



George Washington's Farewell Address

September 19, 1796

Selected quotes on foreign
policy themes



International context

- America's former colonizer Britain is at war with America's ally France (War of the First Coalition)
- The French monarchy has been overthrown and replaced by a Republic
- The aftermath of the French Revolution has seen major atrocities
- The United States has remained out of the war



Domestic context

- Washington is announcing that he will not run for office again and offering his advice on domestic and foreign policy
- France and Britain had each sought to draw America to support their side of the war
- There are pro-French and pro-British factions in U.S. politics
 - Pro-French (Democratic-Republican Party): sympathetic to the French Revolution, feel it expresses the same ideals as the American Revolution or that the United States owes France a favor for its support during the War of Independence
 - Pro-British (Federalist Party): Fear the violence of the French Revolution and sympathize with Britain's more conservative political order
- Washington had proclaimed America's neutrality in the conflict

Washington on attitudes toward other countries

“Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachments for others should be excluded, and that in place of them just and amicable feelings toward all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.”

Inveterate Antipathies

- “Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur.”
- “Hence frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests. The nation prompted by ill will and resentment sometimes impels to war the government contrary to the best calculations of policy. The government sometimes participates in the national propensity, and adopts through passion what reason would reject. At other times it makes the animosity of the nation subservient to projects of hostility, instigated by pride, ambition, and other sinister and pernicious motives. The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations has been the victim.”

Passionate Attachments

- “So, likewise, a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification.”
- “It leads also to concessions to the favorite nation of privileges denied to others, which is apt doubly to injure the nation making the concessions by unnecessarily parting with what ought to have been retained, and by exciting jealousy, ill will, and a disposition to retaliate in the parties from whom equal privileges are withheld; and it gives to ambitions, corrupted, or deluded citizens (who devote themselves to the favorite nation) facility to betray or sacrifice the interests of their own country without odium, sometimes even with popularity...”

Discussion

- Are there countries today toward which many in the United States have inveterate antipathies?
- Have these antipathies led to “frequent collisions” or even war?
- Are there countries toward which we have passionate attachments?
- Have these attachments led us to consider particular states as our enemies not because they threaten us, but because they threaten those to whom we’re attached?
- Are there political incentives to engage in “projects of hostility” against other countries?

States: self-interested

- “It is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another; that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character; that by such acceptance it may place itself in the condition of having given equivalents for nominal favors, and yet of being reproached with ingratitude for not giving more.”
- “There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation. It is an illusion which experience must cure, which a just pride ought to discard.”

The danger of foreign influence on politics

- “Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be *constantly* awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. But that jealousy, to be useful, must be impartial, else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defense against it.”
- “Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people to surrender their interests.”

Partisanship: a channel of foreign influence

The “spirit of party [...] opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passion. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another.”

Discussion

- Have domestic divisions enabled other states special access to American politics?
- Many think tanks receive significant funding from foreign governments, especially Middle Eastern states (notably the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia), but also from European and Asian allies. Should this be acceptable?
- The murder of Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi led some think tanks to declare that they would only accept money from democracies. Is this better? If it's better, is it good enough?
- Should think tanks accept donations from states with which America has a relationship that is neither good nor bad? What about bad relationships?
- Is Washington correct that states do not offer one another “disinterested favors”? Should states offer one another disinterested favors?

Disentanglement from Europe

“Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.”

Disentanglement: a space for growth

- “Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.”
- “Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?”

Against permanent alliances

“It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world [...] Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.”

Discussion

- Is entanglement in others' conflicts a danger in military alliances?
- Washington suggested that the United States needed to stay out of international conflicts in order to focus on its own development, and that development would be a source of security. Does this have any relevance today?
- Not long after Washington's presidency, the United States ended its alliance with France, and would not have another permanent military alliance until NATO was established after World War II. Was avoiding permanent military alliances a good model, or one only suited to early America?
- More generally, are the foreign policy ideas in Washington's Farewell only useful for his time, or do they have lasting relevance?



**JOHN QUINCY ADAMS
SOCIETY**

The John Quincy Adams Society, JQAS.org