**George Washington’s Farewell Address**:

*A Departing Friend’s Unselfish Advice*

*Concerning Looming Dangers and Top Priorities for National Wellbeing*

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Introduction:

As we have again recently experienced the peaceful transfer of power and a Presidential Farewell Address, we should be mindful that both of these are reminders of the impact that George Washington made upon the American political tradition. During his own lifetime he was called, “The Father of his nation”.

The Presidential Farewell Address is a precedent established by our first President, George Washington. Washington’s Farewell Address[[1]](#footnote-1), could be considered his third Farewell if his Circular to the States as the victorious general at the end of the Revolution and an uncompleted draft from the end of his first term are counted.[[2]](#footnote-2) He concluded his Circular with the words that proved not to be true for the indispensable Washington: "I now bid adieu…at the same time I bid a last farewell to the cares of office, and all the employments of public life.

What Washington called his “last farewell” would lead to an aborted second farewell[[3]](#footnote-3) before his real “last” Farewell was given, that which we consider here. Having served a second term, he states in his Farewell, “…my inclination to [retire], previous to the last election, had even led to the preparation of an address …but … unanimous advice … impelled me to abandon the idea.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Alexander Hamilton and James Madison assisted Washington in its composition.[[5]](#footnote-5) Washington states that it was “dictated”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Each of these Farewells is essentially forgotten and “Washington” has morphed from a towering person of character into a tumultuous seat of political power. It is time to rediscover the wisdom and political concerns of our First President and Founding Father.

To help us recover Washington’s legacy, his Farewell Address here is outlined and each paragraph is summarized and restated in contemporary English. His actual text is found in the endnotes. The successive numbers in the text, 1 to 50, conform to the endnote numbers and identify each of the paragraphs in the Address. Where appropriate, parallels with his Circular to the States are noted in the footnotes.

As Washington sensed it was time for him to retire and he was confident that the nation could finally handle a change in leadership:

Since the beginning of my difficult role as the first president, I have given my best for the administration of the government despite limited ability and lack of experience. I see retirement as necessary and welcome due to age, and that the need for my service was temporary and this service now fulfilled, my retirement is not inconsistent with patriotism.

Washington’s purposes for his Farewell, written to “Friends and Citizens” beyond explaining his intention to retire and not to seek a third term, are evident in paragraphs 6 and 42. Using the summaries developed here, he says:

6—Until I die I will offer unceasing prayers that the nation will be blessed with

* perpetual union,
* a sacredly maintained constitution
* with a wise and virtuous administration,
* as well as such complete happiness under the liberties of the Constitution that every nation who learns of it will desire to adopt it.

42—My countrymen, this advice is given by an old affectionate friend. I know my thoughts will not make the impact that I wish given human passions and the usual course of the destiny of nations. Yet I desire that they may bring some benefit by

* moderating partisan rivalry,
* warning against foreign intrigue
* and guarding against pretended patriotism.
* If this happens, I will have been paid in full for my concern for your welfare that moved me to dictate them.

Washington was a praying man. In his earlier Circular, he concluded with this prayer,

I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection, that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.

Similarly, Washington’s spirituality is evident throughout the Farewell Address. Again, using his summarized language we find:

* *Prayer at beginning*—paragraph 6: Until I die I will offer unceasing prayers that the nation will be blessed with perpetual union, a sacredly maintained constitution with a wise and virtuous administration, as well as such complete happiness under the liberties of the Constitution that every nation who learns of it will desire to adopt it.
* *Religion and Morality in national life*—paragraphs 27, 28: Foremost among the tendencies and habits that lead to political success, religion and morality are essential supports. One cannot be a patriot who works to overthrow these great pillars of human happiness and firmest props of the duties of humans and citizens. One who is just a politician just as much as the devout should respect and cherish the worship of God and the principles of good conduct as their connections with private and public well-being are beyond description. If the sense of religious obligation disappears from the oaths taken in courts of justice, what security will remain for property, reputation and life? We must be cautious of the claim that men can be moral without religion, regardless of what is claimed by highly educated thinkers and their distinctive ways of thinking. Reason and experience prevent us from expecting national morality to prosper if the morally correct behavior taught by religion is excluded from society.

Truly, doing what is right is a necessary source for government by the people. A friend of free government cannot be neutral to attacks on morality as such attempts shake the foundation of its structure.

* *Religion and Foreign Policy*—paragraph 31: Keep your word and be just toward all nations, seeking peace and harmony with all as religion, morality and good policy call for this. This is worthy of a free, enlightened and soon to be great nation that will give the world a new example of a people always guided by exalted justice and goodwill. Although this may be costly at times, the nation will be richly repaid. Hasn’t Providence connected the permanent happiness of a nation with behavior showing high moral standards? The best of human nature calls for this experiment. But will our vices make this impossible?
* *Concluding Prayer*—paragraph 49: During my presidency, I am not aware of intentional error, but am sure given my limitations that I have often erred. I fervently pray to the Almighty to avert or lessen the evils that they may result in.

The outlined and summarized text of the Farewell next follows. It is hoped that this will provide encouragement and further learning for students and patriots throughout our nation at this critical time in our nation’s history.

**An Outline and Summary of George Washington’s Farewell Address**

1. **Recipients: “Friends and Citizens”**
2. **Occasion: Retirement after Second Term as President**
3. A new election is coming, and I decline being a candidate.[[7]](#endnote-1)
4. My decision was carefully considered as a dutiful citizen not due to loss of concern for the country or lack of gratitude.[[8]](#endnote-2)
5. My second term was a sacrifice of my desire to retire evidenced by a planned Farewell Address which did not happen due to critical issues in foreign relations and the unanimous advice of my closest counselors.[[9]](#endnote-3)
6. I am happy that national circumstances now permit my desire to retire even in light of duty, propriety and the desire of his supporters.[[10]](#endnote-4)
7. Since the beginning of my difficult role as the first president, I have given my best for the administration of the government despite limited ability and lack of experience. I see retirement as necessary and welcome due to age, and that the need for my service was temporary and this service now fulfilled, my retirement is not inconsistent with patriotism.[[11]](#endnote-5)
8. So now I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to my beloved country for its honors, confidence, and opportunities to serve with usefulness and zeal. I praise the country for its support that sustained me despite passionate misrepresentations, doubtful and discouraging circumstances and the lack of success that yielded criticism. Until I die I will offer unceasing prayers that the nation will be blessed with perpetual union, a sacredly maintained constitution with a wise and virtuous administration, as well as such complete happiness under the liberties of the Constitution that every nation who learns of it will desire to adopt it.[[12]](#endnote-6)
9. **The Body of the Address: A Departing Friend’s Unselfish Advice Concerning Looming Dangers and Top Priorities for National Wellbeing**
10. Although tempted to conclude with this, I wish to express concerns for the nation’s looming dangers that move me to offer some deeply considered top priorities for the nation’s well-being, freely given as I leave as an unselfish and unbiased friend.[[13]](#endnote-7)

