

# On the first inauguration of GEORGE WASHINGTON

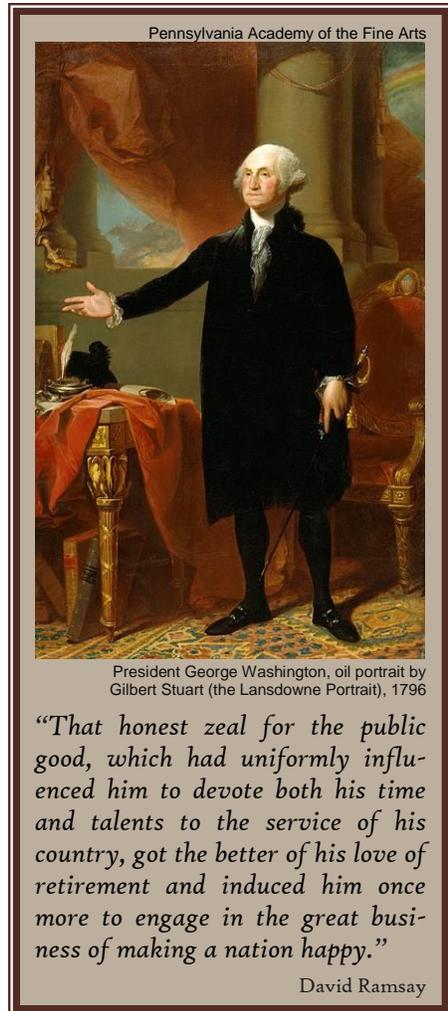
April 1789

David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, 1789  
with Washington's First Inaugural Address (excerpts)

On April 30, 1789, the first President of the United States under the new Constitution was inaugurated in New York City, the temporary capital of the nation. *General* George Washington—the revered Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, the president of the Constitution Convention, and the briefly retired Virginia planter—became *President* George Washington, the first Chief Executive of the new federal government. The exaltation and grandeur of this event was captured by the historian-physician David Ramsay in the final chapter of his two-volume history of the American Revolution, published late in 1789. To conclude his work, Ramsay added heartfelt words of advice for his fellow citizens: “If you continue under one government, built on the solid foundations of public justice and public virtue, there is no point of national greatness to which you may not aspire with a well founded hope of speedily attaining it.”

Though great diversity of opinions had prevailed about the new constitution, there was but one opinion about the person who should be appointed its supreme executive officer. The people, as well anti-federalists as federalists (for by these names the parties for and against the new constitution were called) unanimously turned their eyes on the late commander of their armies as the most proper person to be their first President. Perhaps there was not a well informed individual in the United States (Mr. Washington himself only excepted) who was not anxious that he should be called to the executive administration of the proposed new plan of government. Unambitious of further honors, he had retired to his farm in Virginia and hoped to be excused from all further public service, but his country called him by an unanimous vote to fill the highest station in its gift. That honest zeal for the public good, which had uniformly influenced him to devote both his time and talents to the service of his country, got the better of his love of retirement and induced him once more to engage in the great business of making a nation happy. The intelligence [news] of his election being communicated to him while on his farm in Virginia, he set out soon after for New York. On his way thither, the road was crowded with numbers anxious to see the Man of the people. Escorts of militia and of gentlemen of the first character and station attended him from State to State, and he was everywhere received with the highest honors which a grateful and admiring people could confer. Addresses of congratulation were presented to him by the inhabitants of almost every place of consequence through which he passed, to all of which he returned such modest unassuming answers as were in every respect suitable to his situation. So great were the honors with which he was loaded that they could scarcely have failed to produce haughtiness in the mind of any ordinary man, but nothing of the kind was ever discovered in this extra-ordinary personage. On all occasions he behaved to all men with the affability of one citizen to another. He was truly great in deserving the plaudits of his country, but much greater in not being elated with them.

