

Topic: The Washington Presidency

Grades: 8, 11

Course: American History

Context: In 1787, the Constitutional Convention met to revise the Articles of Confederation. Across the country there was debate between those who wished to expand and safeguard the power and standing of the national government and those who wished to protect individual liberty by maintaining strong state power. The result was a compromise. Applying the principle of Federalism, the members of the Constitutional Convention designed a foundational document that would divide power between the various states and the new national government. However, they also made sure that whatever power the national government maintained would be robust and largely absolute within its own limited domains. For example, the new national government could coin money and lay tariffs, whereas all states were forbidden to do so. Likewise, they established the concept of “supremacy”: the idea that if the states and national government both claimed jurisdiction, the federal government had precedence. They also determined that the creation of a national executive office, the presidency, was critical to bolstering both the national government’s legitimacy as well as its ability to take decisive action. However, as powerful as this seemed to make the federal government, the lion’s share of power was reserved for the states. In 1788, five years after the end of the American Revolution, the United States had its first constitutional election, establishing membership of the House and Senate and, by unanimous vote, the election of George Washington as the first American president. In 1789, George Washington swore the oath of office for the first time on Wall Street, New York City. His presidency and the decisions made by his Cabinet would establish political precedents that continue today.

Focus: Washington served as the American president between 1789 and 1797. In that time he established a variety of precedents related to the conduct and nature of the American presidency. However, his biggest impact as president was the legacy of American business, banking, and trade. With a cabinet consisting of Alexander Hamilton running the Department of Treasury, Thomas Jefferson running the Department of State, and Henry Knox running the Department of War, Washington oversaw a highly talented crew. Washington’s (and Hamilton’s) primary goal was to establish a highly robust international trade, while also staying well out of the constant wars and conflicts of global mercantilism. In other words, the United States would need to walk a fine line between political isolationism and energetic world trade.

Outcomes: Students will be able to identify George Washington's foreign policy goals in terms of trade and military alliances while demonstrating how his domestic policy supported those goals. They should become familiar with Washington's tariff and banking initiatives as well as his efforts to manage state and national debt.

Factors:

- Hamilton's Financial Plan: Assumption of Debt, Funding at Par, Tariffs and Excise Taxes, Bank of the United States
- Jay's Treaty
- Neutrality Proclamation & Washington's Farewell Address
- The Whiskey Rebellion

Student Writing: Describe how George Washington attempted to balance global trade on the one hand and neutrality and isolation on the other. How did Washington's domestic policies support his foreign policy goals?