

GEORGE
WASHINGTON
— & THE —
FIRST FREEDOM

Introduction by **Wilfred M. McClay**

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN WE CELEBRATE THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY of American independence, what do we think of first? Most likely we think of the resounding words of Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed to the rest of the world our reasons for separating from our mother country.

Jefferson did so in soaring language that described the event as our coming-of-age as a distinct “people,” but that laid down a foundation of powerful and enduring truths — that all men are created equal, that they come into the world possessing rights that derive from a power higher than any government, that the purpose of government is the protection of those rights, and that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed — truths that would guide and inspire this nation’s progress in the years ahead. The influence of those truths would spread far beyond our shores, and make the United States an enduring example to the rest of the world in the years to come.

And indeed, the importance that we assign to the Declaration is shown by the fact that we Americans celebrate our independence on July 4th, the date on which the words of the Declaration were promulgated, rather than July 2nd, the date on which the Continental Congress passed the resolution put forward by Richard Henry Lee, making our separation from the British empire official.

The father of our country, however, was not around for either event. George Washington was too busy out in the field, already fighting the British.

Which raises an important point: even if we celebrate our independence on the Fourth, we have to remember that accomplishing the Revolution was not just a matter of great words. It required great deeds too. Declaring was the easy part. Yes, it was deeply impressive for the Revolution's leaders to sign their names to a Declaration in whose conclusion they pledged their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" to the cause. That pledge carried real weight, since they all knew that they would surely be made to pay the ultimate price if their cause failed. They had to hang together, as Benjamin Franklin quipped, or else they would hang separately.

It was quite another matter, though, to lead rag-tag and disorganized colonial forces to prevail against the greatest military power in the world — a result that even the most sonorous words could not make a reality, certainly not by themselves. The country was far from being fully united behind the revolutionary cause, and it could field only the most rudimentary, ill-trained, and poorly supplied army. It had no navy to speak of. It had little money, and no obvious way of raising funds to build and support these essential military components.

But the fledgling nation had the leadership of George Washington, a committed patriot with extensive military experience and admirable character, who commanded the respect and loyalty of nearly all Americans. When he showed up at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia on May 9, 1775, wearing his imposing buff-and-blue military uniform, he was signaling with something more commanding than words that he was ready to fight for the colonial cause — and more than that, ready to serve as its military leader. The Congress unanimously agreed, and appointed him commander-

in-chief of the Continental Army a few weeks later. He accepted the position on condition that he receive no pay for it.

These facts begin to give us the measure of the man, and why he was so widely admired.

The challenges facing Washington as commander-in-chief were immense. First, he had to create and weld together an effective American army. This was no easy task. In August of 1776, for example, he had 28,000 men under his command; by December that number had shrunk to a mere 3,000. Such was the roller-coaster pattern he coped with for the entire five years of active combat. Not only did he deal, as any general must, with the tactical and strategic issues of military leadership, he was also constantly dealing with problems of exhaustion, desertion, plunging morale, disease, and devastating winter weather — the harsh realities of an army that was frequently on the edge of complete dissolution.

But Washington was an inspiring leader: imaginative, determined, intrepid, and courageous. He held the army together, and used its limited means to best effect, drawing upon the assistance of the new nation's allies, especially the French. It is said that when the combined American and French forces ended the war by defeating British General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, the British band struck up a familiar English ballad, "The World Turned Upside Down," at the time of surrender, on October 19, 1781.

So it was said, and so it must have seemed to Cornwallis and the rest of the world. The impossible had happened. The improbable American independence that had been so boldly declared in 1776, and that had been so courageously sought in the five long and hard years thereafter, had been achieved. It could not have been done without the leadership of George Washington.

Even after the Revolution was successfully concluded, Washington continued to be the indispensable man for the American cause. As

always, it was the quality of his character that illuminated the way. He set a powerful example for America's future when he resigned his commission as commander-in-chief upon the war's conclusion, an act that established the principle of civilian authority over the military, and modeled the voluntary relinquishment of power as a principle of democratic governance. It was an act that amazed the world; he could have been a king, had he wanted to be, in just the way that military victors throughout history had been. But he chose instead to "take my leave of all the employments of public life" and return to his private life at Mount Vernon, thereby convincing the world of the depth and sincerity of his republican convictions.

