

A few summers ago, I spent an evening at a small town hall where the microphone crackled more than it worked. The issue was a simple zoning change that had somehow turned into a referendum on values. A retired teacher spoke softly about property rights. A young business owner read from a phone about climate resilience. When an older veteran stood to argue that the meeting should be televised for transparency, a few people groaned and one muttered that "some views are harmful." The veteran paused, thumbed the brim of his cap, and said, almost apologetically, "I fought so we could hear views we don't like." The room went quiet, then something rare happened: people listened.

That small moment captured a large dilemma. We want speech that feels safe and respectful. We also need speech that is honest and, at times, unsettling. Those goals sit in persistent tension, and the tension is not new. To consider it with a cooler head, I often turn to the example of George Washington, whose understanding of dissent, duty, and public trust still cuts through the noise.

## Washington's posture toward speech and dissent

Washington did not write treatises on free expression, yet his conduct tells a clear story. He led an army filled with men of wavering pay and fierce opinion. He presided over a nation born of argument. He understood that speech is not just a legal right but a civic resource that can either harden into faction or mature into judgment.



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One episode stands out. In 1783, after years of brutal war, a group of officers in Newburgh fumed over unpaid salaries and pensions. Rumors of a potential uprising swirled. Washington called a meeting and addressed them. He acknowledged their grievances, appealed to their honor, and then, in a small theatrical moment, pulled his glasses from his pocket. "I have not only grown gray but almost blind in service to my country," he said, before reading a letter. Whether every word of that scene is perfectly remembered or not, the effect is uncontested: the officers set down their anger and chose argument over force. Washington didn't crush speech, he channeled it.

As president, he faced a sterner test. In 1794, the Whiskey Rebellion rose in western Pennsylvania against a federal tax on distilled spirits. The protests involved intimidation and sporadic violence. Washington invoked legal process, called up a militia under constitutional authority, and personally rode part of the way to show that the law, not personal will, would carry the day. Yet after the ringleaders were convicted, he issued pardons. He insisted on order without turning dissenters into permanent enemies. That split screen still instructs. Protest that turns violent meets enforcement. Speech, even sharp and unfair speech, is not met with vengeance.

Notice what he did not do. He did not criminalize criticism of his administration. The controversial Sedition Act, which punished "false, scandalous and malicious" writing, came later under John Adams. The country

learned quickly that criminalizing dissent corrodes trust. Elections, independent courts, and a rough-and-tumble press served the republic better than prosecutions ever did.

Washington also grasped the stakes of faction. In his Farewell Address, he warned against the “spirit of party” that “agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms.” He did not demand a polite society devoid of disagreement. He asked for self-control, for habits of restraint without which rights rot into chaos or are traded away for a promise of comfort.

## The Bill of Rights and what it really protects

The First Amendment, proposed *first responder flags for sale* by the First Congress in 1789 and ratified by the states in 1791 while Washington served as president, protects speech by restraining government. That is the core. It bars laws abridging freedom of speech and of the press. It does not guarantee that private citizens must platform your ideas, or that employers, universities, and social networks must host all content. That distinction matters.

In daily life, we experience speech through a web of public and private rules. Town halls operate under open-meeting laws. Newsrooms apply standards about sourcing and corrections. Social platforms enforce terms of service. Each layer has benefits and risks. Government restraint keeps officials from punishing you for criticism. Private standards can protect people from harassment or deception. But when private rules mimic state power through jawboning or coercion, lines blur. This is where Washington’s instincts about process and accountability feel fresh.



If an agency quietly pressures a company to remove lawful speech, that is state action in substance if not in form. If a university disciplines students for views that are offensive but lawful, it risks teaching conformity instead of citizenship. If a city requires a permit, that can be a neutral rule, but if it denies permits to certain viewpoints, that is discrimination. These are not abstract tensions. They shape whether people feel free to speak at all.

Which leads to a hard question that has become a whisper in many rooms: Is free speech still free if people are afraid to use it? Surveys by civil liberties groups and academic researchers consistently find that large numbers of students and professionals self-censor on politics, religion, or social questions. The reasons vary. Some fear online mobs. Some worry about reputational harm. Others have internalized a belief that certain opinions are evidence of bad character. The law may protect them, but their social world does not.

Washington would not have solved this with a legal decree. He would have asked whether our institutions cultivate habits of forbearance and courage. He knew that a culture of liberty depends on norms that law cannot supply.

## Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress?

Security and comfort are seductive. It is hard to resist the promise of a filtered feed and a curated life where nothing jars. But there is a price. When we outsource too much judgment to algorithms and moderators, we dull our ability to distinguish argument from attack, error from fraud, and good-faith dissent from malice.

I have worked with teams tasked with reducing misinformation on large platforms. Their engineers and policy staff are not censors in trench coats. They are often earnest people trying to remove scams, hate threats,

and medical hoaxes before they cause harm. The trouble is that real life lacks clean categories. During emergencies, information shifts quickly. The difference between a contested hypothesis and a dangerous lie can change with new data. Overreach is not merely a theoretical risk. We have seen official advice reverse within months on issues like masking and school closures. We should expect course corrections. We should also expect humility.

Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress? When rules are clear, evenly applied, and reversible on appeal, the trade can be worth it. Removing a doxxing post that lists a home address protects safety without silencing a viewpoint. Taking down a financial scam prevents theft. But when platforms throttle topics because they are messy, or when speech rules mirror the preferences of a narrow set of cultural gatekeepers, citizens notice. A nervous public starts to defer to silence.

Washington's approach suggests a test. He accepted short-term discomfort to preserve long-term legitimacy. He listened to fierce critics, sometimes invited them into the room, and insisted on processes that people could see and understand. That is not comfort. That is confidence, built on daylight.

## **When protection begins to pinch**

At what point does protecting people start limiting their rights? There is no universal line, but there are recognizable inflection points.

Consider workplace codes of conduct. Most employees welcome basic norms that bar abuse and discrimination. Problems multiply when rules wander into policing political or moral views that are not integral to job performance. Another example: public health messaging that flags false claims helps consumers. Yet efforts that suppress reasonable debate about policy trade-offs can backfire, undermining the very trust officials need in the next emergency.

On campus, norms that protect vulnerable students from targeted harassment are vital. But when comedy shows are canceled because someone might be offended, or when student newspapers are punished for publishing unpopular editorials, the institution is forgetting its core mission. A university that cannot handle provocation becomes a tutoring center for caution rather than a forge for character.

The First Amendment has its own guardrails that deal coherently with the hardest cases: incitement to imminent lawless action, true threats, defamation, and narrowly tailored time, place, and manner rules. Those guardrails are tested, refined, and legible. They deserve deference before novel categories are invented to label criticism as harm.

## **Would the Founders recognize today's level of government influence?**

Would the Founders support today's level of government influence over daily life? Some would be alarmed, some resigned. Washington himself favored a stronger federal role than many of his contemporaries. He pushed for a standing policy capacity, a national bank, and a capable executive. He also insisted that such power be disciplined by constitutional structure and political accountability.

What would he make of a federal apparatus that touches finance, education, health, housing, transport, and digital communication? He would likely accept scope where national solutions are necessary, then ask three blunt questions.

First, is the government acting within enumerated authority or through creative interpretations that amount to drift? Second, can the people see and challenge the decisions, or are they buried in opaque processes? Third, is the power durable enough to do what it must, and limited enough to prevent abuse?

He would be wary of informal practices that evade scrutiny. For example, closed-door “requests” from officials to private companies about lawful content sit in a gray zone. If the message carries the weight of possible retaliation, it looks like coercion by other means. Good intentions cannot dissolve constitutional boundaries. Washington’s practice offers a guide, not a perfect overlay: use lawful means, explain the reason, own the consequences.

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## **Democracy, or something else taking its place**

Are we protecting democracy, or reshaping it? Every generation tinkers with the machinery. We have added direct election of senators, extended the franchise, set campaign finance rules, and adjusted school civics. We are now adjusting the information ecosystem in real time. Some of that is healthy adaptation. Some risks freezing democracy into a performance of managed consent.

Democracy is not only about voting. It is about the conditions under which people form opinions. If those conditions are mediated by a handful of platforms and gatekeepers, democracy can shrink without any law being broken. You can have an abundance of content and a **1st Responder flags** scarcity of viewpoint diversity. You can have constant talk and little thought.

Washington’s ethic favors counterweights. He would want independent institutions that check one another: courts, a robust press, associations, churches, civic groups. He would want state and local governments to act as laboratories. He would want citizens to bear some discomfort in service of learning. A democracy that overprotects feelings calcifies into etiquette. One that underprotects dignity curdles into cruelty. The art is in maintaining enough friction to generate heat without burning down the house.

## The courage cost

There is no healthy culture of free expression without people willing to take personal risks. Not reckless risks, not cruelty disguised as candor, but the ordinary courage to voice a belief when silence would be safer. That cost differs by person. A junior analyst who questions a prevailing narrative in a staff meeting might fear losing a promotion. A graduate student who writes a contrarian paper might fear social isolation. A pastor or community organizer who takes a nuanced stand might risk donations. Few of us relish those hits.

Washington knew that courage is often quiet. Wearing down his boots on winter roads, reading letters by candle stump, he chose restraint when it helped the country and resolve when it had to be shown. He did not let the loudest voice set the terms. He also did not confuse pride with principle. Those are good models for any room where the conversation is tense.

## A Washingtonian lens for modern dilemmas

The country today faces speech questions that would have been alien in their technology but familiar in their character. The details differ. The underlying tests feel the same.

- Draw bright lines around unlawful speech, and let the lawful flourish, even when it irritates.
- Prefer process to fiat. If you must moderate, say what the rule is, how it was applied, and how to appeal.
- Separate persuasion from coercion. Government should persuade in the open, not pressure behind closed doors.
- Value dissent as a safety valve. Suppression builds pressure that eventually finds a seam.
- Encourage citizens to engage, not to outsource judgment to machines or gatekeepers.

