

## Washington Becomes A Commander: Pros and Cons to Military Leadership

### Students will learn...

- To extract information from a primary source document
- About the role of leadership and how it affected Washington

### You will need...

- An annotated copy of Washington's letter to Burwell Bassett- [original](#) and [transcript](#)
- Pros and Cons worksheet
- *Optional:* A modernized version of the letter for younger students or students who would find the original challenging
- *Optional:* Record yourself reading the letter for audio learners

### Opener: Assessing GW's Character

- Ask your students to describe Washington and write those words on the board.
- Tell them that most of those qualities (brave, a good leader, etc.) were recognized in him at a young age:

At the age of 23, he was the Commander in Chief of all Virginia Forces (the highest rank for a colonial officer) in the French and Indian War. Afterward, he was labeled a war hero. So, 17 years later, at the time of the Revolutionary War, he was an obvious choice as the Commander of the Continental Army.

- Ask your students how they think Washington felt about this role.

### Task: Commander Pros and Cons

- Let the students read Washington's letter to Burwell Bassett after being elected as Commander of the Continental Army.
- Then, have them use Washington's comments in the letter to fill out the Pros and Cons worksheet.
- Tell the students to create two more pros and cons that Washington did not mention but may have been on his mind.

### Closer: What Would You Do

- Talk about the pros and cons together and record them on a big list class running list- Are there more pros or cons?
- Now ask them if they would accept this position. Have them stand up and go to one side of the classroom depending on whether they would accept or not.
- Pick some students to explain their thinking- did their knowledge of the outcome influence how they read the letter?
- *Optional:* Have your students think of a cause they believe in. How much would they be willing to fight for it? List the pros and cons.
- *Optional:* Compare this letter with the song "History Has Its Eyes On You" from the musical *Hamilton*.
- *Optional:* Have them write a letter back as Bassett, either to convince Washington he made the right choice or get him to change his mind.





These are the facts, & more than probable  
my character along with it, as a reputation  
derived its principal support from suc-  
cess - but it will be remembered that  
I had no design, or insinuation of mine,  
placed me in this situation, & that he  
be degraded the orders of a conqueror in the  
world would if I retain a consciousness  
of having acted to the best of my judg-  
ment.

I am at liberty, to take out, from  
the Bankers in Committee (which will, I  
dare say, be proved to a great profit)  
have converted to a Continental Curren-  
cy, and have ordered two Millions of  
Dollars to be struck for payment of the  
Troop, and other expenses, and to support  
our defence - and also that 15000 Men  
recruited are Continental Army, which  
will I dare say be augmented as more  
Troops are embarked & embarked for  
America than was expected at the time  
of paying their Bills. - As to the arti-  
cles of Intemperance I must refer you to  
the Gazette, or the Printer pick up  
every thing that is otherwise true, or

The other Officers in the higher depart-  
ments are all resigned - therefore I  
cannot give you their names - I  
selow to London for a more <sup>particular</sup> particu-  
lar way, be glad to hear from you -  
my best wishes attend M<sup>r</sup> Pope &  
M<sup>r</sup> Dandridge & all our Relations and  
friends - as great haste as I have  
many letters to write and other busi-  
ness to do I enclose with this sincere  
in regard to the

Y<sup>r</sup> most obed<sup>t</sup>  
& affec<sup>t</sup>ed Son

P<sup>r</sup>

I would be glad  
you & M<sup>r</sup> Pope &  
if possible, to visit  
at Mr. Vernon & also my  
wife's other friends - I could wish you  
to take her down as I have no expecta-  
tion of returning in this winter - & see your  
uncle's health & see some of the  
- I have sent my Chariot & Horse, but

A modern version of

## George Washington's Letter to Burwell Bassett

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1 To Burwell Bassett

2 Philadelphia, June 19th 1775.

3 Dear Sir,

4 I am now sailing off on a stormy ocean where perhaps I will not find a friendly harbor. The  
5 Voices of the Colonies have all agreed to give me the Command of the Continental Army—It is  
6 an honor I did not aim for—It is an honor I wished to avoid, because I do not want to leave my  
7 peaceful life with my family, and I believe I am not qualified and don't have enough experience  
8 for such an important job- but Congress, with some political motives, wanted me and left me  
9 with no choice. God grant that when I accept this role it is for the good of the common cause and  
10 does not injure my reputation. I can answer for only three things, my firm belief of the justice of  
11 our cause, that I will closely chase it, and my strictest good character. If these do not make up for  
12 my lack of ability and experience, then the cause will suffer, and likely my character with it since  
13 reputation comes from success- but I hope it is remembered that it was not my desire that placed  
14 me in this situation. In the worst events, I will have comfort in knowing I acted in my best  
15 judgment.

16 ...In a hurry, as I have many letters to write and other business to do, I remain with the  
17 sincerest regard dear sir, your most obedient and affectionate humble servant.

18 Go: Washington

19 P.S. I must beg you and Mrs. Bassett, if possible, to be my wife's friends and visit Mount  
20 Vernon- I wish you to take her down there, as I do not expect to return until winter and feel very  
21 uneasy about her being lonely- I have sent my chariot and horses back.

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Modernized by the Education Department at Mount Vernon

An abridged version of

## George Washington's Letter to Burwell Bassett

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1 To Burwell Bassett

2 Philadelphia, June 19th 1775.

3 Dear Sir,

4 I am now [embarked] on a tempestuous Ocean from whence, perhaps, no friendly [harbor] is  
5 to be found. I have been called upon by the unanimous Voice of the Colonies to the Command of  
6 the Continental Army—It is an [honor] I by no means aspired to—It is an [honor] I wished to  
7 avoid, as well from an unwillingness to quit the peaceful enjoyment of my Family as from a  
8 thorough conviction of my own Incapacity & want of experience in the conduct of so  
9 momentous a concern—but the [partiality] of the Congress added to some political motives, left  
10 me without a choice—May God grant therefore that my acceptance of it may be attended with  
11 some good to the common cause & without Injury...to my own reputation—I can answer but for  
12 three things, a firm belief of the justice of our Cause—close attention in the prosecution of it—  
13 and the strictest [integrity]—If these cannot supply the places of Ability & Experience, the cause  
14 will suffer, & more than probable my character along with it, as reputation derives...from  
15 success—but it will be remembered I hope that no desire...of mine, placed me in this situation. I  
16 shall not be [deprived] therefore of a comfort in the worst event if I retain a consciousness of  
17 having acted to the best of my judgment.

18 ....In great haste, as I have many Letters to write and other business to do I remain with the  
19 sincerest regard [dear] Sir [your] Most [Obedient] & [Affectionate Humble Servant]

20 Go: Washington

21 P.S. I must [entreat] you & Mrs Bassett, if possible, to visit at Mt Vernon as also my Wife's  
22 other friends—I could wish you to take her down, as I have no expectations of returning till  
23 Winter & feel great uneasiness at her lonesome Situation—I have sent my Chariot & Horses  
24 back.

# Becoming a Commander: Pros and Cons

Instructions: Using George Washington’s letter to Burwell Bassett to write the pros and cons that Washington expressed for becoming the Commander of the Continental Army. Then **write 2 more points for each**, which Washington did not state in his letter but could have been on his mind.

Pros	Cons
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
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