He was early to recognize the crippling defects of the Articles of Confederation, and presided over the Convention in the summer of 1787 that would produce a more worthy Constitution. His very presence imparted to the proceedings an atmosphere of high legitimacy. Once the Constitution was ratified by the states, he would be made the first President of the United States by unanimous vote.

In his two terms of office, Washington set examples and created precedents for all subsequent holders of that office, and served above all else as a standard-bearer of national unity. He remains among our most widely admired presidents.

Now that we have a better sense of the stature and moral gravitas of this man, it perhaps will come as no surprise that he was a great and consistent spokesman for the importance of religion to the preservation of a republican form of government. Not that he ever spoke in a personal or confessional way of his religious faith; we know little about that, aside from the fact that he was a lifelong Anglican Christian and occasional vestryman and warden in one of his various parishes. (He also was a Freemason, which was not an unusual combination for the day, and was an association that

reinforced his notions of the necessity of a Supreme Being.) There is much debate about his faith among scholars, and I will interject only the view, which I regard as incontrovertible, that Washington could not have been a Deist; no man who invoked the concept of Providence and its guiding hand as often as he did could have believed in a clockmaker God who stands aloof from human affairs and entertains no intercessory prayers. About his private beliefs, in the end, we shall have to leave him to his privacy.

But he was not shy about proclaiming the essential importance of religion to the conduct of public affairs in a republican society. Even as a general during the Revolutionary War, his commands to his troops often included instructions about the importance of faithful religious practice. On July 9, 1776, five days after the Declaration, he directed commanding officers:

To see that all inferior officers and soldiers pay suitable respect [to chaplains] and attend carefully upon religious services: The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger — The General hopes and trusts, that every officer, and man, will endeavor so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country.

We see a similar sentiment even more clearly expressed in some of the key political speeches of his presidency. In his First Inaugural Address, Washington begins by declaring that:

[I]t 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. . .

He also declared that “the propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the external rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained,” and he added that “the foundations of our national policy, will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality.” The entire speech appears hereinafter, and should be appreciated in its entirety.

As President, he supported the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution, including the provision making explicit the right of Americans to free exercise of religion. Religious liberty is often referred to as “the first freedom,” not only because of its primacy in the First Amendment, but in recognition of the foundational importance of freedom of conscience to all other liberties.

Washington’s most lasting articulation of the need for religion in public life, however, came in his Farewell Address of 1796. In that lengthy and profound Address, he proclaimed that “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness – these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens.” Nor, he makes clear, did he think much of the idea that a national morality could be generated in the absence of religion, an idea that Jefferson would have been inclined to endorse. Washington understood and accepted the view that we are “theotropic” beings, who stand in need of transcendent supports for the structure of our moral existence.

It is worth noting, though, that Washington employed the generic term “religion” in these public statements. He had his reasons.

Obviously, he did not wish to interject himself in the denominational quarrels between and among Catholics and Protestants or other Christian religious groups, or allow these disputes to affect the more general public purpose that a generic sense of “religion” could serve. As one can tell from a full reading of the Farewell Address, nothing concerned Washington so much as the problem of preserving and reinforcing national unity; and it served the purposes of national unity well to use as general a term as possible, and keep sectarian religious agitations to a minimum.

But even so, he chose not to use the term “Christian” in these passages either. And his choice not to do so, but to speak in terms that were broadly Biblical in character, strongly suggests that he wished to reserve a space for freedom of belief for all Americans in his understanding of the national soul.

Fortunately, the evidence for that assertion is more plentiful than what we can extract from reading between the lines.

The most significant non-Christian religious group in the America of Washington’s time was the Jewish community. The American experiment took place against the backdrop of the long history of Jewish exclusion and persecution in Europe. Indeed, we should note that even as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of American independence in the year 2026, we find our world being shaken by a rising spirit of anti-Semitism, visible both in our country and around the world to an extent not seen since the dragon-ridden days of the Second World War. This depressing fact is shocking but perhaps should not be surprising, given the ubiquity and persistence of Jew-hatred in the history of the world. No nation, no people, should ever count itself exempt from it.

George Washington was well aware of this dismal history. The exchanges of letters between President Washington and the members of Hebrew congregations in several cities attest to the

President's surprisingly (given the historical context) warm embrace of Jews as Americans in full. Note the fact that Washington's letters came even before the Jewish emancipation of 1791 in France, and you will have a sense of the magnitude of what Washington was doing with these letters, which are included hereinafter.