*Liberty*

1. Nothing needs to be added to strengthen concern for liberty as it is woven in the American heart.[[14]](#endnote-8)

*Positive Reasons for National Unity*

1. Unity is dear to the nation as it is a pillar of independence, peace at home and abroad, safety, prosperity and liberty. However, pains will be taken to weaken this conviction from within and without, so every effort must be expended to protect national union, the foundation of the nation’s success.[[15]](#endnote-9)
2. Many reasons lead to concern for unity: You are American citizens with national patriotism, not just concern for local interests. National unity is reinforced by the same religious, cultural and political values, as well as having successfully fought together for liberty.[[16]](#endnote-10)
3. As important as these concerns are, every part of the country has immediate and overarching motives to guard and preserve the union of the whole nation.[[17]](#endnote-11)
4. Every part of the nation, the north with the south and the east with the west, need each other for the mutual benefits that come from commerce, agriculture, raw materials, industry and shipping under the equal laws of a common government.[[18]](#endnote-12)
5. Beyond this, the combination of all parts brings increased strength, resources, security. It limits the risks of foreign destabilization and civil wars caused by the lack of a common government, avoiding the need for an oversized military that darkens the prospects for republican liberty. To support unity is to support liberty and vice versa.[[19]](#endnote-13)
6. These persuasive reasons show that the union is a primary concern of patriotism. Let experience in trying the experiment of a common government working with state governments move us from speculation, and the doubtful patriotism of those who seek to weaken our union, instead, to a hope for happy result.[[20]](#endnote-14)
7. The nation must strive to avoid disturbing the union as when geographical interests are used by those seeking influence to create a sense of opposing interests by misrepresenting the aims and opinions of others. The nation has seen two successful treaties with Spain and the United Kingdom, preserving the concerns of the western regions, which argues for continuing unity rather than allying with foreign governments.[[21]](#endnote-15)
8. A government for the whole country is indispensable for an effective and permanent union, as a mere alliance will fail. This is why the US set aside the Articles of Confederation and carefully chose and should continue to depend upon the secure, powerful yet amendable Constitution that advances freedom by distributing power. Respectful compliance with it is the sacred duty of true liberty until the whole people explicitly exercise their right to change their form of government and establish another.[[22]](#endnote-16)

*Partisan Politics Endangers National Unity*

1. All obstructions and associations trying to control or counteract constituted authorities are destructive of constitutional government and lead to its demise. Such organized factions gain artificial minority partisan power at the expense of the delegated wholesome will of the nation that results from shared counsel and mutual concerns.[[23]](#endnote-17)
2. Such partisan activity occasionally may achieve popular goals, yet they will become powerful engines for unscrupulous politicians to subvert popular rule by usurping so much power that they destroy the very party that enabled their unjust dominion.[[24]](#endnote-18)
3. Not only should you reject opposition to the Constitution, but also resist the spirit of innovation with its principles. Opponents may attempt to change or weaken the Constitution since they cannot overthrow it. An infrequently changed effective Constitution will best preserve liberty in our vast country.[[25]](#endnote-19)
4. Along with the danger of partisanship based on geography, GW wishes to warn America more generally about partisan politics.[[26]](#endnote-20)
5. The passions of human nature produce the party spirit in politics seen in every government but most evident and most uncontrolled in popular governments, being in fact the people’s worst enemy.[[27]](#endnote-21)
6. Rival factions motivated by revenge have produced vast tragedies and are in themselves a form of despotism, leading to a permanent despotism. In order to address the disorder and misery, the people turn to an individual with absolute power and the result is the elevation of a leader and the ruin of liberty.[[28]](#endnote-22)
7. While this is an extreme case, and one of which we must be mindful, the mischief of a partisan spirit is sufficient for a wise people to discourage and restrain it.[[29]](#endnote-23)
8. Partisan politics distracts and weakens government by agitating the public with jealousy, false alarms, mutual animosity, even fomenting riots and insurrection enabling foreign influence and corruption.[[30]](#endnote-24)
9. In free countries, political parties may be a useful check on government to protect liberty, but this is truer of monarchies than in elected governments. The natural partisan spirit of liberty is sufficient. Its excess must be avoided just as a fire should not be quenched, but great care must be exercised lest instead of offering warmth, it erupts into flame consuming everything.[[31]](#endnote-25)

*Encroachment of One Branch of Government on Another Branch*

1. It is important that leaders in a free country by habitual reflection should be inspired to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres. When one branch encroaches on another, this consolidation of power creates a real despotism. The human love of power and tendency to abuse it should persuade us that this is true. History shows that political power has the potential for one branch to invade the power of another which requires checks and balances, the distribution of power and that each branch be on guard. If the Constitution needs to be changed, let it be done in accordance with the Constitution. Change by usurpation might result in good, but this is the exception as it will more likely destroy a free government, providing only a temporary good or worse, what proves to be evil.[[32]](#endnote-26)

*The Necessity of Religion and Morality*

1. Foremost among the tendencies and habits that lead to political success, religion and morality are essential supports. One cannot be a patriot who works to overthrow these great pillars of human happiness and firmest props of the duties of humans and citizens. One who is just a politician just as much as the devout should respect and cherish the worship of God and the principles of good conduct as their connections with private and public well-being are beyond description. If the sense of religious obligation disappears from the oaths taken in courts of justice, what security will remain for property, reputation and life? We must be cautious of the claim that men can be moral without religion, regardless of what is claimed by highly educated thinkers and their distinctive ways of thinking. Reason and experience prevent us from expecting national morality to prosper if the morally correct behavior taught by religion is excluded from society.[[33]](#endnote-27)
2. Truly, doing what is right is a necessary source for government by the people. A friend of free government cannot be neutral to attacks on morality as such attempts shake the foundation of its structure.[[34]](#endnote-28)
3. Thus a primary goal should be to establish educational institutions to disseminate knowledge. Just as government shapes public opinion, so it is also essential that education also should enlighten public opinion.[[35]](#endnote-29)

*Good Credit and Paying National Debt*

1. National strength and security come by cherishing good credit so that the government can borrow. This ability is preserved when it is used sparingly, avoiding expensive wars through peace, although timely preparation for danger can save greater expense in fighting a war. Also, avoid the accumulation of debt, by vigorously laboring in times of peace to pay off debts from unavoidable wars. Let us not ungenerously put off the burden to pay our debts upon future generations. Bring public opinion to bear on your representatives regarding these matters. But remember that to pay off debt, there must be revenue, and for there to be revenue there must be taxes which are generally inconvenient and unpleasant. This embarrassing reality means that the government must be transparent in its plans for taxation and there must be a willingness to accept the measures necessary to meet the demand to pay the public debt.[[36]](#endnote-30)

*Honesty and Justice in International Relationships*

1. Keep your word and be just toward all nations, seeking peace and harmony with all as religion, morality and good policy call for this. This is worthy of a free, enlightened and soon to be great nation that will give the world a new example of a people always guided by exalted justice and goodwill. Although this may be costly at times, the nation will be richly repaid. Hasn’t Providence connected the permanent happiness of a nation with behavior showing high moral standards? The best of human nature calls for this experiment. But will our vices make this impossible?[[37]](#endnote-31)
2. To do this, the most essential issue is the exclusion of permanent opposition to some nations and passionate attachment to others. Instead, a just friendship toward all should be cultivated. Permanent hatred for a nation is a type of slavery, diverting from duty, disposing to insult, developing conflicts that will ultimately, intentionally or not, lead to war resulting in the loss of peace and perhaps even liberty.[[38]](#endnote-32)

