

WASHINGTON'S FAREWELL ADDRESS



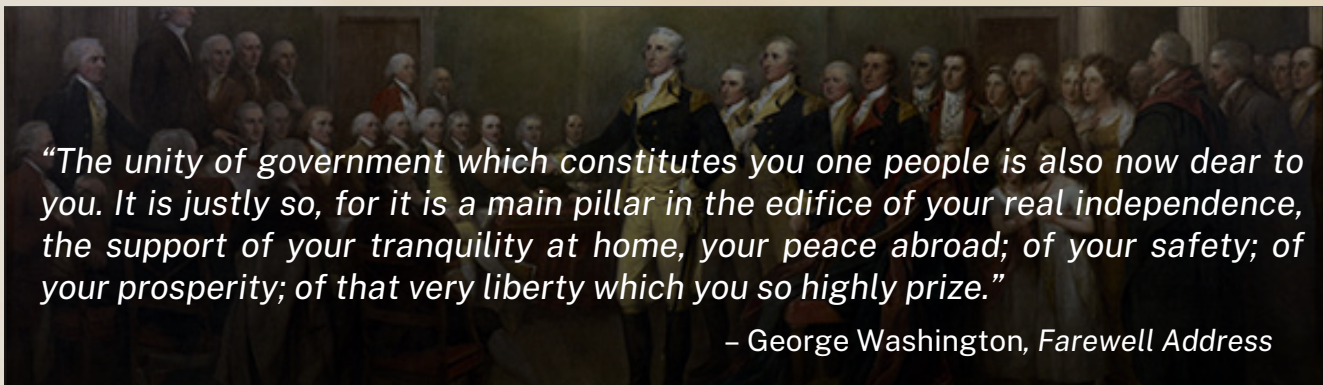
AN ENDURING EXAMPLE OF LEADERSHIP

BY DR. CAROL MCNAMARA



The term "semiquincentennial" may be a mouthful, but it's a fitting term for marking our nation's 250th anniversary. In 2026, the [Great Hearts Institute](#) and [Symposium](#) will commemorate this anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—a defining moment that launched the bold and enduring experiment of American self-government. Our collective goal throughout the year is to examine how classical learning across the curriculum – from science and math to the fine arts, languages, history, philosophy, and literature – shapes the American experiment in republican government and prepares students to become citizens and leaders for the future. It is at this point prosaic to hold up George Washington as the greatest model for presidential leadership in American history. Some argue that he is not an appropriate model because his example is not replicable. It is likely true that no one can match Washington's leadership, but it is always worth understanding the classical prototype if not to duplicate, then at least to emulate.





The United States is a large country, diverse in its geography and its mores. At the time of the American founding, many – including the men who drafted the Constitution – wondered if the fundamental principles of self-governance and the rule of law pronounced in the 1776 Declaration of Independence and codified in the 1789 United States Constitution – would suffice to keep us together as one nation. As with many matters, George Washington anticipated the challenges of leadership and unity in a country as big and free as the United States.

Scholars often describe George Washington as the indispensable man whose judgement, prudence, and leadership were essential to the success of the early American experiment. Long before the Constitutional Convention, Washington sounded the alarm in 1783 about the need for “a Convention of the People’ to invest the central government with more power” to ensure its ability to function and to defend itself effectively from external threats.[i] He presided over the Constitutional Convention during that long hot summer in Philadelphia with imposing silence. Ultimately, it was his vision for a strong central government with an independent executive that prevailed, and his stature with the American people that ensured ratification of the Constitution.

In 1788, as expected, Washington was unanimously selected by the electoral college to become the first president of the United States. He was the one man whom the entire new nation trusted to guide the United States through the first decade of our history. He was acutely aware that every word he uttered and every action he took set a precedent because he was the first president of the United States. Washington accepted the responsibility and dedicated himself to providing an elevated model of leadership for presidents to come.

In 1796, Washington released his farewell address to the nation to make clear his resolution “to decline” consideration for a third term as president and to return to his own private pursuits at his beloved Mount Vernon. In doing so, Washington establishes perhaps the most important precedent of voluntarily relinquishing public leadership, a power that he exercised not for self-aggrandizement, but for the sake of the public good.

[i] Akihil Reed Amar, *The Words That Made Us*, (New York: Basic Books, 2012) 203.



Washington explains that he can now rejoice in the belief that the state of the nation is no longer so fragile as to persuade him that he should stay in office. He thanks his country for the honor of serving it in often its darkest and most dangerous hours, as Revolutionary War general and then as its first president. And he expresses his hope that while his own leadership will conclude, the union and affection of Americans for one another will be perpetual.

Washington acknowledges that he could end his address there, but he is inclined to offer yet one more piece of advice to the nation for which he has fought so hard. He cautions against disunity. Washington's concern is that American citizens will privilege regional attachments over dedication to their common country, so as to create permanent party preferences and enmities. This spirit of party is natural to human beings, but Washington asks the nation to exercise its reason and wisdom to restrain the impulse of faction and party interests that can tear us apart. Instead, Washington reminds us that "virtue" is a necessary spring of popular government, the sort of virtue that is informed by institutions of learning that promote knowledge and enlightenment.

By his example, Washington very deliberately demonstrates how to balance ambition with wisdom and human happiness, the individual good with the common good. Leaders must, to some extent, be reluctant servants of the people who gain our trust and confidence, through their genuine willingness to represent the interests of the nation above all. George Washington shows us how that is done. We trusted his motives and he accepted our honor. He served and stepped down from power to demonstrate in the most profound way that while good leadership is necessary and important, it is not all of life.

When we study the thoughts and arguments of the Founders, we understand more fully the importance of a classical education. Washington reminds us in his Farewell Address, that only an educated and enlightened citizenry can sustain the habits of independent thought and self-governance necessary for the preservation and flourishing of a free people in a constitutional republic.



Carol McNamara is the director of the [Great Hearts Institute for Classical Education](#). She is a scholar of political thought and literature, and a founder and leader of civic-minded academic organizations in Utah and Arizona. McNamara holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto and a PhD in Politics from Boston College. Her academic teaching, professional speaking, and publishing address Shakespeare's politics, political philosophy and literature, civic thought, and the American Presidency.

