George Washington's

Rules *of* Civility & Decent Behavior

in company & conversation

Literary House Press *of* Washington College

Chestertown, Maryland 21620

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In this text, the original errors in numbering and spelling have been corrected.

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300 Washington Avenue

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Dr. William Smith
founder of Washington College,
to George Washington,
July 8, 1782

PREFACE

Deep in an inner labyrinth of the Library of Congress, on an ordinary-looking metal shelf, sits a slim, tattered paper notebook. It is stained and spotted with age, and its outermost pages appear to have been partly chewed away by rodents, or perhaps wadded up into spitballs by the teenage schoolboy who kept it, long ago.

But this unprepossessing volume is one of the national library's greatest treasures—for that schoolboy was, of course, none other than George Washington, aged about fifteen. Along with two similar notebooks of geometry lessons, it is one of the very few documents to survive from his childhood and adolescence. Its last ten pages are filled with the *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company & Conversation* reprinted here, which have fascinated our first president's biographers for nearly two centuries.

Some historians have suggested that the *Rules of Civility* were a mere penmanship exercise and thus that too much has been read into their content. Yet if one looks at the notebook as a whole, it is clear that its well-thumbed pages served as a repository of information that the young Virginian considered useful, even essential: a sample land deed, lease, and bill of sale; a helpful hint for keeping ink from freezing in wintertime (add a few drops of brandy). Just like those sample deeds and leases, the *Rules of Civility* were crucial tools of self-advancement in the land-hungry, rough-and-tumble, status-obsessed environment of early Virginia. It was a world poised precariously between drawing-room gentility and frontier squalor, between civilization and the wilderness—a world in which you couldn't always count on keeping your ink warm.

The youthful Washington himself, one senses, still possessed more than a trace of backwoods awkwardness, perhaps even crudeness. Surely he would not have earnestly copied down the rules about spitting, scratching, and nail-chewing (#9, #11, #90) unless he thought he needed reminding not to spit, scratch, or chew his nails. Born in a modest house, to a family of decidedly second-tier tobacco planters, he would have played as a child in muddy farmyards crowded with chickens, geese, and pigs. Now, as an ambitious teenager, he longed to make his way gracefully among the manicured parterres and polished ballrooms of the Fairfaxes—but this self-

transformation would be strenuous and halting, with continuing interludes of mud and squalor. For instance, the prohibition in his *Rules of Civility* against killing "fleas lice ticks &c in the sight of others" (#13) would prove anything but academic. A year or so after he wrote this, while on a surveying expedition in the Shenandoah Valley, the sixteen-year-old Washington wrote of sleeping on a straw mat with a blanket that held "double its Weight of Vermin such as lice fleas &c." One wonders, too, whether he consulted the elaborate rules on table manners when he ate his meals at a campfire, with sticks and wood chips as his only utensils.

Yet these *Rules of Civility* are about far more than mere table manners and scratching etiquette, and also about more than mere self-advancement. The very word *civility* attests to this. Its root is the Latin word *civis,* which means "citizen." Washington's *Rules of Civility,* in fact, have a great deal to say about good citizenship, and can even be read as a kind of political philosophy. Knowing what we know about his views on that subject in later life, some of these rules seem archaic, almost reactionary, reminding us how far he still had to evolve. It is hard to believe that a boy preoccupied with how to behave in front of noblemen (#26) and "Lords or others of high degree" (#36) would grow, three decades later, into the man who led a revolution proclaiming that all men are created equal.

Other rules, however, seem to foreshadow those values that still—let's hope—underlie the foundations

of democratic society in America and around the world. At their most fundamental level, the *Rules of Civility* proclaim the belief that other people matter; that their opinions, rights, and personal comfort (both physical and emotional) deserve just as much respect, or more, than one's own. (#43: "Do not express joy before one sick or in pain, for that contrary passion will aggravate his misery.") It is a very, very short step from this idea to a kind of egalitarianism. No less a twenty-first-century expert than Miss Manners, aka Judith Martin, has written that civility is an act of acknowledging "that one has duties toward others." Although the outward forms of good manners may constantly change, that basic acknowledgment remains as essential in the era of text messages and techno raves as it was in the days of dropped fans and minuets.

On the last page of his notebook, after the 110th rule, Washington wrote the word "Finis" and surrounded it with some big, loopy curlicues. The *Rules of Civility* were hardly the end of the schoolboy Washington's—let alone his unborn country's—path to greater things. But they were a pretty good start.

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INTRODUCTION

Copybook maxims were, for many of the eighteenth-century "enlightened," an inspirational, intellectual, and moral lodestone. These lists of aphorisms sprang from a combination of actual experience in the real world with idealistic and, at times, sentimental reflection.

