

1. "The opinion and advice of my friends I receive at all times as a proof of their friendship and am thankful when they are offered."

Washington's greatest strength is his ability to recognize his own limitations and to cultivate the advice of those who know more than him. Confident of his own abilities, Washington was comfortable adopting wholesale the ideas of those around him. A lesser man would have felt threatened by the prospect of being seen as a tool of others. Washington did not hesitate to take advice he deemed sound.

After unsuccessfully trying to use the Senate as a sort of Privy Council, he established one of the most important precedents in the unwritten Constitution, the Cabinet, acknowledging that he could not run the country on his own and was in need of the assistance of specialists. While even a king has his ministers, Washington relied so heavily on his closest advisors, especially Alexander Hamilton, for advice, that at times he is not much more than a conduit for Hamilton's ideas. Recognizing that he had solicited the advice of a genius, Washington stood by Hamilton's plan in its entirety, despite the strongest warnings and urgings to amend, modify or dismiss it. Imagine if Washington had try to negotiate some sort of settlement of Jefferson's objections to Hamilton's plan, or worse tried to tinker with Hamilton's financial plan in order to put his own imprint on it, to "make it his own." Even if he didn't understand it all, Washington recognized that Hamilton had a plan that hung together perfectly, and was reasoned out to the nth degree. Washington felt no need to put his particular mark on something, and seemed to not be threatened by the genius of those around him. His ability to recognize wisdom in others, and to take action to implement advice from Hamilton, even in the face of Jefferson's extreme resistance, is his greatest quality.

2. "The foundation of our empire was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but at an epoch when the rights of man were better understood and more clearly defined than at any other period."

This quotation demonstrates two important features of Washington's thinking: his vision of the future of the United States and his secular view of the world. The fact that Washington refers not to the foundation of our "nation" or "country", but rather of our "empire", illustrates his grand vision for the future. He is anticipating the tremendous expansion of America, from 13 states hugging the Atlantic into a transcontinental empire. It was his interest in westward expansion (and the profits to be derived therefrom) that most likely motivated his early and intense nationalism at a time when local prejudices ran strong, and despite his abhorrence of factionalism ultimately pushed him into the Federalist camp. Few at the time were able to look beyond their own parochial interests and embrace a grander vision; Washington certainly did, and it affected the way he perceived this country's interests and therefore affected his decisions regarding public

policy. It is somewhat ironic that America's First Farmer ultimately embraced Hamilton's industrial and mercantile vision of America's future, at the expense of Jefferson's agrarian affinity.

The quotation also illustrates Washington's secularism, his rejection of superstition in favor of a strictly rational view of the world. He emphatically rejected Divine Right theory, which although it had fallen out of favor in England long ago, still affected European politics. As a child of the Enlightenment, he rejected religious tests for public office and strongly advocated freedom of religion. Although it would be an oversimplification to characterize New Englanders as pious tea-drinkers and Southerners as impious julep-sippers, this country would have been substantially different had the descendants of the Puritans been given free reign (witness the refusal of the citizens of Massachusetts to include religious liberty in their constitution, and their establishment of an official state religion that lasted into the 19th century).

3. [On Americans] "We are apt to run from one extreme into another."

What a prescient statement. When I read this quotation I immediately thought of our current "red state/blue state" dichotomy, and the enormous gulf that separates modern liberals and neo-conservatives. Our public discourse has become so poisoned by the extremes of our political spectrum that political opponents now seem to be almost incapable of engaging in a genuine political debate. Issues aren't addressed by the media anymore, only symbols are. Whether it's the flag or Terry Schiavo or gay marriage, we seem to have completely lost our ability to have a rational dialogue. Then again, given Washington's quote, I wonder whether we ever had that ability.

The importance of this quotation is that given this view of human nature, Washington and others were determined to set up a system of government in which it would be very difficult for one party to completely throttle the opposition. Even when, as now, one political party pulls all the levers of power, the opposition still has a voice. The importance of parliamentary procedures like the filibusters has been amply demonstrated in recent weeks. These procedures are in place, like the very structure of the Constitution itself, to keep the country from running too far to one or another extreme.

4. "In a country like this...if there cannot be money found to answer the common purposes of education...it is evident that there is something amiss in the ruling political power."

How much truer this statement is today, given the staggering wealth of this country. Instead of providing funds for education, we work to eliminate the taxation of the leisure class. This quote works in tandem with the quote on false economy: "there are some cases in which parsimony may be ill placed." I want to send this quotation to George Bush, Dick Cheney, and Karl Rove.

It may also indicate that Washington was no patrician. We really haven't talked about Washington's views on the franchise, but based on this quotation I imagine that he would

ultimately be in favor of granting the vote much more broadly than it historically had. If the main purpose of education is to create good citizens, then why would Washington insist on educating the lower classes if he had no intention of admitting them into the political life of the country? Assuming, that is, that Washington was in favor of universal education, at least of males.

5. "Happiness depends more upon the internal frame of a person's own mind than on the externals in the world."

This is really the essence of Washington's stoicism. It reflects his constant struggle to master his own thoughts and actions, to be courageous and honest and accomplished, a person worth admiring. Still, it's a little ironic that Washington finds contentment in *virtu*, in being acknowledged by others of his own worth. He does what he does because it is the right thing to do, but also to win the admiration of other men. Still, if my students only learn one thing from me each year, let it be this.