

## George Washington's Farewell Address

Document: George Washington, Farewell Address (1796)

### Historical Context

The Twenty-second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution became law in 1951. It limits a U.S. president to two terms. Until Franklin Roosevelt in 1940, no president had won a third term. Only a few tried. President George Washington began the two-term tradition. Almost all later presidents held to this tradition.

Washington's departure from office was also important for his final speech, or address, to the American people. By the end of his second term in 1796, Washington had had enough of politics. Sixty-four was a reasonable age to retire from public life. He had accepted his second term with reluctance. His health had been declining. He had been away from Mount Vernon, his Virginia plantation, for the better part of eight years. Before that, he had served as the commanding general of the Continental Army from 1775 to 1783.

In addition, Washington had begun to find the presidency less appealing. He had watched political parties develop during his second term. His secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton, led the Federalists. His former secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, became the Republican leader. Strong competition existed between these two men. Each believed that the other's ideas would harm the country's future. President Washington tried to stay out of the conflict. But he had become identified with the Federalists by the end of his second term.

The Republicans began criticizing Washington. The most important was over Jay's Treaty with England. The Federalists supported this treaty. The pro-French Republicans opposed it. The experience left Washington, a man quite sensitive to criticism, wishing for retirement at Mount Vernon.

These political problems led President Washington to worry about the nation's future. Before leaving office he gave some advice to his country. He called this advice the "warning of a parting friend." Alexander Hamilton wrote a draft of the Farewell Address, and Washington revised it. The address especially concerned two issues that had created conflict during his administrations and threatened future ones. These issues were:

- The quarrels advanced by political parties. At the time, people like Washington believed that political parties were harmful to a nation. They saw political parties as acting for their own self-interest rather than for the well-being of the whole nation.
- Interference by other nations with the affairs of the United States. Washington had his experience with France in mind. It had meddled in American internal politics to get support for its conflict with England.

## Importance

This is one of two famous farewell addresses by American presidents. Both included warnings. The other, by Dwight Eisenhower, warned about the growing military-industrial complex. Washington's warnings are interesting today because we have not followed his advice. Some believe these problems cause trouble today. The address is also an interesting look at American thinking at the time, when anything seemed possible. The address has been read in the U.S. Senate on Washington's birthday since 1893.

### George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796

Friends and Fellow 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. . . .

I have already intimated to you the danger of parties in the State, with particular reference to the founding of them on geographical discriminations. Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally. . . .

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 . . .

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. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. . . .

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

*(continued)*

existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them. . . .

Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies. . . .

United States

19th September, 1796

Geo. Washington

## Vocabulary

**administer**—to supervise

**executive**—the branch of government responsible for carrying out laws; the U.S. president

**designating**—selecting

**trust**—responsibility

**conduce**—lead

**distinct**—separate

**apprise**—inform

**resolution**—firm decision

**intimated**—made known

**discriminations**—differences

**comprehensive**—complete

**solemn**—serious

**baneful**—seriously harmful

**councils**—elected bodies

**enfeeble**—weaken

**agitates**—excites

**ill-founded**—without a sound basis

**kindles**—stirs up

**animosity**—hatred

**foments**—incites, stirs up

**insurrection**—rebellion against government

**corruption**—dishonesty

**conduct**—behavior

**commercial**—having to do with business

**good faith**—honesty

**alliances**—associations between nations

**portion**—part

**patronizing**—supporting

**infidelity**—unfaithfulness

**engagements**—agreements

**maxim**—a basic principle

**genuine**—real

**suitable establishments**—proper military organizations

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## **Comprehension Questions**

1. Who is the intended audience for Washington's address?
2. An election will be held soon. What office will people be voting for?
3. What does Washington say his role will be in that election?
4. What negative effects of political parties does Washington list?
5. Under what circumstances does Washington believe the United States should have relations with foreign nations?
6. What type of relations should the United States avoid?
7. Washington warns against permanent alliances with foreign nations. What exception does he make?

