

A DIFFICULT Task



by Marcia Amidon Lusted

George Washington (right) faced unexpected challenges as the first American president when his secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson (standing left), and his secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton (standing second from right), developed opposing views on how to run the government.

George Washington did not want to be president in 1789. For many Americans, however, he was the only person for the job. He was persuaded to accept his unanimous election despite a heartfelt desire to remain peacefully retired at his home, Mount Vernon, in Virginia.

Washington recognized that he had a duty to help the new United States. After all, he had led the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War. He did not want to watch that military victory go up in smoke because the Americans could not govern themselves. But he worried about what was at stake. He knew that he was not just accepting a position of

leadership in the new country's government. As the first president, he would also have to organize the office carefully and create a role model for those who would follow him.

Washington had many goals for his presidency. He wanted to establish the dignity and authority of the office without being seen as another king. After their experience with Great Britain's King George III, Americans were suspicious of one person's holding too much power. At the same time, Washington wanted to be seen as a strong leader and to establish good precedents that would keep the republican form of government intact even after his term as president ended.

In addition, Washington wanted to strengthen the new nation's finances (which had suffered greatly during the war), to repair and normalize its relationship with Great Britain, and to develop the western frontier. To accomplish these goals, he called on some of the most intelligent men in the country to help him. In particular, he relied on the guidance of two advisors, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton.

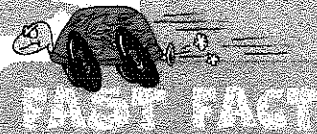
Unfortunately, Jefferson and Hamilton had two very different views of the role of government. Hamilton believed in a strong central government, while Jefferson wanted to keep most of the power at the state and local levels (see the articles on pages 7 and 10 for specifics on each man's views). Each hoped that Washington's presidency would interpret the new Constitution in his favor.

So as Washington faced the difficult task of giving the new nation a firm foundation on which to build, he also had the additional problem of getting his two advisors to put aside their differences and work together. His efforts were unsuccessful.

Jefferson's and Hamilton's differing opinions developed into an open personal dislike and distrust of each other. By 1792, Jefferson and Hamilton were seen as the symbolic heads of two opposing political parties. Hamilton had established himself as a leader of the Federalists, while Jefferson headed up a new party called the Democratic-Republicans. Their different views about the central government led them, and the two political parties they forged, to stand for many different policies.

Washington agreed with and supported many Federalist policies, but like most of the Founding Fathers — including Jefferson and, to a lesser degree, Hamilton — he disapproved of political parties. Washington feared that loyalty to a specific party rather than to the government as a whole would ultimately divide the new nation. In his farewell address in 1796, toward the end of his second term, Washington even warned his fellow Americans to avoid the harmful effects of political party alliances.

Despite Washington's concerns, the two-party system has survived and flourished. What developed partly as a result of the political disagreements between Hamilton and Jefferson has evolved into a democratic exchange of ideas beyond anything Washington could have imagined. ★



FAST FACT
POLITICAL PARTIES ARE NOT MENTIONED IN THE CONSTITUTION. THE FRAMERS WANTED CITIZENS TO VOTE FOR INDIVIDUALS, NOT PARTIES. BUT GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS THE ONLY PRESIDENT TO BE ELECTED WITHOUT ANY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION.