

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S FAREWELL ADDRESS

1796

"It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world."

Overview



A key element of George Washington's legacy to his country, his Farewell Address is one of the most memorable speeches in American history. In the first of two parts, Washington expresses his thanks for the opportunity to serve his country. In the second part, which is much longer, Washington stresses the importance of the Union in maintaining independence, peace, liberty, and prosperity. He fears that the Union may be threatened by the political turmoil and partisanship raging throughout the country because of a rise of political parties, attempts to undermine the Constitution's separation of powers, and the adherence to foreign powers at the expense of America's best interests. American foreign policy and commerce, Washington suggests, should be pragmatically developed on a country-by-country basis with America's interest always occupying center stage.

Context

After serving as commander in chief during the Revolution for eight years, Washington announced that he would retire from the army and not serve again in public office. In 1787 friends and advisers such as James Madison, Virginia governor Edmund Randolph, and Henry Knox (chief artillery officer of the Continental army and later the first U.S. Secretary of War) persuaded him to come out of retirement to serve as a delegate to a general convention of the states to amend the Articles of Confederation. When the new Constitution was ratified, Washington was unanimously elected as the country's first president. He reluctantly accepted the position and hoped to serve no longer than one full term. In May 1792, near the end of his first term, Washington asked Madison to assist in drafting a farewell address. (Madison had written Washington's presidential inaugural address in April 1789.) Domestic turmoil and European war coupled with the unified advice of the cabinet persuaded Washington to accept a second term, to which he was unanimously reelected. With partisanship raging in 1796, however, he refused to seek a third term.

Early in 1796, Washington decided to write a farewell address to announce his retirement, to thank his countrymen for the opportunity to serve, and to admonish Americans to preserve their Union. Washington had prepared farewell addresses on six previous occasions: to his fellow militia officers (January 1759), to the state executives (June 1783), to the army (November 1783), to the army officers at Fraunces Tavern in New York City (December 1783), to Congress in surrendering his commission (December 1783), and at the end of his first term as president when he asked Madison to prepare a draft address to the American people (May 1792). In February 1796, a year before the end of Washington's second term, he asked Alexander Hamilton for assistance in reworking the draft of his Farewell Address. Washington sent Hamilton the 1792 draft by Madison, his own revised copy of that draft, and some general sentiments that he wanted to express in the address. Hamilton returned all the documents to Washington with his revisions.

Washington and Hamilton exchanged ideas and copies of the address once more before Washington received Hamilton's final version, which Washington revised only slightly. Washington submitted his final version of the address to his cabinet on September 15, 1796, and all members endorsed it. Four days later, Washington publicly announced his decision to retire, and his Farewell Address was printed in the *Philadelphia American Daily Advertiser*. Reprinted in newspapers and as broadsides and pamphlets throughout the country, the address was immediately perceived as part of the partisan politics of the day—Federalists extolled it while Jeffersonians criticized it, especially Washington's harsh statements about political parties. Four years later, with Jefferson's victory in the election of 1800 and the gradual demise of the Federalist Party, the advice in Washington's Farewell Address was embraced by the Jeffersonians and came to be universally admired and perceived as Washington's legacy to his country.

About the Author

George Washington was born in Westmoreland County, Virginia, on February 22, 1732, into a middle-gentry family. His father died when he was only eleven years old. His

Time Line

1759

- **January 10**
Washington gives a letter to the officers of the Virginia Regiment.

1775

- **June 15**
Washington becomes commander in chief of Continental military.

1783

- **March 15**
Washington gives a speech to army officers at Newburgh, New York.
- **June 8–14**
Washington presents his last circular to the states as commander in chief.
- **November 2**
Washington gives farewell orders to the army.
- **December 4**
Washington bids farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern in New York City.
- **December 23**
Washington surrenders his commission to Congress.

1787

- **May 25–September 17**
Washington serves in the Constitutional Convention.

1788

- **June 21**
The Constitution is officially ratified.

1789

- **April 6**
Washington is elected first president under the Constitution.
- **April 30**
Washington is inaugurated as president.

1792

- **June 20**
James Madison sends Washington a draft of a farewell address.
- **December 5**
Washington is reelected president.

elder stepbrother Lawrence married into the prominent Fairfax family, and Washington often visited his brother at the Fairfax estate. It was through this connection that at age seventeen Washington was appointed surveyor of Culpeper County, which was on the fringe of the Virginia frontier. The young surveyor learned how to live in the wilderness and deal with Native Americans. He also made excellent personal and business connections and started to build his own estate by purchasing land.

Unlike most Virginia political leaders who rose to prominence through steady advancement in civilian offices, Washington's popularity came through the military. Governor Robert Dinwiddie sent Washington to order the French to leave an area Virginians considered their territory (the present-day area around Pittsburgh). Several encounters between Washington and the French led to the French and Indian War, which escalated into the Seven Years' War in Europe. In 1755 Washington escaped unscathed from the decimation of General Edward Braddock's British army. At twenty-two, Washington became commander in chief of the Virginia militia (1755–1758). Even though Washington emerged from the war as one of only a few American heroes, the British refused to give him a commission in the regular army.

Washington served in the Virginia House of Burgesses from the western district of Frederick County from 1758 to 1765 and from his home district of Fairfax County from 1766 to 1776. His marriage to the wealthy widow Martha Dandridge Custis in January 1759 brought him added land, slaves, and social prominence.

Washington joined those colonists who opposed the new imperial policy instituted after the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. He served in the First and Second Continental Congresses, arriving at the latter dressed in the uniform of a Virginia militia colonel—the only delegate dressed in a military uniform. On June 15, 1775, Congress elected him commander in chief, a position he held until the end of the war despite several early attempts to remove him.

In March 1783 Washington squelched an uprising among army officers who contemplated marching in on Congress to demand their back pay and pensions, which Congress had promised them in 1780 during the war. In early June 1783 Washington wrote his final circular letter to the chief executives of the states, informing them that he intended to retire to civilian life after the conflict ended and that he would not serve again in public office. The letter outlined what Washington thought was necessary for America to be great as a nation. First, the Union had to be preserved and Congress's powers had to be increased. Second, the country's public credit and public justice had to be maintained by paying the wartime debt both to foreign and domestic public creditors, honoring promises made to the army and its officers, and providing pensions to invalid soldiers and widows and orphans of those who had died during the war. Third, Congress had to provide an appropriate peacetime military establishment. The old militia system had been largely ineffective, thus demonstrating that some kind of standing army was essential. Last, Washington sug-