

Washington's Brief Farewell

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George Washington gave several notable farewell addresses. The first was a written circular to the troops distributed in September 1783. Four months later, he would give a brief address as he returned his commission to the American Congress. Thirteen years later in September 1796, Washington prepared for newspaper publication the memorable "Farewell Address" that signaled Washington's retirement from the presidency.

Washington's first farewell address was the shortest. It was delivered on Thursday, Dec. 4, 1783. The general was in New York, homeward bound, the British having finally evacuated. First, he wanted to join a final lunch for the officers with whom he had served during the eight-year conflict. Only the previous March, many officers had threatened to mutiny in a pay dispute with Congress. Only Washington's leadership resolved the conflict.

At Fraunces Tavern in what is now downtown New York, Washington, accompanied by three officers, climbed the stairs to the second floor room where his subordinates had gathered. Silently, Washington served a glass of Madeira to himself. The officers did likewise and sampled the cold lunch as they waited for their leader to propose a toast.

"With a heart full of love and gratitude, I now take leave of you," said their commander, briefly but emotionally. "I most devoutly wish that your latter days may be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious and honorable."

Always the master of the moment, Washington had captured the hearts and minds of his subordinates. "I cannot come to each of you. But shall feel obliged if each of you will come and take me by the hand." Washington was overcome by emotion -- as was everyone in the room.

Henry Knox, a Massachusetts bookseller before the war, had been Washington's chief of artillery during the entire war. "General Knox being nearest to him turned to the Commander-in-chief who, suffused in tears, was incapable of utterance but grasped his hand when they embraced each other in silence," later wrote one of the officers. "In the same affectionate manner every officer in the room marched up and parted with his general in chief. Such a scene of sorrow and weeping I had never before witnessed and fondly hope I may never be called to witness again."

When Washington had completed his silent goodbyes, he moved to the door and wordlessly lifted his hand in farewell. The Virginia planter then proceeded to a ferry that took him across the harbor to New Jersey. He and his aides rode south to Philadelphia and then to Annapolis, where on Dec. 23 General Washington returned his commission to the Continental Congress meeting there. Like the legendary Roman general Cincinnatus, to whom he would be compared, Washington was leaving the battlefield for his farm.

"Having now finished the work assigned me," Washington told Congress, "I retire from the greater theater of action and bidding farewell to this august body under whom I have long acted, I here offer my commission and take leave of all the employments of public life."

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