

The first inauguration: George Washington and his reluctance to become president, 1789

Introduction

From 1787 to 1789, as the Constitution was submitted for ratification by the states, most Americans assumed that George Washington would be the first president. In this April 1789 letter to General Henry Knox, his friend from the Continental Army who served as Secretary of War, Washington accepted the inevitability of his election to the presidency, but with remarkable reluctance. His tone suggests how precarious the future of America seemed to him. Just twenty-nine days later Washington would be inaugurated in the (then) capital, New York City, and would advise his fellow citizens that “the destiny of the Republican model of Government [is] staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history as well as evidence from the document in order to answer these questions.

1. Compare Washington’s comments with the current political climate where there are frequently numerous candidates for political office, including the presidency.
2. List and explain the skills Washington thought he lacked as well as those he believed he possessed.
3. Do you believe that a man of Washington’s stature, reputation, and wealth could truly be so humble?
4. What aspects of Washington’s letter to Knox indicate that he was concerned about his future reputation and the success of the new nation?

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Image

Mount Vernon April 1. 1789 ⁹⁴ 2795
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My dear Sir,

The Mail of the 30th brought me your favor of the 23^d. - For which, & the regular information you have had the goodness to transmit of the state of things in New York, I feel myself very much obliged, and thank you accordingly. -

I feel for those members of the new Congress, who, hitherto, have given an unavailing attendance at the theatre of business. - For myself, the delay may be compared to a reprieve; for in confidence I can assure you with the world it would obtain little credit - that my movements to the chair of Government will be accompanied with feelings not unlike those of a culprit who is going to the place of his execution! So unwilling am I, in the evening of a life nearly consumed in public cares, to quit a peaceful abode for an Ocean of difficulties, without that competency of political ^{judgment} abilities, which is necessary to manage the helm. - I am sensible, that I am embarking the voice of my Countrymen and a good name of my own, on this voyage, but what returns will be made for them - Heaven alone can foretell. - Integrity & firmness is all I can promise - these, be the voyage long or short, never shall forsake me although I may be deserted by all men. - For of the consolations, which are to be derived from these (under any circumstances) the world cannot deprive me. -

With best wishes for h^{is} Knox, & sincere friendship for yourself - I remain

Your affectionate
G. Washington

The Hon^{ble}
Maj^r Gen^l Knox

George Washington to Henry Knox, April 1, 1789. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.09419)

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Transcript

George Washington to Henry Knox, April 1, 1789. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.09419)

Mount Vernon April 1st. 1789

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Your Affectionate

G^o: Washington

The Hon^{ble}
Maj^r Gen^l Knox

[*docket*]

from The President

Mount Vernon

1 April 1789

Original

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