ENTRY #11

The Power of Citizenship: The Message for the True Protectors of the Constitution in George Washington’s Farewell Address

Introduction

Upon receiving the news of George Washington’s death, Alexander Hamilton remembered the President as an “Aegis very essential” to him, referencing a Grecian mythological piece of divine armor. Washington personally protected Hamilton from political attacks and his mentorship was largely responsible for Hamilton’s success in his late career. To others, Washington was remembered as an Aegis very essential to us all. He shielded his nation and his friends and cloaked both with an impenetrability of virtue and confidence. He was, without exaggeration, perceived as a Father to his nation and a Moses to his people.

Washington’s Farewell Address was more than a political will and testament, and was certainly more than simple lessons of unity, republicanism, and constitutionalism in the face of faction, passion, and conflict. Treating these sentiments as if they are all the Address has to offer misses the deeper significance of the Farewell Address; it is a perennial civics lesson, through which Washington uses every facet of domestic and foreign politics to create a template for citizenship. Through each example of prudence and wisdom he creates an American character complete with the rights and duties of all citizens, shared equally by everyone who calls themselves an American. This type of citizen, he argues, is the only means by which to maintain both a free society and virtue itself.

The greatest constitutional crisis is a crisis of citizenship; over time, we have not simply lost sight of the individual lessons given to us by Washington, but we have lost sight of what it means to be a citizen at all. Contemporary politics treats citizenship as a presumption, not an honor and duty. Contemporary politics ignores how citizens ought to act, how citizens ought to contribute to society, and where they ought to come from. Morality, let alone true political philosophy are afterthoughts just as virtue, righteousness, and responsibility. In the face of this constitutional crisis, Washington can still be our protector; let the founding citizen teach us once again how to be American.

Framing the Farewell Address Through Washington’s Introduction

The theme of citizenship is certainly not the first premise that most readers choose to focus on. Yet, despite an absence of its attention in most, if not all contemporary scholarship on the Farewell Address, there is evidence that suggests that Washington’s original audience would have understood the subliminal argument he was making about citizenship. In his eulogy of George Washington, Richard Allen spoke of the Address by

1 From Alexander Hamilton to Tobias Lear, 2 January 1900
2 Ron Chernow’s biography of Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton beautifully details the influence of the General and President on Hamilton’s career in the military and in public service.
proclaiming, "Your observance of these short and comprehensive expressions will make you good citizens – and greatly promote the cause of the oppressed and shew to the world that you hold dear the name of George Washington." Remembering the Farewell Address was both a way to show respect for the beloved late-President, but was a way to show that they had learned from him how to behave as citizens. Allen’s eulogy provides a first glance into how the initial audience of the Address would have received its content; it was an address closing the pages on a successful first presidency, yes, but it also contained lessons on how to be a good citizen—not simply expressions to listen to, but lessons that changed how citizens behaved and thought.

Further, there is evidence from within the Address itself that shows that its deeper focus is on creating good citizens. Editing the address was a long process that took countless drafts between James Madison’s initial copy in 1792 and the final address at the time of its publication. During that time, the Address transformed from Madison’s simple curtain call into a detailed, purposeful, and cohesive argument. The argument for citizenship begins with a Hamiltonian addition to the opening of the address: “The period for a new election of a citizen to administer the executive government of the United States”. This opening is essentially a thesis; when Americans employ their thoughts “in designating the person who is to be clothed” with the “important trust” of the Presidency, they must pick a citizen qualified by the portrait of citizenship outlined in the remainder of the address. If the task of 1796 was simply to find any citizen to take the office, it would have been an eventless election. 1796 was, however, the year the American people chose a successor for Washington, someone worthy of the office that he helped create, and someone worthy of the standards that he outlined in his farewell address. Because of the opening line, which in turn was the first step in a more complex argument, the Farewell Address should indeed be read as advice about the proper administration of government, but is additionally a more subtle, more persuasive argument about the proper role of citizens.