Of the numerous addresses which were presented on this occasion, one subscribed [offered] by Dennis Ramsay,<sup>1</sup> the Mayor of Alexandria [Virginia] in the name of the people of that city, who were the neighbors of Mr. Washington, was particularly and universally admired. It was in the following words:



To **GEORGE WASHINGTON, Esq., President of the United States, &c.**

**A**gain your country commands your care. Obedient to its wishes, unmindful of your ease, we see you again relinquishing the bliss of retirement, and this too at a period of life when nature itself seems to authorize a preference of repose!

Not to extol your glory as a soldier, not to pour forth our gratitude for past services, not to acknowledge the justice of the unexampled honor which has been conferred upon you by the spontaneous and unanimous suffrage of three millions of freemen in your election to the supreme magistracy, nor to admire the patriotism which directs your conduct, do your neighbors and friends now address you. Themes less splendid but more endearing impress our minds. The first and best of citizens must leave us — our aged must lose their ornament, our youth their model, our agriculture its improver, our commerce its friend, our infant academy its protector, our poor their benefactor, and the interior navigation of the Potomac (an event replete with the most extensive utility, already, by your unremitting exertions, brought into partial use) its institutor and promoter.

Farewell! — Go! and make a grateful people happy — a people who will be doubly grateful when they contemplate this recent sacrifice for their interest.

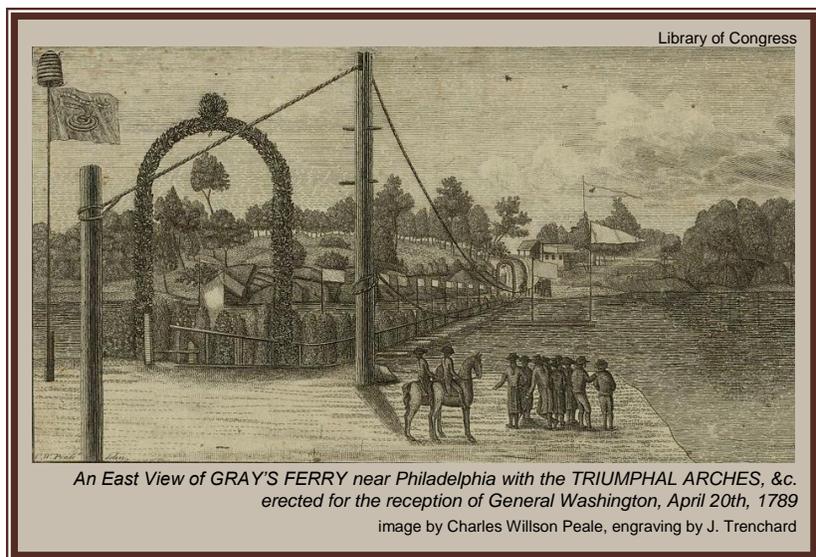
To that Being who maketh and unmaketh at his will, we commend you; and after the accomplishment of the arduous business to which you are called, may he restore to us again the best of men and the most beloved fellow citizen!”

To this Mr. Washington returned the following answer:<sup>2</sup>

GENTLEMEN,

**A**lthough I ought not to conceal, yet I cannot describe the painful emotions which I felt in being called upon to determine whether I would accept or refuse the presidency of the United States. The unanimity in the choice, the opinion of my friends communicated from different parts of Europe as well as from America, the apparent wish of those who were not entirely satisfied with the constitution in its present form, and an ardent desire on my own part to be instrumental in connecting the good will of my countrymen towards each other; have induced an acceptance. Those who know me best (and you, my fellow citizens, are from your situation in that number) know better than any others my love of retirement is so great that no earthly consideration, short of a conviction of duty, could have prevailed upon me to depart from my resolution “never more to take any share in transactions of a public nature.” For at my age and in my circumstances, what prospects or advantages could I propose to myself from embarking again on the tempestuous and uncertain ocean of public life?

I do not feel myself under the necessity of making public declarations in order to convince you, gentlemen, of my attachment to yourselves, and regard for your interests. The whole tenor of my life has been open to your inspection, and my past actions, rather than my present declarations, must be the pledge of my future conduct.



<sup>2</sup> George Washington, Letter to the Mayor, Corporation, and Citizens of Alexandria [Virginia], 16 April 1789.

