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## Ideal man for the job

Retired exec encourages ethical behavior by bringing George Washington to life

by DOROTHY WALDMAN

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**W**hat would George Washington think of the United States today? Ask him and he'll be happy to tell you.

Dr. James Hodges is George Washington, or could be, if you don't look at his face too closely. From the breeches and waistcoat to the three-cornered hat and gray pony tail, Hodges looks the part. When he speaks, he often quotes the father of our country directly or paraphrases his meanings to comment on ethics, leadership and moral principles.

When he was in the business world as a vice president at Merrill Lynch, Hodges observed more leaders than he cared to who did not act in an ethical manner.

He looked at educators and government officials in the news and was dismayed that many did not set appropriate examples for young people. He wondered how we could reasonably expect youngsters to stay on the straight-and-narrow when the nation's leaders were not.

He asked himself who would be a role model for ideal behavior. As an expert in the Revolutionary era of American history, he immediately thought of George Washington.

"During his own time, Washington was revered for his ethics. He freed his own slaves, even though he took flack for doing it," said Hodges, 71, of Bellaire. "He was disappointed that others didn't follow his lead."

Hodges said the cherry tree story is true. A

Harvard professor recently found evidence to support the validity of the tale, in which the young George admitted to chopping down the tree, a story thought for many years to be false. In his portrayal of Washington, Hodges often tells the yarn. He also tells stories about the winter at Valley Forge, and the battles for Trenton and Princeton.

In one program, Hodges relates how Washington, using leadership principles, brought together two nations, three armies, the new Congress and civilians. He tells how

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James Hodges



Photo by Mike Williams

James Hodges delights in portraying George Washington.

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American armies marched 450 miles to defeat the British at Yorktown and how Washington's courage and faith in God, his men and America sustained him and helped him create our country.

Today, Hodges hopes others will follow Washington's lead and encourages such behavior in his performances as the first president for business, educational and civic groups.

"At first I talked about him in the third person. Then I realized that I would be much more effective if I became him. I never use notes, because that would be out of character to refer to notes about my life or ideas," Hodges said. Now retired from Merrill Lynch, he has the time to be Washington full-time.

For his work in portraying the Founding Father and his ideals, Hodges was awarded the George Washington

National Medal of Honor by the Freedom Foundation of Valley Forge. As the recipient, he spoke at the group's annual meeting, which is attended by business, educational and government leaders from throughout the United States. He frequently performs at the Houston Independent School District's annual Heritage Day.

Hodges is currently finishing a book, "Beyond the Cherry Tree, The Ethical Leadership Principles of George Washington," which he hopes will be available this summer and will be available via his Web site.

He's also president of the Harris County Historical Society, following in the footsteps of Andrew Jackson Houston, the son of Sam Houston, the first president of the Republic of Texas, and occasionally portrays the elder Houston, who also put his principles above expediency and even his own well being.

But whether he's portraying the Father of Our Country or the president of Texas, Hodges' message of the importance of ethics and principles remains clear.

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Dr. James Hodges has been portraying George Washington for everyone from government leaders to grade schoolers since retiring from a successful career in business. He hopes to encourage others to aspire to Washington's ethical ideals.

Photo by Mike Williams



Please See **GEORGE** on 6AA