



Washington's Farewell Address Socratic Seminar

Context: It is 1796 and Washington is nearing the end of his second term. He had wanted to retire in 1792, but Hamilton (and others) had convinced him that the fragile Republic was in dire need of his leadership. Washington is now determined to leave office once again.

Washington is concerned about his legacy. His detractors in the press and his political rivals have been calling him a monarchist. They accuse him of clinging to power. He wants to willingly lay down power and retire to prove them wrong. He also greatly desires rest after his long years of public service.

He tasks Hamilton with drafting his farewell address. Writing with Washington's voice comes easily to Hamilton, as he handled Washington's correspondence during the war. While Hamilton writes it, the substance of the text is undoubtedly Washington's. Hamilton writes multiple drafts and Washington edits and provides feedback for these drafts via numerous letters over a span of some months. What emerges is a letter to the American people that contains a series of warnings that are as relevant today as they were in 1796. [Full text.](#)

1. Why is Washington retiring? Why not run for reelection in 1796?
2. How does Washington justify his decision to relinquish power?
3. Why, according to Washington, is it so critical that the United States remain united? How do the sections of the country benefit from this unity? What will happen to the states if they break apart? (tie in to Federalist #6)
4. Why does Washington believe the spirit of party is so dangerous? (tie in to Federalist #10).
5. Washington writes, "...that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government." What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree with Washington? Do you believe our Republic is a virtuous one today?
6. What role, according to Washington, does education play in the preservation of the Republic?
7. Why does Washington warn against the accumulation of debt?
8. Why, according to Washington, do foreign alliances endanger the Republic? (tie in with Article V of NATO charter)
9. Can you detect any other warnings or attacks (against individuals, countries, or parties) in this letter?