The most famous of the three is the Newport letter, which was the product of a visit to Newport that Washington made in conjunction with Rhode Island's belated ratification of the Constitution. The exchange repays a close reading, both of the August 17, 1790 letter to Washington from Moses Seixas, Warden of the Touro Synagogue, and Washington's response to it (on the very next day, August 18!). I will permit you the pleasure of absorbing Seixas's beautiful and deeply Biblical letter to Washington, and Washington's thrilling response, with only one editorial kibitz: notice how often the language of Seixas's query is echoed faithfully in Washington's response, in a way that implicitly shows Washington's deep respect for his Jewish interlocutors. (Seixas: "A Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance. . ." Washington: "for happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. . .")

But also note what Washington has added, preceding his repetition of Seixas's formulation: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." The proclamation of these words is a form of action, and constitutes a quiet bombshell.

What he is doing here, in his office as President of the United States, is declaring that the religious freedom his nation proclaims is based, not on Christian tolerance for the unorthodox beliefs of others, but on the belief that the Jews' exercise of their religious freedom need make no curtsies toward the Christian majority or seek its permission

to breathe free. Instead, such freedom is an exercise of their inherent natural rights, the protection of which cannot be denied them, so long as they demean themselves as good citizens.

Note too that Seixas's description of himself and his congregants as "children of the Stock of Abraham" is also repeated by Washington, who adds the great vision from Micah 4:4 in the Hebrew Bible, in which "every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." Such moments in the text convey a subtle but unmistakable indication that there is a deep spiritual bond connecting the two correspondents.

Small wonder that Washington has always been particularly venerated by Jewish Americans, who know the history, and sense his affinity for the Jews. It was not so with Jefferson, who while fervently committed to the principle of religious freedom, had little regard for the Jewish faith. Moses, he said, "had bound the Jews to many idle ceremonies, mummeries & observances of no effect towards producing the social utilities which constitute the essence of virtue."

Washington was prudently silent about such matters. But I think we can guess that he did not share Jefferson's judgments. His exchanges with the three Hebrew congregations, and the praise for religion that he consistently offered in his great speeches, along with his consistently expressed gratitude to Providence, offer powerful evidence to the contrary.

"No People," Washington said in the First Inaugural, "can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the People of the United States."

As we celebrate our distinguished past and the longevity of our institutions, we Americans also have more cause than ever to recall and take pride in our nation's deeply rooted opposition, from its founding, to coercion and intolerance in matters of conscience. For evidence of this opposition, we need only to consult the career of

George Washington, the man colloquially (but rightly) known as the father of our country. Washington was a man of many virtues, but high among them was his stalwart understanding and defense of religious liberty for all.

Wilfred M. McClay holds the Victor Davis Hanson Chair in Classical History and Western Civilization at Hillsdale College. His book, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America*, received the Merle Curti Award of the Organization of American Historians for the best book on American intellectual history. Among his other books are *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*, which will soon appear in a revised and expanded Second Edition, and *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past*. He has served on the National Council on the Humanities and the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission.

GEORGE WASHINGTON — & THE — FIRST FREEDOM

Excerpt from the General Orders, in which General George Washington announced the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Army in New York.

HEAD QUARTERS, NEW YORK, JULY 9TH 1776.

. . . The Honorable Continental Congress having been pleased to allow a Chaplain to each Regiment, with the pay of Thirty-three Dollars and one third per month—The Colonels or commanding officers of each regiment are directed to procure Chaplains accordingly; persons of good Characters and exemplary lives—To see that all inferior officers and soldiers pay them a suitable respect and attend carefully upon religious exercises: The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger—The General hopes and trusts, that every officer, and man, will endeavour so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country.

The Honorable the Continental Congress, impelled by the dictates

of duty, policy and necessity, having been pleased to dissolve the Connection which subsisted between this Country, and Great Britain, and to declare the United Colonies of North America, free and independent STATES: The several brigades are to be drawn up this evening on their respective Parades, at six OClock, when the declaration of Congress, shewing the grounds & reasons of this measure, is to be read with an audible voice.

The General hopes this important Event will serve as a fresh incentive to every officer, and soldier, to act with Fidelity and Courage, as knowing that now the peace and safety of his Country depends (under God) solely on the success of our arms . . .