The young George Washington began his copybook compilations early, probably between twelve and fourteen years of age. Important were influences from his home life, dominated after the death of his father (when Washington was eleven) by his older half-brother Lawrence and Lawrence's in-laws, the Fairfax family.

Perhaps of greater formative impact on Washington was his growing wider world of disparate experiences, particularly on the western frontier of the day. As an increasingly accomplished surveyor and wilderness scout, on the one hand, and frequent visitor to Belvoir, the Fairfax mansion, on the other, he pursued a personal

search for values and a moral compass. Youthful idealism and a practical realism were to shape Washington for the remainder of his life.

Along with his penchant for physical activity, Washington was actually a rather bookish youth. We know from his account books that he purchased volumes dealing with agriculture, history, military affairs, biography, and even some notable novels of the day.

Many of his 110 maxims in the *Rules of Civility* were derived from his wide reading. They show a true child of the eighteenth-century American Enlightenment, a child who was father to the mature man. Basically, Washington equated happiness with virtue, a view typical of the Enlightenment. Virtue to him meant paying careful attention to the effect of one's own actions on the feelings of others.

The geometric and surveying rules of his early copybooks were often closely followed by exact and specific reflections on advantageous social behavior just as precisely stated as his mathematical calculations. One must be realistically prepared, he wrote, to cultivate the good will of those who already possessed social rank. The acceptance of an elite leadership seemed to him to be the way of the world, though this elite should be virtuous, enlightened, and dedicated to the general welfare.

There is no denying that Washington absorbed the hierarchical values of his age. In his mind there were

definitely differences between the "better sort" and less desirable types. (#57: "Keep to the fashion of your equals and when accompanying a man of great quality . . . walk not with him cheek by jowl but somewhat behind him, but in such a manner that he can easily speak to you.")

Washington always maintained that leaders must be virtuous and attuned to the views of the governed. They should be virtuous as a reward to themselves since, according to Washington, virtue brings happiness.

What do the *Rules of Civility* have to do with virtue? Washington's rules do not seem to stem from strict guidelines of religious behavior and morality. Gentlemanly behavior is a sufficient achievement, the exemplar of a person of good breeding. In this sense, Washington was a lifelong advocate of politeness and mutual forbearance rather than a devotee of intense religious moralism. He was an advocate of due respect for religious belief but was more interested in human relationships than preoccupation with the divine. He did like to use Biblical allusions and believed that there was an early religious origin for many human laws.

Washington's writings show a familiarity with the urbane *Spectator Papers* of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele and with *Gentleman's Magazine*. They were among his favorite English sources for proper behavior. Their worldliness appealed to him. These models also represented the measured ambition and sometimes

calculated mores of worthy and realistic men, especially those entrusted with political power. The end of government, Washington explained, is to aggregate the happiness of society, which is best produced by the practice of a virtuous policy. A good start toward the cultivation of virtue would be to follow his *Rules of Civility*.[1]

The *Rules* are also an early textbook version of Washington's mature judgment of appropriate political action and disputation. He believed that personal friendship should not be destroyed by political disagreement, a view not surprising when we remember Washington's strong dislike of the vicious partisan political warfare during his presidency. He wrote in a letter to an old friend whose opposition to the Revolution had vexed Washington:

> The friendship I ever professed, and felt for you met with no diminution from the differences in our political sentiment. I know the rectitude of my own intentions, and believing in the sincerity of yours, lamented, though I did not condemn your renunciation of the creed I adopted.[2]

It is obvious that Washington valued correct personal behavior as a prerequisite to a desirable state of social order, but not at the expense of individual natural rights, among them self-government, which were also

hallmarks of a virtuous society. He believed that his *Rules of Civility* would promote both social order and the preservation of individual rights. The civility must be genuinely extended, though, or as Washington put it, "Overly ceremonial civility was tantamount to incivility."[3]

The most popular edition of the *Rules of Civility* was probably that published in 1926 by Houghton Mifflin. Although this popularity may seem surprising given the debunking during the rather cynical 1920s, even of Washington, one can nonetheless appreciate the contrasting elevation of admirable individuals (the Charles Lindbergh cult, for instance) as an antidote that led to the celebration of the heroic Washington as a wise counselor.

In his Farewell Address, Washington said that, in the discharge of his duties, he had been guided by the principles reaching back to the maxims and rules of civility. Whether he adhered to these principles would be decided by others, but he himself felt certain that he had done so. His Farewell Address insists on "the assurance of my own conscience . . that I have at least believed myself to be guided by them" and to have served well as a citizen of the "Great Republic of Humanity."[4]

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Endnotes

1 Letter to Comte de Moustier, Nov. 1, 1790, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington, 1745-1799* (Washington, D.C.: United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1931-1944), vol. 31, p. 42.

