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Kenneth P. Schell

Mid-America Christian University, Liberty University, kpschell@liberty.edu

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show that there is a forgotten lesson of religion and morality found in Washington's Farewell Address. Like many of the Founders, George Washington believed that a government established as a republic could only stand if the people were virtuous. The works of many modern historians use a traditional two lesson narrative to explain the significance of Washington's Farewell Address. The lesson is that the nation should be wary of entangling political alliances and the growing spirit of political factions. However, Washington put forth a third lesson that should be included when discussing Washington's Farewell Address, that virtue could not be maintained in the absence of religion.

Keywords

George Washington's Farewell Address, Religion, Morality, Role of Religion in America

Cover Page Footnote

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Soon after its publication, George Washington's Farewell Address entered the rarified air of sacred documents alongside the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. As historian Arthur Markowitz noted, "no ambitious nineteenth-century American Politician could afford not to pay lip service to Washington's parting advice to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world."¹ Twentieth and twenty-first century politicians followed suit, with members of Congress reading the speech with intermittent regularity until 1933 when it became a yearly fixture in the House until 1979, and as of 2021, the Farewell Address is still annually read in the Senate.² The lessons that can be garnered from George Washington's Farewell Address were not only vital enough for him to give to his friends and fellow citizens upon his leaving the Presidency, but so vital that politicians, state educational school boards, along with history standard creators, and educators have continually sought to convey Washington's farewell lessons to later generations of Americans. Unfortunately for the United States, Washington's Farewell Address has been marginalized by the growing secular nature of the country. The modern narrative of Washington's formal departure to the nation deals with political parties and foreign policy and misses a vastly important lesson where morality based on religious principles is necessary to sustain the nation.

Modern historians gleaned that there have been two important lessons to take from Washington's Address. One lesson was a warning about the political nature and heading of the country into a dangerous split along party factions and the other lesson, elevated by historians, dealt with an ensnaring foreign policy. Historian Paul E. Johnson, in his monograph *The Early American Republic*, describes Washington's Farewell Address, written with substantial help from

¹ Arthur A. Markowitz, "Washington's Farewell and the Historians: A Critical Review." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 2 (1970): 173, Accessed June 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20090419>.

² "The Reading of George Washington's Farewell Address on the House Floor," US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives, Accessed June 6, 2021. <https://history.house.gov/HistoricalHighlight/Detail/36742>.

Alexander Hamilton, as a shot across the bow at the Democratic-Republicans, but not before explaining its lasting legacy. "In it, he warned against long-term 'entangling alliances' with other countries...and internal political divisions."³ School textbook collectives led by Eric Foner, David M. Kennedy, Lizabeth Cohen, and others echo Johnson's understanding. Kennedy and Cohen use their textbooks' space to show that Washington's foreign policy advice was in regards to the "still-vexatious Franco-American treaty of 1778."⁴ Foner described the Address as one that "defended his administration against criticism, warned against the party spirit and advised his countrymen to steer clear of international power politics."⁵ While it is true that the bulk of Washington's Farewell Address deals with those two issues and historians should take that into account like so many of them have, they are still missing an essential instruction from Washington. Those historians who only take a two-lesson understanding of Washington's Farewell Address have fundamentally overlooked the most important lesson of his Address: the role religion should and must play to ensure the success of Washington's America.

Four separate times in his Farwell Address, Washington mentions the importance of religion in the preservation of the United States. For Washington, religion provided a unity in the country to forge freedom from England, "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 counsels, and joint efforts of common dangers, sufferings, and successes."⁶ Washington also believed that

³ Paul E. Johnson, *The Early American Republic* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2007), 22.

⁴ David M. Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen, *The American Pageant: A History of the American People Sixteenth Edition* (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2016), 195.

⁵ Eric Foner, *Give me Liberty! An American History* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. 2020), 281.

⁶ George Washington and Washington Benevolent Society, *Washington's Farewell Address to the people of the United States* (Albany, NY: Balance Press, 1810), 22. In Sabin Collection https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0102734579/SABN?u=vic_liberty&sid=SABN&xid=a30a9134&pg=22

religion was not only a common unifier but provided a foundation to correctly deal with domestic and foreign issues. "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."⁷ Washington saw that religion was the key to success for the United States, "of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."⁸ Ultimately, Washington knew that a republic could not stand without morality, and morality cannot endure without a foundation in religion.

