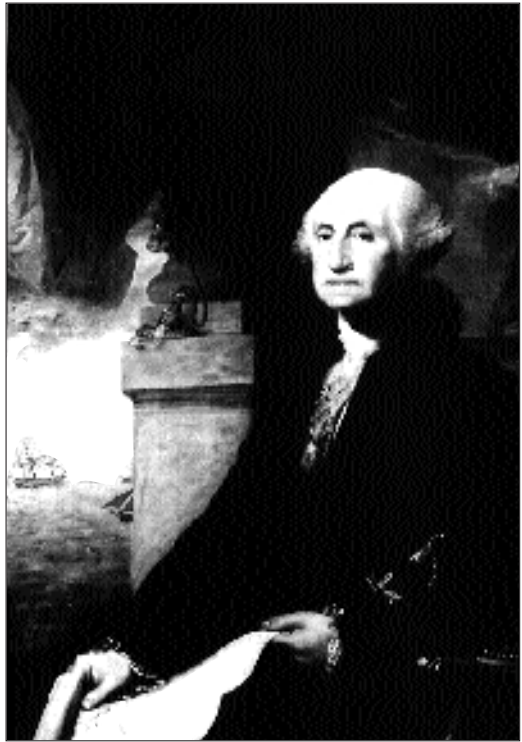


# George Washington's Farewell Address

*Two hundred years ago, on September 19, 1796, George Washington announced his decision to step down from the presidency. As venerated as Washington remains today, few Americans appreciate the wisdom contained in his carefully crafted Farewell Address—wisdom that earlier generations of Americans considered an indispensable part of their nation's political thought.*



*Portrait of Washington by Gilbert Stuart (1796-97)*

by **Matthew Spalding**

**O**ur Washington is no more! The hero, the patriot, and the sage of America, the man on whom, in times of danger, every eye was turned, and all hopes were placed, lives now only in his own great actions, and in the hearts of an affectionate and afflicted people.” With these words, drafted by James Madison and Henry Lee, John Marshall offered resolutions in Congress calling for a national period of mourning and the creation of an appropriate memorial to honor the memory of President George Washington after his death in December 1799.

Congressman Henry Lee—Lighthorse Harry of Revolutionary War renown—was chosen to deliver the official eulogy, which included these memorable words:

First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in humble and enduring scenes of private life. Pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding; his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting. . . . Correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence and virtue always felt his fostering hand. The purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues. . . . Such was the man for whom our nation mourns.

Two centuries later, Washington remains one of the most recognized and widely respected figures in American history. Indeed, in recent years there has been a major revival of interest—marked by a spate of biographies, popular essays, and political

speeches. This revival is no accident. Americans increasingly question their national purpose and role in the world. They doubt the ability of government to address the very real problems of society. They fear the breakup of community and family, and the deeper loss of morality, that seem to result from unrestrained individualism. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that Americans might look to the father of their country for guidance and inspiration.

Remarkably, though, this renaissance has so far paid scant attention to Washington's most famous written work, his Farewell Address of 1796. Such neglect is all the more strange considering the high regard in which the address was so long held. Along with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the *Federalist*, it was judged by prominent Americans of earlier times to be one of the great documents of American history and a major contribution to our political thought.

Washington's objective, as explained in the address itself, was "to offer to your solemn contemplation and to recommend to your frequent review, some sentiments which are the result of much reflection, of no inconsiderable observation, and which appear to me all important to the permanency of your felicity as a People." He was not alone in claiming some permanency for the Farewell Address. John Quincy Adams expressed his hope that the American people "may not only impress all its admonitions upon their hearts, but that it may serve as the foundation upon which the whole system of their future policy may rise, the admiration and example of future time." When Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were designing the primary reading list for the University of Virginia in 1825, they described the address as one of the best guides to the distinctive principles of American government. And Daniel Webster, speaking at the centennial of Washington's birth in 1832, said it was

"full of truths important at all times" and called on "every man in the country to reperuse [it] and consider."

