

*The Command of Our Own Fortunes*

Three Lectures on the Statesmanship of George Washington

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### Lecture III:

#### *Washington as Statesman: "Counsels of an old and affectionate friend"*

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Thank you, Gay, once again for your warm welcome. I am deeply humbled by these lectures, and will always cherish our time together in this hallowed place.

Our last conversation focused on Washington, the lawmaker, as president of the United States. Let us jump forward to the morning of September 19, 1796, and discuss Washington the statesman.

In the capital to confer with Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, the new minister to France, President Washington was anxious to be on his way before Philadelphia's largest newspaper was delivered that morning. He quickly signed a batch of naval commissions, reviewed the day's paperwork, and was in a carriage headed home to Mount Vernon before most of the city had awakened.

The *American Daily Advertiser* carried an exclusive story that Monday morning, without banner headline, introductory explanation, or editorial comment. On page two was a seemingly innocuous article introduced under the simple heading: "To the PEOPLE of the United States" and then "Friends and fellow Citizens." No grand occasion, no official fanfare. The reader discovered the author and realized the significance of the essay only at the end, where there appeared: "G. Washington, United States." Quickly reprinted by virtually every major newspaper in America, only one—the *Courier of New Hampshire*—reprinted it under the title by which it is now known: "Washington's Farewell Address."

From the beginning, Washington's purpose was clear. The next presidential election was not far distant, and Washington would not be among those "out of whom the choice is to be made."<sup>1</sup> It was a stunning announcement. The United States of America had never been without Washington at its head.

After the Revolutionary War, General Washington surrendered his commission to Congress and retired from military life at a moment when he could have become—as some hoped—an American monarch. Now, a decade later, Washington was voluntarily retiring from the highest office in the new nation, at a time when he easily could have remained in the position—a prospect many assumed would be the case—for life. When Washington stepped down the second time, a dumbfounded King George III proclaimed him "the greatest character of the age." So powerful was Washington's decision that it lasted as an unenforced precedent until Franklin Roosevelt's wartime third term in 1940, and was made a constitutional mandate in 1951.

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<sup>1</sup> Washington, "The Farewell Address," in Writings of Washington, 35:215.

But while its immediate purpose was to announce his departure from public life, Washington's objective was to offer for "solemn contemplation" and "frequent review" some thoughts that he considered "all important" to the future safety and happiness of his country. He hoped his advice might be remembered by future generations "now and then," he says, when contemplating their own course.<sup>2</sup>

Well, here we are. For numerous reasons of politics and policy, our nation has come to one of those momentous times. A great national debate has been engaged about our meaning, and the trajectory of our country. Important issues have been nationalized, and even more so the national discussion has been what I like to call *foundationalized*—it has become focused on foundational themes. And yet for all that, we remain fairly adrift, looking for our bearings.

With that in mind, let us continue our conversation with George Washington, and seek his guidance for today.

### **Washington's Farewell Address**

For many, Washington's Farewell Address is one of those forgotten, dusty, eighteenth-century documents thought to have little application to today's modern and complicated society. Scholars are quick to assume that the words were written for Washington by his wily advisor, Alexander Hamilton, as a piece of political propaganda to influence the election of 1796. Another popular reading argues that the address supposedly illustrates the roots of isolationist foreign policy.

Yet the Farewell Address was considered by the founders themselves to be a major contribution to American political thought; and, together with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, judged to be one of the great documents of American history. It is all the more significant since Washington turned for assistance first to James Madison and then to Hamilton, the two primary authors of *The Federalist Papers*. When Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were designing the primary reading list for the University of Virginia in 1825, they described the Farewell Address as one of "the best guides to the distinctive principles" of American government.<sup>3</sup> John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Abraham Lincoln—all looked to Washington's valedictory for council.

This is because the Farewell Address represents Washington's collected wisdom, and outlines the major themes of his statesmanship. It is the culmination of his public task.

### **Unity**

Washington's first theme is American unity—of the states, and as a people. Union supports our safety and happiness -- the ends of government as set forth in the

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<sup>2</sup> Washington, "The Farewell Address," in Writings of Washington, 35:218.

