

Washington on a proposed third term and political parties, 1799

Introduction

By 1798, George Washington had led America to victory in the Revolution, helped create the American government, and served two terms as the nation's first president (1789–1797). He was called back to service, though, by President John Adams, who offered Washington a commission as chief officer of the US Army in July 1798 to help plan for possible conflict with the French. Washington reluctantly accepted.

A year later, in June 1799, Jonathan Trumbull Jr., the governor of Connecticut who had served as Washington's military secretary during the Revolution, wrote to urge him to run for a third term as president. "Election of a President is near at hand," Trumbull wrote, "and I have confidence in believing, that, should your Name again be brot up . . . you will not disappoint the hopes & Desires of the Wise & Good in every State, by refusing to come forward once more to the relief & support of your injured Country." Trumbull continued, writing that unless Washington sought the presidency, "the next Election of President, I fear, will have a very illfated Issue."^[1]

Washington had several reasons for not running again. There was his promise not to seek unfair power as a government official and his desire to avoid being, as he wrote to Trumbull, "charged . . . with concealed ambition." There was also his "ardent wishes to pass through the vale of life in retiremt, undisturbed in the remnant of the days I have to sojourn here." Washington's early promise and the lure of retirement were reasons for his declining to seek a third term.

Perhaps even stronger than those factors were Washington's feelings about the country's heated political climate. "The line between Parties," Washington wrote Trumbull, had become "so clearly drawn" that politicians would "regard neither truth nor decency; attacking every character, without respect to persons – Public or Private, – who happen to differ from themselves in Politics." Washington wrote that, even if he were willing to run for president again, as a Federalist, "I am thoroughly convinced I should not draw a single vote from the Anti-federal side." For Washington, the nation's political parties had soured discourse and created a climate in which, as he predicted in his 1796 farewell address, "unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government." Referring to the Democratic-Republicans, Washington wrote, "Let that party set up a broomstick, and call it a true son of Liberty, a Democrat, or give it any other epithet that will suit their purpose, and it will command their votes in toto!"

George Washington was never a man to shirk responsibility. Though he might have liked nothing better than to retire to Mount Vernon after the Revolution, he was, as he wrote Trumbull, always ready to "render any essential service to my Country," having served, after the American

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Revolution, in the Constitutional Convention, two terms as president, and again as commander in chief of the Army. By 1799, though, Washington was through with elected office despite the urging of those who knew him. “Prudence on my part,” he told Trumbull, “must arrest any attempt of the well meant, but mistaken views of my friends, to introduce me again into the Chair of Government.”

[1] Jonathan Trumbull Jr. to George Washington, June 22, 1799, in *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, University of Virginia, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=GEWN-print-06-04-02-0111>.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. How closely do Washington’s comments about political discourse and disagreement in 1799 compare with America’s current political climate?
2. To what extent was Washington sincere about his inability to serve his nation once again as president? To what degree is his reluctance to serve a third term a result of his desire for a genuine retirement?
3. Research the content of Washington’s Farewell Address in 1796, especially his comments regarding political parties. Compare the concerns expressed in this letter written three years later, with Washington’s earlier statements.

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Image

Mount Vernon 21 July 1799
 My dear Sir,
 Your favour of the 22nd ult^o got to my hands yesterday, ^{early} safe, and without any apparent marks of violence; but whence the length of its passage, I am unable to inform you.
 To you, and to your brother Col^o In^o Trumbull, I feel much indebted for the full, frank, and interesting communication of the political sentiments contained in both ~~of~~ your letters.
 The project of the latter is vast - and under any circumstances would require very mature consideration; but in its extent, and as one being had to the disorganizing Party in the United States, I am sure it would be impracticable in the present order of things.
 Not being able to convey my ideas to you on this subject, in more concise terms than I have already done to your brother, in answer to the letter he informs you he had written to me, I shall take the liberty of giving you an extract thereof - as follows. -

" For

George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull Jr., July 21, 1799. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05787)

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Transcript

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Mount Vernon 21st July 1799

My dear Sir;

Your favour of the 22^d. Ult^o. got to my hands yesterday, only. – It came safe, and without any apparent marks of violence; – but whence the length of its passage, I am unable to inform you. –

To you, and to your brother Col.^o Jn^o Trumbull, I feel much indebted for the full, frank and interesting communication of the political sentiments contained in both your letters. –

The project of the latter is vast – and under any circumstances would require very mature consideration; but in its extent, and an eye being had to the disorganizing Party in the United States, I am sure it would be impracticable in the present order of things

Not being able to convey my ideas to you, on this subject, in more concise terms than I have already done to your brother, in answer to the letter he informs you he had written to me, I shall take the liberty of giving you an extract thereof – as follow. –

