IN SEPTEMBER, 1796, a tired and embittered President Washington was determined to exclude himself from consideration for a third term of office. The Father of His Country had wanted to retire at the end of his first term in 1792 and conceived of the idea of announcing his exit from public life by publishing a valedictory address. However, the urging of friends including both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson had convinced him to stay on for another term. But four years later, even the entreaties of his friends were not enough to dissuade Washington from his chosen course; the barbs thrown by Republican journalists had penetrated the thin-skinned President. Early in 1796 he revived his old idea of issuing a valedictory to the American people. The rather lengthy message slowly took shape and first appeared in Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser, No. 5444, on September 19, 1796.

The Farewell Address, as it came to be called, was soon elevated to the status of a sacred document, rivaled only by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and, later, the Monroe Doctrine. No ambitious nineteenth-century American politician could afford not to pay lip service to Washington’s parting advice “to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world” when discussing any diplomatic question of import. In the 1880’s, for example, the custom arose in the Senate of reading the Farewell Address on Washington’s Birthday and this tradition, formalized by standing order in 1901, has continued to the present day. The first President’s name was often invoked during the foreign policy debates of the years between Versailles and Pearl Harbor, usually by

1 The Address was given directly to the press. It was never spoken by Washington.

2 Congressional Record, 75th Congress, 1st Session, 1458. The Address was supposed to be alternately read by a Democrat and a Republican to signify bipartisan adherence to its precepts.
those who favored a more limited role for the United States in world affairs. Even today, after nearly three decades of world involvement and responsibility, so-called "neoisolationists" are calling for retrenchment both in foreign aid and military commitments. Clearly, the cycle has swung full circle. Political oratory has changed drastically and the references to the Founding Fathers are fewer, but the ideas expressed in Washington's Farewell, as they have traditionally been defined, are once again in vogue.

The historical evolution of the Farewell Address within the realm of American political folklore is an exceedingly involved story which need not concern us here. Rather, this article will deal with the historiography of the Farewell, specifically the controversies concerning authorship, motivation, and meaning.

The debate over the authorship of the Farewell Address began in the early nineteenth century and has continued almost unabated to the present. Despite the seemingly unitary nature of the question, there are really two key issues involved—the actual literary authorship of the document and the philosophical origins of the ideas it contains. That the two are not necessarily synonymous is a fact which many historians have neglected to point out.

The first phase of the controversy revolves around the question of literary authorship. After Alexander Hamilton's death in 1804, a group of Hamilton partisans led by his widow claimed that he and not Washington had authored the Farewell Address. Proof of this fact, they insisted, existed in the late President's private correspondence which was being kept closed by his family. This partisan view was still being expounded by the Hamilton family and others into the twentieth century. In *The Intimate Life Of Alexander Hamilton*, Allan McLane Hamilton charged that certain incriminating papers had been withheld by "a small coterie of Washington's friends" in order to give the President full credit for the address. These secret papers, he insisted, "certainly show that there was collaboration, at least, and probably that much of the original mate-
rial, and most of the suggestions, originated with Hamilton.”⁵ James G. Randall, in an article which appeared in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1931, went even further and claimed that Hamilton was Washington’s “ghost writer.” Hamilton, he declared, wrote the Farewell Address. Washington merely copied it.⁶

Certain of the early Federalist writers like Chief Justice John Marshall fail even to mention Hamilton in connection with the formulation of the Address, implying by their silence that no real question regarding authorship existed as far as they were concerned.⁷ On the other hand, Jared Sparks, the Federalist-leaning Harvard historian who first edited the President’s private correspondence, presents a surprisingly objective, and, in terms of later scholarship, reasonably accurate view of the situation. He notes that Hamilton had stood by the President in every hour of trial and occupied the highest place in his confidence. “To whom could Washington more safely apply for the fruits of a wise and disciplined mind?” asks Sparks. “From whom could he hope for better counsel, or a more sacred regard for so confidential a trust?”⁸

