GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ANNAPOLIS SPEECH by Alan Taylor (Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chair, Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia), Feb. 16, 2015, Maryland State House.

Many of you have visited the "Charters of Freedom" shrine in the rotunda at the National Archives and have seen the three most celebrated documents of our founding: the Declaration of Independence; the Federal Constitution; and the Bill of Rights. No one could debate the primacy of those three, but what would the fourth most important document be? I would nominate the document that you have acquired, preserved, and presented here in this statehouse: the speech which George Washington gave upon resigning his command of the Continental Army to the Continental Army. It is a precious document for a preciously rare event. For how many military commanders of revolution in history have voluntarily given up power? To understand the importance of that moment in late 1783 let me explore Washington's life-long project to reshape his character and to perform for the American public.

With great pains and much internal struggle, Washington developed a public persona that proved essential to winning the revolutionary war and constructing a union of the new states. He began as an adolescent, when he copied a detailed list of 110 rules of civility. Two of them are: "Let thy carriage be such as becomes a Man Grave, Settled, and attentive to that which is spoken." "Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial Fire called Conscience." For the ensuing fifty years, Washington mastered himself into an almost perfect presentation of gravity, dignity, and integrity. But it was never easy, for by nature he was a very emotional, passionate man with a thin-skin. And he sometimes battled privately with despair at his own limitations and frustrations. No American of his century created a greater public reputation or labored more to bear up under its accumulating weight.

In the spring of 1775, war erupted between the thirteen colonies and the British Empire. Washington's patriotic sentiments, his political weight as a leading Virginian (from the largest and wealthiest colony), his military experience, and his prodigious public dignity combined to secure his

appointment by the Continental Congress to command its new army. Given the might of the British Empire, the appointment was a potential death sentence for Washington as a traitor in the event of defeat. But Washington dared not turn down the appointment because he so cherished his standing with the public. He characteristically explained, "It was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment without exposing my Character to such censures as would have reflected dishonour upon myself."

Washington made his share of battlefield mistakes, but he mastered the strategic and political essence of his difficult command. And at times, he privately despaired. In September 1776, after several defeats, he poured out his soul to a relative:

> In short, such is my situation that if I were to wish the bitterest curse to an enemy on this side of the grave, I should put him in my stead with my feelings; and yet I do not know what plan of conduct to pursue. I see the impossibility of serving with reputation, or doing any essential service to the cause by continuing in command, and yet I am told that if I quit the command, inevitable ruin will follow from the distraction that will ensue. In confidence I tell you that I never was in such an unhappy, divided state since I was born.

But he knew that he had to keep this despair private. By doing so, Washington preserved, almost miraculously, an unruffled public demeanor that commanded the respect and sustained the hopes of his people. Washington's greatest service and greatest sacrifice was to endure the psychological and emotional toll of this rigid detachment of his public resolve from his private agony.

He knew that he had to secure respect for himself and the American cause by consistently presenting, in orders, letters, speech, and posture, a persona of utter dignity and self-assurance - no easy task given his ramshackle army, divided country, and powerful enemy. Washington exhorted his soldiers that "The Eyes of all our Countrymen are now upon us, and we shall have their blessings, and praises, if happily we are the instruments of saving them from the Tyranny meditated against them. Let us therefore animate and encourage each other, and shew the whole world, that a Freeman contending for Liberty on his own ground is superior to any slavish mercenary on earth."

By almost sheer force of will and by an extraordinary mastery of appearances, he kept alive a suffering army that sustained the revolution until the fall of 1781, when French military assistance secured the critical victory at Yorktown. But the war's end did not end the troubles of the weak union of new states. Indeed, peace compounded some of those difficulties by eliminating their common bond: the shared military struggle against the British Empire.

Perhaps you have heard the legend that Washington turned down a king's crown and thereby saved republican government. This story is not literally true, but it has a germ of truth that leads to the importance of his resignation speech at this statehouse. In March 1783, Congress was beginning to decline into irrelevance because under our original federal constitution, known as the Articles of Confederation, Congress lacked the power to tax. Instead, it had to rely on payments "requisitioned" from the states, and with the war winding down, the states were defaulting on those payments. Consequently, Congress lacked the money to pay the arrears in pay owed to the soldiers. And Congress could not afford to fund pensions which had been promised to the officers of the Continental Congress. And nationalists in Congress feared that once the British evacuated their last garrisons in America, and the Continental Army demobilized, they would lose their last leverage to secure tax revenues for Congress.