The model for citizenship is Washington himself, although the final draft is absent the “egotism” he apparently sensed in the previous versions. As a “dutiful citizen” bound to his country, he confidently states that his “zeal” for America and gratefulness for their support are not incompatible with his retirement. In fact, his forty-five years are a single tender of service humbly rescinded at the moment of its fulfillment. Citizens can never make themselves servants, they must instead be awakened by the call of the “public voice”, or at least, a public need, and their tender of service requested by the common people. A citizen is a humble servant by nature—humble and earnest in their devotion and affection for the nation.

Recognize, though, that the introduction of Washington as a dutiful citizen also introduces an implied set of obligations on behalf of the citizen. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are silent on explicit matters of duty, and only speak of

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4 Richard Allen, Eulogy of George Washington
5 Drawing much of my argument from the back-and-forth drafts between Hamilton and Washington, I have decided to use Hamilton’s numbering system of the paragraphs as the simplest means of citing the Address. Each number refers to the number of the paragraph in the final draft. This quotation comes from the Final Draft, paragraph one: (Farewell Address 1)
6 From George Washington to Alexander Hamilton on August 25, 1796
7 Farewell Address 2
freedom with respect to the liberties of individuals and the prohibition of encroaching on them. Here, Washington adds a layer to the law; there are duties for citizens that stretch beyond their freedoms to exercise their rights and recognize the rights of others. In a time where the separation between a public life and private life was carefully attended to and cared for, Washington subtly shows by his language and his example that a citizen is expected to sacrifice the latter for the former. His assertion that “patriotism does not forbid” retirement carries with it an implicit recognition that it may require or demand it.\(^8\) Lest it be presumed that the sacrifice must be permanent and absolute, he also reiterates that the summation of his public service is his public career, and it must come to its natural close with the termination of his second term as president. This is the first duty implicitly set forth by Washington: a duty to serve, but not beyond what is necessary. One irony that Washington does not address is that the proper identification of the division between necessary duty and unnecessary action requires prudence, a common political virtue that one must first have in order to serve virtuously.

The second feature of proper citizenship, an affectionate attachment to the nation and government, appears repeatedly throughout the address. Washington refers to his own “inviolable attachment” manifesting itself in his submission to public career of service. By hearkening back to the duty of service, he shows that an honest affection for the nation naturally reveals itself through service. If faith without works is dead, so is patriotism. Furthermore, the affection of a good citizen towards government stands unwavering in the face of adversity. Washington urges his audience to remember his actions if they benefited the country, but cautions them against being misled or discouraged by a “spirit of criticism”.\(^9\) In arguing, “The constancy of your support was the essential prop of the efforts,” Washington links the positive support and attachment of the people to the success of government; one is not possible without the other and the citizen is directly responsible for both the efficiency and efficacy of their government. The affection of the public has two effects on citizens in this passage: it manifests itself in tangible acts of service and it bars citizens from being openly and unjustly critical towards government.

The affections Washington demands of citizens for their nation and for their fellow citizens are distinct. The former, patriotism, is an attachment that citizen requires solely because of the nature of citizenship. In other words, by virtue of being a citizen, one does and ought to have an attachment to their nation. The latter, the “brotherly affection,” results from this attachment. Citizens share equally in their citizenship, none are greater or lesser than others and all are united by one cause. A good citizen must naturally have an unwavering attachment to their nation and an abiding love for their fellow citizens. If we might extend Washington’s argument about the duty of service produced by his attachment to his country, we find ourselves with an additional duty; the duty of service produced by an attachment to our fellow countrymen.

It is critical to note that all of this takes place before Washington coyly suggests he ought to stop, though he has no intention of doing so because this is only his introduction to the Address. But, because he has “some sentiments which are the result of much reflection, of no inconsiderable observation, and which appear to me all-important to the permanency

\(^8\) Farewell Address 5
\(^9\) Farewell Address 6
of your felicity as a people," he continues.⁠²⁰⁰ Rhetorically, the preceding paragraphs serve as an introduction to the "sentiments" worthy of "solemn contemplation" and "frequent review". They establish both that Washington is a portrait of good citizenship and that the responsibility of the audience is to find a good citizen to take his place. Naturally, the subsequent paragraphs expressing guidance after guidance should not be taken out of the context of the introduction, rather, they help unify all of the advice into one central message: the ensuing sentiments are good practices for good citizens.

