

LESSON TWENTY-SEVEN

In His Own Words:

George Washington's Farewell Address

There have probably been many times in your life that you have been given advice. Maybe your mom has said that you should wear a jacket to the park because it's chilly and you don't want to catch the sniffles. Maybe your teacher has said that you should spend some extra time studying for this week's spelling test because the words are particularly challenging. Or maybe your soccer coach has said that you should give each of your teammates a high five when they come off the field to show that you appreciate their hard work and effort.

You may wonder why adults tell kids what to do, but it's because they care. Your mom wanted you to have fun at the park, while staying healthy and comfortable. Your teacher wanted you to do well on your test and to succeed. And your coach wanted you to be a leader who shows others through your example how to be a good teammate. Your mom, teacher, and coach have learned these lessons throughout their life and now, they are passing them on to you.

George Washington took a similar approach when he published what is known as his Farewell Address. In this public letter, which was printed in Philadelphia's "American Daily Advertiser" on September 19, 1796, Washington announced his retirement and left his fellow Americans with lasting advice that would keep the United States strong, free, and secure for many generations.

In 1796, George Washington had been serving as president for more than 7 years and the end of his second term was drawing near. Today, presidents can only serve two terms – for a total of eight years – but when George Washington was president, this wasn't the case. [Editor's note: The Twenty-Second Amendment sets the two-term limit on the presidency and was passed by Congress in 1947 and ratified in 1951.]¹

Washington could have chosen to run for a third term, but he was done with politics and had wanted to retire for quite some time. In his Farewell Address, Washington outlined the reasons for not seeking a third term to the American people -- who had fought with him in the American Revolution and supported him as their first president. (Editor's note: The draft had initially been written by James Madison in 1792 – when Washington first planned to retire – but then was rewritten by Alexander Hamilton and polished by George Washington. A few opening paragraphs from Madison's draft were used in the final copy.)²

He wanted to retire after his first term, but there was a conflict brewing between Britain and France that the United States was at risk of getting swept up in. So, Washington's friends persuaded him to remain in office so he could use his thoughtful statesmanship and prudent leadership to see America through the conflict.³

Washington also realized that as the first president, he would set the example for future presidents. If he was to die in office, it would imply that presidents were elected for life – like a king.

By 1796, with America now safe from getting involved in the war between Britain and France, it was clear that it was time for our first president to step down, which would ensure the office of the president served the people, rather than the one person's power.

After explaining his reasons for retiring and thanking the American people for the “constancy of [their] support” and “my beloved country for the many honors,” Washington offered some serious advice and warned against forces that would destroy America.⁴

Keep in mind what was happening in America at the time when Washington issued his Farewell Address in 1796. America was a young country, working to establish itself, and solidify its foundation. The Constitution was less than 10 years old, the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments to the Constitution) was less than 5 years old, and our nation's capital in Washington D.C. was still being built (recall that the federal government was still in Philadelphia at this time). America had just navigated a major foreign crisis with the French and British, Spain still controlled the territory west of the Mississippi, and the British empire still had a foothold in Canada.

In short, the great American experiment of government of, by, and for the people was new and there was no guarantee that it was going to succeed – or survive. Additionally, America was founded upon resource rich and beautiful land that at any time, a foreign, wealthier, and militarily stronger power could decide that they wanted for themselves.

In addition, two new political parties – the Southern Democratic Republican party and the New England Federalists – had begun to emerge. Washington wanted to be America's president, not the president for a particular political party. In his view, America could not survive if it was divided. Washington believed that the division of Americans by political parties and division based upon where you lived could lead to the devastation of our national union and the end of liberty.

Washington's Farewell Address emphasized the importance of the Union, which brought Americans together and ensured their right to live freely. He also described how regionalism, partisanship, and foreign entanglements threaten this Union and the future security of liberty and survival of our nation.

Let's break this down by examining some of the key passages in the Farewell Address.

“The name of American...must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. ... 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. ... In this sense it is that your union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty, and that the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other.”⁵

In 1796, political parties were relatively new, and most people condemned them for being disruptive and a way for individuals to take power away from the people and give it to themselves. Americans did, however, see themselves as belonging to a particular state or region. Washington feared that these identities of where you lived could work to further divide Americans and fuel the growing political parties of the time. Washington was concerned about what political parties would do to the freedom of the people. He thought that partisanship would lead to a focus on a “spirit of revenge,” and a focus on winning, keeping, and growing the power of individuals. This would ignore what was good for the people, which the government was established to serve and protect.⁶

In this passage, Washington described what unites Americans. It is our national pride, the fact that we are able to enjoy our liberty and freedom because of those who have made sacrifices for us, and because we continue to work to make this country the best that it can be. The union of our country is the reason we have our liberty, and because we love our liberty, we should work to preserve the union.

“Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. ... just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated.”⁷

Washington saw the combination of partisanship and foreign influence as the most serious danger to the Union. Partisanship, he said, “open[ed] the door to foreign influence and corruption” and would allow foreign powers to chart the course for America, rather than the American people choosing their future. ⁸

Washington was not arguing that America should remain in a bubble, separate and alone from all other countries. Rather, he said in his Farewell Address that America should not play favorites and should be kind, fair, and reasonable to all nations while working toward peace.

Shortly after the publication of Washington’s Farewell Address, John Adams was elected as the second president of the United States. Washington returned to Mount Vernon where he remained for less than three years before dying of a throat infection on December 14, 1799.

Washington’s wisdom included in the Farewell Address still endures today. Every year, the United States Senate recites this address as a reminder of the importance of unity in our nation’s history and our future.⁹ His advice is a historic gift to generations of Americans who want to learn from his example and keep America free, strong, and safe.

Footnotes

1. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments/amendment-xxii>
2. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/george-washington-s-farewell-address/>
3. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/farewell-address-4/?swcfpc=1>
4. https://billofrightsintstitute.org/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwvdajBhBEEiwAeMh1U2Yr-AbDD049KZfby1dmc9XGBbs1SY737Ui6eMjxp-N-pH6PffKAeRoCRIYQAvD_BwE
5. https://billofrightsintstitute.org/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwvdajBhBEEiwAeMh1U2Yr-AbDD049KZfby1dmc9XGBbs1SY737Ui6eMjxp-N-pH6PffKAeRoCRIYQAvD_BwE
6. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/george-washington-s-farewell-address/>
7. https://billofrightsintstitute.org/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwvdajBhBEEiwAeMh1U2Yr-AbDD049KZfby1dmc9XGBbs1SY737Ui6eMjxp-N-pH6PffKAeRoCRIYQAvD_BwE
8. https://billofrightsintstitute.org/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwvdajBhBEEiwAeMh1U2Yr-AbDD049KZfby1dmc9XGBbs1SY737Ui6eMjxp-N-pH6PffKAeRoCRIYQAvD_BwE
9. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/george-washington-s-farewell-address/>

Additional Resources

- <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments/amendment-xxii>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/george-washington-s-farewell-address/>
- <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/farewell-address-4/?swcfpc=1>
- https://billofrightsintstitute.org/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwvdajBhBEEiwAeMh1U2Yr-AbDD049KZfby1dmc9XGBbs1SY737Ui6eMjxp-N-pH6PffKAeRoCRIYQAvD_BwE
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