

“Promote ... institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge”

By Nancy Spannaus

Sept. 19, 2018—The quotation that forms the headline of this post comes from George Washington’s letter to “the people of the United States,” subsequently known as his [Farewell Address](#).^[1] That letter was published in the *American Daily Advertiser* (a Philadelphia newspaper) on September 19, 1796 as an announcement to the nation that he would not be a candidate in the upcoming Presidential elections.

I cannot emphasize too much the value of reading this letter today, and re-reading it at least yearly. Written in close collaboration with Alexander Hamilton, Washington’s letter expresses at some length the principles which he believed were vital to the survival of the American republic, the cause for which he had served in public life for 45 years. I would argue that none of his concerns are outdated (although I’m sure many would disagree), despite the differences in circumstances today.



George Washington presiding over the Constitutional Convention.

Washington’s leading concern was that his fellow citizens maintain and protect their attachment to the *national union*, the union which won independence and liberty for all its inhabitants, and which he argued was essential to economic progress for all. He summarized the mutual benefits which the

economic strengths of various sections of the nation represent for the whole, and pressed his readers to adhere to the "indissoluble community of interest, as one nation."

A large part of the remainder of the document is dedicated to identifying, and countering, the threats to this union. These threats include sectionalism, the "spirit of party," and the effects of foreign influence, especially through the passionate attachment or habitual enmity toward particular nations. "Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all," he counsels. Seek commercial relations, but not political ones: no "permanent alliances." His warning against "entangling alliances" (that term was used by Thomas Jefferson, rather than Washington's "permanent alliances") should be understood in the context of Washington's overall policy statement. He was admonishing the nation to avoid a foreign policy based on *sentiments* of hatred or love of another nation; Washington's major concern was to ensure peaceful relations based on commerce in the interest of all.

The Citizen's Responsibility

What should become clear in reading this document is the degree to which Washington, writing as a citizen, is putting responsibility on his fellow-citizens to maintain the republic. You bled and died to create this country, he says, in effect; you deliberated on and established a Constitution; now you must act to defend that Constitution, follow the laws of the land, and do what is necessary to preserve the Union into the future.

I find the following section particularly poignant, and thought-provoking:

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 a 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.

*“It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. This 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? **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 should be enlightened.** (emphasis added)*



Statue of George Washington
at George Washington
University.

It was Washington's original inclination to elaborate on this admonition to promote education in this open letter, but Hamilton convinced him not to extend the length of the document, but to include his thoughts in his final address to Congress, which would be given in early December. [There](#) Washington called for the establishment of a National University, as well as a Military Academy. The National University in the nation's capital should bring in students from around the country to create a common bond and increase the prospects for "permanent Union," he said. And, he continued,

...a primary object of such a National Institution 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?

Washington put his money where his mouth was. In his last will and testament, he bequeathed his shares in the Potomac Company toward the endowment of a university in the District of Columbia. George Washington University (initially called Columbian College), chartered in 1821, was Congress's belated response to his call.

Food for Thought

There is no question but that Washington's (and Hamilton's) admonitions in his September 19 Farewell Address were taken quite seriously by the leading representatives of the [American System](#) of political economy, most notably John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln. Above all, their concern was for preserving the Union. But they also put great stress on the moral dimension of this question, which they understood to rely on the "general diffusion of knowledge."

It is my hope that this blog, in its own way, can further the

attainment of that essential goal.

[\[1\]](#) Washington's Dec. 7 speech to Congress, also known as his 8th annual address, is also often called his Farewell Address.

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