

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Wisdom of George Washington

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*Diana Schaub (b. 1959), a professor of political science at Loyola University Maryland and coeditor (with Amy and Leon Kass) of What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song, delivered these remarks at a 2012 panel discussion celebrating Washington's Birthday, "First Among Equals: George Washington and the American Presidency."*¹

The world's most generous prize money is attached not to the Nobel Prize but to the Mo Ibrahim Prize, awarded for good governance in Africa, as determined by a very simple test: a democratically elected leader who actually leaves office at the end of his term. The winner receives five million dollars plus 200,000 dollars a year for life. The 53 African nations yielded one claimant in 2011,² but not a single one for the two years previous. The precedent set by the retirement of George Washington has not been easy to establish elsewhere, prize money or not.

Thus, Washington is justly honored for his republican refusal of perpetual power—a refusal he performed not once but twice, first when he resigned supreme military authority in 1783 and then again when he relinquished presidential authority in 1797. Although Washington went *willingly*, it can't be said that he went *quietly*. Not, of course, that he made any sort of fuss and bother—that was not his style—but he did on both occasions take the opportunity to speak to his fellow citizens about the perils ahead. This impulse to extend his guiding presence over the generations indicates, I think, how difficult it actually was for the most competent man on the stage to exit of his own accord.

In Washington's first valedictory, the "Circular to the States," the General had noted that there were some who might object to his even offering political counsel for the future, viewing it as an act of arrogant presumption, "stepping out of the proper line of . . . duty." Washington responded by saying, "silence in me would be a crime." Why a crime?—because although the war had been won, it was yet to be determined, according

¹ View the panel discussion, and read other participants' remarks, at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/celebrating-george-washington.

² Pedro Verona Pires of Cape Verde.

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to Washington, “whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse.” In view of what he called “the present Crisis,” Washington was convinced it was not only permissible but incumbent on him to set forth his thoughts on government, which he proceeded to do by describing four “Pillars” that were needed to support “the glorious Fabrick of our Independency and National Character.”³

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Like the Circular, the Farewell Address was never delivered as a speech; it was, from the first, a written document, intended to be pondered, not applauded. Its audience and mode of distribution, however, were strikingly different from the Circular’s. The Circular had been sent to the respective governors of the states who were addressed with the salutation “Sir.”⁴ The “Citizens of America” were mentioned, but always in the third person as “they.” By contrast, the Farewell was published via the popular medium of the newspapers, and bore the salutation “Friends, and Fellow-Citizens”—the only instance of this intimate form of address in all of Washington’s writings. Whereas the formal voice of the Circular had been actuated by duty—remember, “silence would be a crime”—the warmer voice of the Farewell is prompted by love. As Washington himself puts it, his counsels are those of “an old and affectionate friend.”

So what did the nation’s “parting friend” offer as his last legacy for our “solemn contemplation” and “frequent review”? The 50 paragraphs of the Address are carefully structured. The primary divisions are an opening section of six paragraphs which constitutes the resignation proper, a central section of 36 paragraphs which delineates Washington’s maxims and warnings, and a concluding section of eight paragraphs which measures Washington’s own administration against his expressed principles and solicits pardon for any shortcomings.

The language of the opening section, with its ostentatious modesty, is now alien to us. Our self-trumpeting politicians would never dream of drawing attention, as Washington does, to his “very fallible judgment” and “incompetent abilities.” For himself, Washington claims only “good intentions.” Of course, maybe it’s easier to appear humble when one’s actions have spoken so irrefutably. The great man in the infant republic effaces himself, and deflects the credit onto his fellow citizens. “If benefits have resulted

³ The four pillars were Union, Justice, Defense, and Patriotism (national attachment on the part of the people).

⁴ The confederated nature of the audience prevented Washington from even enlarging upon the crucial fourth Pillar. He is forced to leave it to local leaders to conquer “local prejudices.” No wonder his advice was neglected.

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to our country from these services,” Washington insists, “let it always be remembered to your praise,” since “the constancy of your support was the essential prop of the efforts.” The converse of Washington’s humility is his gratitude. He closes the opening section with a prayer—a carefully itemized prayer—hoping that the nation will be blessed with the favor of Heaven; perpetual Union; fidelity to the Constitution; the wise Administration of government; and a completion of national Happiness that will inspire the worldwide spread of liberty.

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Having given his notice, Washington declares “Here, perhaps, I ought to stop.” The attention of the reader is riveted both by the style of this statement (short, punchy sentences are rare in George Washington’s writing) and its implication. What could move the ever-proper George Washington to go beyond the bounds of propriety? If he “ought to stop,” why doesn’t he? Two things—“solicitude” and “apprehension”—urge him forward to present counsels that he regards as “all important.” Interestingly, he begins this central section by declaring that the love of liberty is secure in American hearts. Unlike Tocqueville, who some decades later did worry that Americans might sacrifice their liberty, Washington’s fears took a different direction. He takes liberty as a given and proceeds to show its relation to three goods that are endangered: the Union, the Constitution, and the virtuous conduct of Government.⁵

The Union comes first. It is “a main Pillar” of independence. As such, Washington says that our “common country . . . has a right to concentrate [our] affections. The name of AMERICAN . . . must always exalt the just pride of Patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations.”⁶ Washington may be retiring to Mount Vernon but he does so as an American not a Virginian.