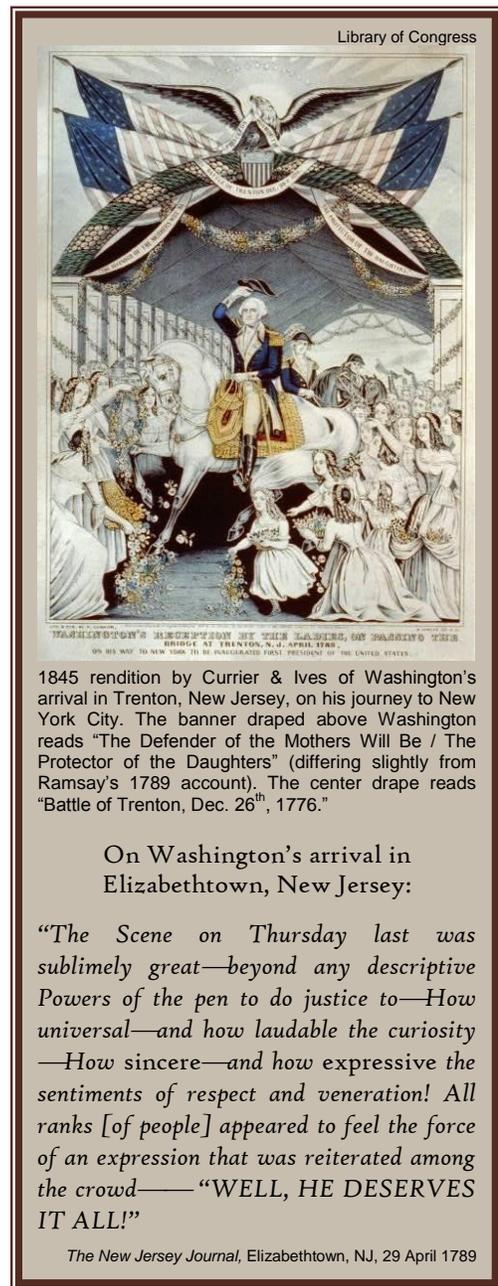
*In the mean time, I thank you most sincerely for the expressions of kindness contained in your valedictory address. It is true, just after having bade adieu to my domestic connections, this tender proof of your friendship is but too well calculated still further to awaken my sensibility and increase my regret at parting from the enjoyment of private life.*

*All that now remains for me is to commit myself and you to the protection of that beneficent Being, who on a former occasion hath happily brought us together after a long and distressing separation; perhaps the same gracious Providence will again indulge me. Unutterable sensations must then be left to more expressive silence, while from an aching heart, I bid you all, my affectionate friends and kind neighbors, farewell!*

Gray's bridge over the Schuylkill [River] which Mr. Washington had to pass was highly decorated with laurels and evergreens. At each end of it were erected magnificent arches composed of laurels, emblematical of the ancient Roman triumphal arches; and on each side of the bridge was a laurel shrubbery. As Mr. Washington passed the bridge, a youth ornamented with sprigs of laurel, assisted by machinery let drop above his head, though unperceived by him, a civic crown of laurel. Upwards of 20,000 citizens lined the fences, fields and avenues between the Schuylkill and Philadelphia. Through these he was conducted to the city by a numerous and respectable body of the citizens, where he partook of an elegant entertainment provided for him. The pleasures of the day were succeeded by a handsome display of fireworks in the evening.

When Mr. Washington crossed the Delaware [River] and landed on the Jersey shore, he was saluted with three cheers by the inhabitants of the vicinity. When he came to the brow of the hill on his way to Trenton, a triumphal arch was erected on the bridge by the direction of the ladies of the place. The crown of the arch was highly ornamented with imperial laurels and flowers, and on it was displayed in large figures, *December 26th 1776*. On the sweep of the arch, beneath was this inscription, *The defender of the Mothers, will also protect their Daughters*. On the north side were ranged a number of young misses dressed in white with garlands of flowers on their heads, and baskets of flowers on their arms. In the second row stood the young ladies and behind them the married ladies of the town. The instant he passed the arch, the young misses began to sing the following ode:

Welcome, mighty chief, once more,  
 Welcome to this grateful shore:  
 Now no mercenary foe  
 Aims again the fatal blow,  
 Aims at thee the fatal blow.  
 Virgins fair, and matrons grave,  
 These thy conquering arm did save,  
 Build for thee triumphal bowers;  
 Strew, ye fair, his way with flowers,  
 Strew your Hero's way with flowers.



