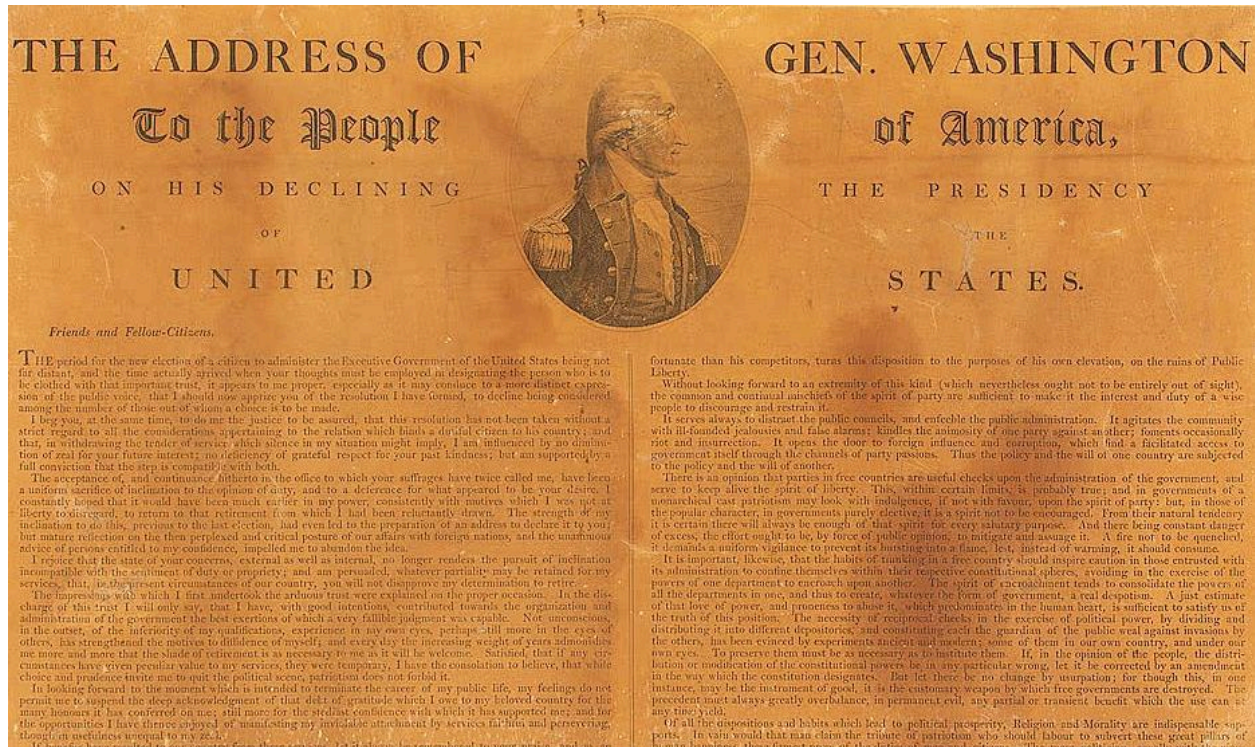


America's Foundational Farewell: George Washington's Farewell Address in Early American Newspapers, 1796-1826¹



Abby Murphy
History 480
Davidson College
December 9, 2025

¹ The Chicago Style Guide recommends putting speeches in quotation marks. However, to prevent confusion due to my constant reference, I have elected to refer to it as the Farewell Address, utilizing capitalization in lieu of quotations.

“I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors.”² When reflecting on his career of public service, George Washington deferred instinctively to self-effacement. Weathered by forty-five years of fighting for and establishing a new American republic, the aging statesman was conscious of the unavoidable imperfections of power. Yet the generation who had steadfastly trusted Washington through revolution, the creation of the Constitution, and the first uncertain years of democracy refused to let their retiring leader’s achievements fade in modesty. As Washington prepared for the peace of Mount Vernon, early Americans grappled for symbols, texts, and memories capable of stabilizing a future he would no longer shepherd.

On September 19, 1796, George Washington published his “Farewell Address to the People of the United States” in newspapers across the country.³ Through his carefully selected words, Washington declared his intent not to seek reelection and offered advice to the young nation, “sentiments which are the result of much reflection.”⁴ How Washington hoped his Address would influence American politics is unknown. What we do know is how Early Americans received it. In the years that followed its release, newspapers across the country reprinted, repurposed, and analyzed the Farewell Address—far beyond simply the reflective statement of a retiring statesman. Publishers sold it, citizens drew advice from it, and politicians

² “Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” *United States Senate Historical Office*, September 19, 1796.
https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

³ “Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” 1796. Washington’s Address was originally published in the Philadelphia *Daily American Advertiser* but subsequently published in newspapers nationally. Contrary to popular belief, Washington never orally delivered his Farewell Address.

⁴ “Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” 1796.

used it to legitimize their claims.⁵ Its multifaceted use in newspaper publications transformed the Farewell Address from the personal reflection of a president into the collective ethos of a nation.

Rather than deliver it orally, Washington entrusted his message to the printed page—a choice which gave ordinary readers unprecedented access to direct presidential rhetoric.

