

Model Answer: History 117 Midterm Exam

What were George Washington's two or three most important contributions to the American Revolution during the period between 1775 and 1789? What leadership qualities made him such a uniquely respected figure during this turbulent era? Make sure to support your answers with specific evidence.

The following answer is not perfect at all, but it contains a reasonably high level of detail organized in a coherent fashion with more than a few moments of sharp analysis. The beginning of the essay is certainly stronger than its second half, where the author seems rushed and somewhat distracted, but the overall result is generally quite effective. There have been a few minor edits to correct typos and small mistakes.

George Washington is often viewed as one of the greatest, if not the greatest revolutionary figure. While he did not necessarily participate as much in the diplomacy of the period, his contributions to the revolution were essential to its success. Washington made numerous contributions, but his two most vital were his military strategy at the outset of the war and his pragmatism, which set him apart from many other revolutionaries such as Thomas Jefferson, who was quite idealistic.

Washington's battle strategy as general in chief of the Continental Army was to "avoid a general action." He understood that the British military was arguably the most powerful in the world, and to engage with them in battle would almost guarantee an American defeat. He also realized that since there was no central place of power, the British could not win by taking over a major city. Furthermore, since the American colonies covered such vast territory it would be impossible for the British to occupy all of it.

Two of Washington's most crucial victories came in late 1776 and early 1777, which occurred at a time in the war when the Americans were losing badly. On December 25-26, 1776, Washington took a gamble and launched a sneak attack at the British in Trenton. Soon after this victory, he beat the British in Princeton on January 3, 1777. After these two victories, as Gordon Wood put it, "Patriot morale soared." They were crucial to the success of the revolution.

Washington's other greatest contribution to the revolution was his pragmatism and realism. For example, while Washington and his army was stationed at Valley Forge during a brutal winter in 1777-78, where they lost 2,000 men to disease and hypothermia, Washington wrote to Congress. He wrote that the soldiers needed to be paid for their service. He claimed that while patriotism was inspiring and instrumental to a point, that "interest is the governing principle." He realized that payment, although it possibly conflicted with the ideas of the revolution, was necessary.

Another example of Washington's realist approach to the revolution came during Shay's Rebellion in 1786. The general had previously squashed the Newburgh conspiracy against the revolution by talking the officers out of a revolt in 1783. However, he realized in 1786 that talking could not be used to squash rebellion in most places. He put that belief in writing to Henry Lee. Concerning Shay's Rebellion, Washington wrote that, "Influence is no government." In this case, he believed that military force by the government was necessary to squash the rebellion and set a precedent against future uprisings. His ability to see situations for what they were was necessary in order to preserve the revolution in the 1780s.

Washington's pragmatism combined with his strategic wisdom and timely victories were his most important contributions to the revolutionary movement. He made many other individual contributions, however, which cannot be overlooked. For instance, his knack for theatre helped raise morale, such as when he wore his uniform to the Second Continental Congress in 1775. Similarly, by returning his sword after the war in 1783, Washington set an example for American leadership. It was all part of his realist approach to conflicts and his wisdom about military strategy that were Washington's most important contributions to the revolution's success.