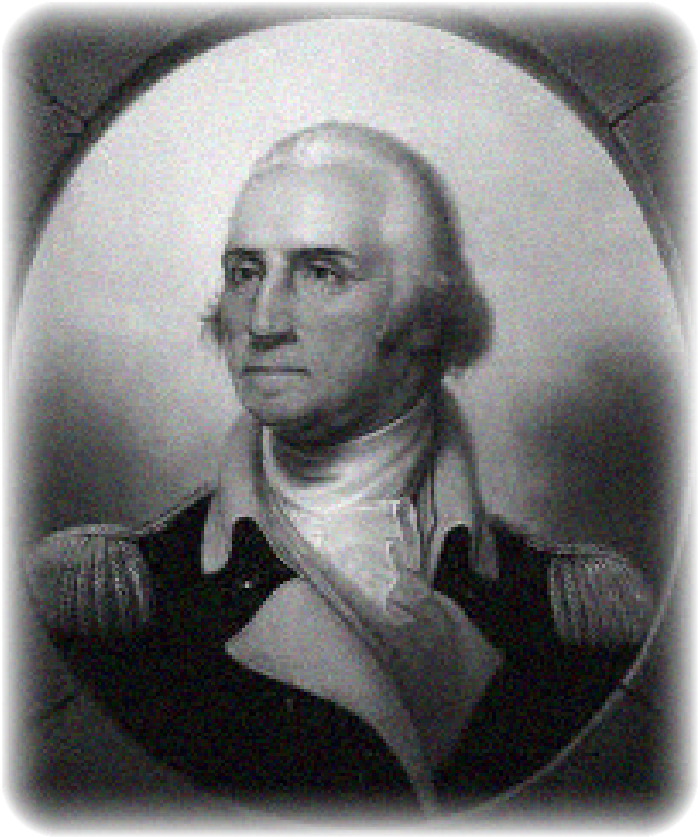

War on the Frontier: George Washington and Native Americans

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In 1789, George Washington, America's first president, set about the monumental task of leading the fragile, infant nation in a rough, older world. While the beginning of the Washington Administration could easily be described as routine (as the country's political system was literally being established), the latter portion of Washington's presidency became anything but mundane. Two major events, concerning the international spectacle of the Napoleonic Wars and the emerging conflict on the western frontier with the Native Americans, consumed most of Washington's time and attention. Washington hoped to keep the young nation out of another international war by avoiding the viper's nest that had become Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon, declaring American neutrality in the ensuing carnage. Moreover, the United States military forces were already embroiled in a conflict with the Native American tribes on the western borders of the country, a conflict that had reached the epitome of war by the time of Washington's second term. Here, historians have disagreed as to the ends of Washington's preoccupation concerning these two items on the nation's political agenda. Some believe that Washington feared that the consequences for the United States would be fatal if it became involved in a European war before it was ready. Still others, most notably Native American historians, contend that Washington feared that since the country already was consumed by a war (the conflict with the Indians on the frontier), it could not shoulder the burdens of another. While both historical positions undoubtedly have some truth to them, a more accurate description of Washington's motives for keeping us out of war falls on the side of the Native American historians, namely since Washington observed the already poor war capabilities of the new republic in combatting the Indian uprisings as well as his own description of the conflict with the Native Americans as a "war."

Washington knew that the United States was in a precarious position following the end of the American Revolution. European powers, including Britain, France, and Spain, still held large tracts of territory in North America, and the British Royal Navy dominated the waves of the Atlantic Ocean as well. With America literally "surrounded" on all sides by potentially (or in the case of the British, currently) hostile powers, Washington "resolved to avoid war at almost

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Written for Dr. Jesse Donahue's PS 331 American Presidency
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