George Washington’s Farewell and the Making of National Culture, Politics, and Diplomacy, 1796–1852

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Addressing America

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Introduction

In 1847, author, academic, and pastor Joseph Alden wrote a book for children, *The Example of Washington Commended to the Young*, to illustrate the great importance of George Washington to the United States. Reading that book today, it is evident that even half a century after Washington’s death, the man and his advice to the nation still held great relevance for the American people. One passage, presenting a conversation about George Washington between a Mr. Grayson and his two sons, John and George, is particularly instructive.

“Now, John,” Mr. Grayson asked, “do you know why [Washington] was born in America, instead of Europe or Africa?”

“Because his father and mother lived here, I suppose,” answered John.

“I know what papa meant,” said George.

“What is your answer?” said Mr. Grayson.

“He was born in America because the Lord willed to have it so.”

“Certainly. Suppose he had been born in Africa, he would have been a poor heathen—perhaps a poor slave. This country would never have been freed by his efforts. He would not have left his shining example for all coming time. God ordered as it was. It was part of his wise plan that Washington should be born when and where he was wanted to perform his appointed work. Did you ever think of that?”

Both during his life and after his death, the American people revered George Washington. With the exception of a bitterly partisan interlude during Washington’s second term as president, Americans placed complete faith in his judgment and wisdom. This fact, more than any other, explains why Washington’s presidential Farewell Address had an enduring significance for the public at large and policy makers in particular. Historians have presented a wide variety of arguments as
to why Washington wrote a valedictory address and what he hoped to accomplish with it, describing his Farewell Address as serving purposes ranging from the political to the altruistic, and uses from the domestic to the diplomatic. What historians have typically overlooked is how the American people themselves made sense of Washington’s Farewell Address. This is an extremely important question: for more than half a century Americans believed that adherence to the tenets laid out in the Farewell Address were and would remain critical to their nation’s growing power and prosperity. So seriously did they take the advice, principles, and wisdom proffered by Washington that they viewed his Farewell Address as being on the same plane as the nation’s founding documents. The Declaration of Independence affirmed their ideals, the Constitution established their government, but it was the principles Washington expressed in the Address—especially those dealing with the conduct of U.S. foreign policy—that would ensure the nation’s safety, security, and maturation into a world power.

Stated most simply, this book tells the history of those principles. In his Farewell Address, George Washington presented a series of general maxims to guide the construction of a wise foreign policy. The Farewell Address was carefully framed to present evolutionary principles rather than a permanent foreign policy. Washington believed, as did generations of his adherents, that should the American people stay true to these principles, the United States would eventually attain national greatness and international respectability. The most fundamental of these principles was the need to recognize the nature of the United States’ best interests and always to allow those interests to shape U.S. foreign policy. America could not let love for one country or hatred for another direct its international relations; it could not let biases or traditions block its true course. In Washington’s time, this meant the rapid expansion of commercial relations with the rest of the world and the minimization of political and military connections with Europe. Neutrality was the watchword of the day. Washington acknowledged that such policies were founded in the conditions of the world and America’s relative weakness at the time he was writing. Changing conditions would change policies, but not adherence to the principle of identifying and pursuing the best interests of the country. As the United States grew stronger, for example, its leaders would need to redefine its interests and transform America’s foreign policy to meet new challenges and realities.

*Addressing America* traces the formulation and evolution of Washington’s principles from 1796 through 1852 from the perspective of their popular, political, and diplomatic uses. After Washington’s death in 1799, the Farewell Address became a sacred, foundational text at the heart of any consideration of the first president’s legacy. Washington’s birthday became one of only two nationally celebrated holidays (Independence Day being the other), and the Address became a cornerstone of those celebrations. Every 22 February, citizens in cities and towns around the country gathered in town halls, city commons, and local churches to
remember Washington and his contributions and to extol the ongoing significance of the Farewell Address for America’s future prosperity. These celebrations became an important avenue through which all Americans could gain a greater understanding of the Address and refresh their devotion to it.

Popular reverence for Washington and his principles ensured that they would continue to guide U.S. presidents and policy makers. In the years after Washington’s death, a divergent conception of the Farewell Address emerged based on Thomas Jefferson’s promise, in his 1801 inaugural address, that the nation would pursue “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.” Washington’s principles were intended as a set of ideals that would guide the continuous evolution of the country’s foreign policy over time. “Entangling alliances with none” quickly became a rigid prescription for a permanent foreign policy of virtual isolation from the rest of the world. The phrase did not appear in the Farewell Address, but within a decade Americans were quoting it as a Washingtonian maxim. Over the next thirty years, the overarching story of U.S. foreign policy was the struggle between these two visions of the Farewell Address.

