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CHAPTER I

THE DEMON OF PARTY SPIRIT

FOR AN OBSERVER looking back on it, the level of trust, respect, and indeed veneration that the founding generation accorded to George Washington is startling.¹ No American has enjoyed greater or more enduring prestige during his lifetime. To his contemporaries Washington's preeminence seemed self-evident. Elections were little more than formalities when he was involved. In 1775 he was the unanimous choice of the Continental Congress to command the Continental Army; in 1787 he was the unanimous choice of the Constitutional Convention to preside over its deliberations; and in both 1789 and 1792 he was the unanimous choice of the presidential electors to occupy the new nation's highest office. For the first decade and a half of the country's independence, the greatest figures in an age full of great figures almost instinctively submitted their wills to his.² It was no exaggeration to say that he was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."³ Without Washington's unifying presence, it seems exceedingly improbable that the states could have remained sufficiently united to win the war for independence, that the Constitution could have received sufficient support to reach the threshold for ratification, or that the new government could have weathered the trials and tribulations of its early years. He was the one truly indispensable figure of the founding era.

As "The Father of His Country," Washington's foremost wish for his progeny was that it remain free of political parties and partisanship.⁴ All the founders at least professed an aversion to factions, as they were frequently called—this was a stock theme of eighteenth-century political discourse—but none loathed them more fiercely, consistently, and sincerely than he did. As Washington saw it, partisans

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are necessarily *partial*, meaning that they favor the interests of a parochial group over the public good. Whether that parochial group was centered on a geographic region, a socioeconomic class, a profession, a culture, an ideology, a religious sect, or some combination thereof was immaterial: any form of favoritism was incompatible with the kind of disinterested virtue that Washington prized above all else. Partisans could not be true patriots. Parties were also, in his view, fatal to republican government. By sowing conflict, they divided the community and subverted public order; by opposing the government's actions, they prevented its effective administration; by favoring some over others, they opened the door to political corruption and foreign influence. From the beginning of the Revolution to the end of his life, Washington counseled anyone who would listen that factions were the gravest threat that the young nation faced. "If we mean to support the Liberty and Independence which it has cost us so much blood & treasure to establish," he warned just a year into his presidency, "we must drive far away the demon of party spirit."⁵

To be sure, Washington was not entirely blind to the inevitability of dissent. "To expect that all men should think alike upon political, more than on Religious, or other subjects," he admitted, "would be to look for a change in the order of nature."⁶ Nor did he believe that it was always wrong for like-minded individuals to band together to further specific ends. But he expected that such alliances would be temporary; when their chosen end was achieved, they would naturally disband and assimilate back into the body politic. The idea of a standing opposition party whose entire purpose was to challenge and resist the administration's measures filled him with disgust.

If this sounds impossibly naïve, we should recall that the Constitution itself not only makes no mention of political parties, but was devised under the assumption that they would never emerge. (The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, implicitly recognized the existence of parties for the first time by stipulating that candidates for president and vice president would be listed and voted for separately, thereby making it more likely that they would hail from the same party—as well as preventing an electoral tie of the kind that occurred in 1800 between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr.) Moreover, two aspects of Washington's past made him more prone than most to

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believe in the possibility and necessity of transcending partisanship. First, his political coming-of-age occurred in 1750s and 1760s Virginia, which was one of the least faction-ridden times and places in colonial America. Second, and even more importantly, his experience commanding the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War convinced him that unity was an essential precondition for any grand undertaking—whether it be winning independence or launching a new government.⁷

As president, then, Washington sought above all to play a unifying role, both within his administration and on behalf of the country as a whole. He did not expect or even desire immediate unanimity within his cabinet, but he did assume that he and his advisors could reason impartially together, and thereby reach a consensus, on any given issue. When that proved impossible with regard to certain controversial topics, he endeavored to do the impartial reasoning himself by gathering facts and opinions from all sides—either in person or via written reports—and mediating among them. Vice President John Adams, for one, thought that Washington generally succeeded in this regard, attesting that “he seeks information from all quarters and judges more independently than any man I ever knew.”⁸ Washington also continually sought ways to encourage the public to follow his own evenhanded and open-minded example. In virtually every action that he took and every policy that he supported—whether it was declaring neutrality in the war between Britain and revolutionary France or promoting the idea of a national university—he did so with an eye toward whether it would diminish the incipient divisions among the American people. The baleful effects of party spirit was one of the foremost themes of his public pronouncements, from his First Inaugural Address to his Farewell Address.

