

January 01, 2008

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Recommended Citation

Fowler, William M. Jr., "Draft of the speech : Farewell to arms : George Washington's long good-bye" (2008). . Paper 1.
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10016831>

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Draft

Farewell to Arms: George Washington's Long Good- Bye

Speech Delivered at Mount Vernon December 2, 2008

William M. Fowler, Jr.

Huzzah, Huzzah Cornwallis beaten. British Army surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia. General Washington triumphant. These were the headlines for October 19, 1781. The war was over. The revolution was won. No, it was not and no one understood this better than the Commander in Chief.

As quickly as he could Washington was wrapping up his affairs at Yorktown so that he could hurry to Philadelphia to join Congress

in a grand celebration. Then came the messenger. Come quickly to Eltham a plantation a few miles away your stepson John Parke Custis is dying. Washington hurried to be with him. When he arrived his wife Martha, Jack's natural mother was already at his bedside. Thus far in her life Martha Washington had lost her first husband and three children. Jack, her fourth, was her last surviving child. He died in her arms. Philadelphia could wait. General Washington accompanied his wife, Jack's widow Nelly and their small children to Mount Vernon where the mourning began.

The war was not over, however, and despite the personal tragedy, duty called again. In late November the Washingtons left this sad household and made their way to Philadelphia. The commander in chief was going he said "to stimulate the Congress." And shake them out of their stupor.

For nearly four months the Washington enjoyed the convivial atmosphere of Philadelphia. Although the commander in chief

spent a good deal of time in somber meetings with Congress there was also ample time to take in the pleasures of the town. The Washingtons enjoyed the theater and the opera (one was written in his honor) as well as elegant dinners and balls. The commander in chief was reputed to have an eye for beautiful woman and despite his large frame he moved gracefully across the dance floor. He danced, they said every set. Despite the accolades being heaped upon him Washington was deeply uneasy. Congress was broke. They could barely get a quorum of members to attend. The army had not been paid. King George III showed no sign of compromise. Peace was not in sight. The enemy still occupied New York City. They also held Charleston, South Carolina, Savannah, Georgia and a good part of Maine. Our French allies were preparing to leave and the Royal Navy still controlled the seas.

In March 1782 Washington asked leave of Congress to join the army at Newburgh, New York just north of New York City.

Ordinarily, it had been Martha's custom during the war to join her husband during the winter season and then in the spring as campaigning got underway she would return to Mount Vernon. This year was different. Perhaps because of the deep personal sadness she felt the general thought it best that she not be left alone and so he persuaded her to join him as he rode north to Newburgh.

For his headquarters Washington commandeered the home of the widow Hasbrouck. It was a stone cottage overlooking the Hudson. Space was at a premium however, and the general and his wife had only one room to themselves – a bedroom directly off the kitchen. They had little privacy. It was a dreary place

Martha wearied of the boredom in Newburgh and missed Nelly and the children. In mid summer she went home to be with them. As he bid farewell Washington assured his wife that he would join her at Mount Vernon later in the year.

The dull routine of camp life at Newburgh was interrupted in September 1782 when the French army under General Rochambeau arrived. Parades, ceremonies and grand dinners filled the days as soldiers on both sides recounted the heady times they had shared at Yorktown. The visit was short, however, for Rochambeau's army was en route to Boston there to be met by transports and carried off to the West Indies. The French were leaving. Somber times.

Spirits were falling at Newburgh. The American army was in a sullen mood. Officers were angry at the neglect they were enduring at the hands of the Congress. Mutiny was rumored. Would the army turn on the commander in chief? Washington heard the rumors. In nearly eight years of war this may well have been one of the lowest points for the commander in chief. As winter closed in Washington changed his plans about returning

home. He dared not leave the Army. He wrote to Martha that affairs were too unsettled. He would not be home for Christmas.

Washington might have taken some comfort had he known of the consternation in London. The British too were in a mess.