George Washington's First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789

Fellow Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives:

Among 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 fourteenth 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, 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. All I dare hope, is, that, if in executing this task, I have been too much swayed by a grateful remembrance of former instances, or by an affectionate sensibility to this transcendent proof of the confidence of my fellow-citizens; and have thence too little consulted my incapacity as well as disinclination for the weighty and untried cares before me, my error will be palliated by the motives which mislead me, and its consequences be judged by my Country, with some share of the partiality in which they originated.

Such being the impressions under which I have, in obedience to the public summons, repaired to the present station: 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, can not 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.

By the article establishing the Executive Department it is made the duty of the President "to recommend to your consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." The circumstances under which I now meet you, will acquit me from entering into that subject, farther than to refer to the Great Constitutional Charter under which you are assembled; and which, in defining your powers, designates the objects to which your attention is to be given. It will be more consistent with those circumstances, and far more congenial with the feelings which actuate me, to substitute, in place of a recommendation of particular

measures, the tribute that is due to the talents, the rectitude, and the patriotism which adorn the characters selected to devise and adopt them. In these honorable qualifications, I behold the surest pledges, that as on one side, no local prejudices, or attachments; no separate views, nor party animosities, will misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great Assemblage of communities and interests: so, on another, that the foundation of our national policy, will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality; and the preeminence of free Government, be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its Citizens, and command the respect of the world. I dwell on this prospect with every satisfaction which an ardent love for my Country can inspire: since there is no truth more thoroughly established, than that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness, between duty and advantage, between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy, and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity: Since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained: And since the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.

Besides the ordinary objects submitted to your care, it will remain with your judgment to decide how far an exercise of the occasional power delegated by the Fifth article of the Constitution is rendered expedient at the present juncture by the nature of objections which have been urged against the System, or by the degree of inquietude

which has given birth to them. Instead of undertaking particular recommendations on this subject, in which I could be guided by no lights derived from official opportunities, I shall again give way to my entire confidence in your discernment and pursuit of the public good: For I assure myself that whilst you carefully avoid every alteration which might endanger the benefits of an United and effective Government, or which ought to await the future lessons of experience; a reverence for the characteristic rights of freemen, and a regard for the public harmony, will sufficiently influence your deliberations on the question how far the former can be impregably fortified, or the latter be safely and advantageously promoted.

To the preceding observations I have one to add, which will be most properly addressed to the House of Representatives. It concerns myself; and will therefore be as brief as possible. When I was first honoured with a call into the service of my Country, then on the eve of an arduous struggle for its liberties, the light in which I contemplated my duty required that I should renounce every pecuniary compensation. From this resolution I have in no instance departed – And being still under the impressions which produced it, I must decline as inapplicable to myself any share in the personal emoluments, which may be indispensably included in a permanent provision for the Executive Department; and must accordingly pray that the pecuniary estimates for the Station in which I am placed, may, during my continuance in it, be limited to such actual expenditures as the public good may be thought to require.

Having thus imparted to you my sentiments, as they have been awakened by the occasion which brings us together, I shall take my present leave; but not without resorting once more to the benign Parent of the Human Race, in humble supplication that, since He

has been pleased to favour the American people, with opportunities for deliberating in perfect tranquility, and dispositions for deciding with unparalleled unanimity on a form of Government, for the security of their Union, and the advancement of their happiness; so this divine blessing may be equally conspicuous in the enlarged views—the temperate consultations, and the wise measures on which the success of this Government must depend.



Correspondence between Hebrew Congregations and President George Washington

LEVI SHEFTALL, PRESIDENT OF THE MICKVE ISRAEL
CONGREGATION IN SAVANNAH, TO GEORGE WASHINGTON,
MAY 1790

Sir,

We have long been anxious of congratulating you on your appointment by unanimous approbation to the Presidential dignity of this country, and of testifying our unbounded confidence in your integrity and unblemished virtue: Yet, however exalted the station you now fill, it is still not equal to the merit of your heroic services through an arduous and dangerous conflict, which has embosomed you in the hearts of her citizens.

Our eccentric situation added to a diffidence founded on the most

profound respect has thus long prevented our address, yet the delay has realised anticipation, given us an opportunity of presenting our grateful acknowledgements for the benedictions of Heaven through the energy of federal influence, and the equity of your administration.

Your unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long, as a veil, shaded religion—unrivetted the fetters of enthusiasm—enfranchised us with all the privileges and immunities of free citizens, and initiated us into the grand mass of legislative mechanism. By example you have taught us to endure the ravages of war with manly fortitude, and to enjoy the blessings of peace with reverence to the Deity, and benignity and love to our fellow-creatures.