## **Critical Thinking**

1. What do political parties and involvement with foreign nations have in common, according to Washington?
2. Is Washington against relations with foreign countries? Explain.

3. Do you think it was important for Washington to make this address? Explain.
4. Do you think the public, when reading this address, felt more anxious or more comfortable about the future?

### **Making Connections**

1. What is Washington referring to when he writes about parties based on "geographical discriminations"?
2. What would Washington think of NATO? What would he think of the permanent establishment of the political parties?
3. Why is Washington's decision not to run for a third term important?
4. What events during Washington's administrations may have caused him to give the advice he gave?

### **Relating the Past to Our Lives**

1. George Washington was the closest the new nation had to a father. Do you listen to advice from either of your parents? Explain.
2. Washington did not have an outlet for this address when he wrote it. He eventually asked a Philadelphia newspaper to print it. How would he make it public today?
3. Write a farewell address for the current U.S. president, issuing warnings about problems you see that threaten the nation's future in the twenty-first century.

### **Essay Questions**

1. How well are we following Washington's advice? Explain.
2. If we followed Washington's advice today, would the United States be better off or weaker? Explain.
3. Do political parties serve a purpose or simply create more problems? Explain.

3. Answers will vary.
4. Many more today come from China, Korea, Japan, Cambodia, India, the Philippines, and Mexico.
5. Answers will vary.

### Essay Questions

Essays will vary.

1. Essays may center on differences in pace of life, recreation, and how one makes a living. Sometimes how a person makes a living contributes to differences in political views. Red states and blue states may be explored for differences in region.
2. Essays may include the end of slavery and segregation and ongoing attempts at equity for African Americans, but continued disproportionate poverty. The mistreatment of Native Americans is acknowledged today, and political rights have been established. But poverty and unemployment on reservations are rife, especially where there are no gambling casinos to provide income.
3. Essays may include that immigrants today enter an already established society, with far greater wealth disparity, and due to immigration laws, many immigrants now arrive with skills and wealth. For those that enter poor, rising quickly in social class is more difficult, but not impossible. Similarities include the need to learn the language and the connection one feels to the country of origin.

## George Washington's Farewell Address

### Comprehension Questions

1. The American public is the audience.
2. The election is for the U.S. presidency.
3. He will not be a candidate.
4. Political parties distract legislative bodies, weaken government, excite the public with jealousy and hatred, even start riots and rebellions, and allow for foreign involvement.
5. It is good to extend trade relations.
6. Permanent political alliances should be avoided.
7. Alliances that had been made previous to his address need to be honored.

### Critical Thinking

1. They both can excite the public and create opportunities for corruption.
2. Answers will vary. Sample answer: No. He fears military alliances above all. Trade relations do not bother him.
3. Answers will vary. Sample answer: Perhaps it was for him because Washington felt the direction of the country threatened its future, and he felt it was his responsibility to address this.
4. Answers will vary. Sample answer: Perhaps some felt less comfortable. But many were caught up in the partisan warfare, and they probably saw the defeat of their opponents as the only insurance for a future.

### Making Connections

1. He is referring to the idea that the Republican Party had a firm foundation in the South, while the Federalists were strong in the North. The parties were sectional.
2. Given what Washington warned against, he would oppose both.
3. He set a precedent that later presidents followed.
4. Answers may include the rise of political parties, friction with France and England, Jay's Treaty, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the Citizen Genet affair, among others.

### Relating the Past to Our Lives

1. Answers will vary.
2. Answers will vary. Sample answer: He would call a press conference that would be televised.
3. Answers will vary.

### Essay Questions

Essays will vary.

1. Essays may include how political parties and foreign alliances have become far more of a factor than Washington could have imagined, but he also could not predict the realities of the modern world's weapons, communications, economic, and transportation systems.
2. Essays may include that with his advice, given the modern world's weapons, communications, economic, and transportation systems, the United States could not stay safely in isolation. The country would eventually be drawn in to