*Pretended Patriotism and Foreign Influence*

1. Sympathy for a favorite nation creates the illusion of common interest when there may be none as well as the assimilation of the favored nation’s hostilities, quarrels and wars. Showing favoritism will doubly injure a nation as it is liable to give up what it should keep and create jealousy and ill-will among the less favored nations. Devious citizens will use the favored nation status to betray or sacrifice their own nation while appearing to be pursuing the national interest.[[39]](#endnote-33)
2. Such opportunities for foreign influence alarm an aware and independent patriot. They give occasion to stir domestic factions, mislead public opinion and influence public councils. Such influence dooms a small or weaker nation to become the satellite of a more powerful nation.[[40]](#endnote-34)
3. I beg you to believe me, fellow-citizens, that the passionate self-interest of a free people ought to be constantly awake, against the subtle and devious stratagems of foreign influence, one of the most dangerous enemies of republican government. Yet such patriotic self-interest must also be unbiased lest it be manipulated by the influences of both favored and disfavored nations.[[41]](#endnote-35)
4. The great rule for our foreign policy should be shaped more by commerce than by politics. Existing commitments should be faithfully kept, but let us stop here. Europe’s interests are not our primary interests. Europe’s frequent controversies are foreign to our concerns and so it is unwise for us to become part of her changing political alliances and conflicts.[[42]](#endnote-36)
5. America’s geography enables a different course, provided we remain united under an effective government. Shortly, we will be able to defy material injury from foreign powers. Our neutral independence will be respected by any who would seek to wage war against us as they will see it is impossible to invade us and that we are guided by justice to choose war or peace per our national interest.[[43]](#endnote-37)
6. Why would we give up our unique advantages to foreign concerns, entwining our destiny and entangling our peace and prosperity for the uncertainties of Europe’s struggles?[[44]](#endnote-38)
7. Steer clear of permanent alliances with any foreign powers to the extent we are free to do so. We will keep our current engagements as honesty is always the best policy, yet, we should extend them no further.[[45]](#endnote-39)
8. As part of respectable national defense, temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies are acceptable.[[46]](#endnote-40)
9. Cooperation and free relationships with all nations are supported by policy, human dignity and national interest. But our commerce should be fair and unprejudiced allowing market forces to work, not by force, but by establishing business rules for stable trade and the rights of merchants. Such rules must be evaluated from time to time as experience warrants remembering that there are no unselfish nations and each nation is seeking its own best interests.[[47]](#endnote-41)
10. **Conclusion**
11. My countrymen, this advice is given by an old affectionate friend. I know my thoughts will not make the impact that I wish given human passions and the usual course of the destiny of nations.[[48]](#footnote-7) Yet I desire that they may bring some benefit by moderating partisan rivalry, warning against foreign intrigue and guarding against pretended patriotism. If this happens, I will have been paid in full for my concern for your welfare that moved me to dictate them.[[49]](#endnote-42)
12. My conscience assures me that as President I have sought to be guided by these principles. How far I have succeeded must be established by the witness of the public record and the evidences of my conduct.[[50]](#endnote-43)
13. Despite attempts to change my mind, I remain committed to my plan regarding the current war in Europe outlined in my proclamation of April, 1793 and approved by Congress and supported by the public voice.[[51]](#endnote-44)
14. Deliberation with counsel established the course of neutrality in this matter which I have resolved to follow.[[52]](#endnote-45)
15. I here will not explain my right to take this approach, but our right to do so has essentially been recognized by all.[[53]](#endnote-46)
16. The duty of neutrality may be inferred from the universal duties of justice and humanity when free to do so, maintaining peace and friendship with all.[[54]](#endnote-47)
17. My predominant motive, as you choose to reflect on them, has been to gain time for our national maturation with regard to our institutions, thereby gaining strength to chart our own national course.[[55]](#endnote-48)
18. During my presidency, I am not aware of intentional error, but am sure given my limitations that I have often erred. I fervently pray to the Almighty to avert or lessen the evils that they may result in. I hope that the nation that I have served for 45 years with zealous integrity will indulgently consign to oblivion such errors caused by my inadequate abilities as I will soon be consigned to the mansions of rest.[[56]](#endnote-49)
19. Relying on America’s kindness and motivated by deep love for it, since in it is the native soil for me and several generations of my forebears, I eagerly look forward to going home to Mount Vernon. There I will share with you, my fellow-citizens, the benefits of good laws under a free government, the favorite object of my heart and the happy reward of our mutual cares, labors and dangers.[[57]](#endnote-50)

Geo. Washington.

Appendix:

General George Washington’s Circular Letter to the States

Hearing the news on April 11, 1783 of the signing of a preliminary peace treaty a cessation of hostilities was proclaimed by Congress. General [George Washington](http://www.mountvernon.org/research-collections/digital-encyclopedia/article/george-washington/) at Newburgh, New York, announced the good news to his soldiers on April 19th. Although the final treaty had yet to be signed, the Revolution was essentially over and independence had been won. They were then simply awaiting the signing of the treaty of peace.

Preparing to become a civilian again, Washington meditated on the nation’s future and the needs of men in the Army that would soon be disbanding. Concerned for their many challenges of reentering civilian life, he determined to share his thoughts with the thirteen Governors of the newly independent states. This became his "Circular Letter to the States."

In his more than 7,000 word long Letter, Washington in his own words emphasized four concerns:

1st. An indissoluble Union of the States under one Federal Head.

2dly. A Sacred regard to Public Justice.

3dly. The adoption of a proper Peace Establishment, and

4thly. The prevalence of that pacific and friendly Disposition, among the People of the United States, which will induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and in some instances, to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the Community.[[58]](#footnote-8)

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Head Quarters, Newburgh, June 8, 1783.

Sir: The great object for which I had the honor to hold an appointment in the Service of my Country, being accomplished, I am now preparing to resign it into the hands of Congress, and to return to that domestic retirement, which, it is well known, I left with the greatest reluctance, a Retirement, for which I have never ceased to sigh through a long and painful absence, and in which (remote from the noise and trouble of the World) I meditate to pass the remainder of life in a state of undisturbed repose; But before I carry this resolution into effect, I think it a duty incumbent on me, to make this my last official communication, to congratulate you on the glorious events which Heaven has been pleased to produce in our favor, to offer my sentiments respecting some important subjects, which appear to me, to be intimately connected with the tranquility of the United States, to take my leave of your Excellency as a public Character, and to give my final blessing to that Country, in whose service I have spent the prime of my life, for whose sake I have consumed so many anxious days and watchfull nights, and whose happiness being extremely dear to me, will always constitute no inconsiderable part of my own.

Impressed with the liveliest sensibility on this pleasing occasion, I will claim the indulgence of dilating the more copiously on the subjects of our mutual felicitation. When we consider the magnitude of the prize we contended for, the doubtful nature of the contest, and the favorable manner in which it has terminated, we shall find the greatest possible reason for gratitude and rejoicing; this is a theme that will afford infinite delight to every benevolent and liberal mind, whether the event in contemplation, be considered as the source of present enjoyment or the parent of future happiness; and we shall have equal occasion to felicitate ourselves on the lot which Providence has assigned us, whether we view it in a natural, a political or moral point of light.