1845 rendition by Currier & Ives of Washington's arrival in Trenton, New Jersey, on his journey to New York City. The banner draped above Washington reads "The Defender of the Mothers Will Be / The Protector of the Daughters" (differing slightly from Ramsay's 1789 account). The center figure reads "Battle of Trenton, Dec. 26<sup>th</sup>, 1776."

On Washington's arrival in Elizabethtown, New Jersey:

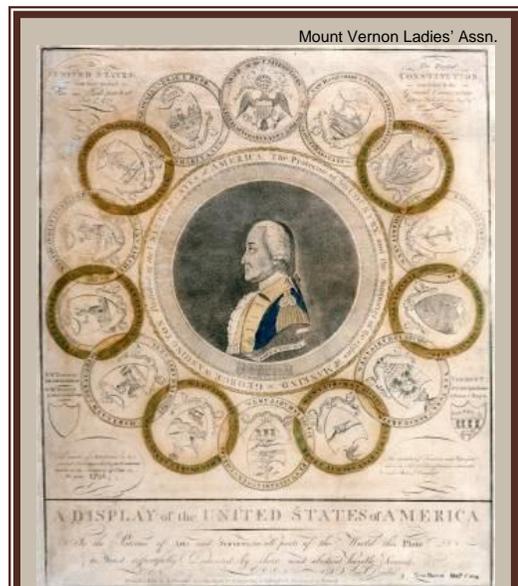
*"The Scene on Thursday last was sublimely great—beyond any descriptive Powers of the pen to do justice to—How universal—and how laudable the curiosity—How sincere—and how expressive the sentiments of respect and veneration! All ranks [of people] appeared to feel the force of an expression that was reiterated among the crowd—— "WELL, HE DESERVES IT ALL!"*

*The New Jersey Journal, Elizabethtown, NJ, 29 April 1789*

As they sung the last lines, they strewed their flowers on the road before their beloved deliverer. His situation on this occasion, contrasted with what he had in Dec. 1776 felt on the same spot when the affairs of America were at the lowest ebb of depression [during the Revolutionary War], filled him with sensations that cannot be described. He was rowed across the bay from Elizabethtown to New York in an elegant barge by thirteen pilots. All the vessels in the harbor hoisted their flags. Stairs were erected and decorated for his reception. On his landing, universal joy diffused itself through every order of the people, and he was received and congratulated by the Governor of the State and officers of the corporation. He was conducted from the landing place to the house which had been fitted up for his reception, and was followed by an elegant procession of militia in their uniforms and by great numbers of citizens. In the evening, the houses of the inhabitants were brilliantly illuminated.

A day was fixed, soon after his arrival, for his taking the oath of office, which was in the following words: “*I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend, the Constitution of the United States.*” On this occasion he was wholly clothed in American manufactures. In the morning of the day appointed for this purpose, the clergy of different denominations assembled their congregations in the respective places of worship and offered up public prayers for the President and people of the United States. About noon a procession, followed by a multitude of citizens, moved from the President’s house to Federal Hall. When they came within a short distance from the Hall, the troops formed a line on both sides of the way, through which Mr. Washington, accompanied by the Vice-President Mr. John Adams, passed into the Senate chamber. Immediately after, accompanied by both houses, he went into the gallery fronting Broad Street, and before them and an immense concourse of citizens, took the oath prescribed by the Constitution, which was administered by R. R. Livingston, the Chancellor of the State of New York. An awful silence prevailed among the spectators during this part of the ceremony. It was a minute of the most sublime political joy. The Chancellor then proclaimed him President of the United States. This was answered by the discharge of 13 guns and by the effusions of shouts from near 10,000 grateful and affectionate hearts. The President bowed most respectfully to the people and the air resounded again with their acclamations. He then retired to the Senate chamber, where he made the following speech to both houses:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Washington’s First Inaugural Address [excerpts].



