

# WISDOM THROUGH WAR: AN EVOLUTION IN PERSPECTIVE

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**LEVEL:**

High School

**TIMEFRAME:**

Two class periods or less, depending on if assigned as an individual or group project

**OBJECTIVES:**

Students will analyze and interpret primary and secondary sources in order to recognize change over time

Students will respond to a writing prompt in a clear, thesis-driven essay that uses evidence from the provided sources

**STANDARDS:**

- Primary Source Analysis
  - Writing Standards
  - Reading Standards
  - Early American History
  - Civic Values and Social Norms
  - Contextualization
  - Comparison
  - Causation
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**PROCEDURE:**

1. Distribute the handout *Wisdom Through War Source Set* (included in ZIP file download). Ask students to evaluate the following statement by historian Joseph Ellis using the documents.

*“Instead of going to college, Washington went to war. And the kind of education he received...left scars that never went away, as well as immunities against any and all forms of youthful idealism.”*

- A. Excerpt: George Washington to John Augustine Washington, May 31, 1754
- B. Excerpt: George Washington to John Augustine Washington, July 18, 1755
- C. Excerpt: *His Excellency: George Washington*, Joseph J. Ellis, 2004
- D. Excerpt: George Washington to John Thomas, July 23, 1775
- E. Excerpt: George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, April 12, 1793
- F. Excerpt: George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, March 4, 1783
- G. Excerpt: George Washington to François Jean de Beauvoir, Marquis de Chastellux, April 25, 1788

- H. *The Virginia Colonel* by Charles Volkmar after Charles Willson Peale, 1874
  - I. *George Washington after the Battle of Princeton* by Charles Willson Peale, 1780
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**OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:**

1. Have the class examine George Washington's relationship with his brother. Do your students believe that Washington's descriptions from 1754 and 1755 are accurate or exaggerated? What might his accounts reveal, if anything, about his relationship with his brother?
2. As a class, explore the many portraits painted of George Washington during the second half of his life. Ask students to examine three portraits, from different eras (i.e. the French and Indian War, the Revolution, the Presidency, post-Presidency, etc.). Instruct students to look closely at Washington's clothing, the background, his stance, and other aspects of the portrait. What observations can they make about George Washington's life based on these portraits?

<http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/artwork/life-portraits-of-george-washington/>

3. Ask students to research the Newburgh Conspiracy and its resolution. What can they infer about Washington's leadership based on this event?
4. Guide students in an evaluation of the effectiveness of Washington's Neutrality Proclamation over the course of US diplomatic history. When, why, and how did America's policy of neutrality change?

**Source A – Excerpt: George Washington to John Augustine Washington, May 31, 1754**

Source Type: Letter

1 I fortunately escaped without a wound, tho' the right Wing where I stood was exposed to &  
2 received all the Enemy's fire and was the part where the man was killed & the rest wounded  
3 I can with truth assure you, I heard Bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming  
4 in the sound

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**Source B – Excerpt: George Washington to John Augustine Washington, July 18, 1755**

Source Type: Letter

5 ... by the All-powerful Dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human  
6 probability or expectation; for I had four Bullets through my Coat, and two Horses shot under me;  
7 yet escaped unhurt, altho[ugh] Death was leveling my Companions on every side of me!

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**Source C – Excerpt: *His Excellency: George Washington*, Joseph J. Ellis, 2004**

Source Type: Book

8 [In 1757] two features of the emerging Washington come into focus: first, a thin-skinned aversion  
9 to criticism, especially when the criticism questioned his personal motives, which he insisted  
10 were beyond reproach; second, a capacity to play politics effectively while claiming total  
11 disinterest in the game

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**Source D – Excerpt: George Washington to John Thomas, July 23, 1775**

Source Type: Letter

12 ... but in such a Cause as this, where the Object is neither Glory nor Extent of Territory, but a  
13 Defence of all that is dear & valuable in Life, surely every Post ought to be deem'd honourable in  
14 which a Man can serve his Country. What Matter of Triumph will it afford our Enemies, that in  
15 less than one Month, a Spirit of Discord should shew itself in the highest Ranks of the Army, not  
16 to be extinguished by any Thing less than a total Desertion of Duty? How little Reason shall we  
17 have to boast of American Union, & Patriotism if at such a Time, & in such a Cause, smaller &  
18 partial Considerations cannot give Way to the great & general Interest...