2 Letter to Bryan Fairfax, March 1, 1778, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 2, p. 2.

3 Letter to Joseph Reed, Dec. 15, 1775, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 2, p. 165.

4 Farewell Address, Sept. 19, 1796, in John F. Schroeder, ed., *Maxims of Washington* (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 1942).

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

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

3rd Show Nothing to your Friend that may affright him.

4th In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.

5th If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh, or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put Your handkerchief or Hand before your face and turn aside.

6th Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others Stop.

7th Put not off your Clothes in the presence of Others, nor go out your Chamber half Dressed.

8th At Play and at Fire it's Good manners to Give Place to the last Comer, and affect not to Speak Louder than Ordinary.

9th Spit not in the Fire, nor Stoop low before it neither Put your Hands into the Flames to warm them, nor Set your Feet upon the Fire especially if there be meat before it.

10th When you Sit down, Keep your Feet firm and Even, without putting one on the other or Crossing them.

11th Shift not yourself in the Sight of others nor Gnaw your nails.

12th 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.

13th Kill no Vermin as Fleas, lice ticks etc. in the Sight of Others, if you See any filth or thick Spittle put your foot Dexterously upon it if it be upon the Clothes of your Companions, Put it off privately, and if it be upon your own Clothes return Thanks to him who puts it off.

14th Turn not your Back to others especially in Speaking, Jog not the Table or Desk on which Another reads or writes, lean not upon any one.

15th Keep your Nails clean and Short, also your Hands and Teeth Clean yet without Showing any great Concern for them.

16th Do not Puff up the Cheeks, Loll not out the tongue rub the Hands, or beard, thrust out the lips, or bite them or keep the Lips too open or too Closed.

17th Be no Flatterer, neither Play with any that delights not to be Played Withal.

18th Read no Letters, Books, or Papers in Company but when there is a Necessity for the doing of it you must ask leave: come not near the Books or Writings of Another so as to read

them unless desired or give your opinion of them unasked also look not nigh when another is writing a Letter.

19th Let your Countenance be pleasant but in Serious Matters Somewhat grave.

20th The Gestures of the Body must be Suited to the discourse you are upon.

21st Reproach none for the Infirmities of Nature, nor Delight to Put them that have in mind thereof.

22nd Show not yourself glad at the Misfortune of another though he were your enemy.

23rd When you see a Crime punished, you may be inwardly Pleased; but always show Pity to the Suffering Offender.

24th Do not laugh too loud or too much at any Public Spectacle.

25th Superfluous Compliments and all Affectation of Ceremony are to be avoided, yet where due they are not to be Neglected.

26th In Pulling off your Hat to Persons of Distinction, as Noblemen, Justices, Churchmen etc. make a Reverence, bowing more or less according to the Custom of the Better Bred, and Quality of the Person. Amongst your equals expect not always that they Should begin with you first, but to Pull off the Hat when there is no need is Affectation, in the Manner of Saluting and resaluting in words keep to the most usual Custom.

27th Tis ill manners to bid one more eminent than yourself be covered as well as not to do it to whom it's due Likewise he that makes too much haste to Put on his hat does not well, yet he ought to Put it on at the first, or at most the Second time of being asked; now what is herein Spoken, of Qualification in behavior in Saluting, ought also to be observed in taking of Place, and Sitting down for ceremonies without Bounds is troublesome.

28th If any one come to Speak to you while you are Sitting Stand up though he be your Inferior, and when you Present Seats let it be to every one according to his Degree.

29th When you meet with one of Greater Quality than yourself, Stop, and retire especially if it be at a Door or any Straight place to give way for him to Pass.

30th In walking the highest Place in most Countries Seems to be on the right hand therefore Place yourself on the left of him whom you desire to Honour: but if three walk together the midst Place is the most Honourable the wall is usually given to the most worthy if two walk together.

31st If any one far Surpasses others, either in age, Estate, or Merit yet would give Place to a meaner than himself in his own lodging or elsewhere the one ought not to accept it, So he on the other part should not use much earnestness nor offer it above once or twice.

32nd To one that is your equal, or not much inferior you are to give the chief Place in your Lodging and he to who 'tis offered ought at the first to refuse it but at the Second to accept though not without acknowledging his own unworthiness.

33rd They that are in Dignity or in office have in all places Precedency but whilst they are Young they ought to respect those that are their equals in Birth or other Qualities, though they have no Public charge.

