

“The Parts and the Whole:
George Washington and the American Body Politic”
Remarks by Senator Jamie Raskin before the Senate of Maryland
February 16, 2009

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen of the Senate, Honored Guests:

President Washington stood right here to resign his Commission as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army and visited our chamber frequently.

So I feel compelled to say at the outset that I never actually met George Washington, but Norman Stone tells me that he was a really good guy. (And a gentleman, too. According to Norman, Washington never left his hunting dogs in the back of his carriage without putting on the appropriate harnesses.)

Washington came here not only as General and later as President of the United States, but in between as *a lobbyist*. Dr. Papenfuss has determined that the father of our country walked the halls in 1784 seeking a subsidy for the Potomac Company to expand commercial navigation of the Potomac River, which means he basically came here like everybody else does—in search of a bond bill. In fact, I heard a rumor that George Washington took the entire Budget and Tax Committee out to Ruth’s Chris Steak House for dinner.

Mr. President, you have bestowed upon me a transcendent honor tonight but also a complex challenge. It’s not simple to capture the greatness of our first president without rendering him wooden and dull. He has become a larger-than-life, almost mythical, figure. There are now 15 mountains named after him, 26 cities, 32 counties in states from Alabama to Wisconsin, 241 townships, not to mention a state, the Nation’s Capital, countless high schools, middle schools and elementary schools, Washington College in Chestertown, Washington College of Law at American University, Washington and Lee University, Washington and Jefferson College, and don’t forget the Washington Monument and trillions of one-dollar bills and quarters, all which bear the imprint of his pleasing countenance and Mona Lisa-like smile (several billion of which dollars and quarters we hope will be making the trek to Annapolis a bit later this year).

Every schoolchild knows that he is the father of our country and that he chopped down the cherry tree and could not tell a lie about it.

When I was a kid growing up across the river from Virginia, Washington seemed impossibly remote and stiff. If there was a Virginian for me, it was Jefferson. I was in love with the Sage of Monticello, the Renaissance Man and Enlightenment thinker, the Francophile man of the people who founded a university and championed strong democracy, civil liberties and the yeoman farmer. I was suspicious of Jefferson’s nemesis that Machiavellian New Yorker Alexander Hamilton, the monarchically-minded finance wizard who advocated a strong central government to back up the banking interests of the big cities.

But, to me, President Washington, was just an enigma in the sky, an inscrutable towering figure, way too solemn for any kid to identify with.

So this assignment sent me on a journey in search of the true greatness of Washington.

The first thing I did was read past Washington Birthday addresses to see what prior speakers had seen—and they had all indeed found in him something great-and something closely resembling themselves. The Chairman of the Finance Committee—Senator Middleton, if I may use his name—found greatness in Washington’s passionate “love of the land.” He was “a farmer before he became a General. . .[and] after he retired from the presidency, and Thoughts about his farm were never far from his mind.” [Hey, that’s a lot like the Chairman himself!]

In his 2005 address, the President of the Senate, the quintessential Marylander, portrayed Washington as a General who “relied on Maryland throughout the war,” a president who was “as comfortable in Maryland as he was in Virginia,” a “natural lobbyist” in Maryland, a gentleman at home in Annapolis. By the time I finished his speech, I was wondering whether Washington had ever even been to Virginia.

Senator Brian Frosh—if I may use his name, saw Washington as a brilliant, guilt-ridden liberal from a wealthy jurisdiction torn over his complicity with injustice and slavery; then-Senator Chris Van Hollen saw him as a local hero with an ambitious national vision; Senator Garagiola, if I may use his name, saw in him a scrupulously well-mannered centrist who prided himself on compromise and careful deal-making; Governor Glendening saw in him the technocratic visionary of a knowledge-based economy; and Senator Barbara Hoffman saw in him a great friend of the Jewish community of Baltimore.

So you can probably guess that I am about to tell you that Washington was a constitutional patriot who gave birth to a nation with his visionary blending of political science and moral philosophy. And indeed I came to just this conclusion simply by following Jefferson, who loved Washington deeply despite their differences.

Of Washington, Jefferson said: “Never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great.”

And great he was. Over the sweep of his career, Washington was unanimously elected Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army; became the first general on earth to win a modern revolutionary war and gallantly refused to accept a salary for his service; was unanimously elected president of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia; was unanimously elected first President of the United States; and was unanimously reelected president. He was a man of powerful physical presence and charisma; a prosperous farmer and surveyor; and an upright gentleman who wrote his own manual of good manners which included helpful advice like “don’t blow on your soup,” “don’t roll your

eyes when others are speaking,” “don’t spit into the fire,” and most importantly for tonight’s purposes, “if you must yawn, cover your mouth and turn to the side.”