May the great Author of worlds grant you all happiness—an uninterrupted series of health—addition of years to the number of your days and a continuance of guardianship to that freedom, which, under the auspices of Heaven, your magnanimity and wisdom have given these States.

GEORGE WASHINGTON TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATION IN
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA,
JUNE 14, 1790

Gentlemen,

I thank you with great sincerity for your congratulations on my appointment to the office, which I have the honor to hold by the unanimous choice of my fellow-citizens: and especially for the expressions which you are pleased to use in testifying the confidence

that is reposed in me by your congregation.

As the delay which has naturally intervened between my election and your address has afforded an opportunity for appreciating the merits of the federal-government, and for communicating your sentiments of its administration—I have rather to express my satisfaction than regret at a circumstance, which demonstrates (upon experiment) your attachment to the former as well as approbation of the latter.

I rejoice that a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the enlightened nations of the earth; and that your brethren will benefit thereby in proportion as it shall become still more extensive. Happily the people of the United States of America have, in many instances, exhibited examples worthy of imitation—The salutary influence of which will doubtless extend much farther, if gratefully enjoying those blessings of peace which (under favor of Heaven) have been obtained by fortitude in war, they shall conduct themselves with reverence to the Deity, and charity towards their fellow-creatures.

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.



MOSES SEIXAS, WARDEN OF THE TOURO SYNAGOGUE OF
CONGREGATION YESHUAT ISRAEL OF NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND,
TO GEORGE WASHINGTON,
AUGUST 17, 1790

Permit the children of the Stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person & merits—and to join with our fellow Citizens in welcoming you to New Port.

With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, & danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword, shielded your head in the day of battle: and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire, rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of Chief Magistrate in these States.

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental Machine: This so ample and extensive Federal Union whose basis is Philanthropy, Mutual Confidence and Publick Virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who

ruleth in the Armies Of Heaven and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatever seemeth him good.

For all the Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Antient of Days, the great preserver of Men—beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life: and, when like Joshua full of days and full of honour, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.

GEORGE WASHINGTON TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATION IN
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND,
AUGUST 18, 1790

Gentlemen.

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to

applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.



HEBREW CONGREGATIONS OF PHILADELPHIA, NEW YORK,
CHARLESTON, AND RICHMOND TO GEORGE WASHINGTON,
DECEMBER 13, 1790

It is reserved for you to unite in affection for your Character And Person, every political and religious denomination of Men; and in this will the Hebrew Congregations aforesaid, yield to no class of their fellow Citizens.

We have been hitherto prevented by various circumstances peculiar to our situation from adding our congratulations to those which the rest of America have offered on your elevation to the Chair of the Fœderal government. Deign then illustrious Sir, to Accept this our homage.

The wonders which the Lord of Hosts hath worked in the days of our Forefathers, have taught us to observe the greatness of his wisdom and his might, throughout the events of the late glorious revolution; and while we humble ourselves at his footstool in thanksgiving and praise for the blessing of his deliverance; we acknowledge you the Leader of the American Armies as his chosen and beloved servant; But not to your Sword alone is our present happiness to be ascribed; That indeed opened the way to the reign of Freedom, but never was it perfectly secure, till your hand gave birth to the Federal Constitution, and you renounced the joys of retirement to Seal by your administration in Peace, what you had achieved in war.

To 'the eternal God who is thy refuge', we Commit in our prayer the care of thy precious Life, and when full of years Thou shall be gathered unto the People 'thy righteousness shall go before thee', and we shall remember amidst our regret, that the Lord hath set apart the Godly for himself; whilst thy name and thy Virtues will remain an indelible memorial on our minds.

GEORGE WASHINGTON TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATIONS OF
PHILADELPHIA, NEW YORK, CHARLESTON, AND RICHMOND,
DECEMBER 13, 1790

Gentlemen,

The liberality of sentiment toward each other which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this Country, stands unparalleled in the history of Nations. The affection of such people is a treasure beyond the reach of calculation; and the repeated proofs which my fellow Citizens have given of their attachment to me, and approbation of my doings form the purest source of my temporal felicity. The affectionate expressions of your address again excite my gratitude, and receive my warmest acknowledgments.