Washington restricted both the Address' length and use of ornate vocabulary to further ensure accessibility.⁶ After declaring his retirement from public life, Washington offered paternalistic advice, framed as “the disinterested warnings of a parting friend,” whose guidance derived not from ambition, but experience.⁷ He warned against sectional divides, political parties, and foreign alliances.⁸ Lastly, Washington reasserted his utmost faith in the Constitution and the American democratic experiment. Washington's deliberate non-partisan tone and reflective nature provided flexibility for Americans to interpret his message and meaning in their own political era.⁹

This paper examines early American newspapers' treatment of George Washington's Farewell Address from its creation until 1826.¹⁰ I draw from twenty-six distinct newspaper

⁵ For an example of publication, see “Proposals, By Gideon Fairman, John Binns and Charles S. Parker, to Publish a Splendid Edition of Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” *The Alexandria Gazette*, September 26, 1818.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83026170/1818-09-26/ed-1/?sp=4&st=image&r=0.533,1.083,0.453,0.383,0> For an example of using the Address for advice, see “Political Miscellany,” *The New Hampshire Gazette*, January 8, 1805. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83025588/1805-01-08/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22&r=0.445,0.209,0.639,0.541,0>. For an example of political use of the Address for legitimization, see “Facts are Stubborn Things,” *Portland Gazette*, November 30, 1807. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016082/1807-11-30/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22&r=-0.073,0.256,0.467,0.395,0>.

⁶ Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 753-754.

⁷ “Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” 1796.

⁸ “The Farewell Address” *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, Accessed December 1, 2025. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/the-farewell-address>.

⁹ Chernow, *Washington*, 754.

¹⁰ 1826 marked the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Just as with the upcoming 250th anniversary, the occasion spurred increased commemorations. Hence, I elected to bookend my time period with this date to include the increased references while highlighting a perceived “end” to the Revolutionary/Founding Era.

articles, published across seven states and the District of Columbia.¹¹ Each article directly references Washington's Farewell Address by name. In closely analyzing the articles' treatment of the Address, this paper considers how early American newspapers actively participated in defining the political, symbolic, and authoritative role of the Farewell Address within American culture.

Washington and his Farewell Address are far from unexplored by historians. The Address and its contents have been thoroughly dissected for political meaning, rhetorical form, and insight into Washington's understanding of the new republic. Washington's 7641 words have warranted multiple book-length investigations on the Address' unique creation and precedent.¹² Perhaps more commonly, scholars have assessed how Washington's rhetoric has been interpreted and returned to over time in various political contexts. Within the Address, Washington dedicates significant attention to warning against permanent foreign entanglements.¹³ Historians, political scientists, and politicians returned to Washington's words when navigating the increasingly global conflicts of the twentieth century. For example, Edward Pessen described the "timeless national interest" of Washington's advice as a key source of guidance amidst Cold War

¹¹ The newspaper articles were retrieved from the Library of Congress' *Chronicling America* database, a public domain collection of historic American newspapers. Additionally, many articles were published multiple times—some articles over fifty times across multiple newspapers. The number twenty-six refers to unique articles.

¹² See for example John Avlon, *Washington's Farewell: The Founding Father's Warning to Future Generations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017); Arthur A. Markowitz, "Washington's Farewell and the Historians: A Critical Review," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 2 (1970): 173-191; Matthew Spalding and Patrick J. Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). These three works are a *small* example of the numerous scholars who have dissected Washington's Address thoroughly. They commonly focus their analysis on the contemporary politics of Washington's time, his intentions, and the ensuing political implications. Additionally, Mount Vernon provides the word count for Washington's Address: "The Farewell Address" *George Washington's Mount Vernon*.

¹³ "The Farewell Address" *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. Washington's warns against permanent alliances and rivalries, encouraging impartial trade with all nations. Additionally, he highlights America's unique geopolitical advantage due to physical isolation from Europe.

tensions.¹⁴ While these works form an invaluable foundation to understanding the Farewell Address, my investigation does not directly involve the contents of the Address. Rather, I investigate its initial reception and the collective memory building processes early Americans engaged in. Thus, in addition to analyses of the Farewell Address itself, my work intersects with tangential bodies of historiography that inform my understanding of collective historical memory, print culture, national identity, and civil religion.

Histories of the Revolutionary Era have transformed across generations into a cohesive “founding myth” that serves as a collective national origin story. A substantial body of scholarship has examined how early Americans constructed shared understandings of timeless “American” symbols.¹⁵ Rather than treating memory as the passive act of preservation, these scholars emphasize the American collective memory’s active and interpretive nature. Interpretations of documents, ideas, people, and icons change over time.¹⁶ Despite their fluctuation, these collective founding memories actively shape the cultural phenomena of national identity, a common sense of belonging to a nation.¹⁷ Identity depends on memory and memory depends on identity.¹⁸ Hence, these scholars establish that national identity derived from shared historical memory is not fixed, but actively produced, contested, and reconfigured over time.

¹⁴ Edward Pessen, “George Washington’s Farewell Address, the Cold War, and the Timeless National Interest,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 1, no. 7 (1987): 1-25. As demonstrated through his work, Pessen views Washington’s Address as a “living document;” one that can be returned to and one that’s rhetoric can be reimagined based on contemporary contexts.

¹⁵ Micheal D. Hattem, *The Memory of '76: The Revolution in American History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024); Micheal D. Hattem, *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Hattem is a leading scholar on the memory of the American Revolution. He traces the understanding and interpretation of the Revolutionary Era over time.

¹⁶ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, (New York City: Vintage, 1998). Maier’s investigation is a prime example of how cultural icons are not created with significance, but their significance is developed through their continued use and understanding over time.

