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George Washington- America's First Patriot, Visionary, and Champion of Democracy
Remarks by Maryland Secretary of State Susan C. Lee
Before the Maryland State Senate
February 17, 2025

Mr. President, Esteemed Senators, and Honored Guests,

On this Presidents' Day, I thank you for the honor of allowing me to provide the 2025 George Washington speech, in the very room where some of our American democratic freedoms first shined bright.

I am especially proud to be here today with many of my former Senate colleagues whom I served with side by side and worked together to pass landmark laws to uplift, empower, and improve the quality of life for all Marylanders, including some of our most vulnerable populations.

I would like to especially thank Senate President Bill Ferguson and members of his team, Chief of Staff Sally Robb and Joy Walker for bestowing on me this great honor today.

Our gratitude to Senior Pastor Seung Jin David Park of Global Mission Church in Silver Spring, Maryland for delivering the Invocation. Our heartfelt thanks also to our worldclass performing artists Jeremiah Washington, who is a student at Morgan State University and Dr. Eric Conway, who is the Chair of Morgan State University's Fine & Performing Arts Department and Conductor of the university's Choir. I am also here with my Deputy Secretary of State Michael Lore and Office of Administrative Hearings Chief Judge Chung Pak. I would like to acknowledge and thank Archivist Elaine Rice Bachmann and Owen Lourie and Mimi Calver of her team for providing us with information on Washington's life.

Washington had special ties to Maryland, as our state played an important role in saving General Washington and his army and helping America win its independence. In an attempt to crush Washington and his outnumbered troops, a large British armada of more than 45 ships and 10,000 men descended on New York Harbor. It was the courageous troops of the 1st Maryland Regiment that saved the day by successfully obstructing the British and allowing Washington and his troops to evacuate and continue the fight for independence. The 19th Century historian, Thomas Field, called the Maryland Line's stand, "an hour more precious to American liberty than any other."

George Washington is America's first Patriot, Visionary, and Selfless Champion of Democracy. He laid the foundation for propelling forward and ensuring America was a Democratic Republic. When the United States won the Revolutionary War against the British, some world observers thought we lost one King George, only to be replaced by another King George Washington. That suspicion was laid to rest right here, on December 23rd, 1783, when Congress met to accept George Washington's resignation from the Continental Army. King George, III told American painter Benjamin West if Washington retired after victory, "He will be the greatest man in the world."

Molly Rideout, who was watching upstairs with the other women, wrote in her famous letter, "I think

the world never produced a greater man and very few so good.”

Washington’s selfless act of transferring military power over to non-military citizen leaders ensured the future of our nation as a Democracy and made him an Exemplar, who inspired generations of world leaders, nations, and Presidents.

In leading and guiding the new nation, in his farewell address, Washington believed that the major threats to the future of the nation’s Democratic Republic were regionalism, factionalism [or partisanship], and foreign entanglement.

Washington thought that political faction “is seen in its greatest rankness and truly their worst enemy,” and that partisanship “open[ed] the door to foreign influence and corruption.”

During the time of Washington’s address, the newspapers and media often printed volumes of mean spirited, untruthful, and scandalous news, very often fueled or controlled by the emerging political parties. Washington’s concerns foretold and resonate even today, as some things never change. A number of surveys have reported that political polarization has significantly increased over the last 20 years, particularly in Congress. The rise in broadcast, social network, and pseudo news media have likely contributed to this trend.

Alarmed by the voluminous amount of divisive and vicious press being streamed by political parties at the time, Washington stated, “However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become the potent engines by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be able to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.”

I believe, he thought that this level of “spirit of faction” would weaken the ability of voters to make reasoned and disinterested choices and lead to the disruption and distraction of public councils, ill-founded jealousies among citizens and party divisions that could open the door to foreign influence and corruption, thereby allowing outside powers to manipulate the nation’s policies.

In striving to be the President for all Americans, I believe Washington, thought that unity and putting the interests of the country over partisan loyalty would ensure the country’s wellbeing and survival. He noted that the hard-fought independence and liberty Americans gained were the result of the “common dangers, sufferings, and successes” they underwent together during the war.