The Power and Goodness of the Almighty were strongly Manifested in the events of our late glorious revolution; and his kind interposition in our behalf has been no less visible in the establishment of our present equal government. In war he directed the Sword; and in peace he has ruled in our Councils. My agency in both has been guided by the best intentions, and a sense of the duty which I owe my Country: and as my exertions have hitherto been amply rewarded by the Approbation of my fellow Citizens, I shall endeavour to deserve a continuance of it by my future conduct. May the same temporal and eternal blessings which you implore for me, rest upon your Congregations.



***Excerpts from George Washington's Farewell Address,
September 19, 1796***

Friends and Fellow-Citizens:

The period for a new election of a Citizen, to Administer the Executive government of the United States, being not far distant, and the time actually arrived when your thoughts must be employed in designating the person, who is to be clothed with that important trust, it appears to me proper, especially as it may conduce to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now apprise you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being considered among the number of those, out of whom a choice is to be made.

I beg you, at the same time, to do me the justice to be assured, that this resolution has not been taken, without a strict regard to all the considerations appertaining to the relation, which binds a dutiful citizen to his country—and that in withdrawing the tender of service, which silence in my situation might imply, I am influenced by no diminution of zeal for your future interest; no deficiency of grateful respect for your past kindness; but am supported by a full conviction that the step is compatible with both.

The acceptance of, and continuance hitherto in, the office to which your Suffrages have twice called me, have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty, and to a deference for what appeared to be your desire. I constantly hoped, that it would have been much earlier in my power, consistently with motives, which I was not at liberty to disregard, to return to that retirement, from which I had been reluctantly drawn. The strength of my inclination to do this, previous to the last Election, had even

led to the preparation of an address to declare it to you; but mature reflection on the then perplexed and critical posture of our Affairs with foreign Nations, and the unanimous advice of persons entitled to my confidence, impelled me to abandon the idea.

I rejoice that the state of your concerns, external as well as internal, no longer renders the pursuit of inclination incompatible with the sentiment of duty or propriety; and am persuaded whatever partiality may be retained for my services, that, in the present circumstances of our country, you will not disapprove my determination to retire.

The impressions with which I first undertook the arduous trust, were explained on the proper occasion. In the discharge of this trust, I will only say that I have with good intentions, contributed towards the Organization and administration of the government the best exertions of which a very fallible judgment was capable. Not unconscious, in the out set, of the inferiority of my qualifications, experience in my own eyes, perhaps still more in the eyes of others, has strengthened the motives to diffidence of myself; and every day the increasing weight of years admonishes me more and more, that the shade of retirement is as necessary to me as it will be welcome. Satisfied that if any circumstances have given peculiar value to my services, they were temporary, I have the consolation to believe that, while choice and prudence invite me to quit the political scene, patriotism does not forbid it.

In looking forward to the moment, which is intended to terminate the career of my public life, my feelings do not permit me to suspend the deep acknowledgment of that debt of gratitude which I owe to my beloved country, for the many honors it has conferred upon me; still more for the steadfast confidence with which it has

supported me; and for the opportunities I have thence enjoyed of manifesting my inviolable attachment, by services faithful and persevering, though in usefulness unequal to my zeal. If benefits have resulted to our country from these services, let it always be remembered to your praise, and as an instructive example in our annals, that, under circumstances in which the Passions, agitated in every direction, were liable to mislead, amidst appearances sometimes dubious, vicissitudes of fortune often discouraging, in situations in which not unfrequently want of Success has countenanced the spirit of criticism, the constancy of your support was the essential prop of the efforts, and a guarantee of the plans by which they were effected. Profoundly penetrated with this idea, I shall carry it with me to my grave, as a strong incitement to unceasing vows that Heaven may continue to you the choicest tokens of its beneficence—that your Union and brotherly affection may be perpetual—that the free Constitution, which is the work of your hands, may be sacredly maintained—that its Administration in every department may be stamped with wisdom and virtue—that, in fine, the happiness of the people of these States, under the auspices of liberty, may be made complete, by so careful a preservation and so prudent a use of this blessing as will acquire to them the glory of recommending it to the applause, the affection—and adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it.

Here, perhaps, I ought to stop. But a solicitude for your welfare, which cannot end but with my life, and the apprehension of danger, natural to that solicitude, urge me, on an occasion like the present, to offer to your solemn contemplation, and to recommend to your frequent review, some sentiments; which are the result of much reflection, of no inconsiderable observation, and which appear to

me all important to the permanency of your felicity as a people. These will be offered to you with the more freedom, as you can only see in them the disinterested warnings of a parting friend, who can possibly have no personal motive to bias his counsel. Nor can I forget, as an encouragement to it, your indulgent reception of my sentiments on a former and not dissimilar occasion.

