

Washington's Farewell Address: An Exhortation to Unity and Caution against Partisanship

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Washington's Personal Background to Farewell

- 1792, Washington wanted to retire and asked James Madison to write him a farewell address
- Friends convinced him to run for second term
- Partisanship and criticism grew in second term
- By end of 2nd term, in 1796, his health was getting worse
- He felt two terms was enough and worried more than two terms would set a precedent for presidents for life
- Washington asked Alexander Hamilton to revise the draft Farewell Address begun by Madison
- Despite assistance with writing, most scholars view this address as Washington's ideas expressed by Madison and Hamilton's words
- Published in a Philadelphia newspaper and then republished in other papers

Broader Historical Context

- First President and his retirement might create a crisis.
- Fear of monarchy or civil unrest.
- The first time the country would face a transfer of power.
- Political Parties: The Federalists and the Democratic Republicans
- Tensions with England, France and Spain
- Threat of Foreign Entanglements and War in Europe

Outline of Address

- Explains his personal reasons for retiring from public life
- Expresses thanks to the American people for their support
- Highlights the successes of the country including the Constitution
- Expresses concerns and gives advice:
 - He warns about the dangers of partisanship and regional division
 - Urges Americans to cherish our national unity
 - Warns against the threat of Despotism and clever men using division and partisanship to become Despots
 - Warns about the risk of foreign governments attempting to influence our government
 - Cautions about foreign entanglements, and encourages a foreign policy of equity and fairness to all, with preference for none
 - Urges the nation to preserve the nation's credit and avoid war that leads to debt
 - Promotes religion and morality

“Unity of Government”

The **unity of government** which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you. It is justly so, for it is **a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence**, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize. But as it is easy to foresee that, from different causes and from different quarters, much pains will be taken, many artifices employed to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth; as this is the point in your political fortress against which the batteries of internal and external enemies will be most constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously) directed, it is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the **palladium** of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion that it can in any event be abandoned; and **indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.**

Benefits of Unity but the Threat of Regionalism

He argues that the North, South, West and East all benefit from mutual trade with each other.

But regional differences will be exploited by politicians and parties to divide us in order to empower them:

“In contemplating the causes which may disturb our Union, it occurs as matter of serious concern that any ground should have been furnished for characterizing parties by geographical discriminations, Northern and Southern, Atlantic and Western; whence designing men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. **One of the expedients of party to acquire influence within particular districts is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heartburnings which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.**”

Threats to the Constitution

Towards the **preservation of your government**, and the permanency of your present happy state, it is requisite, not only that you steadily discountenance irregular oppositions to its acknowledged authority, but also that you **resist with care the spirit of innovation upon its principles, however specious the pretexts**. One method of assault may be to effect, in the forms of the Constitution, alterations which will impair the energy of the system, and thus to undermine what cannot be directly overthrown... and **remember, especially, that for the efficient management of your common interests, in a country so extensive as ours, a government of as much vigor as is consistent with the perfect security of liberty is indispensable**.

Partisanship is bad but it is also inevitable

Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and **warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally.** This spirit, unfortunately, is **inseparable from our nature**, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.

Partisanship can Lead to Despotism

The **alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension**, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. **But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual;** and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty.

Checks and Balances of Constitution and Divided Power

It is important, likewise, that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution in those entrusted with its administration, **to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres, avoiding in the exercise of the powers of one department to encroach upon another.** The **spirit of encroachment** tends to **consolidate the powers of all the departments in one and thus to create, whatever the form of government, a real despotism.** 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. The **necessity of reciprocal checks in the exercise of political power, by dividing and distributing it into different depositories and constituting each the guardian of the public weal against invasions by the others,** has been evinced by experiments ancient and modern, some of them in our country and under our own eyes.

Threat of Foreign Influence

Against the **insidious wiles of foreign influence** (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, **since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government**. But that jealousy to be useful must be **impartial**; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defense against it. **Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other**. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.

Religion and Morality as Foundation of Civilized Society

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, **religion and morality are indispensable supports.** In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: **Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.** Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

Debt and War

As a very important source of strength and security, **cherish public credit**. One method of preserving it is to **use it as sparingly as possible, avoiding occasions of expense by cultivating peace**, but remembering also that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it; avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertions in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear.

Summary

- Washington established a precedent for a peaceful transfer of power.
- He recognized how partisanship, regionalism, and foreign interference could lead to division and even worse to civil war and despotism.
- He offers us the Constitution as the most important protector of our country by balancing power and by giving us something to unify around.
- What lessons can we take away today from his Farewell Address?