Yet today, when not completely forgotten, the address is thought of as a document concerned almost exclusively with foreign policy. In fact, it is far more comprehensive. Its two great themes are union at home and independence abroad, but union and independence were not goals unto themselves. They were necessary preconditions for and the consequence of the development of what Washington called a national character.

Washington had earlier set forth his understanding of the American character in his Circular Address to the States in 1783, upon his retirement from the army, and in his First Inaugural Address in 1789. But the final and most mature statement of his views appeared, unostentatiously, on page two of Philadelphia's *American Daily Advertiser* on September 19, 1796, under the simple heading, "To the PEOPLE of the United States" and then "Friends and Fellow Citizens," all in slightly enlarged type. The author of the 6,100-word article was not disclosed until the end: "G. Washington, United States, September 19, 1796."

Washington had begun work on the address the previous spring. Finishing a rough draft (which contained several paragraphs that James Madison had written for him in 1792), he had turned it over to Alexander Hamilton for editing, reshaping, and elaboration. At the president's behest, Hamilton skillfully produced a new and fuller draft, which Washington then reworked into the final manuscript. Though a collaborative effort, the address was (as comparison of the first and final drafts reveals) emphatically Washington's at its intellectual core. And the circumstances of its publication—it was not communicated to Congress or given any official fanfare—emphasized Washington's intent to speak directly to the American people. In all respects, it was an appropriate capstone to his long public career, the culmination of four decades of political

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wisdom and practical experience.

The opening of the address is an explanation and defense of Washington's decision to retire. He modestly notes the "inferiority" of his qualifications for president and states that he has discharged his responsibilities as best "a very fallible judgment was capable." At the age of 64, the "weight of years" has made the "shade of retirement" as necessary as it is welcome. Yet his decision has been made foremost in his capacity as "a dutiful citizen" and reflects neither a diminution of zeal nor a deficiency of gratitude.

Washington's announcement is a small part of the address, but it sets the tone and gravity of the whole document. The opening carries such weight precisely because it explains more about the decisionmaker than the decision. It is a proof of Washington's character, emphasizing modesty and duty as evidence of his republicanism.

If announcing his decision to retire was Washington's sole intention, he could have ended at this point: "Here, perhaps, I ought to stop." Instead, he chose to use the occasion to offer some thoughts for the "solemn contemplation" and "frequent review" of the American people. The main body of the Farewell Address is composed of a long section recounting Washington's advice on the necessity and importance of national union, the Constitution and the rule of law, political parties, the proper habits and dispositions of the people, foreign influence in domestic affairs, international relations, and commercial policy.

At first glance, this medley of topics seems haphazard, yet an order emerges. The general theme is the preservation of the Union as the core of American nationhood. Washington argued for the policies needed to perpetuate the Union—the most important being a well-formed constitution and measures to promote good character among the people. His advice was to maintain the Union, the Constitution, and the habits of good citizenship, and to observe good faith and justice toward all nations. His warnings were to distrust the passions of political parties, be wary of foreign influence, avoid an entangling foreign policy,

and be mindful of policies that might undermine the Union, the Constitution, or the character of the people. The thread that held all these thoughts together was self-government, for the question Washington's advice was intended to answer was whether the American people were capable of ruling themselves.

In the end, Washington's argument for union was based on the idea of a common interest—persuading the people that they could best achieve the material requirements of independence by being united rather than divided. The two primary benefits of this unity were prosperity and security.

Washington's Union, however, was not a mere agreement of security or convenience. He predicted that if the people would assess the immense value of national union not only to their collective but also their individual happiness, they would inevitably come to cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it. Not only did he urge the people to discourage any hint of abandoning the Union and to disapprove any attempts to alienate its geographic sections; he also warned of those who sought to enfeeble the sacred ties which now linked the various parts. These ties—the foremost being the Union, the formal tie being the Constitution—must be cherished as *sacred* and must be *sacredly* maintained. Long before Abraham Lincoln, Washington was calling for a form of political religion.

