



On February 4, 1789, the 69 members of the Electoral College made George Washington the only chief executive to be unanimously elected. (Illustration by Joe Ciardiello)

George Washington: The Reluctant President

It seemed as if everyone rejoiced at the election of our first chief executive except the man himself

By Ron Chernow

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Editor's note: *Even as the Constitution was being ratified, Americans looked toward a figure of singular probity to fill the new office of the presidency. On February 4, 1789, the 69 members of the Electoral College made George Washington the only chief executive to be unanimously elected. Congress was supposed to make the choice official that March but could not muster a quorum until April. The reason—bad roads—suggests the condition of the country Washington would lead. In a new biography, Washington: A Life, Ron Chernow has created a portrait of the man as his contemporaries saw him. The excerpt below sheds light on the president's state of mind as the first Inauguration Day approached.*

The Congressional delay in certifying George Washington's election as president only allowed more time for doubts to fester as he considered the herculean task ahead. He savored his wait as a welcome "reprieve," he told his former comrade in arms and future Secretary of War Henry Knox, adding that his "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.” His “peaceful abode” at Mount Vernon, his fears that he lacked the requisite skills for the presidency, the “ocean of difficulties” facing the country—all gave him pause on the eve of his momentous trip to New York. In a letter to his friend Edward Rutledge, he made it seem as if the presidency was little short of a death sentence and that, in accepting it, he had given up “all expectations of private happiness in this world.”

The day after Congress counted the electoral votes, declaring Washington the first president, it dispatched Charles Thomson, the secretary of Congress, to bear the official announcement to Mount Vernon. The legislators had chosen a fine emissary. A well-rounded man, known for his work in astronomy and mathematics, the Irish-born Thomson was a tall, austere figure with a narrow face and keenly penetrating eyes. He couldn’t have relished the trying journey to Virginia, which was “much impeded by tempestuous weather, bad roads, and the many large rivers I had to cross.” Yet he rejoiced that the new president would be Washington, whom he venerated as someone singled out by Providence to be “the savior and father” of the country. Having known Thomson since the Continental Congress, Washington esteemed him as a faithful public servant and exemplary patriot.

Around noon on April 14, 1789, Washington flung open the door at Mount Vernon and greeted his visitor with a cordial embrace. Once in the privacy of the mansion, he and Thomson conducted a stiff verbal minuet, each man reading from a prepared statement. Thomson began by declaring, “I am honored with the commands of the Senate to wait upon your Excellency with the information of your being elected to the office of President of the United States of America” by a unanimous vote. He read aloud a letter from Senator John Langdon of New Hampshire, the president pro tempore. “Suffer me, sir, to indulge the hope that so auspicious a mark of public confidence will meet your approbation and be considered as a sure pledge of the affection and support you are to expect from a free and enlightened people.” There was something deferential, even slightly servile, in Langdon’s tone, as if he feared that Washington might renege on his promise and refuse to take the job. Thus was greatness once again thrust upon George Washington.

Any student of Washington’s life might have predicted that he would acknowledge his election in a short, self-effacing speech full of disclaimers. “While I realize the arduous nature of the task which is conferred on me and feel my inability to perform it,” he replied to Thomson, “I wish there may not be reason for regretting the choice. All I can promise is only that which can be accomplished by an honest zeal.” This sentiment of modesty jibed so perfectly with Washington’s private letters that it could not have been feigned: he wondered whether he was fit for the post, so unlike anything he had ever done. The hopes for republican government, he knew, rested in his hands. As commander in chief, he had been able to wrap himself in a self-protective silence, but the presidency would leave him with no place to hide and expose him to public censure as nothing before.

Because the vote counting had been long delayed, Washington, 57, felt the crush of upcoming public business and decided to set out promptly for New York on April 16, accompanied in his elegant carriage by Thomson and aide David Humphreys. His diary entry conveys a sense of foreboding: “About ten o’clock, I bade adieu to Mount Vernon, to private life, and to domestic felicity and, with a mind oppressed with more anxious and painful sensations than I have words to express, set out for New York...with the best dispositions to render service to my country in obedience to its call, but with less hope of answering its expectations.” Waving goodbye was Martha Washington, who wouldn’t join him until mid-May. She watched her husband of 30 years depart with a mixture of bittersweet sensations, wondering “when or whether he will ever come home again.” She had long doubted the wisdom of this final act in his public life. “I think it was much too late for him to go into public life again,” she told her nephew, “but it was not to be avoided. Our family will be deranged as I must soon follow

him.”

Determined to travel rapidly, Washington and his entourage set out each day at sunrise and put in a full day on the road. Along the way he hoped to keep ceremonial distractions to a minimum, but he was soon disabused: eight exhausting days of festivities lay ahead. He had only traveled ten miles north to Alexandria when the townspeople waylaid him with a dinner, lengthened by the mandatory 13 toasts. Adept at farewells, Washington was succinctly eloquent in response. “Unutterable sensations must then be left to more expressive silence, while, from an aching heart, I bid you all, my affectionate friends and kind neighbors, farewell.”

Before long, it was apparent that Washington’s journey would form the republican equivalent of the procession to a royal coronation. As if already a seasoned politician, he left a trail of political promises in his wake. While in Wilmington, he addressed the Delaware Society for Promoting Domestic Manufacturers and imparted a hopeful message. “The promotion of domestic manufactures will, in my conception, be among the first consequences which may naturally be expected to flow from an energetic government.” Arriving in Philadelphia, he was met by local dignitaries and asked to mount a white horse for his entry into town. When he crossed a bridge over the Schuylkill, it was wreathed with laurels and evergreens, and a cherubic boy, aided by a mechanical device, lowered a laurel crown over his head. Recurrent cries of “Long Live George Washington” confirmed what his former aide James McHenry had already told him before he left Mount Vernon: “You are now a king under a different name.”

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