But Washington wasn’t born a Monument or a city. The first-born son of five, he grew up on the farm and inherited slaves while still a boy. Craving travel and the thrill of military adventure, he fought valiantly and often recklessly in the French and Indian Wars as a very young man. He immersed himself in Virginia politics and rose to power with the Revolution and the new nation, whose interests were foremost in his mind. When other Revolutionary soldiers were fighting for their states, Washington fought for the country that was in his heart. As a politician, he lived the searing controversies of his day, and if you don’t believe me, consider some things that were being said about him when he was president--you’ll never complain about your own bad press again:

** Thomas Greenleaf wrote that he had cold “aristocratical blood” running in his veins and that he wasted his long youth “gambling, reveling, horseracing, and horse whipping.”

** Tom Paine, who had been his friend during the Revolution, complained that Washington had abandoned his ideals. He called him “a treacherous hypocrite” and said: “The world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an imposter, whether you have abandoned good principles or whether you ever had any” in the first place.

** A newspaper critic wrote: “If ever a nation was debauched by a man, the American nation has been debauched by WASHINGTON. If ever a nation was deceived by a man, the American nation has been deceived by WASHINGTON. . .”

** Another newspaperman writing in 1795 bluntly urged Washington to get out of politics. “Retire immediately,” he wrote, “let no flatterer persuade you to rest one hour longer at the helm of state. You are utterly incapable to steer the political ship into the harbour of safety.”

These indictments launched the American habit of “presidential disrespect,” as my father calls it, the cultural practice that reminds us that, under our Constitution, there are no kings here (even in our presidents) and no hereditary castes; we are all equal under law; and nobility is a quality of character and not birth. Moreover, we are granted the broadest freedom of political expression, dissent, blasphemy, satire, parody and even direct caustic criticism of the government and its leaders, which is the offense the Brits called seditious libel but that we treat as a birthright.

The abuse he suffered drove Washington up the wall in private, but he never lashed out at his critics or used government to stifle them. He rose above tawdry partisan combat to cultivate the quality that set him apart and now defines the gold standard for American political leadership: a serene power to find and tease out the good in *everyone* in politics and, specifically, to understand that conservatism and liberalism--the instinct for order and stability and the passion for progress and justice--are not opposites but necessary and complementary parts of the whole that is the American body politic.

Many people have noticed how President Obama created a “cabinet of rivals,” bringing in not only progressives and conservatives from his Party but also three (well, maybe now two) Republicans. Everyone gives credit to Lincoln for this model, and he definitely excelled at it, but Washington was the *first* to assemble a cabinet of rivals.

His Administration shined with John Adams as Vice-President and cabinet luminaries like Edmund Randolph and Timothy Pickering, but the two sparkling and clashing stars were the dazzling Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and the equally brilliant Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton.

While many people advised Washington to choose *between* the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian visions for our country, Washington’s genius was to bring them together. Even as the two pushed and pulled at every turn, ushering in a two-party system, Washington understood that America needed both a right wing and a left wing to fly. He showed that liberalism and conservatism flourish best when they work together. We have always had a party of memory and a party of hope, as Emerson would come to write--and we always will.

So, in his Farewell Address, Washington told America to rise above partisan rancor in favor of a patriotic commitment to the common good of all.

We should never allow the “artificial and extraordinary force” of “the will of a [single] party,” he said, to replace the “delegated will of the nation.” The “spirit of party,” he warned, can “distract” and “enfeeble” government, “agitate[] the community, and “kindle[] the animosity of one part against another.”

Washington wasn’t naïve. He recognized that partisan spirit is totally “inseparable from our nature,” as he put it, “having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind.”

But he wanted us to remember what a party is. The word comes from the French word “partie,” which means both a political party but also more simply a “part.” Each party is just one part of the political whole. We can benefit from a dynamic partisan competition as we benefit from competition in the marketplace, but parties should never tear asunder the basic bonds of social affection and union. Parties can be constructive; they channel passions, organize conflict, clarify the public agenda, and crystallize choices. But, taken too far, partisanship can lead to division, even civil war. No part and no special interest pleading its cause should ever pretend to be the whole.

Washington invited us to place our patriotic love of American liberty first. The “love of liberty,” he said, is “interwoven” with “every ligament of your hearts,” and the “unity of government which [protects your liberty and] constitutes you one people, is also now dear to you.” He insisted that we put aside partisan and sectional feeling so that our “union and brotherly affections may be perpetual” and so that “the free constitution, which is the work of your hands, may be sacredly maintained.”

