

George Washington's First Inaugural Address



ABOUT THE SOURCE Electors unanimously chose George Washington to be the nation's first president in February 1789. Washington's popularity and leadership experience made him the obvious choice. The general was at his Mount Vernon home when he was notified of his election. Washington then set off for the nation's capital, New York City. There, on April 30, 1789, he gave the first inaugural address in U.S. history.



*As you read note how Washington describes the members of Congress. The following words may be new to you: **vicissitudes**, **immutable**, **actuate**, **rectitude**, **indissoluble**. You may want to use a dictionary to look them up.*

Fellow-Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives:

Among the **vicissitudes** incident to life no event could have filled me with greater anxieties than that of which the notification was transmitted by your order, and received on the 14th day of the present month. On the one hand, I was summoned by my country, whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love, from a retreat which I had chosen with the fondest predilection, and, in my flattering hopes, with an **immutable** decision, as the asylum of my declining years—a retreat which was rendered every day more necessary as well as more dear to me by the addition of habit to inclination, and of frequent interruptions in my health to the gradual waste committed on it by time. On the other hand, the magnitude and difficulty of the trust to which the voice of my country called me, being sufficient to awaken in the wisest and most experienced of her citizens a distrustful scrutiny into his qualifications, could not but overwhelm with despondence one who (inheriting inferior endowments from nature and unpracticed in the duties of civil administration) ought to be peculiarly conscious of his own deficiencies. In this conflict of emotions all I dare aver is that it has been my faithful study to collect my duty from a just appreciation of every circumstance by which it might be affected . . .

By the article establishing the executive department it is made the duty of the President “to recommend to your consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” The circumstances under which I now meet you will acquit me from entering into that subject further than to refer to the great constitutional charter under which you are assembled, and which, in defining your powers, designates the objects to which your attention is to be given. It will be more consistent with those circumstances, and far more congenial with the feelings which **actuate** me,

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to substitute, in place of a recommendation of particular measures, the tribute that is due to the talents, the **rectitude**, and the patriotism which adorn the characters selected to devise and adopt them. In these honorable qualifications I behold the surest pledges that as on one side no local prejudices or attachments, no separate views nor party animosities, will misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great assemblage of communities and interests, so, on another, that the foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality, and the preeminence of free government be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its citizens and command the respect of the world. I dwell on this prospect with every satisfaction which an ardent love for my country can inspire, since there is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an **indissoluble** union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity; since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained; and since the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as *deeply*, as *finally*, staked on the experiment instructed to the hands of the American people.

Source: *The Chief Executive: Inaugural Addresses of Presidents of the United States from George Washington to Lyndon B. Johnson*

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How did Washington feel about being selected as the nation's first president?

2. What did Washington do instead of recommending specific policies to Congress?

3. What, according to Washington, was necessary to ensure the success of the republic?
