

George Washington's Rules of Civility By Cliff Dickinson

George Washington did not have what we call "quick intelligence". He was not known for being able to think fast on his feet. This does not mean Washington was not bright; he just did not process information rapidly. His lackluster performance in the critical military campaign of 1776 in New York was largely due to the fact that his adversary evaluated tactical situations and reached decisions faster. Washington's three victories in the Revolution followed periods where he was afforded time to deliberate. His seven defeats came in fluid, rapidly developing battlefield situations.

Washington was very well trained in mathematics. In fact, few college graduates today unless they major in math, become so well informed in that subject. But Washington was not a man of letters, or science, or of the law. He was neither a phrasemaker, nor an original thinker. He never prepared a treatise on government or politics. Instead, conviction, leadership skills and vision, all acquired through personal experience, carried Washington from the farmlands of Virginia to the battle fields of the War for Independence and eventually, to the first presidency of the United States.

Gentility and courtesy were also important elements of Washington's success. Before the end of his public life, he could converse with heads of state and common soldiers. He knew how to behave in royal courts and local taverns. He knew how to conduct himself in virtually every situation. Washington's principles of decorum were few and simple, the most important of which was "to be honest and just ... and to exact it from others." These maximums were instilled in him at a relatively young age.

Before his sixteenth year, George Washington had copied by hand, 110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company in Conversation. They were based on a code of personal conduct composed by French Jesuits in 1595 and translated into English in 1640. The rules were for copied by an adolescent Washington as part of an assigned exercise in penmanship. They proved to be a formative influence in the development of his character. The initial Rules of Civility included guidelines for behavior and pleasant company, appropriate actions in formal situations, and general courtesies. Washington carried them with him for the rest of his life.

Today many of these rules sound a little fussy, if not downright silly. Some are outdated and humorous. Many are practical. Others are timeless. Let me offer the few examples of each.

Humorous: Spit not in the fire, nor stoop low before it. Neither put your hands into the flames to warm them, nor set your feet upon the fire, especially if there be meat before it. *In other words, don't spit in the kitchen and don't put your hands too close to a flame.*

Shake not thy head, feet, nor leg; role not the eyes; lift not one eyebrow higher than the other; wry not to mouth; and bedew no man's face with your spittle by approaching too near him when you speak. *Don't make strange faces at people, and when you get excited, make sure you're not spitting on anyone.*

Kill no vermin as fleas, lice, ticks etc. in the sight of others; if you see any filth or thick spittle, put your foot dexterously upon; if it be upon the cloths of your companions,

put it off privately; and if it be upon your own clothes, returned thanks to him who pushes it off. *Don't squish bugs around other people; and if there's gunk in your friend's cloths take it off when people aren't looking; also, if someone takes gunk off your clothes, thank him for doing it.*

Do not puff up your cheeks; loll not out the tongue, rub the hands, or beard, thrust out the lips, bite them, or keep the lips too open or close. *Don't do weird stuff with your mouth.*

When in company, put not your hands to any part of the body, not usually discovered. *Don't fidget or scratch your private parts in public.*

Practical: It is unbecoming to stoop too much to one's meat. Keep your fingers clean and when foul, wipe them on a corner of your table napkin. *Bring your food to your mouth, not your mouth to your food. Keep your hands clean by using your napkin.*

Let your discourse with men of business be short and comprehensive. *When you speak, be concise.*

Undertake not to teach your equal in the art and himself professes, it savors of arrogance. *It's pretty arrogant to assume you can teach a friend something he already knows.*

Take all admonitions thankfully in what time or place soever given, but afterwards, not being culpable, take a time and place convenient to let him know it that gave them. *If you get blamed for something he didn't do, make sure your conscience is clear, then tell the person who blamed you that you did nothing wrong.*

The gestures of the body must be suited to the discourse you are upon. *The way you gesture with your hands should match what you're talking about.*

Do not laugh too much or too loud in public. *Do not laugh too much or too loud in public.*

Timelessness: When a man does all he can, though it succeeds not well, blame not him that did it. *When a person does his best and fails, do not criticize him.*

Reproach none for the infirmities of nature, nor delight to put them that have in mind thereof. *Don't be mean to people about how they look, don't call attention to other people's problems, and if someone is not as lucky as you are don't rub it in.*

Speak not of evil of the absent, for it is unjust. *Don't talk about someone behind their backs.*

When you deliver a matter, do it with passion and with discretion, however mean the person be you do it to. *When you take up a task, do it with all your heart, even if there is little reward.*

Undertake not what you cannot perform, but be careful to keep your promise. *Don't promise more than you can deliver, and make sure you follow through.*

Every action done in Company to be with some sign of respect to those who are present. *Respect others.*

When you speak of God or his attributes, let it be seriously and with reverence. Honor and obey your natural parents although they be poor. *Don't take God's name in vain; Honor your parents even if they aren't rich.*

Labor to keep alive in your breast that little celestial fire called conscious. *Work on listening to your conscience.*

In his book on Washington, Richard Brookhiser wrote that "all modern manners in the Western world were originally aristocratic. *Courtesy* meant behavior appropriate to the court; *chivalry* comes from *chevalier*- a knight." In leading a revolution, George Washington dedicated himself to freeing America from a court's control. One of his greatest victories may have been in proving that manners could survive the operation.

A gentleman is someone who makes others feel comfortable. Good manners are simply a matter of common sense and courtesy. Today, unfortunately, there are many quick to dismiss them as outdated and more appropriate to an era of quill pens and powdered wigs. The truth is that manners reflect a focus increasingly difficult to find in a world of cellular phones, express lanes, business lunches, and political correctness.

Fussy or not, the rules of civility represent more than just manners. They all have in common a focus on other people, rather than a narrow regard for self-interest. The rules represent small sacrifices that everyone should be willing to make for the good of community and the sake of living together. Without realizing it, the Jesuits who wrote them, and the young man who copied them, were outlining and absorbing a system of courtesy appropriate to everyone.

When the company for whom the decent behavior was to be performed expanded to the nation, George Washington was ready. Mason Locke Weems got it right when he wrote in his biography of the first president that it was "no wonder everybody honoured him who honoured everybody."

Mr. Dickinson made this presentation to the Sons of the American Revolution on November 11, 2004. He has taught American History at St. Christopher's School for twenty years. Mr. Dickinson is a frequent book reviewer for the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, for five summers performed archival work at the Museum of the Confederacy and for ten summers worked as a National Park Service ranger. Cliff has a MA degree from Edinboro University near Erie, Pennsylvania. Cliff, his wife Crystal, daughter and son live in Richmond, Virginia.