

**2. Winning Entry for the Category  
“Individuals and Society”:**

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## **Bidding Adieu: On Teaching the Historical Significance of George Washington’s *Farewell Address***

Plenty of ink has been spilled in addressing the historical importance of President George Washington’s role in shaping the new republican government and his political legacy. Although not known as one of our country’s more eloquent rhetors, with the aid of Alexander Hamilton, Washington crafted a compelling and observant message near the end of his second term that continues to resonate today. This lesson plan is designed to aid educators in discussing the significance, both past and present, of *Washington’s Farewell Address*.

**T**he *Farewell Address* touches on the “Individuals and Society” theme promulgated by *Our Documents*. Washington played a pivotal role in defining the office of the presidency and establishing precedence for the Executive branch. Although much American History has been maligned recently for focusing on “dead white men,” failure to consider Washington’s role in the founding of our nation discounts the notion that individuals can have a profound impact on society and its institutions. Certainly, the success of the young republic resided equally in both the ideas contained in the Constitution and the persons responsible for helping to realize them. Today, at a time when civic participation is waning, this message of civic virtue needs to be reinforced in hopes of reinvigorating public life.

### *Our Document Used*

**Document 15, President George  
Washington’s *Farewell Address*, 1796.**

### **Historical Background**

George Washington’s first term in office was marked by broad political support and the virtual absence of public opposition. Nonetheless, within his own cabinet, Washington endured a contentious conflict between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton and their polemic debate over a “weak” or “strong” federal government. With Hamilton’s success in establishing The National Bank, advocates for a “weak” government were becoming increasingly discontent. Jefferson, along with James Madison, began to disseminate their ideas more widely through the press, eventually leading to the formation of the Democratic-Republican Party. The Democratic-Republican Party was in its nascent stage in the election of 1792 and as a result, did not play a decisive role in the outcome of the election. Even if political parties such as the Democratic-Republican Party had become political forces, Washington’s public status was unassailable at the time.

In his second term, however, the American Cincinnatus began to show signs of vulnerability, experiencing for the first time in his career open political opposition. Age began to catch up to him as he suffered from fatigue running

the new government. In addition, he became seriously ill with influenza as well as fell off his horse, straining his back, which further slowed him down. Some people began to speculate as to whether Washington's cognitive abilities were beginning to diminish. While deterioration of the body was difficult enough, Washington felt the most pain from the increasing number of open attacks against the government and his presidency, both of which the President took personally. Some critics from the Democratic-Republican Party went so far as to appeal to the public's antipathy toward anything monarchical by arguing that Washington had made himself into a quasi-king.

Coupled with the discernable decline of Washington's public person was a foreign policy dilemma that was becoming increasingly contentious. England and France were warring in Europe and both were looking to elicit support from the young United States. Francophiles such as Jefferson believed that the United States was obligated to support France, out of respect to the Franco-American alliance of 1778, which was strategic in obtaining French military assistance and winning the Revolution. Anglophiles believed that despite the Revolution, America's true allegiance resided with the mother country. Moreover, many wanted to preserve the profitable economic trade relationship that existed at the time between the two nations.

Washington made his position well known with the Proclamation of Neutrality (1793), which declared the United States a bystander to the ongoing European conflict. As to be expected, this decision did not endear him with either camp. As the conflict escalated between France and England, Washington sent Chief Justice John Jay to London to negotiate a deal to avoid war with England. Out of this encounter

emerged the Jay Treaty (1794), which among other things recognized English naval and commercial dominance, and championed a version of American neutrality that was decidedly favorable toward England. Working behind the scenes, Jefferson and Madison plotted to prevent congressional approval of the treaty while calling into question the treaty-making power vested in the Executive Office. Once again, this debate invoked disparaging remarks about Washington's monarchical tendencies. Eventually, the treaty was approved, in large part, due to the prestige of its number one supporter—Washington. The President was able to maintain his doctrine of neutrality, but at a cost that his critics viewed as excessive.

Overall, Washington's *Farewell Address* sought to address three pressing issues: 1) The potential threat that political parties and interest groups pose to the democratic process as evinced by the conflict within his own cabinet; 2) The mounting criticism of the government, and in particular, of Washington and the way in which he exercised his authority; and 3) The proper role of the United States in international politics. These issues defined the political context and framed the rhetorical situation that elicited from Washington his *Farewell Address*.