A Display of the United States of America, engraving by Amos Doolittle, Connecticut, 1794, in which a chain of the thirteen states’ seals, with the Great Seal of the United States at the top, encircles Washington.

### ODE

Sung on the arrival of the PRESIDENT of the UNITED STATES [in New York City, 24 April 1789]

Tune—“God save &c.”

[“God Save the Queen”/“America”]

Hail thou auspicious day!  
Far let America  
Thy praise resound:  
Joy to our native land!  
Let ev’ry heart expand,  
For WASHINGTON’S at hand,  
With Glory crown’d!

Thrice-blest Columbians hail!  
Behold, before the gale,  
Your CHIEF advance;  
The matchless HERO’S nigh!  
Applaud HIM to the sky,  
Who gave you Liberty,  
With gen’rous France.

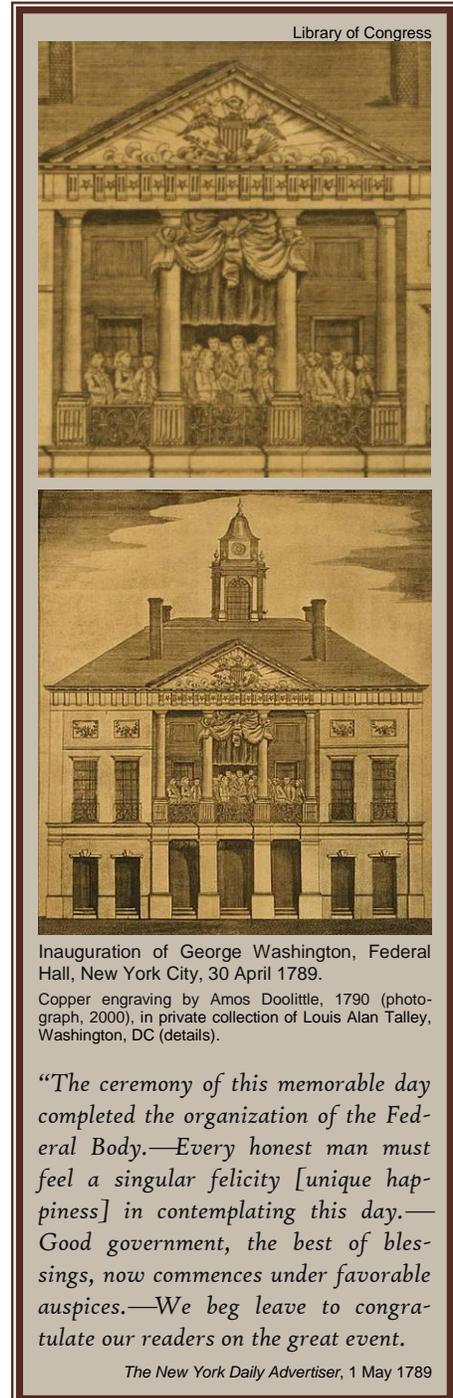
...  
Far be the din of Arms,  
Henceforth the Olive’s charms  
Shall War preclude;  
These shores a HEAD shall own,  
Unsullied by a throne,  
Our much lov’d WASHINGTON,  
The Great, the Good!

The New York Packet, 24 April 1789

*Fellow Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives.*

**A**mong the vicissitudes incident to life, no event could have filled me with greater anxieties than that of which the notification was transmitted by your order and received on the 14 day of the present month. On the one hand, I was summoned by my country, whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love, from a retreat which I had chosen with the fondest predilection, and in my flattering hopes with an immutable decision, as the asylum of my declining years — a retreat which was rendered every day more necessary as well as more dear to me by the addition of habit to inclination, and of frequent interruptions in my health, to the gradual waste committed on it by time. — On the other hand, the magnitude and difficulty of the trust to which the voice of my country called me, being sufficient to awaken in the wisest and most experienced of her citizens, a distrustful scrutiny into his qualifications, could not but overwhelm with despondence one who, inheriting inferior endowments from nature, and unpracticed in the duties of civil administration, ought to be peculiarly conscious of his own deficiencies. In this conflict of emotions, all I dare aver [assert] is that it has been my faithful study to collect my duty from a just appreciation of every circumstance by which it might be affected. . . .