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**Source E – Excerpt: George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, April 12, 1793**

Source Type: Letter

19 War having actually commenced between France and Great Britain, it behoves the Government of  
20 this Country to use every means in its power to prevent the citizens thereof from embroiling us  
21 with either of those powers, by endeavouring to maintain a strict neutrality. I therefore require  
22 that you will give the subject mature consideration, that such measures as shall be deemed most  
23 likely to effect this desirable purpose may be adopted without delay...

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**Source F – Excerpt: George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, March 4, 1783**

Source Type: Letter

24 The predicament in which I stand as Citizen & Soldier, is as critical and delicate as can well be  
25 conceived. It has been the subject of many contemplative hours. The sufferings of a complaining  
26 army on one hand, and the inability of Congress and tardiness of the States on the other, are the  
27 forebodings of evil; but I am not without hope, if there is such a disposition shewn (shown)  
28 prudence and policy dictates, to do justice, your apprehensions, in case of Peace, are greater than  
29 there is cause for...Be these things as they may, I shall pursue the same steady line of conduct  
30 which has governed me hitherto; fully convinced that the sensible, and discerning part of the  
31 army, can not be unacquainted (although I never took pains to inform them) of the services I have  
32 rendered it, on more occasions than one.

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**Source G – Excerpt: George Washington to François Jean de Beauvoir, Marquis de Chastellux, April 25, 1788**

Source Type: Letter

33 Now, for my part, I humble conceive, you have had much the best and wisest of the bargain. For  
34 certainly it is more consonant to all the principles of reason and religion (natural and revealed) to  
35 replenish the earth with inhabitants, rather than to depopulate it by killing those already in  
36 existence, besides it is time for the age of Knight-Errantry and Mad-heroism to be at an end. Your  
37 young military men, who want to reap the harvest of laurels, dont care (I suppose) how many  
38 seeds of war are sown: but for the sake of humanity it is devoutly to be wished that the manly  
39 employment of agriculture and the humanizing benefits of commerce would supersede the waste  
40 of war and the rage of conquest—that the swords might be turned into plough-shares, the spears  
41 into pruning hooks—and, as the Scripture expresses it, the nations learn war no more.

**Source H – *The Virginia Colonel* by Charles Volkmar, after Charles Willson Peale, 1874**

Source Type: Painting

*Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association*



**Source I – *George Washington after the Battle of Princeton* by Charles Willson Peale, 1780**

Source Type: Painting

*Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association*



**Source A – Excerpt: George Washington to John Augustine Washington, May 31, 1754**

Source Type: Letter

**Background Information:** In this letter, Washington relates to his brother the excitement of his first military engagement. In doing so, he exaggerates many details.

- 1 I fortunately escaped without a wound, tho' the right Wing where I stood was exposed to &
  - 2 received all the Enemy's fire and was the part where the man was killed & the rest wounded
  - 3 I can with truth assure you, I heard Bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming
  - 4 in the sound
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**Source B – Excerpt: George Washington to John Augustine Washington, July 18, 1755**

Source Type: Letter

**Background Information:** Much the same as the passage above, the thrill and excitement of battle was not tempered for Washington over the course of a year.

- 5 ... by the All-powerful Dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human
  - 6 probability or expectation; for I had four Bullets through my Coat, and two Horses shot under me;
  - 7 yet escaped unhurt, altho[ugh] Death was leveling my Companions on every side of me!
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**Source C – Excerpt: *His Excellency: George Washington*, Joseph J. Ellis, 2004**

Source Type: Book

**Background Information:** It is Ellis' contention that the Washington of the French and Indian War era is at a crossroads: one part hubris, one part politically skilled.

- 8 [In 1757] two features of the emerging Washington come into focus: first, a thin-skinned aversion
  - 9 to criticism, especially when the criticism questioned his personal motives, which he insisted
  - 10 were beyond reproach; second, a capacity to play politics effectively while claiming total
  - 11 disinterest in the game
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**Source D – Excerpt: George Washington to John Thomas, July 23, 1775**

Source Type: Letter

**Background Information:** In Sources A and B, it seems as if Washington is seeking and describing personal glory; he comes across as cocky and shallow. In this passage, however, he lashes out at those who seek personal gain and comfort instead of focusing on the larger cause and the greater good.