The Citizens of America, placed in the most enviable condition, as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a vast Tract of Continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniencies of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification, acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independency; They are, from this period, to be considered as the Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity; Here, they are not only surrounded with every thing which can contribute to the completion of private and domestic enjoyment, but Heaven has crowned all its other blessings, by giving a fairer oppertunity for political happiness, than any other Nation has ever been favored with. Nothing can illustrate these observations more forcibly, than a recollection of the happy conjuncture of times and circumstances, under which our Republic assumed its rank among the Nations; The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition, but at an Epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period, the researches of the human mind, after social happiness, have been carried to a great extent, the Treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labours of Philosophers, Sages and Legislatures, through a long succession of years, are laid open for our use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the Establishment of our forms of Government; the free cultivation of Letters, the unbounded extension of Commerce, the progressive refinement of Manners, the growing liberality of sentiment, and above all, the pure and benign light of Revelation, have had ameliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of Society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be intirely their own.

Such is our situation, and such are our prospects: but notwithstanding the cup of blessing is thus reached out to us, notwithstanding happiness is ours, if we have a disposition to seize the occasion and make it our own; yet, it appears to me there is an option still left to the United States of America, that it is in their choice, and depends upon their conduct, whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptable and miserable as a Nation; This is the time of their political probation, this is the moment when the eyes of the whole World are turned upon them, this is the moment to establish or ruin their national Character forever, this is the favorable moment to give such a tone to our Federal Government, as will enable it to answer the ends of its institution, or this may be the ill-fated moment for relaxing the powers of the Union, annihilating the cement of the Confederation, and exposing us to become the sport of European politics, which may play one State against another to prevent their growing importance, and to serve their own interested purposes. For, according to the system of Policy the States shall adopt at this moment, they will stand or fall, and by their confirmation or lapse, it is yet to be decided, whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse: a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn Millions be involved.

With this conviction of the importance of the present Crisis, silence in me would be a crime; I will therefore speak to your Excellency, the language of freedom and of sincerity, without disguise; I am aware, however, that those who differ from me in political sentiment, may perhaps remark, I am stepping out of the proper line of my duty, and they may possibly ascribe to arrogance or ostentation, what I know is alone the result of the purest intention, but the rectitude of my own heart, which disdains such unworthy motives, the part I have hitherto acted in life, the determination I have formed, of not taking any share in public business hereafter, the ardent desire I feel, and shall continue to manifest, of quietly enjoying in private life, after all the toils of War, the benefits of a wise and liberal Government, will, I flatter myself, sooner or later convince my Countrymen, that I could have no sinister views in delivering with so little reserve, the opinions contained in this Address.

There are four things, which I humbly conceive, are essential to the well being, I may even venture to say, to the existence of the United States as an Independent Power:

1st. An indissoluble Union of the States under one Federal Head.

2dly. A Sacred regard to Public Justice.

3dly. The adoption of a proper Peace Establishment, and

4thly. The prevalence of that pacific and friendly Disposition, among the People of the United States, which will induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and in some instances, to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the Community.

These are the pillars on which the glorious Fabrick of our Independency and National Character must be supported; Liberty is the Basis, and whoever would dare to sap the foundation, or overturn the Structure, under whatever specious pretexts he may attempt it, will merit the bitterest execration, and the severest punishment which can be inflicted by his injured Country.

On the three first Articles I will make a few observations, leaving the last to the good sense and serious consideration of those immediately concerned.

Under the first head, altho' it may not be necessary or proper for me in this place to enter into a particular disquisition of the principles of the Union, and to take up the great question which has been frequently agitated, whether it be expedient and requisite for the States to delegate a larger proportion of Power to Congress, or not, Yet it will be a part of my duty, and that of every true Patriot, to assert without reserve, and to insist upon the following positions, That unless the States will suffer Congress to exercise those prerogatives, they are undoubtedly invested with by the Constitution, every thing must very rapidly tend to Anarchy and confusion, That it is indispensable to the happiness of the individual States, that there should be lodged somewhere, a Supreme Power to regulate and govern the general concerns of the Confederated Republic, without which the Union cannot be of long duration. That there must be a faithfull and pointed compliance on the part of every State, with the late proposals and demands of Congress, or the most fatal consequences will ensue, That whatever measures have a tendency to dissolve the Union, or contribute to violate or lessen the Sovereign Authority, ought to be considered as hostile to the Liberty and Independency of America, and the Authors of them treated accordingly, and lastly, that unless we can be enabled by the concurrence of the States, to participate of the fruits of the Revolution, and enjoy the essential benefits of Civil Society, under a form of Government so free and uncorrupted, so happily guarded against the danger of oppression, as has been devised and adopted by the Articles of Confederation, it will be a subject of regret, that so much blood and treasure have been lavished for no purpose, that so many sufferings have been encountered without a compensation, and that so many sacrifices have been made in vain. Many other considerations might here be adduced to prove, that without an entire conformity to the Spirit of the Union, we cannot exist as an Independent Power; it will be sufficient for my purpose to mention but one or two which seem to me of the greatest importance. It is only in our united Character as an Empire, that our Independence is acknowledged, that our power can be regarded, or our Credit supported among Foreign Nations. The Treaties of the European Powers with the United States of America, will have no validity on a dissolution of the Union. We shall be left nearly in a state of Nature, or we may find by our own unhappy experience, that there is a natural and necessary progression, from the extreme of anarchy to the extreme of Tyranny; and that arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of Liberty abused to licentiousness.

As to file second Article, which respects the performance of Public Justice, Congress have, in their late Address to the United States, almost exhausted the subject, they have explained their Ideas so fully, and have enforced the obligations the States are under, to render compleat justice to all the Public Creditors, with so much dignity and energy, that in my opinion, no real friend to the honor and Independency of America, can hesitate a single moment respecting the propriety of complying with the just and honorable measures proposed; if their Arguments do not produce conviction, I know of nothing that will have greater influence; especially when we recollect that the System referred to, being the result of the collected Wisdom of the Continent, must be esteemed, if not perfect, certainly the least objectionable of any that could be devised; and that if it shall not be carried into immediate execution, a National Bankruptcy, with all its deplorable consequences will take place, before any different Plan can possibly be proposed and adopted; So pressing are the present circumstances I and such is the alternative now offered to the States!

The ability of the Country to discharge the debts which have been incurred in its defence, is not to be doubted, an inclination, I flatter myself, will not be wanting, the path of our duty is plain before us, honesty will be found on every experiment, to be the best and only true policy, let us then as a Nation be just, let us fulfil the public Contracts, which Congress had undoubtedly a right to make for the purpose of carrying on the War, with the same good faith we suppose ourselves bound to perform our private engagements; in the mean time, let an attention to the chearfull performance of their proper business, as Individuals, and as members of Society, be earnestly inculcated on the Citizens of America, that will they strengthen the hands of Government, and be happy under its protection: every one will reap the fruit of his labours, every one will enjoy his own acquisitions without molestation and without danger.