Sparks did not have all the correspondence relating to the Address at his disposal and readily admitted that until such a time when someone compared all the papers which ever existed on the subject “the precise paragraphs, words, or thoughts which originated with either” could not be known.⁹ Yet he was willing to hazard a guess on the basis of the material which he had examined. The Address, he concludes, “is much indebted for its language and style to the careful revision and skilful [sic] pen of Hamilton.” No doubt, says Sparks, “he suggested some of the topics and amplified others.” But

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⁵ Allan McLane Hamilton, *The Intimate Life Of Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1911), 87.
⁸ Jared Sparks, *The Life Of George Washington* (Boston, 1839), 526–527. Also see Sparks, *The Writings Of George Washington: Being His Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, And Other Papers, Official And Private, Selected And Published From The Original Manuscripts, With A Life Of The Author, Notes, And Illustrations* (Boston, 1837), XII, 385–398.
he insists that this aid, "however valuable," does not "detract from the substantial merit of Washington" or "divest him of a fair claim to the authorship of the address." The question of authorship is of "small moment" since the Address consists of Washington's known sentiments. He maintains that it "derives its value, and is destined to immortality, chiefly from the circumstance of its containing wise, pure, and noble sentiments, sanctioned by the name of Washington." A Hamilton's Farewell Address would have meant nothing.

Horace Binney's *An Inquiry Into The Formation Of Washington's Farewell Address*, written in 1859, ranks as one of the first critical essays in American historiography. This prominent Philadelphia lawyer-turned-historian did not have access to the original manuscripts and was forced to work from rather incomplete texts. Furthermore, his documentation is often inaccurate and his points extremely difficult to follow. Yet, despite these shortcomings, his conclusions, though superficial, have been proved reasonably accurate by later research.

Washington, Binney suggests, "was the designer, in the general sense, if not in the artistic." "The Address was to disclose his principles and admonitions, of which he gave a full outline, in sentiments sufficiently delineated by him to characterize and identify them." As for "order, symmetry, amplification, illustration, support by reasoning . . . or even additions of the same temperament as those he had expressed," all these, says Binney, he left to Hamilton.

The most intensive research on the literary authorship of the document has been done by Victor H. Paltsits, late Chief Research Librarian at the New York Public Library. In *Washington's Farewell Address*, Paltsits assembled facsimiles of every draft and letter which has any bearing on the formulation of the Address and then proceeded to trace meticulously the literary origins of its thoughts and phraseology. His conclusions regarding its authorship are similar to those reached by Jared Sparks and Horace Binney. He notes

10 Ibid., 530.
11 Ibid., 525–526.
12 Ibid., 530.
that Washington had on other occasions “solicited and gratefully accepted Hamilton’s ideas and skills in literary structure.” Was it not natural for him to invoke Hamilton’s aid on the document through which he was to make known his retirement?\textsuperscript{15}

Paltsits concludes that the drafting of the Farewell Address was a joint project, “a picture of cooperative enterprise in which Washington was always the principal, and Hamilton a devoted, friendly, and disinterested volunteer.”\textsuperscript{16} Washington’s ideas or “sentiments,” he feels, are dominant throughout the Address. Hamilton knew from Washington that whatever he might do in “reshaping, rewriting, or forming anew a draft,” the results had to be “predicated upon the sentiments which Washington had indicated.”\textsuperscript{17} Hamilton always had recognized that in the last analysis, the President would be the final judge. “Washington,” Paltsits declares, “was his own editor; and what he published to the world as a Farewell Address, was in its final form and content what he had chosen to make it by processes of adoption and adaption. By this procedure every idea became his own without equivocation.”\textsuperscript{18}

Recent students of the period like John C. Miller, Felix Gilbert, and Douglas Southall Freeman and his associates accept Paltsits’ contention that the final literary product represents a collaboration of the thoughts of Washington, Madison (who had written the 1792 valedictory), and Hamilton, with Washington serving as the final editor.\textsuperscript{19} But however much historians owe to Paltsits for his pioneer-
ing and exhaustive research, the fact remains that his is a rather sterile analysis, narrow in scope and largely devoid of historical significance. He makes no attempt to trace the origins of the ideas contained in the Address or to place them in their proper context. Rather, we are led to believe that the document took shape within an intellectual vacuum and represented only the thought of the three contributing authors.

