

Discussion Guide



Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. What were George Washington's troops considering doing in 1783?
2. Do you think Washington was tempted to seize power and become a dictator? Explain.
3. Why might Washington, while addressing the troops, have paused to put on his glasses and admit his eyesight was failing?
4. Self-governance requires officials to moderate the "passions" of the people, i.e., to serve as a check against the tyranny of the majority, or against mob violence. What are some ways that Washington accomplished this?
5. Self-governance 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. Why do you think Washington's greatest fear was that he would die in office? How does this evidence his putting the public good ahead of his own interest?
10. Why does self-government at a societal level require self-governance on an individual level?
11. Moments after taking the oath of office for the first time, President Washington addressed the new nation, stating, "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 self-governance and ensure the success of this experiment.