<sup>3</sup> Jefferson, "From the Minutes of the Board of Visitors, University of Virginia", March 4, 1825, in Thomas Jefferson: Writings ed. Merrill D. Peterson. (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 479.

Declaration of Independence. It is “the support of your tranquillity at home; your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; [and] of that very Liberty which you so highly prize” and so we should “cherish a cordial, habitual and immoveable attachment to it.”<sup>4</sup> We should be wary of anything that will “enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.” One potential threat to union, Washington warned, was the growth of sectionalism based on particular interests--an allusion to the coming slavery controversy. But he generally had in mind policies--think of multiculturalism, nativism, or class warfare--that divide us against ourselves.

The immediate reason for union, of course, is security: "If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy injury from external annoyance; ... when belligerent nations, ... will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as *our interest guided by justice shall counsel*."<sup>5</sup>

## **Independence**

Washington's second theme is independence.

At the time of its founding, the United States was a weak and fledgling nation, unique in its claim to republican institutions, and extremely vulnerable to the great powers that dominated the world. Its objectives were to strengthen its constitutional government, build an adequate military capacity to defend itself, and remove European influence from the North American continent. Washington's warning against permanent political alliances in favor of temporary (or better yet – commercial) alliances is especially prudent in light of the circumstances.

Washington argued that the United States should take advantage of its geographic and political situation—a physical separation from Europe and the opportunity to remain aloof from its quarrels—to pursue a long-term strategy of defying external threats and choosing its own course as a nation. Washington's policies--and here we begin to see the larger principle at work--were intended “to gain time for our country to settle and mature its recent institutions, and to progress, without interruption, to that degree of strength and consistency, which is necessary to give it, humanly speaking, (here, another of my favorite Washington's phrases) *command of its own fortunes*.”<sup>6</sup>

One way to understand this is “strategic independence,” or freedom of action in international affairs. I think a more accurate meaning is found in the older term self-sufficiency. Certainly, strategic independence requires taking care of the nation’s security and material interests. But self-sufficiency comprehends a larger sense of moral purpose, well-being, and completeness of the political community.

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<sup>4</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:219.

<sup>5</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:234.

<sup>6</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:237.

It means sovereignty in the fullest sense. Or as the Declaration of Independence says: “to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them.” Washington advocates a prudent foreign policy so that Americans may come to determine their own fate.

A self-sufficient America freely chooses its own leaders, makes its own laws, and ensures its own safety and happiness. If a foreign power can tell America “what we shall do, and what we shall not do,” Washington once told Hamilton, “we have Independence yet to seek, and have contended hitherto for very little.”<sup>7</sup>

True independence is not only the absence of physical restraint and control, but also the flourishing of an autonomous and free character. It requires freedom of action and independent thinking. Americans must be free from prejudices and irrational attachments to foreign nations if they are to become partisans of their own. Preconceived positions restrict options and prevent the nation from responsibly choosing its own course. When these attachments dominate the public mind, they not only lead the nation away from its duty and interest, but also make the supposedly free nation “in some degree a slave” to the other. “Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence,” Washington famously warns us, “the jealousy of a free people ought to be *constantly* awake.”<sup>8</sup>

### **The Politics of Factionalism**

Taking “a more comprehensive view,” Washington also famously warns us in his third theme of “the baneful effects of the Spirit of Party,” which stir up individual passions and overpower reason, thus bringing out the worst aspects of democracy at home and abroad.<sup>9</sup>

Washington is not against political partisanship, as is sometime thought. Party spirit, he writes, is part of “our nature” and has its root in the “strongest passions” of man, a point famously made by Madison in Federalist 10.<sup>10</sup> The problem, says Washington, is “the constant danger of excess.” “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.”<sup>11</sup> Party spirit must be mitigated, not by law or coercion, but by “the force of public opinion.”<sup>12</sup>

Whereas Madison's solution to the problem of faction emphasizes increasing the diversity of interests, Washington emphasizes the formation of a common opinion that will transcend man's petty and self-interested differences. Now we are beginning to see Washington's larger argument.

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<sup>7</sup> Washington to Alexander Hamilton, May 8, 1796, in Writings to Washington, 35:40.

