

George Washington's Grit

Lessons for today's leaders

by LtCol Stephen J. Kopach, USMCR

George Washington was a visionary leader and uniquely qualified to accomplish the complex challenges put before him. He demanded exceptionalism from himself, his soldiers, and his nation and worked tirelessly to achieve his goals, whether winning in conflict or securing peace for a new nation. He was a man of exceptional talent, which he wielded to significant effect throughout his lifetime. Beyond talent, however, a critical trait set him apart from other remarkable individuals of his time. This quality was grit.

Defining Grit

Esteemed psychologist and academic Angela Duckworth, who conducted extensive research on human perfor-

>LtCol Kopach is a reserve Marine Attache currently assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps and a civilian employee working for the DOD. He wrote this article as a National War College student for an elective George Washington: Strategy, Intelligence, and Revolution.

a high level of natural grit based on hereditary factors, grit can be developed over time through internal and external stimuli.³ By examining the events and experiences that molded George Washington, military leaders can derive lessons that can improve their grit. His example may enable leaders to harness their talents to accomplish long-term goals and achieve successful outcomes over time.

intellectual nor a yokel, but a typical, somewhat precocious boy.”⁵ Psychologist Catharine Cox, who conducted pioneering research on intelligence and genius, judged Washington’s IQ to be around 140.⁶ This is superior intellect, but he was not among the most brilliant of his generation. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had IQs of 160 and 155, respectively.⁷ When measured against other significant historical figures and among all other U.S. presidents, Washington is near the center of the pack.⁸

What sets Washington apart from his contemporaries is his possession and development of four psychological assets critical to grit. Duckworth identifies these as “interest, practice, purpose, and hope.”⁹ These traits are not immutable. Duckworth notes, “One can learn to discover, develop, and deepen your interests. You can acquire the habit of discipline. You can cultivate a sense of purpose and meaning. And you can teach yourself hope.”¹⁰ While Washington had a natural proclivity to these traits, he also deepened them over the years through study, experience, and reflection.

Beyond talent, however, a critical trait set him apart from other remarkable individuals of his time. This quality was grit.

mance, explains that grit—a combination of passion and perseverance—sets high achievers like Washington apart from those of equal talent and intellect.¹ She defines passion as “staying consistent on goals over time” and perseverance as “working hard and bouncing back from setbacks.”² While some individuals like Washington may have

How Important is Talent?

Talent is a vital baseline determinant of exceptionalism, but it is only a starting point. Washington had many natural gifts from a young age. He was tall, athletic, and intellectually curious.⁴ Despite being above average, however, biographer Edward Lengel describes him in youth as “neither an

Discovering Interests and Following Passion

Discovering interests and following passions are critical components for developing grit.¹¹ Although cliché, doing what you love and loving what you do determines the level of commitment. Washington explored many topics in his adolescence but developed an early passion for the military. Detailed journals and notes from his school years suggest he enthusiastically sought to expand his knowledge through self-study and exposure through hands-on learning.¹² Lengel indicates that in his teenage years, Washington “attacked every subject with vigor, often drawing meticulous diagrams and taking notes” and only moved on to new areas after he fully absorbed the information.¹³

This period of discovery and broad exposure to many subjects allowed Washington to focus on areas that piqued his interest. The influence and mentorship of his half-brother Lawrence, who served in the British expeditionary army in the Caribbean, seems to have profoundly shaped his fascination with the military.¹⁴ Washington’s early passion for armed service only deepened over the years after he took on command roles of increasing responsibility. Having identified military arts as a discipline of interest, Washington sought to master its many facets through dedication and effort.

Practice, Discipline, and Hard Work

Practice and hard work were integral to Washington’s development as a competent military practitioner. Washington undertook efforts that deliberately pushed his limits to purposefully expand his capabilities. His efforts were akin to “deliberate practice,” a term introduced by Swedish psychologist K. Anders Ericsson, which describes “practice that focuses on tasks beyond your current level of competence and comfort.”¹⁵ To harness talent, it is necessary to work diligently and focus over time toward improvement, particularly in areas of weakness. Ten years or 10,000 hours of such practice is the estimated threshold to achieve true expertise.¹⁶

Washington gained such expertise while conducting months-long survey-



Statue of George Washington, located near Washington’s Headquarters at Valley Forge. A cast bronze copy of a marble statue by French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon. (Photo by author.)

ing expeditions and military endeavors during the French and Indian War.¹⁷ These missions were fraught with danger, hardship, and austerity that tested his mettle and pushed his physical and mental limits to exhaustion. His successive military campaigns and their associated challenges taught him valuable but often painful lessons that deepened his expertise.

