

## INTRODUCTION TO WASHINGTON'S FAREWELL ADDRESS



Philadelphia's largest newspaper carried quite a momentous exclusive on September 19, 1796. The article was introduced, without editorial comment, under the simple heading: "To the PEOPLE of the United States" and then "Friends and fellow Citizens." The reader discovered the lengthy article's author only at the end, where there appeared the words: "G. Washington, United States." The first-of-its-kind presidential statement — it was not communicated to Congress, delivered on a grand occasion, or given an official fanfare — was reprinted by virtually every major newspaper in America, but only one, the *Courier of New Hampshire*, can claim the credit for having reprinted it under the title for which it is now known: "Washington's Farewell Address."

The practical purpose of the Address was to announce Washington's unexpected decision to retire from public life and not seek a third term as president. For a great leader to voluntarily relinquish political power and retire from public life was itself unprecedented in the annals of history. Washington used this occasion "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."

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It was an open letter of advice and warning to the American people about their long-term safety and happiness.

From the beginning, the Farewell Address was revered, along with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as one of the great statements of American purpose. James Madison described it as one of “the best guides to the distinctive principles” of American government, and Thomas Jefferson made it primary reading at the University of Virginia. John Marshall described it as a “last effort to impress upon his countrymen those great political truths which had been the guides of his own administration,” and argued that it contained “precepts to which the American statesman can not too frequently recur.”

Today, the Farewell Address is primarily remembered for its recommendations concerning American involvement in international affairs. The first President sternly warned the nation to be constantly alert to the wiles of foreign influence and recommended as few political connections with other nations as possible. But the document also includes Washington's advice on national union, the Constitution and the rule of law, political parties, religion and morality, foreign influence in domestic affairs, and commercial policy.

President Washington had considered retiring at the end of his first term, and, in May 1792, went so far as to ask Representative James Madison for advice on the “mode and time most proper” for announcing his intention to step down and to prepare a “valedictory address” based on Washington's instructions. In the spring of 1796, Washington again thought of retirement and the preparation of a valedictory statement, and approached Alexander Hamilton to see if he would be interested in helping to revise the work. Washington sent Hamilton a rough draft of the address, made up of the paragraphs written by Madison in 1792 and an additional, lengthier section written by Washington himself. With Washington's direction, Hamilton skillfully produced a new, fuller draft, which Washington then reworked into the final manuscript. It was this manuscript, in Washington's handwriting, that Washington showed to

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his cabinet and then delivered to David Claypoole, the owner and editor of *Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, the largest newspaper in Philadelphia.

The timing of the publication of the document is important. Washington delivered the final manuscript, dated the original proof from the first printing, and recorded the Farewell Address in his letterbook as September 17. It was published for the first time on September 19. Just nine years earlier, on September 17, 1787, the draft Constitution had been approved by the Constitutional Convention which Washington had chaired. And it was published for the first time in David Claypoole's newspaper on September 19, 1787. Washington assuredly realized the great symbolic importance of these dates.

The general theme of the Farewell Address is the preservation of the Union as the core of American nationhood. The President thought that Americans could best achieve the material requirements of independence by being united rather than divided and 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." He urged the people to discourage any hint of abandoning the Union and warned of those who sought to "enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts." The ties that linked the various parts — the foremost tie being the Union, the formal tie being the Constitution — must be cherished as *sacred* and must be *sacredly* maintained.

One potential source of division that Washington warned against was sectionalism. He was concerned that a strong preference for one's state or local section of the country might become prejudicial and destructive of the common interest and national character. Foreshadowing the conflict between Union and sectionalism in the mid-nineteenth century over the question of slavery, he spoke of designing men that might misrepresent and alienate other sections of the country as an expedient to their own political power.

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Washington also warned of “the baneful effects of the Spirit of Party”—one of the two most famous recommendations of the Farewell Address. This was not surprising, as the question of party, and the more notorious problem of faction, was a dominant question of Washington’s presidency and a prominent concern throughout the Founding period. By this he didn’t mean what we mean by political parties but instead what we call special interest groups, pushing their single-issue agendas at the expense of the common good. In its worst form, excessive party spirit distracted the government, agitated the community and opened the door to foreign influence and corruption. “A fire not to be quenched; it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest instead of warming it should consume.”

For Washington, the most important opinion to encourage was a common understanding of the rights and responsibilities of constitutional government. Thus, in one of the most succinct paragraphs of the Address, he 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.” By enlightened, Washington meant not only the basic parameters of liberal education but also knowledge of the rights of man and the obligations of citizenship.

Washington also believed that republican government was only possible if the virtues needed for civil society and self-government remained strong and effective. It is “substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government,” a rule that extends “to every species of free government.” And the “great Pillars of human happiness” and the “firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens,” he emphasized, were religion and morality. “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports.” 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

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the nation: "And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion."

Washington goes on to advise that the United States should "observe good faith and justice towards all Nations." He 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."

Americans must be free from 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 to unnecessarily "entangle" the new nation's peace and prosperity with "the toils of European Ambition, Rivalship, Interest, Humour [and] Caprice."

Washington's other famous recommendation was against excessive ties with other countries: "'Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world." (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 he favored harmony and liberal intercourse with all nations as recommended by "policy, humanity and interest" and 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."

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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." The first President was endeavoring to inculcate maturity and moderation in both domestic and international affairs, and 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 also held out the prospect 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.

Nevertheless, despite his many warnings, Washington anticipated "the sweet enjoyment of partaking, in the midst of my fellow Citizens, the benign influence of good Laws under a free Government, the ever-favourite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust, of our mutual cares, labours and dangers." Has America moved down the path that has previously "marked the Destiny of Nations"? Amidst the seemingly intractable problems of modern public policy, those looking for guidance would do well to look to the Farewell Address and its "counsels of an old and affectionate friend."

— MATTHEW SPALDING