

GEORGE WASHINGTON, “FAREWELL ADDRESS” (1796)

Questions:

- 1) What effect did Washington believe that foreign affairs could have on domestic policies?
- 2) What type of foreign policy does Washington advocate for the United States?
- 3) How has U.S. foreign policy departed from the principles Washington proposed? Explain your answer thoroughly.

One of the most beloved Americans, George Washington was commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and later served as the nation's first president (1789-97). Although the Constitution did not create political parties, bitter factions emerged during Washington's presidency. Clashes over the size of the federal government, the national debt, and the capacity of the general populace for political thought soon hardened into partisan distinctions. The Federalists advocated a strong national government ruled by elites independent of direct popular influence. Fearful of tyranny and corruption, the Republicans wanted a government responsive to an informed citizenry. Washington tried to remain nonpartisan.

A volatile international environment complicated matters. When the French Revolution began in 1789, Americans initially cheered to collapse of another monarchy. But, when the French republic descended into the Reign of Terror, the U.S. response was decidedly mixed. While Republicans defended the French (America's ally in the Revolution), Federalists were horrified by news of riots and public executions. When war erupted between France and Britain in 1793, the Federalists supported the British. After Washington declared American neutrality, Republicans accused him of betraying France.

The warring European nations did not respect U.S. neutrality. They restricted American trade, encouraged hostile Indians along the frontier, and expanded their North American empires. Highly reliant on economic exports and vulnerable to military attack, Washington could not ignore these threats. Siding with the Federalists, he advocated a pro-British diplomacy and strong federal government. Such policies enraged his Republican critics.

Exhausted by the political infighting, President Washington decided to retire after two terms. In 1796, he issued a farewell address on the problems facing the nation.



Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. But that jealousy to be useful must be impartial; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defense against it. Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.

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. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.

Europe has her own 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. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.

Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not

lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.

Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.

Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand; neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences; consulting the natural course of things; diffusing and diversifying by gentle means the streams of commerce, but forcing nothing; establishing (with powers so disposed, in order to give trade a stable course, to define the rights of our merchants, and to enable the government to support them) conventional rules of intercourse, the best that present circumstances and mutual opinion will permit, but temporary, and liable to be from time to time abandoned or varied, as experience and circumstances shall dictate; constantly keeping in view that it is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another; that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character; that, by such acceptance, it may place itself in the condition of having given equivalents for nominal favors, and yet of being reproached with ingratitude for not giving more. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation. It is an illusion, which experience must cure, which a just pride ought to discard.