Generally, Washington's speech was well-received. Although his advice on avoiding political parties was not heeded, he accurately predicted some of the problems that arose with party politics. By resigning on his terms, Washington's *Farewell Address* communicated to the public that his allegiances were completely republican, again reaffirming his status as the American Cincinnatus. Finally, his advice on foreign affairs was closely followed for some time. Washington's advocacy for neutrality helped to postpone a war with England until America was capable of fighting one.

## Teaching Activity

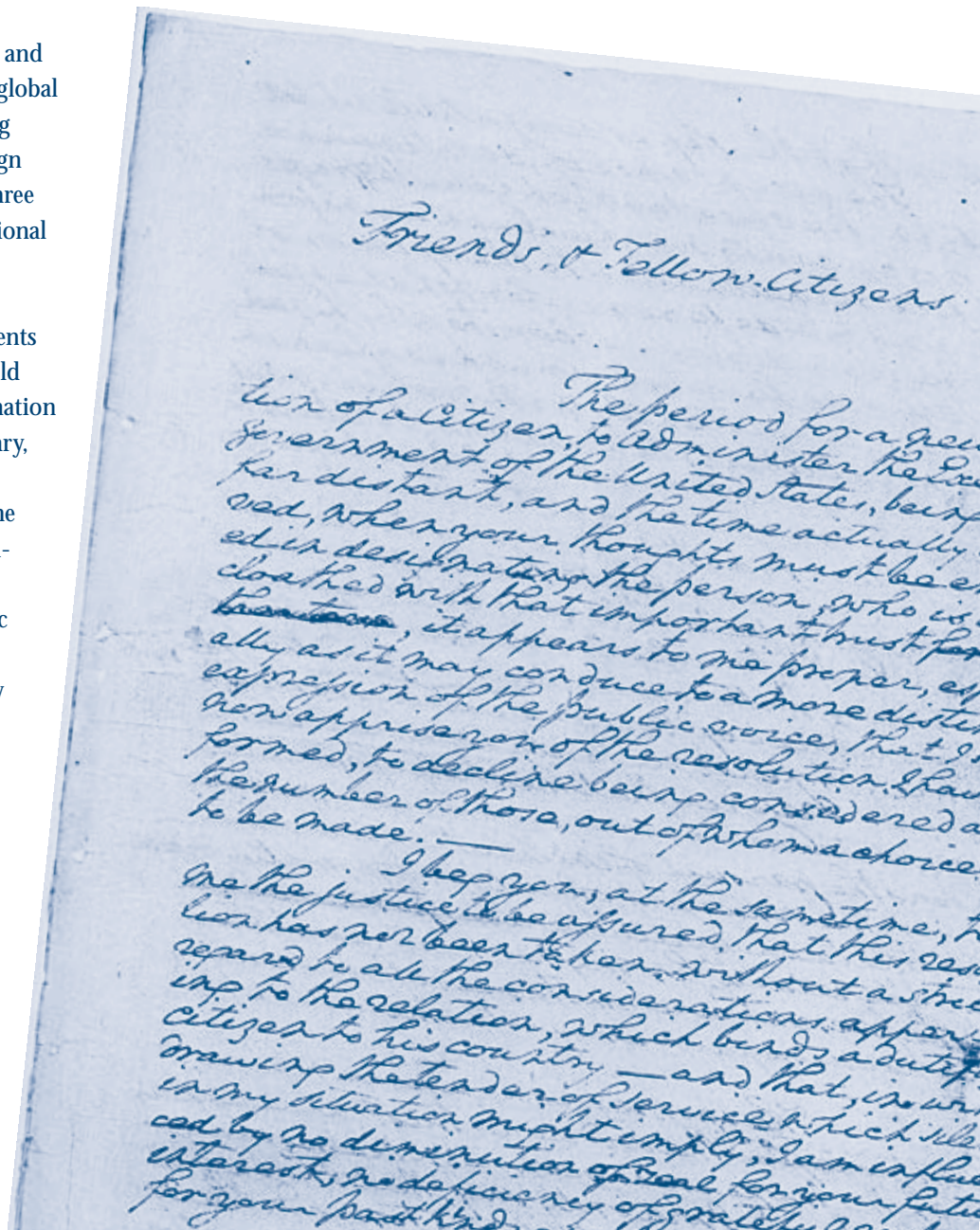
### Materials:

Copies of George Washington's *Farewell Address* (facsimile and transcript of the *Farewell Address* available at [www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov)), butcher paper, markers, and tape.