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.⁹

Washington's Address is not just giving lessons about the issues inherent in the tribalism created by political parties or the problem of moving away from national interest to appease an entangling ally. Washington gave the solution to the problems and warnings on which historians

⁷ George Washington and Washington Benevolent Society, *Washington's Farewell Address to the people of the United States.*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

have concentrated their bulk effort. For the United States to prosper, the people must be moral, and the only way to establish a virtuous society is through religion.

George Washington's Farewell Address contains his last words to the American people for whom he sacrificed so much. He answered his nation's call not once but twice, leaving behind his beloved Mount Vernon. Six years as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army to help the United States gain independence and another eight years as the President of the United States in order to preserve the nation. The Farewell Address became Washington's most famous written work, and for a time, it was long thought of with the same lofty regard as other significant documents of American history like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.¹⁰ Decades after the publication of Washington's Farewell Address, the leaders of the country still lauded its message. During his "Eulogy on Washington" in honor of his centennial birthday on February 22, 1832, Daniel Webster still paid homage to Washington's parting words. Describing the Farewell Address as "full of truths important at all times, and particularly deserving consideration at the present" that in the Address Washington "pointed out the dangers that even at this moment most imminently threaten us" and Webster invited "every man in the country to reperuse and consider it."¹¹ Webster, like so many other leaders in United States history, knew the advice that Washington bestowed upon the country would help preserve the Union.

Analyzing the document, one can see that the entire purpose of his final formal Address was to put forth policies that would help the young nation prosper now that the "Father of the

¹⁰ Matthew Spalding, "George Washington's Farwell Address." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 20, no. 4 (1996), 66, accessed July 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40259366>

¹¹ Daniel Webster, "*The Speeches of Daniel Webster, and His Master-Pieces*" (Philadelphia, PA: Porter & Coates, 1854), 256. <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/HOL/P?h=hein.beal/spdweb0001&i=1>.

Country” was moving on. Washington advised, “on the need and importance of national union, the Constitution and the rule of law, political parties, the proper habits and dispositions of the people, foreign influence in domestic affairs, international relations, and commercial policy.”¹²

The policies that Washington sought to promote were his attempt to answer the question that had followed the United States since its inception. Are the American people able to rule themselves? Washington understood that the key to self-government lay in a religious foundation that could sustain the morality necessary to preserve a republican government.

George Washington's life was deeply religious. Records show his, "service as a vestryman, contemporaneous observations of his personal practices of Sabbath keeping, church attendance, and prayer, and his own scattered indications of biblical knowledge and expressions of his beliefs," show his religious nature.¹³ The value of religion was evident in George Washington's life, but Washington also knew the value that religion would have on his fellow citizens. When placed in a position of power, Washington consistently encouraged religion to help develop the moral fiber of those he led. As Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, he fought some members of Congress for military chaplains, argued for higher pay to get men of worth, and then commanded his soldiers to attend services.¹⁴ When he resigned his commission as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, he outlined four essential for the well-being of the nation. First, the nation should be a union under a singular federal power, second have a sacred regard to the rule of law, third, the adoption of a proper peacetime security force, and his

¹² Spalding, “George Washington’s Farwell Address.” 67.

¹³ Paul K. Longmore, “‘In the Hands of a Good Providence’: Religion in the Life of George Washington.” *Journal of American History*, vol. 96, no. 4, Mar. (2010), 1168, accessed May 23, 2021, <https://web-b-ebshost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&sid=2d21d3dd-c886-4494-a8738d0409834486%40sessionmgr102>.

¹⁴ Vincent Phillip Muñoz, “George Washington on Religious Liberty,” *The Review of Politics* 65, no. 1 (2003): 14-15, accessed May 23, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1408786>.

fourth essential, the development of a society that will put the interest of the community above the individual advantages they may have.¹⁵ As Washington ends his resignation letter to the states, he gives one last piece of parting advice that would help establish his four essentials to developing a prosperous nation, “he would most graciously be pleas’d to dispose us all to do Justice, to love mercy and to demean ourselves, with that Charity, humility & pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion & without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.”¹⁶ Washington continued his encouragement of morality through religion, setting a precedent as the first President of the United States. He recommended and assigned Thursday the 26th day of November as a proclamation of thanksgiving to give thanks to God for the creation of their government which was established for the peace and contentment of its citizens.¹⁷ When Washington was in a position of authority, he repeatedly strived to foster religious principles in the United States. For he knew that no matter how thought out and planned a country under a self-government was, it could only survive, “so long as there shall remain any virtue in the body of the people.”¹⁸ Washington’s actions and words show that he

¹⁵ George Washington, “General Washington’s Circular Letter on His Resignation of the Command of the Armies of the United States of America, Dated Head Quarters, Newburgh, June 18, 1783.” *The Gentleman's Magazine: And Historical Chronicle, Jan. 1736-Dec. 1833* 53, no. 3 (09, 1783), 787, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fhistorical-periodicals%2Fgeneral-washingtons-circular-letter-on-his%2Fdocview%2F8806929%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12085>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 789.