The noted diplomatic historian Samuel Flagg Bemis was the first to approach the question of authorship on a more meaningful level. In an article in the American Historical Review in 1933, Bemis anticipated Paltsits' conclusions regarding literary authorship of the document. However, he goes on to insist that the ideas contained in the Address did not originate with either Washington or Hamilton but were merely the restatement of commonly accepted principles of the time. The experience of twenty years of independence had made American statesmen very wary of close ties with Europe. The writings of Thomas Paine, John Jay, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson are, he says, "full of affirmations that it was the true policy of the United States to steer clear of European politics."

In a later article, Bemis attempted to assess John Quincy Adams' influence in the formulation of the Farewell Address. In 1793 young Adams had written two letters under the pseudonyms "Columbus" and "Marcellus" warning of the perils of foreign intrigue in American domestic affairs. Later, as Minister to the Netherlands, Adams had seen at first hand the danger of foreign meddling. He was convinced, says Bemis, "that French diplomacy was bent on treating the United States as it did the satellite republics which it set up for its own

"one only need compare the different drafts to recognize how completely the Address is Washington's in both thought and form." "Especially noteworthy," they insist, "is the fact that it is Washington's corrections and additions which give high distinction to the paper." Nathaniel Wright Stephenson and George Waldo Dunn, George Washington (New York, 1940), II, 412.

20 "The trunk and branches of the sturdy tree were Washington's. The shimmering foliage dancing and shining in the sunlight was Hamilton's." In the writing of the final text, the two men thought in "absolute unison." Samuel Flagg Bemis, "Washington's Farewell Address: A Foreign Policy Of Independence," American Historical Review, XXXIX (1934), 262.

21 In this regard, see Bemis' earlier article, "The Background Of Washington's Foreign Policy," Yale Review, XVI (1927), 316–337.

purposes in Europe,” and he voiced these fears in his private correspondence with his father, the Vice-President. Washington had read both the “Columbus” and “Marcellus” letters when they had appeared in the newspapers, and the Vice-President had undoubtedly showed him and perhaps Hamilton his son’s private correspondence. After a detailed analysis, Bemis concludes that John Quincy Adams’ public letters in the American press and his private notes to his father “had an appreciable influence upon the mind of the President as he thought over what he desired to say in the Address.” Indeed, Bemis feels that “so clearly do the thoughts of the younger Adams, even little traces of his phraseology, appear in the Farewell Address that one may wonder whether Washington may not have had still before him the letters of “Columbus” when he drew up the first draft of that document.”

Later in this same article, however, Bemis cautions the reader not to conclude that John Quincy Adams was “unduly responsible” for the ideas contained in Washington’s valedictory. Returning to his earlier position, he concludes that “presumably, the Address would have been given out, in somewhat the same form, if Adams had never lived, for these ideas already were common to American statesmen and diplomatists of the time.” They were “the fruit of American diplomatic experience since the Declaration of Independence.”

According to Bemis, John Quincy Adams shared these principles of foreign policy which were confirmed by his close-hand observation of the wars of the French Revolution. “Thus validated, they had reinforced Washington’s own opinions and even shaped their expression a little.”

Two exceedingly able scholars, John C. Miller and Alexander DeConde, have refined Bemis’ thesis, arguing that the ideas expressed in the Farewell were the common property of the Federalist party and cannot be said to represent the exclusive thoughts of any one man. “Every point made in this valedictory,” Miller notes, “had

24 Ibid., 377.
25 Ibid., 381.
26 Ibid. Also see Bemis, “The Background Of Washington’s Foreign Policy,” and J. Fred Rippy, America And The Strife Of Europe (Chicago, 1938), Chapter I.
been enunciated by Washington, Hamilton, and other leading Federalists at one time or another." DeConde similarly declares that these were "prevalent" Federalist ideas on foreign policy and politics and "can be found expressed in various ways in the polemical literature of the time." One student of American diplomacy, Felix Gilbert, sees the intellectual origins of the Address in "the large complex of enlightened eighteenth century thought." Unlike Bemis, who feels that the American concept of isolationism was a result of the young country's experience, Gilbert believes it was inherited from Europe. This tradition of isolation was, he insists, embedded in the American mind long before the Revolution.

