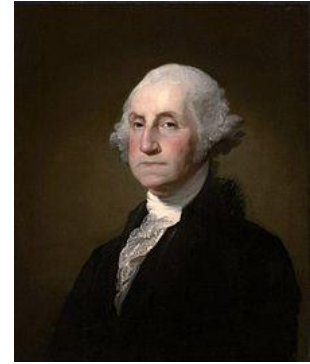


Washington's Farewell Address

Richey's Notes

Washington starts off with a humble introduction, speaking of how long he has craved his re-entry into retirement. While this may sound like mere rhetoric to the casual reader, anyone who has set foot on Mount Vernon - or seen pictures skillfully taken by their AP US History teacher – can see that he is absolutely serious. There are many things that Washington would rather have been doing than playing referee between Jefferson and Hamilton.



“Here, perhaps, I ought to stop.” What better indication that things are about to get personal? This is the point where Washington steps onto his soapbox to launch into a series of exhortations, or, as he puts it, *“the disinterested warnings of a parting friend, who can possibly have no personal motive for his counsel.”* In doing this, Washington actually starts a tradition that will be continued by other presidents – most notably when Eisenhower warned of the *“Military-Industrial Complex.”*

Contention #1: The Union is Advantageous to All

In spite of sectional, political, and economic differences, the Union had been advantageous to all parties involved. Not only had the several states benefited economically, but the strong federal Union created by the Constitution had fostered a climate of peace and liberty. Since the states did not have to worry about conflicts with one another, they did not have to maintain large standing armies, which Washington believed to be “particularly hostile to republican liberty.”

Contention #2: Sectionalism and Political Parties are Dangerous

It was during Washington's second term that the Federalist and Republican parties began to take shape. Washington viewed this to be one of the most dangerous developments of his administration and had harsh words for those who were promoting factionalism. Eventually, the party system would allow “cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men... to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government.” He saw a future in which the United States would experience “the alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension,” which in Washington's eyes was “a frightful despotism.”

Contention #3: Consolidation of Power Threatens Liberty

Washington did not see the party system as the only means by which “cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men” would try to subvert popular rule. Americans were also warned about the dangers of consolidation of power. The unprincipled, driven by “love of power, and proneness to abuse it,” would try to consolidate powers by *usurpation* rather than by the legitimate process of constitutional amendment.

Contention #4: Religion and Morality Support Republican Virtue

“It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government,” Washington contended. At the time of this Address, the French Revolution was in full swing, creating a wider gulf between religion and government than had ever been seen in a European country. There were many in the Republican ranks who admired the revolutionary movement in France, but Washington did not want to see the new American Union go the route of France. He believed that religion was a useful and necessary support for a virtuous republic:

Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

Contention #5: Education is Important

Washington noted that education was also important for the maintenance of Republican government. “In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.”

Contention #6: Cherish Public Credit and AVOID DEBT

Once again, a direct quote is necessary:

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.

What might Washington say if he heard that your generation is *over ten trillion dollars* in debt!?

Contention #7: Neutrality is the Best Foreign Policy

“Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course” than Europe. The nations of Europe had, for years, been consumed by foreign wars. Washington’s last word of advice to his countrymen was that they avoid getting entangled in these incessant conflicts. Americans could guarantee peace to themselves and their posterity by avoiding “the insidious wiles of foreign influence.” [Note, he is partially responding to the controversy surrounding Citizen Genet, who had tried to stir up Republicans in support of the French Republic, which Federalists opposed.]

Contention #8: It Is Unlikely that Anyone is Going to Listen

It might have occurred to you by this point in the Address that the future that Washington hoped for has very little resemblance to our present-day national situation. He had an inkling that this would be the case:

In offering to you, my countrymen, these counsels of an old and affectionate friend, I dare not hope they will make the strong and lasting impression I could wish; that they will control the usual current of the passions, or prevent our nation from running the course which has hitherto marked the destiny of nations. But, if I may even flatter myself that they may be productive of some partial benefit, some occasional good; that they may now and then recur to moderate the fury of party spirit, to warn against the mischiefs of foreign intrigue, to guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism; this hope will be a full recompense for the solicitude for your welfare, by which they have been dictated.