

VITAL SPEECHES

— OF THE DAY —

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Vital Speeches of the Day

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Colloquium Honoring the 200th Year of George Washington's Death

GEORGE WASHINGTON, THE SPIRIT OF PUBLIUS AND MODERN POLITICS

Address by DAVID M. ABSHIRE, *President of the Center for the Study of the Presidency*
Delivered to the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, November 19, 1999

Over 30 years ago, Catherine Drinker Bowen wrote a classic little book about the Constitutional Convention. She called it *Miracle at Philadelphia*. But it was not the only miracle of the day. In addition to the *Miracle at Philadelphia*, America benefited from miracles from Trenton to Yorktown, to Newburgh. America also witnessed miracles within the halls of its nascent government in Philadelphia throughout those first precarious years of building republicanism. The founding fathers of our country, attendant at many of these miraculous happenings, therefore could also be called miracle workers of sorts in their own right. Today, I speak especially of Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, Mason and Jay. Yet it was surely miracle of miracles to harness and leverage the intellect, strength, energies, and drive of all of these citizen-giants. Each of them was strongwilled and iconoclastic and firm in their convictions. That is why I think it appropriate that on this occasion to speak of a miracle-worker-in-chief. And, of course, I speak of the figure whose visage shall always permeate American history, George Washington. He is the one whom we commemorate at this wonderful symposium on the 200th anniversary of his death.

It was Washington, his character and wisdom, that made so much of the American project possible. This evening I propose that George Washington was also aided by what I will call "the spirit of Publius," borrowed from the Federalist papers, an inspired methodology that allowed Washington to harness and lead the assemblage of brilliant minds present at the birth of the republic.

Moreover, I suggest that there is nothing better that today's candidates for the Presidency could do than to study how this all came about. They would be particularly wise to study the role of the miracle-worker-in-chief, his high quotient and quality of character, and how he employed that character in the spirit of Publius. I respectfully argue that Vice President Al Gore, Governor George W. Bush, Former Senator Bill Bradley, Senator John McCain, or whoever else may grasp the golden ring, will have little chance of presiding over a truly transforming presidency if he does not study these principles with care and abide by their example.

I believe I was asked to speak here because of a previous speech that I delivered about Washington about a year ago. I reflected on his character and what that example has to offer to political leaders today. That lecture before the Center for the Study of the Presidency was really an outgrowth of some thoughts that I would periodically deliver to the more than 200 interns who come every year to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I selected from Washington's life a few lessons that I felt were important and highly relevant for the

growth and development of America's young, potential leaders.

In the course of speaking to young people about George, I've found there to be an initial barrier. Practically all of these interns and junior scholars see the first President as he is portrayed in Gilbert Stuart's exquisite and stately paintings, or as he appears in various regal sculptures, sometimes even bearing a sword and Roman toga. And for others he is further associated with the splendid but unblemished obelisk of the Washington Monument. All are cold images, appropriate for commemorating an almost mythical figure, but they are not as useful for understanding a human leader. The humanizing frailties of the man, including a bad temper, are excluded.

For my purposes with young people therefore, it was first necessary to break down the cold and mythological representations of Washington and in their place examine the real man, beginning when, at the age of seventeen, he surveyed the old town Alexandria, Virginia, where I live today.

Frankly, it seems to me that as a young man, Washington was pretty stuck on himself. He shrewdly accumulated land as a surveyor, arriving at self-made status from poorer origins through ambition, ceaseless drive, and a knack for capitalizing on good luck.

He would later apply this drive to his interest in the military arts and to the promotion of his own interests. As a major in the Colonial forces, he was constantly hectoring Virginia's Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie. He complained that he was not being paid at a salary commensurate with the British regulars or his talents

A bit hotheaded and overconfident, he went over the mountains on a mission against the French and Indians and camped in a vulnerable place. The vain young officer engaged the French against orders, was defeated by a superior force employing guerilla tactics, unwillingly or unwittingly signed onto embarrassing terms of surrender, and was written up in the London newspapers as a disgrace. Luckily, he was afforded second chances. He learned and matured. Having learned a valuable lesson about tactics, he tried unsuccessfully to warn General Braddock on the tactics of a later dangerous expedition. Dinwiddie would eventually appoint Washington commander of all Virginia colonial forces and promote him to Colonel.