Interestingly all of the content about citizenship was added by Hamilton and Washington during the long editing process. Madison was silent on the issue in his initial draft. From the documents available to us today, reconstructing the drafts is possible. With Washington's prompt and guidance, Hamilton slowly worked the term "citizen" and the surrounding ideas about citizenship into his "abstract of points to form an address" in July of 1796. By September, Hamilton's major draft, and what would largely constitute the final draft of the Farewell Address was complete, with each instance of the term "citizen" and instances of good citizenship approved by Washington.⁠¹¹ Hamilton's role in working citizenship into the Farewell Address should not be overlooked, and as I argue later, is significant for interpreting the Address.

**Citizenship in the "Sentiments"**

Tracing the pattern of citizenship through the remainder of the Address yields a special reading of Washington's recommendations; it uncovers a system of duties, obligations, and virtues that produce unity in government and therefore also produce unity in the citizen body. Washington's choice to include an argument about human nature also reminds the public that government, after all, is created to restrain and improve human nature. Together, his portrayal of good citizens and good governance crafts a striking understanding of the proper relationship between citizens and their government.

Washington focuses heavily on unity throughout the Address, and for a good cause. The unity of the United States, that which makes them a common body of "one people" instead of a loosely related confederacy of human beings, is achievable only through the unity of government. The "unity of government" is "a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prized".⁠¹² Interestingly, "real independence" is only attainable through the unity of government; any other type of independence that comes independently from government is not true. This claim that one must be dependent on government for independence may seem paradoxical at face value, but is perfectly consistent with a theory of government where the state protects citizens from themselves and others in order for them to be free.

It is also perfectly consistent with the theory of government expressed in the Farewell Address as well as the Federalist Papers and the writings of other political

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⁠¹⁰ Farewell Address 7
⁠¹¹ This history comes from Washington's farewell address, in facsimile, with transliterations of all the drafts of Washington, Madison, & Hamilton, together with their correspondence and other supporting documents; edited, with a history of its origin, reception by the nation, rise of the controversy respecting its authorship, and a bibliography, by Victor Hugo Palsits (1930)
⁠¹² Farewell Address 9
philosophers and politicians. The "collective and individual happiness" of Americans is dependent on the "national union" because only the "national union" can adequately protect against "the batteries of internal and external enemies" that face any nation, republic or not. A "national union" is the founder and finisher of liberty, freedom, independence, and happiness, and should be revered as such, with a "cordial, habitual, and immoveable attachment."\textsuperscript{13}

Here, he writes on patriotism again. Each citizen has a dual identity; they have a national capacity and a local capacity. The "national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations" because all Americans, "with slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles."\textsuperscript{14} Each American's identity as an American is justified by a national identity rooted in a common tradition. They all "fought and triumphed together" in "a common cause" and their "independence and liberty" were produced by the work of a united nation. All local interests, all passions and hopes for self-improvement must come second to the needs of the nation as a whole. Their identity as one nation is, interestingly, completely dependent on a set of shared practices, experiences, and beliefs.

The sense of a duty engrained in this presentation of citizenship is unavoidable. Citizens have a duty to the nation first, their fellow citizens second, and themselves last. They have a duty to respect the Union's authority, and ensure "compliance with its laws" and "acquiescence in its measures" and "obey the established government".\textsuperscript{15} These duties, which are created by patriotism, are further upheld by "political prosperity, religion, and morality".\textsuperscript{16} Citizenship demands submission, but not inaction; Washington fully recognizes the fallibility of leaders and the Constitution throughout the address, but still maintains that any injustices may be resolved through the deliberative process outlined within the Constitution. Citizenship demands affection, but not undeservedly; from Washington's perspective, the unity of government is the only thing separating a civil society of happiness and virtue from the despotism of nature, and the most natural response on behalf of citizens who recognize the volatility between the two is a dignified and humble thanks and affection for the state.