The cornerstone of this sacred union was the uniting of the states and the people under one government: "To the efficacy and permanency of Your Union, a Government for the whole is indispensable." The previous loose confederation of states (1781–88), although chartered under the "Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union," had been proven inadequate for the purposes of nationhood. Fortunately, this endeavor had been "improved upon" by a plan calculated to create a national union. The new Constitution (in force for eight years at the time of the Farewell Address) was sufficiently energetic to meet the requirements of good government yet limited in its scope: it was "completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with

energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment.”

According to the Declaration of Independence, governments derived their just powers from the consent of the governed; it was the right of the people to form, alter, or abolish their constitution so as best to effect their safety and happiness. The Constitution was formed on the basis of this principle. Such grounding in consent, according to Washington, made it “sacredly obligatory upon all” until it was formally changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People.

One principal threat to the Union, Washington knew, was sectionalism. He was concerned that a strong preference for one’s state or local section of the country might become destructive of the common interest and national character. As though anticipating the conflict between union and sectionalism in the mid-19th century over the question of slavery, he spoke of designing men who might misrepresent the opinions of other sections of the country as an expedient to their own political power.

Taking “a more comprehensive view,” Washington warned of the “baneful effects of the Spirit of Party”—one of the two most famous recommendations of the Farewell Address. (The other recommendation, concerning foreign alliances, comes later.) This was not surprising, for the question of party, and the more notorious problem of faction, was the dominant question of Washington’s presidency and a prominent concern throughout the Founding period.

Washington noted that the spirit of party was to be found in the “strongest passions of the human mind” and was inseparable from “our nature.” (Likewise, James Madison wrote in *Federalist* 10 that “the latent causes of faction are sown in the nature of man.”) He was well aware that, in monarchies, party might be a useful check on the administration of government and thus serve the cause of liberty. Nevertheless, it was “a spirit not to be encouraged” in popular governments.

The threat of party spirit was not its existence, however, but “the constant danger of excess.” Party spirit stirred up individual passions and overpowered man’s reason, bring-

ing out the worst aspects of popular government. In its worst form, excessive party spirit distracted the government, agitated the community, fomented riots and insurrections, and opened the door to foreign influence and corruption. The problems of party spirit made it both “the interest and duty of a wise People to discourage and restrain it.” An effort ought to be made to mitigate it, he argued, not by law or coercion but by “the force of public opinion.”

Washington’s solution was not to increase the diversity of interests so much as to shape a common opinion that would transcend the petty and self-interested differences that divided men. This common opinion would be shaped by strengthening important shared characteristics: civic responsibility and education, morality and religious obligation, independence and justice toward foreign nations.

The Farewell Address teaches that the creation of a regime with a national purpose and a national character demands not only a good government but the cultivation of the proper habits and dispositions on the part of both the rulers and the ruled. The problem under the regime of the Articles of Confederation, dominated by the state governments, was that jealous and petty politics invited and encouraged a jealous and petty spirit in the people. By nourishing petty politics, speculation, and special interests, and in general serving narrow political passions, bad government generated licentious appetites and corrupted morals.

The new Constitution, Washington argued, actually encouraged moderation and good habits of government. First, the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances thwarted governmental despotism and encouraged responsibility in public representatives. A responsible government, in turn, bolstered responsible people. Second, the legitimate constitutional amendment process allowed democratic reform at the same time that it elevated the document above the popular passions of the moment, thereby encouraging deliberation

and patience in the people.

