

George Washington's Explosive Temper



Most Americans picture General George Washington as calm, dignified, and unshakably composed. While that image is largely accurate, those who knew him best also knew another side of his character. Beneath his disciplined exterior lay a fiery temper that, though rarely seen, could erupt with astonishing force.

One of the most dramatic examples occurred at Kip's Bay on Manhattan Island on September 15, 1776. As British forces landed, American militia—joined by several New England brigades of Continental soldiers considered among the army's best—broke ranks and fled in panic. Many had not even fired a shot before throwing down their muskets.

Watching the chaotic retreat from horseback, Washington was stunned. Then, in an instant, his self-control gave way. Spurring his horse into the fleeing mass of soldiers, he struck men with his riding cane while shouting a torrent of oaths. Officers were not spared his anger as his whip came down again and again upon shoulders and backs. He even drew an unloaded flintlock pistol, repeatedly snapping the hammer at men rushing past him.

Finally, in utter frustration, Washington threw his hat to the ground and cried, **"Are these the men with whom I am to defend America?"** So consumed was he by anger that an aide was forced to seize his horse's bridle and lead him away as the advancing British drew dangerously near. That decisive intervention may well have preserved the life of the commander who would lead the American cause to victory.

Washington's temper was no secret to those who had known him from his youth. In 1748, Lord Fairfax—his mentor, employer, and close friend—wrote to Washington's mother, Mary Ball Washington:

"I wish I could say that he governs his temper... He is subject to attacks of anger on provocation, sometimes without just cause."

Fairfax also believed that maturity would temper the young Virginian's passions, predicting that Washington would "go to school all his life." Time proved him largely correct. Although he never entirely conquered his quick temper, he learned to master it through remarkable self-discipline.

Thomas Jefferson later observed that Washington's "temper was naturally irritable and high-toned," yet "reflection and resolution had obtained a firm and habitual ascendancy over it." When that restraint failed, Jefferson added, "he was most tremendous in his wrath."

John Adams agreed, praising Washington's remarkable self-command:

"He had great self-command... Whenever he lost his temper, as he did sometimes, either love or fear in those about him induced them to conceal his weakness from the world."

Along with his temper came an unforgettable command of profanity. Tobias Lear, Washington's longtime secretary, remarked that few things could equal the sound of Washington swearing when truly angered.

The most famous outburst occurred at the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778. General Charles Lee ordered a retreat before fully engaging the British, throwing the American line into confusion. When Washington encountered Lee withdrawing from the field, he exploded in fury. General Charles Scott later recalled:

"Yes, once. It was at Monmouth, and on a day that would have made any man swear. Yes sir, he swore on that day, till the leaves shook on the trees—charming, delightful. Never have I enjoyed

such swearing before or since. Sir, on that ever-memorable day, he swore like an angel from heaven."

Despite these rare eruptions, Washington devoted much of his life to mastering himself. Historian Fred Anderson has observed that ambition marked his early personality, along with a degree of social uncertainty. Before the age of sixteen, Washington painstakingly copied by hand the **110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation**, a seventeenth-century guide emphasizing respect, humility, and consideration for others. Those principles became a lifelong standard by which he measured his own conduct.

Founding Father Gouverneur Morris admired Washington's triumph over his own passions:

"The tumultuous passions which accompany greatness and frequently tarnish its luster... his first contest, and his first victory, was over himself... Yet those who have seen him strongly moved will bear witness that his wrath was terrible."

Military service continually tested that self-mastery. Washington witnessed cowardice, incompetence, hardship, and mutiny. He insisted upon discipline as the foundation of an effective army, believing that officers must maintain authority without sacrificing dignity. He advised:

"Be easy and condescending in your deportment to your officers, but not too familiar, lest you subject yourself to a want of that respect which is necessary to support a proper command."

His commitment to discipline could be severe. Washington complained when Congress reduced the number of lashes that could be administered as punishment, and near the end of the Revolution he supported the execution of mutineers to preserve the army's cohesion.

Yet those closest to him recognized that beneath his stern discipline was a man engaged in constant moral striving. Abigail Adams admired his combination of dignity and kindness, writing:

"He has a dignity which forbids familiarity married with an easy, obliging mind which creates love and reverence."

Author Katherine Kersten has argued that Washington's greatest achievement was not simply winning a revolution but mastering his own nature. His guiding virtues were fortitude, justice, and moderation. Time and again he subordinated personal ambition to the

needs of the nation, demonstrating the self-restraint that defined true leadership.

British historian Robert Harvey perhaps summarized Washington's legacy best:

"Under the unassuming exterior... was to display leadership, strength and dignity of such an order that ultimately the whole American Revolution came to revolve around him."

Washington's legendary temper was real, but so was his determination to control it. His rare outbursts—at Kip's Bay, Monmouth, and a handful of other moments—were memorable precisely because they contrasted so sharply with his usual composure. His greatest victory was not over the British Army, but over himself. That extraordinary self-mastery helped make him not only the commander who won American independence, but also the enduring model of republican leadership.