Some congressmen hoped to pressure their colleagues and the state governments by playing a dangerous game with the army. They send a secret emissary to meet with angry officers of the Continental Army, which lay encamped around New York City waiting for the British to withdraw. The emissary encouraged the officers to organize an effort to intimidate Congress and the states. By refusing to demobilize and threatening to march in arms on Philadelphia, the army could pressure Congress and the states to pay the soldiers and pension the officers. A former army officer in Congress, Alexander Hamilton, slyly explained that "the necessity and discontents of the army presented themselves as a powerful engine" to pressure wavering politicians. If necessary, Gouverneur Morris favored staging a military coup: "When a few Men of sense and spirit get together and declare that they are the Authority,

such few as are of a different opinion may easily be convinced of their Mistake by that powerful Argument, the Halter."

Hamilton wrote to urge Washington to lead the army's forceful demand for the nationalist program, but the general balked. Dreading "to open the flood Gates of Civil discord" that would "deluge our rising Empire in Blood," Washington preferred to wait and trust the states and nation eventually to do right by the soldiers and officers. In mid-March at Newburgh, New York, he dramatically intervened in a meeting of angry officers, persuading them to stand down. As the nationalists feared, Congress had Washington discharge 80 percent of his army in June 1783.

The soldiers did not all go home quietly. In June, one group of disgusted and unpaid soldiers passed through Philadelphia, where they surrounded the State House loudly to denounce and threaten the Congressmen. Feeling insulted and helpless, the congressmen adjourned and hastily moved away to Princeton, New Jersey. Too fearful to return to Philadelphia, Congress moved on again to Annapolis, Maryland in November. One delegate described Congress as "hated by the public creditors, insulted by the Soldiery, and unsupported by the citizens." Benjamin Rush agreed, "The Congress is abused, laughed at and cursed in every company." So it is not true that today's Congress has reached the lowest ebb in public opinion.

With the British evacuation completed in late November, Washington dismissed the last of his troops and rode south to Annapolis to resign his commission to Congress on December 23. Only twenty Congressmen attended because a mere seven states had bothered to send delegations to the increasingly ineffectual and irrelevant Congress. But a throng of spectators filled the hall and gallery of the Maryland statehouse to watch Washington resign. He aptly described his performance as theatrical: "Nothing now remains, but for the actors of this mighty Scene to preserve a perfect, unvarying, consistency of character throughout the last act; to close the Drama with applause; and to retire from the Military Theatre." In the actual speech, he also used a theatrical metaphor: "I retire from the great theater of action." Throughout the war, he had played a consummate and utterly demanding role as the face of the revolution and of its commitment to a republic, where the military served the civil authority of the people.

An impressed congressman praised the "solemn and affecting spectacle." Washington had become the consummate performer of dignified and selfless devotion to the republican cause.By surrendering power, Washington refuted Loyalist critics who had predicted that he would become a dictator as had Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell, previous rebel commanders in history. In London, the American-born artist Benjamin West had predicted Washington's retirement. A skeptical George III allegedly replied, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world." Expressing a relief felt by most Americans, Thomas Jefferson declared that Washington's virtuous act had "prevented this revolution from being closed, as most others have been by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish."

Later, another general in a different revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte in France cynically claimed that God favored the general with the biggest battalions in battle. But the biggest and best army had not won the War of the American Revolution. Washington understood the importance of a reputation for moral courage and self-sacrifice. He also knew that no reputation could stand without substance and consistency.

By resigning command of a dissolving army, he paradoxically gained real power in a republic governed by public opinion. He became the most popular and the most revered man throughout the states, for everyone was relieved and impressed by his dignified resignation of command. Thereafter, he became the essential man to the movement to seek constitutional reform of the inadequate Articles of Confederation. No reform was possible without his engagement. Because of his support, the Constitutional Convention succeeded at Philadelphia in 1787, for his gravitas helped to keep the often squabbling delegates together to the end of their labors in September. Then his support for the constitution proved critical to winning the long, hard ratification struggle in the states in 1787-1788. Then Washington won unanimous election by the electoral college to the presidency, something that will never again happen. Finally, Washington helped to hold the fragile new government together through the bitter conflicts of the members of his cabinet. I believe the constitution would not have held without Washington as the first president.

Of course, Washington developed his public persona through many years of struggle with his emotions and many occasions of public performance. But I would single out the December 23, 1783 speech that he made here as the most important moment in his political career, for here Washington consolidated his standing as first in the hearts and minds of his countrymen.