On the question of literary authorship, Gilbert accepts Paltsits' contention that the final document represents a collaboration of the minds of Washington, Hamilton, and Madison, with Washington acting as editor-in-chief. "Washington," he insists, "would not place his name on a document which he could not regard as an expression of his own mind and ideas." However, Gilbert tries to show that Hamilton's contribution went beyond a mere "execution of Washington's instructions." Hamilton, he feels, added "a new intellectual element" to the section of the document dealing with foreign affairs. Where Washington had favored a more idealistic statement of policy, Hamilton succeeded in writing into the Address "a general principle of policy for America" which showed his clear awareness of the realities of power politics. Thus, under Hamilton's direction, idealism had given way to a classic statement of the doctrine of the interests of America.

There has similarly been a great deal of disagreement about the motives which prompted Washington to issue the Farewell Address. John Marshall, the staunch Federalist, felt that the President wanted

28 Miller, 196.
30 Gilbert, 69. Also see his article, "The New Diplomacy Of The Eighteenth Century," World Politics, IV (1951), 28-29.
31 Gilbert, The Beginnings Of American Foreign Policy, 128.
32 Ibid., 168.
33 Ibid., 130.
to end his political career with "an act which might be at the same time, suitable to his own character and permanently useful to his country." The Address, then represents a last effort by Washington to impress upon his countrymen "those great political truths which had been the guides of his own administration."

Jared Sparks unashamedly admired "the vigor of its language, the soundness of its maxims, the wisdom of its counsels, and its pure and elevated sentiments," and believed that it represented a sincere attempt by Washington to convey his "sentiments and advice" to the people. Politician-historian Henry Cabot Lodge proved no less subjective in his appraisal. "Now, from the heights of great achievement he [Washington] turned to say farewell to the people whom he so much loved, and whom he had so greatly served." "Every word," says Lodge, "was instinct with the purest and wisest patriotism."

Washington's primary reason for issuing the Farewell Address, according to Roland Usher, was to "remove doubt at the next election as to his candidacy for the office of President." Thus, the President hit upon the idea of a valedictory address, which, "apparently occasioned by more general and permanent considerations," would "make the statement of his unwillingness to become a Presidential candidate incidental to larger issues."

Washington biographers John C. Fitzpatrick and Douglas Southall Freeman and Freeman's associates agree with Usher on this point. The purpose of the valedictory address, they feel, was to clear the political atmosphere by eliminating Washington from the next election. They insist that the document must be viewed as the disinterested warnings of a parting friend who was sincerely concerned about the future welfare of his beloved country.

In his book *The Beginnings Of American Foreign Policy*, Felix Gilbert emphasizes this idea of the Farewell Address as Washington's political testament. According to Gilbert, Hamilton wanted the President to leave to his successor "an explanation of the

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34 Marshall, II, 468.
37 Usher, 29-30.
38 Fitzpatrick, 497-499; Carroll and Ashworth, 401. The latter is, in many respects, a monumental work but displays a lack of insight regarding the Farewell. Perhaps this fault would have been corrected had Freeman lived to complete the final volume.
principles which had guided his policy, just as other rulers and statesmen of the eighteenth century were accustomed to doing in their political testaments." By revising Washington's draft for a valedictory, Gilbert feels that Hamilton succeeded in transforming it into such a document. 39

