

ISSUE BRIEF

“Information to Action”

Topic: Foreign Affairs

Title: *GEORGE WASHINGTON’S WARNING AGAINST FOREIGN ENTANGLEMENTS* by Joshua Charles

In this time of international uproar, it is fitting to ponder the wisdom offered to us by the Father of our nation, George Washington, in his last public address to his countrymen—the famous 1796 *Farewell Address*.

Delivered after two terms in office as President—after which he voluntarily vacated the seat of power—the *Farewell Address* touches on many issues. But among the most prominent was Washington’s deep concern that the United States would be brought to ruin by foreign influence, and foreign conflicts into which such influence sought to draw it.

He consistently warns against the spirit of party and faction, which, he argued, not only weaken the country internally, but externally as well. “It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption,” he observed, “which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus, the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another.”

This is perhaps his most famous line on this topic:

“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 a 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...”

“Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation?” Washington asked. “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?”

He concluded:

“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.”

Why should such warnings be soberly considered? To apply them with perfect consistency to present events? No. We live in a different time, and different circumstances. Perhaps if we began following Washington's advice now, it would be to our benefit. Perhaps it wouldn't.

But what we should have in our minds are the various considerations Washington so wisely raises: intrigue in Europe; foreign influence as a means of goading the United States into war; the supplanting of our own interests by those of others; and the difficulty of extricating ourselves from either alliances or conflicts which could lead to disaster.

Statesmen of every party should bear these considerations in mind as they ponder the great issues of our time—of which war and peace are certainly the most momentous.