



Broadway Family Karate

Personal Development Through the Martial Arts

Warrior Personal Strength: **Courtesy**

Lesson #5: What is an “honorific”, and why did George need one?

What’s an “honorific” anyway, and why did George need one?

An “honorific” is a special way we speak to or about someone else that shows courtesy and respect. Some of these we use so often we don’t think about them very much – when we call someone Ms. Smith or Mr. Jones, we’re using an honorific. A judge is usually called “Your Honor”.

When George was elected President, no-one was sure what they should call him. Many people had different opinions over what “honorific” would show proper Courtesy and respect – and they often disagreed strongly with each other.

George was elected first President of the United States at the beginning of 1789. He agreed to accept election only reluctantly. He had led the Continental Army through eight hard, frustrating years during the War of Independence. After many defeats, he had finally led the army to victory. Then he had worked with other leaders to plan a new government for the United States.

George thought he had done enough – now he was going to stay home in Virginia, sit under a shade tree, and raise mules. But many of his friends – people like Henry Knox, Alex Hamilton, and many more – thought differently. Every time

they spoke to George, every letter they wrote to him, they insisted the new government would only be a success if George served as the first President.

George's friends refused to take "no" for an answer. They tried everything they could to persuade him – they told him everyone was depending on him. They kept after him, insisting he had to do it. After many long months, George agreed to take to take on the job.

The new government of the United States would meet for the very first time in New York in the Spring of 1789. And it *was* completely new. No-one was certain how well it would work – or if it would work at all. For everyone involved, and especially for George, there would be plenty of unexpected new challenges.

One of the first of these involved George – and how to treat him with courtesy and respect. As the Senators and Representatives gathered in New York to form the first congress, George was on his way north from Virginia. When George arrived in a few days and took up his duties as President, what should they call him? What would be courteous and respectful? What was his proper honorific?

Since he had commanded the Continental Army, George was usually called "General Washington" or sometimes "Your Excellency". But what honorific to use once he became President?

This was a harder question to answer than you might think. In 1789, almost all other countries were led by princes, kings or even emperors. They were called things like "Your Majesty" (King George III), or "Your Most Christian Majesty" (King Louis XVI), or even "Your Imperial Majesty" (Emperor Joseph II of Austria). But the new United States wasn't a kingdom or an empire – it was a republic, led by an elected President: George.

The Senators and Representatives of the first congress would have to decide soon.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Many of the other leaders of the new United States insisted to George that he had to serve as the first president – no-one else was as trusted or respected as he was. Did they say this just to butter him up and get on his good side, or did they really believe it to be true? Is it important to be honest in being courteous and respectful?
- 2) George could have refused election as President – no-one could force him to take the job. His closest friends told him that everyone was depending on him to do it – the new government wouldn't succeed without him. Would it have been courteous for George to tell them to find somebody else – raising mules in Virginia was more important to him? Does courtesy mean that we're sometimes willing to put other people's needs before our own?
- 3) What are some ways we use honorifics now?