Interwoven as is the love of liberty with every ligament of your hearts, no recommendation of mine is necessary to fortify or confirm the attachment.

The Unity of Government which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main Pillar in the Edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very Liberty which you so highly prize. But as it is easy to foresee, that from different causes and from different quarters, much pains will be taken, many artifices employed, to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth; as this is the point in your political fortress against which the batteries of internal and external enemies will be most constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously) directed, it is of infinite moment, that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national Union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the Palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion that it can in any event be abandoned; and indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our Country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together

the various parts.

For this you have every inducement of sympathy and interest. Citizens, by birth or choice, of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections. The name of AMERICAN, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of Patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same Religion, Manners, Habits, and political Principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together—the independence and Liberty you possess are the work of joint councils, and joint efforts—of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.



To the efficacy and permanency of your Union, a government for the whole is indispensable. No Alliances however strict between the parts can be an adequate substitute. They must inevitably experience the infractions and interruptions which all Alliances in all times have experienced. Sensible of this momentous truth, you have improved upon your first essay, by the adoption of a Constitution of Government, better calculated than your former for an intimate Union, and for the efficacious management of your common concerns. This government, the offspring of our own choice uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and

your support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its Laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true Liberty. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their Constitutions of Government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, 'till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People, is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea of the power and the right of the People to establish Government presupposes the duty of every Individual to obey the established Government.

All obstructions to the execution of the Laws, all combinations and associations, under whatever plausible character, with the real design to direct, control, counteract, or awe the regular deliberation and action of the Constituted authorities are destructive of this fundamental principle, and of fatal tendency. They serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force—to put, in the place of the delegated will of the Nation, the will of a party; often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the Mirror of the ill concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the Organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common councils and modified by mutual interests. However combinations or Associations of the above description may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the Power of the People, and to usurp for themselves the reins of Government: destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.

Towards the preservation of your Government and the

permanency of your present happy state, it is requisite, not only that you steadily discountenance irregular oppositions to its acknowledged authority, but also that you resist with care the spirit of innovation upon its principles however specious the pretexts. One method of assault may be to effect, in the forms of the Constitution, alterations which will impair the energy of the system, and thus to undermine what cannot be directly overthrown. In all the changes to which you may be invited, remember that time and habit are at least as necessary to fix the true character of Governments, as of other human institutions—that experience is the surest standard by which to test the real tendency of the existing Constitution of a country—that facility in changes upon the credit of mere hypothesis and opinion, exposes to perpetual change, from the endless variety of hypothesis and opinion; and remember, especially, that for the efficient management of your common interests, in a country so extensive as ours, a Government of as much vigor as is consistent with the perfect security of liberty is indispensable—Liberty itself will find in such a Government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest Guardian. It is indeed little else than a name, where the Government is too feeble to withstand the enterprises of faction, to confine each member of the Society within the limits prescribed by the laws, and to maintain all in the secure and tranquil enjoyment of the rights of person and property.

I have already intimated to you the danger of Parties in the State, with particular reference to the founding of them on Geographical discriminations. Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the Spirit of Party, generally.

This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having

its root in the strongest passions of the human Mind. It exists under different shapes in all Governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries, which result, gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an Individual: and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty.

Without looking forward to an extremity of this kind (which nevertheless ought not to be entirely out of sight), the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of Party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise People to discourage and restrain it.

It serves always to distract the Public Councils and enfeeble the Public Administration. It agitates the Community with ill founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country, are subjected to the policy and will of another.

There is an opinion that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the Administration of the Government and serve to keep alive the spirit of Liberty. This within certain limits is probably true—and

in Governments of a Monarchical cast Patriotism may look with indulgence, if not with favor, upon the spirit of party. But in those of the popular character, in Governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged. From their natural tendency, it is certain there will always be enough of that spirit for every salutary purpose. And there being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be, by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it. A fire not to be quenched; it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest instead of warming it should consume.