<sup>8</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:233.

<sup>9</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:226.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*; *Federalist* No. 10, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:226-28.

<sup>12</sup> See Colleen A. Sheehan, “The Politics of Public Opinion: James Madison's 'Notes of Government,'” *William and Mary Quarterly* 49 (1992): 609–27; Charles R. Kesler, “*Federalist* 10 and American Republicanism,” and William B. Allen, “Justice and the General Good: *Federalist* 51,” in *Saving the Revolution: The Federalist and the American Founding*, ed. Charles R. Kesler (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 13–39 and 131–149. Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:228.

## **Constitutionalism**

The key to Union, independence, and the moderation of partisan passions is Washington's fourth theme: constitutional government. A loose confederation of the states had already been tried and proven inadequate to the purposes of nationhood. And under the Articles of Confederation and the dominance of state governments, jealous and petty politics had formed a jealous and petty spirit in the people. Government must have vigor consistent with the security of liberty, and must be able to resist the enterprises of faction in order to enforce the law and secure the rights of persons and property. The “surest Guardian” of liberty, then, is not a small and weak government, but a strong national government of adequate powers limited and properly distributed.<sup>13</sup>

In its design, our Constitution encourages moderation and good habits of government. Working properly, the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances thwart despotism and encourage responsibility. A responsible government bolsters responsible people. At the same time, the people would learn from the law-making process to curb their desires for immediate political change, and abide by the legitimate legal process. In particular, the constitutional amendment mechanism allows democratic reform at the same time that it elevates the document above the whims of popular passions. Until the Constitution is formally changed “by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People,” Washington reminds us, it remains “sacredly obligatory upon all.”<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, we must be ever vigilant against the spirit of government encroachment: “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.”<sup>15</sup>

## **The Centrality of Character**

This brings us to Washington's overarching theme: the ever-present question of character.

The formation of good opinions demands the cultivation of good character and habits that moderate the passions, encourage deliberation, and uphold justice. Washington gives us several examples of national character: paying taxes to support the legitimate operations of the government; cherishing public credit and avoiding the accumulation of debt; fulfilling contracts; keeping national commitments and “Observ[ing] good faith and justice towds. all Nations.”<sup>16</sup>

But necessary to the moderation of public passion and the support of public morality is the moderation of private passion through the encouragement of private morality. Recall that in his First Inaugural, Washington said that “the foundation of our national policy

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<sup>13</sup>Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:226.

<sup>14</sup>Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:224.

<sup>15</sup>Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:228.

<sup>16</sup>Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:231.

will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality.”<sup>17</sup> In the Farewell Address he focuses on two concerns prominent throughout his writings: religion and education.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,” Washington writes, “Religion and morality are indispensable supports.” They are the “firmest props of the duties of man and citizens” and the “great pillars of human happiness.” They aid good government by teaching men their moral obligations and creating the conditions for decent politics. “The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them.” Washington takes his observation one step further: “And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.”<sup>18</sup>

No matter what might be conceded to the “influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure”—think of a Jefferson or a Thomas Paine—“reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”<sup>19</sup> While there might be particular cases where morality does not depend on religion, Washington argues that this is not the case for the morality of the nation.

Of course, Washington’s statements about the importance of religion in politics must be understood in light of his equally strong defense of religious liberty, expressed most powerfully in a series of letters to different religious congregations, written soon after he became president. The most moving was a beautiful letter written to one of the most persecuted religious groups in history.

“It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights,” Washington wrote to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, “for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.”<sup>20</sup>

While it is often thought that the separation of church and state marks the divorce of religion and politics in America, Washington’s conception of religious liberty was quite different. Washington’s understanding of liberty requires a certain moralization of politics, which includes—and indeed requires—the expansion of religion’s influence in our politics. Church and state are formally separated, but religion, in the form of morality and the moral teachings of religion, is now free to exercise an unprecedented influence over private and public opinion by shaping *mores*, cultivating virtues and, in general, providing an independent source of moral reasoning and authority.

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<sup>17</sup> Washington, First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789, in *Writings of Washington*, 30:291-6.

