

Washington's Address, Part 1

Farewell



By Paul Engel

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- While preparing to leave office, the first President under the new Constitution left the country he loved a present.
- He not only discussed why he was retiring, but provided some salient advice on how those who would pick up his mantle should seriously consider.
- The advice he gave his nation is something we should review, more than once.

As he prepared to leave office, President George Washington gave a Farewell Address.

Friends and Citizens:

The period for a new election of a citizen to administer the executive government of the United States being not far distant, and the time actually arrived when your thoughts must be employed in designating the person who is to be clothed with that important trust, it appears to me proper, especially as it may conduce to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now apprise you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being considered among the number of those out of whom a choice is to be made.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

As our thoughts are employed in the designation of the person

who is to be clothed with the trust of administering the executive branch of the government of the United States, I think we should look back at the advice and warnings from the first occupant of that office.

Retirement at Last

As Washington said in the opening of his farewell address, he would not serve a third term.

The acceptance of, and continuance hitherto in, the office to which your suffrages have twice called me have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty and to a deference for what appeared to be your desire. I constantly hoped that it would have been much earlier in my power, consistently with motives which I was not at liberty to disregard, to return to that retirement from which I had been reluctantly drawn. The strength of my inclination to do this, previous to the last election, had even led to the preparation of an address to declare it to you; but mature reflection on the then perplexed and critical posture of our affairs with foreign nations, and the unanimous advice of persons entitled to my confidence, impelled me to abandon the idea.

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Not once, but twice, George Washington was called on to be President of the new country under the new Constitution, and twice he agreed. With the expectation that he would be called again a third time, Mr. Washington wished only to retire to Mount Vernon. After seeking advice from those in his confidence, he made it clear that he intended to return to the retirement he had previously enjoyed.

In looking forward to the moment which is intended to terminate the career of my public life, my feelings do not permit me to suspend the deep acknowledgment of that debt of gratitude which I owe to my beloved country for the many honors it has conferred upon me; still more for the steadfast

confidence with which it has supported me; and for the opportunities I have thence enjoyed of manifesting my inviolable attachment, by services faithful and persevering, though in usefulness unequal to my zeal. ...

Here, perhaps, I ought to stop. But a solicitude for your welfare, which cannot end but with my life, and the apprehension of danger, natural to that solicitude, urge me, on an occasion like the present, to offer to your solemn contemplation, and to recommend to your frequent review, some sentiments which are the result of much reflection, of no inconsiderable observation, and which appear to me all-important to the permanency of your felicity as a people.

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As Mr. Washington prepares to retire, his concerns over the welfare of the people of the United States leads him to one last duty. He takes the time to record the dangers he foresees and to provide advice. It was his hope that the people would frequently review his warnings. Let us renew that tradition, starting today.

Strength of the Union

The unity of government which constitutes you one people is now dear to you. It is justly so, for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize. But as it is easy to foresee that, from different causes and from different quarters, much pains will be taken, many artifices employed to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth; as this is the point in your political fortress against which the batteries of internal and external enemies will be most constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously) directed, it is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national

union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion that it can in any event be abandoned; and indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

Washington knew that enemies, both foreign and domestic, would seek to pull this nation apart. That only a people devoted to unity within the union would support the peace and safety they so greatly prized. That those enemies would work to devalue and divide the union. That the division and alienation that has become the basis of so much of our society would be the destruction of more than the union, but of our domestic tranquility itself. We are witnessing the prescience of Washington's warning. Perhaps we can learn how best to rescue ourselves from this situation by reading more of his words.

For this you have every inducement of sympathy and interest. Citizens, by birth or choice, of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections. The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together; the independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint counsels, and joint efforts of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.

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Being an American used to be a source of pride. Whether a citizen by birth or by choice, patriotism should supercede our petty differences. Our willingness to tolerate our minor differences led to our independence and liberty in a way no other nation has ever achieved. Our willingness to come together to face our common dangers and sufferings and to protect the rights of our neighbors and fellow citizens now seems to have weakened to the point of failure. Because of this, the American motto *e pluribus unum*, out of many one, is collapsing into *e unum pluribus*, out of one many. More and more we are no longer Americas, but African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans, LGBTQ-Americans, along with another host of hyphenated titles. We forget that what all of these labels have in common is that we are all Americans. While we set ourselves against our hyphenated brethren, while we tear the Union apart with our focus on division, we lose one of the things that once made America the shining city on a hill Ronald Reagan once talked about: Affection for our neighbors.

In contemplating the causes which may disturb our Union, it occurs as matter of serious concern that any ground should have been furnished for characterizing parties by geographical discriminations, Northern and Southern, Atlantic and Western; whence designing men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. One of the expedients of party to acquire influence within particular districts is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heartburnings which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.

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It's not just ethic backgrounds that are being used to divide us. Have you noticed how we all have fallen into these geographic distinctions? North vs south, eastern vs western,

coastal vs central, even urban vs rural. How often have we seen those who seek after influence lie about those of other groups? So often that we even have a joke about it. "How can you tell when a politician is lying..." We have divided ourselves to the point that some are calling for a national divorce, a dividing of the union, or even a civil war. It seems to me that most of this division comes more from political agitation than actual differences.

Centrality of the Constitution

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 very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.

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For this union to exist, all parties must agree to the obligation of following the Constitution established by the people. We create governments via constitutions. Until the people change the powers and function of the government established by the Constitution, we are all obliged to follow that government. However, what happens when that government violates the constitution which created it? As the Constitution states, we owe our allegiance to the Constitution as the supreme law of the land, not to the men who may pervert it. Yet how many today even know what the Constitution says? You are almost certainly not going to learn it in law school, where they teach the opinion of judges supersedes the supreme law of the land. If we do not read the Constitution for ourselves, how are we to know whether an act of Congress, a regulation from the executive branch, or the opinion of a judge is obstructing the supreme law? How are we to know if those who serve in government are obstructing the very law

they swore or affirmed to support?

All obstructions to the execution of the laws, all combinations and associations, under whatever plausible character, with the real design to direct, control, counteract, or awe the regular deliberation and action of the constituted authorities, are destructive of this fundamental principle, and of fatal tendency. They serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put, in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community;

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Have you noticed how the execution of laws seems to be focused on factions and political parties? What one group does goes unpunished while a group from another faction is severely punished. This is not merely double standards, but is destructive to the fundamental principle of liberty and equal protection under the law. We shouldn't be surprised, since for decades those in charge of making and executing the laws, not to mention those tasked with deciding controversies, have been obstructing the execution of the Constitution as the supreme law of the land while We the People stood around, watched, and cheered.

Conclusion

There is so much we can learn from Washington's Farewell Address I've had to break it up into two parts. In the [next article](#) I will review the rest of the document. Before I close today though, I would like you to consider this. At the birth of our country, our very first President set the standards and traditions that Presidents have followed for almost 150 years. As the people we have placed in office, along with those we hire to represent us and the states, have walked away from his advice, we have watched the crumbling of the republic.

Perhaps, by frequent review of Washington's advice, we can return the republic to the constitutionally sound country he helped create.

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