

2 About Being President

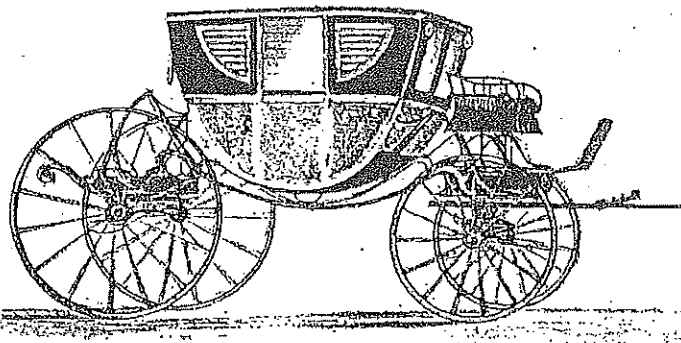
Precedent (PRESS-ih-dent) and **president** (PREZ-ih-dent). They sound similar, but their meanings aren't the same. Say them aloud and hear the difference.

George Washington
PRESIDENT, 1789-1797



Washington himself sketched the design he wanted for the doors of his presidential carriage.

As always, he did his very best. He didn't want the president to be like the English king, but he did think it important that the president be grand. He wanted people to look up to the president and respect and admire him.



No one could tell George Washington how to be president. No one had done the job before. Washington knew that whatever he did would set a precedent. That means he would be the example and other presidents would follow his lead.

The Constitution outlined the basic tasks of the president, but it didn't go into details. George Washington had to decide many things himself.

So Washington acted with great dignity and rode about in a fine canary-yellow carriage pulled by six white horses whose coats were shined with marble dust, whose hoofs were painted black, and whose teeth were cleaned before every outing.

When President Washington held official receptions he wore velvet knee breeches, yellow gloves, silver buckles on his shoes, and a sword strapped to his waist. He used his coach to tour the country.

Washington liked things just so. He also chose his carriage's paint and seat fabric.

Washington had a lot to do as first president. He had to create a stable economic system, set up a system of courts, establish an executive branch, and consider the need for military action. Today we talk of national security and a Defense Department. Then we had a War Department. Does the choice of words make a difference? What kind of dangers did the new nation face? What about dangers now?

As president he was head of the executive branch of our three-branch government. (The other two branches are the legislative, which is Congress, and the judicial, which is the courts.) Washington knew he couldn't make all the decisions of the executive branch by himself. So he appointed advisers. Most of those helpers were called secretaries: secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, and so on. All together they were known as the "cabinet."

Washington picked the very best people he could find. To help with foreign affairs, he picked an American who had been Virginia's governor and had lived in France and knew a lot about foreign nations. Can you guess who he was? Well, George Washington named Thomas Jefferson as his secretary of state.



The president and his first cabinet. *Left to right:* Washington, Knox, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Randolph. Not in the cabinet, but just as important, was first speech writer Madison (*below*).

Nowadays, the cabinet (look on page 21 for the details of Washington's cabinet) also includes secretaries of these departments: interior; labor; agriculture; commerce; health and human services; housing and urban development; transportation; energy; veterans' affairs; and education.

You can't run a country without money. Since the days of the Revolution, when the states first united, they had had money problems. Washington needed a good man as a financial adviser. He named Alexander Hamilton as secretary of the treasury. Hamilton organized the nation's monetary system. Some people think that Alexander Hamilton was the best secretary of the treasury ever.

To head the army and navy, Washington chose his old friend Henry Knox. Remember Knox the Ox? He was the general in charge of artillery during the Revolutionary War. Washington named him secretary of war in charge of national security.

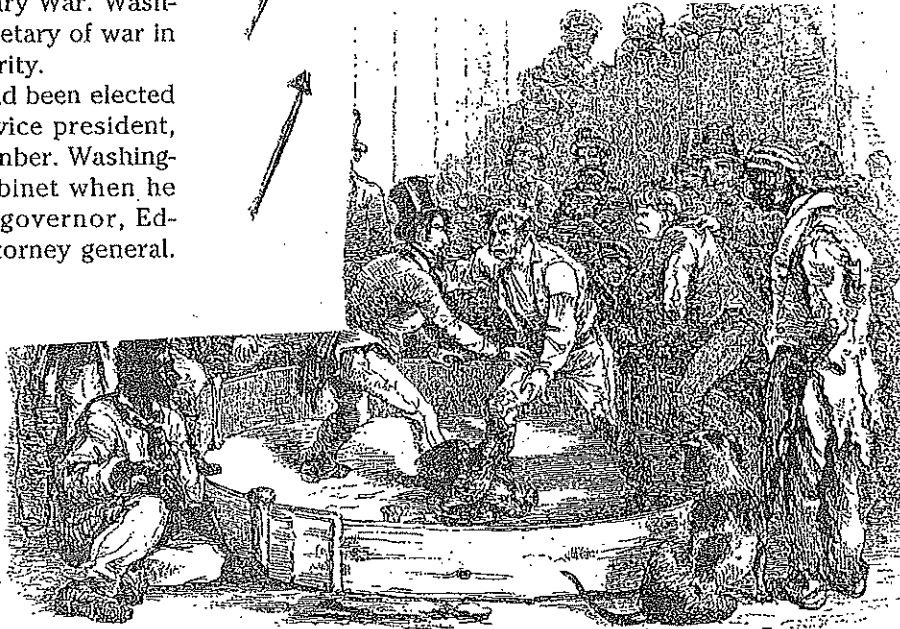
John Adams, who had been elected George Washington's vice president, was also a cabinet member. Washington completed the cabinet when he appointed Virginia's governor, Edmund Randolph, as attorney general.

When he needed help writing a speech, President Washington turned to a congressman who had one of the finest minds in American history: James Madison. (And when Congress wished to address the president, guess who wrote the message? James Madison. So Madison was writing and answering the same messages!)

Altogether, Washington had about 350 people help him manage the new government. That was only about a hundred more people

than he supervised at his plantation home, Mount Vernon.

Almost as soon as the new government got started, something happened that Washington hadn't expected. His two top advisers argued with each other. They really argued. Jefferson and Hamilton had ideas that clashed. They found it hard to compromise. In those days people sometimes watched cockfights, and so when Jefferson wanted to describe himself and Hamilton, he said, "Hamilton and myself were daily pitted in the cabinet like two fighting cocks."



Cockfighting, an ancient betting sport, began in Asia and reached Europe in the fifth century B.C.E. It was no sport for the roosters—they were usually fitted with metal spurs and fought to the death. Here, two men seem to be fighting, too.

Here, to **pit** means to "set against each other." It doesn't have anything to do with the pit inside a cherry or a peach. Cockfights were staged in pits.

Both were brilliant men. Both were patriots who wanted to do their best for their country. They just disagreed on what was best. Did they ever disagree! In fact—this is interesting—political parties in America developed because of that disagreement.

The country didn't begin with parties like today's Democrats and Republicans. The Founding Fathers—the men who wrote the Constitution—didn't realize that parties would develop. Washington didn't like the idea at all. He called them "factions" and warned against them. "The spirit of party," said the president, "agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms."

But people just don't think alike. That's what makes politics and life interesting. James Madison understood that. Madison knew that it was dictators who usually try to force all people to think alike. Dictatorships are one-party governments.

Madison believed that in a democracy factions should be encouraged. He thought the more the better. He said they would balance each other and then no one group could become too strong and take control of the government.