

Print Version of the Address:

THE ADDRESS OF To the People ON HIS DECLINING OF UNITED GEN. WASHINGTON of America, THE PRESIDENCY THE STATES.



Friends and Fellow-Citizens,

THE period for the 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 I may continue to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now apprize 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.

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 withholding the tender of service, I am not, as might possibly be supposed, influenced by any disposition of zeal for your future interests; nor deficiency of grateful respect for your past kindness; but an unshaken conviction that the step is compatible with both.

The acceptance of, and continuance in the office to which your suffrages have twice called me, have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty, and of a detestation for what appeared to be your choice. 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 unshaken advice of persons confided to my confidence, impelled me to abstain from it.

I repeat 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.

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 free 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 stage of retirement is as necessary to me as it will be to every citizen. Notwithstanding, that if any circumstances have even peculiarly qualified me 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.

In looking forward to the moment which is intrusted to terminate the career of my public life, my feelings do not permit me to suppress the deep acknowledgments of that debt of gratitude which I owe to my beloved country for the many honours it has conferred on me; still more for the steadfast confidence with which it has supported me; and for the opportunities I have thrice 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

fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty.

Without looking forward to an extremity of this kind (which nevertheless ought not to be entirely out of sight), the common and cautious anxieties of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.

It serves always to distract the public councils, and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one party against another; fomenting occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and the will of another.

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 nominal cast patriotism may look with indulgence, if not with favour, 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.

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 propensity 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 depositories, 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 own 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 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.

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. In vain would we make laws of great virtue if we did not first endeavour to plant in the hearts of the people the love of God, the love of one another, and the love of our country. The more these are rooted in the minds of the people, the more will they be able to resist and control the influence of every

endeavour to weaken its bonds.

In contemplating the causes, which may disturb our Union, it occurs as matter of serious concern, that any ground should be found for characterizing parties by Geographical discriminations—Northern and Southern—Atlantic and Western. 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 heart-burnings 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 in regard to the Mississippi; they have been witnesses to the formation of two treaties, that with Great Britain, and with Spain, which secure to them every thing they could desire, in respect to our foreign relations, towards confirming their property. 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?

As to the efficacy and permanency of your Union, a government for the whole is indispensable—No alliance, however strict, between the several states, can supply the place of it. They must inevitably experience the infractions and interruptions which all alliances have in all times 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 your own choice, unaided and unassisted, 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, assiduousness in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of free liberty. The basis of our political system is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government—but the constitution which at any time shall be established by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very next day the power and the right of the people to establish government, presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.

All obstructions to the execution of its 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 an artificial and extraordinary force to part 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 triumph of different parties, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of its common and wholesome plans, directed by common councils, and modified by mutual interests.

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.

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 pretences. One method of assault may be to effect, in the forms of the constitution, 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 government 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 small extent 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.

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 comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party, generally.

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 even in its greatest rankness; and it is truly their worst enemy.

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party discussions, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a trigonal despotism. The disorders and miseries, to which it gives birth, are in their nature and in their effects, consistent with the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of

our detached and dissipated situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people, under one 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. 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, rivalry, interest, humour, or caprice? It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; to far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronising 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 us those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary, and would be unwise, to extend them. Taking care always to keep ourselves, by suitable establishments, on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.

Harmony and a liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should have an equal and impartial hand; neither seeking nor granting exclusive favours 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 decline 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 altered or varied, as experience and circumstances shall dictate; constantly keeping in view, that it is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favours 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 favours, and yet of being reproached with ingratitude for not giving more. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favours from nation to nation. It is an illusion which experience must cure; which a just pride ought to discard.

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 inferences from the present to the future, which 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 the welfare by which they have been dictated.

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 any 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.

In relation to the still subsisting war in Europe, my proclamation of 23d April, 1793, is the index to my plan. Satisfied 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 divert or divert me from it. 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. The considerations with respect to 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. The duty of holding a neutral conduct may be of pleasure expectation; that retreat in which I promise myself to retire, without alloy, the sweet enjoyment of peace and tranquillity, in the midst of my fellow-citizens, the benign influence of good laws under a free government—the ever favourite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust, of our mutual cares, labours, and dangers.

The inducements of interest for observing that conduct will be best referred to your own reflections and experience. With me, a predominant motive has been to endeavour 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, in a manner speaking, the command of its own fortunes.

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 lead. I shall also carry with me the hope that any unwise or unwise measures to which they may have led, 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.

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 retire, without alloy, the sweet enjoyment of peace and tranquillity, in the midst of my fellow-citizens, the benign influence of good laws under a free government—the ever favourite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust, of our mutual cares, labours, and dangers.

United States, 17th Sept. 1796.

G. WASHINGTON.

endeavour to weaken its bands. In contemplating the causes which may disturb our Union, it occurs as matter of serious concern, that any ground should have been furnished for characterising parties by Geographical discriminations—Northern and Southern—Atlantic and Western; whence designing men may endeavour 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 heart-burnings 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 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 every thing 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?

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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 endeavour to gain time to our country to settle and mature its yet recent good will, to be ready to meet the emergency with vigour and confidence, and to guard against every danger which is necessary to its safety.

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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 relate, 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 favourite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust, of my mutual cares, labours, and dangers.

Cover and Newspaper Reprint:

WASHINGTON'S
FAREWELL ADDRESS,
TO THE
PEOPLE
OF THE
UNITED STATES.

PUBLISHED FOR THE WASHINGTON BENEVOLENT SOCIETY.

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BY DAVID CARLISLE.
1800.

Communication was received on Thursday last after the Publication of our Paper—we embrace the earliest Opportunity to present it to the Public.]

To the PEOPLE of the UNITED STATES.
FRIENDS AND FELLOW-CITIZENS,

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 more peculiarly as it may conduce to a more extensive diffusion of the public voice, and to a more judicious selection of the person being

many honors it has conferred upon me, I still more for the steadfast confidence which it has supported me; and for the opportunities I have thereby enjoyed of manifesting my inviolable attachment by services faithful and persevering, though in situations unequal to my zeal. If benefits have related to our country from these services, let it always be remembered to our 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—the confidence of your support was instrumental to the success of the efforts, and a guarantee of the plans by which they were effected. I shall carry it with me to my grave, as a privilege and honor, that I have been permitted to share in the triumphs of the public mind, and to be permitted to share in the triumphs of the public mind.

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