¹⁷ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*. (London: Penguin Books, 1991). Smith views national identity not “simply as an ideology or form of politics” but also as a “cultural phenomena as well.” (vii)

¹⁸ John R. Gillis, ed, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

As the First President of the United States, George Washington is at the forefront of American historical memory. Despite increasing attempts to reframe early American history in contemporary academia, Washington's pivotal role in the Revolution and nation's founding render him indispensable from American memory.¹⁹ Rather than functioning solely as a historical figure, Washington has been repeatedly reimagined as symbolic of national values.²⁰ His rhetoric has persisted as a guiding language through which successive generations articulated ideals of unity, civic virtue, and national purpose. However, Washington and his rhetoric did not automatically become a part of American national identity; they were actively incorporated through deliberate cultural work.

Print culture was a powerful force in the formation of early American national identity. Due to their unparalleled ability to reach Americans, newspapers and pamphlets were fundamental in shaping citizens' understanding of the young nation. The early nineteenth century saw a drastic rise in political reporting.²¹ The increased diffusion of information expanded political mobilization.²² Historian Trish Loughran cites Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* as the cornerstone of increased information dissemination in republican discourse.²³ Unlike books, newspapers and pamphlets were readily accessible to middle- and lower-class Americans.²⁴ It is

¹⁹ In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there have been increasing efforts to recenter alternative stories as a part of the American founding narrative as opposed to simply the Founding Fathers. These "new" histories highlight the experiences of women, enslaved laborers, indigenous people, and other non-elite groups. See for example, R. B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York: Vintage Publishing, 2006); Judith Van Buskirk, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

²⁰ Matthew R. Costello, *The Property of the Nation: George Washington's Tomb, Mount Vernon, and the Memory of the First President* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2021).

²¹ Thomas C. Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.

²² Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9.

²³ Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 17.

²⁴ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, 22.

vital to note that print culture primarily reflected the sentiments of white Americans in urban areas. Nevertheless, the rise in publications provided a platform to disseminate information and shape collective perceptions of politics and national values. Print culture helped codify shared understandings of who and what represented the American nation.²⁵

Over time, American national identity has cultivated an American civil religion. Coined by Robert Bellah in 1967, civil religion is a public religious dimension “expressed in a set of belief, symbols, and rituals.”²⁶ While the American civil religion is not Christianity, much of it is derived from Christianity. Civil religion consists of “the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance.”²⁷ For lack of a better term, Bellah elected to theorize this “religion” which institutionalizes national identity and provides a “transcendent goal for the political process.”²⁸ Through commemorations, rituals, and symbols, Americans have actively created a civil religion, demonstrating how constructed collective identity is embedded into the national identity of the United States.

Despite these extensive bodies of scholarship, the Farewell Address itself has not been examined through the same lens of collective historical memory and national identity in its initial reception. Scholars treat the Address as a small aspect of Washington’s historical memory or fail to assess early responses, often skipping ahead to the twentieth century. My project therefore draws from these interconnected historiographies, applying their collective memory, national identity, and civil religion frameworks to the immediate reception of the Farewell Address in early American print culture.

²⁵ Leonard, *The Power of the Press*, 5.

²⁶ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 104.

²⁷ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 101.

²⁸ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 101.

Washington's Address cannot be understood without examining its early reception. Early Americans encountered the Farewell Address not as a fixed political document, but as a living text that guided their civic life. Each reprinting, editorial, and commemoration layered new meaning onto Washington's words, gradually transforming a presidential farewell into a national ethos. Examining the Address' early print life therefore not only reveals how Americans remembered Washington, but also how they defined their political and moral foundations as a nation. Ultimately, I argue that by reprinting it as a commercial object, turning to it for political guidance, and treating it as a moral authority deserving of religious-like reverence, early American newspapers demonstrate how they collectively constructed the national memory of George Washington as an "indispensable man" and the "Father of our Country."²⁹ American print culture in the three decades after delivery of the Address actively established the Farewell Address as a permanent facet of American national identity.

While Washington's retirement fulfilled his dream to sit "under [his] own vine and fig tree," his Farewell Address was far from sedentary.³⁰ For nearly 250 years, Americans have turned to the Farewell Address for political wisdom and moral guidance—a tradition that began with its earliest readers in the 1790s.

Reprinting the Farewell Address

The Farewell Address' initial publication in the Philadelphia *Daily American Advertiser* in 1796 was far from its last. Washington's parting words were reprinted in newspapers across

²⁹ The term "indispensable man" was coined by Historian James T. Flexner in his 1965 biography of Washington. Washington was called "Father of our Country" in his congressional eulogy by Henry Lee III. *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, Accessed December 2, 2025. <https://www.mountvernon.org/>.

³⁰ George Washington, "George Washington to James Anderson (of Scotland)," April 7, 1797. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-01-02-0059>. Washington wrote to James Anderson and noted how he was enjoying his retirement at Mount Vernon.

the country.³¹ What began as a single, moment-bound political message was transformed into a recurring feature of American print culture. Through repeated circulation, printers ensured that Washington's advice remained familiar and accessible, framing it as guidance that citizens should read, remember, and uphold. Furthermore, newspapers did not just simply reprint the Address; they promoted it, presenting its continued presence as a civic benefit and establishing its significance in the political consciousness of the republic.

