

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS:

EXCERPTS FROM WASHINGTON'S FAREWELL ADDRESS



George Washington, the first president of the United States

George Washington served as president of the United States from 1789 to 1796. Despite requests that he continue leading the country, Washington chose to retire after his second term. In his Farewell Address, he offers guidelines for future presidents on issues of unity, political partisanship, and international entanglements.

Washington's Farewell Address is one of the most frequently quoted founding documents. After surviving the struggles of the Civil War in the 1860s, government leaders reflected more deeply on Washington's call for unity. In 1896, the United States Senate began an annual ceremony to read the address aloud in Congress. The tradition continues to this day.

Read this excerpt from the beginning of Washington's Farewell Address. Then answer the question.

The period for a new election . . . being not far distant . . . it appears to me proper . . . 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.

1 What is the main idea of this excerpt?

- a. Washington thinks he will lose the election.
- b. Washington will not run for re-election.**
- c. The presidential election is coming up soon.
- d. Washington is concerned that too many people are running for president.

After stating his intentions, Washington offers several pieces of advice for future leaders. Read the following excerpts with advice about foreign relations. Then complete the sentence.

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. . . . Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be **engaged in frequent controversies**, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns.

engaged in frequent controversies: involved in wars and disputes

2 Complete the sentence based on the two excerpts above. **Sample answer**

When it comes to foreign relations, Washington believes that the United States should focus primarily on its commercial interests. He advises against getting involved in political disputes.

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Washington's Farewell Address also gives advice about political relationships within the United States. When Washington wrote the address in 1796, the United States had been independent for just 20 years! National unity was relatively new, and many people identified with issues specific to their geographic region more than common interests across the country. Washington feared this geographic sectionalism and spoke about political unity in his Farewell Address. Read the following excerpt about political unity. Then answer the questions.

[I]t 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 . . . indignantly frowning upon . . . every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest.

of infinite moment: extremely important
cordial: heartfelt

3 Washington is urging the American people to hold a strong attachment to what?

- a. Alienation
- b. Individuality
- c. National unity**
- d. Regional identities

4 What does "indignantly frowning upon" mean in this passage?

- a. Attempting to change
- b. Strongly disapproving of**
- c. Questioning the truth of
- d. Being judgmental of

5 What does Washington suggest Americans should be "indignantly frowning upon"?

- a. Forming attachments between different parts of the country
- b. Valuing collective happiness more than individual happiness
- c. Any effort to add new territory to the nation
- d. Any effort to separate one region of the country from the rest**

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS: *Sample answers*

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Washington devotes a significant portion of his Farewell Address to discussing political parties. As early as 1796, he feared that the petty criticisms between the newly organized political parties in the United States would encourage unwanted divisions within the country. Read the following excerpt's advice about political parties. Then answer the questions.

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. . . . It agitates the community with ill founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, **foments** occasionally riot and insurrection.

intimated: suggested

baneful: destructive

foments: creates

6 Why does Washington think political parties are destructive?

Washington believes that political parties will generate jealousies and hostility that could even lead to riots.

7 Do you think George Washington's warnings about political parties being destructive are still relevant today? Give specific examples to support your response.

Answers may vary.

Return your focus to Washington using his retirement from office as an opportunity to establish important guidelines and to provide instructive advice to future leaders. Then answer the question.

8 Think about the fact that the former British colonies had only recently fought a war to gain independence from a monarchy. What larger message does Washington give by volunteering to retire? Why would it be problematic for the first president of the newly independent United States to remain in office until he died or was forced out of power?

By voluntarily stepping down from power, Washington is setting the example that the presidency should not be a lifetime position. If Washington stayed in office until he died, it would appear that a U.S. president is like a king who rules indefinitely until he dies or is pushed out of power.