Jefferson picked up on this theme in his first Inaugural Address: “We are all Republicans,” he said, “we are all Federalists.” At his first Inaugural, Lincoln struck the same chord: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection.” Then-Senator Obama caught America’s attention in 2004 when he too challenged the habits of partisan division: “There are neither red states nor blue states,” he said, “but only the *United States of America*.” How Washingtonian a sentiment.

The sense of brotherhood and love that Washington evinced for Americans was only diminished slightly for the other people of the world. His Farewell Address condemned “permanent. . . antipathies” against any nation and argued that “just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated.” He wanted to leave behind not only the religious wars and persecutions of Europe but also the constant intrigue and imperial jockeying of its nations, the “frequent collisions” and “obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests.” Where Anglophiles like Hamilton wanted to enter the Napoleonic Wars on the side of England and Jefferson’s democrat-republicans wanted to side with the rebels, Washington wanted to steer clear of the whole thing. He warned against what Jefferson would come to call, in an echo of Washington, “entangling alliances.” Rather, Washington urged his countrymen and women to master the art of diplomacy and democratic solidarity: “Observe good faith and justice toward all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all.” The way to influence the world, he said, is through fair commerce and trade and the sharing of our knowledge and ideas.

Washington’s life shows how a passionate patriotism for all and a love of the cause of humanity can become the catalyst for dramatic national progress even against entrenched injustice.

Slavery was our original sin, and Washington was born into it. It is true that he never directly rebelled against it and that he profited from slave labor until the end of his life. Most of the time, he avoided addressing the subject. As he put it: “I shall frankly declare to you that I do not like to think, much less talk of it.”

But over time, his views progressed. His later writings were infused with strong anti-slavery statements like: “I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for this abolition of slavery.” “I wish from my soul that the legislature of this state could see the policy of a gradual abolition of slavery.” And perhaps most clairvoyantly he said: “No man desires more heartily than I do [the end of slavery]. Not only do I pray for it on the score of human dignity, but I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union.”

Then, astonishingly, in writing his last will and testament the summer before his death, Washington freed all of his personal slaves. He made explicit provisions for their future education, a radical proviso at a time when enforced ignorance was still law. For those slaves too young or too old to provide for themselves, he set up a “regular and

permanent fund” to care for them. To be sure, he was only giving the slaves back a small portion of what had been stolen from them and he did not free Martha’s slaves as they did not belong to him, but the fact remains that Washington did not have to do any of this and he was the only Founder—the only one—who actually freed his slaves—not Jefferson, not Madison, not John Marshall, none other. Freeing his slaves, as Garry Wills put it, was “the last and greatest debt he owed to his honor.” And he paid it.

How proud and awed would Washington have been to see Barack Obama sworn in as America’s 44th president. What astonishing proof that our government belongs not to one man or one party or one race or one gender but to all of the people of the nation. This land was indeed made for you and me.

Washington’s views on war, as with slavery, evolved over his life. As a young man fighting for the King in the French and Indian War, many saw him as bellicose. He wrote to his brother Jack: “I heard bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound.” He was very proud of his military uniform that he had custom-made. But writing thirty years later about this formative experience, he showed a far more sober view of war: “The shocking scenes which presented themselves in this Night’s March are not to be described—The dead—the dying—the groans, the lamentations and crys along the Road were enough to pierce a heart of adamant stone.” He wrote to Governor Dinwiddie: “The supplicating tears of the women; and moving petitions of the men, melt me into such deadly sorrow. . .”

Washington’s mad love for country and republican virtue led him, amazingly, to the conclusion that true political greatness consists of walking away from power at the right time as much as grabbing for it. When he entered this Chamber to resign his Commission as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army after 8 years of glorious service and to announce that he would return to his beloved estate at Mount Vernon and his dear wife Martha, whom the Washington Post described just last week as “foxy, not frumpy,” the world was absolutely dumbfounded. For when had a commanding military hero ever returned from battle covered in glory and not seized the opportunity to take power? The example of the ruthless emperor Napoleon replacing King Louis was on everyone’s mind; and there were American military officers planning a coup after the revolutionary war was over before Washington talked them down from it. Mischievous Aaron Burr was already dreaming of insurrection and a personal kingdom.

So when King George III was told that Washington, after his sensational victory, now planned to return to his simple farm life at Mount Vernon, the King could not believe his ears. He said: “If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world.” And so he did, and so he was. His fame spread the world over as the new Cinicinnatus, the ancient Roman general who went home to his farm after winning a war and took up his plow precisely where he had left it before going to battle.