The most repeatedly cited – and, coincidentally, the most incorrectly quoted – duty Washington outlines is the duty to "discourage and restrain" the "spirit of party".\textsuperscript{17} It is not a duty against parties themselves, simply a duty to mitigate the spirit of agitation and antagonism in individuals that parties exploit. Indeed, the "spirit of party" is a manifestation of the narrow-minded selfishness of human nature; it is rooted "in the strongest passions of the human mind," where greed, rapacity, avarice, and pride intermingle to produce a terrible internal despotism.\textsuperscript{18} They erode at the virtue of humans, and antagonize brother against brother and citizen against citizen.

The parties created by the "spirit of party" are indeed a "frightful despotism".\textsuperscript{19} However, Washington's main concern is the effect of the "spirit of party" on the individuals

\textsuperscript{13} Farewell Address 9
\textsuperscript{14} Farewell Address 10
\textsuperscript{15} Farewell Address 16
\textsuperscript{16} Farewell Address 27
\textsuperscript{17} Farewell Address 23
\textsuperscript{18} Farewell Address 21
\textsuperscript{19} Farewell Address 22
within society, not merely on society itself. The spirit of party, like most of the spirits induced by the passions, changes “the minds of men” so that they seek tyrants to escape the back-and-forth of a party system. It is the spirit of party that manages to “distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration,” just as it “agitates the community” and “kindles the animosity of one part against another.”20 Parties are only a production of the passions, but the passions distort human nature such that tyranny is favored over republicanism.

Yet, Washington is careful to note that the “spirit of party” must not and may not be completely extinguished. Because it is grafted into human nature, the spirit of party will always exist, and because the nature of patriotism is a belief in the supremacy of a system, principle, or ideal, it is a perpetual problem. To quench the spirit of party would be to strip humanity of its vices, something neither man nor government is capable of doing. Instead, it is the duty of “a wise people to discourage and restrain it”21 and it is the duty of a government to “withstand the enterprises of faction” and protect its citizens from the worst of human nature.22

Washington clearly articulates the dangers of failing to perform any of these duties. Faction will threaten the unity of the government, and therefore the unity of the people. Passions will erode at human nature until the national morality is lost and virtue is ignored. In turn, a national without virtue is disconnected from Providence.23 Americans cease to be true Americans because their duties as citizens are ignored, the Constitution and the laws of the nation are subverted and unheeded, and the nation itself becomes open to attack and hatred from the rest of the world.

One of the more interesting dangers of ignoring the duty of citizens to always place the “delegated will of the nation” over the will of a party is that “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.”24 First, there is nothing wrong with cunning and ambitious men who are principled; good citizens, sharing in the common principles, virtue, and morality, are excluded from this warning. Second, these bad citizens – the imposters extolling “pretended patriotism”25 – exploit the public’s oversight to rise to an “unjust dominion.”26

The existence of an “unjust dominion” by bad citizens immediately juxtaposes the dangers of an idle government and citizen body with the alternative hope of a just dominion by good citizens such as Washington. The idea of being ruled is an uncomfortable notion in contemporary society, but the reality of citizenship is that the acceptance of citizenship is submission. However, as Washington explained earlier, it should be every good citizen’s buoyant desire to be ruled by good government; only the rule of good government provides unity, felicity, and security.