Good opinions in the people, and good government, would have a complementary effect on politics. On the one hand, the “habits of thinking” in a free people would “inspire caution” in their representatives and thereby confine them to their constitutional responsibilities and prevent a spirit of encroachment in government: “A just estimate of that love of power, and proneness to abuse it, which predominates in the human heart is sufficient to satisfy us of the truth of this position.” On the other hand, the people would learn from the lawmaking process to curb their own passions for immediate political change and abide by the legitimate legal process. The demands of good public policy would cause the people to be moderate and circumspect.

Likewise, in one of the most succinct paragraphs of the address, Washington encouraged education as a requirement of good citizenship: “Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.” The brevity of the statement was by no means indicative of the importance Washington placed on the issue.

But civic responsibility and the moderation of public passions required the moderation of private passions through the encouragement of private morality. Republican government was possible only if the public and private virtues needed for civil society and self-government remained strong and effective. And the “great Pillars of human happiness” and the “firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens,” Washington emphasized, were religion and morality.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and

*Friends & Fellow Citizens*

The period for a good sleep of all eyes, seldom in the history of the United States, has passed her darkest, and has actually arrived, when you, Honors, must be called upon to describe the person, who is to be clothed with that important trust. ~~It appears to me proper, especially as it may convey to more distant eyes, a just opinion of the public opinion, that I should do an appropriation of the case, which I have formed, to decide being considered and the number of those, out of the number, is to be made.~~

I have, at the same time, to do on the subject, the opinion, that the world has not seen the like, without a strict regard to all the considerations, which are to be taken into the selection, which bears a double relation to his country, and that, in such a manner, that a sense of service, which is in any situation, might imply, I am influenced by an desire, to be able to give you, a full and satisfactory, and cheerful, of all the respect, for your part, and so, but with the same, in the same.

The first holograph page of Washington's address.

morality are indispensable supports,” Washington wrote. They were the props of duty, the indispensable supports of the qualities that lead to political prosperity, and the great pillars of human happiness. They aided good government by teaching men their moral obligations and creating the conditions for decent politics. Neither the religious nor the political man, Washington noted, can ignore this fact: “The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them.”

No matter what might be conceded to the “influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure”—a reference to the atheistic tendencies of some forms of Enlightenment education—“reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” While there might be particular cases where morality did not depend on religion, Washington argued that this was not the case for the morality of the nation. Religion was needed to give weight to morality: “And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.”



Washington advised that the United States should “observe good faith and justice towards all Nations.” As there was a connection between private morality and public happiness in a people, so there was a connection between the virtue and happiness of a nation; as there were proper dispositions and habits of people, so too with nations. This conduct was enjoined by both religion and morality as well as good policy. Washington noted that “it will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period, a great Nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.” Besides, proper conduct toward other nations served to elevate and distinguish the national character: “The experiment is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human Nature.”

This demanded not only freedom of action but also independent thinking. If just and amicable relations with other nations were to be cultivated, “inveterate antipathies” or “passionate attachments” on the part of the people must be overcome. Americans must be free from their hatreds and allegiances to foreign nations if they were to become partisans of their own nation and the larger cause of human freedom it represented. Foreign influence, in addition to the “baneful effects” of party, was “one of the most baneful foes of Republican government.”

Washington recommended as the great rule of conduct that the United States primarily pursue commercial relations with other nations and have with them “as little political connection as possible.” Binding the destiny of America to Europe would only serve unnecessarily to “entangle” the new nation’s peace and prosperity with “the toils of European Ambition, Rivalship, Interest, Humour [and] Caprice.”

In the most quoted and misinterpreted passage of the document, Washington warned against excessive ties with any country: “’Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.” Although Washington’s words are usually cited to support isolationism, it is difficult to construe them

as a recommendation of strict noninvolvement in the affairs of the world. (For one, the activities of his administration suggested no such policy.) The infamous warning against “entangling alliances,” often attributed to the Farewell Address, is in the 1801 Inaugural Address of Thomas Jefferson. Washington warned of *political* connections and *permanent* alliances and added the hedge, “So far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do.”