As passionate as he was for honor (“If it be a sin to covet honor,” says Shakespeare’s Henry V, “I am the most offending soul alive”), Washington knew in

every bone of his body that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is why he insisted that the army zealously respect the supremacy of civilian power. It is why he came here to resign when the war was over. It is why, in his Farewell Address, he warned of “overgrown military establishments, which under any form of government are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty.” It is why he championed the separation of powers and urged public officials “to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres” and to avoid “encroach[ing] upon one another.”

It is why he saw things that, I now must admit, even the more cerebral Jefferson did not. When Jefferson protested to him about the division of the Congress into two chambers and questioned why a Senate was needed if there was going to be a House of Representatives, Washington listened patiently and then asked, “Why did you pour your tea from your cup into that saucer before drinking it?” And Jefferson said: “So that it would cool off.” And Washington said: “Just so. That is the same reason we pour legislation into the Senate.”

Washington’s conviction that power in the Republic must be shared and rotated led him to leave the presidency after two successful terms in which he won every single electoral college vote. (This is something we will not see again until the rest of the states follow the wisdom of this body by passing the National Popular Vote Plan.) He was a shoo-in for a third term but he wanted to emphasize for the sake of posterity the difference between monarchy and democracy. Democracies have great leaders, but they take turns and are integrated into the rule of constitutional law and the democratic faith. Great leaders here are great not because of superior heredity or divine appointment. They are great because they are able to move, and to be moved by, the needs, desires and values of the people. Washington’s decision to step down made way for Adams and Jefferson, who had great projects of their own. It was a decision that built republican virtue into our bones and that we constitutionalized two centuries later in the 22nd Amendment.

But, notably, it was *not* a selfless decision. When Washington said, both in resigning his generalship and leaving the presidency, that he wanted to return to the joys of private life, of his marriage to Martha, of farming the land and exploring the wilderness, he was speaking with utter sincerity. As his friend Henry Lee put it, Washington “was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life.” And he was something of a night owl too; he enjoyed playing cards, billiards, and backgammon, dancing at balls, drinking in taverns late at night, attending horse races and theater, the fox hunt and the fishing trip. And why shouldn’t he have? There is no conflict between virtue and celebration. As Sir Toby Belch says in Twelfth Night, “Doest thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes or ale?” Washington was a public man who never lost his appreciation for any of the irreplaceable private and domestic pleasures.

This example of maintaining balance is significant for those of us who are public servants. For Washington recognized the anxieties of holding public office and wielding

power, the slings and arrows of outrageous political fortune. “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” said Shakespeare’s King Henry IV, whose story showed that having power is often the opposite of having freedom.

In a democracy, holding office also holds burdens and seductive dangers for the politician, like the temptations of personal profit and political revenge. But no danger is worse than confusing the pursuit of power with the pursuit of happiness itself. Many powerful people are miserable indeed, and many happy people would go nowhere near public office. Washington reminds us that political leaders should enjoy the countless pleasures in life that exist beyond public office: love and friendship, song and dance, food and wine, children and animals, the comforts of home and the romance of travel, which Washington’s friend Ben Franklin described as a magical way of lengthening your experience of life. If we define ourselves exclusively with respect to our public offices and let the demands of office become all-consuming, if we think we are nothing without our titles, and hang on to power for power’s sake, we risk not only public wrongs but private misfortunes.

When Washington stood here to resign his commission, Thomas Jefferson sat out there where you are. So did Samuel Chase, the later-to-be impeached Chief Justice of the United States whose portrait looms ominously over us freshmen back in the goody-goody corner. Alexander Hamilton was probably there too. The people in the crowd—Congressmen, Cabinet members, state senators, mayors--were moved profoundly, many of them to tears, by what Jefferson called an “affecting scene.” This was one of several dramatic resignations and departures in Washington’s astonishing life. None were so important as this moment when he peacefully transferred power from the military domain to the civil, but none was more shocking than his final departure—his death.

For Washington had been the indispensable figure of our founding—first in our war for independence, then during our constitutional period as the presiding lawgiver, and finally in launching the habits of our new government as our chief executive. “Take his character all together,” wrote Abigail Adams, “and we shall not look upon his like again.”

“First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” Henry Lee said in his eulogy. And we may add today: first in teaching those of us in public life how to think about what we do, how to be partisan but to rise above party, how to treat one another with dignity and affection, how to take criticism with equanimity, how to relate to other nations with decency and justice, how to progress in our lifetimes beyond our own childish prejudices, how to be engaged to the fullest every day for the common good, and how—finally--to leave when our leaving is what patriotic duty requires.

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