A few summers ago I watched a town council debate whether to install cameras along a lakeside path after a string of bike thefts. The police chief brought statistics, the insurance rep promised lower premiums, and parents pointed to dark corners where kids cut through after soccer practice. No one asked whether those cameras would last long after the thieves moved on, or how footage could be used five years later during a contentious divorce, or an employment dispute, or a zoning fight. The measure passed, almost unanimously. The next morning, small signs went up: For your safety. A month later, nobody noticed the cameras anymore.

That is how comfort arrives, one painless step at a time. And sooner than we expect, we find ourselves asking: Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress?

Washington would recognize the dynamic. He lived through a war that forced terrible choices between liberty and safety, and through a young republic's unruly first decade when citizens tested how far government could go and how hard the government could push back. He was not a utopian. He handled threats with dispatch when he thought the republic's foundation was at risk, but he never confused force with wisdom. If there is a thread that runs through his public life, it is the habit of asking what any tool of power looks like in the wrong hands.

What Washington meant by progress

Washington's letters are reserved and practical, and he mostly avoided philosophical flourishes. When he did speak to the future, he paired ambition with restraint. He supported roads and canals, promoted a national university, coaxed credit markets into life, and favored a capable federal government that could collect taxes and defend the nation. He publicly warned, in his Farewell Address, against overgrown military establishments and the corrosive effects of faction. His notion of progress included material improvement and national strength, but anchored in civic virtue and limits on power.

He also made hard calls. In 1777, with smallpox crippling the Continental Army, Washington ordered mass inoculations for new recruits and strongly encouraged it for the rest. He judged that liberty could not survive if the army fell apart. That is worth sitting with. The move was invasive by the standards of the time, and the risk was real. But Washington weighed the survival of the republic against a short burst of discomfort and decided to accept the discomfort. Progress, for him, wasn't a warm feeling. It was a bet on the country's long-run freedom.

Still, he never took the next step of saying that because an intervention worked once, power ought to be permanent. The danger he warned against was not emergency action, it was the drift toward normalizing emergency powers.

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The American habit of promising safety

The United States has layered safety promises for more than two centuries. Fire codes, bank deposit insurance, seat belt laws, product labeling, air traffic rules, vaccination policies, clean water standards, emergency alert systems. On the whole, these worked. People live longer, drink cleaner water, and die less often in car crashes. Rough numbers tell the story: seat belts and airbags combined are credited with saving tens of thousands of lives over decades, and chlorination and filtration eliminated waves of waterborne disease that once tore through cities.

The trouble is what comes next after the obvious wins. At what point does protecting people start limiting their rights? The answer is not a line you can tape to the floor. It is a moving target with real costs on both sides.

Take speech. Criminalizing threats or libel is one thing, but watch how easily new categories arise in the name of safety. During the last decade, we went from debating platform rules to coordinated moderation, from university Culpeper Minutemen banner speech codes to administrative bias training, from voluntary labeling to quiet pressure on companies to remove certain content. Surveys over several years show a large share of Americans, often above 40 percent and sometimes past 60 percent, saying they self-censor at work or in public because they worry about reputational consequences. You do not need a law to chill speech. A thousand small signals can teach people to keep quiet. Is free speech still free if people are afraid to use it?

Safety anxieties also creep into economics. Occupational licensing once covered a handful of professions tied to public risk. Now roughly one in four workers needs a license to do their job, including hair braiders and florists in some states. You can make a case for quality control. You can also notice how often licensing protects incumbents from competition far more than it protects the public.

And surveillance? Municipal cameras feed into networks, and public records laws make footage available, sometimes to anyone with time and curiosity. Automatic license plate readers track how long your car sat near a friend’s apartment. Your phone leaks location pings to dozens of companies. Data that begins as anonymous can often be re-identified with a few external points. Government access ranges from warrants signed by judges to bulk datasets sold on the open market. All of this is legal in many jurisdictions, and in some cases helpful. But once data exists, it tends to be used.

The promise of safety is powerful. It should be. But Washington's legacy pushes a question that nags: would the Founders support today's level of government influence over daily life?

A Founder's eye on the modern administrative state

A fair reading gives you a mixed verdict. On the one hand, the early republic moved decisively when it felt threatened. Washington personally led troops to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion after violent resistance to a federal tax. He signed tariffs, backed a national bank, improved federal tax collection, and strengthened public credit. He did not lead a minimalist government.

