

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Farewell Address to the Continental Congress

GEORGE WASHINGTON

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George Washington's famous Farewell Address was given in 1796, at the conclusion of his second term as President of the United States. (It appears later in this anthology.) But this earlier and less well-known speech of farewell is also of great significance, and it too repays careful attention. After eight years of service, and more than two years after Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, George Washington traveled to Annapolis, Maryland, where he formally resigned his commission as commander in chief of the Armies of the nascent United States of America; he delivered these remarks to the Continental Congress on December 23, 1783. Washington here offers, with remarkable brevity, a few thoughts on the outcome of the war; his own feelings on accepting and laying down his commission; his regard (and requests) for the Army and especially for the "confidential Officers" who composed his "family" during the war; and his closing benediction on "our dearest Country."

What is the tone and mood of these remarks? To what does Washington attribute his original willingness to undertake the mission? To whom and for what does he express gratitude? What does he regard to be his closing "indispensable duty"? Can you understand why he thinks so? How does Washington look upon his relation to Congress? How does he view this supposed end of his employment in public life? Imagining yourself a member of the Continental Congress, how would you have heard and received Washington's Farewell Address?¹ Historian Gordon S. Wood calls this deed "the greatest act of his life." Can you understand why?

Mr President

The great events on which my resignation depended having at length taken place; I have now the honor of offering my sincere Congratulations to Congress & of presenting myself before them to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service of my Country.

¹ Read the Continental Congress's official response to George Washington here:
<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/revolution/congress.html>.

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Happy in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable Nation, I resign with satisfaction the Appointment I accepted with diffidence—A diffidence in my abilities to accomplish so arduous a task, which however was superseded by a confidence in the rectitude of our Cause, the support of the Supreme Power of the Union, and the patronage of Heaven.

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The Successful termination of the War has verified the more sanguine expectations—and my gratitude for the interposition of Providence, and the assistance I have received from my Countrymen encreases with every review of the momentous Contest.

While I repeat my obligations to the Army in general, I should do injustice to my own feelings not to acknowledge in this place the peculiar Services and distinguished merits of the Gentlemen who have been attached to my person during the War. It was impossible the choice of confidential Officers to compose my family should have been more fortunate. Permit me Sir, to recommend in particular those, who have continued in Service to the present moment, as worthy of the favorable notice & patronage of Congress.

I consider it an indispensable duty to close this last solemn act of my Official life, by commending the Interests of our dearest Country to the protection of Almighty God, and those Who have the superintendence of them, to his holy keeping.

Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of Action—and bidding an Affectionate farewell to this August body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my Commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life.