20 Farewell Address 24
21 Farewell Address 23
22 Farewell Address 19
23 Farewell Address 31
24 Farewell Address 18
25 Farewell Address 42
26 Farewell Address 18
Alexander Hamilton's role in the authorship of the Farewell Address adds an interesting interpretive layer for readers. With the risk of brutally and unfairly summarizing the Federalist understanding of citizenship, let it simply be said that Hamilton repeatedly references poor citizens as one of the many hamstrings to effective government.27 Because of his traditionally low levels of confidence in ordinary citizens, his incorporation of citizenship into the Farewell Address is of significant importance. Beneath all of the claims of the security and prosperity that government can provide citizens, Hamilton, through Washington, is laying out a template for citizens so that they might be ruled in the best possible way. This template unites the interests of citizens with the interest of the national government; if adopted, it ties the citizens directly to the government in affectionate dependence. For Hamilton, citizens seek a vigorous government that provides them with their freedom and true independence.28

For Hamilton, the Farewell Address may have then been a strategic devise used for the strength of government. However, this need not be a political move motivated by malice. Hamilton genuinely wanted the federal government to work, but was concerned that individual interests that were separate and sectional from the national government, like Thomas Jefferson and the interest of small farmers, would divide the nation's interest and detract from the unity of the nation. His argument for the national debt is the practical end to the confederate understanding of citizenry; the national government unites the people and the people's debts. By articulating a sense of duty, obligation, and appreciation on behalf of good citizens towards the government Hamilton could have been working to fortify the system that he helped create through the Constitutional Convention and the Federalist Papers. This is just one possible explanation for the appearance of citizenship, from Hamilton, in the Farewell Address; I find this particular explanation intellectually curious, but should not ultimately distract our focus from the virtue of citizenship in the Address.

**Contemporary America and the Crisis of Citizenship**

A significant portion of contemporary America treats good government as an oxymoron.29 If any weight can be given to scientific polls, it must be significant that less than half of the United States trusts government to “do what is right” most of the time.30 A majority of Americans believe that most members of Congress are corrupt, and an overwhelming supermajority of Americans has little to no confidence in government as a whole.31 Even the rhetoric surrounding the current election cycle highlights how prominent the anti-government or anti-establishment sentiments are nationwide.

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27 A brutal and unfair summary it certainly is. The claims by some, in particular by James Madison, that Hamilton sympathized with monarchists was rooted in his not-so-hidden disdain for common Americans. Veiled or unveiled, Hamilton had a definitely negative perception of common citizens, if only in his lack of trust in their ability to govern themselves. See The Federalist Papers or Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* for more historical insight about this particular issue with Hamilton.

28 For more on the energetic or vigorous executive, see Federalist No. 70

29 It is by no means a new phenomenon; the same spirit Calvin Coolidge adopted is the same spirit that Ronald Reagan taped into when he claimed that “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem” in his first inaugural address.


The easy conclusion to make is that we have a crisis of government. That is not the complete conclusion, however. Our greatest crisis is a crisis of citizenship. Gone is any sense of duty on behalf of the citizen body in contemporary society. Gone is any consideration of virtue, public or private, or of a national morality. Gone too is the division between public and private life, any suggestion of a “cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment” to government, and any expectation of duty. Nearly every characteristic of good citizenship that Washington outlines in his farewell address is absent from both citizens and the national dialogue and it seems that the nature of citizenship matters little to contemporary politics or constitutional scholars.

Truthfully, nothing could be more important than the nature of citizenship; a crisis of citizenship is the greatest constitutional crisis a nation can face. Washington’s farewell address makes this clear enough. A unified government is the only means of securing a unified citizen body, and yet the only means of securing a unified government is watchful and dutiful citizens. Every crisis of government originates in a failure of citizens, either the failure of citizens to elect and keep watch over their public officials, or the failure of the citizens elected. For the citizens elected, Washington gave no advice in his farewell address. The entire message was carefully written to appeal to the philosopher and the “Yeomanry of this Country” alike, ensuring that the latter especially knew the roles of citizens in the newfound government. Only an educated and aware citizen body could protect the republic against the “batteries of internal and external enemies”. The consequence is disunity, division, and domestic and foreign hostility.