It is important, likewise, that the habits of thinking in a free Country should inspire caution, in those entrusted with its administration, to confine themselves within their respective Constitutional spheres, avoiding in the exercise of the Powers of one department to encroach upon another. The spirit of encroachment tends to consolidate the powers of all the departments in one, and thus to create whatever the form of government, a real despotism. A just estimate of that love of power, and proneness to abuse it, which predominates in the human heart is sufficient to satisfy us of the truth of this position. The necessity of reciprocal checks in the exercise of political power; by dividing and distributing it into different depositaries, and constituting each the Guardian of the Public Weal against invasions by the others, has been evinced by experiments ancient and modern; some of them in our country and under our own eyes. To preserve them must be as necessary as to institute them. If, in the opinion of the People, the distribution or modification of the Constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this, in one instance, may be the instrument of good, it

is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed. The precedent must always greatly overbalance in permanent evil any partial or transient benefit which the use can at any time yield.

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure—reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

‘Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?

Promote then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.



Observe good faith and justice towards all Nations, cultivate peace and harmony with all—Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it? It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period, a great Nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence. Who can doubt that in the course of time and things the fruits of such a plan would richly repay any temporary advantages which might be lost by a steady adherence to it? Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its virtue? The experiment, at least, is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human Nature. Alas! is it rendered impossible by its vices?

In the execution of such a plan, 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 towards all should be cultivated. The Nation, which indulges towards 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. 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.



In offering to you, my Countrymen, these counsels of an old and affectionate friend, I dare not hope they will make the strong and lasting impression, I could wish—that they will control the usual current of the passions, or prevent our Nation from running the course which has hitherto marked the Destiny of Nations: But if I may even flatter myself, that they may be productive of some partial benefit, some occasional good, that they may now and then recur to moderate the fury of party spirit, to warn against the mischiefs of foreign Intrigue, to guard against the Impostures of pretended patriotism—this hope will be a full recompense for the solicitude for your welfare, by which they have been dictated.

How far in the discharge of my Official duties, I have been guided by the principles which have been delineated, the public Records and other evidences of my conduct must witness to You and to the world. To myself, the assurance of my own conscience is, that I have at least believed myself to be guided by them.



Though, in reviewing the incidents of my Administration, I am unconscious of intentional error—I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend. I shall also carry with me the hope that my Country will never cease to view them with indulgence; and that, after forty five years of my life dedicated to its Service, with an upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion, as myself must soon be to the mansions of rest.

Relying on its kindness in this as in other things, and actuated by that fervent love towards it, which is so natural to a man, who views in it the native soil of himself and his progenitors for several Generations, I anticipate with pleasing expectation that retreat, in which I promise myself to realize, without alloy, the sweet enjoyment of partaking, in the midst of my fellow Citizens, the benign influence of good Laws under a free Government—the ever favorite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust, of our mutual cares, labours, and dangers.



The Trinity Forum

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1** Washington famously argued that “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” What is it that Washington believed that religion contributes to a healthy society? Do you agree?
- 2** How did Washington believe that “religious principle” could play the role he hoped for in society without undermining religious freedom? Was he arguing that government should promote religion, or that free religious communities in a nation strengthen civil society? Is the difference meaningful?
- 3** Based on his arguments, how do you think Washington might respond to a society that is becoming increasingly religiously diverse—or increasingly secular?
- 4** In his letters to various religious communities—including Catholics, Quakers, Baptists, and Presbyterians, as well as to the Hebrew congregations in the letters included here —Washington consistently affirmed freedom of conscience. How was his vision of religious freedom shaped by the pluralistic nature of the new American society?
- 5** Focusing on his letters to the Jewish congregations, what light does the history of anti-semitism in Europe shed on Washington’s statements?

6 Why does Washington write negatively of “toleration”? What is the distinction he draws between this concept and his idea of equal citizenship, and does that distinction matter?

7 Washington repeatedly warned against the dangers of political faction and partisan spirit. Did he see religious practice as inflaming or moderating such factions? How might his concerns apply to today’s political climate?

8 We learn in the Reading that Washington was unusually private about his own faith. Does our uncertainty about the exact content of his beliefs challenge his credibility on issues of religious freedom, in your view?

9 The Bill of Rights, including its prohibition on governmental establishment of religion and interference with the free exercise of religion, was added to the Constitution with his support. How does his public action in this case relate to his statements in the addresses and letters in this Reading?

IO Throughout his career, Washington emphasized restraint, humility, and service over personal ambition. Which aspects of his leadership seem most countercultural today?

II Why did Washington believe personal character mattered so much in public leadership? Do you share his view? Why or why not?

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