

REMEMBERING PRESIDENTS' DAY

Stephen L. Bakke – February 21, 2011



First, writings by George Washington, followed by Abraham Lincoln's spoken words.

From George Washington's Farewell Address – This was released and printed by a Philadelphia newspaper, the American Daily Advertiser on September 19, 1796. It was widely published the next day in papers across the young United States of America. Washington was then 63 years old and in failing health. He personally described this as “warnings of a parting friend.” These words were printed and distributed, not spoken, as was the tradition of the time. Here are some excerpts.

Friends and Fellow Citizens:

..... In looking forward to the moment which is intended to terminate the career of my public life, my feelings do not permit me to suspend the deep acknowledgement of that **debt of gratitude which I owe to my beloved country for the many honors it has conferred upon me**

..... Here, perhaps, I ought to stop. But a solicitude for your welfare, which cannot end but with my life, and the apprehension of danger, natural to that solicitude, urge me, on an occasion like the present, to **offer to your solemn contemplation**, and to recommend to your frequent review, **some sentiments** which are the result of much reflection, of no inconsiderable observation, and which appear to me **all-important to the permanency of your felicity as a people**.

..... One method of assault may be to effect, in the forms of the Constitution, alterations which will impair the energy of the system, and thus to undermine what cannot be directly overthrown. In all changes to which you may be invited, remember that time and habit are at least as necessary to fix the true character of governments as of other human institutions **Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian**.

..... It is important, likewise, that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire **caution in those entrusted with its administration, to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres**, avoiding in the exercise of the powers of one department to encroach upon another. The spirit of

encroachment tends to consolidate the powers of all the departments in one, and thus to create, whatever the form of government, a real despotism.

..... If, in the opinion of the people, the distribution or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, **let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates**. But let there be no change by usurpation the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed.

..... As a very important source of strength and security, cherish public credit. On method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible, avoiding occasions of expense by cultivating peace, but remembering also that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it, avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but **by vigorous exertion in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear**.

..... Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all [but] **Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake**, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.

..... I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors I anticipate with pleasing expectation that retreat in which I promise myself to realize, without alloy, the sweet enjoyment of partaking, in the midst of my fellow citizens, **the benign influence of good laws under a free government, the ever-favorite object of my heart**, and the happy reward, as I trust, of our mutual cares, labors, and dangers.

United States – 19th September, 1796
Geo. Washington

From Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address – As with most of Lincoln's communications, this was short, eloquent, and easily seen as relevant. And he could be startlingly blunt – even “biting” in his commentary. For example, in the fall of 1864, Lincoln wrote a personal note regarding November's election and his possible loss: “It will be my duty to so cooperate with the president-elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards.” **OUCH!** Lincoln won with 91% of the Electoral College. The message in Lincoln's second inaugural address is that: “While peace is the highest goal, avoiding war might cost too much when our nation's very ideals and values are under attack.” (Quote from “The Essential American – ed. Gingrich Cushman.) Some excerpts:

Fellow Countrymen:

..... The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. **With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.**

..... Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and **the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.**

..... Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the seat of other men's face; but let us judge not that we be not judged **The prayers of both could not be answered**

..... **The Almighty has His own purpose.** "Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" **If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God He now wills to remove,** and that He gives both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came "the judgment of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

March 4, 1865
Abraham Lincoln

A few weeks later, on April 14, 1865, Lincoln was shot. He died the following morning.

So eloquent! So humbly presented! And remarkably timeless in their relevance for today's world.