

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Letter to the Marquis de Lafayette

GEORGE WASHINGTON

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George Washington's early thoughts about his retirement from public life are touchingly represented in this short letter, written from Mount Vernon on February 1, 1784 to the Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), the French commander who had served with distinction as a major general under Washington in the Continental Army. His retirement was, as everyone knows, short-lived: Within three years he was called back to public life to head the Virginia delegation to the Constitutional Convention, over whose proceedings he would preside. Two years after that he became the nation's first president, and served for two terms.

In what terms does Washington here describe his present life in retirement? How does he describe the public world he left behind? Can you understand why a greatly successful public man might speak this way about the relative merits of public and private life? If so, can you understand also why a man who speaks this way would later return to demanding public service, presiding not only over the founding convention, but over the new republic as well? Is Washington's preference for retirement believable? Why might it be, paradoxically, part of what makes him both uniquely great and greatly beloved by the American people?

At length my Dear Marquis I am become a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac, and under the shadow of my own Vine & my own Fig-tree, free from the bustle of a camp and the busy scenes of public life, I am solacing myself with those tranquil enjoyments, of which the Soldier who is ever in pursuit of fame, the Statesman whose watchful days and sleepless Nights are spent in devising schemes to promote the welfare of his own, perhaps the ruin of other countries, as if this Globe was insufficient for us all, and the Courtier who is always watching the countenance of his Prince, in hopes of catching a gracious smile, can have very little conception. I am not only retired from all public employments, but I am retiring within myself; and shall be able to view the solitary walk, and tread the paths of private life with heartfelt satisfaction. Envious of none, I am determined to be pleased with all; and this my dear friend, being the order for my march, I will move gently down the stream of life, until I sleep with my Fathers. . . .

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And to tell you that . . . at Annapolis, where Congress were then, and are now sitting, I did, on the 23d. of December present them my commission, and made them my last bow, and on the Eve of Christmas entered these doors an older man by near nine years, than when I left them, is very uninteresting to any but myself.

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