<sup>18</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in *Writings of Washington*, 35:214-38. See also, Matthew Spalding and Patrick J. Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in *Writings of Washington*, 35:229.

<sup>20</sup> Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, August 1790, *Washington: A Collection*, 548.

But the key element of Washington's solution has to do with education: "In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."<sup>21</sup> The consent that legitimates government must be informed. The "best means of forming a manly, virtuous and happy people, will be found in the right education of youth," he wrote in one letter. "Without this foundation, every other means, in my opinion, must fail."<sup>22</sup>

In the Farewell Address he advises us to "Promote ... as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge."<sup>23</sup> In his First Message to Congress in 1790, Washington had called for the general promotion of knowledge—what he called "the surest basis of public happiness"—because (and here we see what he emphasizes as education) it teaches citizens to know and defend their rights, to distinguish between oppression and lawful authority, and "to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness—cherishing the first, avoiding the last."<sup>24</sup>

Washington returned to the subject again in his Eighth Annual Message:

Amongst the motives to such as Institution, [referring to his failed call for a national university] the assimilation of the principles, opinions and manners of our Country men, by the common education of a portion of our Youth from every quarter, well deserves attention.... [A] primary object ... should be, the education of our Youth in the science of Government. In a Republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? and what duty, more pressing on its Legislature, than to patronize a plan for communicating it to those, who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the Country?<sup>25</sup>

As commissioners for the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison wrote a report on the civic purpose of schools in similar language. They required as part of the University of Virginia's original government curriculum Washington's Farewell Address.

To recap Washington's themes: National Unity, Sovereign Independence, Political Moderation, Constitutional Responsibility, Religious Freedom, and the education of citizens in the first principles of liberty. This sounds to me like someone who ought to run for president.

## **A Grand Renewal**

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<sup>21</sup> Washington, "The Farewell Address," in *Writings of Washington*, 35:230. See also, Matthew Spalding and Patrick J. Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Washington to George Chapman, December 15, 1784, in *Writings of Washington*, 28:13-4.

<sup>23</sup> Washington, "The Farewell Address," in *Writings of Washington*, 35:230.

<sup>24</sup> Washington, "First Annual Message", *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 469.

<sup>25</sup> Washington, "Eighth Annual Message", *Writings of Washington*, 35: 316–17.

When I spoke earlier of recent events I did not mean it in a partisan sense, or in terms of immediate changes in Congress. I meant to suggest something deeper.

There is something about a nation founded on principles -- something unique in its politics that often gets shoved to the background, but never disappears. Most of the time, American politics is about local issues and the small handful of policy questions that top the national agenda. But once in a while, it is instead about voters stepping back and taking a longer view as they evaluate the present in the light of our past. That is why all the great turning-point elections in U.S. history ultimately came down to a debate about the meaning and trajectory of America.

In the era of modern government and the administrative state, the conventional wisdom has been that serious political realignment — bringing politics and government back into harmony with the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — is no longer possible. Yet there are indications that we may be entering a period of such magnitude. The form of the modern state is not yet settled — at least not by the American people.

The view of America that shapes and dominates elite opinion today was marked out at the start of the last century by progressive thinkers. They criticized the Founders' understanding, holding that there are no self-evident truths—in the Declaration of Independence or elsewhere—but only *change* in the constant search for progress. There are no permanent rights with which man is endowed, but only evolving rights that develop and grow to reflect current conditions. Our fidelity must be to a “living” Constitution that adapts to fit the times. Progress requires a new form of government that is able to control conditions and engineer a better society, assuring outcomes through a distant state that oversees more and more of American life.

The implications of this argument have played out over the course of the twentieth century, through the ebbs and flows of American politics, and the dominance of Democrats and Republicans alike. We are now in a debate over where this trajectory may be taking us.

One possible future lies across the ocean. The grand nations of old Europe are now stifled by regulated economies and nationalized industries, ruled more by bureaucrats than by their own elected legislatures. Europeans are disinclined to defend themselves in the world. Magnificent cathedrals are now empty testaments to postmodern secularism. The cultures of Europe are in steep decline.