¹⁷ George Washington, “Thanksgiving Proclamation, 3 October 1789,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, accessed May 23, 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0091>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, vol. 4, 8 September 1789–15 January 1790, ed. Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 131–132.]

¹⁸ George Washington, “From George Washington to Lafayette, 7 February 1788,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, accessed July 2, 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-06-02-0079>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series*, vol. 6, 1 January 1788–23 September 1788, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997, pp. 95–98.]

firmly believed the development of a moral American people through the encouragement of religion was necessary to sustain the nation.

Washington was not alone in his assertion that the way forward for a prospering self-government in America must be with a population that is religious in nature. Many other American presidents, either through their own religious nature, understanding of history, use of political rhetoric to pull the religious heartstrings of the American people, or the moral requirements necessary to sustain a republican form of government, also came to the same conclusion as Washington. The United States must be home to a moral people, or the country shall not endure as the Founders had created it. Retired Bible professor Dr. Harold Willminton from Liberty University, compiled a list of “Statements from Famous Personalities Concerning the Bible” that reiterates the importance of religion upon the United States. Andrew Jackson said, “That book, sir, is the rock on which our Republic rests.” In a letter published in the New York Times, President Ulysses S. Grant advised Sunday-school children that they should “hold fast to the Bible as the sheet-anchor of your liberties.” William McKinley explained that the study of the Bible would allow us to become better citizens, and Herbert Hoover summarized the role the Bible has played in American history, saying, “The whole of the inspirations of our civilization springs from the teachings of Christ... to read the Bible... is a necessity of American life.”¹⁹ Through the words and actions of America’s leaders, one can see the significance that religion must play in the lives of its citizens.

¹⁹ Harold Willminton, “Statements from Famous Personalities Concerning the Bible,” in *The Owner’s Manual File* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2018), 72. accessed July 4, 2021, https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/owners_manual/72

Since many famous historians have missed this third significant lesson in Washington's Farewell Address where religion is paramount in creating the morality necessary to support the American system. Various institutions like the Anti-Defamation League have also pushed to diminish popular understanding of the role religion needs to play for the United States. Those types of institutions consistently miss the message from Washington, as well as many of the nation's other leaders, as they cherry pick particular quotes and take them out of context to paint a historically inaccurate picture to minimize the role religion should play in the United States and to maximize the wall between church and state.²⁰ Furthermore, in so doing, it has caused many modern Americans to never know the emphasis the founders placed on religion in preserving the United States in the past as well as the present.²¹ In 1787 the same year the Constitution was written, American leaders also passed the Northwest Ordinance to create the rules for orderly expansion. The Founders wrote in Article 3, "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."²² Sentiments that other Founders besides Washington also shared. In corresponding to John Adams about shoring up human nature, Benjamin Rush explained that all systems of religion, virtue, and government not founded on the Bible would eventually perish.²³ "Even influential founders who rejected the Bible as God's revealed word valued the Bible especially the moral teaching of Jesus Christ-because it was a great source for moral instruction

²⁰ "Founding Fathers and the U.S. Presidents: Statements on Religious Freedom," *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed July 4, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/founding-fathers-and-us-presidents-statements-on-religious-freedom>.

²¹ W. Cleon Skousen. *The 5000 Year Leap: the 28 Great Ideas That Changed the World* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Constitutional Studies), 75.

