

George Washington's Rules of Civility

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Introduction

I remember a time when I took a frantic call from my mother, who was entering her 70's and constantly creating opportunities to employ her teen-age grandchildren to do handyperson work or run errands. The jobs were over-compensated, and often hastily constructed, as a means of luring them to her house, when she was missing their company. On this occasion, she had left a note for my youngest nephew with clear instructions in the most beautiful Denalian-style cursive handwriting. Upon returning to observe the work that had been done, several items had not been attended to. My nephew, under hard lighting and combative questioning by his skillful interrogator, confessed that he could not read her writing and asked if it was a form of shorthand or secret code. My mother, aghast that her youngest grandson could not READ, began an intensive afterschool program (with paid, compulsory attendance) in hopes of teaching him to read cursive writing.

I cannot say that our first president, George Washington, had a grandmother who was possessed by a campaign that no child would be left behind in literacy, but we do have records that his skill in penmanship was to be celebrated and recorded.

I'll begin with an excerpt from the Washington papers on the scope of the manuscripts (Stertz, 2013):

“Among the hundreds of volumes of Washington Manuscripts in the Library of Congress, two contain the school exercises of George Washington, written before he had reached the age of sixteen years. The one devoted to mathematics exhibits a wide range of subjects, combined with sureness and accuracy in working, and clearness and neatness of presentation.

The second book begins with legal forms, such as every planter should know: bills of sale and exchange, contracts, conveyances, deeds, leases, and even wills. The middle portion contains poetry.

The remaining ten pages of the second book are occupied by one hundred and ten *Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*, about which much has been written and little is known.”

As a young schoolboy in Virginia, George Washington took his first steps toward greatness by copying out by hand a list of 110 *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. Based on a 16th-century set of precepts compiled for young gentlemen by Jesuit instructors, the Rules of Civility were one of the earliest and most powerful forces to shape America's first president, says historian Richard Brookhiser (2003):

“This exercise, now regarded as a formative influence in the development of his character, included guidelines for behavior in pleasant company, appropriate actions in formal situations, and general courtesies, such as: ‘Superfluous Complements and all

Affectation of Ceremonie are to be avoided, yet where due they are not to be Neglected' (no. 25); 'Think before you Speak' (no. 73); and 'Rince not your Mouth in the Presence of Others' (no. 101)."

By age sixteen, Washington had copied out by hand, *110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. They are based on a 1595 set of rules originally drafted by French Jesuits. The consensus is that it composed part of an exercise in penmanship assigned by Washington's schoolmaster.

There is also little doubt that Washington incorporated many of these virtues in his later written thought and practice. His writing indicated deep reflection and consideration of God and fellow man. Many of the poems and attributes attributed to him by others directly address his character and leadership.

110 Rules of Civility as Literature

The original manuscript for the Rules of Civility, as well as other primary original writings from the hand of George Washington reside in the Library of Congress.

In the George Washington Papers' commentary on *Charles Moore's Origin of the Rules of Civility* (Stertzer, 2013), a clear pathway is delineated of the origin of the rules from the French Jesuits:

The French Jesuits at the College at LeFleche, sent it to the brothers at Pont-a-Mousson. One of the recipients, Father Perin, translated the Maxims into Latin, adding a chapter of his own on behavior at table. The Latin edition appeared at Pont-a-Mousson in 1617, at Paris in 1638, at Rouen in 1651. It was translated into Spanish, German, and Bohemian. A French edition appeared at Paris at least as early as 1640."

The next connection of how the rules were translated from French to English is documented through Francis Hawkins' biography, which is included in the Dictionary of the National Biography (Oxford, 2005):

"Francis Hawkins was born in London in 1628. His father, John Hawkins, M.D. (Padua), was a brother of Sir Thomas Hawkins and of Henry Hawkins, all members of an old, active and influential family. Dr. John Hawkins had published five books before his precocious son Francis, at the age of eight years, turned into English the French version of the Maxims. The pleased father took the manuscript to the printer, William Lee, who published it about 1640. The troubled state of the country kept the book from being reprinted until 1646, when a second edition appeared. Then, followed in quick succession, nine other editions before 1672."