To the great embarrassment of King George and his ministers they learned of Yorktown from the French. A swift French frigate had carried the news across the Atlantic first. Louis XVI knew before George III. When the messenger from Paris arrived in London he went immediately to Lord George Germain the American Secretary of State. Germain sent a message to the king and then hurried off to 10 Downing Street to deliver the news to the Prime Minister Lord North. North took the news, according to Germain “as he would have taken a ball in his breast. For he opened his arms, exclaiming wildly, as he paced up and down, “O God it is all over.”

Well, the king didn't think so. He told Germain and North that the "unfortunate" news from Virginia would not cause him to make "the smallest alteration in my conduct." At this point the British government fell into near chaos. Parliament voted for peace. The king threatened to abdicate. North tried to resign, but the king would not let him. All the while the press and public opinion were howling for an end to the war.

Across the channel in Paris Benjamin Franklin was holding private talks with his British counterparts. Franklin and the other American emissary John Adams were growing increasingly distrustful of the French. In defiance of their instructions from congress the Americans diplomats entered into secret negotiations with the British and did not inform the French.

Washington knew nothing of what was going on in London or Paris. Neither, for that matter, did the Congress in Philadelphia. Communication was slow. What Washington did know was that

his troops were restless and uneasy, his officers were grumbling and the enemy still strongly entrenched. For the commander in chief the winter ahead presented a dismal prospect broken only by Martha's return to Hasbrouck House in late fall of 1782,. She was ready once more to spend the winter with her husband.

The crisis came towards the end of winter in March 1783. An anonymous summons circulated amongst the officers at Newburgh calling them together for a special meeting where it was implied they might decide to talk up the sword against the congress. At noon Saturday March 15, 1783 the officers convened. To their surprise they were joined by the commander in chief. In a dramatic speech lasting not more than ten minutes Washington reminded his men of their patriotic duty. He assured them that he would take their cause to congress. "Washington stood," remembered one eyewitness "not at the head of his troops, but as it were in opposition to them: and for a dreadful moment the interests of the army and its General seemed to be in competition." But here was

their commander who had been at their side every moment at the war. “He spoke, every doubt was dispelled, and the tide of patriotism rolled again in its wonted course.” The officers, still unhappy but loyal, returned to their duties.

While the army still teetered on the edge of mutiny grand news arrived at Newburgh. The British had signed a preliminary peace. On April 19, 1783 (eight years to the day after Lexington and Concord) Washington ordered “A Proclamation for the Cessation of Hostilities.” In New York City the British commander General Sir Guy Carleton ordered his troops to stand down as well.

Sir Guy faced a great challenge. With peace coming his orders were to evacuate New York. That meant finding transport for more than 10,000 soldiers and nearly as many refugee Loyalists.

Terrified at what the patriot victory meant for them thousands of “Good Americans,” that is those who remained loyal to the king had sought Carleton’s protection. So too had many hundreds of

escaped slaves who had no intention of returning to servitude.

Carleton knew that it would take months to get everyone out.

Could he maintain order in the city during this tense time? How long would Washington and his army wait patiently for him to leave?

On April 21 Washington asked Carleton for a personal conference to determine the manner in which the British were to relinquish their posts in the United States and to settle issues concerning the restoration of American property. Carleton agreed to meet. On May 3 Washington left his headquarters in Newburgh and traveled by barge down river first to West Point and then to Peekskill where he stayed the night. The next morning he landed near the Tappan Zee and went immediately to the DeWint House, a small neat stone structure. It was a familiar place. Washington had stayed here twice before including in 1780 when he made his quarters here during the trial of Major Andre Benedict's Arnold co conspirator. It was at the DeWint House that he signed Andre's death warrant.

The next day HMS *Perseverance* accompanied by smaller vessels made her way up the river carrying Sir Guy Carleton His Majesty's Commander in Chief. What must have been in Washington's mind as the British in all their splendor had come to see him – the victor! Carleton came ashore and the two met at DeWint House.