Washington's fundamental concern, Gilbert insists, was "the need for overcoming the spirit of party in decisions in foreign policy." The President saw himself as the nonpartisan leader of the nation whose duty was to urge all politicians to unite under "the banner of true national interest." Thus, Gilbert views the Farewell Address as a warning against "the spirit of faction" and against "the danger of letting ideological predilections and prejudices enter considerations of foreign policy." 40

Samuel Flagg Bemis has persistently and persuasively argued that Washington's Farewell clearly enunciated "a foreign policy of independence" at a time when the French Government was trying to exert an influence in American domestic affairs. The immediate purpose of the Address, Bemis says, "was to strike a powerful blow against French meddling in American affairs." 41 He insists that the Farewell Address did not disown the French Alliance, but "taught a patronizing ally that we were an independent and a sovereign nation, and that the French Republic could not use in America . . . the lever of a political opposition to overthrow any government that stood in the way of French policy, purpose, and interest." 42

A number of historians have preferred to view the Farewell Address as a constitutional document—an effort by Washington to reinforce the sagging concept of unity and boost a nascent nationalism. In his multivolume A History Of The United States, Edward Channing suggests that Washington regarded all feelings of sectionalism with deep foreboding because they tended "to teach the minds

39 Gilbert, The Beginnings Of American Foreign Policy, 134. John C. Miller, p. 197, also accepts this view of the Farewell Address. An older work which offers a similar interpretation is Horace E. Scudder, George Washington: An Historical Biography (Boston, 1891), 243.

40 Gilbert, The Beginnings Of American Foreign Policy, 123–124. Paul Varg believes that Washington's fears were groundless because the pro-French sympathies of most Republicans were "rigidly subordinate to their American Nationalism." Paul A. Varg, Foreign Policies Of The Founding Fathers (East Lansing, 1963), 113.

41 Bemis, "Washington's Farewell Address," 263.

of men to consider the Union as an object to which they ought not to attach their hopes and fortunes.” The purpose of his valedictory, says this consensus historian, was to implore the people to look upon the federal system as the “paladium of your potential safety and prosperity” and to “discountenance any suspicion that it can be abandoned.”

Nathan Schachner essentially agrees with Channing and takes direct issue with Bemis. Washington, he says, very clearly recognized that the real threat to the Union was internal and not external. “With all the earnestness at his command, Washington warned against party passions and ‘designing men’ who sought to create the impression that ‘there is a real difference of local interests and views based on geographical dispersion.’” Schachner rather carelessly concludes that “the true interrelation and interdependence of North, South and West” was “the major and indeed the only theme of the Valedictory.”

Charles A. Beard’s view of the Farewell Address in The Republic (published in 1943) was considerably different from what he had said some ten years earlier in The Idea Of National Interest. The earlier work had been written during a time of intense introspection. Beard, the isolationist, had viewed the Farewell Address as a doctrine of national interest. Washington had realized that “nations in their intercourse with one another were governed by their interests” and hoped that the young republic would profit from “a knowledge of these stubborn truths.” This advice, according to Beard, was as relevant in 1934 as it had been in 1796 because he felt that it was still in the interest of the United States to pursue a foreign policy of nonentanglement.

When Beard was writing The Republic, the United States was engaged in a desperate struggle with the totalitarian Axis nations and old American institutions now took on a new meaning for the old progressive historian. So did the Farewell Address. Washington’s valedictory, he concludes, was at bottom “a plea for the continuation of the Union and constitutional government.” It “posits the

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43 Edward Channing, A History Of The United States (New York, 1927), IV, 156.
Union as necessary to the security, the progress, and the true grandeur of the nation." In that sense, says Beard, "it was above all partisanship." "It provides guidance for us as long as constitutional government endures." 46

Another group of historians led by Alexander DeConde have taken the position that the Farewell Address was wholly a partisan document. Washington's aim, they insist, was to defend his administration against Republican attacks. They feel that by 1796 even the idealistic Washington had come to realize that nonpartisanship was a myth. The President had become the central figure in emerging party politics 47 and the Farewell "laid the basis for Federalist strategy of using Washington's great prestige to appeal to patriotism, as against the evil of foreign machinations, to make 'Federalist' and 'Patriot' synonymous in the minds of the electorate." 48 The revisionists argue that at the time the Address was recognized for what it really was—"a political manifesto"—"the opening blast in the campaign to prevent the election to the presidency of Thomas Jefferson." 49