Within months of Washington's death in December 1799, newspapers highlighted public leaders were reissuing and promoting the Address, reaffirming its relevance in a moment of collective mourning and beyond. On December 31st, officials from Salem, New Hampshire requested the compilation of locally given speeches of Washington's alongside his Farewell Address in "a volume, to be delivered to each family."³² A decade later, a Massachusetts Legislature approved a proposal to print ten thousand copies of Washington's Address to be distributed throughout the state.³³ These directives reveal the perceived importance of Washington's Address, not just for political figures, but for all citizens. Officials were willing to dedicate time and resources to ensure its citizenry was familiar with Washington's words. To these governments, the Farewell Address extended beyond formal political culture and into the domestic sphere. By moving the Address into private households, local authorities established the Address as a shared point of reference for citizens. Their efforts embedded Washington's Address in collective memory as a common moral and political touchstone.

³¹ "Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States," 1796.

³² "Salem, Dec. 31," *The New Hampshire Gazette*, January 8, 1800, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83025588/1800-01-08/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>.

While the newspaper was published on January 8, the included excerpt is indicated to be written on December 31.

³³ "Massachusetts Legislature, House of Representatives, June 26," *Portland Gazette*, July 6, 1812, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016082/1812-07-06/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>.

A member of the Massachusetts Legislature, Mr. Cannon, described the goal of printing Washington's Address: "that it was printed in schoolbooks, and in every edition of the laws of the Commonwealth, and was universally in the hands of the people, old and young."

The early expectation that families should own the Farewell Address only grew stronger as newspapers began openly promoting and selling copies across the country. When announcing new publications at a local bookstore in 1811, *The Alexandria Gazette* included “The Americans’ Guide” at the top of their list. The “Guide” contained the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Washington’s Farewell Address.³⁴ Its inclusion among the nation’s core governing documents demonstrates that the Address was understood as necessary political reading. Additionally, in 1818, *The Alexandria Gazette* ran an advertisement at least fifty-two times promoting a “splendid edition of Washington’s Farewell Address.”³⁵ Identical advertisements were published in papers across state lines.³⁶ However, this advertisement itself did not merely disclose its product; it consumed a column and a half of space framing, promoting, and encouraging the purchase of Washington’s Address. The authors began by lauding Washington, painting him as the most impressive political figure of the time, before describing his remarks as “the condensed result of long experienced, matured reflection and strong anxiety for the permanent prosperity of his country.”³⁷ Washington is framed as the ideal leader whose judgment continued to warrant public attention even beyond his presidency. Washington’s authority is the primary selling point: “why therefore should not his legacy of wisdom and affection, be so published, as to admit of being constantly before our eyes? An ornament to our apartments, while it serves as a memento to guide our public feelings, and to

³⁴ “New Publications, and other Valuable Books,” *The Alexandria Gazette*, April 22, 1811.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024013/1811-04-22/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>.

³⁵ “Proposals, by Gideon Fairman, John Binns and Charles S. Parker to publish a Splendid Edition of Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” *The Alexandria Gazette*, September 26, 1818.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83026170/1818-09-26/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>.

The advertisement was published in *The Alexandria Gazette* at least on September 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, October 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, and November 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14.

³⁶ The same advertisement was also published in *The Kentucky Gazette* (August 28 and October 2), *Daily National Intelligencer* (July 25 and July 28), and *The New Hampshire Gazette* (August 4, August 11, and August 18). Given the widespread nature of this advertisement, it was likely published in other newspapers as well.

³⁷ “Proposals, by Gideon Fairman, John Binns and Charles S. Parker,” 1818.

manifest that the author lives in our memories?”³⁸ The advertisement’s language casts the Address not as historic rhetoric, but as an active guide for public sentiments and therefore political and civic behavior. Readers were encouraged to keep the Address close and visible as a physical symbol of collective American memory. Lastly, the publishers described their intended printing process. The Address shall be written in “highly ornamental penmanship” with “appropriate ornaments” and “shall be printed on paper of the same quality and size as the splendid edition of the Declaration of Independence and shall...be a companion worthy of that great State paper.”³⁹ The emphasis on fine materials underscores their belief that Washington’s words deserved long-term preservation, constant visibility, and veneration. The Farewell Address should not just be read once in a newspaper; it should be accessible for continued reference. Furthermore, by comparing the Address to the Declaration of Independence, the publishers suggested that the Farewell Address should be regarded equally, as a text of American foundational importance. The publishers wanted to ensure Washington’s Farewell Address was committed to public memory and history, a goal they viewed as “vital to the prosperity of his country.”⁴⁰

By propagating and promoting the Farewell Address, newspapers reinforced the idea that Washington’s guidance was a vital part of the political framework Americans were expected to know and uphold. The Address was not confined in its application but instantly understood as a set of enduring civic principles meant to guide both private and public life. These print strategies ensured the Farewell Address maintained a permanent physical presence in American life, further ensuing that Washington’s influence extended beyond his lifetime.

³⁸ “Proposals, by Gideon Fairman, John Binns and Charles S. Parker,” 1818.

³⁹ “Proposals, by Gideon Fairman, John Binns and Charles S. Parker,” 1818.

⁴⁰ “Proposals, by Gideon Fairman, John Binns and Charles S. Parker,” 1818.

Seeking Political Guidance from the Farewell Address

Even in the years immediately following its creation, Washington's Farewell Address was viewed as a symbol of political wisdom and used for guidance—specifically amid the political instability of the early nineteenth century. Despite its static language, the Address was utilized to further, even occasionally conflicting, goals. All political actors, regardless of their party association, understood the legitimacy and importance of Washington's words and sought to interpret his image to support their arguments and rationalize their agendas. Washington's Farewell Address played a versatile role in American politics; it was used for guidance, to justify views, to criticize opponents, and to condemn opposing political parties. Hence, the Farewell Address became a political battleground; one where political legitimacy was claimed through proximity to Washington's ideals.

