

A Meeting with George Washington

If I had the opportunity to sit down with a prominent Washington, D.C. figure, I would choose George Washington. As the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and our nation's first president, he had to make a lot of tough decisions that could have potentially led to the demise of our young nation. One scenario in which I am particularly interested took place during the Revolutionary War when just about ninety percent of the Continental Army's deaths were caused by diseases. A large portion of the disease was caused by various kinds of smallpox. Smallpox is a potentially fatal disease that starts with fever and vomiting, an outbreak of ulcers in the mouth, and a skin rash. The skin rash turned into highly contagious fluid-filled blisters, and the fatality rate was very high. Washington had to find a solution to this problem or else he would unquestionably lose the war. Inoculation in those days was far more dangerous and primitive than today's vaccinations. The most common method was to cut a person's skin and rub it with a thread or cloth contaminated with the pus from the blisters of an infected person. Nevertheless, Washington still considered it to serve as an antidote for the disease. He knew a mass inoculation campaign could backfire and might cause more disease than it prevented, and he also worried that his decision might affect recruitment numbers. After weighing both pros and cons, Washington told the Continental Congress on February 5, 1777, of his plans for mass inoculation. The general's plans contradicted the 1776 proclamation by the Continental Congress, which prohibited inoculations. He gained approval from Congress, and his plan and course of action was largely successful. This was the military's first mass inoculation requirement.

Learning about this smallpox event in my history class got me wondering how Washington went about making this critical decision. How does a prominent leader in his position make a decision that could be devastating to our country? Without much research or data on the inoculation of smallpox, how did Washington decide to risk the lives of thousands of American troops? Undoubtedly he faced much doubt and criticism, and I would like to ask him where he found the strength to hold strong and firm to his beliefs. Did making this decision gain the trust of citizens and other leaders when the time came to make another tough decision?

I admire George Washington for his faith and his willingness to stand firm for what he believed was the best course for his country. His character and leadership qualities were extraordinary, and it would be a privilege to be able to have an actual conversation with him.