Such being the impressions under which I have in obedience to the public summons repaired to the present station [arrived at this current office], it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe — who presides in the councils of nations — and whose providential aids can supply every human defect — that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes, and may enable every instrument employed in its administration to execute with success the functions allotted to his charge. In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own, nor those of my fellow citizens at large, less than either. No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency. And in the important revolution just accomplished in the system of their united government, the tranquil deliberations and voluntary consent of so many distinct communities, from which the event has resulted, cannot be compared with the means by which most governments have been established, without some return of pious gratitude, along with an humble anticipation of the future blessings which the past seem to presage. These reflections arising out of the present crisis have forced themselves too strongly on my mind to be suppressed. You will join with me, I trust, in thinking that there are none under the influence of which the proceedings of a new and free government can more auspiciously commence. . . .



Gibbes Museum, Charleston, SC



David Ramsay, oil portrait attrib. to Rembrandt Peale, ca. 1796

*Citizens of the United States! You have a well balanced constitution established by general consent, . . . Cherish and support a reverence for government, and cultivate union between the East and the South, the Atlantic and the Mississippi. Let the greatest good of the greatest number be the pole star of your public and private deliberations. . . . Reckon the necessity of labor not among the curses, but the blessings of life. . . . Remember that there can be no political happiness without liberty — that there can be no liberty without morality — and that there can be no morality without religion. . . . It is now your turn to figure on the face of the earth and in the annals of the world. . . . Perfect the good work you have begun . . .*

The President, of Congress, then attended on divine service.

In the evening a very ingenious and splendid show of fire works was exhibited. Betwixt [between] the fort and the bowling green<sup>4</sup> stood conspicuous a superb and brilliant transparent painting, in the center of which was the portrait of the President represented under the emblem of fortitude. On his right hand was justice, representing the Senate of the United States, and on his left, Wisdom, representing the House of Representatives.

This memorable day completed the organization of the new constitution. By this establishment the rising generation will have an opportunity of observing the result of an experiment in politics which before has never been fairly made. The experience of former ages has given many melancholy proofs that popular governments have seldom answered in practice to the theories and warm wishes of their admirers. The present inhabitants of independent America now have an opportunity to wipe off this aspersion, to assert the dignity of human nature, and the capacity of mankind for self-government.

Citizens of the United States!<sup>5</sup> You have a well balanced constitution established by general consent, which is an improvement on all republican forms of government heretofore established. It possesses the good qualities of monarchy — but without its vices. The wisdom and stability of an aristocracy — but without the insolence of hereditary masters. The freedom and independence of a popular assembly acquainted with the wants and wishes of the people — but without the capacity of doing those mischiefs which result from uncontrolled power in one assembly. The end and object of it is public good. If you are not happy, it will be your own fault. No knave or fool can plead an hereditary right to sport with your property or your liberties. Your laws and your lawgivers must all proceed from yourselves. You have the experience of nearly six thousand years to point out the rocks on which former republics have been dashed to pieces. Learn wisdom from their misfortunes. Cultivate justice both public and private. No government will or can endure which does not protect the rights of its subjects.<sup>6</sup> Unless such efficient regulations are adopted as will secure property as well as liberty, one revolution will follow another. Anarchy, monarchy or despotism will be the consequence. By just laws and the faithful execution of them,

public and private credit will be restored, and the restoration of credit will be a mine of wealth to this young country. It will make a fund for agriculture, commerce, and manufactures, which will soon enable the United States to claim an exalted rank among the nations of the earth. Such are the resources of your country, and so trifling are your debts compared with your resources that proper systems wisely planned and faithfully executed will soon fill your extensive territory with inhabitants, and give you the command of such ample capitals as will enable you to run the career of national greatness, with advantages equal to the oldest kingdoms of Europe. What they have been slowly growing to, in the course of near two thousand years, you may hope to equal within one century. If you continue under one government, built

<sup>4</sup> *Bowling green*: manicured expanse of grass for playing the game of lawn bowls

<sup>5</sup> The following paragraphs present David Ramsay's conclusion to his two-volume history of the American Revolution and its aftermath to 1789.

