

George Washington's Address to Congress on Resigning His Commission, December 23, 1783

Guiding Question

- How did George Washington support republican principles when he resigned his commission as commander-in-chief?

Objectives

- ☑ I can explain why Washington resigned his commission as commander-in-chief to Congress by identifying the republican principles he demonstrated.
- ☑ I can understand the virtue of humility and how Washington demonstrated it in his address to Congress.
- ☑ I can explain the importance of civilian control over the military in a self-governing society.

Scaffolding note: Vocabulary defined in text.

Background Information

Throughout history, military leaders have held immense political power. By commanding the loyalty of armies, they have been able to overthrow governments and put themselves in power. This was the precedent established for thousands of years when the British and Americans signed a peace treaty in 1783, ending the Revolutionary War. Americans built their new country during the Revolutionary War on the republican principle of self-governance, but the Continental Congress that had governed the country during the conflict had proven to be dysfunctional. Some wondered if the hero of the war—Commander-in-Chief George Washington—would use his power over the army to replace Congress with a new, more powerful, government under his control. Instead, Washington chose to resign his military commission and return to private life as an ordinary citizen. He gave the following speech to the Continental Congress when he resigned.

George Washington's Address to Congress on Resigning His Commission, December 23, 1783

Source: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-06-02-0319-0004>

Text	Notes/Summary
The great events on which my resignation depended having at length taken place; I have now the honor of offering my sincere Congratulations to Congress and of presenting myself before them to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence [satisfaction] of retiring from the Service of my Country.	
Happy in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty [power to govern] and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable Nation, I resign with satisfaction the Appointment [position] I accepted with diffidence [lack of confidence].	
A diffidence in my abilities to accomplish so arduous [difficult] a task, which however was superseded [replaced] by a confidence in the rectitude [righteousness] of our Cause, the support of the Supreme Power of the Union, and the patronage [support] of Heaven.	
Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of Action; and bidding an Affectionate farewell to this August [distinguished] body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my Commission and take my leave of all the employments of public life.	

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why does Washington say he is resigning his commission? What has been accomplished?
2. Humility is defined as: “A recognition that one’s ignorance is far greater than one’s knowledge. Putting others ahead of ourselves in thought, word, and deed. A willingness to give others credit and to admit when we are wrong.” How did Washington demonstrate the civic virtue of humility in this address? How did he demonstrate humility by surrendering his commission and retiring?
3. Why do you think it is important in a republican government that the civilian government has control over the military? What dangers exist when the military has more power than the elected government?
4. Review the list of principles in the Principles and Virtues handout. What republican principles did George Washington demonstrate when he resigned his commission as commander-in-chief?