In this state of absolute freedom and perfect security, who will grudge to yield a very little of his property to support the common interest of Society, and insure the protection of Government? Who does not remember, the frequent declarations, at the commencement of the War, that we should be compleatly satisfied, if at the expence of one half, we could defend the remainder of our possessions? Where is the Man to be found, who wishes to remain indebted, for the defence of his own person and property, to the exertions, the bravery, and the blood of others, without making one generous effort to repay the debt of honor and of gratitude? In what part of the Continent shall we find any Man, or body of Men, who would not blush to stand up and propose measures, purposely calculated to rob the Soldier of his Stipend, and the Public Creditor of his due? and were it possible that such a flagrant instance of Injustice could ever happen, would it not excite the general indignation, and tend to bring down, upon the Authors of such measures, the aggravated vengeance of Heaven? If after all, a spirit of dis-union or a temper of obstinacy and perverseness, should manifest itself in any of the States, if such an ungracious disposition should attempt to frustrate all the happy effects that might be expected to flow from the Union, if there should be a refusal to comply with the requisitions for Funds to discharge the annual interest of the public debts, and if that refusal should revive again all those jealousies and produce all those evils, which are now happily removed, Congress, who have in all their Transaction shewn a great degree of magnanimity and justice, will stand justified in the sight of God and Man, and the State alone which puts itself in opposition to the aggregate Wisdom of the Continent, and follows such mistaken and pernicious Councils, will be responsible for all the consequences.

For my own part, conscious of having acted while a Servant of the Public, in the manner I conceived best suited to promote the real interests of my Country; having in consequence of my fixed belief in some measure pledged myself to the Army, that their Country would finally do them compleat and ample Justice, and not wishing to conceal any instance of my official conduct from the eyes of the World, I have thought proper to transmit to your Excellency the inclosed collection of Papers,[31](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw260534))#N0528-635) relative to the half pay and commutation granted by Congress to the Officers of the Army; From these communications, my decided sentiment will be clearly comprehended, together with the conclusive reasons which induced me, at an early period, to

[Note 31: The "inclosed collection of Papers" is not listed or noted in the *Washington Papers*, nor with any of these circulars which have been seen by the editor. The following note is appended to the circular sent to Connecticut (now in the Connecticut State Library): "The collection of Papers mentioned to be inclosed, not being compleated, cannot be sent by this oppertunity; but will be forwarded in a few days; the present Letter is sent on in this manner, lest your Legislature should be adjourned before its arrival." Before June 15 a pamphlet of 36 pages was printed by Samuel Loudon, Fishkill, N. Y., entitled "A Collection of Papers relative to Half-Pay and Commutation of Half-Pay granted by Congress....Compiled by permission of His Excellency General Washington from the Original Papers in his Possession. Fishkill: Printed by Samuel Loudon M,DCC,LXXXIII." In all probability one of these pamphlets was inclose in each circular.] recommend the adoption of the measure, in the most earnest and serious manner. As the proceedings of Congress, the Army, and myself are open to all, and contain in my opinion, sufficient information to remove the prejudices and errors which may have been entertained by any; I think it unnecessary to say any thing more, than just to observe, that the Resolutions of Congress, now alluded to, are undoubtedly as absolutely binding upon the United States, as the most solemn Acts of Confederation or Legislation. As to the Idea, which I am informed has in some instances prevailed, that the half pay and commutation are to be regarded merely in the odious light of a Pension, it ought to be exploded forever; that Provision, should be viewed as it really was, a reasonable compensation offered by Congress, at a time when they had nothing else to give, to the Officers of the Army, for services then to be performed. It was the only means to prevent a total dereliction of the Service, It was a part of their hire, I may be allowed to say, it was the price of their blood and of your Independency, it is therefore more than a common debt, it is a debt of honour, it can never be considered as a Pension or gratuity, nor be cancelled until it is fairly discharged.

With regard to a distinction between Officers and Soldiers, it is sufficient that the uniform experience of every Nation of the World, combined with our own, proves the utility and propriety of the discrimination. Rewards in proportion to the aids the public derives from them, are unquestionably due to all its Servants; In some Lines, the Soldiers have perhaps generally had as ample a compensation for their Services, by the large Bounties which have been paid to them, as their Officers will receive in the proposed Commutation, in others, if besides the donation of Lands, the payment of Arrearages of Cloathing and Wages (in which Articles all the component parts of the Army must be put upon the same footing) we take into the estimate, the Bounties[32](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw260534))#N0530-636) many of the Soldiers have received and the gratuity of one Year's full pay, which is promised to all, possibly their situation (every circumstance being duly considered) will not be deemed less eligible than that of the Officers. Should a farther reward, however, be judged equitable, I will venture to assert, no one will enjoy greater satisfaction than myself, on seeing an exemption from Taxes for a limited time, (which has been petitioned for in some instances) or any other adequate immunity or compensation, granted to the brave defenders of their Country's Cause; but neither the adoption or rejection of this proposition will in any manner affect, much less militate against, the Act of Congress, by which they have offered five years full pay, in lieu of the half pay for life, which had been before promised to the Officers of the Army.

Before I conclude the subject of public justice, I cannot omit to mention the obligations this Country is under, to that meritorious Class of veteran Non-commissioned Officers and Privates, who have been discharged for inability, in consequence of the Resolution of Congress of the 23d of April 1782, on an annual pension for life, their peculiar sufferings, their singular merits and claims to that provision need only be known, to interest all the feelings of humanity in their behalf: nothing but a punctual payment of their annual allowance can rescue them from the most complicated misery, and nothing could be a more melancholy and distressing sight, than to behold those who have shed their blood or lost their limbs in the service of their Country, without a shelter, without a friend, and without the means of obtaining any of the necessaries or comforts of Life; compelled to beg their daily bread from door to door! suffer me to recommend those of this discription, belonging to your State, to the warmest patronage of your Excellency and your Legislature.

It is necessary to say but a few words on the third topic which was proposed, and which regards particularly the defence of the Republic, As there can be little doubt but Congress will recommend a proper Peace Establishment for the United States, in which a due attention will be paid to the importance of placing the Militia of the Union upon a regular and respectable footing; If this should be the case, I would beg leave to urge the great advantage of it in the strongest terms. The Militia of this Country must be considered as the Palladium of our security, and the first effectual resort in case of hostility; It is essential therefore, that the same system should pervade the whole; that the formation and discipline of the Militia of the Continent should be absolutely uniform, and that the same species of Arms, Accoutrements and Military Apparatus, should be introduced in every part of the United States; No one, (who has not learned it from experience, can conceive the difficulty, expence, and confusion which result from a contrary system, or the vague Arrangements which have hitherto prevailed.

