**From Washington's Farewell Address of 1796**



… the common and continual mischiefs [trouble] of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.

It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble [reduce the strength of] the public administration. It agitates [stirs up and disturbs] the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles [creates] the animosity [a feeling of hostility and resentment] of one part against another, foments [to cause or stir up trouble or rebellion] occasionally riot and insurrection [rebellion]. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption [dishonest behavior for personal gain], which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another.

September 19, 1796

**Introduction**

Sober George Washington daringly made his Farewell Address an open letter of advice and warning to the American people about their long-term safety and happiness. For a great leader to voluntarily relinquish political power and retire from public life was itself unprecedented in the annals of history—an act that contributed to the establishment of republican government in America. But his words on this occasion are no less cherished for, as his biographer and Chief Justice John Marshall put it, “precepts to which the American statesman can not too frequently recur.” With the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the Farewell Address constitutes the central statement of the American purpose.

Washington warned of the dangers facing the young republic, chiefly from internal faction and foreign dangers. But he also hailed the greatness that could come from a unity founded on necessity and prosperity, and further graced by the character of its citizens. The Address itself exemplified unity. Drafted in part by James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, the two collaborators on the Federalist Papers who were now political rivals, the manuscript was revised by Washington and published in Philadelphia’s largest newspaper on September 19, 1796—just nine years after the signing of the Constitution.

**The Preservation of the Union.** The general theme of the Farewell Address is the preservation of the Union as the core of American nationhood. Washington warned against sectionalism as the destroyer of the common interest and national character. The ties of the Union and the Constitution that made the various parts one must be cherished as sacred. “The name of American, which belongs to you, in your national capacity must always exalt the just pride of Patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations.”

**The Danger of Factions.** Washington also warned of “the baneful effects of the Spirit of Party”—one of the two most famous recommendations of the Farewell Address (along with a warning about permanent alliances). By party, Washington meant factious groups that sought their own good, to the detriment of the common good and the rights of others. The proliferation of faction or party in this sense was a dominant question of his presidency. He spoke of designing men, who would divide sections of the country as a means to their own political power. The factions of the 1790s foreshadowed those of the Civil War.

**Religion and Morality.** In a self-governing nation, a unifying public opinion requires the enlightenment of formal institutions of education and of civic education. The “great Pillars of human happiness” and the “firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens,” he emphasized, were religion and morality. “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports.”

**America’s Role in the World.** The foreign policy of the new nation requires both principles and prudence, given its circumstances. The United States should “observe good faith and justice towards all Nations.” In the future, he asks Americans to keep in mind that “it will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period, a great Nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.” America’s place in the world will elevate and distinguish its national character.

Washington recommended as the great rule of conduct that the United States primarily pursue commercial relations with other nations and have with them “as little political connection as possible,” consistent with its treaty obligations. Washington did not call for America to withdraw from the world: he warned of political connections and permanent alliances. In a world convulsed by the French Revolution, he advised that the young republic “steer clear of permanent Alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” America should be clear-headed about its own capacities under changing circumstances while keeping itself in mind as an example to the world. Washington recommended that the nation pursue a long-term course of placing itself in a position to defy external threats, defend its own neutrality, and, eventually, choose peace or war as its own “interest, guided by justice, shall Counsel.”

The first President was endeavoring to inculcate maturity and moderation in Americans’ conduct of both domestic and international affairs. He hoped that re-reading his Address over the years might lead Americans to “controul the usual current of the passions” and “prevent our Nation from running the course which has hitherto marked the Destiny of Nations.”

1. What does Washington mean by “Sectionalism as the destroyer of the common interest and national character”?
2. How did he feel about political parties? Was he in favor of them or against them? What did Washington believe people should do about political parties?
3. Do you agree with Washington’s assertion of religion and morality? How do these ideas clash with existing politics today?
4. Why does Washington warn us against aligning ourselves with other nations? Do you agree with this policy of “neutrality?”
5. When, in your opinion, is it okay to pick a side? When would Washington have allied with other countries?
6. Washington does not mention western Pennsylvania or the Whiskey Rebellion in this passage. Based on what you have learned about the Whiskey Rebellion, what evidence do you see in this passage that Washington had this rebellion in mind as he wrote and delivered his Farewell Address?