What struck me about the real Washington was that this highly self-centered young man grew so amazingly to become such a highly "other-centered" leader. This headstrong and sometimes insolent self-promoter, who had argued about his pay, was the same man who twice refused pay as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, and as President of the United

States. Washington was able to learn from his mistakes and his setbacks. These became bedrock for his character growth. This is what I pointed out to my young friends: this example of dealing with failure. He could continue to make mistakes and in fact he was defeated in more battles than he won in the Revolutionary War. But he would win the war, keeping an eye fixed upon his ultimate goal despite the many and daunting obstacles before him.

It was Washington's imposing character that eventually made him a great combat leader. This word character is especially relevant to younger generations. In their very formative years, they have witnessed and participated in the national debate over whether private character is needed if a leader seems to have "public character." As Washington matured, it is quite clear that he believed the two should attempt to be the same. Reputation and honor were his code words. The historian, Michael Beschloss used the word "integrity" and reminds us that it means unified, not just virtuous. I conclude that it was the towering presence that was Washington, built upon demonstrated unity of character, which not just won the Revolutionary war, but sustained the Constitutional Convention. As one historian wrote: "Seated in his high back chair as the presiding officer on the raised platform, when he rose to his feet he was almost the Commander-in-Chief again." Witnessing Washington's effect on the proceedings, Monroe concluded, "Be assured his influence carried the government."

In my talk to you today, I do not want to repeat further that earlier discussion but, in the spirit of the Revolution, those thoughts are available in pamphlet form to anyone interested. David Gergen has done me the kind favor of writing an insightful introduction to the pamphlet and made the speech required reading for the classes in political leadership that he teaches at Harvard.

For you today, however, I want to further develop a theme from these earlier musings, that of the spirit of Publius. My theme, a vision of a more desirable polity, can be summed up in one somewhat obscure word from our history: "Publius." This was, of course, the common nom de plume used by the three authors of *The Federalist Papers* — Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison — in their effort to build support for the ratification of the Constitution. The name was taken after Publius Valerius. He helped overthrow Tarquin Superbus, the last tyrannical Etruscan king, and establish the Roman Republic. Our founding fathers were very well read in classical history, including this dramatic story recorded in Plutarch's *Lives*. They sought to learn from the history of republics and democracies, emulating the best and drawing wisdom from the worst. I want to look at the contribution that George Washington made by being the fulcrum that assembled and leveraged so many brilliant, extraordinary people.

Likewise, and even more dramatically, Washington surrounded himself with unusually creative people who would not have necessarily gotten along in their own right. It was at the foot of his pedestal that they could gather, their common respect for him and what he symbolized enabling them to erect a greater edifice. This spirit produced the miracle of the United States: not Washington alone, but Washington and what perhaps turned out to be the most unusual company in human history.

The entrepreneurial leader in the Federalist effort was Alexander Hamilton. Small in person, delicate in features, but a dashing colonel under Washington in the war. The youngest of

the three, 30-year-old Hamilton possessed the most cutting edge brilliance, but he was also often shrill and hotheaded. Of the principal founders, he was the one who was the most nationalistic in the extreme. He started out practically a monarchist, even making a long speech at the Constitutional Convention advocating a permanent chief-executive-for-life with the power to veto state laws. The shock in the hall after his over four-hour long speech was so great that by the next day he realized his political blunder. Fortunately for our Republic, Hamilton recognized that he would have to compromise, accept some ideas and indeed wisdom from others, and work within more temperate and pragmatic constraints if the nascent American experiment was to be preserved.

His partner was 36 year old James Madison. While Hamilton, an illegitimate child, was self-made and took on an air of aristocracy, Madison was a true blue blood, possessing the Virginia estate of Montpelier. Yet Madison sought to understand the concerns of people, and struggled in his own conscience with the moral burden of slavery. Shy, possessing a weak physique and never fit to serve as a soldier, Madison was a profound scholar, concerned with checks and balances to counter the tyranny of the majority that had been common to pure democracies.