### Activities:

1. For a warm-up, ask students to give an example illustrating when political neutrality is advisable in international politics and when military involvement is the preferred course of action.
2. Discuss with students the advantages and disadvantages of isolationism versus global activism. Work with students by using their examples to illustrate how foreign policy decisions are often based on three dominant and interrelated issues: national security, economic development, and political ideology.
3. Extend the discussion by asking students whether and how their opinions would change if the year was 1800 and the nation had a modest economy, a weak military, and limited influence in world affairs. Again, help lead students to the conclusion that although their recommendations might have changed, the concerns (national security, economic development, and political ideology) underlying their decisions most likely have not.
4. Use the warm-up as a springboard to instruct students on the historical context and events that compelled Washington to publish his *Farewell Address*.
5. Once students have a clear understanding of the political context and rhetorical situation, distribute copies of Washington's *Farewell Address*.
6. Instruct students to read the text at least a couple of times carefully. Moreover, tell them as they read through the text the first time to identify the introduction, body, and conclusion as well as the topic of each paragraph in the body of the text. This will help students recognize the various themes

Page from President George Washington's *Farewell Address* (1796). Document facsimile and transcription available at [www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov).





- that Washington addresses as well as how he organizes his speech.
7. Assign students the following questions:
    - A. Identify the major issues/topics in Washington's *Farewell Address*. Cite excerpts from the text to illustrate your point.
    - B. What actions and/or advice does Washington offer in response to the three dominant issues confronting him in his second term in office? Again, cite excerpts from the text to support your response.

- C. In light of what you know about the historical context, choose one of Washington's "issues" and argue whether his action/advice was wise or foolish. Be sure to provide a rationale for your response.
  - D. Warning about political parties and "entangling alliances" are two issues that tend to dominate the better part of Washington's *Farewell Address*. Explain how both of these issues relate to the present day and argue whether Washington's advice is still applicable. (For example, think about the role political parties play in shaping public policy and the country's fragile, newly formed international anti-terrorist coalition.)
8. Upon completing the questions, divide the class up into six groups and assign each group question B, C, or D. Instruct students to come up with a group answer to the assigned question. (Allow students some time to discuss their responses.) After the group is finished, ask those groups working on B to post their response on one wall, C on another wall, and D on yet another wall.
9. Instruct the B groups to read and critique the C responses, C groups to evaluate the D responses, and D groups to assess the B responses. Repeat this step until all groups have written a response to one question and critiqued two different questions.
10. Debrief the class by reviewing responses posted on the wall and in their own papers.
11. End the lesson by first explaining how Washington's *Address* was received by the public and second, by asking the class whether it believes the *Address* transcends time and speaks to the present.

### Student Reactions

To begin the lesson I studied some of Washington's background history. I also got a clear understanding of what happened during his presidency and why he decided to retire in the first place. When the class began to get into the *Farewell Address* I found it interesting but also very challenging.

Well, to begin with, I found this project interesting because I learned many new things about George Washington. I understood what he thought of political parties and his disagreement with them. I also learned that he believed that our country would thrive but only if it stays together. I also got a clear understanding of Washington's point of view on how domestic and foreign policy issues are interconnected. From this whole assignment I learned lots of new stuff about George Washington that I never knew before.

On the other hand, this lesson was a challenge. The language Washington's *Farewell Address* is written in can be hard to understand. I more than once had to ask for help understanding what a sentence or paragraph was saying. This assignment took a long time to complete and I must have read through it about five times to understand what it was saying. Even though I did want to learn a lot and understand what Washington's *Farewell* said, reading through it so many times was very time consuming and somewhat tedious.

All in all I enjoyed the assignment. In the end I felt like all the time I took to work on this assignment was time well spent. I learned lots of new things about George Washington that I never knew before and I was able to work on understanding documents written during that time.

