

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Letter to Martha Washington

GEORGE WASHINGTON

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Three days after receiving his commission from the Continental Congress, General George Washington wrote this letter to his wife Martha. The letter may very well strike modern ears as overly formal and insufficiently affectionate. But giving the letter a closer reading, do you think that Washington is really indifferent or insensitive to his wife's feelings and concerns? What is Washington's understanding of the relation between his public duties and his (and their) private life and happiness? How does Washington explain to Mrs. Washington his acceptance of the position? What does he mean by saying "it has been a kind of destiny that has thrown upon me this service"? And what does he then mean by saying, in response, that he hopes "that my undertaking it is designed to answer to some good purpose?" How does Washington address his wife's possible concerns? Imagining yourself the recipient of this letter, how would feel and respond? What sort of a man could write such a letter?

June 18, 1775

Philadelphia

My Dearest,

I am now set down to write to you on a subject, which fills me with inexpressible concern—and this concern is greatly aggravated and increased, when I reflect upon the uneasiness I know it will give you—It has been determined in Congress, that the whole army raised for the defense of the American cause shall be put under my care, and that it is necessary for me to proceed immediately to Boston to take upon me the Command of it. You may believe me, my dear Patsy, when I assure you, in the most solemn manner that, so far from seeking this appointment, I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the Family, but from a consciousness of its being a trust too great for my Capacity, and that I should enjoy more real happiness in one month with you at home, than I have the most distant prospect of finding abroad, if my stay were to be Seven times Seven years. But as it has been a kind of destiny, that has thrown me upon this Service, I shall hope that my undertaking it is designed to answer some good purpose—You might, and I suppose did perceive, from the Tenor of my letters, that I was apprehensive I could not avoid this appointment, as I

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did not pretend to intimate when I should return—that was the case—it was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment, without exposing my Character to such censures, as would have reflected dishonor upon myself, and given pain to my friends. This, I am sure, could not, and ought not, to be pleasing to you, and must have lessened me considerably in my own esteem. I shall rely, therefore, confidently on that Providence, which has heretofore preserved and been bountiful to me, not doubting but that I shall return safe to you in the fall—I shall feel no pain from the Toil or the danger of the Campaign—My unhappiness will flow from the uneasiness I know you will feel from being left alone—I therefore beg of you to summon your whole fortitude and Resolution, and pass your time as agreeably as possible—nothing will give me so much sincere satisfaction as to hear this, and to hear it from your own Pen. . . .

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My earnest and ardent desire is, that you would pursue any Plan that is most likely to produce content, and a tolerable degree of Tranquility; as it must add greatly to my uneasy feelings to hear, that you are dissatisfied or complaining at what I really could not avoid.

As Life is always uncertain, and common prudence dictates to every Man the necessity of settling his temporal Concerns, while it is in his power—and while the Mind is calm and undisturbed, I have, since I came to this place (for I had not time to do it before I left home) got Colonel Pendleton to Draft a Will for me, by the directions I gave him, which Will I now enclose—The provision made for you in case of my death will, I hope, be agreeable. . . .

I shall add nothing more, as I have several Letters to write, but to desire that you will remember me to Milly¹ and all Friends, and to assure you that I am with the most unfeigned regard, my dear Patsy,

Your Affectionate, &c.

¹ *Amelia Posey, daughter of Captain John Posey and a friend of Martha Parke Custis (Washington's stepdaughter), who lived at Mount Vernon for most of the Revolutionary War.*