However, there is danger in simply transferring Washington’s sentiments to problems of contemporary society is that it ignores the assumption that we are indeed the same America as he was addressing to his audience. We are certainly no longer a country of “the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles,” and the “slight shades of difference” that once divided one American from the other certainly do not seem as slight as they once were. If the love of liberty is still interwoven “with every ligament of [our] hearts,” it is less evident than it was in 1796.32 Further, if the spirit of party does indeed transform the minds of men, warping our desires and eroding at our virtue, then we must be unrecognizable to the original audience of Washington.33 Indeed, if Washington’s own logic is correct, if we are no longer a country where we share all of these experiences and principles, we may not still be a country where “the name of an American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations.”34 A land of local discriminations is a land too divided to be called a United States; we would be less worthy of the title “United” than ever since the Civil War.

The danger of transferring Washington’s sentiments, even about citizenship, to contemporary society is deeper than ordinary ignorance; it carries with it a painful and poisonous pessimism. The sentiment behind doing so is that we have fallen, that the generations preceding us were more fallible and more foolish than the original audience of Washington’s address. The reality is that the farewell address was written to fallible citizens just as unsure of their duties as we are. Washington refers to the fallibility of

32 Farewell Address 8
33 The transforming process is explained in Farewell Address 22
34 Farewell Address 10
himself, his peers, and of all members of society as a comfort to those thinking that his wish was for citizens and leaders to be perfect. His address was an attempt to guide and shepherd the citizen body to teach them how government was best administered, and how they played a part in its administration.

This analysis shows that reemploying Washington’s strategies in contemporary constitutional struggles – suppressing partisanship, taking a firm stance against nullification, or promoting international neutrality – fail to address the crisis. Even the greatest policy directed towards the greatest constitutional problem will fail if the citizens enacting and supporting it do not know what it means to be a citizen. Discussions of the virtue and nature of citizenship is absent from our educational curricula, from our political discourse, and from our academic scholarship. It is no wonder that the word itself causes confusion because it is so rarely defined or considered.

George Washington’s Farewell Address should be convicting, but it should not be condemning. We need direction on the question of citizenship as much as the Yeomanry of the 18th century. We need to recognize that our citizenship carries an expectation of service and duty for our country that extends past the ordinary rights of a birth certificate. We need to recognize that citizenship is earned by all, natural or naturalized. In moderation, we can be suspect of politics without forfeiting all of our trust and faith in the government and those who feel called to serve others. We need to discuss virtue and morality and the role that it plays in true freedom and liberty. We need to think about human nature and independence, and how government is the system for restraining our passions that we might be safe, prosperous, and virtuous. In the end, the only true political victory will be for the virtuous; can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a politician or citizen with their virtue? This is citizenship. Not a birth certificate, not a visa, not an ethnicity or a country or a culture; it is a system of duties, responsibilities, and principles that should be joyfully undertaken for their collective and individual felicity.

Hamilton, who owed his public and private success to his close friendship with Washington more than his natural ability, wrote that with Washington’s death, “the Seal is now put upon his Glory. It is no longer in jeopardy from the fickleness of fortune”.35 I think he was incorrect. Truthfully, the Seal that secured Washington’s glory from fortune was not his death, but the publishing of his Farewell Address. Beneath the list of sentiments was a clear articulation of how citizens ought to act with respect to their government; with a new government firmly in place, and two terms as President helping to craft the role of the Executive Branch, the remaining piece of the puzzle was ensuring that the citizens understood their role as a militia of watchmen, carefully keeping the Constitution and its laws, and protecting the young republic from those who wished it harm. Washington, above all other founding fathers, knew that free society itself depended completely on the humble citizens that it consisted of—their commitment and their virtue.

In his eulogy of the President, Richard Allen wrote, “The name of Washington will live when the sculptured marble and statue of bronze shall be crumbled into dust—it is the decree of the eternal God that ‘the righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance, but the memorial of the wicked shall rot.’”36 Ultimately the Farewell Address is a guide so

35 From Alexander Hamilton to Tobias Lear, 2 January 1800
that ordinary Americans, equal in citizenship with George Washington if unequal in every imaginable virtue, might share in that righteousness and prevent the rot that had stricken every republic before the United States.