²² "The Northwest Ordinance," *Northwest Ordinance*, August 2017, Accessed June 6, 2021. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=prh&AN=21212524&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²³ Benjamin Rush, "To John Adams from Benjamin Rush, 23 January 1807," *Founders Online, National Archives*, accessed July 2, 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5162>.

and, thus, promoted the virtue necessary for a people to govern themselves.”²⁴ The many Founders that came from various Christian denominations and believed in varying religious perspectives had all come to the same conclusion, that a self-governing people needed to be virtuous. Religion, especially the moral values taught in the Bible, would create a society with the virtue necessary to prosper in America’s Republic.²⁵

For the first half of American history, Washington’s third lesson was not lost on the American people. Americans like Daniel Webster could see the political and foreign policy lessons in Washington’s Farewell Address and the importance of religion for the country. When lauding Washington’s Farewell Address Webster said, “its political maxims are invaluable; its exhortations to love of country and to brotherly affection among citizens touching: and the solemnity with which it urges the observance of moral duties and impresses the power of religious obligation gives to it the highest character of truly disinterested sincere parental advice.”²⁶ The importance of religion in America was clearly visible to French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville, when describing America’s religious nature wrote, “I do not know whether all Americans have a sincere faith in their religion--for who can search the human heart?- -but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation and to every rank of society.”²⁷

²⁴ Daniel Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁶ Daniel Webster, “*The Speeches of Daniel Webster, and His Master-Pieces.*” 256-257.

²⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America Volume 1*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York, NY: The Colonial Press, 1900): 275, Accessed June 4, 2021. <https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/DemocracyInAmerica-Volume1.pdf>

Tocqueville, in 1831, saw Americans living the lesson taught by so many of the Founders including Washington on the importance of religion in the maintenance of the Republic.

Unfortunately, many modern historians have trivialized the importance of religion to the degree that it has not been included in the modern narrative on the lessons and warnings that Washington provided the country in his Farewell Address. For instance, *The American Yawp*, an open-source American history textbook that was collaboratively built by over three hundred college-level instructors, scholars, and academics, reiterates the two-lesson approach to explaining the significance of George Washington's Farewell Address. This massively collaborative United States history textbook explains the Address by saying it was Washington's last chance "to warn against what he understood as the two greatest dangers to American prosperity: political parties and foreign wars. Washington urged the American people to avoid political partisanship and entanglements with European wars."²⁸ To their credit, Foner's *Give Me Liberty!* and the editors of *The American Yawp* felt it was necessary to include excerpts of Washington's Farewell Address. However, not the full Address, both only included one of the four times Washington mentioned religion. By not highlighting or even including Washington's complete view of religion's role for the country, it interprets the Farewell Address as only a byproduct of the events and issues of the time in which it was written. By diminishing Washington's parting advice to the nation, to this extent, it will eventually be scrubbed from the historical record altogether. This is what the authors of *U.S. History* by OpenStax an open-source textbook from Rice University did, by not including a single mention of Washington's Farewell Address.

²⁸ Joseph Locke, and Ben Wrights, eds. *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Textbook*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), <http://www.americanyawp.com/reader/a-new-nation/george-washington-farewell-address-1796/>

George Washington only lived three years and three months after the publication of his final Address. The policy that he set forth to his nation espouses the principles that he had always advocated.²⁹ While some men are lifted up to become symbols for an age, Washington was much more as his life became embedded in American culture. “Indeed, in their remembrances of the Father of his Country is registered in large measure the entire ideological development of the American people.”³⁰ For now, generations of Americans are still taught the political and foreign policy lessons of Washington. However, there is a real disservice that they are not taught Washington’s most vital lesson to the nation. Secular historians and countless school textbook contributors and editors have overlooked the fact that Washington's solution to dealing with the problems on America's horizon is found in the moral growth that can be developed by immersing oneself in the Word of God. "Recent scholarship teaches historians of the early republic that their field has witnessed a return of the Word."³¹ This is a fitting turn of events as Washington urged the whole nation to turn to the word of God.

Past and present Americans, historians and scholars included, should see another vital lesson in Washington's Farewell Address, the importance of a religious center to hold up the nation. Washington, and his peers, saw that need, and it is time for others to see it as well. Historians must include the religious lesson contained in Washington’s Farewell Address because if the interpretation of his instruction stays only in the political and foreign policy realms, his Address, as well as the United States, will end up in the dust bins of history.

²⁹ George Mott, “Formation of Washington’s Farewell Address to the American People.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1897), 404, accessed May 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20085755>

³⁰ Robert Hay, “George Washington: American Moses.” *American Quarterly*, 21, no.4 (1969), 781, accessed May 22, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2711609>

³¹ Eric R. Schlereth, “Review of Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers,” by Daniel L. Dreisbach. *Journal of the Early Republic* 38, no. 4 (2018): 707, accessed May 23, 2021, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/710817>.

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