In assembling his cabinet, Washington appreciated balance and a diversity of views and backgrounds. As our first President, Washington set the example of appointing a Cabinet with rival or opposing views. Along with Henry Knox and Edmund Randolph, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, who were of rival views, were members of his cabinet. Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama were some of the presidents who followed his model, I believe, Washington thought that the spirit of unity, inclusion, and collaboration in his government would lead to beneficial outcomes for the common good.

George Washington also was not perfect, but a complex man, in that he owned slaves, like some of the other founding fathers. However, historians have indicated that later in his life, the issue of slavery was on his mind, and he may have been influenced by those close to him. During the war, his aides John Laurens and the Marquis de Lafayette both opposed slavery. He also admired and praised the poet Phillis Wheatley who some believed influenced him to urge education for former slaves. While Washington took no action to free his slaves during his lifetime, after his death, he freed them in his will, but unfortunately, not the slaves owned by his wife Martha. Washington, towards the end of his life, wrote that, “The unfortunate condition of the persons, whose labour in part I employed, has been the only unavoidable subject of regret. To make the Adults among them as easy and as comfortable in

their circumstances as their actual state of ignorance and improvidence would admit; and to lay a foundation to prepare the rising generation for a destiny different from that in which they were born; afforded some satisfaction to my mind, and could not I hoped be displeasing to the justice of the Creator." He also believed that the abolition of slavery could be accomplished through legislation. Despite some of those contradictions and inaction on the issue of slavery, generations of Americans, nevertheless, have been inspired by the Democratic principles Washington and the other founding fathers espoused in the Constitution.

Since its birth, America has represented to many to be the beacon of liberty, justice, equality and boundless opportunities, including generations of immigrants and people of all backgrounds, such as my own grandparents who left behind a war torn, divided, ravaged China to seek a better life based on the promise of those principles. Over the course of our nation's history, while not perfect, many Americans from marginalized communities, rose up and joined the effort to fight tyranny, injustice, and inequality, like Marylanders Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Thurgood Marshall, and others. During WWII, Americans who faced discrimination and overwhelming obstacles, sprang to action, such as the Tuskegee Airmen, like my constituent the late Brigadier General Charles McGee, the 6888th Battalion of African American women led by Lt. Colonel Charity Adams [Earley], the Navajo Code Talkers, the Go for Broke 442nd Regimental Combat Team of Japanese Americans, one of the most decorated unit, and even my father Harry Lee, who at 17 enlisted in the US Navy and defended freedom on the perilous Atlantic and Pacific oceans. They were all part of "the Greatest Generation." And let us not forget the enormous role the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Freedom Riders, including our Maryland State Senator Gwen Britt, and others played in help ensuring the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. They all came together to work tirelessly toward achieving the democratic principles George Washington championed through his words and personal example.

In concluding his address he stated, "Though in reviewing the incidents of my administration I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend. I shall also carry with me the hope that my country will never cease to view them with indulgence and that, after forty-five years of my life dedicated to its service with an upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion." We are grateful to Washington not only for laying the foundation in which America could grow, prosper and thrive as a Democratic Republic, but also for his farewell address, which foretold and provided future generations with enduring wisdom and advice that is relevant today about addressing extreme partisanship to avoid division, conflict, insurrection, and destruction. America is truly a Work in Progress and is constantly evolving. Our strength lies in our rich diversity, and what we all share in common as Americans. Through our love of America and Maryland, our resilience and ability to confront and triumph over adversity such as 9-11, COVID, and other major challenges, we are continuing to work to realize those Democratic principles Washington fought hard for.

While I sometimes miss the high energy and drama of the Senate, I'm truly honored and privileged to be your 72nd Secretary of State and partner with you- Mr. Senate President, our House Speaker, Senators, Delegates, and the other public officials and community advocates and leaders here today to ensure our Democracy is strong and to make government work and better serve the people as Washington envisioned in 1796.

I commend you for your service, because I know of your sacrifice of being away from your families, taking time away from your jobs, working long hours in Committee and in Chamber to bring all the stakeholders to the table, reach consensus on, and pass meaningful legislation that will uplift and

improve the quality of life for countless individuals and as Governor Wes Moore often states, “Leave No One Behind.”

Guided by Washington’s enduring message of unity, common good, justice, equality, integrity, and putting country over partisanship, let us continue to work in partnership, and together we can work toward fulfilling the promise of America and making this a better world.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan C. Lee". The signature is fluid and elegant, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Susan C. Lee
Maryland Secretary of State