Early Americans routinely turned to the Farewell Address as a source of political guidance. One political commentator advised to “let every American citizen who does not possess the Farewell Address of Washington immediately purchase it—for it was written for the years 1808, 9, 10, 11.”⁴¹ The commentator is reinforcing the notion that every American should have the Farewell Address readily accessible as a valuable source of guidance as Americans debated their role in international politics. Additionally, the commentator understood the permanence of Washington's words. The Address was not limited to 1796 but was capable of providing timeless political advice. Another journalist reflected on the influx of immigration from the “old country” and suggests “to these men I would recommend a thorough perusal of

⁴¹ “Communication,” *The Delaware Gazette*, July 19, 1809. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn82014385/1809-07-19/ed-1/?sp=3>. The author is referring to the Napoleonic Wars in Europe and the U.S.'s political debate on whether or not to maintain neutrality. For more information, see “Napoleonic Wars and the United States, 1803-1815,” *Department of State Office of the Historian*, Accessed December 7, 2025. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/napoleonic-wars>.

Washington's Farewell Address and particularly of that part which relates to education."⁴² The author viewed the Farewell Address as not only essential to Americans, but also as essential guidance for those wishing to become American. Washington's advice functioned as a political credential: understanding Washington's words was fundamental to political participation in the American republic. The Farewell Address was understood as common vocabulary from which all Americans could seek legitimate political guidance. Readers were actively encouraged to reference Washington's words as a practical guide and shared resource to navigate political uncertainty.

Beyond simply turning to it for guidance, early Americans utilized the Farewell Address to justify their political positions, drawing upon Washington's understood legitimacy. There was no doubt of Washington's authority as a leader.⁴³ Hence, other political leaders drew upon his words to endorse or vindicate their positions. For example, in 1814, a Senator Robertson criticized a new loan bill which would expand government spending. He asserted that "it is confidently believed that during the eight years of General Washington's administration there was not expended on the navy of the U. States one million of dollars. In his farewell address which contains so many principles of inestimable value to all who admire our form of government, he says nothing...in regard to a navy."⁴⁴ Robertson insinuated that his position was correct because it would be held by Washington. To contradict Robertson, in his opinion, would

⁴² "Desultory remarks on American Literature." *Rhode Island Republican*, October 25, 1809.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83025561/1809-10-25/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>.

⁴³ For example, Washington was elected as president unanimously by the Electoral College in 1789. He is the only president to ever achieve such a feat. See "Presidential Election of 1789," *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, Accessed December 8, 2025,

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/presidential-election-of-1789>.

⁴⁴ "Debate on the Loan Bill. Mr. Robertson's Speech." *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 13, 1814.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83026172/1814-04-13/ed-1/?dl=page&q=farewell+address&sp=2>.

The article itself is a reprinting of Mr. Robertson's Speech given in the House of Representatives. However, its ensuing publication in the local newspaper demonstrates its reflection of the understanding of a broader American public.

be to contradict Washington—a political risk few Americans were willing to take. Similarly, a Virginia newspaper described the platform of a new political group: “The George Washingtonians.” The “George Washingtonians” were legitimate according to the author because they were “in compliance to Washington’s Farewell Address.”⁴⁵ Those opposed to the “Washingtonians” ideals “stand opposed to those of the illustrious George Washington, the pride and boast of America.”⁴⁶ Since the “Washingtonians” were in accordance with George Washington, they were perceived as rightfully legitimate. In addition to their content, both articles relied on reverential language to frame Washington and magnify his authority, describing him as “illustrious” and his ideas being of “inestimable value.” This pattern of praise reflects an established rhetorical norm in which Washington was positioned above ordinary political debate and treated as an untouchable moral figure. Such political appeals using the Farewell Address were successful because both leaders and citizens alike believed Washington’s principles represented the nation’s true ideals. Leaders did not need to persuade voters to trust them, rather only to trust Washington. Washington’s authority remained uniquely unquestioned in the public mind, providing a distinct opportunity for politicians to justify and strengthen their arguments by capitalizing on the Farewell Address.⁴⁷

Just as Washington’s Farewell Address was used to legitimize political stances, it was also weaponized against those who appeared to deviate from Washington’s guidance. Due to his unquestioned authority, Washington’s words provided a powerful tool to discredit those who defied his principles. In an opinion piece, an anonymous author argued that “if the present

⁴⁵ *Virginia Argus*, May 25, 1814.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1814-05-25/ed-1/?q=george+washington>.

⁴⁶ *Virginia Argus*, May 25, 1814.

⁴⁷ For another example of political legitimization, see “on Napoleon’s Restoration,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 13, 1815. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83026172/1815-05-13/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>. The author draws upon Washington’s Farewell Address as evidence that the United States should remain neutral in foreign affairs.

administration of the general government had have adhered to the political advice given by Washington in his Farewell Address; the peace of the country would not now have been in jeopardy.”⁴⁸ Another author mirrored those sentiments: “if the rulers of the United States were governed by the maxims of Washington as contained in his farewell address, and the policy which characterized his administration, no one would sooner rank himself on the side of the administration, than the Editor of this paper. If this were the case, instead of witnessing the present state of things...we should enjoy peace, a lucrative trade and a good market for our produce.”⁴⁹ In both cases, the authors are not chastising the policies and leaders alone, but their perceived failure to follow Washington’s guidance. Washington is thoroughly trusted as a leader of the nation. To fall out of line with Washington would be to jeopardize the nation—and invite public condemnation. Such attacks intensified when critics framed their opponents as fundamentally betraying Washington’s legacy. When reflecting on contemporary politics, an author argued “if Washington were now living, he would denounce this faction.”⁵⁰ The author eradicates any potential defense by opponents, framing them as vehemently opposed to Washington’s principles. Anyone who strayed from Washington’s ideals, as posited in his Farewell Address, was understood as acting against the nation’s best interests. Hence, political arguments shifted from debates over policy to contests over perceived loyalty to Washington’s Address and therefore the nation.