Washington offered his guest a sumptuous dinner catered by his friend Samuel Fraunce New York City's best known tavern keeper who came up from the City for the occasion. The following day Washington went aboard *Perseverance*, where he was given a 17 gun salute. A tribute due to a full general and the first official recognition to be offered by His Majesty's government to the fledgling republic. The two day meeting was pleasant, convivial but unsuccessful. Despite Washington demands that he turn over all the "Negroes" Carleton refused. Washington then asked precisely when the British would be gone from New York Carleton replied that given his lack of transport he could not give any specific date.

Frustrated, that so little has been accomplished Washington returned to Newburgh where his army was fast disappearing. Many soldiers simply left – deserted. Others waited for their pay. Instead of money the bankrupt congress offered soldiers interest bearing certificates to be redeemed in the future. Having already experienced the faithlessness of the men in Philadelphia many soldiers viewed the certificates as another empty promise. In desperate need of cash they sold their certificates to speculators for a fraction of their face value. Sadly, once home weary soldiers found that their neighbors were nearly as indifferent to their plight as the Congress. The veterans returned according to one observer “to the bosom of their country, objects of jealousy, victims of neglect.”

Some of these “victims of neglect “rose up. In June 1783 about 100 soldiers of the Pennsylvania Line, angry at their treatment, marched from their camp in Lancaster, Pennsylvania to

Philadelphia to place their demands before the authorities.

Congress fearful and feckless, abandoned the city and fled to Princeton, New Jersey. When Washington heard the news of the mutiny he dispatched loyal soldiers to quell the rebellion. By the time they got to Philadelphia it was all over. The mutinous soldiers had returned peacefully to their barracks.

With little to do at Newburgh except wait for news of the final peace and the evacuation of the British Washington decided “to wear away a little time in performing a tour to the northward.”

Leaving Martha in Newburgh for three weeks Washington rode more than 700 miles visiting Ticonderoga, Crown Point, and lake Champlain. He then headed west up the Mohawk River and over to Lake Otsego and then back to Newburgh via Albany.

Ever the surveyor and land speculator Washington wrote a glowing account of the west and its possibilities. It was he said a rising empire.

Upon his return to Newburgh Washington found Martha in ill health He also found a summons from Congress to attend them at Princeton. For one of the few times during the entire Revolution Washington sent a snippy response. He told them that their request came at a moment when his wife was ill and not able to travel. He went on to describe his “disagreeable situation, waiting as I am, with little business and less command for the Definitive Treaty; when I have so anxious a desire of retiring from public life and reestablishing myself in domestic life where my private concerns call loudly for my presence.” Two weeks later Washington and his wife set out for Princeton. They stopped at West Point and visited with the Knoxes. In one of those inexplicable moments in history for some reason during the stay Washington, Knox and General Benjamin Lincoln agreed to be weighed. Washington 209 pounds, Lincoln 244, Knox 280.

The Washingtons arrived in Princeton on August 25. The general made his headquarters at the home of Margaret Berrien widow of Judge John Berrien, about four miles from Princeton College where the Congress was assembled. Remote, rural and boring neither Washington nor the members of Congress had much use for Princeton. Frequently not even enough members showed up to make a quorum. It was Washington wrote “an awkward and disagreeable situation, it being my anxious desire to quit the walks of public life, and under the shadow of my own vine and my own fig tree to seek those enjoyments and that relaxation, that a mind, that has been constantly upon the stretch for more than eight years, stands so much in need of.”

Washington’s old friend Thomas Paine, the author of *Common Sense* and *The Crisis*, came by to lighten life a bit. Washington and Paine had been close friends throughout the Revolution. The commander had never forgotten that in the war’s most dismal moments Paine had rallied Americans. “These are the times that

try men's souls." Paine wrote in *The Crisis*, "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country: but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny like hell is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph."