— Rachel Ibarra, Eighth Grade,  
Morey Middle School, Denver, Colorado

### Cross-curricular Connections

George Washington's *Farewell Address* fits squarely in a class on American History. The applicability of this lesson, nevertheless, can extend beyond this conventional course. With some modification, this lesson can be utilized in most World History courses, particularly when addressing the thematic issue of foreign relations. China and Japan, for example, once energetically pursued a foreign policy based on isolationism. Cross comparisons could be made to determine the conditions under which such a policy might be deemed conducive and/or detrimental to national interests. In addition, instructors for political science and contem-

porary issues courses might find this lesson helpful when focusing on such topics as the formation of republican governments and the role of party politics and interest groups in public life. Indeed, Washington's words can shed light on the current efforts underway in the establishment of new Afghanistan and Iraqi governments and the Republican-lead redistricting proposals in both Texas and Colorado. Finally, students in argumentation and debate and English classes can analyze the rhetorical features and arguments in Washington's text and generate a text-based evaluation of his persuasive endeavor.

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### Student Reactions

In social studies we did a lesson on Washington's Presidency. Overall, I had a moderately easy time doing this lesson, but that doesn't mean it was all easy. Taking notes on the lesson was one of the easier aspects of the lesson, but reading the text was somewhat difficult. After we took notes on the lesson and read Washington's *Farewell Address*, we had to answer three questions. Answering the questions was the most difficult part of the lesson for me.

When we began the lesson, our teacher put up notes on a projector and elaborated a great deal on them as we went. Taking notes during this section of the lesson was not hard, all I had to do was listen and write down the main ideas. Even though hearing the lesson was a great learning aid, I feel that taking notes on the main ideas really helped me grasp the concepts that were presented.

After we had the oral presentation and took notes, copies of Washington's *Farewell Address* were passed out. I read the document, understood what it was about, but did not grasp the overall ideas presented in the document. When we were done reading the paper, the teacher elaborated on the document by explaining what some common concepts that were found in it were, by making connections to Washington's life, and most by explaining some smaller subjects concealed inside of this document.

The last thing we had to do for this lesson was to answer three questions concerning Washington's *Farewell Address*. Answering the questions was the hardest part of the lesson for me. The questions were somewhat difficult to begin with, but I believe they were especially hard for me because they were what brought the whole lesson together. By having these questions at the end of the lesson, my mind brought together everything I learned and sealed it in.

Overall, I had a moderately easy time doing this lesson. Even though the questions were difficult, I found them extremely helpful in the long run.

— *Tristan McKay, Eighth Grade,  
Morey Middle School, Denver Colorado*

### Assessment

Review of each student's individual response to the assigned questions; review of each group's answer to the guiding questions; classroom debriefing discussion.

### Lesson Review

Overall, the lesson was well received by the class. Students came away with a better understanding of the issues Washington faced during his presidency and some of his motives for leaving office after his second term. The debriefing played a critical role in helping students realize how the very act of resignation can serve as an argument that Washington was anything but monarchical. At first glance, most students were not quite sure if Washington addressed this topic. However, when I explained to students how a speech act could communicate additional meaning beyond the literal statement, they began to realize how the speech could function as a rejoinder to the monarchical argument. In review, I would recommend presenting this general idea in advance so students would be better prepared to read the *Address* in broader terms. Still, this teachable moment served as a great opportunity to reinforce the lesson of how Washington served as a model of civic virtue and thus, had a profound impact on shaping the Executive Office.

The students were most vocal on the topic of foreign policy, especially in light of the country's current involvement in the Eastern Hemisphere and with its war on terrorism. Students learned why Washington advocated for a policy of neutrality in terms of foreign affairs and were also quick to recognize and debate how Washington's advice might play out in today's foreign affairs climate. In contrast,

students struggled more with Washington's advice on party politics. I believed part of the problem is that because my students do not see themselves as players in the political sphere due to their inability to vote, they had a hard time assessing how party politics shape public policy and in turn, their lives. Life experiences, or the lack there of, seemed to be a limiting factor when it came to addressing this issue in the speech. A few students whose parents are active politically were able to address this aspect of the assignment competently.

Finally, the single and largest challenge that students had with this assignment is reading the actual text. I cautioned students that some might find Washington's *Address* difficult to read due to both its style and vernacular. Sure enough, this was the most common complaint about the lesson. Still, I am inclined to continue to have students read the entire text. A challenge working with some older, primary texts is that the language can be difficult to comprehend. Nonetheless, with time and practice, I have found that students eventually become accustomed to the language. Furthermore, reading the *Farewell Address* requires patience and diligence, which are key attributes that students need to develop if they hope to become skilled researchers. Finally, there is nothing more rewarding than reading the actual words of our first President and coming away with an appreciation of their importance for the time they were written and for the relevancy that they carry today. This will not happen unless students work with the primary source in question.