The Monroe Doctrine became a critical component of this struggle. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams framed the Doctrine as an expansion of Washington’s Farewell Address to meet the new global challenges posed by an independent Latin America and an allied Europe, but most Americans quickly viewed it as a violation of Washington’s principles. The relationship of the Monroe Doctrine to the Farewell Address, including its subsequent reinterpretation by men like James K. Polk as an un-Washingtonian declaration supportive of very aggressive foreign policies, is an integral part of this larger story. By the 1840s, the maxim of “entangling alliances with none” not only had won out as the dominant meaning of the Farewell Address, but also had come to be seen as the critical reason for the nation’s rapid growth and development. Ironically, after the Mexican-American War, some Americans began to argue that the rigidity of Washington’s principles was preventing the United States from fulfilling its true destiny as the defender of republicanism around the world.

Through its focus on the diplomatic, political, and cultural impacts of Washington’s Farewell Address, *Addressing America* reasserts the fundamental importance of this critical document to the development of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. This story is told both through a reconsideration of the hallmark events of early U.S. history, such as the War of 1812, the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine, and the Mexican War, but also by examining many largely overlooked episodes in that history. These include the Nootka Sound Controversy of 1790, the formation of Washington Benevolent Societies in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the debate over U.S. participation at the Congress of Panama in 1825–26, the celebration of the centennial anniversary of Washington’s birth in 1832, the consideration of intervention in Yucatan in early 1848, and the
U.S. tour undertaken by Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth in 1851–52. Such a far-reaching investigation is intended to help modern readers discover the variety of ways that Washington’s legacy shaped life in the early republic.

Despite its influence in the first half of the nineteenth century, the significance of Washington’s Farewell Address has since faded into the background of the history of this period. This is unfortunate but not surprising. In the realm of political culture, the Farewell Address only infrequently became a subject of special or protracted attention. Instead, discussion and celebration of the Address was simply built into people’s lives as an essential part of Washington’s birthday observations and Independence Day celebrations. In the realm of foreign policy, the Farewell Address typically became a subject of debate in instances when no significant action was ultimately taken. The interpretation linking the Address with Jefferson’s promise to undertake “entangling alliances with none” turned it into a conservative bulwark against precipitous change in U.S. foreign policy. Historians typically do not spend much time poring over congressional debates wherein nothing consequential ultimately transpired, but it was in these debates that references to Washington’s Farewell Address had the greatest impact—by ensuring that traditional policies were upheld.

The significance of this study is twofold. First, it allows for a much deeper assessment of the development of U.S. foreign policy over an extended period of time by placing that policy in the context of evolving American principles and ideals, while also highlighting the formative connection between popular views and diplomatic action. Second, it refocuses modern attention on the paramount importance Americans in the nineteenth century placed on the Farewell Address. People throughout the nation derived their understanding of the development of the United States, its relationship with the wider world, and ultimately its responsibilities on the global stage from Washington’s Farewell Address.

*Addressing America* begins with the creation of the Farewell Address. The traditional narrative of Washington’s presidency places a great deal of emphasis on developments in his second term in comprehending the foreign-policy portion of the Farewell Address, but consideration of the Confederation period and of Washington’s first term allows for a more robust conversation about the evolution of his foreign-policy thought, as well as a more accurate understanding of his true objectives in the Address. Though it was widely praised at the time it was published, the Farewell Address became engrained in the American consciousness as a sacred document expressing principles of perpetual utility only after Washington’s unexpected death in December 1799. The period of national mourning that followed, and Americans’ widespread invocation of the Address as their departed Father’s vital legacy, elevated it to the status of a foundational document for the nation.

Chapter 2 explores this process, as well as the immediate impact of Thomas Jefferson’s 1801 inaugural pledge that the country would engage in “entangling al-
liances with none,” on evolving conceptions of the Farewell Address. This chapter also examines the founding of Washington Benevolent Societies in the northern states during the presidencies of Jefferson and James Madison and the role played by these primarily Federalist organizations in making an explicit connection between adherence to the Farewell Address and America’s continued peace and security. These societies largely faded away after the War of 1812, but the traditions and discourse they popularized had a lasting impact.

Chapter 3 focuses on John Quincy Adams’s conduct of U.S. foreign policy, especially during his tenure as James Monroe’s secretary of state. Next to Washington himself, Adams is the single most important individual to be considered in any extended discussion of the legacy of the Farewell Address, as he was the leading proponent of the interpretation of the Address uninfluenced by the rigidity of “entangling alliances with none.” This chapter explores the development of Adams’s foreign policy thought and his applications of Washington’s principles in the years after the War of 1812. Making sense of Adams in this regard is critical to understanding the creation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. Adams framed the doctrine as an expansion of the Farewell Address to meet new global challenges. Where Washington had warned Americans to pursue neutrality toward Europe, Adams warned Europe to pursue a similar neutrality toward both American continents in the aftermath of Spanish American independence. Adams did not intend to fundamentally alter U.S. principles; rather, he believed that the changed conditions in the world required the United States to take a more assertive stance against European intervention in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere.