⁴⁸ “Facts are Stubborn Things,” *Portland Gazette*, November 30, 1807.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016082/1807-11-30/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>.

The author’s op-ed is a critique of “Mr. Jefferson’s conduct.” While the author does not explicitly state it, due to the publication date and frequent reference to ports, the author is likely criticizing Jefferson’s support of the Embargo Act of 1807.

⁴⁹ “Remarks,” *Portland Gazette*, August 10, 1812.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016082/1812-08-10/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>. The article focuses on U.S. involvement in the War of 1812.

⁵⁰ “Communication,” *The Delaware Gazette*, July 19, 1809.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn82014385/1809-07-19/ed-1/?sp=3&q=%22farewell+address%22&r=0.071.0.986.0.65.0.282.0>.

In addition to using the Address for general political justification and criticisms, partisan early Americans drew upon Washington's Farewell Address to actively discredit the opposing political party. Both Federalists and Democratic-Republicans utilized Washington's advice to simultaneously support their platforms and expose the flaws in those of their adversaries. The Federalist Party most closely claimed Washington's identity and legacy. Alexander Hamilton is commonly thought of as the founder of the Federalist Party.⁵¹ Due to Hamilton's close working relationship with Washington, those ideas transferred.⁵² It was publicly known that Hamilton worked with Washington to draft and write the Farewell Address.⁵³ Hence, Federalists closely associated with Washington's words and sought to claim greater political legitimacy through Hamilton and Washington's relationship. In the early 19th century, the Federalist Party established Washington Benevolent Societies, philanthropic political groups derived from Washington's legacy.⁵⁴ These groups aimed "to impress on the minds of Americans the invaluable legacy which the father of his country had bequeathed in his farewell address."⁵⁵ The Washington Benevolent Societies demonstrated how Federalists transformed Washington's words into a practical tool for political influence. By advertising themselves alongside Washington's Address, they encouraged citizens to align themselves with the Federalist vision, transforming general reverence for Washington into Federalist political participation. Additionally, by associating so closely with Washington, the Federalist Party alluded that other

⁵¹ "The Federalist and Republican Party," *American Experience*, Accessed November 4, 2025.
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/duel-federalist-and-republican-party/>.

⁵² Chernow, *Washington*.

⁵³ "The Hamilton Papers," *The Phenix Gazette*, December 6, 1825.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1825-12-06/ed-1/?q=george+washington>. The same article is also published in *Daily National Intelligencer* on December 8, 1825.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83026172/1825-12-08/ed-1/?sp=2&q=%22farewell+address%22&r=0.234,0.097,0.604,0.524,0>

⁵⁴ "The Washington Benevolent Society," *The Papers of Bushrod Washington*, Accessed November 5, 2025.
<http://bushrod.washingtonpapers.org/node/2785>.

⁵⁵ "Just Published, by John A. Stewart," *The Alexandria Gazette*, July 31, 1813.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024014/1813-07-31/ed-1/?dl=page&q=farewell+address&sp=2>.

parties were less faithful to the nation's founding values. Control over Washington's Address became a marker of political legitimacy.

While Federalists leaned heavily on their assumed personal connection to Washington, Democratic-Republicans combatted that notion and attempted to deny the Federalist claim to Washington's authority. For example, in direct response to the creation of the Washington Benevolent Society, one political critic sought to "compare the principles and conduct of these Washington Societies as they call themselves, with sentiments contained in the Farewell Address of the great Washington himself."⁵⁶ Upon examination, the author argued the ideological connection was not as clear as Federalists assumed it to be, pointing out discrepancies between Federalist ideology and the Farewell Address. Democratic-Republicans continued to highlight these alleged hypocrisies. When discussing local rebellions in the Rhode Island Legislature, one member suggested Washington's Farewell Address should be read aloud. Other members opposed. A political commentator for the *Rhode Island Republican* remarked: "the violent opposition of many Federalists to the reading of Washington's Address, we can account for in no other way, than a consciousness on their part of their secret endeavors...that the reading of this address would...lay bare their hypocrisy, and expose their hidden designs."⁵⁷ The Democratic-Republican's portrayed the Federalists as inaccurately claiming Washington's identity and thus aimed to delegitimize the Federalist Party by revoking their claim to Washington's authority. However, not all partisan claims to Washington were as targeted. Some writers used Washington's words to frame their political beliefs. For example, in an opinion by Democratic-Republican authors, the editors profiled themselves: "they are Republican. In

⁵⁶ "Disciples of Washington!" *New Hampshire Gazette*, September 10, 1812.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83025588/1812-09-10/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>.