34th It is good Manners to prefer them to whom we Speak before ourselves especially if they be above us with whom in no Sort we ought to begin.

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

36th Artificers & Persons of low Degree ought not to use many ceremonies to Lords, or Others of high Degree but Respect and highly Honour them, and those of high Degree ought to treat them with affability & Courtesy, without Arrogance.

37th In Speaking to men of Quality do not lean nor Look them full in the Face, nor approach too near them at least Keep a full Pace from them.

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

39th In writing or Speaking, give to every Person his due Title According to his Degree & the Custom of the Place.

40th Strive not with your Superiors in argument, but always Submit your Judgment to others with Modesty.

41st Undertake not to Teach your equal in the art himself Professes; it Savours of arrogance.

42nd Let thy ceremonies in Courtesy be proper to the Dignity of his place with whom thou converses for it is absurd to act the same with a Clown and a Prince.

43rd Do not express Joy before one sick or in pain for that contrary Passion will aggravate his Misery.

44th When a man does all he can though it Succeeds not well blame not him that did it.

45th Being to advise or reprehend any one, consider whether it ought to be in public or in Private; presently, or at Some other time in what terms to do it & in reproving Show no

Sign of Choler but do it with all Sweetness and Mildness.

46th Take all Admonitions thankfully in what Time or Place Soever given but afterwards not being culpable take a Time & Place convenient to let him know it that gave them.

47th Mock not nor Jest at any thing of Importance break no Jests that are Sharp Biting and if you Deliver any thing witty and Pleasant abstain from Laughing thereat yourself.

48th Wherein you reprove Another be unblameable yourself; for example is more prevalent than Precepts.

49th Use no Reproachful Language against any one neither Curse nor Revile.

50th Be not hasty to believe flying Reports to the Disparagement of any.

51st Wear not your Clothes, foul, ripped or Dusty but See they be Brushed once every day at least and take heed that you approach not to any Uncleanness.

52nd In your Apparel be Modest and endeavour to accommodate Nature, rather than to procure Admiration keep to the Fashion of your equals Such as are Civil and orderly with respect to Times and Places.

53rd Run not in the Streets, neither go too slowly nor with Mouth open go not Shaking your Arms kick not the earth with your feet, go not upon the Toes, nor in a Dancing fashion.

54th Play not the Peacock, looking everywhere about you, to See if you be well Decked, if your Shoes fit well if your Stockings sit neatly, and Clothes handsomely.

55th Eat not in the Streets, nor in the House, out of Season.

56th Associate yourself with Men of good Quality if you Esteem your own Reputation; for 'tis better to be alone than in bad Company.

57th In walking up and Down in a House, only with One in Company if he be Greater than yourself, at the first give him the Right hand and Stop not till he does and be not the first

that turns, and when you do turn let it be with your face towards him, if he be a Man of Great Quality, walk not with him Cheek by Jowl but Somewhat behind him; but yet in Such a Manner that he may easily Speak to you.

58th Let your Conversation be without Malice or Envy, for 'tis a Sign of a Tractable and Commendable Nature: And in all Causes of Passion admit Reason to Govern.

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

60th Be not immodest in urging your Friends to Discover a Secret.

61st Utter not base and frivolous things amongst grave and Learned Men nor very Difficult Questions or Subjects, among the Ignorant or things hard to be believed, Stuff not your Discourse with Sentences amongst your Betters nor Equals.

62nd Speak not of doleful Things in a Time of Mirth or at the Table; Speak not of Melancholy Things as Death and Wounds, and if others

Mention them Change if you can the Discourse tell not your Dreams, but to your intimate Friend.

63rd A Man ought not to value himself of his Achievements, or rare Qualities of wit; much less of his riches Virtue or Kindred.

64th Break not a Jest where none take pleasure in mirth Laugh not aloud, nor at all without Occasion, deride no man's Misfortune, tho' there Seem to be Some cause.

65th Speak not injurious Words neither in Jest nor Earnest Scoff at none although they give Occasion.

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

67th Detract not from others neither be excessive in Commanding.

68th Go not thither, where you know not, whether you Shall be Welcome or not. Give not Advice without being Asked & when desired do it briefly.

69th If two contend together take not the part of either unconstrained; and be not obstinate in your own Opinion, in Things indifferent be of the Major Side.

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

71st 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.

72nd Speak not in an unknown Tongue in Company but in your own Language and that as those of Quality do and not as the Vulgar; Sublime matters treat Seriously.

73rd Think before you Speak pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your Words too hastily but orderly & distinctly.

