

ESSAY¹ - A BRAZILIAN DREAMS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON AND HIS "FAIRWELL ADDRESS"

José Marcos Carvalho de Mesquita

Doutor pela Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) e Professor na Universidade Fundação Mineira de Educação e Cultura (FUMEC).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5897-1537>

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/7150900381295527>

George Washington served as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War (1775-83). After a short period of retirement, he became a prime mover in the steps leading to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in 1787. When the new Constitution was ratified, the Electoral College unanimously elected Washington the first president of the USA¹.

Upon reading George Washington's Farewell Address, I got to thinking about my native country, Brazil, and its many political afflictions. Suddenly, I remembered an old talk I had with my father.

One day, when I was just a kid, my family and I traveled to visit some friends of my parents who lived several hours away on a big farm. The trip meant we would be passing through a town that had a big sugar plant of some renown within Brazil. As a child with a sweet tooth, I must have imagined we were about to behold a scene grander than the second act of the Nutcracker, with its scrumptious Land of Sweets. But when we finally passed through the factory town, I was deflated to see what was just a dismal, underdeveloped tableau, not at all befitting the stake the place had on Brazilian cupboards and economic development.

"Dad, is that all there is?" I asked my father, utterly perplexed.

¹ Recognizing the nature and the place reserved for Form in the Essay, the *PSR* does not alter the formal choices of the authors of the works submitted and accepted for publication in this section.



“Son,” he replied, “listen to me, wherever politicians are most ferocious, their towns and cities and states never progress. Two groups in this town are fighting for power, and everything one does, the other destroys the moment it wins the election.”

I didn't understand his words at the time, but I never forgot them.

Now, I'm afraid, I do. In the small town where I grew up, in the big city where I worked and throughout the country that I still love, I have observed the fiercer the politics, the bigger the socio-economic problems tend to be. Brazil made a giant stride forward 39 years ago when it replaced its military government for a democratic one. But after nine highly divisive presidential elections, the populace is now almost cleaved in two. Each side seems to be the enemy of the other. Family relationships and long friendships are in tatters. On the other hand, almost all politicians and representatives get along nicely; although some public arguments, they always agree when deciding and voting on their own benefit issues.

But what does George Washington's farewell speech, delivered more than 200 years ago in Philadelphia in 1796, have to do with the dysfunction of a modern-day Latin American country? It could be a hallucination; however, I truly believe America's first president accurately outlined in his cautionary remarks to a fledgling nation at least three problems that politicians throughout the ages unleash on their citizens, and not just in the United States, but also in Brazil.

In his parting words to the citizens who had twice elected him to lead them, Washington first warned of the dangers of party factionalism:

“With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits and political principles. You have in common cause fought and triumphed together. The independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint counsels, and joint efforts; of common dangers, suffering and success... In contemplating the causes which may disturb our union, it occurs as matter of serious concern, that any ground should have been furnished for characterizing parties by geographical discriminations: Northern and Southern, Atlantic and western; whence designing men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. One of the expedients of Party to acquire influence, within particular districts, is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heart-burnings which spring from these misrepresentations. They tend



to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What a vision - to have accurately predicted that political parties would incite dispute among groups or regions that ought to be bound by brotherhood and common interests! It makes sense that a divided people are easier to dominate and manipulate. That is certainly so in Brazil. Despite the country's legendary friendliness, what we have instead is widespread belligerence and groups separated by political ideologies, pushing their agenda and defending their favorite parties right off the proverbial cliff. Endless enmities have been created and fostered between North and South, rich against poor, left wing against right wing. The battle-tested principle of “divide and rule,” applied often in ancient civilizations and championed by Machiavelli, once again seems back in fashion.

Factionalism rises the most in election years, almost splitting the population into two enemy camps. After votes are counted, things calm down, but the feelings of brotherhood and fraternity are never fully restored. Even worse, with each election, public discourse becomes more and more brittle, less civil. Alliances are formed and broken, according to expediency.

