

FAREWELL ADDRESS (1796) - George Washington

George Washington had been the obvious choice to be the first president of the United States, and indeed, many people had supported ratification of the Constitution on the assumption that Washington would be the head of the new government. By all measures, Washington proved himself a capable, even a great, president, helping to shape the new government and leading the country skillfully through several crises, both foreign and domestic.

Washington, like many of his contemporaries, did not understand or believe in political parties, and saw them as fractious agencies subversive of domestic tranquility. When political parties began forming during his administration, and in direct response to some of his policies, he failed to comprehend that parties would be the chief device through which the American people would debate and resolve major public issues. It was his fear of what parties would do to the nation that led Washington to draft his Farewell Address.

The two parties that developed in the early 1790s were the Federalists, who supported the economic and foreign policies of the Washington administration, and the Jeffersonian Republicans, who in large measure opposed them. The Federalists backed Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton's plan for a central bank and a tariff and tax policy that would promote domestic manufacturing; the Jeffersonians opposed the strong government inherent in the Hamiltonian plan, and favored farmers as opposed to manufacturers. In foreign affairs, both sides wanted the United States to remain neutral in the growing controversies between Great Britain and France, but the Federalists favored the English and the Jeffersonians the French. The Address derived at least in part from Washington's fear that party factionalism would drag the United States into this fray.

Two-thirds of the Address is devoted to domestic matters and the rise of political parties, and Washington set out his vision of what would make the United States a truly great nation. He called for men to put aside party and unite for the common good, an "American character" wholly free of foreign attachments. The United States must concentrate only on American interests, and while the country ought to be friendly and open its commerce to all nations, it should avoid becoming involved in foreign wars. Contrary to some opinion, Washington did not call for isolation, only the avoidance of entangling alliances. While he called for maintenance of the treaty with France signed during the American Revolution, the problems created by that treaty ought to be clear. The United States must "act for ourselves and not for others."

The Address quickly entered the realm of revealed truth. It was for decades read annually in Congress; it was printed in children's primers, engraved on watches and woven into tapestries. Many Americans, especially in subsequent generations, accepted Washington's advice as gospel, and in any debate between neutrality and involvement in foreign issues would invoke the message as dispositive of all questions. Not until 1949, in fact, would the United States again sign a treaty of alliance with a foreign nation.

In his address Washington:

***Extolls the benefits of the federal government. "The unity of government...is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence...of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize."

***Warns against the party system. "It serves to distract the Public Councils, and enfeeble the

Public Administration....agitates the Community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one....against another....it opens the door to foreign influence and corruption...thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another."

***Stresses the importance of religion and morality. "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?"

***On stable public credit. "...cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible...avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt....it is essential that you...bear in mind, that towards the payments of debts there must be Revenue, that to have Revenue there must be taxes; that no taxes can be devised, which are not...inconvenient and unpleasant..."

***Warns against permanent foreign alliances. "It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world..."

***On an over-powerful military establishment. "...avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments, which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty."

In saying farewell to the new nation he helped create Washington pointed out that ".....the name of American, which belongs to you, in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of Patriotism..."

To the great soldier, statesman and leader of his country...no tribute could be more fitting.