

The intelligence of this event had no sooner reached New York than the leaders of the clubs were seen haranguing in every corner of the city, to stir up our citizens into an imitation of the example of the meeting at Boston. An invitation to meet at the city hall quickly followed, not to consider or discuss the merits of the treaty, but to unite with the meeting at Boston to address the President against its ratification.

This was immediately succeeded by a hand-bill, full of invectives against the treaty, as absurd as they were inflammatory, and manifestly designed to induce the citizens to surrender their reason to the empire of their passions.

In vain did a respectable meeting of the merchants endeavor, by their advice, to moderate the violence of these views, and to promote a spirit favorable to a fair discussion of the treaty; in vain did a respectable majority of the citizens of every description attend for that purpose. The leaders of the clubs resisted all discussion, and their followers, by their clamors and vociferations, rendered it impracticable, notwithstanding the wish of a manifest majority of the citizens convened upon the occasion.

Can we believe that the leaders were really sincere in the objections they made to a discussion, or that the great and mixed mass of citizens then assembled had so thoroughly mastered the merits of the treaty as that they might not have been enlightened by such a discussion?

It cannot be doubted that the real motive to the opposition was the fear of a discussion; the desire of excluding light; the adherence to a plan of surprise and deception. Nor need we desire any fuller proof of the spirit of party which has stimulated the opposition to the treaty than is to be found in the circumstances of that opposition.

F. The Retirement of Washington

I. A President Bids Farewell (1796)

Weary of body and outraged by political abuse, Washington announced his decision to retire in his Farewell Address, which he simply gave as a gratuitous “scoop” to a Philadelphia newspaper. At first a nonpartisan but now a Federalist, he had leaned heavily on Hamilton’s collaboration in its composition. The bulk of the address deals with domestic difficulties, but the part relating to foreign affairs is best known. The document was clearly partisan. It served as the opening gun in the forthcoming presidential campaign of 1796 by indirectly defending Jay’s Treaty and by directly alerting the public to flagrant French intrigue in the nation’s capital. Many Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans, recognizing the attack on them, condemned the document. Why was it to the advantage of America to remain aloof? Did Washington reject all alliances in all circumstances?

¹J. D. Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (1896), vol. 1, pp. 221–223.

Observe good faith and justice toward all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct. And can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it? It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great nation to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence. . . .

In the execution of such a plan nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachments for others should be excluded, and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings toward all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest. . . .

The nation prompted by ill will and resentment sometimes impels to war the government, contrary to the best calculations of policy. The government sometimes participates in the national propensity, and adopts through passion what reason would reject. . . .

So, likewise, a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification. . . .

As avenues to foreign influence in innumerable ways, such attachments are particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot. How many opportunities do they afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public councils! Such an attachment of a small or weak toward a great and powerful nation dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter.

Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be *constantly* awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. . . .

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 [French treaty], 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.

Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.

Why forgo the advantages of so peculiar a situation? 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?

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, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But in my opinion it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.

Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand, neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preference; . . . constantly keeping in view that it is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another; that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character; that by such acceptance it may place itself in the condition of having given equivalents for nominal favors, and yet of being reproached with ingratitude for not giving more. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation. It is an illusion which experience must cure, which a just pride ought to discard.

2. Editor Benjamin Franklin Bache Berates Washington (1797)

Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of “Old Ben,” was a newspaper editor notorious for his malicious attacks on the Federalists in general and on Washington in particular. He published the following tirade when the president retired, but fortunately his sentiments were not shared by the vast majority of Washington’s appreciative countrymen. In retaliation, Federalist rowdies wrecked the office of the Philadelphia Aurora and manhandled editor Bache. How much of this incendiary editorial is anti-Federalist partisanship, and how much is pure libel?*

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation,” was the pious ejaculation of a man who beheld a flood of happiness rushing upon mankind [Simeon, who had just seen Jesus]. If ever there was a time that would license the reiteration of the exclamation, that time is now arrived. For the man who is the source of all the misfortunes of our country is this day reduced to a level with his fellow citizens, and is no longer possessed of power to multiply evils upon the United States.

²*Philadelphia Aurora*, March 6, 1797, in Allan Nevins, ed., *American Press Opinion* (Boston and New York: D. C. Heath and Company, 1928), pp. 21–22.

*Benjamin Franklin Bache was nicknamed “Lightning Rod, Junior,” an obvious reference to his inventive grandfather and to his own high-voltage journalism.