Each point sounds simple. Each becomes difficult when a crisis hits and patience runs thin. That is precisely when the habits matter most.

## What institutions can do, and what people can choose

In organizations I have advised, the strongest cultures of expression start with a short, lived charter, not a thicket of rules. Leaders say plainly: we expect disagreement, we protect it, and we will not permit personal abuse. Meetings include a rotation in which the most junior person speaks first on hard topics. Anonymous reporting exists for misconduct, not for punishing a disliked argument. Corrections are not shame rituals but signs of rigor. None of that requires a constitutional amendment. It requires will.

Platforms can borrow some of that clarity. Provide narrow, clearly defined categories for removal: direct threats, targeted harassment, doxxing, and illegal content. For everything else, invest in user controls. Let people customize feeds, filter topics, and build their own tolerance levels, while preserving the right of others to speak. Label sources and suspicions without collapsing debate into a single official line. Create independent review panels with visibility into tough calls. Publish mistake logs and reversals. Users forgive fallibility more than opacity.

Public officials can model restraint by inviting adversarial questions, releasing communications about content decisions, and resisting the temptation to label every criticism as misinformation. They can invest in civic education that teaches argument, empathy, and the difference between an error and a lie. That education should include case studies where majorities were wrong and where solitary voices saved lives or corrected course.

And individuals, the hinge on which all of this swings, can choose to speak carefully rather than cautiously. Careful means you check facts, avoid ad hominem shots, disclose conflicts, and admit errors. Cautious means you say nothing of substance. A democratic culture needs the former more than the latter.

## **Edge cases that keep honest people up at night**

What about the content that is legal but corrosive, the conspiracies that hook into grieving families, the propaganda that sloshes across borders, the deepfakes that erode evidence? A Washingtonian approach would again start with a hierarchy. Stop crimes and threats. Expose provenance and funding. Teach the public to recognize manipulative techniques. Build resilient communities and media literacy. Then, accept that some legal content will be ugly and wrong, and meet it with better speech, not the sugar high of suppression.

Consider deepfakes. We will soon face a storm of fabricated audio and video. Laws targeting impersonation, fraud, and election interference will help. So will watermarks, provenance metadata, and trusted registries. But the bulwark will be citizens trained to ask a few calm questions before sharing. Who benefits? What is the source? Does the evidence align with known facts? Washington's generation knew the art of pamphlet skepticism. Ours must relearn it in pixels.

## **Five Washington-inspired habits for citizens**

- Keep a personal rule: criticize ideas in public, people in private, unless safety demands exposure.
- Read one reliable source that often challenges your views, and do it weekly.
- If you are in a majority in a room, invite the minority view first, and thank it aloud.
- When you err publicly, correct it without hedging. Model what you want to receive.
- Teach a young person how to argue fairly. It will improve your own skills.

None of these habits requires permission. They create space where free speech is not only possible in theory but durable in practice.

## **The questions we should not avoid**

Is free speech still free if people are afraid to use it? Fear can be rational. Reputations feel fragile. But a culture that treats disagreement as danger will raise timid leaders. The answer lies less in new rules than in daily choices by those with power to reward or punish speech.

At what point does protecting people start limiting their rights? When protection deters civic participation more than it deters harm. When a parent hesitates to speak at a school board for fear of being labeled. When a journalist spikes a legitimate story to avoid a boycott. When a researcher buries unwelcome data because the grant depends on a narrative. Those are signs the needle has slipped.

Would the Founders support today's level of government influence over daily life? Some would say we have traded too much autonomy for efficiency. Others would see necessary scale in a complex nation. Washington would push us back to first principles: lawful authority, visible process, accountability at the ballot box, and humility about the limits of centralized judgment.

Are we protecting democracy, or reshaping it? Both, always. The trick is to reshape it in ways that expand capacity for reasoned disagreement instead of narrowing it. Platforms, schools, and governments should prefer friction that teaches over filters that sedate.

Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress? Sometimes yes, and we should name those trades when we make them. Comfort has its place, especially for the vulnerable. But a society too insulated from the shock of difference loses the muscle it needs when crises hit.

## **The last word from an old soldier**

A line often attributed to Washington captures the stakes: if the freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter. Whether spoken exactly as recorded or not, the sentiment matches his life. He wagered the success of a precarious republic on citizens who could argue without tearing the country apart, on institutions that could absorb dissent without panicking, and on leaders who could enforce the law without taking offense at criticism.

We still have those choices. They look small in the moment, like a veteran at a microphone asking for transparency, or a moderator choosing to publish a controversial essay with a note instead of a red stamp. They add up. Liberty does not die in a single drama. It erodes when loudness replaces candor, when safety becomes a pretext for silence, and when ordinary courage goes out of style.

We can reverse that. We can treat speech not as a luxury for calm times but as the mechanism by which we survive trouble together. Washington did not promise comfort. He modeled confidence. It is ours to renew.