If in treating of political points, a greater latitude than usual has been taken in the course of this Address, the importance of the Crisis, and the magnitude of the objects in discussion, must be my apology: It is, however, neither my wish or expectation, that the preceding observations should claim any regard, except so far as they shall appear to be dictated by a good intention, consonant to the immutable rules of Justice; calculated to produce a liberal system of policy, and founded on whatever experience may have been acquired by a long and close attention to public business. Here I might speak with the more confidence from my actual observations, and, if it would not swell this Letter (already too prolix) beyond the bounds I had prescribed myself: I could demonstrate to every mind open to conviction, that in less time and with much less expence than has been incurred, the War might have been brought to the same happy conclusion, if the resourses of the Continent could have been properly drawn forth, that the distresses and disappointments which have very often occurred, have in too many instances, resulted more from a want of energy, in the Continental Government, than a deficiency of means in the particular States. That the inefficiency of measures, arising from the want of an adequate authority in the Supreme Power, from a partial compliance with the Requisitions of Congress in some of the States, and from a failure of punctuality in others, while it tended to damp the zeal of those which were more willing to exert themselves; served also to accumulate the expences of the War, and to frustrate the best concerted Plans, and that the discouragement occasioned by the complicated difficulties and embarrassments, in which our affairs were, by this means involved, would have long ago produced the dissolution of any Army, less patient, less virtuous and less persevering, than that which I have had the honor to command. But while I mention these things, which are notorious facts, as the defects of our Federal Constitution, particularly in the prosecution of a War, I beg it may be understood, that as I have ever taken a pleasure in gratefully acknowledging the assistance and support I have derived from every Class of Citizens, so shall I always be happy to do justice to the unparalleled exertion of the individual States, on many interesting occasions.

I have thus freely disclosed what I wished to make known, before I surrendered up my Public trust to those who committed it to me, the task is now accomplished, I now bid adieu to your Excellency as the Chief Magistrate of your State, at the same time I bid a last farewell to the cares of Office, and all the imployments of public life.

It remains then to be my final and only request, that your Excellency will communicate these sentiments to your Legislature at their next meeting, and that they may be considered as the Legacy of One, who has ardently wished, on all occasions, to be useful to his Country, and who, even in the shade of Retirement, will not fail to implore the divine benediction upon it.

I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection, that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.[33](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw260534))#N0533-637)

[Note 33: The draft is in the writing of David Cobb.]

