Narrative:
George Washington and Prudence

- I can identify George Washington’s actions as examples of prudence in leadership.

Essential Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>prudence</td>
<td>Practical wisdom that applies reason and other virtues to discern right courses of action in specific situations.</td>
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<td>coup</td>
<td>A sudden, violent, and unlawful seizure of power from a government.</td>
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<td>tyranny</td>
<td>A cruel and oppressive government or rule.</td>
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<td>shrewdly</td>
<td>In a way that shows sharp powers of judgment; astute.</td>
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<td>mollify</td>
<td>Appease the anger or anxiety of someone.</td>
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<td>restive</td>
<td>Unable to keep still or silent and becoming increasingly difficult to control, especially because of impatience, dissatisfaction, or boredom.</td>
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<td>forbearance</td>
<td>Patient self-control, restraint, tolerance.</td>
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<td>malcontents</td>
<td>A person who is dissatisfied and rebellious.</td>
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<td>despotism</td>
<td>The exercise of absolute power.</td>
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<td>precedent</td>
<td>An earlier event or action that is regarded as an example or guide to be considered in subsequent similar circumstances.</td>
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<td>resign</td>
<td>Voluntarily leave a job or other position.</td>
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Narrative

It was 1783, and George Washington’s troops were stationed at Newburgh, New York. At this late stage of the American Revolution, Congress was flat-out broke, and the army had not been paid for months. On March 10, an anonymous address from a “fellow soldier” (most likely Major John Armstrong)
circulated through camp, calling the officers to meet the next day to answer “a country that tramples upon your rights, disdains your cries, and insults your distress.” The announcement suggested that the army should, under Washington’s leadership, defy Congress and launch a military coup. At this moment the Revolution could have spun out of control, ending in tyranny. Resistant to the allure of power, Washington was determined to quell the potential uprising.

Recognizing that the army’s patience had worn thin and that its grievances were legitimate, Washington knew he could neither cancel the meeting nor allow it to take place. Instead, he shrewdly called his own substitute gathering on March 15, hoping somehow to mollify the men and avert a coup. He would meet his disgruntled officers in person, face-to-face, either to stand them down or be removed.

On March 15, a “visibly agitated” Washington (according to an eyewitness) spoke to a tense, restive audience in an overcrowded assembly hall known as “The Temple of Virtue.” He begged the officers not to take a step that would bury their reputations in infamy. “My God,” he asked, "what evil could the author of the anonymous address have been up to? “Can he be a friend to the Country? Rather is he not an insidious foe,” perhaps even an enemy agent “sowing the seeds of discord & separation between the Civil and Military power of the Continent”?

Despite an eloquent and impassioned speech, Washington’s arguments for forbearance fell on deaf ears. As hostile murmurs welled up in the audience, he miraculously subdued the malcontents with a dramatic gesture: Washington pulled out his glasses. No one had ever seen him wear them in public before. Donning them, he remarked, “Gentlemen, you must excuse me. Not only have I gone gray, but I have also grown blind in the service of my country.” That poignant moment, that admission of weakness, that selfless dedication to duty, shattered the mutiny and left the officers in tears. After Washington left the room, the assemblage unanimously rejected a military coup in favor of peaceful negotiations with Congress. The new nation had survived its brush with despotism because its military commander prudently directed the army to support the civilian authority of the republican government.

Indeed, the American Revolution is unusual among modern world revolutions because it did not end in a dictatorship, like the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. That the new nation instead ended up a republic had a lot to do with Washington’s careful use of power. Once the war was over and
inddependence won, his job complete, Washington resigned as
Commander-in-Chief and retired to his Mount Vernon plantation.

The irony is that by never abusing power, and by giving it back to people,
he became more and more powerful. He again prudently set a precedent for
upholding civilian authority over military rule by surrendering power.
Washington won the trust of his countrymen, who repeatedly called for his
services, not only as Commander-in-Chief, but also as president of the 1787
Constitutional Convention, and finally as president of the new nation for two
terms, from 1789 to 1797. On four separate occasions the American people or
their representatives thus unanimously elected Washington to lead them.

Washington’s contemporaries well understood his virtue. Consider the
statue sculpted by the eighteenth-century French artist Jean Antoine Houdon.
Instead of depicting one of Washington’s military victories, the statue shows
Washington retiring from the army, hanging up his military cloak and sword,
and going back to his plow. Similarly, artist John Trumbull’s painting that hangs
in the U.S. Capitol rotunda shows Washington resigning his military
commission back to Congress and becoming an ordinary citizen again.

Washington always did the virtuous thing because he wanted “secular
immortality.” He wanted to live forever in the pages of history books, and in the
hearts and minds of the American people. He wanted to be a leader unlike any
other in modern world history — greatest of them all. To do that, he had to
walk away from power, unlike other leaders. He had to act prudently in each
circumstance to support the creation of an American republic.

Washington kept answering the call of his country because he became the
only one who could. Not until the nation gained maturity could another leader
hold it together. As Thomas Jefferson cautioned him, “North and South will
only hang together if they have you to hang onto.” By accepting two terms as
President, Washington put his cherished reputation at stake. Had he died in
office (his greatest fear was dying in office) he would have died holding power
instead of giving it up, and his prized reputation would have been shot. Not
until he retired for good did he secure his secular immortality once and for all.
Without an “Indispensable Man” like Washington, the American experiment in
republican government could never have succeeded or become a model and
inspiration to the world.

Analysis Questions:

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What were George Washington’s troops considering doing in 1783?
Do you think Washington was tempted to seize power and become a dictator? Explain. If he was, how might prudence have helped him to make the right decision?
Why might Washington, while addressing the troops, have paused to put on his glasses and admit his eyesight was failing?
Prudence helps serve as a check against the “passions” of the people that can lead to the tyranny of the majority and violence. What are some ways that Washington exercised prudence to accomplish this?
Prudence also requires individuals to moderate their own passions, i.e., to put the public good ahead of their own self-interest. What are some ways Washington accomplished this?
Washington never abused the military power given to him as commander-in-chief of the continental army. He resisted the temptation to use the army as his personal bodyguard, to make himself a dictator, to become a Caesar, a Napoleon, or a Hitler. Instead, to what principles did Washington remain faithful?
Historian Stuart Leibiger notes the irony that by never abusing power, and by giving it back to people, Washington became more and more powerful. Why do you think this came about?
Think of other examples from history where individuals have voluntarily given up great power. Are they easy to find? In what ways can a leader demonstrate power by giving it up?
Why do you think Washington’s greatest fear was that he would die in office? How does this evidence show he put the public good ahead of his own interest?
Why does self-government at a societal level require prudence and self-governance on an individual level?
Moments after taking the oath of office for the first time, President Washington addressed the new nation and stated, “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the republican model of government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.” Discuss how you personally uphold the virtue of prudence and ensure the success of this experiment.
Return to the parking lot of questions from the Trumbull art analysis. Are there any questions that can be answered after reading more about Washington and having this discussion? Ask students to investigate remaining questions for homework.