



*President Shirley 's Presidents Day Message*  
*Celebrating George Washington & Abraham Lincoln*  
*February 16, 2009*

On this Presidents Day, it is appropriate to remember history and to consider why America celebrates the lives of its first and 16<sup>th</sup> presidents, considered by many scholars to be the two greatest we have ever had.

For more than 100 years, the federal holiday we know today as Presidents Day was simply Washington's Birthday and was celebrated on February 22. This was the first federal holiday established to honor an American. In 1968, Congress intended to rename the holiday Presidents Day to also honor Abraham Lincoln, who was born on February 12, and to change the observation to the third Monday in February. However, the new name was removed in committee before the legislation passed, and the holiday remained Washington's Birthday until the 1980s when the term Presidents Day came into popular but unofficial use.

In 1787, four years after the Revolutionary War, 55 of America's most brilliant men gathered for a summer in Philadelphia, then the largest city in the country. They came to debate, draft and create the U.S. Constitution which would establish a permanent United States of America and invent a new form of government based on democracy and freedom. In a world of monarchs and despots, the constitution was revolutionary. The most important and distinguishing characteristic it contained – the heart of it – is its Separation of Powers.

Because the deep political beliefs of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention were grounded in the concept of representation of the people, they would *never* have given as much power to the Executive Branch as they did had they not completely believed that General George Washington would become the first president.

Washington was an incredible man. When the American Revolution ended, he surrendered his sword to Congress and declared he would accept no political reward commensurate with his military achievement. He never sought the presidency, vigorously refused taking on both his first and second terms, and needed to be persuaded both times that his service as president was for the good of the country then, and for its future.

His act of refusal was considered unprecedented in history. His popularity was so universal that he could have been the first American king had he wanted to be, and it was inconceivable that anyone would turn away from such power. In the first presidential election in 1789, he received every electoral vote, and remains the only president in history to do so. But he was not just the most popular figure in the fledgling United States. He was arguably the most popular and best-known man in the entire world. After the storming of the infamous Bastille Prison in 1789 at the beginning of the French Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette, one of its leaders who had served under Washington during the American Revolution, presented the key to prison to him because he was considered the world's greatest revolutionary.

While not the most learned among American presidents or leaders of his time, it can be stated that Washington was the most talented and most respected. He had a lifelong reputation for fairness, honesty, dependability, dignity, patience and restraint. In his professional life, he was a surveyor and mapmaker who surveyed the land that became Washington, D.C. At age 23, he became the military commander of an improvised army to protect Virginia's frontiers. At the beginning of the Revolution, there was little doubt that he would be the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. His fame and prestige was unparalleled in the world after he succeeded in keeping an ill-trained, poorly-equipped, starving and undisciplined army of farmers and shopkeepers together to defeat the most formidable military force in the world at that time, especially after losing countless battles.

Besides being a soldier, Washington was a statesman. He attended the first Continental Congress in 1774, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and presided over the Constitutional Convention in 1787 primarily to give it the credibility it needed to succeed. He participated little in the actual debates but found his voice to argue for a strong central government to hold the collection of 13 vastly different states together as one country. He was also a farmer, a horticulturalist, a brewer, a distiller, an entrepreneur, an interior decorator, a writer, and a superior horseman. He designed his own uniforms. As military commander, he established the first Badge of Military Merit for the common soldier that eventually came to be known as the Purple Heart, which bears his image today.

He was ready to return home to Mount Vernon at the end of his first term as president but relented to serve again only after the most earnest pleas and requests for him to seek a second term. Given his immense acclaim, his relinquishing the presidency at the end of his second term is still considered one of the most selfless acts in American political history. His Farewell Address, which stressed the value of the union of states and warned against the tyranny of political partisanship, is considered one of the greatest presidential addresses, and its wisdom is still applicable in today's world. Since 1862, Washington's Farewell Address has been read in the U.S. Senate every year on his birthday, as it will be again on Sunday for the 147<sup>th</sup> time.

Lincoln, whose 200<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated this year with countless news stories and television shows, represents a huge contrast to the first president. Unlike Washington, Lincoln's family was poor and he never had wealth. Unlike Washington, he was never in combat and never led men into battle although he served as a captain in the Illinois militia. Very unlike Washington, he looked badly in clothes.

Yet despite hardly anyone in the country giving him a chance to win the presidential nomination of the newly-formed Republican Party, he brilliantly persuaded the party to hold the convention in the relatively new and raw city of Chicago in his home state. He then prepared the ground with a series of well-received speeches throughout New England. Even at the convention, it was not until the third ballot that Lincoln came from behind a roster of much better known national candidates who swaggered with confidence to wrest the nomination away from them.

Newspaper editors and leading politicians across the country thought Lincoln's presidential campaign a lost cause practically before it began. Despite his being a lawyer, his lack of formal education from an Ivy League university was cause not to take him seriously as a formidable candidate. But a lifetime of storytelling and spinning yarns before rapt groups of people, reading and writing and honing his words to precision for courtroom presentations, produced in Lincoln a speaker who entered a room with low expectations and left to standing ovations.

It was his powers of persuasion coupled with his clarity of intellect which we now recognize in his leadership style – from patching together the celebrated "Team of Rivals" that formed his cabinet and keeping them from destroying each other, holding the country on course during the Civil War despite constant political attacks, ridicule in Congress, unrelenting criticism in the press, and the highest number of casualties of any American war in history, to the poetry of the Gettysburg Address or his Second Inaugural Address – that made Lincoln great in his own time.

Lincoln's genius did not merely flow out of him, as it would appear from reading his words today. He worked at it. He saved his thoughts on little scraps of paper and would write with them spread out before him. He would send letters to newspapers to see how fractions of his thoughts were received. He would have members of his cabinet read his statements and then would refine from their suggestions. He read constantly. He wrote and re-wrote. And through it all he never considered himself a great writer.

The lesson for us from these two remarkable presidents is that both led the United States through two of the most tumultuous periods in the history of the country when every American citizen stood to lose everything they had, including their lives and the lives of their families, which many did. Both men recognized that sacrifice is the cost of freedom and the cost to keep the country unified, acknowledging that there was not – nor is – any greater calling to service.

Every sovereign, including the Navajo Nation, faces similar questions, and every leader must strive for the same foresight, clarity and selflessness. Our Nation has confronted its own survival during the Long Walk period, the Livestock Reduction period, and the period when children were forcibly taken away. We face it now with the slow smothering of poverty and the economic survival of our people. But we must always remember, and we must teach our children, that as before the answers to all of today's problems are contained within our traditional teachings, held within the wedding basket, heard in the songs of our ceremonies, and reside within our sacred mountains. As great as our American presidents were, our Navajo leaders of the past were equally great for leaving to us a Nation that is recognized by the world as the greatest there is and ever was.

DR. JOE SHIRLEY, JR., PRESIDENT  
**THE NAVAJO NATION**