⁵⁷ "Progress of Rebellion," *Rhode Island Republican*, November 16, 1814.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83025561/1814-11-16/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>.

general, they approve on the administration of Washington, and especially his political opinions as given in his farewell address to the people of the United States.”⁵⁸ These

Democratic-Republicans framed themselves not just as opponents to the Federalist interpretation of Washington, but also as rightfully aligned with his ideologies. Democratic-Republicans understood the importance of Washington’s authority in early American politics. Hence, they refused to allow Federalists to dominate the use of the Farewell Address.

In the decades following Washington’s presidency, his Farewell Address had become more than historic remarks; it was now a living resource in American political life. Politicians and citizens drew on its language to navigate uncertainty, legitimize policy decisions, and challenge opponents who appeared to stray from Washington’s ideals. Since Washington’s authority remained uniquely unquestioned, proximity to his words became a marker of legitimacy and credibility. Disputes over policy quickly transformed into disputes over who represented the nation’s principles as outlined by Washington. The Farewell Address functioned simultaneously as a guide, weapon, and political prize, cementing Washington’s unique influence over American politics and perceived collective national identity long after his retirement from public life.

Moral and Religious Reverence of the Farewell Address

Beyond simply political guidance, early Americans drew upon Washington’s Farewell Address for moral guidance, transforming a secular political text into one deserving of religious-like reverence. Citizens looked to Washington not only as a political leader, but as a model of civic virtue. Therefore, the Address came to function as a source of ethical instruction

⁵⁸ “The Western Monitor,” *Kentucky Gazette*, July 11, 1814.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn82014783/1814-07-11/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>.

for their civil religion.⁵⁹ By elevating the Address to the status of a moral compass deserving of reverence, early Americans positioned Washington as a moral authority whose advice transcended partisan disputes.

Early Americans looked beyond the surface-level political advice of the Farewell Address. For example, one author recalls “in his Farewell Address he exhorts us to feel and act towards each other as members of one great family.”⁶⁰ Irrelevant of its political sentiments, the author is viewing Washington’s message as a model of national morals grounded in unity, empathy, and civic responsibility. Washington is framed as a guide to virtuous behavior, as documented in his Address.

As readers continued to draw on Washington’s moral authority, the distinction between the Farewell Address as a political versus religious text blurred. A New York church recited Washington’s Address during a 4th of July service.⁶¹ The reading was accompanied by sermons, prayers, hymns, and processions. Other articles documented sermon-like speeches given using Washington’s rhetoric and lauding his impact on the country.⁶² The Farewell Address and its contents were understood as appropriate for, and worthy of, inclusion in religious settings. This practice collapsed the boundary between politics and religious devotion, treating Washington’s political counsel as a form of scripture. Americans recognized the existence of this political

⁵⁹ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”

⁶⁰ “Political Miscellany,” *The New Hampshire Gazette*, January 8, 1805.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83025588/1805-01-08/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>.

While published in and sourced from the *New Hampshire Gazette*, the article was originally published in the *Boston Chronicle*. An author is not listed.

⁶¹ “New York, July 7,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, July 10, 1817.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83026172/1817-07-10/ed-1/?sp=3&q=%22farewell+address%22&st=image&r=-0.655.0.896.2.309.1.003.0>.

⁶² See for example: “An Address to the Washington Benevolent Society,” *The Rhode Island American*, March 1, 1811. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83025442/1811-03-01/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>. The speech seems to worship the young American republic alongside Washington, comparing the two to Gods and biblical stories. The speaker ends their speech with an aside: “note—much of this address is extracted from Washington’s Farewell Address; some verbatim, and some the ideas only.” And “Just Published, by John A. Stewart,” July 31, 1813. Both “sermons” were given to meetings of the Washington Benevolent Society.

religion. It not only shaped private religious practices but also the language and symbolism of public political gatherings. At a Senator's dinner, a speaker offered a toast to "The memory of George Washington—in the heat of Political Controversy, may we never forget his last public act, and Farewell Address, but keep them in our hearts and as the ritual of our public faith."⁶³ Americans did not just encounter Washington's rhetoric in spiritual spaces, they were actively encouraged to treat the Farewell Address as a document deserving of "faith." By presenting it as a toast, the speaker believed that worship of Washington's ideas would be agreed upon by all in attendance. In moments like these, political reverence took on the language and posture of religious devotion. Washington was not confined the political sphere; his authority extended into religious life as well. The Farewell Address was understood to have spiritual-like significance and to be worshiped as part of the American civil religion.

Furthermore, religious-like treatment of the Farewell Address in newspapers' language became more explicit. Washington was increasingly viewed not just as a recent politician, but as a leader deserving of reverence. In one reflection, an author describes "the immortal Washington" whose Farewell Address is "worthy of record on a tablet of adamant."⁶⁴ The author believed the Address should be permanently preserved on a tablet—just like the Ten Commandments—so Washington can be eternally preserved. By comparing the Farewell Address to a key tenet of the Christian faith, the author emphasized the timeless capacity of Washington's words. The use of biblical imagery to refer to Washington's Address subtly elevated it as a sacred civic scripture. Another author used Washington's Farewell Address to

⁶³ "Toasts at the Dinner," *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 20, 1825.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83026172/1825-06-20/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>

⁶⁴ "Domestic," *Virginia Argus*, June 22, 1810.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1810-06-22/ed-1/?q=farewell+address>. Adamant is a form of rock. The same article was also published in the *Rhode Island Republican* on June 13, 1810.

guide his political commentary. However, he described it as “His Farewell Address.”⁶⁵ The capitalization of “His,” typically only reserved for God, implied that Washington is deserving of the same reverence. Whether intentional or not, it communicates to readers that Washington is God-like. The author continued: “Where is now the great, the good, the patriotic Washington? He is no more seen in the land...but his soul is doubtlessly in the regions of the blessed.”⁶⁶ The author sees Washington as an ethereal-like spirit guiding the country. Such language demonstrates the extent to which Washington’s memory and his rhetoric were sacralized in the public imagination. The blending of biblical, religious language and political commentary transformed the Farewell Address into a form of civic scripture and Washington himself into a symbolic national saint.

