**THE PRESIDENCY OF GEORGE WASHINGTON**

**Accepting the job**

On April 30, 1789, Washington took the oath of office and began his new job as President of the United States of America. He had traveled from Mount Vernon to New York City slowly, accompanied by celebrations, cannon salutes, and parades. Soon afterwards he fell very ill. A tumor was discovered in his leg. When the surgeons went to remove it (they had no anesthesia then) they were certain they would kill him. Jefferson feared that his death would sink the government. But Washington recovered, and within a month he was back on the job.

**Creating a Cabinet**

At first he had little to do. He began by appointing his cabinet: Henry Knox as Secretary of War, John Jay as Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury, Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State, and Edmund Randolph as Attorney General. He was happy with this group, though less happy with his Vice President, John Adams. Washington and Adams did not get along, and they mostly ignored each other.

**Establishing Rules for the New Office**

He devoted much of his time to working out the details of his office, such as how and when to receive visitors. Otherwise he waited for Congress to present him with bills to bring into law. Because he felt it was his duty as president to make a decision for the good of everyone, he did not try to influence Congress when it considered a bill. For the same reason, he refused to veto a law unless he believed it contradicted the Federal Constitution.

**Issues facing his first Congress: Financing the War Debt**

The first session of Congress considered several issues, most important of which was Hamilton's financial plan. Hamilton’s plan was to deal with the debts created by the a Revolutionary War

The government had sold “war bonds” to raise money for the war and promised when the war was over that these bonds would be paid. If you had a bob, you could go to a bank and cash it for much more than the price it cost you before the war.

Unfortunately, many felt the bonds would never be paid and they sold them to people called “speculators.” Speculators were willing to take the risk that the bonds would eventually be worth something so they bought them from the original owners at a fraction of what the owners had paid for them. It was a risk as the bonds could have been worthless, but they were willing to take the risk.

The questions after the war was “whether the new government would pay off the bonds and if so, to whom?” Would the original owner get the money or the person who held the bond (paper)?

Hamilton’s plan said that “all debts would be honored” and that the new government would pay the bond-holder. Many of the Southern states had already paid off these bonds but the Northern states were too poor to do this so they asked the Federal government to pay them.

Merchants and traders, mostly based in the north, generally approved of Hamilton's plans. Many farmers, including southern planters such as Jefferson and Madison, opposed it. Though a planter, Washington supported Hamilton's plan because he believed it would strengthen the nation. His kept his opinions to himself, however, so as not to influence the Congress. Finally, Jefferson brokered a compromise: he would persuade southern Congressmen to vote for Hamilton's plan if Hamilton would persuade northerners to support moving the national capital to the South. A deal was reached, and Washington selected the site for the future capital of Washington, D.C. He chose a spot on the banks of the Potomac, not far from Mount Vernon.

**Suffering Personal Tragedy**

During this time, Washington's mother died. Mary Ball Washington had lived to the ripe age of eighty-one. She had been a willful woman, eager to control her son. She even objected to his job of president, complaining that his duties caused him to neglect her. Washington's relationship to Mary was rocky, but he mourned her death.

**Traveling the Country**

In his first term Washington also made two tours of the new country. He went first to New England, where he was greeted with cheers everywhere, then to the South, where he traveled almost alone. He returned convinced that the nation was more prosperous as a united nation

**Establishing a National Bank**

When Congress convened in December of 1790, Hamilton unveiled a plan to establish a national bank. Southern planters, protested. Northern merchants and business people supported the idea. The difference between these two groups got worse. From this division the nation's first political parties would emerge: Republican and Federalist. Washington tried to stay out of the argument, but he ultimately, he supported Hamilton's plan.

**Washington’s accomplishments as President**

Washington's term as president drew to a close in 1792. He had done much to establish the government in general and the presidency in particular. He had kept his cabinet together and established a working relationship with Congress. He had also sought, futilely, to peacefully negotiate with Indian nations on the frontier. The country, though divided, was prospering. Washington decided to retire and asked Madison to help him write a farewell speech. As the time approached, however, the conflict between Federalists and Republicans grew so intense that it seemed no one would be able to reconcile them. Hamilton and Jefferson, the respective leaders of these groups, both urged Washington to stay on for a second term. Reluctantly, he agreed.

**Analysis**

Washington moved carefully as president because he knew that the office would hinge on his behavior. If Washington handled the job well, people would accept the idea of having a president. If he failed, people would not just reject him but the entire office of president too. Yet again the fate of the nation rested largely on him. Though not the most brilliant man of his generation, he perhaps alone had the strength of character and respect of the people to succeed.

Part of what made Washington's job so difficult was the fact no one quite knew what it involved.

How should he lead?

Whom should he consult?

How should he deal with Congress?

What kind of image should he project?

There were no answers in the Constitution; Washington had to make it up as he went along. He wrote:

"Few can realize the difficult and delicate part which a man in my situation has to act I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent." Washington established many of the basic aspects of the president's job; he created the role that later presidents up to now have filled.

In making his appointments, Washington sought experienced people from all regions of the country. He also sought a diversity of opinions. He wished to hear all the sides of an argument, then decide as impartially as he could. This worked for a brief time, but the growing rivalry between Jefferson and Hamilton made it increasingly difficult.

Washington could not understand why good men could not reach agreements. He was disgusted by the arguments he heard in Congress. He feared that when he left office the whole system of government would break down.

Washington expected of himself and his contemporaries that all who worked for the government for do so with the idea that serving everyone was more important that serving yourself or your political party. He saw the government in personal terms: it was not a group of politicians representing different interests, but rather a group of virtuous individuals working for the good of the entire nation. Though politicians today sometimes talk of "virtue" and "character," they generally act in the interests of whomever they represent.

1.  Where did Washington take the oath of office (what city?)

2.  What medical concerns almost cost him his life?

3.  Why do you think he appointed a cabinet?

4.  What were the jobs each cabinet member had?

5.  Who was the Vice President?

6.  How would you describe their relationship?

7.  What caused the country to be in so much debt?

8.  Who were "speculators?"

9.  Why did people sell their bonds to speculators?

10.  Why did the Southern States pay off their bonds but the Northern states did not?

11.  How did Hamilton think the new government should handle the problem?

12. Which people supported Hamilton's plan?  Why di you think they did?

13.  Which people were opposed to his plan?  Why do you think they opposed it?

14.  What was the "compromise" that was reached that made both the North and South happy?

15.  How often did Washington travel around the country during his first term as President?

16.  What trouble did the National bank cause?

17.  Why was Washington very careful about every move he made as the first President?

18.  When Washington sought help in creating his cabinet, what kind of people did he choose?  Why?

19.  How did Washington feel about all the arguments going on around him?  
20.  How did Washington feel politicians should behave?