

George Washington's Farewell Address (1796)- Group Four

In 1792, George Washington nearly decided to retire from public life. He sat down with his friend, James Madison, to write a farewell letter to the nation. However, shortly thereafter he changed his mind and decided to run for re-election. When he was re-elected by a unanimous Electoral College vote, all the written notes were set aside.

However, four years later Washington set down a tradition that was followed until 1940. This tradition was to serve as President only for two terms and then step aside for someone new. In 1940, Franklin Roosevelt became the first president to break this tradition by running for a third term. Roosevelt won this election in a landslide, and was even elected a fourth time in 1944.

So in 1796 when Washington decided to retire he again took out the notes he and James Madison had written four years earlier. This time, Washington worked with his original notes and the thoughts of Alexander Hamilton and John Jay to write his farewell.

Although the resulting work is known as one of Washington's greatest 'speeches', he never spoke the words out loud to the public. Rather, this farewell address appeared first in a Philadelphia newspaper, and then seven days later, it appeared in the *Independent Chronicle*, a Boston newspaper.

The following is an excerpt from this address. You and your group need to read it, discuss it, and determine the main idea. What is Washington telling the nation? Why is he telling them that?

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent (*forever*) alliances (*partnerships*) with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing (*encouraging*) infidelity (*abandonment*) to existing engagements (*treaties*). I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

Taking care always to keep ourselves, by suitable establishments, on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.

Harmony, liberal intercourse (*trade*) with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial (*trade*) policy should hold an equal and impartial hand; neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences. Establishing conventional rules of intercourse (*trading*) in order to give trade a stable course, to define the rights of our merchants, and to enable the government to support them, the best that present circumstances and mutual opinion will permit, but temporary, and liable to be from time to time abandoned or varied, as experience and circumstances shall dictate.

Constantly keeping in view, that it is folly (*foolish*) 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.