The veneration of the Farewell Address served to unify American citizens under a shared, almost sacred, national identity. Patriotism was grounded in religious-like devotion to Washington’s advice. Thus, Americans constructed a civic community defined by laws, institutions, and the moral teachings of the Founding Fathers. The Farewell Address functioned as a civic creed that bound the nation together in a collective American identity, legitimized by Washington’s image.

Conclusion

Even to early Americans, Washington’s Farewell Address was understood as more than just a presidential goodbye. Through its widespread reprinting, its use for political guidance, and understanding as a moral reference, the Farewell Address was transformed into a permanent facet of the American national identity. The Farewell Address was a document citizens were

⁶⁵ “Political Disquisitions,” *Richmond Enquirer*, November 11, 1825.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1825-11-11/ed-1/?q=%22farewell+address%22>.

⁶⁶ “Political Disquisitions,” *Richmond Enquirer*, November 11, 1825.

expected to reference, leaders were compelled to honor, and the nation should look to for guidance. The continuous life of the Farewell Address in print culture ensured that Washington's authority and the ideals he embodied remained central to the political and civic character of the United States.

Washington's Farewell Address is far from the only presidential rhetoric ingrained in American collective national identity. Jefferson's "we hold these truths to be self-evident," Lincoln's "four score and seven years ago," and Kennedy's "ask not what your country can do for you – but what you can do for your country" are all widely recognized phrases. School children learn them, monuments reference them, and politicians quote them. But how did these speeches come to be embedded in American collective memory? By closely examining early constructions of the memory of Washington's Farewell Address, I illustrated how presidential rhetoric actively becomes ingrained in national identity. The Farewell Address demonstrates how presidential rhetoric does not endure naturally or automatically, but because citizens preserve, interpret, and elevate it as shared pillars of collective identity.

As the United States approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, the language of the Revolutionary Era is receiving increasing attention in public life. Washington's Farewell Address, along with other foundational texts, is increasingly quoted in public commemorations as Americans look backward to remember the past and define what the nation should become. This renewed attention makes it especially important to understand how such rhetoric gained its recognition and authority in the first place. The power of these words lies not only in their original composition, but in the centuries of repetition, reverence, and reinterpretation that followed. Examining the creation and circulation of this language reveals how national identity is not inherited naturally, but actively built through memory, ritual, and preservation. Just as

Washington remarked “promote then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge,” Americans must continue to promote knowledge and examine the language that has shaped their political identity to sustain an informed and productive democracy.⁶⁷

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Daily National Intelligencer

Portland Gazette

The Alexandria Gazette

The Constitutional Whig

The Delaware Gazette

The Kentucky Gazette

The New Hampshire Gazette

⁶⁷ Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” 1796.

The Phenix Gazette

The Rhode Island American

The Rhode Island Republican

Richmond Enquirer

Virginia Argus

“Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States,” *United States Senate Historical Office*, September 19, 1796.

https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

Secondary Sources

Avlon, John. *Washington’s Farewell: The Founding Father’s Warning to Future Generations*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Bellah, Robert N. “Civil Religion in America.” *Daedalus* 117, no. 3 (1988): 97–118. *Reprinted from 1967*.

Bernstein, R. B. *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Brown, Richard D. *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Cavitch, Max. “The Man That Was Used Up: Poetry, Particularity, and the Politics of Remembering George Washington.” *American Literature* 75, no. 2 (2003): 247-274.

Chernow, Ron. *Washington: A Life*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

Costello, Matthew R. *The Property of the Nation: George Washington’s Tomb, Mount Vernon, and the Memory of the First President*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2021.

Costello, Matthew and Lindsay M. Chervinsky, eds. *Mourning the Presidents: Loss and Legacy in American Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023.

Flexner, James Thomas. *Washington: The Indispensable Man*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1994.

Gillis, John R., ed. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

George Washington’s Mount Vernon. <https://www.mountvernon.org/>.

Hattem, Micheal D. *The Memory of ’76: The Revolution in American History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024.

- Hattem, Micheal D. *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
- Leonard, Thomas C. *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Loughran, Trish. *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. New York City: Vintage, 1998.
- Markowitz, Arthur A. "Washington's Farewell and the Historians: A Critical Review." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 2 (1970): 173-191.
- Office of the Historian, Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/>.
- Pessen, Edward. "George Washington's Farewell Address, the Cold War, and the Timeless National Interest." *Journal of the Early Republic* 1, no. 7 (1987): 1-25.
- Smith, Anthony D. *National Identity*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Spalding, Matthew. "Washington's Farewell Address." *The Wilson Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1996): 65-71.
- Spalding, Matthew and Patrick J. Garrity. *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.
- "The Federalist and Republican Party." *American Experience*, Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/duel-federalist-and-republican-party/>.
- "The Washington Benevolent Society." *The Papers of Bushrod Washington*, Accessed November 5, 2025. <http://bushrod.washingtonpapers.org/node/2785>.
- Van Engen, Abram C. *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.