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Inside this issue:

- ★ Presidents' Day
- ★ US Focus On: Chicago
- ★ Quiz

Page 1

PRESIDENTS' DAY A Tribute to George Washington

Americans have long honored George Washington, commander of the United States armies in the War of Independence, first president of the United States, and "first in the hearts of his countrymen."

During the Revolutionary War, Washington's small band of soldiers faced a well-equipped professional army. However he led forces to victory in the face of incredible hardships.

Washington enjoyed nearly universal respect, not least for spurning all offers of political power at the moment of his military triumph (1781), choosing instead to return to his Mount Vernon, Virginia farm. The drafters of the new Constitution in 1787 were willing to afford the executive branch greater powers because they anticipated that Washington, who could be counted on not to abuse his office, would serve as the chief executive, and would establish important precedents for his successors.

The most popular figure in America at the end of his second four-year term, Washington again decided to relinquish power, establishing an informal eight-year limit later formalized by the 22nd Amendment to the Constitu-



This portrait of General George Washington, first president of the United States, hangs at Washington College.

tion in 1951.

In 1971, Congress fixed Washington's birthday along with a number of other holidays, to Mondays, in order to create long holiday weekends. Because a number of states (but not the federal government) also officially celebrate the February 12 birthday of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president, many

Americans have come to believe -- incorrectly -- that the third Monday of February is a consolidated "Presidents' Day" honoring both Washington and Lincoln, and indeed all U.S. presidents.

Many states designate the holiday as Presidents' Day, and merchants offer Presidents' Day sales. The federal holiday, however, remains Washington's Birthday. It is but one way in which Americans celebrate the life of the man often called the "father of his country."

The 555-foot-high (169-meter) Washington Monument, dedicated in 1885, dominates the skyline of the nation's capital, Washington, D.C. A 60-foot-high (18-meter) likeness of George Washington was carved in stone (completed in 1941) on South Dakota's Mount Rushmore, along with those of Presidents Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1976, Congress posthumously promoted Washington to the rank of six-star general of the armies, assuring that he would outrank all other members of the military, now and in the future.