Perhaps the most unusual interpretation of the motivation behind the Farewell is given by Harold W. Bradley in an article which appeared in the Journal Of Southern History in 1945. Bradley feels that the old warrior possessed "a cautious humanitarianism" which led him to "deplore the cruelties of war." While he admits that the General was no pacifist, he does believe that his antipathy to war

47 This development is discussed in John Bach McMaster, A History Of The People Of The United States From The Revolution To The Civil War (New York, 1919), II, 290-291.
was genuine. It is this hatred of war, Bradley argues, which "explains in part" Washington's anxiety that "this country should avoid a participation in the quarrels of the old world."\(^{50}\)

Because of the ambiguous tone of the Address, statesmen and historians have never agreed on its meaning, particularly in regard to foreign policy. The canonization of the so-called "Great Rule of non-entanglement" indicates the preponderant assumption that Washington was speaking to future generations, but the actual words of the Address itself neither affirm nor deny that supposition. Its words are similarly vague in regard to its space and scope. As one historian has correctly put it: "The words are at the same time inherently unclear, and yet, with certain predispositions in the interpreter, sufficiently suggestive to give the illusion of clarity to interpreters from the most diverse schools of thought."\(^{51}\)

One extremely heterogeneous group has maintained that Washington was warning future generations of the perils of American involvement in the affairs of other nations. John Marshall regarded the Address as a "Great Rule" which contained precepts "to which the American statesman can not too frequently recur."\(^{52}\) Washington partisans John Spencer Bassett and Willis Fletcher Johnson both viewed the document as a most sacred political legacy,\(^{53}\) and Henry Cabot Lodge, who at one time was willing to see America join with other civilized nations to promote peace, was later encouraged by the exigencies of party politics to regard the first President's advice as permanently binding on the nation. "Children and children's children have turned to it in all times," Lodge declared in 1920,\(^{54}\)


\(^{51}\) Weinberg, "Washington's 'Great Rule' In Its Historical Evolution," 115. One late nineteenth-century writer, for example, seriously argued that Washington's Farewell Address indirectly favored our retention of the Philippines because annexation would give pause to those European nations casting covetous eyes towards South America. Robert Ellis Jones, "Washington's Farewell Address And Its Applications," *Forum*, XXVIII (1899), 13-38.

\(^{52}\) Marshall, II, 469.

“and have known that there was no room for error in following its counsels.”

For isolationist Charles A. Beard, these were not “light words, spoken privately, or angry ejaculations made in the heat of controversy.” Rather, they were “weighed and winged words, directed to his contemporaries and coming ages—the expressions of a firm conviction carefully matured out of a long and varied experience.”

Beard saw Washington as advocating a policy of “Continental Americanism”—a concentration on the continental domain and the building of a unique civilization to realize the promise of America. Such a policy, Beard insisted, was not “blind isolationism” or “a rejection of all collaboration with foreign powers,” but rather “a positive program” for choosing peace or war and making temporary arrangements with other governments in “the interests of our destiny and continental security.”

Nowhere in the Address, a piqued Beard declared, did Washington “lend any sanction to the idea that, at some future time, the United States should interfere in the European combination and collusions of power or take part in the efforts to settle the internal quarrels of that continent.”

Those of an internationalist persuasion have tended to view the Farewell in a quite different light. James G. Randall, who favored American membership in the World Court and close cooperation with the League of Nations, argued that the Address was by no means a call for complete isolation or a warning not to deal with European countries on matters common to the United States and Europe. Randall insisted that “the reference to temporary alliances as well as the qualification of the warning against permanent alliances . . . shows how far Washington was from any notion of absolute isolation.”

In their widely-used texts on foreign policy, both John H. Latané and George H. Blakeslee argued strongly for American membership in the League. Latané made the point that Washington regarded a

55 Charles A. Beard, *A Foreign Policy For America* (New York, 1940), 15.
56 Ibid., 18.
57 Ibid., 19.
58 Randall, 225.
policy of isolation as "a temporary expedient" rather than as "a cardinal rule" of United States foreign policy.\textsuperscript{59} Blakeslee agreed with this assessment, reminding his readers that the General had spoken of a time in the future when "our institutions being firmly consolidated and working with complete success, we might safely and perhaps beneficially take part in the consultations held by foreign states for the advantage of the nations."\textsuperscript{60}

Internationalist Louis B. Wright, writing in 1943, was especially fearful that the United States would crawl back into her isolationist cocoon at the end of the war. Washington's valedictory, Wright declared, was merely "a defense of his own policies and a plea for caution in foreign relations during the immediate future."\textsuperscript{61} He was giving realistic advice to the nation "as it was," not "as it might be ten or more generations later."\textsuperscript{62} Now (in 1943), the United States had outgrown the weaknesses which the first President was trying to protect, and modern technology had made the ancient dream of withdrawal within our borders "a fantasy." Wright argued that if Washington were living in the present, he would agree that the national interest now demanded "the assumption of international leadership and international responsibility."\textsuperscript{63}

Alexander DeConde, like Wright, feels that it is foolish to believe that Washington was attempting to establish long-enduring principles to guide the nation's future foreign policy. To do that, he insists, "is to endow Washington with powers reserved for the gods of Olympus."\textsuperscript{64} Washington's main interest, says DeConde, was in negating the alliance with France, and he realized that for the greatest psychological appeal any attack on the Alliance would have to be clothed in terms of "non-involvement with Europe." In time,
“this specific meaning was lost and only the generalization remained.”

Samuel Flagg Bemis also curtly dismisses the claim that Washington was seeking to establish a “Great Rule,” but he sees a totally different meaning in the Address than DeConde. In Bemis’ opinion it was aimed not at the French Alliance but at foreign (French) meddling which Washington considered “one of the most baneful foes of Republican Government.” “What we have generally construed as a policy of isolation,” Bemis declares, ought really to be interpreted “as a policy of vigilant defense and maintenance of sovereign national independence against foreign meddling in our internal domestic concerns.”

Conversely, J. Fred Rippy feels that Washington was trying to lay down a general rule for the conduct of foreign affairs, at least for the immediate future. He argues that the President was fearful that temptation to depart from the policy of isolation would have to be faced in the future—even the immediate future, because European nations were “neither willing to consider America a realm apart from their political activities nor content to assume that the United States could not be induced to participate in European politics.” In this sense, says Rippy, the Farewell Address was really Washington’s political testament.

Felix Gilbert, as noted earlier, emphasizes Alexander Hamilton’s role in formulating the section of the Farewell dealing with foreign affairs. It was Hamilton who added the “Great Rule” of foreign policy which was based on “a realistic evaluation of America’s situation and interests.” Thus, in Gilbert’s opinion, Hamilton was

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65 DeConde, “Washington’s Farewell, The French Alliance, And The Election of 1796,” 650. Roland Usher, pp. 33-35, presents a similar view of the Alliance. Richard Van Alstyne, on the other hand, argues that the French Alliance, in spite of its provisions for permanency, “was no real embarrassment to the administration.” Richard W. Van Alstyne, American Diplomacy In Action: A Series Of Case Studies (Stanford, 1944), 619.