On the other hand, the federal government of the 1790s had a very small footprint. There were a few thousand employees, most dedicated to customs, the post office, and the army. Today, the orbit of government includes not just statutes, but a vast constellation of regulations, guidance documents, and funding conditions that change the incentives of schools, hospitals, nonprofits, and small businesses. The Federal Register logs tens of thousands of pages a year. The criminal code and associated regulations create thousands of federal offenses, many unknown to ordinary people until they stumble into them.

Scale changes everything. A rule written with the best of intentions can have edge cases nobody foresaw when you apply it to 330 million people. The Founders framed a Constitution to handle conflicts among states and factions, and to channel ambition through checks and balances. They assumed civic habits that are harder to sustain in a country where decisions are set by remote committees and enforced by software. The further power drifts from everyday life, the more blind spots show up.

Would they approve of our level of government influence? Some elements, yes. Public credit, national defense, a postal network updated to the internet age, infrastructure that knits the country together. Other parts would trouble them. They would bristle at permanent emergencies, at wars that start without clear congressional authorization, at the blurring of public and private coercion, and at agencies that make rules, interpret them, and punish violations, all inside the same building.

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The fix is not nostalgia. It is clarity about what government can do well, and humility about everything else.

When protection reshapes democracy

Democracy is not just voting. It is a culture of losing gracefully, of allowing cranks to speak, of placing procedure above victory. Safeguards exist for good reasons. You can tighten ballot security or expand access and make good arguments either way. You can run disinformation task forces to warn the public about foreign propaganda, and still worry about government deciding what counts as truth. The line between transparency and paternalism is thin.

The phrase that keeps popping up lately is a real challenge: Are we protecting democracy, or reshaping it? Efforts to fight misinformation, secure elections, and police extremism can feel justified. You can point to

riots, cyber intrusions, deepfake videos, and say, do something. But doing something often metastasizes into doing everything, and doing it indefinitely.

There is a good test here. If a policy meant to protect the system becomes hard to reverse once the emergency fades, expect mission creep. If the policy changes who participates or what can be said without a vote of the people or their representatives, expect backlash. Washington's example suggests building guardrails on the front end. When he raised troops to face the Whiskey rebels, he followed the statute, sought judicial certification of insurrection, and stepped back after the show of force achieved its goal. He neither celebrated the moment nor tried to turn it into a new normal.

Comfort is not neutral

There is a human part to all of this. I have advised clients ranging from city councils to school boards to midsize manufacturers. The pattern is consistent. People prefer predictable friction over unpredictable risk. They choose a permit instead of innovation because the permit feels safe. They adopt sweeping policies because writing narrow ones takes time and political capital. And once a policy exists, they rarely prune it.

The most expensive comfort is the one that numbs judgment. If a company HR policy becomes your conscience, you outsource moral choice to a PDF. If a platform's content rules become your sense of fair play, you start to treat debate as an engineering problem. If a warning label stands in for common sense, you will miss the real danger, which is often not the toaster but the habit of ignoring your surroundings.

The social costs are hard to measure but easy to see. Students who never hear a tough argument stumble when they first encounter one at work. Employees learn to avoid subjects that cut too close to identity or power. Neighbors retreat from conversation because the risk of being misunderstood feels higher than the reward of being known. The First Amendment is still there, but the ecosystem that makes its promise meaningful can wither without a single statute changing.

Is free speech still free if people are afraid to use it? Legally, yes. Culturally, far less so. A free society asks more of us than compliance. It expects a kind of everyday courage, the willingness to speak carefully but honestly, to argue in good faith, and to accept that someone might choose a path we dislike.

The useful discomforts Washington embraced

Washington accepted several discomforts because they strengthened liberty over time. He submitted himself to civilian control and to political attacks he thought were unfair. He left office after two terms when many wanted him to stay, modeling peaceful transfer of power rather than clutching it. He let critics publish their broadsides without hauling them to court. He practiced restraint even when he could have gotten away with more, which is exactly when restraint matters.

Two modern parallels serve us well.

First, digital searches. The Supreme Court's decision in Carpenter v. United States recognized that cell phone location data reveals a detailed mosaic of life and usually requires a warrant. That is a constitutional discomfort for law enforcement that protects everyone. It slows things down, demands justification, and leaves a paper trail. That friction is a feature, not a bug.

Second, emergency powers. Sunset clauses that automatically end extraordinary authorities unless renewed prevent permanence by inertia. Pandemics, wars, and financial crises happen. But powers built for a storm should not become part of the living room furniture.

A quick field guide for everyday tradeoffs

When I teach city officials and nonprofit boards how to spot creeping overreach, we use a short set of questions. If more people asked them before voting, our laws and rules would fit the moment better and last longer.