With that "glorious triumph" now at hand Paine and Washington took some time off to go on a scientific expedition. For years locals had reported seeing strange flames dancing on the Millstone River. Washington was curious. He had seen similar phenomena as a youth on his western travels. One night the two revolutionaries hired a boat and rowed out onto the river. With a long pole Washington stirred the bottom and then held a torch over the disturbed area. It suddenly took fire. He accounted the phenomena to be "swamp gas." He was right, not swamp gas but methane.

Washington the surveyor, frontiersman, soldier, and horseman enjoyed the outdoors. It was in many ways his natural environment. Less natural was inactivity and confinement and so it was with some reluctance that he agreed while whiling away time at Princeton to sit for his portrait.

During the battle of Princeton January 1777 British soldiers had taken refuge in Princeton College's Nassau Hall. Captain Alexander Hamilton rolled up cannon and fired a six pound shot that decapitated a full length portrait of King George III. Having no desire to repair that portrait the trustees of the college commissioned the Philadelphia painter Charles Willson Peale to replace the headless George with another George. Washington agreed to sit for Peale.

Sitting for his portrait, exploding swamp gas, listening to congressmen drone on with their complaints about dull Princeton

Washington yearned to be home. But he could not leave. Early in October 1783 Martha left to return to Mount Vernon “before the weather and roads should get bad.” She traveled by way of Philadelphia where she stayed with the Robert Morris family and spent several days buying furniture for her home. Hopefully, she remarked, the revolutionary days of enduring crowded headquarters and jolting carriage rides was over.

Martha’s departure left Washington with even less to do except to wait in ever more anxious anticipation for news of a final peace and the British evacuation from New York. That news arrived on October 23, 1783 when Washington learned that Carleton had received news of a final peace and that he planned to complete his withdrawal by the end of November. One week later the commander in chief issued his “Farewell Orders to the Armies of the United States.” It was he said time for him “to address himself once more, and that for the last time, to the armies of the United States and to bid them an affectionate, a long farewell.” He told

them “The unparalleled perseverance of the armies of the United States through every possible suffering and discouragement for the space of eight long years was little short of a standing miracle.”

“May ample justice be done to [you] and may the choicest of heaven’s favors attend those who under the divine auspices have secured innumerable blessings for others, with these wishes and his benediction the commander in chief takes leave from the service. The curtain of separation is drawn. The military scene is closed to him forever.”

While calling down the favor of heaven Washington also had more earthly concerns to which he needed to attend. He was in a New York state of mind. Seven years before he had been ignominiously driven from that city. Now he was planning to return in triumph. He made preparations to ride to West Point where what remained of the Continental Army was assembled under the command of General Henry Knox. These were the men, the most faithful of the

regiments, with whom he would return in honor to New York.

First, however, there was some personal business.

George Washington was an incredible archivist. Over the course of eight years he had carefully collected, and preserved his papers.

They were stored securely in “six strong hair trunks well clasped with good Locks.” Nothing was more important to the commander in chief than his reputation and legacy. These papers insured that both would survive.

He ordered Captain Bezaleel Howe commander of his personal guard to escort his papers which he told Captain Howe are “of immense value to me” home to Mount Vernon. He gave the precise route to follow and told them to be particularly careful ferrying across rivers especially the Susquehanna and Potomack which were wide and subject to high winds. Security was paramount He ordered that “The wagons should never be without a Sentinel over

them, always locked and the Keys in your possession.” By the way on your way through Philadelphia check with Mr. Morris to see if Mrs. Washington left anything behind.

As the wagons rumbled south Washington headed north to West Point to begin his final moments as commander in chief.

Accompanied by Knox the officer who had been with him since the earliest days of the war, Washington gathered what troops remained, about 800 in all and marched towards New York. He was soon joined by George Clinton governor of the state.