Of course each represented the two key states in the ratification process, Hamilton of New York and Madison of Virginia. While Hamilton initially espoused a harsh-sounding nationalism in the effort to produce the Constitutional Convention, Madison talked of an adjusted federalist system. Hamilton came to see the strategic value of dropping the word "nationalism" and indeed cleverly captured the word "federalist", consequently forcing his opposition to be cast as anti-federalist. This was a dramatic political breakthrough since the term "federalist" was a popular word, if not a coherent notion. Hamilton was learning from Madison how to seize the high ground.

Even though the Constitutional Convention was not fully in line with Hamilton's ideals, of greater centralization, he knew the perfect should not be the enemy of the good. The failure of ratification could lead to a mortally fractured nation, leaving nothing more than a league of states. Along with Madison, the father of the Constitution, he was perhaps the Constitution's foremost driver. No matter how fallible the product by fallible men who differed, they had to seize the moment. Now we call that constitution a miracle.

When the Constitutional Convention was completed, however, a challenging ratification process lay before the new states. It was indeed clever that the Constitution was written to require the ratification of only nine states whereas the Articles of Confederation had mandated that any change in the Articles required unanimity of all thirteen states. Even with the lower standard of passage, Hamilton's own great state of New York was in doubt due to the anti-Federalist forces led by Governor Clinton. It must be remembered that eminent Americans of the time, such as Patrick Henry, George Mason, Tom Paine, Sam Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, and the New York Governor were opposed to the Constitution. They had fought a revolution in the name of liberty, and feared first losing that liberty to a central government capable of such taxing powers, and second that the convention had assumed unauthorized powers.

In making my point about Publius, I want to make it clear that compromises were not made to so water down the Constitutional draft as to please all the dissenters. Indeed, only about

half of the population of the thirteen colonies supported ratification of the Constitution. Publius was not an endeavor to accommodate every faction in a compromised, down to the least common denominator. To concede to Jefferson, Lee, Henry and others would have produced a confederacy of states, not a federal government. I am arguing that the Constitution was made possible and the first President was made stable because of an ability and outreach in building powerful coalitions in the furtherance of shared, though perhaps initially unpopular, strategic ends. The Publius leadership drew on insights that overcame original conflicts. Publius does not represent a simple compromise, a middle distance between opposing sides or incrementalism to come together. With new information and creativity, the parties were moved to higher ground. The agenda was moved forward by a commanding majority crafted from an amalgam of disparate parties. This was, indeed, "transforming leadership."

As we already noted, Hamilton had the idea of joining with Madison in authoring a series of letters to the public through the newspapers. They also broadened their base by bringing in another New Yorker, John Jay, who, like Jefferson, had great international knowledge and experience as a diplomatist. But unlike Jefferson, Jay, the experienced diplomat, reinforced Hamilton's arguments for the necessity of a powerful United States to deal with international finance, trade, and European power.

Looking back over the history of ideas and idealistic government wrought by the Federalist, we now know it to be one of the greatest political devices and documents of all time. The Federalist Papers continues to inform the thinking of the Supreme Court. George Washington took these papers authored by his men, his colleagues, and had them reprinted in Richmond for greater distribution in his key state, and he wrote:

"The work will merit the notice of posterity; because in it are candidly and ably discussed the principles of freedom and the topics of government, which will be always interesting to mankind...."

When Washington was elected the first President, he began to assemble the first cabinet, abiding by what I call the spirit of Publius. His Vice President, a short, learned Massachusetts lawyer, had written his own, *A Defense of the Constitution*, and has been called the Father of American conservatism. Thomas Jefferson, in France at the time, had been against the Constitution; as I have noted, he might be called the Father of American liberalism. Jefferson once called the documents provision for a strong presidency a "bad edition of a Polish king." He abhorred the secrecy of the Convention proceedings viewing them as anti-democratic. Yet he was embraced by Washington — in the spirit of Publius — as the nation's first Secretary of State.

Alexander Hamilton, so brilliant and preeminent in his knowledge of finance, was tapped to be Secretary of the Treasury. James Madison went to the House of Representative where he became the representative of Washington's policies there. Drawing on the work of George Mason, he became the architect of the Bill of Rights, the missing link in the Constitution that led Mason, Jefferson, and others to oppose it. Lincoln in the next century said that, "Our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The Bill of Rights would become the framework for the Fourteenth Amendment. This is Mason's and Madison's Legacy.