12 ... but in such a Cause as this, where the Object is neither Glory nor Extent of Territory, but a  
13 Defence of all that is dear & valuable in Life, surely every Post ought to be deem'd honourable in  
14 which a Man can serve his Country. What Matter of Triumph will it afford our Enemies, that in  
15 less than one Month, a Spirit of Discord should shew itself in the highest Ranks of the Army, not  
16 to be extinguished by any Thing less than a total Desertion of Duty? How little Reason shall we  
17 have to boast of American Union, & Patriotism if at such a Time, & in such a Cause, smaller &  
18 partial Considerations cannot give Way to the great & general Interest...

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**Source E – Excerpt: George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, April 12, 1793**

Source Type: Letter

**Background Information:** War had broken out between France and England, and many Americans were eager to jump in to assist one side or the other. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson believed the US should side with France, since they had offered such vital assistance during the Revolution. Washington, however, demanded that the United States remain neutral, as a costly and destructive war could destroy the nation.

19 War having actually commenced between France and Great Britain, it behoves the Government of  
20 this Country to use every means in its power to prevent the citizens thereof from embroiling us  
21 with either of those powers, by endeavouring to maintain a strict neutrality. I therefore require  
22 that you will give the subject mature consideration, that such measures as shall be deemed most  
23 likely to effect this desirable purpose may be adopted without delay...

**Source F – Excerpt: George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, March 4, 1783**

Source Type: Letter

**Background Information:** Washington heard rumblings of a mutiny in the ranks over a lack of pay, a part of what is now known as the Newburgh Conspiracy. His deliberative optimism and inherent confidence in his officers stood in clear contrast to the implied pessimism of Hamilton.

24 The predicament in which I stand as Citizen & Soldier, is as critical and delicate as can well be  
25 conceived. It has been the subject of many contemplative hours. The sufferings of a complaining  
26 army on one hand, and the inability of Congress and tardiness of the States on the other, are the  
27 forebodings of evil; but I am not without hope, if there is such a disposition shewn (shown)  
28 prudence and policy dictates, to do justice, your apprehensions, in case of Peace, are greater than  
29 there is cause for...Be these things as they may, I shall pursue the same steady line of conduct  
30 which has governed me hitherto; fully convinced that the sensible, and discerning part of the  
31 army, can not be unacquainted (although I never took pains to inform them) of the services I have  
32 rendered it, on more occasions than one.

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**Source G – Excerpt: George Washington to François Jean de Beauvoir, Marquis de Chastellux, April 25, 1788**

Source Type: Letter

**Background:** With the Revolution behind him and the Constitution written, Washington wished for a future of bountiful production, without the destructive waste of war.

33 Now, for my part, I humbly conceive, you have had much the best and wisest of the bargain. For  
34 certainly it is more consonant to all the principles of reason and religion (natural and revealed) to  
35 replenish the earth with inhabitants, rather than to depopulate it by killing those already in  
36 existence, besides it is time for the age of Knight-Errantry and Mad-heroism to be at an end. Your  
37 young military men, who want to reap the harvest of laurels, dont care (I suppose) how many  
38 seeds of war are sown: but for the sake of humanity it is devoutly to be wished that the manly  
39 employment of agriculture and the humanizing benefits of commerce would supersede the waste

40 of war and the rage of conquest—that the swords might be turned into plough-shares, the spears  
41 into pruning hooks—and, as the Scripture expresses it, the nations learn war no more.

**Source H – *The Virginia Colonel* by Charles Volkmar, after Charles Willson Peale, 1874**

Source Type: Painting

*Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association*

**Background:** Painter Charles Volkmar recreated this 1772 painting by Charles Willson Peale which captured Washington in the uniform of the Virginia militia, fifteen years after he wore it fighting with the British during the French and Indian War and three years before Lexington and Concord.



**Source I – *George Washington after the Battle of Princeton* by Charles Willson Peale, 1780**

Source Type: Painting

*Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association*

**Background:** This is a different Washington than we see in Volkmar's copy of Peale's 1772 painting in Document H. Here there is a confidence, a firm resolve, and a war-weariness that stands in stark contrast to the more youthful optimism in the prior portrait.