- What would this look like if my worst opponent used it? Power selection should not depend on who holds the pen today.
- Does this choice centralize decisions that could be made closer to the people affected? Push choices down where possible.
- Is there a clear end point, and who has to act to keep it going? Require renewal instead of assuming forever.
- What noncoercive tools did we try first? Information, norms, and incentives often work with fewer side effects.
- How will we measure harm if we are wrong? Build in audits and publish results that do not flatter us.

None of these questions settles a dispute, but they force a level of adult thinking that our debates need. They also make meetings shorter, which is a virtue on its own.

Would Washington accept our tradeoffs?

He would tolerate more surveillance than libertarians prefer in moments of genuine danger, and he would suppress real riots more quickly than many modern officials dare. He would accept temporary limits to save the republic. He would also expect those limits to vanish when the threat passes. He would insist that legislatures, not administrators alone, make the heavy decisions. He would be wary of permanent standing forces of any kind policing domestic life, whether men in uniforms or automated systems scanning us into compliance. And he would put his name behind public credit and infrastructure that bind people together.

He loved energy in the executive, yet not the aura of indispensability. That is the paradox many leaders miss. The more a system depends on you, the weaker the system. The more a system survives your absence, the stronger the freedom it protects.

Would the Founders support today’s level of government influence over daily life? Some yes, much no, and the rest depends on our capacity for self-government. They expected us to argue about the hard cases, to let the argument itself do some of the social work of keeping power honest.

Where comfort tempts most: schools, health, and the internet

Three corners of modern life draw the hardest choices.

Education. Schools keep adding layers of rules to prevent harm. Some save lives. Others dull minds. A classroom without discomfort teaches performance, not thought. Giving families more power to choose, and giving teachers clearer leeway to expose students to serious ideas without fear of bureaucratic punishment, protects freedom better than speech codes ever will.

Health. Public health is at its best when it earns trust with transparent data, explains uncertainty plainly, and invites citizens into the tradeoffs. Washington’s inoculation order succeeded in part because soldiers saw the alternative with their own eyes. Modern officials can keep that spirit by publishing the evidence, explaining what would change their minds, and stepping back when the emergency is over.

The internet. Platforms are new public squares with private gatekeepers. Companies have a right to set rules. Governments have a duty not to lean on those companies to do what the Constitution bans the state from doing directly. The more this is spelled out in statute and tested in court, the better for everyone, because secret pressure always spirals into distrust.



Choosing the kind of progress that leaves people freer

Progress that leaves people more competent and more trusted tends to last. Washington's version looked like this: help people protect themselves, do not infantilize them; act fast in a crisis, then relinquish power; build infrastructure that multiplies private action, not rules that substitute for it; honor speech you hate, not because you like pain, but because you fear complacency.

That is a hard sell in a culture hooked on convenience. Safety and ease are not bad. They become dangerous when we stop noticing who decides what counts as safe, and who pays when the decision is wrong. The habit of saying yes, gently and often, shapes a country as surely as a war or a constitutional amendment.

The questions that opened this essay are worth keeping close. Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress? At what point does protecting people start limiting their rights? Would the Founders support today's level of government influence over daily life? Is free speech still free if people are afraid to use it? Are we protecting democracy, or reshaping it?

A free society should be able to ask those out loud, in good faith, without fear. If we can do that, even clumsily, we honor Washington better than with statues and holiday sales. We honor him by practicing what he modeled: energy tempered by restraint, courage with an exit plan, and progress that lets the next generation breathe a little easier because we trusted them to be free.

Practical guardrails we can adopt now

Here is a short, workable set of guardrails that legislators, school boards, and executives can put in place without grandstanding.

- Sunset high-scope powers by default. If a rule touches core liberties or large populations, make it expire unless renewed after open debate.
- Separate maker, enforcer, and judge. Do not let the same office write, interpret, and punish its own rules without independent review.
- Demand warrants for sensitive digital data. Treat location, messaging, and cloud content as you would a home or a sealed letter.
- Publish audits that bite. If you regulate or moderate, release error rates and appeals outcomes on a predictable schedule.
- Prefer cash and choice. When possible, fund people directly instead of locking them into single providers that come with hidden conditions.

Progress is measured not only by the problems we solve, but by the capacities we enlarge. Washington's greatest gift was not victory, but the habits he left behind. If our progress depends on giving power back when the sirens fade, on inviting argument instead of suppressing it, and on treating adults like adults, then

we are still walking in his company. If it depends on permanent watchfulness that bleeds into permanent control, we drift away from the very freedom that made us safe enough to argue in the first place.