

# George Washington's Greatest Mistake

Richard H. Curtis

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

June 24, 1989

Speaking at a research lodge can be a challenging experience. A research lodge is composed of those who want to learn more about Masonry, those who ought to learn more, and those who know it all anyway. How do you reach a group like that?

If some of you thought I was going to impart great knowledge today, I am sorry to disappoint you. I am not going to give you answers. I'm going to leave you with questions. We will not solve problems today, but we may create some.

On the way from the airport yesterday I noticed a safety sign as we approached a school district. The sign read: "Drive carefully -- Don't Kill a Child." Written beneath it in a childish scrawl was: "Wait for a teacher."

I am not a teacher. And I hope you won't rev up your engines with any malicious intent. I may upset some of you, but I do hope I can leave in one piece. It may seem strange for a Yankee to come to Virginia to point out George Washington's shortcomings. One would assume that such a person would either be wearing a bullet-proof vest or had arrived already with a head full of lead. Before you fire your first shot let me assure you that I have no intention of destroying anyone's image of George Washington as a fine general and President. And although I never had the opportunity to meet George personally, I can only assume he was also a fine Mason.

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

I'm not sure what we mean by "fine Mason." Today a "fine Mason" could be someone who faithfully pays his dues, happily devours everything on his plate at lodge suppers, and quietly sits on the sidelines at a lodge meeting -- with or without dozing, and then returns for more of the same at the next meeting.

That was not George Washington's style. I am not qualified to paint a picture of Masonic meetings in Colonial America. But we can only assume that Washington's involvement with so many other concerns did not lend itself to a schedule of attending regular lodge meetings. I do not wish to get hung up on details of Washington's Masonic participation. There have been too many conflicting views on that subject. Did he attend such-and-such lodge? Did he actually preside over Alexandria Lodge? Was he really asked to serve as Grand Master of Virginia? Allen Roberts has done a beautiful job of compiling data on Washington. But answers to these questions are not relevant to my remarks today.

There is only one aspect of Washington's Masonic career that pertains to my discussion here with you this morning. In December of 1779, American Union Lodge proposed that George Washington serve as General Grand Master. At approximately the same time, the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania purportedly came up with a similar proposal. George Washington made many fateful decisions during the course of his life. But I contend that his decision to refuse the offer to lead Masonry in America was his gravest mistake.

Some say it was not his fault. That it was really the fault of other Grand Lodges for rejecting the notion of a General Grand Lodge at that time. No job description was ever written. Would a General Grand Master assume the powers of the existing Grand Lodges? That was a big question in the minds of some.

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

Let's face it. In 1779 there was plenty of dissension between Federalists and anti-Federalists. Should the colonies unite or should each remain independent? That was still a major concern in 1787 during the ratification process.

Henry Coil summed it up nicely: "The proposal for a General Grand Master aroused essentially the same jealousies which made it so difficult to frame and adopt the Constitution of the United States."

The matter of a General Grand Lodge did not die. The records show that in 1819 the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania once again raised the question. This time much of the emphasis was placed on the need for standardizing the Masonic ritual among the various Grand Lodges.

By 1822, representatives from many Grand Lodges met in Washington, DC. The question of a General Grand Lodge was taken up and rejected. Ironically, it was Pennsylvanians who argued against the proposal. They were worried that such a body would infringe upon the jurisdictions of existing Grand Lodges. Here are some other excuses given:

1. It would be too unwieldy,
2. It would be unable to make prompt decisions because of distance and weather,
3. It would probably be composed of persons chosen for their prominence in public life rather than for their Masonic qualifications.

There have been many attempts to come together. The infamous Baltimore conventions in the 1840's attempted to settle the issue but the Grand Lodges could not agree. Further efforts in the 1850's proved fruitless.

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

Perhaps World War I did more to wake up American Masonry than any other event. Masons were concerned about servicemen during the war. Government officials had turned down requests from various Grand Lodge leaders to travel to Europe to provide aid and comfort to Masons in uniform, because the federal government did not want to work with 50 or more Masonic groups. "Give us one Masonic agency to deal with," government officials said.