On Friday the 21st of November Washington paused at Day’s Tavern in Harlem (corner of 125th and 8th Ave). The troops went ahead and encamped at what is today the northern edge of Central Park. For three days Saturday, Sunday and Monday, the Americans waited at their posts while the British finished leaving the city boarding the waiting transports in the harbor.

Early in the morning of Tuesday November 25 the great moment arrived. General Knox led the American army into the city. Behind them came General Washington “straight as a dart and noble as he could be riding a spirited grey horse.” They swung onto Broadway and with cheering crowds lining the avenue made their way to the battery. The City was a sad sight. A great fire had swept through it in 1776, followed by a smaller conflagration two years later.

Virtually nothing had been rebuilt. Many fences, barns and out buildings that survived the fire had later been demolished to supply fuel for the cold winter months.

According to the orders from the commander in chief as soon as the troops were formed up at the battery “an office of the artillery will immediately hoist the American standard. On the standard being hoisted the artillery will fire thirteen rounds. The officers will salute His Excellency as he passes them, and the troops present their arms by corps and the drums beat a march.” Not all went as planned.

In a final act of spite the British nailed their colors to the peak of the Battery flagpole and then greased it from top to bottom. No one could get up the pole until a young captain John Van Arsdale managed to nail some spikes into the side and climb up. He climbed to the top tore the Union Jack away and replaced it with the stars and stripes. So much time had been lost in this endeavour, however, it was near dinner, so they cancelled the rest of the celebration and everyone, including Washington headed for Fraunces Tavern.

For the next ten days the city was joyous. Taverns were packed, dinners hosted, innumerable toasts offered, all punctuated with endless ceremonies of thanksgiving. Washington was exhausted by the accolades. He stayed at Fraunces and Every day to his lodgings a parade of people trooped. A last, and very special group arrived on December 4. That day the commander in chief hosted the few

officers still with him to a final entertainment. They met in the long room of the tavern.

Only a few of this band of brothers were there. Of the 29 major generals who had served with him, only three were present, of the brigadiers only one. His closest friend Henry Knox was there.

According to one witness Major Benjamin Talmadge

“A collation had been laid on the table. Laboring to control himself, Washington tried to eat but failed. With a shaking hand, he filled a glass of wine and motioned for the decanters to go around.

Washington waited for the glasses to be filled... Then, though his hand still shook, he lifted his glass. He addressed his fellow soldiers

**With a heart full of love and gratitude I now take leave of you;
I most devoutly wish that your latter days may be as
prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious
and honorable. I cannot come to each of you, but shall feel
obliged if each of you will come and take me by the hand.**

They did. Knox was the first. In a gesture highly unusual for a man known for austere and distant demeanor, Washington embraced his old friend. Every officer in the room marched up, embraced and parted with the general in chief. “Such a scene”, reported Tallmadge, “of sorrow and weeping I had never before witnessed.”

Washington left Fraunces and walked past a line of infantry drawn up in his honor. He moved silently to a wharf to a board barge that would carry him across the Hudson. Again Tallmadge recorded “As soon as he was seated the barge put off into the river, and when out in the stream, our great and beloved general waved his hat and bid us a silent adieu.”

The adieu was not silent on the other side of the river. It was a triumphal procession. People lined his route – bunting, banners and flags were everywhere. At Trenton the Governor and Council of New Jersey presented him with an address. As he approached Philadelphia the President of Pennsylvania met him on the outskirts of the city accompanied by a cheering crowd of citizens as well as a troop of horse. As he entered cannon roared a salute, bells rang and “the people testified their satisfaction by repeated acclamations.”

A grand dinner was held at the City Tavern. After innumerable toasts and speeches an exhausted Washington retired to the home of his old friend Robert Morris. Over the next few days Washington spent considerable time with Morris. Robert Morris was the man who kept the books for the Continental Congress and Washington was eager to settle his accounts. During his entire life time Washington kept careful records – the Revolution was no

exception. He served without a salary – expenses only. According to his reckoning the nation owed him \$449, 261. 51. It would take a while for congress to pay but when they did they did so without a murmur.