Washington showed himself to be an extraordinary leader of his talented cabinet, employing the spirit of Publius throughout

his first administration. He sought different views from his cabinet members. In the event that his earnest attempts at reconciliation failed, he led the cabinet to strong outcomes.

He was an activist President. He strongly backed Alexander Hamilton in his advocacy of the Assumption Bill to meet the needs of the Treasury. With so many states unwilling or unable to pay their debts, the financial solvency of the new nation was in dire jeopardy. When the Assumption Bill to take over and consolidate those debts was defeated in the House, Jefferson hosted a sort of Publius dinner with Madison and Hamilton. There Jefferson proposed trading the move of the capital to the Potomac River in ten years in exchange for votes for the Assumption bill.

Washington's move to get Jefferson into the fold had paid off. Historian Henry Jones Ford was to write, "Had the national forces failed at the crucial period of financial organization, and the states, bankrupt by the revolutionary struggle, been left in the lurch, the republic would have followed the usual course of disintegration displayed by federations down to the Holy Roman Empire." He also wrote "The Assumption bill was lifted to its place on the statute books through the leverage exerted by Hamilton and Jefferson, with Washington's prestige as their fulcrum." This is how the spirit of Publius would ideally operate in Washington's cabinet, with him leveraging other parties and serving as the fulcrum.

Eventually, however, factional warfare began to develop within the Cabinet, particularly in the form of attacks on strong-minded Hamilton as trying to move to a more centralized government. This eventually led to Jefferson's resignation.

There was one final victory of the spirit of Publius over the power to tax. Without that power, there would be no way to pay the country's debts; no way to establish any kind of financial standing internationally; and no way to build any kind of effective military force to assert America's interests before the designs of foreign powers. Hamilton led the way in arguing that it would take a powerful, unified United States to defend and hold its own. And Madison backed him in this.

There was, however, a very unfortunate issue between the Congress and the Presidency early in Washington's first term that I believed hindered a more frequent spirit of Publius between the Legislative and the Executive throughout the subsequent history of this republic.

In the first Congress, during the debate over establishing the first Treasury Department, there was the language authorizing the Secretary to "digest and report plans" to the Congress, indeed as the Secretariat of Finance in the Continental Congress had been allowed; in other words, create a real dialogue. This would have been similar to the practice at Westminster, where ministers address the British Parliament and engage in an exchange. But the intellectually powerful Hamilton was a threatening figure to some and, in response to his opponents, this word "report" was changed to "prepare" so Hamilton had to work out of the House lobby as have subsequent Cabinet members.

Part way through Washington's second administration, Hamilton also departed. Eventually the factions gave way to two parties, the Federalists and the Republicans, that is the Democratic Republicans, forebearers of the Democratic Party today. While Washington remained popular, the fight over the Jay Treaty was so polarizing that, sadly, attacks began to center on Washington, alleging that the Treaty had not been tough enough with the British. Alas, the spirit of Publius was weakening; in the term of John Adams it would break down further, and

Federalism became increasingly rigid, losing its appeal. Hence, the victory of Jefferson's new Republican party.

Jefferson's inaugural address, however, was one of outreach and conciliation. He spoke about the nation: "We are all republicans—we are all federalists." A strict constructionist, Jefferson did not share Hamilton's reliance on implied powers. Jefferson, however, would become more like Hamilton in his geopolitical views, first in undeclared wars against the Barbary States, and then with his giant Louisiana purchase without Congressional authorization and with dubious constitutionality. He was strengthened by his willingness to play off the balance of power between France and Britain. In other words, the Publius factor, if not operating across party lines, operated anew intellectually in concepts shared by Jefferson and Madison, the Secretary of State, now with Madison in their midst.

Ironically, the Republicans had adopted parts of the Federalist argument for a strong government. Under Republican President James Monroe, who wanted the United States to be recognized as the major republic in the world, the famous 1823 Monroe doctrine was promulgated, which, in effect, made the Americas our sphere of influence, a doctrine that would have pleased Hamilton. Finally, the second President's son, John Quincy Adams, crossed party lines and became a Republican President.

