

Gen. George Washington

FAREWELL LETTER

Circular Letter Addressed to the Governors of All
the States on Disbanding the Army, June 8, 1783

EXCERPTS

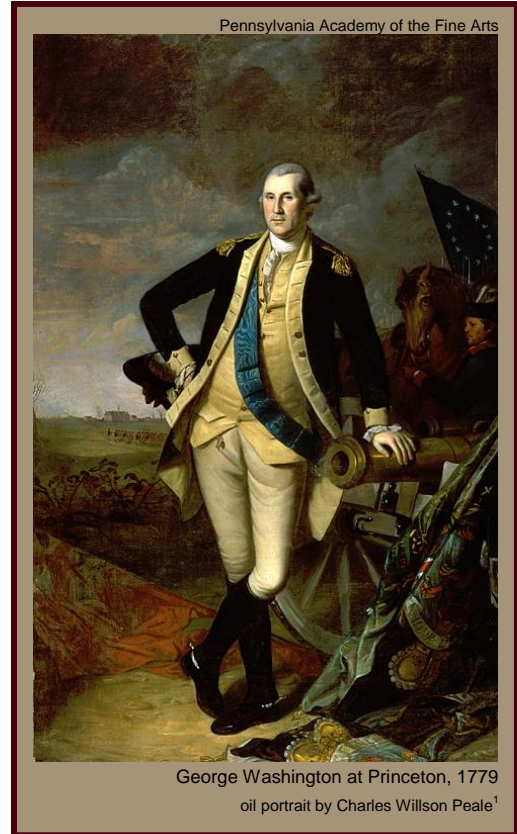
As his final statement as Commander in Chief, Washington addressed a letter to the state governors congratulating Americans on their victory and, more urgently, warning them to guard their hard-won independence from the dangers of faction, vengefulness, and petty self-interests. He stressed four factors “essential to the well being” of the new nation and condemned anyone who hindered them to “the severest punishment which can be inflicted by his injured Country.” Strong words. Washington feared that the Revolution could be lost after it was won—a fear voiced by others including Thomas Paine in *The American Crisis* #13. How did Washington use his national stature, combined with his matured humility, to structure his message and give it impact?

Sir:

The great object for which I had the honor to hold an appointment in the Service of my Country being accomplished, I am now preparing to resign it into the hands of Congress, and to return to that domestic retirement which, it is well known, I left with the greatest reluctance — a Retirement for which I have never ceased to sigh through a long and painful absence, and in which (remote from the noise and trouble of the World) I meditate to pass the remainder of life in a state of undisturbed repose. But before I carry this resolution into effect, I think it a duty incumbent on me to make this my last official communication, to congratulate you on the glorious events which Heaven has been pleased to produce in our favor, to offer my sentiments respecting some important subjects which appear to me to be intimately connected with the tranquility of the United States, to take my leave of your Excellency as a public Character, and to give my final blessing to that Country in whose service I have spent the prime of my life, for whose sake I have consumed so many anxious days and watchful nights, and whose happiness being extremely dear to me will always constitute no inconsiderable part of my own.

...

The Citizens of America, placed in the most enviable condition as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a vast Tract of Continent comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification² acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independence. They are from this period to be considered as the Actors on a most conspicuous Theater which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity. Here they are not only surrounded with everything which can contribute to the completion of private and domestic enjoyment, but Heaven has crowned all its other blessings by giving a fairer opportunity for political happiness than any other Nation has ever been favored with. Nothing can illustrate these observations more forcibly than a recollection of the happy conjuncture of times and circumstances under which our Republic assumed its rank among the Nations.



The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition but at an Epoch when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined than at any former

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period. The researches of the human mind, after social happiness, have been carried to a great extent. The Treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labors of Philosophers, Sages and Legislatures, through a long succession of years, are laid open for our use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the Establishment of our forms of Government. The free cultivation of Letters [arts and literature], the unbounded extension of Commerce, the progressive refinement of Manners [social norms of behavior], the growing liberality of sentiment, and above all, the pure and benign light of Revelation, have had ameliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of Society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.