1. For a published version of the Farewell, see https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21/pdf/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Appendix at end of this summary. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Washington's Farewell Address was similar to one he had prepared at the end of his first term, when he had considered retiring from office. Toward the close of his first term in 1792 James Madison prepared notes to be used by Washington in formulating a valedictory speech. Madison submitted a draft but it was set aside when Washington abandoned his plans for retirement.” https://www.varsitytutors.com/earlyamerica/milestone-events/washingtons-farewell-address [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See paragraph 3, note 3. A limited Address was prepared by James Madison. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “In May 1796 he took Madison's notes and wrote a first draft for the new address. Washington showed his manuscript to Alexander Hamilton and asked him to revise it. For the next four months various drafts were sent back and forth between Washington and Hamilton. Finally, Hamilton read his version of the address to John Jay for criticism, discussing the work paragraph by paragraph. The result, rewritten again by Washington in a final version, and admittedly a collaborative effort, nonetheless embodies the thoughts, ideas and principles of the retiring president.” <https://www.varsitytutors.com/earlyamerica/milestone-events/washingtons-farewell-address>. “The Farewell Address definitely embodies the core beliefs that Washington hoped would continue to guide the nation. Several hands produced the document itself. The opening paragraphs remain largely unchanged from the version drafted by James Madison in 1792, while most of the rest was penned by Alexander Hamilton, whom Washington directed to remove the bitterness from an intermediate draft that the president himself had written. Although the drawn out language of the Address follows Hamilton's style, there is little doubt that the core ideas were not only endorsed by Washington but were beliefs that he and Hamilton had developed together as the new nation's leading nationalists.” http://www.ushistory.org/us/17d.asp [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Paragraph 42, note 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
8. I beg you, at the same time, to do me the justice to be assured that this resolution has not been taken without a strict regard to all the considerations appertaining to the relation which binds a dutiful citizen to his country; and that in withdrawing the tender of service, which silence in my situation might imply, I am influenced by no diminution of zeal for your future interest, no deficiency of grateful respect for your past kindness, but am supported by a full conviction that the step is compatible with both. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
9. The acceptance of, and continuance hitherto in, the office to which your suffrages have twice called me have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty and to a deference for what appeared to be your desire. I constantly hoped that it would have been much earlier in my power, consistently with motives which I was not at liberty to disregard, to return to that retirement from which I had been reluctantly drawn. The strength of my inclination to do this, previous to the last election, had even led to the preparation of an address to declare it to you; but mature reflection on the then perplexed and critical posture of our affairs with foreign nations, and the unanimous advice of persons entitled to my confidence, impelled me to abandon the idea. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
10. I rejoice that the state of your concerns, external as well as internal, no longer renders the pursuit of inclination incompatible with the sentiment of duty or propriety, and am persuaded, whatever partiality may be retained for my services, that, in the present circumstances of our country, you will not disapprove my determination to retire. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
11. The impressions with which I first undertook the arduous trust were explained on the proper occasion. In the discharge of this trust, I will only say that I have, with good intentions, contributed towards the organization and administration of the government the best exertions of which a very fallible judgment was capable. Not unconscious in the outset of the inferiority of my qualifications, experience in my own eyes, perhaps still more in the eyes of others, has strengthened the motives to diffidence of myself; and every day the increasing weight of years admonishes me more and more that the shade of retirement is as necessary to me as it will be welcome. Satisfied that if any circumstances have given peculiar value to my services, they were temporary, I have the consolation to believe that, while choice and prudence invite me to quit the political scene, patriotism does not forbid it. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
12. In looking forward to the moment which is intended to terminate the career of my public life, my feelings do not permit me to suspend the deep acknowledgment of that debt of gratitude which I owe to my beloved country for the many honors it has conferred upon me; still more for the steadfast confidence with which it has supported me; and for the opportunities I have thence enjoyed of manifesting my inviolable attachment, by services faithful and persevering, though in usefulness unequal to my zeal. If benefits have resulted to our country from these services, let it always be remembered to your praise, and as an instructive example in our annals, that under circumstances in which the passions, agitated in every direction, were liable to mislead, amidst appearances sometimes dubious, vicissitudes of fortune often discouraging, in situations in which not unfrequently want of success has countenanced the spirit of criticism, the constancy of your support was the essential prop of the efforts, and a guarantee of the plans by which they were effected. Profoundly penetrated with this idea, I shall carry it with me to my grave, as a strong incitement to unceasing vows that heaven may continue to you the choicest tokens of its beneficence; that your union and brotherly affection may be perpetual; that the free Constitution, which is the work of your hands, may be sacredly maintained; that its administration in every department may be stamped with wisdom and virtue; that, in fine, the happiness of the people of these States, under the auspices of liberty, may be made complete by so careful a preservation and so prudent a use of this blessing as will acquire to them the glory of recommending it to the applause, the affection, and adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
13. Here, perhaps, I ought to stop. But a solicitude for your welfare, which cannot end but with my life, and the apprehension of danger, natural to that solicitude, urge me, on an occasion like the present, to offer to your solemn contemplation, and to recommend to your frequent review, some sentiments which are the result of much reflection, of no inconsiderable observation, and which appear to me all-important to the permanency of your felicity as a people. These will be offered to you with the more freedom, as you can only see in them the disinterested warnings of a parting friend, who can possibly have no personal motive to bias his counsel. Nor can I forget, as an encouragement to it, your indulgent reception of my sentiments on a former and not dissimilar occasion. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
14. Interwoven as is the love of liberty with every ligament of your hearts, no recommendation of mine is necessary to fortify or confirm the attachment. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
15. The unity of government which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you. It is justly so, for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize. But as it is easy to foresee that, from different causes and from different quarters, much pains will be taken, many artifices employed to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth; as this is the point in your political fortress against which the batteries of internal and external enemies will be most constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously) directed, it is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion that it can in any event be abandoned; and indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
16. For this you have every inducement of sympathy and interest. Citizens, by birth or choice, of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections. 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. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
17. But these considerations, however powerfully they address themselves to your sensibility, are greatly outweighed by those which apply more immediately to your interest. Here every portion of our country finds the most commanding motives for carefully guarding and preserving the union of the whole. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
18. The North, in an unrestrained intercourse with the South, protected by the equal laws of a common government, finds in the productions of the latter great additional resources of maritime and commercial enterprise and precious materials of manufacturing industry. The South, in the same intercourse, benefiting by the agency of the North, sees its agriculture grow and its commerce expand. Turning partly into its own channels the seamen of the North, it finds its particular navigation invigorated; and, while it contributes, in different ways, to nourish and increase the general mass of the national navigation, it looks forward to the protection of a maritime strength, to which itself is unequally adapted. The East, in a like intercourse with the West, already finds, and in the progressive improvement of interior communications by land and water, will more and more find a valuable vent for the commodities which it brings from abroad, or manufactures at home. The West derives from the East supplies requisite to its growth and comfort, and, what is perhaps of still greater consequence, it must of necessity owe the secure enjoyment of indispensable outlets for its own productions to the weight, influence, and the future maritime strength of the Atlantic side of the Union, directed by an indissoluble community of interest as one nation. Any other tenure by which the West can hold this essential advantage, whether derived from its own separate strength, or from an apostate and unnatural connection with any foreign power, must be intrinsically precarious. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
19. While, then, every part of our country thus feels an immediate and particular interest in union, all the parts combined cannot fail to find in the united mass of means and efforts greater strength, greater resource, proportionably greater security from external danger, a less frequent interruption of their peace by foreign nations; and, what is of inestimable value, they must derive from union an exemption from those broils and wars between themselves, which so frequently afflict neighboring countries not tied together by the same governments, which their own rival ships alone would be sufficient to produce, but which opposite foreign alliances, attachments, and intrigues would stimulate and embitter. Hence, likewise, they will 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 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
20. These considerations speak a persuasive language to every reflecting and virtuous mind, and exhibit the continuance of the Union as a primary object of patriotic desire. Is there a doubt whether a common government can embrace so large a sphere? Let experience solve it. To listen to mere speculation in such a case were criminal. We are authorized to hope that a proper organization of the whole with the auxiliary agency of governments for the respective subdivisions, will afford a happy issue to the experiment. It is well worth a fair and full experiment. With such powerful and obvious motives to union, affecting all parts of our country, while experience shall not have demonstrated its impracticability, there will always be reason to distrust the patriotism of those who in any quarter may endeavor to weaken its bands. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
21. In contemplating the causes which may disturb our Union, it occurs as matter of serious concern that any ground should have been furnished for characterizing parties by geographical discriminations, Northern and Southern, Atlantic and Western; whence designing men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. One of the expedients of party to acquire influence within particular districts is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heartburnings which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection. The inhabitants of our Western country have lately had a useful lesson on this head; they have seen, in the negotiation by the Executive, and in the unanimous ratification by the Senate, of the treaty with Spain, and in the universal satisfaction at that event, throughout the United States, a decisive proof how unfounded were the suspicions propagated among them of a policy in the General Government and in the Atlantic States unfriendly to their interests in regard to the Mississippi; they have been witnesses to the formation of two treaties, that with Great Britain, and that with Spain, which secure to them everything they could desire, in respect to our foreign relations, towards confirming their prosperity. Will it not be their wisdom to rely for the preservation of these advantages on the Union by which they were procured ? Will they not henceforth be deaf to those advisers, if such there are, who would sever them from their brethren and connect them with aliens? [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
22. To the efficacy and permanency of your Union, a government for the whole is indispensable. No alliance, however strict, between the parts can be an adequate substitute; they must inevitably experience the infractions and interruptions which all alliances in all times have experienced. Sensible of this momentous truth, you have improved upon your first essay, by the adoption of a constitution of government better calculated than your former for an intimate union, and for the efficacious management of your common concerns. This government, the offspring of our own choice, uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government. But the [Constitution](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/usconst.asp) which at any time exists, till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
23. All obstructions to the execution of the laws, all combinations and associations, under whatever plausible character, with the real design to direct, control, counteract, or awe the regular deliberation and action of the constituted authorities, are destructive of this fundamental principle, and of fatal tendency. They serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put, in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common counsels and modified by mutual interests. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
24. However combinations or associations of the above description may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