Demanding and consistent effort is a critical component of the quality

practice needed to develop grit. Lengel notes that Washington “worked with almost superhuman stamina, organizational ability, and regard for detail.”¹⁸ While in command of the Virginia Regiment and assembling the American Army in Boston, this level of effort was necessary to ensure the success of the fledgling enterprises.¹⁹ At Valley Forge, Washington exerted himself to even further extremes in miserable conditions to hold the Continental Army together.²⁰ Washington emphasized to the company captains of his Virginia Regiment, “Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all.”²¹ Difficult experiences served as a crucible, forging Washington’s natural talent into expertise. His soldiers came to admire Washington’s dedication, which proved instrumental beyond the American Revolution. His principles and a sense of purpose guided his efforts allowing him to direct his energies toward a greater goal.

Purpose and Philosophy

A purpose or overarching philosophy to motivate actions is essential to developing passion. Duckworth notes, “A clear, well-defined philosophy give you guidelines and boundaries that keep you on track.”²² It can help focus tasks and short-term goals toward a higher purpose. Washington’s purpose in his



Muhlenberg Brigade Encampment, Valley Forge, 31 January 2022. (Photo provided by author.)

early years was to establish himself as a man of good repute and eminence in society. According to historian William Sayen, “Washington strove to embody the manners and virtues of civility ... and honor. Honor comprised all that was most dear to gentlemen warriors of the eighteenth century: manliness, respect, valor, fame, and glory.”²³

As Washington matured and dove deeper into the cause of revolution and armed conflict, he developed a deep passion for the ideals of liberty that would form the new nation he fought to conceive.²⁴ He maintained a strong conviction about the righteousness of the American cause. Washington’s short and long-term goals evolved with changing colonial dynamics and his personal circumstances, but his guiding principles never changed. The maxims he discovered in his youth while translating the *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, such as honor and dignity, became the values he espoused throughout his life.²⁵ The values remained consistent whether he commanded soldiers, served in government, or worked as a private citizen to run a prosperous business.

Hope and Optimism

Hope is the final but perhaps most consequential trait in determining a person’s grit. Hope involves an optimistic mindset and belief that efforts contribute to a better future.²⁶ Why persevere if efforts are trivial or in vain?

George Washington’s grit—his perseverance and passion—was instrumental to his success as a military commander and leader.

George Washington maintained hope and resolve throughout the Revolution that American forces would triumph. He rarely openly displayed discouragement or pessimism. After the defeat at the Battle of Brandywine and other operational setbacks, Washington maintained a determined posture belying no outward projection of despondency.²⁷



Washington’s Headquarters Valley Forge, 15 October 2022. (Photo by author.)

Washington’s optimism was anchored in action and the idea of progress. Lengel notes, “When frustration or boredom led him into a funk ... the prospect of battle or work could throw him almost instantaneously into a more optimistic frame of mind.”²⁸ His bias for boldness often led to stunning successes, as was the case in his Christmas crossing of the Delaware.²⁹ On other occasions, Washington’s desire to act led him to make rushed or imprudent decisions as was the case with his subse-

In his farewell address to the Army in November 1783, Washington expressed unbounded optimism for the new United States, stating, “It is universally acknowledged that the enlarged prospect of happiness, opened by the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, almost exceeds the power of description.”³² Washington’s overarching worldview was sanguine despite moments of struggle and self-doubt. He trusted in the ideals of liberty for which he fought and the men who toiled with him in the great struggle. Hope allowed Washington to persevere in the face of odds that must have appeared insurmountable at times.