By the early 1900's, Grand Lodges had learned to live with jurisdictional sovereignty. Yet several Masonic leaders saw the need for a central agency to coordinate efforts to assist Masonic brethren serving their country. The war had ended, however, before representatives of 22 Grand Lodges were finally brought together to discuss the matter. At a meeting at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in November 1918, there was some interest in forming a national Masonic agency -- one that could be of service in peacetime as well as war. A proposal was prepared and the representatives returned to their various Grand Lodges to seek approval. The following November, 34 Grand Lodges were represented at the first annual meeting of the Masonic Service Association.

To ease the minds of those who still feared that the Grand Lodges might become subordinate to the newly-formed agency, a provision was written into the constitution so that "this constitution shall never be amended in such a manner as to provide or permit the development of the Association into a National Grand Lodge."

The history of the MSA has been well documented by Allen Roberts, who wrote [Freemasonry's Servant](#), an interesting narrative of the first 50 years of the Association. To date there are still three Grand Lodges refusing to support the MSA - Arkansas, Texas, and West Virginia. If one were to examine the reasons closely, there would probably be a common thread - fear of a General Grand Lodge.

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

During most of this century the Grand Masters of North America have met annually each February. That conference, however, is used mostly as a social gathering and nothing is accomplished that would bind any Grand Lodge.

The current situation with most Grand Lodges today closely resembles the old children's fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." In too many instances we have Masonic leaders parading around their states in all their pomp and glory, but everyone is afraid to tell them that they have no clothes on. There is no substance to their programs or aims or philosophy. Should we judge a leader's success by the number of lodges he can visit in the course of his term? Should we judge a leader's success by the number of tuxedos he has in his closet?

In many Grand Lodges the Grand Master serves for only one year. He is titular head with little opportunity to develop a long-range plan. He is concerned with his year, primarily because he wants to make himself look good. Occasionally a Grand Master realizes that things don't happen overnight, and he may work hard with his predecessors to build for his eventual reign. But all his efforts are still quite provincial. They may make him look good among Masons within his state, but they do nothing for Masonry in general so far as the non-Mason is concerned.

It seems to me that one of the big concerns among so many Masonic leaders is that Masonry must remain forever exactly as it is today. That would imply that Masonry today is exactly the same as it was 200 years ago. Do you believe that?

Do you know that there are still people who believe that Adam was the first Mason? Perhaps he was raised to the sublime degree by Eve - and we've been living under the misconception that there was no place for women in Masonry.

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

Do you know that there are people who are convinced that today's Masonry can be traced directly to King Solomon? Perhaps he should be blamed for not passing on the title of General Grand Master of the World.

If there is one word in the English language that causes more Masonic leaders to flinch it is the word "change." Go to a Grand Master's Conference in Washington some time and with all of them gathered in one room, yell the word "change." You would think you had yelled the word "fire." Watch them scramble for the exits.

We are not supposed to include the words "change" and "Masonry" in the same sentence. Last fall the Barton-Gillet Company of Baltimore was hired to conduct a national survey among non-Masons to determine their attitudes toward Masonry. The results were presented to the Grand Masters at their Conference in February. I asked an executive of the company to prepare an article for *The Northern Light*. While I was reviewing his article with him, I suggested that he might make a few revisions. "Couldn't we find another word for 'change'," I asked. This man was not a Mason at the time of the survey but has since begun the process. He said to me, "What do Masons have against the word 'change'? If I had a dollar for everyone who has told me not to use that word, I could retire."

In a recent issue of *Arizona Masonry*, the editor (Terry Schick) wrote an article, "Do Attitudes Regarding Change Need Revision?" He was commenting on the annual communication of the Grand Lodge of Arizona.

What has usually been the case at Annual Communication? Little change for one thing. After all, Freemasonry has been around a long, long time; it has worked well for centuries, and there's no reason to make any great changes.

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

Or so it seems the theory goes . . . as well as the practice when it comes to major revisions in Freemasonry in Arizona.

Why is this? Could it be that many of us have a mind set when it comes to change? That we blindly say 'no' to just about anything that might rock the boat - even just a tiny bit?

Do we have an attitude I heard that goes something like this: Someone said, "If you're in doubt about it, then vote no to be safe." What a head-in-the-sand attitude!

A much better way would be to become informed about a proposal, to study in depth the ramifications of a proposal. And only then decide whether to favor or go against the issue. That's the intelligent way, in my book.