Washington left Philadelphia on December 15 bound to Annapolis, Maryland where the Congress was now sitting having left Princeton. The commander in chief's escort had grown considerably smaller. The horse guard was gone and only his secretaries David Humphreys and David Walker were with him. Also beside him was the man who had never left his side William "Billy" Lee, his slave.

Before he left Philadelphia Washington had sent a special wagon on a direct route to Mount Vernon. It was loaded with Christmas presents. Washington had gone shopping in New York and Philadelphia. He bought gifts for Martha, as well her widowed daughter in law Nelly and two step grand children young Nelly

age 4 four and George Washington Parke Custis age two. For Martha he had lockets and sashes, hats and stockings and an umbrella. For the children he brought books, a fiddle, a whirligig, a sailing ship, a horse and rider and a rowboat with a fisherman.

The wagon also had a few items the General had purchased for himself: books, a new hunting rifle, and wine (he loved wine) and a few fine delicacies, brazil nuts, capers, walnuts, raisins and anchovies.

The party rode through Wilmington, Delaware and Baltimore, (more parades and toasts) hurrying to Annapolis and the Congress.

Washington entered Annapolis on Friday December 19. As usual there was a great hub bub – cannon roaring, bells pealing and crowds gawking. After taking up quarters he waited on the president of Congress Thomas Mifflin. The next day Saturday Congress convened in a special session to receive a letter from the

commander in chief “asking leave to resign his commission, and desiring to know their pleasure in what manner it will be most proper to offer his resignation.”

Not since the ancient days of the legendary Roman general Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus had there been such a moment. A victorious general whose only wish was to lay down the sword and once more put his hand to the plow. The symbolism was extraordinary. How should Congress receive this general? How should this general present himself to Congress? This simple event would set the tone for civil military relations in the new republic.

A committee of the Congress, chaired by Thomas Jefferson, wrote the protocol for the occasion.

At noon Tuesday December 23 the members of Congress led by the president entered the chamber, took their seats and remained covered. A messenger then entered to announce the arrival of the

commander in chief who was given leave to enter. The members of Congress remained seated and covered. Washington took his seat with his two aides Walker and Humphrey at his side. The president called for silence and then spoke

“Sir, The United States in Congress Assembled are prepared to receive your communications.”

The general rose bowed to Congress. The gentlemen uncovered but did not stand.

Washington, drew from his coat a sheaf of papers and began. His hands and voice trembled a bit.

He spoke for less than five minutes. He thanked the Congress and the men that had served with him. He concluded

Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theater of action; and bidding an Affectionate farewell to this August body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my Commission and take my leave of all the employments of public life.”

He then reached in his bosom and drew out the commission presented to him 8 years earlier and handed it to the president. The President thanked him. Mr. Washington withdrew as members uncovered but did not stand.

It was all over in probably less than 10 minutes. That done he rode off according to his friend James McHenry “intent upon eating his Christmas dinner at home.”

It was winter and so darkness came early. Mount Vernon was too far to reach in one day. On Christmas Eve he finally arrived home. One can only imagine the scene of welcome as he rode by the

fields, meadows, and orchards he loved so well, and through the wooden gates leading up to the house. Despite the chill everyone must have been out to see the return. If the breeze was right he probably caught the holiday odors of baking pies, chocolate and gingerbread being prepared for Christmas. As he thought of all that had gone before he might well have been recalling the words of the prophet Micah – words of hope that he had often spoken himself during the long war.

Then they will hammer their

Swords into plowshares

And their spears into pruning hooks

Nation will not lift up sword against

Nation

And never again will they train for war

And each of them will sit under his

Vine and his fig tree

With no one to make them afraid.

Martha greeted him believing then in her heart, as she later told Mercy Otis Warren, “that from this moment we would grow old together, in solitude and tranquility.”

I suspect this was the happiest Christmas the Washingtons ever had.

