

Primary Sources: George Washington's Farewell Address

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Word Count **1,014**



General George Washington resigning his commission as commander in chief of the Continental Army before Congress, which was then meeting at the Maryland State House in Annapolis, Maryland, December 23, 1783. This action was of great significance in establishing civilian, rather than military rule, leading to a republic, rather than a dictatorship. Painting by John Trumbull, 1824. Located in the United States Capitol rotunda in Washington, D.C.

Editor's Note: In 1796, President George Washington decided not to seek re-election for a third term. He wrote this farewell letter to the American people to explain why. Washington had already been president twice. Some people thought the country needed his leadership or it would be torn apart. But Washington worried that he would be like a king if he was president again.

In the 32-page handwritten address, Washington wrote about the forces he feared could destroy our democratic republic. The French Revolution had just turned to tyranny and Washington worried that the U.S. could as well. Washington felt that disagreements between political parties weakened the government. He urged people not to divide themselves by where they lived in the country. In foreign affairs, he warned against long-term alliances with other nations. Washington worried that other countries could influence U.S. politics.

The address was printed in the American Daily Advertiser, a Philadelphia newspaper, on September 19, 1796. Here is part of Washington's letter.

"I No Longer Wish To Be President"

"The Address of General Washington To The People of The United States on his declining of the Presidency of the United States,"

Friends and Citizens:

A new election of the President of the United States is near. It appears to me proper that I should now inform you I no longer wish to be President.

Four years ago, after my first term, I wrote a similar message. But thinking about the critical situations with foreign nations and the advice of persons I trusted, I decided to seek a second term.

In looking forward to the moment which will end my career of public life, my feelings are filled with the gratitude owed to my beloved country. I shall carry these deep feelings with me to my grave. I also pray for the promise that heaven may protect this union and the free Constitution, which is the work of your hands.

At this point, I feel I must offer, for your careful consideration, some feelings which are the result of much reflection and thought.

"The Unity Of Government Is A Main Pillar"

The unity of government is a main pillar in building your real independence and liberty. It supports peace and safety at home and abroad and your prosperity. But, it is easy to see that enemies could use tricks and deception to weaken your beliefs in these truths.

But see that every portion of our country carefully guards and preserves the union of the whole. The North, with its shipping, business and manufacturing companies helps the South, with its valuable materials, agriculture and their own seaports. The East and the West have improved transportation on land and water. This brings valuable materials and products that promote both growth and comfort to the communities in our one nation. All are protected by the equal laws of a common government.

Every part of our country thus feels an immediate and particular interest in union. All the parts combined cannot fail to find that each part works to preserve the other.

The new Constitution now establishes a government that has principles of freedom, the plan to share powers and the method to amend and change what needs to be improved. Respect for its authority and obeying its laws are duties so important to true liberty.

"The Necessity Of Checks And Balances"

It is also important that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution in those entrusted with our government. Do not try to force the power of one department upon another, for this tends to combine departments into one which can lead to abuse. The necessity of checks and balances that divide political power into different departments must be protected. If this does not work to benefit the union, let it be corrected by an amendment as described in the Constitution.

However, often there can be small groups of cunning, ambitious and unprincipled men working to benefit their small number. They do not care to work for all in our union.

This spirit, unfortunately, is in our nature. Its root comes from passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments and is truly our worst enemy.

This can lead to a sharpened spirit of revenge. This can lead to an individual claiming absolute power that ruins public liberty.

"Educational Institutions Are Needed To Spread Knowledge"

Therefore educational institutions are needed to spread knowledge. Just as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is so very important that the public should be educated.

As a very important source of strength and security, avoid the accumulation of debt. Do not thrust upon our children the responsibility to pay the bills for what we have spent.

Observe good faith in business and justice toward all nations. Those agreements that are now in place should be completed in good faith. Here let us stop. Our business policy should be fair and equal and should not grant favors to one nation above another. Europe has a set of primary interests which are very different from our own. It would be unwise for us to involve ourselves in their politics.

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world. However, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for unusual emergencies.

"Advice From An Old And Loving Friend"

In offering to you, my countrymen, this advice from an old and loving friend, it is my hope it may produce some partial benefit and some occasional good.

Through these eight years of my administration I suspect that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I hope they can be forgiven. I shall also carry with me the hope that my country will, after 45 years of my life dedicated to its service, forgive these faults. Therefore, now I leave and come yet closer to mansions of rest.

I seek that retreat knowing my fellow citizens to be under the influence of good laws and under a free government.

Geo. Washington

Quiz

- 1 Which section of the address highlights the idea that negative aspects of human nature work to damage a unified government?
 - (A) "I No Longer Wish To Be President"
 - (B) "The Necessity Of Checks And Balances"
 - (C) "Educational Institutions Are Needed To Spread Knowledge"
 - (D) "Advice From An Old And Loving Friend"

- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "The Unity Of Government Is A Main Pillar" that suggests that the government might need to adapt as the nation evolves.

- 3 How does the following paragraph from the section "The Necessity Of Checks And Balances" support Washington's CENTRAL ideas?

It is also important that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution in those entrusted with our government. Do not try to force the power of one department upon another, for this tends to combine departments into one which can lead to abuse. The necessity of checks and balances that divide political power into different departments must be protected. If this does not work to benefit the union, let it be corrected by an amendment as described in the Constitution.

- (A) It explains the method by which the government may be changed according to the Constitution.
- (B) It describes the different departments of the government and how they work to help the people.
- (C) It emphasizes the need for the people to be involved with the government to ensure fairness and balance.
- (D) It demonstrates that the government is not set up well enough to prevent abuses of power.

- 4 Which of the following statements would be MOST important to include in a summary of the address?
- (A) Washington observed that the characteristics of cunning and revenge were part of human nature.
 - (B) Washington praised the value of educating the public so that they could make informed decisions.
 - (C) Washington decided to seek a second term only because he was advised to do so by those he trusted.
 - (D) Washington believed a unified government was essential to maintaining independence and freedom.