Such is our situation, and such are our prospects: but notwithstanding the cup of blessing is thus reached out to us, notwithstanding happiness is ours if we have a disposition to seize the occasion and make it our own. Yet it appears to me there is an option still left to the United States of America, that it is in their choice and depends upon their conduct whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptible and miserable as a Nation. This is the time of their political probation. This is the moment

when the eyes of the whole World are turned upon them. This is the moment to establish or ruin their national Character forever. This is the favorable moment to give such a tone to our Federal Government as will enable it to answer the ends of its institution, or this may be the ill-fated moment for relaxing the

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powers of the Union, annihilating the cement of the Confederation, and exposing us to become the sport of European politics, which may play one State against another to prevent their growing importance and to serve their own interested purposes. For, according to the system of Policy the States shall adopt at this moment, they will stand or fall, and by their confirmation or lapse, it is yet to be decided, whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse — a blessing or a curse not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn Millions be involved.

. . .

There are four things which I humbly conceive are essential to the well being, I may even venture to say, to the existence of the United States as an Independent Power:

- 1st. An indissoluble Union of the States under one Federal Head;
- 2^{dly}. A Sacred regard to Public Justice;
- 3^{dly}. The adoption of a proper Peace Establishment; and
- 4^{thly}. The prevalence of that pacific [peaceful] and friendly Disposition among the People of the United States, which will induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and in some instances to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the Community.

These are the pillars on which the glorious Fabric of our Independence and National Character must be supported. Liberty is the Basis, and whoever would dare to sap the foundation or overturn the Structure — under whatever specious pretexts he may attempt it — will merit the bitterest execration [hatred and contempt] and the severest punishment which can be inflicted by his injured Country.

On the three first Articles I will make a few observations, leaving the last to the good sense and serious consideration of those immediately concerned.

Under the first head, altho' it may not be necessary or proper for me in this place to enter into a particular disquisition of the principles of the Union and to take up the great question which has been frequently agitated — whether it be expedient and requisite for the States to delegate a larger proportion of Power to Congress or not — yet it will be a part of my duty and that of every true Patriot to assert without reserve and to insist upon the following positions:

1__“An indissoluble Union of the States
under one Federal Head”

That unless the States will suffer [permit] Congress to exercise those prerogatives [that] they are undoubtedly invested with by the Constitution [Articles of Confederation], everything must very rapidly tend to Anarchy and confusion;

That it is indispensable to the happiness of the individual States that there should be lodged somewhere a Supreme Power [executive] to regulate and govern the general concerns of the Confederated Republic, without which the Union cannot be of long duration.

That there must be a faithful and pointed compliance on the part of every State with the late [recent] proposals and demands of Congress, or the most fatal consequences will ensue;

That whatever measures have a tendency to dissolve the Union, or contribute to violate or lessen the Sovereign Authority, ought to be considered as hostile to the Liberty and Independence of America, and the Authors of them treated accordingly, and lastly;

That unless we can be enabled by the concurrence of the States to participate of the fruits of the Revolution and enjoy the essential benefits of Civil Society under a form of Government so free and uncorrupted, so happily guarded against the danger of oppression as has been devised and adopted by the Articles of Confederation, it will be a subject of regret that so much blood and treasure have been lavished for no purpose, that so many sufferings have been encountered without a compensation, and that so many sacrifices have been made in vain.

Many other considerations might here be adduced to prove that without an entire conformity to the Spirit of the Union, we cannot exist as an Independent Power. It will be sufficient for my purpose to mention but one or two which seem to me of the greatest importance. It is only in our united Character as an Empire that our Independence is acknowledged, that our power can be regarded, or our [economic] Credit supported among Foreign Nations. The Treaties of the European Powers with the United States of America will have no validity on a dissolution of the Union. We shall be left nearly in a state of Nature [i.e., anarchy] or we may find by our own unhappy experience that there is a natural and necessary progression from the extreme of anarchy to the extreme of Tyranny, and that arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of Liberty abused to licentiousness.

As to the second Article which respects [deals with] the performance of Public Justice, Congress have, in their late [recent] Address to the United States, almost exhausted the subject.³ They have explained their Ideas so fully and have enforced the obligations the States are under to render complete justice to all the Public Creditors,⁴ with so much dignity and energy that in my opinion no real friend to the honor and Independence of America can hesitate a single moment respecting the propriety of complying with the just and honorable measures proposed. . . .