[2] “For the Political information contained in it (that is his letter) I feel grateful, as I always shall for the free, & unreserved communication of your sentiments upon subjects so important in their nature, and tendency. – No well informed, and unprejudiced man, who has viewed with attention the conduct of the French Government since the Revolution in that Country, can mistake its objects, or the tendency of the ambitious projects it is pursuing. – Yet, strange as it may seem, a party, and a powerful one too, among us, affect to believe that the measures of it are dictated by a principle of self preservation; – that the outrages of which the Directory are guilty, proceed from dire necessity; – that it wishes to be upon upon the most friendly & amicable terms with the United States; – that it will be the fault of the latter if this is not the case; – that the defensive measures which this Country have adopted, are not only unnecessary & expensive, but have a tendency to produce the evil which, to deprecate, is mere pretence in the Government; because War with France they say [3] say, is its wish; – that on the Militia we sh.^d rest our security; – and that it is time enough to call upon these, when the danger is imminent, & apparent. –

“With these, and such like ideas, attempted to be inculcated upon the public mind (aided

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by prejudices not yet eradicated) and with art, and sophistry, which regard neither truth nor decency; attacking every character, without respect to persons – Public or Private, – who happen to differ from themselves in Politics, I leave you to decide on the probability of carrying such an extensive plan of defence as you have suggested in your last letter, into operation; and in the short period which you suppose may be allowed to accomplish it in. –

I come now, my dear Sir, to pay particular attention to that part of your Letter which respects myself. –

I remember well, the conversation which you allude to, – and have not forgot the answer I gave you. – In my judgment it applies with as much force now, as then; nay more, because at that time the line between Parties [4] Parties was not so clearly drawn, and the views of the Opposition, so clearly developed as they are at present; – of course, allowing your observation (as it respects myself) to be founded, – personal influence would be of no avail. –

Let that party set up a broomstick, and call it a true son of Liberty, – a Democrat, – or give it any other epithet that will suit their purpose, and it will command their votes in toto! *[inserted at the bottom of the page: As an analysis of this position, loo to the pending Election of Governor, in Pennsylvania –.]* Will not the Federalists meet, or rather defend their cause, on the opposite ground? – Surely they must, or they will discover a want of Policy, indicative of weakness, & pregnant of mischief; which cannot be admitted. – Wherein then would lye the difference between the present Gentleman in Office, & Myself? –

It would be matter of sore regret to me, if I could believe that a serious tho.^t was turned towards me as his successor; not only as it respects my ardent wishes to pass through the vale of life in retirem^t, undisturbed in the remnant of the days I [5] have to sojourn here, unless called upon to defend my Country (which every citizen is bound to do) – but on Public ground also; – for although I have abundant cause to be thankful for the good health with wh^h I am blessed, – yet I am not insensible to my declination in other respects. – It would be criminal therefore in me, although it should be the wish of my Country men, and I could be elected, to accept an Office under this conviction, which another would discharge with more ability; – and this too at a time when I am thoroughly convinced I should not draw a single vote from the Anti-federal side; and of course, should stand upon no stronger ground then any other Federal character well supported; & when I should become a mark for the shafts of envenomed malice, and the basest

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calumny to fire at; – when I should be charged not only with irresolution, but with concealed ambition, which wants only an occasion to blaze out; – and, in short, with dotage and imbecility.–

All this I grant, ought to be like dust [6] dust in the balance, when put in competition with a great public good, when the accomplishment of it is apparent. – But as no problem is better defined in my mind than that principle, not men, is now, and will be, the object of contention, – and that I could not obtain a solitary vote from that Party; – that any other respectable Federal character would receive the same suffrages that I should; – that at my time of life, (verging towards three score & ten) I should expose myself without rendering any essential service to my Country, or answering the end contemplated; – Prudence on my my part must arrest any attempt of the well meant, but mistaken views of my friends, to introduce me again into the Chair of Government. –

Lengthy as this letter is, I cannot conclude it without expressing an earnest wish that, some intimate & confidential [*inserted*: friend] of the Presidents would give him to understand that, his long absence from the seat of Government in the present critical conjuncture, affords matter for severe animadversion [7] animadversion by the friends of government; who speak of it with much disapprobation; while the other Party chuckle at, and set it down as a favourable omen for themselves. – It has been suggested to me to make this communication, but I have declined it, conceiving that it would be better received from a private character – more in the habits of social intercourse and friendship. – With the most sincere friendship, and affectionate regard,

I am always,

Your Obedient Servant,

G^o: Washington.

His Excellency

Jonathan Trumbull

[*docket*]

Mount Vernon 20th July 1799.

from General Washington –