

THE BIBLE AND THE FOUNDERS, PART 4—THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS GEORGE WASHINGTON NEVER DELIVERED

George Washington became the first President of the United States on April 30, 1789 when he was inaugurated in the manner prescribed by the Constitution. His first inaugural speech has gone down in history as one of the best, largely because it set a precedent for all future inaugural addresses.

But there is “second” first inaugural that Washington never delivered.¹ It has come down to us in a series of fragments, which we can reasonably assume represent his rough thoughts as he constructed the final draft. Many of them express ideas that made their way into the final inaugural. But their existence is nonetheless interesting, particularly from a religious perspective, for they contain numerous references to both the Divine, and the Bible (to which there are at least five allusions). Such references are replete throughout Washington’s writings, even, apparently, in his “rough drafts.”

Proceeding in order of appearance, Washington first acknowledges that his inauguration takes place in the presence of God, upon whom all human beings depend:

We are this day assembled on a solemn and important occasion...not as a ceremony without meaning, but with a single reference to our dependence upon the Parent of all good...

Washington then goes on to list the various reasons the Americans were victorious in the Revolutionary War:

If we had a secret resource of an nature unknown to our enemy, it was in the unconquerable resolution of our Citizens, the conscious rectitude of our cause, and a confident trust that we should not be forsaken by Heaven.

Washington then asserts what he commonly asserted in his private correspondence for years both prior to, and during his term in office, namely that all things being equal, he would much rather be a mere private citizen on his farm. He also alludes to the New Testament book of Romans:

I solemnly assert and appeal to the searcher of hearts [Rom. 8:27] to witness the truth of it, that my leaving home to take upon myself the execution of this Office was the greatest personal sacrifice I have ever, in the course of my existence, been called upon to make.

¹[George Washington, *Undelivered First Inaugural Address: Fragments* \(April 30, 1789\).](#)

He then goes on to thank “Divine Providence” for ensuring that America would not be ruled by a hereditary monarch who would merely use the country for his own and his family’s glory:

In the next place, it will be recollected, that the Divine Providence hath not seen fit, that my blood should be transmitted or my name perpetuated by the endearing, though sometimes seducing channel of immediate offspring. I have no child for whom I could wish to make a provision—no family to build in greatness upon my Country’s ruins.

Washington then reflects on the glorious and prosperous future he foresees for the United States, one in which the expansive lands of the New World will be made into a new Garden of Eden, and where people will worship God freely (for which he alludes to the Psalms):

I feel the consolatory joys of futurity in contemplating the immense desarts [sic], yet untrodden by the foot of man, soon to become fair as the garden of God [Garden of Eden], soon to be animated by the activity of multitudes & soon to be made vocal with the praises of the Most High. [Ps. 7:17, et al] Can it be imagined that so many peculiar advantages, of soil & of climate, for agriculture & for navigation were lavished in vain—or that this Continent was not created and reserved so long undiscovered as a Theatre, for those glorious displays of Divine Munificence, the salutary consequences of which shall flow to another Hemisphere & extend through the interminable series of ages! Should not our Souls exult in the prospect! Though I shall not survive to perceive with these bodily senses, but a small portion of the blessed effects which our Revolution will occasion in the rest of the world; yet I enjoy the progress of human society & human happiness in anticipation.

Washington then observes that he derives consolation first from his hope of God’s approval, then his conscience, and finally from the good opinion of his fellow citizens:

Thus I have explained the general impressions under which I have acted: omitting to mention until the last, a principal reason which induced my acceptance. After a consciousness that all is right within and an humble hope of approbation in Heaven—nothing can, assuredly, be so grateful to a virtuous man as the good opinion of his fellow citizens.

Washington then reflects on the fact that while America has been greatly blessed, it can turn this blessing into a curse through vice (utilizing language drawn from the Torah, specifically Deuteronomy). He observes that even the government framed by God Himself for the Israelites came undone because of the sins of Israel, and that if it could happen to God’s chosen, how much more could it happen to the unchosen Americans? He concludes by warning of both vice in *rulers*, as well as in the *people themselves*, who, he observed, frequently attempt to make government a means by which they may obtain undeserved riches from despoiling others. In the final analysis,

he asserts that the Constitution will only be maintained by the virtue of the people, for on its own, it is nothing but paper:

If the blessings of Heaven showered thick around us should be spilled on the ground or converted to curses [Deut. 30, et al], through the fault of those for whom they were intended, it would not be the first instance of folly or perverseness in short-sighted mortals. The blessed Religion revealed in the word of God [Bible] will remain an eternal and awful monument to prove that the best Institutions may be abused by human depravity [reference to ancient Israel]; and that they may even, in some instances be made subservient to the vilest of purposes. Should, hereafter, those who are entrusted with the management of this government, incited by the lust of power & prompted by the supineness or venality of their Constituents, overleap the known barriers of this Constitution and violate the unalienable rights of humanity: it will only serve to shew, that no compact among men (however provident in its construction & sacred in its ratification) can be pronounced everlasting and inviolable—and if I may so express myself, that no wall of words—that no mound of parchment can be so formed as to stand against the sweeping torrent of boundless ambition on the one side, aided by the sapping current of corrupted morals on the other.

Washington then expresses his desire to manage the interests of *all* his countrymen with wisdom. He specifically observes that he will seek to fully respect the rights of conscience and religious liberty by diverting those taxes gathered from religious sects such as the Quakers, who did not believe in using armed force, to the use of only the civil, as opposed to the military aspects of the government:

It is in my conception, worth the pains of an attempt, to endeavor to conciliate the good will of every description of honest men, when it can honestly be done. In conformity to this sentiment, I could wish to relieve the tender consciences of that industrious, frugal & valuable sect, [Quakers] who are religiously principled against supporting an armed force, by faithfully appropriating the whole monies which shall be collected from them, to the support of civil government...

Washington then encourages his countrymen to constantly engage in the arts of self and societal improvement by training up future generations to work hard, to innovate, and to grow in knowledge and virtue, a task which would no doubt be approved by God:

It belongs to you especially to take measures for promoting the general welfare. It belongs to you to make men honest in their dealings with each other, by regulating the coinage & currency of money upon equitable principles as well as by establishing just weights and measures upon an uniform plan. Whenever an opportunity shall be furnished to you as public or as private men, I trust you will

not fail to use your best endeavors to improve the education and manners of a people; to accelerate the progress of arts & Sciences; to patronize works of genius; to confer rewards for inventions of utility; and to cherish institutions favorable to humanity. Such are among the best of all human employments. Such exertion of your talents will render your situations truly dignified & cannot fail of being acceptable in the sight of the Divinity.

As he does in both the final draft of his inaugural, and in his *Farewell Address* delivered at the end of his presidency, Washington warns his countrymen to always remember the dictates of morality, which remain permanent and unchanging (while alluding to the biblical books of Isaiah and Luke), which elsewhere Washington attributes to the fact that morality is ultimately defined by God, not man:

While others in their political conduct shall demean themselves as may seem [dear] to them, let us be honest. Let us be firm. Let us advance directly forward in the path of our duty. Should the path at first prove intricate & thorny, it will grow plain and smooth as we go. [Is. 40:4; Luke 3:5] In public as in private life, let the eternal line that separates right from wrong, be the fence...

In the final incomplete fragment, Washington concludes, as he does in the final draft of his inaugural, with an appeal to God to watch over and guide the country:

I most earnestly supplicate that Almighty God, to whose holy keeping I commend my dearest Country, will never offer so fair an inheritance to become a prey to avar[ice.]