<sup>6</sup> Congress submitted twelve constitutional amendments, including a bill of rights, to the states in September 1789. They were ratified in December 1791 by the ninth and final state required for adoption (Virginia).

on the solid foundations of public justice and public virtue, there is no point of national greatness to which you may not aspire with a well founded hope of speedily attaining it. Cherish and support a reverence for government, and cultivate union between the East and the South, the Atlantic and the Mississippi. Let the greatest good of the greatest number be the pole star of your public and private deliberations.

Shun wars — they beget debt, add to the common vices of mankind, and produce others which are almost peculiar to themselves. Agriculture, manufactures and commerce are your proper business. Seek not to enlarge your territory by conquest. It is already sufficiently extensive. You have ample scope for the employment of your most active minds in promoting your own domestic happiness. Maintain your own rights and let all others remain in quiet possession of theirs. Avoid discord, faction, luxury, and the other vices which have been the bane of commonwealths. Cherish and reward the philosophers, the statesmen and the patriots who devote their talents and time at the expense of their private interests, to the toils of enlightening and directing their fellow citizens, and thereby rescue citizens and rulers of republics, from the common and too often merited charge of ingratitude. Practice industry, frugality, temperance, moderation, and the whole lovely train of republican virtues. Banish from your borders the liquid fire of the West Indies [rum] which, while it entails poverty and disease, prevents industry and foment private quarrels. Venerate the plow, the hoe, and all the implements of agriculture. Honor the men who with their own hands maintain their families and raise up children who are inured to [accustomed to] toil and capable of defending their country. Reckon the necessity of labor not among the curses, but the blessings of life. Your towns will probably e're [before] long be engulfed in luxury and effeminacy.<sup>7</sup> If your liberties and future prospects depended on them, your career of liberty would probably be short; but a great majority of your country must and will be yeomanry [farmers] who have no other dependence than on Almighty God for his usual blessing on their daily labor. From the great excess of the number of such independent farmers in these States, over and above all other classes of inhabitants, the long continuance of your liberties may be reasonably presumed.

Let the hapless African sleep undisturbed on his native shore, and give over wishing for the extermination of the ancient proprietors of this land [Native Americans]. Universal justice is universal interest. The most enlarged happiness of one people by no means requires the degradation or destruction of another. It would be more glorious to civilize one tribe of savages than to exterminate or expel a score. There is territory enough for them and for you. Instead of invading their rights, promote their happiness, and give them no reason to curse the folly of their fathers, who suffered [allowed] yours to sit down on a soil which the common Parent of us both had previously assigned to them. But above all, be particularly careful that your own descendents do not degenerate into savages. Diffuse the means of education, and particularly of religious instruction, through your remotest settlements. To this end, support and strengthen the hands of public teachers, and especially of worthy clergymen. Let your voluntary contributions confute the dishonorable position that religion cannot be supported but by compulsory establishments [i.e., taxes to support state-sponsored churches]. Remember that there can be no political happiness without liberty — that there can be no liberty without morality — and that there can be no morality without religion.

It is now your turn to figure on the face of the earth and in the annals of the world. You possess a country which in less than a century will probably contain fifty millions of inhabitants. You have, with a great expense of blood and treasure, rescued yourselves and your posterity from the domination of Europe. Perfect the good work you have begun by forming such arrangements and institutions as bid fair for ensuring to the present and future generations the blessings for which you have successfully contended.

May the Almighty Ruler of the Universe, who has raised you to Independence and given you a place among the nations of the earth, make the American Revolution an Era in the history of the world remarkable for the progressive increase of human happiness!

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<sup>7</sup> Many commentators in the 1780s bemoaned Americans' post-revolution demand for European luxury goods—especially criticizing women who coveted the latest French and British fashions—as dangerous to the young nation's moral strength and independence.