74th When Another Speaks be attentive your Self and disturb not the Audience if any hesitate in his Words help him not nor Prompt him without desired, Interrupt him not, nor Answer him till his Speech be ended.

75th In the midst of Discourse ask not of what one treateth but if you Perceive any Stop because of your coming you may well entreat him gently to Proceed: If a Person of Quality comes in while you are Conversing it's handsome to Repeat what was said before.

76th While you are talking, Point not with your Finger at him of Whom you Discourse nor Approach too near him to whom you talk especially to his face.

77th Treat with men at fit Times about Business & Whisper not in the Company of Others.

78th Make no Comparisons and if any of the Company be Commended for any brave act of Virtue, commend not another for the Same.

79th Be not apt to relate News if you know not the truth thereof. In Discoursing of things you Have heard Name not your Author always A Secret Discover not.

80th Be not Tedious in Discourse or in reading unless you find the Company pleased therewith.

81st Be not Curious to Know the Affairs of Others neither approach those that Speak in Private.

82nd Undertake not what you cannot perform but be careful to keep your promise.

83rd When you deliver a matter do it without passion & with discretion, however mean the person be you do it to.

84th When your Superiors talk to any Body hearken not neither Speak nor Laugh.

85th In Company of those of Higher Quality than yourself Speak not until you are asked a Question then Stand upright put of off your Hat & Answer in few words.

86th In Disputes, be not So Desirous to Overcome as not to give Liberty to each one to deliver his Opinion and Submit to the Judgment of the Major Part especially if they are Judges of the Dispute.

87th Let thy carriage be such as becomes a Man Grave Settled and attentive to that which is spoken. Contradict not at every turn what others Say.

88th Be not tedious in Discourse, make not many Digressions, nor repeat often the Same manner of Discourse.

89th Speak not Evil of the absent for it is unjust.

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

91st Make no Show of taking great Delight in your Victuals, Feed not with Greediness; cut your Bread with a Knife, lean not on the Table neither find fault with what you Eat.

92nd Take no Salt or cut Bread with your Knife Greasy.

93rd Entertaining any one at table it is decent to present him with meat, Undertake not to help others undesired by the Master.

94th If you Soak bread in the Sauce let it be no more than what you put in your Mouth at a time and blow not your broth at Table but Stay till it Cools of it Self.

95th Put not your meat to your Mouth with your Knife in your hand neither Spit forth the Stones of any fruit Pie upon a Dish nor Cast anything under the table.

96th It's unbecoming to Stoop much to one's Meat Keep your Fingers clean & when foul wipe them on a Corner of your Table Napkin.

97th Put not another bit into your Mouth until the former be Swallowed let not your Morsels be too big for the Jowls.

98th Drink not nor talk with your mouth full neither Gaze about you while you are a Drinking.

99th Drink not too leisurely nor yet too hastily. Before and after Drinking wipe your Lips breathe not then or Ever with too Great a Noise, for it's uncivil.

100th Cleanse not your teeth with the Table Cloth Napkin Fork or Knife but if Others do it let it be done with a Pick Tooth.

101st Rinse not your Mouth in the Presence of Others.

102nd It is out of use to call upon the Company often to Eat nor need you Drink to others every Time you Drink.

103rd In Company of your Betters be not longer in eating than they are lay not your Arm but only your hand upon the table.

104th It belongs to the Chiefest in Company to unfold his Napkin and fall to Meat first, But he ought then to Begin in time & to Dispatch with Dexterity that the Slowest may have time allowed him.

105th Be not Angry at Table whatever happens & if you have reason to be so, Show it not but on a Cheerful Countenance especially if there be Strangers for Good Humour makes one Dish of Meat a Feast.

106th Set not yourself at the upper of the Table but if it Be your Due or that the Master of the house will have it So, Contend not, least you Should Trouble the Company.

107th If others talk at Table be attentive but talk not with Meat in your Mouth.

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

109th Let your Recreations be Manful not Sinful.

110th Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.

Finis

Colophon

This book was set in Hoefler Text, a font inspired by the seventeenth-century baroque types of Jean Jannon and Nicholas Kis. This contemporary Antiqua font was commissioned by Apple in order to demonstrate the advanced type technologies of the Mac. Hoefler Text was designed to allow typography on its highest level.

Cover & book design by Diane Landskroener

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- ★ Founded in 1782 under the patronage of George Washington and still committed to educating independent thinkers
- ★ Offers students an intensely personalized education that tests and stretches the limits of their potential
- ★ Set in colonial Chestertown on Maryland's Eastern Shore amid the natural beauty and cultural bounty of the Chesapeake Bay region
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