



Farewell Address (1796)

George Washington

In 1796, Americans faced an election for a new president. After almost eight years in office, President George Washington declined to run again. In September 1796, as voters considered their choices—John Adams vs. Thomas Jefferson—Washington published his “Farewell Address.” This document outlines his “sentiments,” or ideas, about the new nation and its future. In the opening, Washington states that his ideas are based on observations of and reflections about the nation as it was taking shape. He asks his fellow citizens to keep in mind his recommendations as the nation grows. Washington’s ideas on foreign policy had a great influence on his successors, and are seen by some historians as the origin of American isolationism. The following excerpts discuss the important issues that Washington wanted Americans to think about.

On Being an American

... Citizens by birth or choice of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections. The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation [name] derived from local discriminations [distinctions]. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together. The independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint councils and joint efforts, of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.

On Political Parties

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 [distinctions]—*Northern* and *Southern*, *Atlantic* and *Western*—whence designing [scheming] men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. One of the expedients [means to an end] of party to acquire influence within particular districts [parts of the country] is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You can not shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heartburnings [resentments] which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien [make foreign] to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal [brotherly] affection. . . .

[The spirit of party] serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble [weaken] the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity [hatred] of one part against another; foment[s] [stirs up] occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated [easy] access to the government itself through the channels of party passion. . . .

On Foreign Policy

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. . . .

Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. . . . Why forego the advantages of so peculiar [unusual] a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry [rivalry], interest, humor [mood], or caprice [whim]? . . .

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world, so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it. . . .

Review Questions

1. Why did George Washington feel that citizens should give their loyalty to the nation as a whole?
2. How did Washington feel about loyalty to state and local areas compared to loyalty to the nation?
3. (a) What did Washington think about political parties? (b) Why did he feel this way?
4. Why did Washington feel differently about foreign trade than foreign alliances?
5. In what way was George Washington discussing national unity in each of the three excerpts from his Farewell Address?
6. How do you think Washington would have felt about the American Civil War if he had lived during this later period?
7. Would it be wise today to follow Washington's advice regarding foreign policy? Explain your answer.