

A Constitution Worth Fighting For

Today, April 30, 2014, is the 225th anniversary of President George Washington's Inaugural Address, given at Federal Hall in New York City. It should be a top priority for all Americans, as well as policy-makers internationally, to read this extraordinary short message to the American people (http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/inaugtxt.html).

The event was historic in several ways. First, that Washington, who had commanded the American Revolutionary Army, had refused to take power in the wake of the American victory, choosing to consign the fate of the nation to the deliberations of his fellow citizens. Second, that, as Washington's closest advisor, Alexander Hamilton, had noted in *Federalist No. 1*, "it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."

With the ratification of the Constitution, a process led by Hamilton, the first step was taken toward answering that question in the affirmative. But the actions of the enemies of the republic had already convinced Hamilton that Washington was the only person who could conceivably bring the American population together into a unified nation which would establish a lasting basis for prosperity and freedom.

Thus, the General, who had retired like Rome's Cincinnatus, to tend his family farm, was prevailed upon by his close young collaborator, to accept the Presidency. At the age of 57, Washington had looked forward to a private life, but he responded to the call of duty. His Inaugural Address reflects that

struggle within himself, and his hopes that the new government would proceed in the spirit of the process that brought the Constitution itself into being.

Washington, like Hamilton, and the great Presidents of the United States, like John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, who followed them, understood that the aims of the Constitution, as laid out concisely *in principle* in the Preamble, were threatened by sectionalism and sectarian thinking. Such localism was a key tool for the Empire against which the Revolution had just been won—and national unity through economic development and scientific progress, true freedom, could only be achieved by defeating it.

Hamilton and Washington, dedicated their lives to this objective, which Washington thus described in his Inaugural speech:

"[I rely on the] surest pledges, that as on one side, no local prejudices, or attachments; no separate views, nor party animosities, will misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great assemblage of communities and interests: so, on another, that the foundations of our National policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality; and the pre-eminence of a free Government, be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its Citizens, and command the respect of the world.

"I dwell on this prospect with every satisfaction which an ardent love for my Country can inspire: since there is no truth more thoroughly established, than that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness, between duty and advantage, between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy, and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity...."