

Washington's Address, Part 2

Farewell



By Paul Engel

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- Previously we started reviewing the farewell address of George Washington.
- As we conclude this review we'll look at Washington's view on separation of powers, Religion and Government, Debt, and more.
- As we read Washington's farewell to public life, we should learn some of the lessons he tried to teach us.

In the [last article](#), I started reviewing George Washington's Farewell Address. As we pick up in the middle of the document, you may want to go [back and refresh your memory](#). Washington has already talked about the strength of the union and the centrality of the Constitution. Now, we pick up his advice with the separation of powers.

Separation of Powers

Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

There's a reason why power is distributed in this country, not just within the federal government, but between the state and federal governments as well. Liberty, the ability to live your life as you see fit, is protected by such separation. So when we see the Executive Branch being delegated and assuming

powers not their own, your liberty is in danger. Even worse, when the states relinquish their power to the bribes and intimidations from Washington, D.C., liberty is not only in danger, but under direct attack.

Political Parties

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

The only thing worse than the states turning over control to a centralized government, is for them to turn their power over to political parties. The spirit of revenge Washington talked about is alive, well, and on full display not only in Washington, D.C., but in many of our states and cities as well. And as he warned, more and more people are turning to the absolute power of an individual to restore order, but they will only find the ruins of our public liberty.

It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and

will of another.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

This war between the political parties not only distracts those we hire to represent us, but in many cases makes it impossible for them to govern based on the Constitution to which they took an oath. It foments the animosity of groups, driving them toward more militant positions which will one day lead to riots and insurrection. If you search the news, you will see several groups have already gone that far, and their political allies accuse their opponents of doing the same.

Religion and Government

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

Before the Supreme Court wrote their own opinions about separation of church and state, Thomas Jefferson stated the it was created to protect the church from the state, not the other way around. Before Jefferson's letter where we get that phrase, Washington stated that religion and morality were indispensable to political prosperity. Or as John Adams put it:

Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other

[From John Adams to Massachusetts Militia, 11 October 1798](#)

So why do we work so hard today to keep religion and morality out of politics? If, as Washington said, you cannot claim the name of patriot while subverting these two great pillars, what

does that say about those today who labor so hard at tearing them down?

Debt

As a very important source of strength and security, cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible, avoiding occasions of expense by cultivating peace, but remembering also that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it, avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertion in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

The full faith and credit of the United States is a source of great strength and influence, not only in times of peace, but for our ability to fund necessary wars. Therefore our credit should be something jealously guarded. Today, with our almost \$34 trillion in debt, (that \$34,000,000,000,000), it seems we not only no longer guard our national credit, but debase it. Rather than using our credit sparingly and shunning occasions of expense, as Washington suggested, we've been finding every possible way to expend more and more money, generally for political gain. When in times of peace, rather than taking the opportunity to discharge our debts, we have been ungenerously throwing upon our posterity a burden they could never bear.

Foreign Relations

In the execution of such a plan, nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

Washington was trying to make a point. As a nation we should not have strong positions, either for or against, any other nation. This is quite the opposite of America's foreign policy for several generations. Why did Washington think we should stay out of foreign entanglements?

The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

When we make a relationship with another nation, when we tie our future to theirs for good or for ill, we put them in charge of our foreign policy. Our alliance with Great Britain got us into two world wars, and our alliance with Saudi Arabia has frequently put us at odds with other Middle Eastern nations, including until recently having our embassy in Israel in Tel Aviv rather than Jerusalem. In the same way our fear of the Soviet Union influenced our decisions in Eastern Europe for decades, our fear of China means we still won't officially recognize Taiwan as its own country.

Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. ... Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

Compare Washington's urging against foreign influence to today's agenda of the United States as the world's policeman, the nation you go to when you need assistance or protection. So what would Washington have us do? How would he have us deal with other nations?

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

Put another way, in commerce friends; beyond that we should have as little connection as possible. Think back, how many wars have started because of treaties between nations? Now we have calls for the U.S. to not only send weapons to Ukraine, but put American boots on the ground.

Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

If honesty is the best policy, both in public and private

affairs, here is a truth we all should share. My father told me not to co-sign a loan for a friend, because your future is tied to them paying the loan. When we link our futures to the affairs of other nations, they are in control, not us. Put another way, we enslave our future to their decisions.

Farewell

Though, in reviewing the incidents of my administration, I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend.

[Washington's Farewell Address 1796](#)

Here is something rare in politics today: Humility. The father of the nation, the first President of the United States, and the only man known for walking away from power, had the humility to know that he has probably committed many errors. Now there is a farewell with class. If only our current crop of politicians, bureaucrats, pundits, and so-called experts, could show a fraction of such class.

Conclusion

What have you learned from the farewell address of the Father of our country? Was it the importance of following the Constitution, or of religion and morality? That we should avoid debt and foreign entanglements? Or was it something else? While no man is perfect, a fact Washington not only knew but expressed, there is a lot to learn from his advice. Perhaps a frequent review of his sentiments on such matters would alleviate us of many of our problems, turmoil, and pain.

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