25. Avoid untested changes allowing for time and experience to fix the character of government. Towards the preservation of your government, and the permanency of your present happy state, it is requisite, not only that you steadily discountenance irregular oppositions to its acknowledged authority, but also that you resist with care the spirit of innovation upon its principles, however specious the pretexts. One method of assault may be to effect, in the forms of the [Constitution](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/usconst.asp), alterations which will impair the energy of the system, and thus to undermine what cannot be directly overthrown. In all the changes to which you may be invited, remember that time and habit are at least as necessary to fix the true character of governments as of other human institutions; that experience is the surest standard by which to test the real tendency of the existing constitution of a country; that facility in changes, upon the credit of mere hypothesis and opinion, exposes to perpetual change, from the endless variety of hypothesis and opinion; and remember, especially, that for the efficient management of your common interests, in a country so extensive as ours, a government of as much vigor as is consistent with the perfect security of liberty is indispensable. Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian. It is, indeed, little else than a name, where the government is too feeble to withstand the enterprises of faction, to confine each member of the society within the limits prescribed by the laws, and to maintain all in the secure and tranquil enjoyment of the rights of person and property. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
26. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
27. This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
28. The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
29. Without looking forward to an extremity of this kind (which nevertheless ought not to be entirely out of sight), the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
30. 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, foments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
31. There is an opinion that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the administration of the government and serve to keep alive the spirit of liberty. This within certain limits is probably true; and in governments of a monarchical cast, patriotism may look with indulgence, if not with favor, upon the spirit of party. But in those of the popular character, in governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged. From their natural tendency, it is certain there will always be enough of that spirit for every salutary purpose. And there being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it. A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
32. It is important, likewise, that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution in those entrusted with its administration, to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres, avoiding in the exercise of the powers of one department to encroach upon another. The spirit of encroachment tends to consolidate the powers of all the departments in one, and thus to create, whatever the form of government, a real despotism. A just estimate of that love of power, and proneness to abuse it, which predominates in the human heart, is sufficient to satisfy us of the truth of this position. The necessity of reciprocal checks in the exercise of political power, by dividing and distributing it into different depositaries, and constituting each the guardian of the public weal against invasions by the others, has been evinced by experiments ancient and modern; some of them in our country and under our own eyes. To preserve them must be as necessary as to institute them. If, in the opinion of the people, the distribution or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the [Constitution](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/usconst.asp) designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this, in one instance, may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed. The precedent must always greatly overbalance in permanent evil any partial or transient benefit, which the use can at any time yield. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
33. Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: 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 ? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
34. It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric? [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
35. Promote then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
36. As a very important source of strength and security, cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible, avoiding occasions of expense by cultivating peace, but remembering also that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it, avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertion in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear. The execution of these maxims belongs to your representatives, but it is necessary that public opinion should co-operate. To facilitate to them the performance of their duty, it is essential that you should practically bear in mind that towards the payment of debts there must be revenue; that to have revenue there must be taxes; that no taxes can be devised which are not more or less inconvenient and unpleasant; that the intrinsic embarrassment, inseparable from the selection of the proper objects (which is always a choice of difficulties), ought to be a decisive motive for a candid construction of the conduct of the government in making it, and for a spirit of acquiescence in the measures for obtaining revenue, which the public exigencies may at any time dictate. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
37. Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be, that good policy does not equally enjoin it - 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. Who can doubt that, in the course of time and things, the fruits of such a plan would richly repay any temporary advantages which might be lost by a steady adherence to it ? Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue ? The experiment, at least, is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human nature. Alas! is it rendered impossible by its vices? [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
38. In the execution of such a plan, nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest. Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable, when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur. Hence, frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests. The nation, prompted by ill-will and resentment, sometimes impels to war the government, contrary to the best calculations of policy. The government sometimes participates in the national propensity, and adopts through passion what reason would reject; at other times it makes the animosity of the nation subservient to projects of hostility instigated by pride, ambition, and other sinister and pernicious motives. The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations, has been the victim. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
39. Likewise, a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification. It leads also to concessions to the favorite nation of privileges denied to others which is apt doubly to injure the nation making the concessions; by unnecessarily parting with what ought to have been retained, and by exciting jealousy, ill-will, and a disposition to retaliate, in the parties from whom equal privileges are withheld. And it gives to ambitious, corrupted, or deluded citizens (who devote themselves to the favorite nation), facility to betray or sacrifice the interests of their own country, without odium, sometimes even with popularity; gilding, with the appearances of a virtuous sense of obligation, a commendable deference for public opinion, or a laudable zeal for public good, the base or foolish compliances of ambition, corruption, or infatuation. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
40. As avenues to foreign influence in innumerable ways, such attachments are particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot. How many opportunities do they afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public councils. Such an attachment of a small or weak towards a great and powerful nation dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
41. Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. But that jealousy to be useful must be impartial; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defense against it. Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
42. 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. Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
43. Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people under an efficient government. the period is not far off when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
44. Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalship, interest, humor or caprice? [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
45. 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 existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
46. Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
47. Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand; neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences; consulting the natural course of things; diffusing and diversifying by gentle means the streams of commerce, but forcing nothing; establishing (with powers so disposed, in order to give trade a stable course, to define the rights of our merchants, and to enable the government to support them) conventional rules of intercourse, the best that present circumstances and mutual opinion will permit, but temporary, and liable to be from time to time abandoned or varied, as experience and circumstances shall dictate; constantly keeping in view that it is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another; that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character; that, by such acceptance, it may place itself in the condition of having given equivalents for nominal favors, and yet of being reproached with ingratitude for not giving more. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation. It is an illusion, which experience must cure, which a just pride ought to discard. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
48. Washington’s expectation of the lack of impact by his letter was not a mere expression of humility. He had experienced less than a rousing acceptance of his earlier Circular Letter. Note 30 to the Farewell in the Fitzpatrick edition states regarding the impact of the Circular: “Edmund Randolph, writing from Virginia, June 28, 1783, to James Madison, in Congress, stated: ‘The arrival of Gen: Washington's circular letter excited this hope [of the passage of the impost law] in the minds of the sanguine: but its effect is momentary, and perhaps it will hereafter be accepted by the assembly with disgust. For the murmur is free and general against what is called the unsolicited obtrusion of his advice.’ Randolph's letter is in the *Madison Papers* in the Library of Congress.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
49. In offering to you, my countrymen, these counsels of an old and affectionate friend, I dare not hope they will make the strong and lasting impression I could wish; that they will control the usual current of the passions, or prevent our nation from running the course which has hitherto marked the destiny of nations. But, if I may even flatter myself that they may be productive of some partial benefit, some occasional good; that they may now and then recur to moderate the fury of party spirit, to warn against the mischiefs of foreign intrigue, to guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism; this hope will be a full recompense for the solicitude for your welfare, by which they have been dictated. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
50. How far in the discharge of my official duties I have been guided by the principles which have been delineated, the public records and other evidences of my conduct must witness to you and to the world. To myself, the assurance of my own conscience is, that I have at least believed myself to be guided by them. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
51. In relation to the still subsisting war in Europe, my proclamation of the twenty-second of April, I793, is the index of my plan. Sanctioned by your approving voice, and by that of your representatives in both houses of Congress, the spirit of that measure has continually governed me, uninfluenced by any attempts to deter or divert me from it. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
52. After deliberate examination, with the aid of the best lights I could obtain, I was well satisfied that our country, under all the circumstances of the case, had a right to take, and was bound in duty and interest to take, a neutral position. Having taken it, I determined, as far as should depend upon me, to maintain it, with moderation, perseverance, and firmness. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
53. The considerations which respect the right to hold this conduct, it is not necessary on this occasion to detail. I will only observe that, according to my understanding of the matter, that right, so far from being denied by any of the belligerent powers, has been virtually admitted by all. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
54. The duty of holding a neutral conduct may be inferred, without anything more, from the obligation which justice and humanity impose on every nation, in cases in which it is free to act, to maintain inviolate the relations of peace and amity towards other nations. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
55. The inducements of interest for observing that conduct will best be referred to your own reflections and experience. With me a predominant motive has been to endeavor to gain time to our country to settle and mature its yet recent institutions, and to progress without interruption to that degree of strength and consistency which is necessary to give it, humanly speaking, the command of its own fortunes. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
56. Though, in reviewing the incidents of my administration, I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend. I shall also carry with me the hope that my country will never cease to view them with indulgence; and that, after forty five years of my life dedicated to its service with an upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion, as myself must soon be to the mansions of rest. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
57. Relying on its kindness in this as in other things, and actuated by that fervent love towards it, which is so natural to a man who views in it the native soil of himself and his progenitors for several generations, I anticipate with pleasing expectation that retreat in which I promise myself to realize, without alloy, the sweet enjoyment of partaking, in the midst of my fellow-citizens, the benign influence of good laws under a free government, the ever-favorite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust, of our mutual cares, labors, and dangers. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
58. This Letter can be found in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources*, 1745-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor. “Circular Letter to the States, 8 June 1783" , Vol. 26, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), pp. 483-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)