

Farewell Address (1796)

George Washington

Historical Background

In September 1796, as George Washington was finishing his second term as President of the United States, he announced his retirement. He had wanted to retire from public service in 1792 but was persuaded that the new union under the Constitution was too fragile for him to do so at that time. By this almost unprecedented act of relinquishing supreme power voluntarily, when forced neither by law nor by ill health nor by political failure, Washington lent his great prestige to the long unwritten rule that presidents should serve no more than two terms thereby helping to ensure the stable, peaceful rotation of power in the United States. The timing of his announcement also shortened the length of the campaign to replace him to a few short months.

Historical Significance

President Washington's Farewell Address is historically important for preserving and memorializing the views of the first president on possible dangers the United States could face and the qualities its citizens needed to cultivate in order to surmount them. Washington saw the national project as an experiment not guaranteed to succeed, especially if the nation did not fully heed the dangers of the "spirit of party" or failed "to steer clear of permanent alliances." Some of George Washington's warnings could be read as quite prophetic. One such example, which seems especially clairvoyant due to the occurrence of the Civil War, is his warning about the danger of seeing the union as readily divisible into distinct and rival interests such as "North and South" or "Atlantic or Western."

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: union; factions; sectionalism and nationalism; federalism; state's rights; moral or civic education; permanent alliances; presidential traditions; political party

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- explain President Washington's view of the proper relationship between the United States and foreign nations;
- analyze and evaluate President Washington's critique of excessive partisanship and faction. SWBAT create an analysis of the contemporary political situation from Washington's critique of the "spirit of party";
- list the reasons given by Washington for the advantages of the union over individual sovereignty of the states. SWBAT infer Washington's views on "states' rights" or "federalism" from this discussion;

- describe the President Washington's views of the advantages of checks and balances and constitutional government;
- evaluate the importance of the appeals to the necessity of religion and virtue in the Farewell Address.

Questions to Explore

George Washington contended that the geographic situation of the United States allowed it to maintain its distance from the political problems and wars of Europe. How does this "fact" affect the moral argument for the United States' nonintervention in the affairs of other nations?

What is the relationship between aspirational (ideal) political principles of Declaration of Independence and Washington's worries about foreign entanglements? How can the United States simultaneously declare universal truths about just political principles and adhere to plan of non-interference?

Should Washington's suggestion to avoid permanent alliances be followed in contemporary international relations? Why or why not?

How much of the success of forms of governments and constitutions depends on the design of the institutions of that government and how much on the people inhabiting important offices in those governments?

To what extent does morality need religious faith to support it? What effect might it have on religion for people to understand it in the terms that Washington outlines?

Washington argues that the "spirit of party" is a part of "our nature." Could a part of our nature be bad? What does it mean to say that this spirit is "the worst enemy" of popular government?