Regardless of all the information surrounding the various contributions to the original *Rules*, most agree that Washington copied from the Hawkins English version and not the French version as his text. Possibly, his father or his father's half-brothers brought the Hawkins's version back from England. They had all received educational training abroad.

From a meta-analysis of the research, we can definitively reach on a conclusion on the matter of origin of Washington's efforts. The original Rules of Civility have their creative origin in France. The French Jesuits are credited with authorship around 1595. The English translation of their work was done by Francis Hawkins in approximately 1640. There are eleven traceable versions up to around 1672. The version selected for handwriting practice by or for Washington was a simplified and revised version of 110 of the rules. George Washington's recopy for penmanship practice was purchased from his family by Congress in 1834 and 1849. The department of state remained a repository for his work, until they were relocated to the Library of Congress and continues as the present location.

“During the days before mere hero worship had given place to understanding and comprehension of the fineness of Washington's character, of his powerful influence among men, and of the epoch-making nature of the issues he so largely shaped, it was assumed that Washington himself composed the maxims, or at least that he compiled them. It is a satisfaction to find that his consideration for others, his respect for and deference to those deserving such treatment, his care of his own body and tongue, and even his reverence for his Maker, all were early inculcated in him by precepts which were the common practice in decent society the world over. These very maxims had been in use in France for a century and a half, and in England for a century, before they were set as a task for the schoolboy Washington.” (Stertzler, 2013)

Walter Jones' 1814 letter to Thomas Jefferson (Jefferson Papers, 2019), “described Washington's character in this way, ‘one the whole, his character was, in its mass perfect, in nothing bad, in few points indifferent; and it may truly be said that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great’.”

According to National Review author, Richard Brookhiser(2003):

“Although George Washington may have transcribed an English translation of the 110 rules at age 16 for penmanship practice, historians have said that the rules themselves came to define much of his character and that he relied on them both as a military officer and as president. While the rules mainly concern external matters of etiquette, they actually address moral matters indirectly and that the Jesuits who developed them in 1595 intended them to transform the inner selves of young men by shaping their outer selves.”

Brookhiser believes that these rules, even as they were crafted centuries ago, still have meaning for modern day America. He further states, “Maybe they can work on us in our

century as the Jesuits intended them to work in theirs — indirectly — by putting us in a more ambitious frame of mind.”

The Man, the Myth, the Legend

In a brief bio paragraph, the elevator speech on George Washington would read: George Washington was born in a prosperous home funded by commercial farming, and raised in colonial Virginia. He began his career as a surveyor and fought in both the French and Indian wars. He was a leader in the colonial forces during the American Revolutionary War, and became a national hero. George was elected president of the 1787 convention that wrote the US Constitution and became America’s first national president, two years later. He died three years after returning to private life at the age of 67.

Like most famous figures, his life also inspires tall tales and common misperceptions. In the footsteps of Abraham Lincoln and Paul Buyan, here are a few of them:

1. George Washington felled the infamous cherry tree.
(Reality: The story was written after Washington died by a man named Mason Weems in a book about the life of Washington.)
2. George and Martha Washington had two children.
(Reality: George and Martha Washington had no children as a result of their union. George married a wealthy widow, Martha Dandridge Custis in 1759. Martha’s two children were from her first marriage. Just a warning, if anyone claims to be a descendant of George Washington, they are sadly mistaken.)
3. George Washington was fluent in French.
(Reality: There is no recorded evidence that Washington could write, read or speak French.)
4. George Washington converted to Catholicism.
(Reality: Washington admired many Catholic traditions and studied Jesuit writings and practices, but he was raised in the Church of England and died an Episcopalian and a Free Mason.)
5. George Washington graduated from Yale.
(Reality: Washington had very little formal education and completed only grammar school.)

