



Broadway Family Karate

Personal Development Through the Martial Arts

Warrior Personal Strength: Courtesy

Lesson #6: What “honorific” did the first congress decide on for George?

As George travelled north by coach from Virginia in the Spring of 1789, the first congress met in New York. Two groups would have to decide on the proper honorific for George – the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The honorific had to be something that both the Representatives and the Senators could agree on. But the two groups met separately first, to talk over their ideas and work up a specific honorific. They met in different rooms in the old New York City Hall. It had been spruced up for the first congress and was renamed “Federal Hall”.

The Representatives made their decision fairly quickly. James Madison led many of the discussions in the House. James and George had worked closely together on planning and launching the new government. James had also repeatedly urged George to accept election as President. He knew George believed a simple, straightforward honorific would be best.

James recommended the Representatives simply use the description in the new constitution: “President of the United States” when talking about George, and just “Mr. President” when speaking to him. After some discussion, the Representatives agreed on this.

The Senators had a much tougher time making their decision. While some of them agreed with the Representatives, many didn't.

John Adams, who presided over the Senate, believed that a grand, exalted honorific was essential – and he said so. Just “President” on its own wasn’t properly respectful – most social clubs had Presidents. George should have a proper honorific, just like the leaders of other countries. John said that “His Highness”, or “His Serene Highness”, or possibly “His Majesty” would show the proper courtesy and respect.

William Maclay, Senator from Pennsylvania, disagreed completely. He made fun of John and his ideas. William said that “His Highness” would be fine for a very tall President, but what should they call someone short? Everybody in the room knew he meant John, who was short and heavyset. William started calling John “His Rotundity”, mocking both his ideas and his appearance.

A rotunda is a big, round, empty space in a building.

John was very sensitive, and his feelings were deeply hurt – but he spoke to William politely, and tried to persuade him to change his mind. William made it clear he didn’t think John had anything to say that was worth his time to listen to. He turned his back and walked away, without letting John finish what he was saying.

John was by no means alone – some Senators agreed with his ideas and made their own suggestions about suitable honorifics for George: “His Elective Majesty”, “His Supremacy”, and “His Most Illustrious Highness” were some of them. The wrangling went on for many days, without the Senators being able to agree.

The Representatives were tired of waiting for the Senators to make up their minds. They went ahead and started using the

honorific they had chosen: *President of the United States*. If the Senators wanted to use a different honorific, that was their affair.

Finally, the Senators passed a resolution. They started off by recommending a grand, exalted honorific for George: “President of the United States and Protector of their Liberties”. But they finished their resolution by agreeing that the Senators would follow the same practice as the Representatives, and use the same honorific for George – “for the present”.

George was relieved when he arrived in New York. Keeping it simple and straightforward – “President of the United States” – suited him personally. James had been right about that. It also fit with his ideas about making the new government acceptable, effective and respected.

Yes, his simple honorific was new and different in 1789. It was not the sort of thing you would call a king or an emperor – but George wasn’t either of these. He was an elected President – and, one day, he was determined he would step down and return home to Virginia as a private citizen. With time and practice, people would get used to speaking to him as “Mr. President” – which remains true today.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) John Adams was short and heavyset. William Maclay made fun of John’s appearance and his ideas by calling him “His Rotundity”. Do you think this was a courteous and respectful way to disagree?
- 2) John was very sensitive, and his feelings were hurt – but he spoke to William courteously, and tried to persuade him to change his mind. William turned his back and walked away before John had finished what he was saying. Was this courteous and respectful? Should he

have heard John out, even though he didn't agree with him?

- 3) Do you think George was correct – that a simple, straightforward honorific would be courteous and respectful? Should he have been called “His High Mightiness the President of the United States and Defender of their Liberties” instead? Or would that have just sounded silly?

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