MODERN POLITICS

Now let me take this lesson of Publius, the idea that I submit secured this republic with George Washington as its anchor, and apply it to the last eight years here in Washington, D.C. I will talk in particular about President Bill Clinton and Speaker Newt Gingrich and I will identify some enormous lost opportunities due to the neglect of the spirit of Publius, first demonstrated by those who anonymously signed the Federalist papers.

I'll begin with Bill Clinton. He arrived in Washington with creative ambition to move the agenda of the country, in terms of lasting change. There were great challenges to meet, and he talked of facing these challenges: balancing the budget, holding down interest rates, developing the economy, and perhaps above all, moving his party and the nation fully into the global economy and taking on the overriding challenge of reforming entitlements. He was seeking objectives that demanded transformational leadership. Beginning with his Renaissance weekends, it became evident that he was not just a policy tinkerer, but a very creative thinker. He came to office with a reputation as an innovative and well-liked governor. He had not only led but had absorbed the philosophy of the Democratic Leadership Council, which attempted to move the Democratic Party from the left in both domestic and international affairs to a position commanding the political center, dominating the mainstream of progress, and producing genuine and creative reform.

Unfortunately his first mistake was to neglect the spirit of Publius at the very beginning by not building bipartisan coalitions. Remember that Jack Kennedy knew and applied this art. Soon after he was elected, Kennedy brought in a very prominent and able Republican as his director of Central Intelligence and an even more prominent Republican as his Secretary of the Treasury.

Instead, Clinton, in his first term, became involved in developing a massive partisan health reform plan under the direction of the First Lady. He did this without staying in touch with the Congress, without drawing on Republicans for give and take or a sharing of ideas, and by keeping the plan's development a secret.

I was a part of the Nunn-Domenici Health Care Commission meeting where the first lady spoke. Republican Senator Domenici

politely told her that her ambitious plans could never muster Hill approval unless it was bipartisan. She fully agreed, "Good advice, Senator," but she failed to act on that advice. It was the opposite of Publius. The plan not only scared the Congress but scared the public as well and produced an enormous setback for Clinton. It also did much to ensure the success of the Republican political revolution, which subsequently gained control of the House of Representatives.

Clinton then made a remarkable comeback in part due to Speaker Gingrich overplaying his hand. The partisan Republican overreach frightened the public as much as Hillary Clinton's partisan health plan. I will return to this event.

The Clinton-Gore administration took on the Reagan mantle of smaller government, with the twist that in order to be smaller, government had to be better and reinvented for efficiency. While some Republicans seemed to argue that no government could be good, when the bombing of the Murrah federal office building occurred in Oklahoma City, President Clinton was able to capitalize on this Republican image effectively. The tragedy became evidence of the necessity of good and able government in a dangerous age, and proof that the Republicans did not understand. Then, by successfully blaming the Republican Congress for the government shutdown, he made his remarkable political comeback only to become tragically embroiled for seven months in the Monica affair. The affair drove Clinton to the left to shore up his political base during the impeachment proceedings and the trial. Consequently, any trust between parties broke down and it became increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to put together any kind of creative measures that could constitute a legacy.

The tragedy is that the buoyant economy offered freedom of action in dealing with the looming entitlements problem. Senator John Breaux, his number two man in the Senate developed creative bipartisan plans for real reform, but the impeachment trial proceedings led a fearful Clinton to back away and shift to the left, out of range of this opportunity.

The other promising overshadowing political figure of this era was Speaker Newt Gingrich. If Clinton had a chance to be the greatest Democratic president since FDR, Gingrich had the chance to be greatest speaker in this century — and a transformational one at that, for he had vision. Like Clinton, he was man of enormous creativity and innovation but, like Clinton, he was undisciplined. When he and Clinton shook hands on campaign reform, there was a brief moment of apparent opportunity for transformational bipartisan leadership to face the biggest obstacle to good government in America.

Indeed, Gingrich had a vision. Soon after the Republican revolution and the Contract with America, he came to CSIS to speak. He cited, as an example of leadership, the CSIS study group that led to the most comprehensive Department of Defense transformation since its creation days. He praised the bipartisan nature of the breakthrough, which featured Sam Nunn, Les Aspin, Barry Goldwater, and himself, among others. He noted the transforming reform of the Joint Chiefs and the establishment of efforts throughout the defense apparatus, which helped make possible the brilliant Gulf War victory. Gingrich stated that this breakthrough bipartisan effort should be the model and indeed would be his model. That day, Gingrich endorsed the spirit of Publius.