Initially hailed as a strong defense of American interests and principles, some critics soon began to question the wisdom of the Monroe Doctrine, fearing that it envisioned a closer relationship with Spanish America and thus a threat to American neutrality and a violation of Washington’s Farewell Address. For the first time, the competing interpretations of the Address came into direct conflict with one another. Chapter 4 examines the moment this conflict became a focus of national debate, during congressional consideration of President John Quincy Adams’s proposal to send U.S. delegates to the Congress of Panama in 1826. This congress was intended as a meeting of the independent countries of the Americas, at which Adams hoped to see U.S. principles—specifically those of the Farewell Address—adopted internationally. At stake in the congressional debate over U.S. participation were the interpretations and legacies of both Washington’s Farewell Address and the Monroe Doctrine. Congress approved the Panama mission after five months of rigorous debate, but the manner in which the debate was carried out and the way it was covered in the press caused the American public to regard the United States’ participation in the Congress of Panama as a failure for the country and for Adams. This legacy of failure carried with it rejection of the Monroe Doctrine and confirmation of “entangling alliances with none” as the dominant interpretation of the Farewell Address.
Chapter 5 explores the quarter-century after the Panama debate as a period of transition for American society and for the principles of U.S. foreign policy. The Panama debate was the first salvo in a renewed partisanship that gave rise to America’s second party system and to an era of mass participatory politics. This upswing in political participation helped to turn the 1832 centennial anniversary of George Washington’s birth into a grand national celebration unlike anything previously witnessed. As the sectional crisis began to deepen in the 1830s and 1840s, the Farewell Address only grew in importance as an expression of both foreign-policy principles and unionist sentiments. This chapter also examines the evolving diplomatic uses of the Farewell Address and the Monroe Doctrine. The principles of the Monroe Doctrine reemerged in the early 1840s and were quickly manipulated by Presidents John Tyler and James K. Polk to justify the annexation of Texas and ultimately war with Mexico. Not only did these actions engraft entirely alien meanings on the Monroe Doctrine but the U.S. victory over Mexico also permanently changed the debate over the fundamental principles of U.S. foreign policy. After 1848, an increasingly vocal minority began advocating a more activist and interventionist foreign policy, and the debate over foreign policy moved away from competing interpretations of the Farewell Address and toward consideration of the Address’s ongoing utility as a guide for American action.

These conflicting views of America’s proper role in the world were put on national display between December 1851 and July 1852 with the U.S. tour of Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth, which is detailed in chapter 6. Kossuth came to the United States to secure economic, political, and potential military support for Hungarian independence, primarily in the form of a pledge by the United States government to prevent any other powers from intervening against Hungary—a promise to intervene to defend the principle of nonintervention. In order for Kossuth to convince the American government and people of the legitimacy of intervention for nonintervention, he had to argue against continued adherence to Washington’s Farewell Address. In the wake of the Mexican War, some Americans felt that the United States now had a responsibility to defend republican principles abroad and thus endorsed Kossuth’s call; most Americans, however, saw Kossuth’s position as an attack on the Farewell Address, which only served to reinvigorate their interest in and allegiance to its principles. The great importance of Kossuth’s tour is not just that it produced the most significant reevaluation of the Address to take place in the nation’s history, but that this reevaluation was national, carried out both at the highest levels of government and by regular citizens in cities and towns throughout the country. When put to the test, Americans still chose Washington over any other alternative.
In 1808 or 1809, a rumor began circulating that a complete draft of the Farewell Address had been discovered in Alexander Hamilton’s handwriting, and that this draft proved that Washington was not the author of the Address that bore his name. By 1859, the evidence clearly showed that Washington and Hamilton had worked together to draft the Farewell Address, but in the 1810s and 1820s all but the most devout supporters of Hamilton rejected as specious the rumors that Washington was not the sole author. At the height of this authorship controversy, John Marshall, who was chief justice of the Supreme Court and a biographer of Washington, cautioned Washington’s nephew Bushrod that the existence of the Hamilton draft could not be covered up. Whatever revelations might be made, Marshall concluded, “the public opinion of General Washington will remain unaltered.” But he also warned that the Farewell Address would be an unfortunate casualty, since Hamilton’s involvement in its drafting would cause the people’s “respect” for it to “be changed.” In 1826, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania investigated the authorship controversy, and one of the society’s witnesses echoed Marshall’s conclusions. Philadelphia judge Richard Peters lamented that “our nation would suffer a serious injury, by having the fascinating name of Washington taken from the creed of every friend of his country.” The Farewell Address mattered because it contained Washington’s wisdom and because its principles had clearly proven useful, but it was their attachment to the Father of their Country that confirmed most Americans in their complete devotion to his Farewell Address.

It is impossible to know if, or how, the history of the early republic would have changed had Washington never written the Farewell Address. We cannot know what direction U.S. foreign policy would have taken, or how Americans would have conceived of their nation’s relationship with the rest of the world. Maybe the only differences would have been rhetorical; maybe the Farewell Address really was as important as so many people claimed, and much would have changed. Washington, with the aid of Hamilton, did write the Address, though, and what we can say with certainty is that Americans understood their nation and their world through its principles and wisdom. The Farewell Address had a lasting impact on the United States—not because “the Lord willed to have it so,” but because George Washington did.