

George Washington's Birthday Celebration

Remarks by Governor Martin O'Malley

The Maryland Senate
Old House of Delegates Chamber
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Thank you President Miller. Thank you all very much,... what a great tradition this is – to gather year-after-year on Washington's birthday and reflect on the many things we can still learn from his legacy of leadership, service, and citizenship.

In so many ways, this man of modest words and powerfully eloquent action remains in our collective memory the Man/Superman of the American Revolution.

To borrow Norman Mailer's words, Washington was *"the existential hero — central to his time, a man whose personality might suggest contradictions and mysteries which would reach into the alienated circuits of the underground, because only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of a nation,... a hero embodies his time and is not so very much better than his time,... but he is larger than life, and so, capable of giving direction to the time,... able to encourage a nation to discover the deepest colors of its character,... a man who has lived with death..."*

One can only wonder what Washington would tell us if he were somehow able to join us today. I suppose he'd probably comment on the traffic congestion on 495. Getting here from Mt. Vernon, at this time of night, can be brutal. Even on a federal holiday like Washington's birthday.

I believe that Washington would warn us about a deeper type of congestion — of which our transportation woes are merely a symptom. I speak of the congestive failure that increasingly grips democracy's heart: that integrating, synthesizing center of our collective being as a people; the heart, whose function it is to sort through divisions, conflicts, and competing fears in order to hold the creative tension necessary to advance,... the common good.[1] Washington would remind us that we are One people.

He would tell us that we are all in this together. That each of us is needed.[2]

He would state again the American truth that the stronger we make our country, the more she gives back to us, to our children and to our grandchildren. [3]

But he would warn us that the Spirit of the Revolution is in danger of being swallowed up by a spirit of hedonism.[4]

He would tell us that our country has a higher and larger purpose than securing gated communities for the few.[5]

He would lament the degree to which the ruling financial elite of our times had been allowed to risk bringing the whole country down in ruin for the sake of their personal profit and gain.[6]

He would lambast the divisions, and factions, and ultra-ideologies of these times which turn the public dialogue toxic and make principled compromise nearly impossible,...[7]

Washington would challenge us to return to first principles.[8] To put consideration of the common good before consideration of personal gain. To understand that our personal economic security depends upon the well-being of our nation as a whole.

He would call upon us all to practice once again the habits of heart that allow us to see our own good in the common good we share with our neighbors; the habits of the heart that allow us to see the goodness of one another even in our disagreements.

And he would warn us that our ability to overcome our current difficulties depends first and foremost on our capacity to hold in our own hearts the best interests of our countrymen as a whole,[9] and to therefore act accordingly.

Washington — this man who lived with death, who knew betrayal, and loss, and bitter defeat — would tell us that the essence of our democracy is not found in the words of the Declaration of Independence or even in the structures

ingeniously established by the Constitution, he would tell us that the tabernacle of democracy is in our own hearts, and there it must be reformed and made new,...

And he would, of course, speak with the greatest authority. For advancing the common good of our new nation was the life's work of George Washington — first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.

Conclusion

In reflecting back on his public service late in life, Washington wrote that *"In every act of my administration, I have sought the happiness of my fellow-citizens. My system for the attainment of this object has uniformly been to overlook all personal, local and partial considerations: to contemplate the United States, as one great whole,... to consult only the substantial and permanent interests of our country."*

Prior to resigning his military commission in this very state house, he wrote a friend about his happy anticipation of being quote *"translated into a private Citizen."*

He capitalized the letter "C" in "Citizen" — a visible symbol of his contemplation in action; a symbol of the faith he placed in the goodness that must be found, and formed, in hearts of his countrymen.

Keeping in mind how far he had to come tonight through rush hour beltway traffic, let's make sure we don't let the old fella down.

Thank you.

[1] Father David Hollenbach of Boston College teaches that freedom and self-determination – a *res publica* – calls for *"a common life in which freedom is more fully shared, for a society in which all people more fully participate in the common goods that can be achieved in their social, political, and economic activity together."* This, in a nutshell, was Washington's governing philosophy.

[2] Washington led by example, choosing to cast a wide net in filling out his own Cabinet. People like Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson were diametrically opposed in philosophy. But Washington expected them to serve together in the spirit of advancing the common good. And he had very little patience for their infighting.

[3] Washington's record says a lot about his philosophy in this regard: he invested in public enterprises like canals and roads. He proposed the creation of a national university. He was willing to make difficult choices about federal taxation in order to move our country forward, in order to stabilize our economy, and in order to prevent future generations from having to shoulder the financial burden of wars that had already been fought.

[4] Biographer John Ferling on Washington's views: *"Unless this 'avarice and thirst for gain' was brought under control, it would inevitably destroy the gains realized through 'the expense of blood and treasure' during the four years of war. The spirit of hedonism had supplanted the spirit of 1776, threatening to 'plunge everything' into 'one common ruin.'"*

[5] Washington's governing philosophy is described well by Parker Palmer's description of the founders: *"The founders believed that citizens who took advantage of that right to improve their own lot in life would turn around and use their gains to contribute to the common good."* Palmer notes that *"Something happened on the way to the modern era. Many Americans seem to believe that this nation's entire reason for being is to secure a self-contained private realm that we can pursue our own happiness without regard for the needs of others, even at their expense."*

[6] In a letter to George Mason written in the spring of 1779, General Washington warned that quite a few high flying traders and speculators would just as soon, *"continue the War for their own private emolument, without considering that their avarice, and thirst for gain must plunge everything (including themselves) in one common Ruin,.. preying upon the vitals of this great Country and putting everything to the utmost hazard."*

[7] Washington held his fellow countrymen to the same high standard he had set for himself. He had very little tolerance for those who would put either private gain, personal squabbles, or partisan differences before the progress of all.

[8] In his letter to George Mason, Washington warned that the only hope is for the broader body politick to bring things back to our "common principles."

[9] Washington would often warn against North-South factionalism, most famously in his farewell address.