2__“A Sacred regard to Public Justice”

The ability of the Country to discharge the debts which have been incurred in its defense is not to be doubted. . . . [L]et us then as a Nation be just, let us fulfill the public Contracts which Congress had undoubtedly a right to make for the purpose of carrying on the War, with the same good faith we suppose ourselves bound to perform our private engagements [monetary obligations]. . . .

In this state of absolute freedom and perfect security, who will grudge to yield a very little of his property to support the common interest of Society and insure the protection of Government? Who does not remember the frequent declarations at the commencement of the War that we should be completely satisfied if, at the expense of one half, we could defend the remainder of our possessions? Where is the

³ On April 18, 1783, the Continental Congress proposed taxing imported goods as a means of paying the massive national debt incurred by the war.

⁴ *Public Creditors*: people and nations to whom the U.S. owed money for wartime provisions and services. Washington is warning the states that if they do not grant taxing power to Congress and thereby leave the nation's war debts unpaid, the nation's global reputation will be irrevocably damaged.

Man to be found who wishes to remain indebted for the defense of his own person and property, to the exertions, the bravery, and the blood of others, without making one generous effort to repay the debt of honor and of gratitude? . . . If after all, a spirit of disunion or a temper of obstinacy and perverseness should manifest itself in any of the States, if such an ungracious disposition should attempt to frustrate all the happy effects that might be expected to flow from the Union, if there should be a refusal to comply with the requisitions for Funds to discharge the annual interest of the public debts, and if that refusal should revive again all those jealousies and produce all those evils which are now happily removed, Congress, who have in all their Transaction shown a great degree of magnanimity and justice, will stand justified in the sight of God and Man, and the State alone which puts itself in opposition to the aggregate Wisdom of the Continent and follows such mistaken and pernicious Councils [advice] will be responsible for all the consequences.⁵

. . .

It is necessary to say but a few words on the third topic which was proposed, and which regards particularly the defense of the Republic, as there can be little doubt but Congress will recommend a proper

3__“The adoption of a proper
Peace Establishment”

Peace Establishment⁶ for the United States in which a due attention will be paid to the importance of placing the Militia of the Union upon a regular and respectable footing. If this should be the case, I would beg leave to urge the great advantage of it in the strongest terms. The Militia of this Country must be considered as the Palladium [safeguard] of our security and the first effectual resort in case of hostility. It is essential therefore that the same system should pervade the whole, that the formation and discipline of the Militia of the Continent should be absolutely uniform, and that the same species [type] of Arms, Accoutrements and Military Apparatus should be introduced in every part of the United States. No one who has not learned it from experience can conceive the difficulty, expense, and confusion which result from a contrary system, or the vague Arrangements which have hitherto prevailed.⁷

With deference to those who wholeheartedly supported the war effort, especially state governors who provided desperately needed food and supplies for the Continental Army, Washington asserts that the war could have been won “in less time and with much less expense” if the Continental Congress had been empowered to exercise more central authority over the states as the main administrative body.

I have thus freely disclosed what I wished to make known before I surrendered up my Public trust to those who committed it to me. The task is now accomplished. I now bid adieu to your Excellency as the Chief Magistrate of your State, at the same time I bid a last farewell to the cares of Office and all the employments of public life.

It remains then to be my final and only request that your Excellency will communicate these sentiments to your Legislature at their next meeting and that they may be considered as the Legacy of One who has ardently wished on all occasions to be useful to his Country, and who, even in the shade of Retirement, will not fail to implore the divine benediction upon it.

I now make it my earnest prayer that God would have you and the State over which you preside in his holy protection, that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind which were the Characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without a humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.

⁵ Washington continues his second topic by urging the states to support Congress's proposals for paying soldiers' wages and pensions, a stridently debated issue at the time.

⁶ *Palladium*: framework upon which to transition the nation to peacetime.

⁷ Washington did not address his fourth topic. As he wrote early in the address: “On the three first Articles I will make a few observations, leaving the last to the good sense and serious consideration of those immediately concerned.”