Unfortunately, he would go on to forsake that idea and eventually lose his speakership. Had he made his Republican Revolution towards decentralization more nonpartisan he might have

done something equal to Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Movement, which centralized government. It is an interesting contrast that the Roosevelts promoted reform through greater centralization, whereas Gingrich and Clinton promoted reform through decentralization made possible by the information technology revolution.

We now have reached in our nation's capital one of the lowest points of our political history, not seen since the total breakdown of trust in the wake of Lincoln's tragic assassination. There was then an enormous lack of stability, trust, and community that led not only to the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, but to the attention of a creative Reconstruction. Our current hour reflects the political intransigence and counterproductivity of those days.

For example, one has to go back to the failure of the ratification of the covenant of the League of Nations to find such political mishandling by both the executive and legislative leadership. In his mismanagement of the Versailles agreement, Woodrow Wilson defied every principal of bipartisanship. There were Republicans who – first in Paris and later in Congress — could have been involved in the agreement. Wilson could have been more flexible in addressing the reservations of skeptics. It is perhaps true that Senator Henry Cabot Lodge was going to do everything possible to destroy the ratification process, but there existed the potential for building a bipartisan majority that even Lodge could not have resisted.

The odds of ratifying the Versailles agreement were no less than those of passing the Marshall Plan through an isolationist Congress and country. The difference is that the latter was handled on a bipartisan basis with extreme skill, with a strategy led by Republican Arthur Vandenberg that targeted the Senate and the grassroots.

The nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, like the Versailles Agreement, had its defects, as a line of former Defense Secretaries pointed out. But in an age of nuclear proliferation when control, prevention, and nuclear missile defense are perhaps our greatest national security concerns, what happened is shocking. Our process of rejection alienated all of our major allies and the third world.

We do not appear as a leader in preventing proliferation. The treaty was defective as the Republicans indicated, but any alternative of dealing with its inadequacies would have been better than the one chosen. On the White House side, forcing this vote was a disaster. On the Senate side, not working out a

compromise was also a disaster. Amidst the impasse, it would have been possible to set up a bipartisan commission to dispassionately review points of controversy, as Henry Kissinger suggested. This could have been done very much like the Rumsfeld missile threat commission or the Greenspan Social Security Commission. But that spirit of Publius and its concomitant creativity were nowhere to be found, and the outcome, unfortunately, was a lose-lose.

It is interesting that throughout this same period there was a successful spirit of Publius in an entirely different area: financial policy. The just-passed financial services reform legislation in a quiet way was about as historic as the original Glass-Steagall Act which, early in the New Deal, separated banking from other financial and holding companies. In the face of fast-changing industries and international competition, the time had truly come for change. But to the credit of this administration and the Congress, the spirit of Publius prevailed. Moderate Republican Jim Leach, Chairman of the House Banking Committee, the more conservative Senator Phil Gramm, Treasury Secretaries Robert Rubin and Larry Summers, and Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan effectively contributed, deliberated, and compromised while adhering to the essential elements that each wanted to see in the final bill. The agreement in my judgement will help us compete better globally and ultimately will aid the consumer.

I think that the absence of the spirit of Publius in Washington has put off the public and has raised demands for this extreme polarization and deadlock on key issues to end. The public demands that we return not to a policy of simply compromising every issue to get along, but to a new creativity based on the spirit of Publius. The challenge of the millennium is enormous. As we stand in the throes of the information revolution, and face unfamiliar global perils, we also confront new opportunities. But the time has come to climb to the higher ground, as our founding fathers did.

So there are lessons here for a Gore, a Bush, a Bradley, a McCain, or any presidential hopeful. But a fundamental point is this: Two hundred years after the death of the father of our country, the successful spirit of Publius among these key founders was made possible by George Washington's character. He did not have the intellectual brilliance of other luminaries, such as Hamilton, Madison, or Jefferson. But it was around the towering figure of Washington that they rallied. The integrity of his character made their collaboration and creativity — and our nation — possible.

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