These are the benign myths about Washington. Through the years, people have speculated on his relationship and marriage to Martha; his belief and reliance on space aliens, and his use of marijuana. None of these speculations have any basis in recorded fact, but add to the mystique of a leader who did amazing things without much fanfare or scandalous circumstances.

What we do know is that as a young man, he practiced his penmanship and idealistic philosophy by writing down some rules that had an origin with the Jesuits.

Jesuits

For me, this was one of the most interesting parts of the story. For a little history on the Jesuits:

“The order grew out of the activity of Ignatius, a Spanish soldier who experienced a religious conversion during a period of convalescence from a wound received in battle. After a period of intense prayer, he composed the Spiritual Exercises, a guidebook to convert the heart and mind to a closer following of Jesus Christ. On August 15, 1534, at Paris, six young men who had met him at the University of Paris and made a retreat according to the Spiritual Exercises joined him in vows of poverty, chastity, and a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. If this last promise did not prove possible, as it did not, they vowed to accept any apostolic work requested by the pope. In 1539, Ignatius drafted the first outline of the order’s organization, which Pope Paul III approved on September 27, 1540. By the time of Ignatius’s death in 1556, about 1,000 Jesuits were already working throughout Europe and in Asia, Africa, and the New World.

The society introduced several innovations in the form of the religious life. Among these were the discontinuance of many medieval practices in the interest of greater mobility and adaptability. Particular emphasis was laid upon the virtue of obedience, including special obedience to the pope. Emphasis was also placed upon flexibility, a condition that allowed Jesuits to become involved in a great variety of ministries and missionary endeavours in all parts of the world.” (Worthington, 2014).

To say that the Jesuits drew hostile fans, is an understatement. Initially, they were hated for defending the native populations found in America, who were often abused by the Portuguese and Spanish explorers and some colonizers. As a result:

“The Portuguese crown expelled the Jesuits in 1759, France made them illegal in 1764, and Spain took other repressive action in 1767. Opponents of the Society of Jesus achieved their greatest success when they took their case to Rome. Although Pope Clement XIII refused to act against the Jesuits, his successor, Pope Clement XIV, issued a brief abolishing the order in 1773. The society’s corporate existence was maintained in Russia, where political circumstances—notably the opposition of Catherine II the Great—prevented the execution of the suppression. The demand that the Jesuits take up their former work became so insistent that in 1814 Pope Pius VII reestablished the society.” (Britannica online, 2019).

Here’s the trivia question: Who was the first Jesuit elected as Pope? His birth name is Jorge Mario Bergoglio. In 2013, he chose to be called Pope Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi.

The Rules

Most of the 110 admonishments are concerned with details of proper manners. They extend advice on attire and dressing, moving from place to place, talking and treating others in authority, and even how to dine in a public setting.

In Brookhiser's *Rules of Civility: The 110 Precepts That Guided Our First President in War and Peace* (2003), he states, "The rules address moral issues, but they address them indirectly. They seek to form the inner man (or boy) by shaping the outer."

There are 110 rules and we don't have time to address them all, so I am doing a take on David Letterman's Top Ten list and then I'll save my favorite for last.

Rule 1. *Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.*

Wow! I'm fascinated that there was concern for how we actually engage with one another. I wonder how he would weigh in on the current flag controversy or might he be a supporter of not propagating micro-aggressions. Recently, Gladys Knight, a famous singer, was called out for agreeing to sing the National Anthem and made to appear as if she was dissing Colin Kaepernick. Applying the rule might help all involved to avoid the ultimate oxymoronic action of showing respect by not show respect. Too complicated!

Rule 2. *When in Company, put not your Hands to any Part of the Body, not usually Discovered.*

As the president of a Christian college, I don't think I need to really spend much time, here. However, I'm afraid that many of our current teen idols, sports heroes and music moguls would be confused by the attention to this standard for behavior. We would probably spend hours debating on social media platforms as to what "discovered" might mean.