For Washington, patriotism is a matter of “sympathy,” but not only sympathy. He supplements the cordial attachment of North and South, East and West, with what he calls “the most commanding motives,” namely those of immediate commercial interest which link us indissolubly as “*one Nation*.” This appeal to Union, compounded of both sense and sensibility, culminates in Washington’s first warning against sectionalism and the “designing men” who would capitalize on geographic differences to divide and alienate affections rather than bridge them. One wonders what Washington would make

⁵ Discussed respectively in paragraphs 9-15, 16-18, and 19-41 in Washington’s full Address.

⁶ The only two words in the Address to appear in all capital letters are “UNION” and “AMERICAN.” It becomes clear why the dateline of the Farewell Address specified the location simply as “United States” rather than the usual Philadelphia or Mount Vernon.

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of our current partisan geography of heartland Red States and bicoastal Blue States.

Washington admits that political fraternity on the large scale that the United States is attempting is an experiment, but as such, “’Tis well worth a fair and full experiment.” We are accordingly authorized to “distrust the patriotism” of the parochial naysayers. Though Washington doesn’t coin the word “un-American,” he is very much fostering public suspicion of certain political positions—positions which because they could undermine the very “continuance of the Union” must be made disreputable. As Lincoln would later say, having learned it from Washington,

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In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.

In the Farewell Address, Washington is engaged in this ultimate task: shaping a fundamental and enduring public sentiment that will support—and just as importantly, restrict—the efforts of future American statesmen.

From Union it is but a short step to the Constitution, for the Constitution furthers “an intimate Union.” Washington’s main point in this section is that “true Liberty” entails duties upon citizens. He delivers a lesson in democratic theory: “The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their Constitutions of Government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, ’till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People, is sacredly obligatory upon all.” The warning here is not only against disobedience to law (of the sort displayed during the Whiskey Rebellion which Washington had decisively suppressed during his second term in office) but more fundamentally against faction, which Washington defines as “all combinations and Associations, under whatever plausible character, with the real design to direct, controul, counteract, or awe the regular deliberation and action of the Constituted authorities.” James Madison may have argued in *Federalist 10* that the solution to the mischiefs caused by faction is to multiply the number of factions and pit them against one another, but Washington seems to have serious reservations about the wisdom of interest group politics, seeing it as an invitation to “cunning, ambitious and unprincipled men . . . to subvert the Power of the People.”

Washington repeats his emphatic warning against “the Spirit of Party” three times,

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first in the section on Union, again in the section on the Constitution (where he warns especially against the “spirit of innovation” with regard to constitutional principles), and then most comprehensively at the beginning of the section on good government. Washington admits that partisanship is both natural and inevitable; it is, he says, “a fire not to be quenched.” His object is “by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it.” The disgust that Americans often express at extreme partisanship and even their longing for “bipartisanship” or “post-partisanship” was encouraged by Washington. A “wise People” behaves like a shovelful of dirt or a spritz of water, tamping down the partisan flames. Of course, ideologues are endlessly inventive and have discovered that they can deploy the accusation of partisanship against their opponents as a means to further their own partisan agenda. Thus, American politics becomes a less-than-candid competition to appear above politics.

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Having made explicit his theme of public opinion, Washington declares that “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports.” Calling these the “great Pillars of human happiness,” Washington makes the case for political as well as pious attention to them. Interestingly, he concludes that the way to foster religion and morality is through education. The first positive command or prescription of the Address states: “Promote then as an object of primary importance, Institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge.” Washington anticipates no conflict between religion, morality, and enlightenment.

The next rule of conduct is to “cherish public credit”—there follows sound advice on debt and taxation. Although “the execution of these maxims” belongs to the elected representatives, Washington points out that “it is necessary that public opinion should cooperate.” Who abandoned their fiscal responsibilities first, I don’t know, but we are so far from what Washington describes that this paragraph makes for painful reading, particularly his warning against “ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burthen which we ourselves ought to bear.”

Finally, there is a lengthy treatment of foreign policy that begins with the injunction to “observe good faith and justice towards all Nations” and includes Washington’s well-known advice to steer clear of “permanent Alliances,” or as Jefferson (more famously) phrased it, “entangling alliances.” Before we dismiss this advice as obsolete—suited to a young and vulnerable America rather than a superpower America—it should be said that Washington was not recommending isolationism. His message was a timeless one about the conditions for national freedom of action and the danger of allowing passions,

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whether hostile or friendly toward other nations, to dictate policy. Domestically, we ought to cultivate bonds of affection, but internationally Washington argued it was a mistake to act on the basis of sympathy or gratitude, or to expect other nations to do so. The more sober formula Washington offers is that we act as “our interest guided by our justice shall Counsel.”

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Washington closes the Farewell Address by anticipating a retreat beyond even his retreat to Mount Vernon, namely his journey toward the “Mansions of rest.” The line is said to have brought tears to the eyes of his readers. Four decades later, a young Abraham Lincoln delivered a remarkable speech that revisited Washington’s theme of “the perpetuation of our political institutions”—arguing, just as Washington had, that perpetuation depends on a firm foundation in public sentiment, and appealing to the nation’s fixed admiration of Washington as a compass point to keep us true to Washington’s principles. The Lyceum Address closed with a poetic flourish by imagining a sort of second coming of Washington. Lincoln’s hopes for that day of judgment can still serve as our own: “that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place; shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our WASHINGTON.”