Key Takeaways

George Washington’s grit—his perseverance and passion—was instrumental to his success as a military commander and leader. His story teaches the value of grit as a character attribute in achieving successful outcomes in combat and life. Firstly, natural talent is important, but it is only part of the equation. Leaders should work to improve their own qualities of perseverance and passion and surround themselves with individuals exuding these qualities. A person with perseverance

works hard toward goals, is undiscouraged by setbacks, remains committed to completing tasks despite challenges and obstacles, and never gives up.³³ A person with passion maintains long-term interests, is undistracted by new ideas and projects, remains committed to set goals, and can focus on a project for multiple months or longer.³⁴

Leaders can work to improve grit by focusing on the four key areas identified by Duckwork.³⁵ Regarding interests, leaders should explore, inquire, and gravitate toward topics that spark fascination. A person is more likely to stay committed to a goal if they have a vested interest. Practice, hard work, and experience are critical to building expertise and resiliency. Leaders should practice with seriousness and dedication, pushing beyond their comfort zones to seek self-improvement. To find purpose, it helps to have a personal philosophy to stay motivated while pursuing long-term goals. Finally, an optimistic mindset will allow a person to persevere through challenging times. Developing a hopeful outlook may involve spirituality, fellowship, or finding a cause greater than oneself. It may also involve lessons from historical figures like George Washington or contemporary leaders who inspire greatness.

Conclusion

George Washington shines as an example of the multiplying effect grit can have on natural talent. While not as singularly outstanding as many of his peers in characteristics such as intelligence, grit distinguished him from the rest. He worked hard to develop and deepen the character traits essential to grit by deepening his interests, working hard to improve areas of weakness, finding a higher purpose, and maintaining a hopeful outlook throughout his life, thereby strengthening his passion and perseverance. He was aware of the importance of these attributes, noting in a letter to Gen Philip Schuyler at the outset of the Revolution that “Perseverance and Spirit have done Wonders in all ages.”³⁶ Military leaders can follow Washington’s example to develop their own grit and foster a culture of grit. In doing so, leaders will maximize the

potential of their unit and improve the likelihood of successful outcomes on and off the battlefield.

Notes

1. Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. William Guthrie Sayen, “George Washington’s ‘Unmannerly’ Behavior: The Clash between Civility and Honor,” *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography* 107, No. 1 (1999).
5. Edward G. Lengel, *General George Washington: A Military Life* (New York: Random House, 2007).
6. Rodrigo de la Jara, “Cox’s Study of 300 (301) Eminent Geniuses born from 1450 to 1850, including Flynn Effect Calculations, listed alphabetically and by descending IQ,” IQ Comparison Site, n.d., <https://www.iqcomparisonsite.com/cox300.aspx>.
7. Ibid.
8. Catharine Cox, *Genetic Studies of Genius II: The Early Mental Traits of Three Hundred Geniuses*, (Stanford University Press, 1926); and Keith Simonton, “Presidential IQ, Openness, Intellectual Brilliance, and Leadership: Estimates and Correlations for 42 U.S. Chief Executives,” *Political Psychology* 27, No. 1 (2006).
9. *Grit*.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. *A Military Life*.
14. Ibid.
15. K. Anders Ericsson, Michael J. Prietula, and Edward T. Cokely, “The Making of an Expert,” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2007, <https://hbr.org/2007/07/the-making-of-an-expert>.
16. Ibid.
17. *A Military Life*.

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. George Washington, “Instructions to Company Captains,” July 29, 1757, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/02-04-02-0223>.
22. *Grit*.
23. “‘Unmannerly’ Behavior.”
24. *A Military Life*.
25. “‘Unmannerly’ Behavior.”
26. *Grit*.
27. *A Military Life*.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Woody Holton, “The Father of our Country Didn’t Always Know Best, But He Learned and Changed,” *The Washington Post*, June 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-father-of-our-country-didnt-always-know-best-but-he-learned-and-changed/2018/06/29/13ccd670-796b-11e8-80be-6d32e182a3bc_story.html.
32. George Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address to the Army,” November 2, 1783, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-12012>.
33. *Grit*.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. George Washington, “From George Washington to Major General Philip Schuyler,” August 20, 1775, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-01-02-0233>.