Rule 12. *Shake not the head, Feet, or Legs roll not the Eyes lift not one eyebrow higher than the other wry not the mouth, and bedew no man's face with your Spittle, by approaching too near him when you Speak.*

That takes care of close talkers, and one that I have a hard time with, "rolling my eyes." What about you?

Rule 35. *Let your Discourse with Men of Business be Short and Comprehensive.*

Wouldn't you love to be able to interject this rule when people make an appointment with you? Several years ago, Malcom Gladwell, wrote a book, *Blink*. In it, he described the way many of us process information as slicers. We just need a small and concise (Cliff notes version) of the project. I am lost after a lengthy and detailed rich presentation.

Rule 38. *In visiting the Sick, do not Presently play the Physician if you be not Knowing therein.*

I think I assumed that contemporary society would be the first to overdo this due to all the information we have at our fingertips about health. Apparently, this was a common assault, even before the *Farmer's Almanac* was introduced. In a 2013, a CBS News expose reported that almost 1/3 of all US adults were said to self-diagnose medical conditions using the Internet.

Rule 59. *Never express anything unbecoming, nor Act against the Rules Moral before your inferiors.*

As we know, leaders can influence the moral compass of the organizations they run and manage, as well as the people that they direct. A new term is being coined that indexes this attribute and is being described as a *moral potential of leadership*. Maybe instead of value judging through tests like *StrengthsFinder* and *Myers-Briggs*, we should test a leader's moral potential.

Rule 66. *Be not froward but friendly and Courteous; the first to Salute hear and answer & be not Pensive when it's a time to Converse.*

This would come in handy when training each other on how to meet a stranger and just be in the moment with those around us. As someone who has spent my life training young people in a college setting, I have to work extra hard to disengage students from contemporary technology in order to be present with others. I spend a lot of time, talking to students, forcing them to take their earpiece out to talk with me.

Rule 70. *Reprehend not the imperfections of others for that belongs to Parents, Masters and Superiors.*

There is an old adage that says that people who can't control themselves, try to control others. I think there is a Scripture that warns us about being pre-occupied with removing the splinter in one person's eye before dislodging the log in our own.

Rule 71. *Gaze not on the marks or blemishes of Others and ask not how they came. What you may Speak in Secret to your Friend deliver not before others.*

I broke this rule the other day. I have a good friend who is a CEO of a successful business. She was attending a professional meeting with me and I went across the room to check on her. Her entire face was scraped and looked as if he had been in a wreck. Fortunately, she had not, but had had a very extensive chemical peel. Ouch!

Rule 90. *Being Set at meat, Scratch not, neither Spit, Cough or blow your Nose except there's a Necessity for it.*

And is there ever a necessity to blow your nose at the table? Could we put this on the back of the restaurant menus like, "No shoes, no shirt, no service, and no blowing of the nose."

Rule 108. *When you Speak of God or his Attributes, let it be Seriously & with Reverence. Honour & Obey your Natural Parents although they be Poor.*

George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1789 reads, "It is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favors."

Manners and Civility

Washington and the peers of his time, didn't just exhibit good and proper manners. They modeled these and other rules of civility to form the basis of character and common courtesy.

Washington is credited with a comment to George Steptoe Washington on October 5, 1790, "A good moral character is the first essential in a man, and that the habits contracted at your age are generally indelible, and your conduct here may stamp your character through life. It is therefore highly important that you should endeavor not only to be learned but virtuous..."

In interviews, various experts (Jacobsen, 2018) in American political discourse and ethics agree that things have gotten much worse:

"Americans generally feel the same way: Last year, with only modest variations depending on the respondent's party affiliation, 68 percent of those surveyed believed that 'the overall tone and civility in American politics over recent years' was getting worse."