The primary reason the United States has not gone the way of Europe is that our country has long maintained a political culture grounded on America's moral and constitutional principles, which has kept it staked to the Western tradition of reason and faith, and protected from the radicalization of modern thought that has devastated much of the European continent. Indeed, those arguments have not fully succeeded here precisely because they are working *against* rather than *with* the deep undercurrents of America's ideas and institutions.

We don't need to remake America, or discover new and untested principles. The change we need is a grand renewal of America's principles.

Modern education has shifted away from civics and social studies in elementary teaching. High schools largely ignore, minimize, or disparage the story of America's Founding. Students can graduate from the top colleges and universities in America without taking a single course in U.S. history. We must reverse this trend by making a commitment at every level of education to promote an awareness and appreciation of America's meaning.

But education must not be confined to the classroom. We must continue to teach the principles of liberty and the rights and responsibilities of self-government to all Americans. The aim is a clear expression and forthright defense of America's principles in the public square so that they become again, as Jefferson once described them, an expression of the American mind.<sup>26</sup>

Most Americans still believe in the uniqueness of this country and respect its noble ideas. The goal must be to restore the liberating principles of the American Founding—its philosophical grounding, its constitutional wisdom, and its limitless spirit of enterprise, self-government and independence—as the defining public philosophy of our nation.

It is the sure commitment to principle that can transform prudence from mere timidity into bold and courageous action when the times call for it. And serious, thoughtful leaders cannot doubt that we are living in a time that calls for Washington's bold prudence.

### **Citizenship and Friendship**

Let me conclude by saying a few words about Washington's last theme: citizenship and friendship. Washington begins the Farewell Address by referring to himself as a “dutiful citizen” and concludes by speaking of “my fellow Citizens” and “you, my Countrymen.” He presents his sentiments as the “disinterested warnings of a parting friend” while toward the end he refers to “these counsels of an old and affectionate friend.”<sup>27</sup> Citizenship and friendship are literally the beginning and the end of Washington's council.

Recall that the Farewell Address is directed to “Friends and Fellow Citizens.” This salutation is, in part, a recognition of an international audience. But it says more about Washington's view of us. Early in the Farewell Address, Washington hopes that not just Union, but “Union and brotherly affection be perpetual.” Later he warns of narrow interests that tend to render “alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.” This language reflects the classical observation that it is friendship above all else that seems to hold political communities together. In the end, while

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, Thomas Jefferson: Writings ed. Merrill D. Peterson. (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1501.

<sup>27</sup> Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:214-38.

commercial and security interests cement the union, true political harmony will only exist if Americans are tied together by the bonds of friendship.

Washington warns Americans that they must be ever vigilant in maintaining their constitutional government and assuring their strategic independence. But the real work is to maintain the brotherly affections of the people, guarding and encouraging the dispositions and habits most conducive to republican government. It is the success of this effort that gives to mankind “the too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence” and allows America the glory of recommending it to the applause, the affection and the adoption of every nation.<sup>28</sup>

That Washington could say in 1796 that Americans had become friends and fellow citizens—despite the geographical distances, party divisions, religious differences and foreign policy dangers—suggests that the Founding, meaning the *creation* of the regime, was in his mind complete. The challenge from that point forward would be one of perpetuation. To be sure, this is no small labor. It would only grow more difficult over time. When Abraham Lincoln assumed the presidency he considered his task “greater than that which rested upon Washington.”

In the end, America is a test to see whether free men can govern themselves. Washington understood that it is not a test which, once taken and passed, is over and done with. America remains a proposition, as Lincoln said in his greatest speech.

Every generation is challenged to vindicate that cause.

We have the immeasurable benefit - the providential gift - of having inherited a great country, built on the rock of human liberty, with a firm confidence in self-government.

America's principles always await rediscovery, not because they are written on faded parchments in glass cases, but because--as Washington recognized--the love of liberty is interwoven with every ligament of the heart.

Our task does not require fixed bayonets, but fixed principles. It is not about revolution, but about restoration.

A task worthy of Lincoln, for sure, but perhaps even more nobly gained and honorably pursued under the mighty banner of Washington.

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<sup>28</sup>Washington, “The Farewell Address,” in Writings of Washington, 35:231.

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