In this vein, we, Brazilian citizens, forget our common principles and needs, and we are lured into playing a zero-sum game, since the gains of one group often mean losses for another. Instead of looking out for the general welfare, we are distracted by sideshows. We are a poor country with many inequalities and several desperate social problems. We should be joining efforts to achieve solutions. We should be demanding improvements to our health, education, safety and quality of life from our leaders. We should not be fighting among ourselves and aggravating problems. That's sad and pitiful, but it's our reality.

Before he made his public exit, George Washington also warned the citizenry he loved about another pitfall in the political realm, and once again, he was prophetic: the careless use of public credit:

As a very important source of strength and security, cherish public credit. One 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 The execution of these maxims belongs to your representatives, but it is necessary that public opinion should co-operate. To facilitate to them the performance of their duty, it is essential that you should practically bear in mind that towards the payment of debts there must be revenue; that to have revenue there must be taxes; that no taxes can be devised which are not more or less inconvenient and unpleasant; that the intrinsic embarrassment, inseparable from the selection of the proper objects (which is always a choice of difficulties), ought to be a decisive motive for a candid construction of the conduct of the government in making it, and for a spirit of acquiescence in the measures for obtaining revenue, which the public exigencies may at any time dictate.

Although some of his aversion to debt grew out of his nation's hostilities with England, Washington's advice to use debt sparingly applies as well to peacetime economies. Nonetheless, in election years, incumbent politicians all too often pander to the masses by suddenly lavishing spending on programs they imagine voters will applaud. Furthermore, the government machinery is also exaggerated in size and continuously growing, in order to accommodate officials appointed by political allies. As a result, public deficits expand and serious long-term investments in public services, such as education, health, transportation and safety initiatives, languish.

Lastly, Washington demonstrates in his speech a rare, almost unheard-of ability among politicians, to detach himself from the reins of power for the betterment of his people. That alone should make his address compulsory reading for any aspiring politicians. As the departing leader explained:

Friends, and Fellow-Citizens: The period for a new election of a citizen, to administer the executive government of the United States, being not far distant, and the time actually arrived, when your thoughts must be employed in designating the person, who is to be clothed with that important trust, it appears to me proper, especially as it may conduce to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now apprise you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being considered among the number of those, out of whom a choice is to be made. ... The acceptance of, and continuance hitherto in, the office to which your suffrages have twice called me, have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty, and to a deference for what appeared to be your desire. I constantly hoped, that it would have been much earlier in my power, consistently with motives, which I was not at liberty to disregard, to return to that retirement, from which I had been reluctantly drawn. The strength of my inclination to do this, previous to the last election, had even led to the preparation of an address to declare it to you; but mature reflection on the then perplexed and critical posture of our affairs with foreign nations, and the unanimous advice of persons entitled to my confidence, impelled me to abandon the idea.



Had Washington run for office a third time, he probably would have won. He was at the height of his popularity. But he refused, partly because he didn't want to take on any of the trappings of the monarchy that Americans had just spent years toppling. Washington believed it was in Americans' best interest to be responsible for their own decisions and for hiring – and firing - the leaders they select to represent them, for limited terms of office.

Whenever a political position becomes someone's professional career, the notion of being someone else's "representative" becomes meaningless. Being elected for public office is a privilege and honor. Officeholder must keep in mind that they have been chosen to represent the interests of voters and play this role properly. No position should be used as a substitute for a permanent livelihood.

According to Brazilian law, successful candidates for higher office such as mayor, governor or president, can only serve two consecutive terms, though they can run again after sitting out a term. City councilors, congressmen and senators face no such limitation. Many, in fact, do serve multiple terms without break. Some never leave office until they retire or die. Moreover, this laxity in the rules also enriches officeholders' friends and family members, who can be hired for long stretches on the public dime.

So, what, Brazil, should we take away from all this? We are a big country, with abundant natural wealth. We are a peaceful and fraternal people. However, we are an economically poor country, full of inequality and full of problems. Socio-economic conditions do not match our potential, like the small town I visited when I was a kid. Do politics and politicians have anything to do with this predicament? George Washington, I imagine, would say "you betcha".

ⁱ Retrieved February 18, 2023 from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/george-washington/>

ⁱⁱ Retrieved February 18, 2023 from: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp

