

Washington's Circular Letter of 8 Jun 1783

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The year 1783 was not an easy one for the thirteen newly-independent former British colonies. Although formal hostilities had ended, the British continued to interfere with commerce. Congress under the Confederation was proving to be a weak and useless institution, unable to meet its financial obligations, and unable to force the states to meet their obligations to Congress. The financial situation was so bad, in fact, that there were a few conspiracies in which some attempted to enlist the aid of the army to force the states to make good on the requisitions imposed by Congress. General George Washington had himself defused such a conspiracy in Mar 1783, in which some of his senior officers had attempted to instill a revolt in the ranks because Congress had not been able to pay the men. Congress continued to seek authority to establish a steady and reliable revenue stream, but the states were opposed to it.

It was at this time that George Washington, as commander of the army, but intending to resign his commission, took the initiative to outline to each of the 13 state leaders his view on necessary reforms. He wrote a circular letter to each of the governors or presidents of the thirteen states, explaining the current situation as he saw it and what would be necessary to ensure that the Revolution had not been in vain. His letter was made public, and was widely published throughout the states in the summer of 1783. It was an early recognition that some move toward a more firm union of the states to replace the ineffective Articles of Confederation was necessary. Washington wrote in part [1]:

The citizens of America, placed in the most enviable conditions, as the sole lords and proprietors of a vast tract of continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the world, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification, acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and independency; they are, from this period, to be considered as the actors on a most conspicuous theater, which seems to be peculiarly designated by providence for the display of human greatness and felicity; here, they are not only surrounded with every thing which can contribute to the completion of private blessings, by giving a fairer opportunity for political happiness, than any other nation has ever been favored with. Nothing can illustrate these observations more forcibly, than a recollection of the happy conjuncture of times and circumstances, under which our republic assumed its rank among the nations; the foundation of our empire was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but at an epoch when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period, the researches of the human mind, after social happiness, have been carried to a great extent, the treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labors of the philosophers, sages, and legislatures, through a long succession of years, are laid open for our use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the establishment of our forms of government; the free cultivation of letters, the unbounded extension of commerce, the progressive refinement of manners, the growing liberality of sentiment, and above all, the pure and benign light of revelation, have had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a nation, and if their citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will entirely be our own.

Such is our situation, and such are our prospects: but notwithstanding the cup of blessing is thus reached out to us, notwithstanding happiness is ours, if we have a disposition to seize the occasion and make it our own; yet, it appears to me there is an option still left to the United States of America, that it is in our choice, and depends on their conduct, whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptible and miserable as a nation; this is the time of their political probation, this is the moment when the eyes of the whole world are turned upon them, this is the moment to establish or ruin their na-

tional character forever, this is the favorable moment to give such a tone to our federal government, as will enable it to answer the ends of its institution, or this may be the ill-fated moment for relaxing the powers of the union, annihilating the cement of the Confederation, and exposing us to become the sport of European politics, which may play one state against another to prevent their growing importance, and to serve their own interested purposes. For, according to the system of policy the states shall adopt at this moment, they will stand or fall, and by their confirmation or lapse, it is yet to be decided, whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse: a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn millions be involved.

With this conviction of the importance of the present crisis, silence in me would be a crime; I will therefore speak to your Excellency, the language of freedom and sincerity, without disguise; I am aware, however, that those who differ from me in political sentiment, may perhaps remark, I am stepping out of the proper line of my duty, and they may possibly ascribe to arrogance or ostentation, what I know is alone the result of the purest intention, but the rectitude of my own heart, which disdains such unworthy motives, the part I have hitherto acted in life, the determination I have formed, of not taking any share in public business hereafter, the ardent desire I feel, and shall continue to manifest, of quietly enjoying in private life, after all the toils of war, the benefits of a wise and liberal government, will, I flatter myself, sooner or later convince my countrymen, that I could have no sinister views in delivering with so little reserve, the opinions contained in this address.

There are four things, which I humbly conceive, are essential to the well being, I may even venture to say, to the existence of the United States as an independent power:

First. An indissoluble union of the states under one federal head.

Secondly. A sacred regard to justice.

Thirdly. The adoption of a proper peace establishment.

Fourthly. The prevalence of that pacific and friendly disposition, among the people of the United States, which will induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and in some instances, to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interests of the community.

These are the pillars on which the glorious fabric of our independency and national character must be supported; liberty is the basis, and who ever would dare to sap the foundation, or overturn the structure, under whatever specious pretexts he may attempt it, will merit the bitterest execration, and the severest punishment which can be inflicted by his injured country.

He then went on at some length to explain each of the first three main points: 1) that the federal government requires certain essential enforceable powers; 2) that creditors must be paid faithfully, and a certain means of revenue put in place, and secondly, the soldiers of the army must be fairly compensated; 3) that the militia is the backbone of the nation's defenses.

[1] John C. Fitzpatrick, editor, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799*, Washington: The United States Printing Office, (1938); Vol. 26, pp. 483-487