



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**A Founding Father's
Farewell**
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Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today (Deuteronomy 8:11).

It's Presidents Day weekend, which is a national holiday, of course, not a church holiday, but there's a long tradition in America of offering sermons that have to do with our life together as a country on the occasion of national holidays. When I've done that from time to time and quoted presidents, it's usually been someone like Lincoln or Jefferson, because they were so good with words and so eminently quotable. George Washington was less gifted as a writer, but Wednesday is his birthday, and his farewell message at the end of his presidency is one of the greatest addresses in our history—not so much for its rhetorical force as for its wisdom and perennial timeliness. So I'd like to share the essence of his message with you this morning, in the context of a Presidents' Day sermon.

It's striking that a text delivered in 1796 should sound in some ways like it was “ripped from the headlines,” as they say nowadays on television. I've always admired Washington's Farewell, so I was happy to find a popular book that's just come out on the subject, called appropriately enough, *Washington's Farewell*. It tells how the address came to be written, what worried Washington about the future of his country, and how the founding father's address has continued to speak to who we are as a nation, down to the present day.

Washington was always self-conscious about his lack of formal education. He read a great deal, but he had to drop out of school when his father died, so he lacked the college

education of Adams's Harvard, Jefferson's William and Mary, Madison's College of New Jersey that later became Princeton, or Hamilton's King's College, now known as Columbia University. Still, nobody else, even among the extraordinary lights of that Revolutionary age, had the stature of Washington—literally, since he was six feet two inches tall, or figuratively, after long, hard years as commander-in-chief of the army, and then presiding over the Constitutional Convention. Only Washington had enough respect to hold together the colossal egos and competing interests of the new Congress. So when it came time for him to retire, our first president enlisted the aid of Madison and Hamilton to help him say what he wanted to say to his countrymen, whom he called “Friends, and Fellow-Citizens.”

What worried Washington most was the destructive power of partisanship. He watched it forming right in front of him, even while he was still the president. Vice President Adams, from the northern urban, commercial center of Boston, was a Federalist like Hamilton, supporting a strong central government and favoring Britain in its global contest with France. Secretary of State Jefferson, on the other hand, was a slave-holding southerner, lifting up rural life as the American ideal, supporting states' rights and favoring France, even as he worked behind the scenes with Madison to create what came to be called the Democratic-Republican Party.

Washington watched the members of his own cabinet, who had risked their lives together for independence twenty years earlier, now dividing themselves into parties, each willing to caricature and vilify the other while championing their own interests as if they represented the entire country. Washington knew from history where all this divisiveness could easily lead. In every experiment with democracy in the

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ancient world, civility gave way to competing factions, which in turn led to the threat of chaos, so that people eventually gave up on democracy and turned to some tyrant to protect them. People may value freedom, but they can't stand chaos, and they will sacrifice a great deal of freedom in exchange for security. As John Adams wrote to a friend in 1814, "there never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."

The founders knew they were trying to establish something that had never succeeded before in history: a democratically elected, representative government able to sustain itself on a grand scale over time. There's a story told about Benjamin Franklin, to the effect that when he emerged from the Constitutional Convention, a group of citizens asked what sort of government the delegates had created. Franklin's answer was, "A republic, if you can keep it."

Washington knew that the health of a republic is always precarious, and nothing threatens to undermine it more than divisive factions or partisanship. He said in his Farewell Address:

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge natural to party dissention ... 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.

Washington recognized that there might be some value in parties, insofar as they see that different interests are represented. But he described partisanship as “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.”

What could prevent the spirit of faction from burning up the republic? Washington’s answer, shared by most of the other founders, was a kind of moral perspective on civic virtue. Civic virtue required a well-educated and informed citizenry, with the moral discipline to put the public interest ahead of purely personal and partisan interests. Washington said:

’Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.... In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.

The founding generation knew that popular opinion might do more harm than good if it was not well informed and enlightened. So they insisted on the importance of civic education, as well as the necessity of a free press, even though some elements of the press were already given to partisan prejudice from the earliest days of the republic.

Washington thought morality, in this broader sense of civic virtue, was essential to a republic, and he thought religion could play a crucial role as a foundation of morality. “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports,” he said in his Farewell Address. “And let us with

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caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion”

George Washington was a Christian of the Anglican variety, though he shared the broad perspective of Jefferson, Madison, and others that the United States should welcome people of all religions, insofar as their religion supported a commitment to doing what's right and living peaceably in the land. When the supervisor of his farms needed to hire more workers, Washington said, “If they are good workmen, they may be from Asia, Africa, or Europe; they may be Mahometans, Jews, or Christians of any sect, or they may be atheists.” In his very first month in office as president, Washington wrote to a Baptist association in Virginia that “no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution.”

Washington believed that Providence had blessed and guided his country all through the Revolutionary War, the creation of the Constitution, and the storms that threatened the new republic. But he also knew that the watchful eye of Providence was not limited to the United States. He urged his fellow citizens to “Observe good faith and justice towards all Nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all.” And within the nation itself, he asked rhetorically, “Can it be, that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its virtue?”

Here Washington sounds like Moses, who gave his own farewell address to the people of Israel on the threshold of the Promised Land. Moses tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy, “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes....” Moses warns them not to

imagine that their prosperity in this new country will be all their own doing, rather than a gift from God. “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth....” Moses and Washington both cautioned their countrymen against becoming so preoccupied with self-interest that they neglect God’s requirements for a just and benevolent society.

Washington also urged his fellow citizens to pay for the things they want from government. As commander-in-chief of the army, he was continually exasperated by Congress’s unwillingness to pay the salaries of the soldiers who sacrificed so much for their country’s independence and security. In his Farewell Address, he reminds his countrymen of the obvious: 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” If people want things from their government they should pay for those things, “not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burthen which we ourselves ought to bear.” Washington was appalled at the idea that one generation would take what it wants from government, while avoiding the taxes to pay for it, and pass on their debt for future generations to repay.

Our first president offered these considerations to his fellow Americans, describing himself as “an old and affectionate friend.” In his own day, the dangers of division were already ominous, especially between the North and the South. A couple of generations later those differences would play out in a tragic and terrible Civil War.

Later generations may not face the same sort of civil war, but a basic threat to democracy always remains: that

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special interests might feed ever greater divisiveness for their own purposes, until at last the public grows cynical and tired of the effort that self-government requires. If that ever happened, the founders knew from their study of history what the outcome was likely to be. People unwilling to muster the civic virtue to govern themselves will forfeit their freedom sooner or later to some tyrant who promises them law and order and security.

Washington's view of his country's prospects was shaped by his understanding of themes from the Bible and by the mistakes other republics made in the past. He loved his country, and dearly wanted it to prosper in the responsible freedom that he and so many others sacrificed in order to establish. Washington's Farewell Address was his encouragement, and his warning, to future generations. It was not given as a speech to Congress, to be heard by a few dozen people, but was sent to newspapers so that it could be read throughout the entire country. Then, having offered his best advice after four decades of public service, Washington finally retired to his home in Mt. Vernon, where he spent the last three years of his life.

Our biblical faith invites us to live as a free people, as servants of God who use our freedom, not for personal indulgence alone, but for God's purposes in a just and benevolent society. We've been blessed to live in this free land that Washington and so many others established and sustained for our benefit. Now it's up to us to determine what we do with this great inheritance, and what kind of country we will pass on to our children, and our children's children, for generations to come.