

Focus on Freedom

WASHINGTON'S FAREWELL ADDRESS

On September 17, 1796, nearing the end of his second term as President, George Washington announced that he would soon retire from public life. In the tradition of the times, Washington's Farewell Address was not delivered as a speech. Instead it was printed in a Philadelphia newspaper and later reprinted in other papers across the nation. In the speech Washington warned the American people of the dangers he believed were ahead. Among his concerns was the formation of political parties.

Let me . . . warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful [very harmful] effects of the spirit of party. . . .

This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature. . . . It exists under different shapes in all governments . . . and is truly their worst enemy. . . .

It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one part against another; foment occasionally riot and insurrection. . . .

There is an opinion that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the administration of government, and serve to keep alive the spirit of liberty. This within certain limits is probably true; and in governments of a monarchical cast patriotism may look with indulgence, if not favor, upon the spirit of party. But in those of the popular

character, in governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged. . . . There being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be, by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it. A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

Examining the Document

Reviewing Facts

1. Cite what Washington believed to be the harmful effects of political parties.
2. Describe the type of government under which political parties were acceptable to Washington.

Critical Thinking Skills

3. Making Inferences Why does Washington want to control political parties rather than abolish them?