Richard J. Mouw, a Fuller Theological Seminary professor of Christian philosophy and ethics, believes, "Civility is more than being tolerant. Toleration is a pattern of live-and-let-live. Genuine civility has to be grounded in empathy—a genuine desire to promote the well-being of others. It has a moral—and I should add—spiritual, component." (Politifact, 2019).

We normally assume that people learn the rules of behavior, etiquette and actions of civility while they are growing up.

Keith Bybee (2016), author of *How Civility Works*, describes etiquette as an authentic homeschooling experience:

"In a static and homogenous society, one would expect homeschooling in civility to yield a consensus on the norms of appropriate public behavior. But the United States is not such a society."

Dr. Richard Mouw (2010), author of *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, says the following about Washington's Rules, "They read like direct reprimands to behavior that is rampant in our contemporary climate — stimulated by bad behavior at the very top of the leadership ladder."

However, before we are ready to declare civility dead due to our recent transcript of political discourse, we need to remember that earlier centuries were not bastions of common decency and world peace.

Louis Jacobson (2018) writes:

"The framers of the Constitution thought the country was teetering on the brink of barbarism, with the crass and interest-ridden behavior of people in the states tearing away at the last vestiges of decorum."

Cornell W. Clayton, director of the Thomas S. Foley Institute for Public Policy and Public Service at Washington State University and author of *Civility and Democracy in America: A Reasonable Understanding*, notes:

"Obviously, the 1850s and 1860s were bad, with fistfights in Congress and then a bloody Civil War. Even as recently as the 1960s, America was rocked by successive political assassinations, violent reactions to the civil rights movement, and campus riots over the Vietnam War. The general state of civil behavior has been far worse during some previous periods in history. We are not that bad yet." (Clayton & Elgar, 2011.)

Clayton (2011) also reminds us, "Historically speaking, periods of consensus and civility have often followed major upheavals, such as crises, wars and social exhaustion." He also poses the question, "Can political leaders help us through this period today by resisting the temptation to purposely aggravate divisions and angers for short-term political gains?"

Summary

Brookhiser(2003), again, in his book on Washington, wrote:

"All modern manners in the western world were originally aristocratic. Courtesy meant behavior appropriate to a court; chivalry comes from chevalier – a knight. Yet Washington was to dedicate himself to freeing America from a court's control. Could manners survive the operation? Without realizing it, the Jesuits who wrote them, and the young man who copied them, were outlining and absorbing a system of courtesy appropriate to equals and near-equals. When the company for whom the decent behavior was to be performed expanded to the nation, Washington was ready."

Parson Weems, who originally tagged Washington with the cherry tree saga, makes all things right with a quote that he uses to sum up Washington's character in light of the rules he made famous, "No wonder everybody honoured him who honoured everybody."

James Russell Lowell, one of the fireside poets and an abolitionist wrote the following poem in 1875 about Washington in honor of the 100 year anniversary of Washington taking command of the Revolutionary Army. Listen and you will hear patterns of character and virtues which would be embraced within the 110 rules Washington studied in his youth:

*Soldier and statesman, rarest unison;
High-poised example of great duties done
Simply as breathing, a world's honors worn
As life's indifferent gifts to all men born;
Dumb for himself, unless it were to God,
But for his barefoot soldiers eloquent,
Tramping the snow to coral where they trod,
Held by his awe in hollow-eyed content;
Modest, yet firm as Nature's self; unblamed
Save by the men his nobler temper shamed;
Never seduced through show of present good
By other than unsetting lights to steer
New-trimmed in Heaven, nor than his steadfast mood
More steadfast, far from rashness as from fear,
Rigid, but with himself first, grasping still
In swerveless poise the wave-beat helm of will;
Not honored then or now because he wooed
The popular voice, but that he still withstood;
Broad-minded, higher-souled, there is but one
Who was all this and ours, and all men's—WASHINGTON*

Let me close with my favorite Rule. I think of all the rules, I desire this most in my sphere of work and life, and maybe the application of this rule could restore a more civil nation.

#110. Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

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