Then he goes on to quote Ronald Sherold, a Grand Lodge officer in California:

Masonry must be willing to accept limited changes.

I believe most firmly that we must accept the inevitability of limited change if we are to survive!

He concludes with a quote from Tom Peters in his management book, Thriving on Chaos:

The old saw, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" needs revision. I propose: "If it ain't broke, you just haven't looked hard enough. Fix it anyway."

Now when you mix the word "change" with the idea of a General Grand Lodge and you put them together in the same bowl, you can plan to bake a very explosive cake. You can

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

find someone to bake it, but you can't find enough people willing to eat it. I doubt if you could even find enough Masonic leaders willing to read the recipe. Some would become masochistic by stabbing it with a fork.

Don't expect to see Grand Lodges rushing to form a General Grand Lodge in the near future. It won't happen. In most cases it's heresy to even suggest it. But there is a need to share our resources and begin to work together.

First we must accept the premise that Masonry has evolved over the years, just as this country has evolved, just as people's lives have changed.

Next we must be ready to accept the idea that if Masonry is to survive it must continue to evolve (Evolve is another way of saying "change"). Then we must be willing to look at ways to strengthen Masonry (Watch out! "Strengthen" is another word for "change"). Perhaps we may find that the best solution really is a General Grand Lodge. Sure it would hurt many egos but why should we rule it out just because it is something that has never been done? There is certainly a need for some centralization. And something must be done soon.

Here is just one situation. Masonry has been attacked by Fundamentalist groups. No one responds. The general public assumes the Fundamentalists are right. No one speaks for all of Masonry in this country. There are 50 fiefdoms out there attempting to operate outmoded feudalistic systems in a world that revolves in a different orbit.

I'm not suggesting that we change our philosophy of upright living and sound moral standards. But I am suggesting that we could improve (that's another word for "change")



## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

we could improve our operating procedures. And I don't believe it can be done with our present method with 50 independent sovereign princes.

Fred Latham, a Past Grand Master of Oklahoma, wrote a book on the history of Oklahoma Masonry. Hidden in his preface are some strong words of wisdom:

Those who so loudly resist making any change seem to have overlooked, or ignored, the fact that if Freemasonry has already reached the point of perfection, where there is no need for change or improvement, it is the first man-made and man-managed institution to do so.

There have been many who have said that we should be promoting Masonry on a national scale. Who's going to lead it? Who's going to fund it? It is not economically feasible for each independent Grand Lodge to attempt to do it within its own jurisdiction. Some have tried. But each Grand Lodge cannot afford to reinvent the wheel. In fact, so many of them have been their wheels so much they have created deep, deep ruts. And if we're not careful, it won't be long before we find that we will not be able to get out of the ditches we have dug for ourselves. Grand Lodges must learn to work together for Masonry to survive.

Current statistics show that Masonry in the United States has been on a steady decline since 1959. And the forecast for the future is far from optimistic.

Some say membership is not the answer to Masonry's problems. Well, look at it this way. Without membership, we won't have to worry about Masonry's problems. There won't be any problems, because there won't be any organized Masonry. The few remaining Masons

## George Washington's Greatest Mistake - Richard H. Curtis

in each state will not be able to maintain lodges and probably won't have any contact with their diminished counterparts in other states. They will merely hold onto a dilapidated membership card that will remind them of "the good old days." Ah, yes, those good old "independent" days.

Most Worshipful Grand Master, I don't want you to take any of my remarks personally. I had never met you before today. I do not know your thoughts on any of the subjects mentioned, but since my arrival in Virginia yesterday I have heard some great things about you. I have been told that you are willing to look at Masonry's future with your eyes open. But I'm sure you will agree that there are far too many in a position of leadership in American Masonry who are nearsighted and would prefer to hide behind rose-colored glasses. They are unwilling or unable to pick up the torch of Masonry and run with it.

You know, it's tough to be a leader today. You can't be sure whether people are following you or chasing you.

Hindsight won't get us very far, but let's just dream for a moment. What would this land be like today if our forefathers had rejected a United States Constitution? Would each state militia be defending its borders against invasion from its neighboring states? Would we need a passport to cross state lines? What would Masonry be like today if George Washington had accepted the position of General Grand Master? Would he have done for Masonry what he did for the country?

Oh, Uncle George, if only you had said "yes."