Instead, Washington favored harmony and liberal intercourse with all nations as recommended by “policy, humanity and interest.” President Washington followed these principles in declaring the United States’ neutrality in the European war in April 1793. He recommended that the nation pursue a long-term course of placing itself in a position to defy external threats, defend its own neutrality, and, eventually, choose peace or war as its own “interest guided by justice shall Counsel.” Rather than a *passive* condition of detachment the president described an *active* policy of national independence as necessary for America, at some not too distant period in the future, to determine its own fate.

In the end, Washington was reluctant to assume that his counsels would have the intended effect: “I dare not hope they will make the strong and lasting impression, I could wish.” Given the significance that Washington knew would be accorded his thoughts under the circumstances, this comment seems an understatement—much like Lincoln’s remark that his words at Gettysburg would be little noted nor long remembered.

Washington was well aware that he was aiming high. He hoped that his advice might lead Americans to “controul the usual current of the passions and prevent our Nation from running the course which has hitherto marked the Destiny of Nations.” He was endeavoring to affect the usual course of human affairs, to inculcate maturity and moderation in both domestic and international affairs. If the American people chose to follow his advice, they would have to learn to control not only their public but also their private proclivities to follow their desires

instead of their reason.

And if this was too much to ask, Washington held out the prospect that his ideas might still be productive of some partial benefits. He hoped that his advice might “now and then” be remembered so as to “moderate the fury of party spirit, to warn against the mischiefs of foreign Intrigue, [and] to guard against the Impostures of pretended patriotism.” If his words did not moderate the people, at least they might serve to moderate their leaders and representatives.

The final themes of the Farewell Address are citizenship and friendship. Washington anticipated his own retirement with “pleasing expectation.” After 45 years of public service, he surely deserved the peace and quiet of private life. He hoped to enjoy for himself the blessings of the more perfect union he had worked so long and hard to secure. Yet the “ever favourite object” of the departing president’s heart was not individual solitude. Instead, he spoke as a republican citizen looking forward to sharing the rights and responsibilities of his political community: “I anticipate with pleasing expectation that retreat, in which I promise myself to realize, without alloy, the sweet enjoyment of partaking, in the midst of my fellow Citizens, the benign influence of good Laws under free Government.”

It is no coincidence that the Farewell Address was framed by references to citizenship and friendship. Washington began by referring to himself as a “dutiful citizen” and concluded by speaking of “my fellow Citizens” and to “you, my Countrymen.” Early on, Washington presented his thoughts as the “disinterested warnings of a parting friend,” while toward the end he referred to “these counsels of an old and affectionate friend.” Citizenship and friendship were literally the beginning and the end of Washington’s collected wisdom for the nation.

When he prepared his draft in 1796, before sending it to Hamilton for revision, Washington added at the top of the first page: “Friends and Fellow Citizens.” This was, in part, a recognition of an international audience. It appealed to the natural ground of peaceful and just relations among all human beings, whatever conventional divisions might separate and distinguish them. But it also reflected Washington’s understanding of his domestic audience. Early in the Farewell Address, he hoped that not just union but “Union and brotherly affection be perpetual.” Later, he warned of a perception of local interests and views that tended to render “alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.” In the end, although commercial and security interests cemented the relationship, true political harmony existed only if Americans were tied together by the bonds of friendship.

That Washington could say in 1796 that Americans had become friends and fellow citizens—despite the geographical differences, party divisions, and foreign policy dangers at the time—suggests that the Founding, meaning the creation of the regime, was in his mind complete. The challenge from that point forward was perpetuating it. Washington warned Americans that they must be ever vigilant in maintaining their constitutional government. The real task, according to the Father of the Country, was to maintain the brotherly affections of the people by guarding and encouraging the dispositions and habits most conducive to republican government.

To be sure, this is no small labor. But the challenge of perpetuation remains with us today. If Americans hope to restore their character as a nation—under much different but no less demanding circumstances—they would do well to remember the wisdom of George Washington.