67 Rippy, 19. Rippy feels that Washington was merely expressing sentiments which were quite common at the time. Furthermore, he insists that Washington was not a dyed-in-the-wool isolationist. “More emphatic assertions of isolationism had been made in the past,” he notes, and “other statesmen of the year 1796 might have expressed them with greater emphasis” (p. 8).
responsible for turning Washington’s rather idealistic valedictory into “the first statement . . . of the principles of American foreign policy.” 68

In his scantily documented but none the less important book, The Contours Of American History, New Left historian William Appleman Williams sees the Farewell Address as a manifestation of a developing American tradition of expansion. Washington’s valedictory, says Williams, was, at bottom, a plea to his countrymen “to calm their fears and take advantage of the opportunity that was theirs to become the leading pioneer of the world.” “Far from being a call for isolation what Washington issued was a mercantilist manifesto for an unchallengeable empire.” In William’s opinion Washington’s Farewell ranks as one of the great documents of what he refers to as “America’s Age of Mercantilism.” 69

The debate over the Farewell Address is similar in many ways to the controversy surrounding the Monroe Doctrine. In both cases we find ourselves confronted with a myriad of interpretations concerning authorship, purpose, and meaning, each reflecting in some way, the insights and biases of the observer.

The question of actual literary authorship of the Farewell has become somewhat clearer thanks to twentieth-century scholarship. Victor H. Paltsits shows that the Address was probably a product of the combined pens of Washington, Hamilton, and, to a lesser extent, Madison, with the President serving as the editor-in-chief. Felix Gilbert assigns a much greater role to Hamilton but realistically concludes that “it seems sound procedure to regard as the author of a document a man who signed it and took responsibility for it.” 70

68 Gilbert, The Beginnings Of American Foreign Policy, 135.
69 William Appleman Williams, The Contours Of American History (Cleveland, 1961), 173-174. This view is seconded by Burton Ira Kaufman, the editor of a recently published book, which conveniently brings together a sampling of the differing interpretations of the Farewell. The valedictory, says Kaufman, was “A Statement of Empire” which is understandable “only in relation to Washington’s concept of his country’s imperial future, a concept whose roots lie in the history of both the country and the man.” Burton Ira Kaufman, “Washington’s Farewell Address: A Statement of Empire,” in Washington’s Farewell Address: The View From The 20th Century (Chicago, 1969), 171.
70 Gilbert, The Beginnings Of American Foreign Policy, 168.
The origin of the ideas contained in the Farewell remains open to question. Gilbert insists that the intellectual bedrock for American foreign policy (and the Farewell Address) was European Enlightenment thought. Samuel Flagg Bemis and J. Fred Rippy, on the other hand, argue that the Address only restated commonly-held ideas which grew out of the American experience. Further work in this area remains to be done, but on the basis of the evidence presented, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Address was more a product of American experience than European philosophical thought.

Only a person lacking historical insight into the period would argue that Washington's valedictory was a noble and disinterested legacy to the nation. The Farewell Address has relevance only within its historical context and first and foremost represents Washington's response to critics of his administration. Since the critics were, for the most part, Republicans, Alexander DeConde and fellow revisionists appear to be correct in suggesting that this was a partisan document. There is also little doubt that Washington and his advisers designed the Address in such a way as to have maximum influence on the presidential election of 1796. In this sense DeConde is justified in viewing it as a campaign document.

The valedictory did plead for the continuation of the Union as Channing, Beard, and Schachner suggest, but they fail to recognize that this was a plea for a Federalist Union and not a bipartisan one. The Address did speak of foreign meddling but hardly to the extent which Bemis leads us to believe. Furthermore, it was not intended as a warning to France, as Bemis insists, but rather was a warning to Republicans whose loyalty was suspect in Washington's eyes. Since most of the Francophiles were Republicans, the Address was also partisan in this sense.

The question which Wright and Schachner ask, "Would Washington be an isolationist in today's world?" is really a quite meaningless one. We should restrict ourselves to considering Washington's views within the context of his own time. A careful reading of the Address reveals that Washington was a political isolationist, at least given the relative weakness of the United States. Yet, as William Appleman Williams and Burton Ira Kaufman correctly point out,
he was also a commercial expansionist, a mercantilist with visions of empire for America. The two policies are inherently incongruous, yet express the same dichotomy which Felix Gilbert feels characterized American foreign policy during this era (and perhaps still does). Americans wanted the best of all worlds—political isolation and, at the same time, commercial intercourse.

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