Washington did manage to keep the country intact during its treacherous first eight years, which is perhaps more than any other individual could have achieved in the same role, but in the end he failed utterly to keep partisanship at bay. The parties that emerged in the 1790s—the Federalists and Republicans—were not quite like modern political parties, with their formal mechanisms for selecting candidates, devising platforms, raising money, and waging campaigns, but they were nonetheless recognizable ideological groupings that

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fought each other with a venom that would make some of the most ardent partisans of today blush. Indeed, the 1790s has been described as “the most fervently partisan decade in American history.”⁹ The two sides were led by a pair of bitter enemies within Washington’s own cabinet, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Historians still debate whether Washington himself was actually a president “above party,” as he sought to be, or whether he was in fact a partisan Federalist in all but name.¹⁰ The fairest conclusion seems to be that he managed to stay largely above the partisan fray for a number of years, but that by the end of his second term he did indeed drift into the Federalist camp.

To this day Americans are more likely than the citizens of almost any other democracy to echo Washington’s fears and aspirations on this score—to denounce the very idea of political parties and to demand that their politicians rise above mere partisanship. On the other hand, political scientists are quick to point out that parties serve a number of crucial roles in democratic politics: they aggregate and articulate interests, channel politicians’ ambitions, provide an organized locus for dissent, mobilize supporters, structure voters’ choices, and provide collective accountability to those voters. In fact, it is now widely believed that “democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties.”¹¹ For our purposes, however, it matters little whether Washington’s ideal of nonpartisan, disinterested politics was a noble aspiration or a naïve pipe dream. Either way, it was one of his fondest hopes for his country, and its disappointment cut him to the core. By the end of his life, we will see, Washington regarded both the government and the citizens of the United States as irretrievably partisan. In his own view, then, his political career represented something like the reverse of his military career: in politics he won most of the battles—the elections, the policy disputes—only to lose the broader war.

Throughout the early-to-mid-1780s, when the Articles of Confederation were in effect, Washington was in an almost continual state of alarm about the nation’s future. He was no longer in the habit of making public pronouncements, having returned to his farm and his plow after the war like a modern-day Cincinnatus, but the correspon-

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dence that poured forth from Mount Vernon made it crystal clear that he regarded the Confederation Congress as woefully inadequate to meet the needs of a dynamic, growing country.¹² Only a stronger, more effective national government could bring America back from “the brink of a precipice” and save it from plunging into “inextricable ruin,” he emphasized time and again.¹³ He was accordingly one of the prime movers, along with Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, in calling for the convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Washington’s exertions were all behind the scenes, as it were, but the mere knowledge that he planned to attend the gathering conferred on it a sense of legitimacy that it would not otherwise have had.

Having (inevitably) been chosen to preside over the convention, Washington participated very little in its deliberations, which suited the laconic general just fine. He found the delegates’ perpetual bickering and intransigence rather trying, however. In the middle of the summer he wrote to Hamilton (who had returned to New York for a time), “I *almost* despair of seeing a favourable issue to the proceedings of the Convention, and do therefore repent having had any agency in the business.”¹⁴ A number of the compromises that the delegates forged left Washington dissatisfied, above all the Connecticut Compromise, according to which representation in the House of Representatives would be based on population while each state would be represented equally in the Senate. Like the other Virginia delegates, he regarded the latter half of the bargain as an ill-advised concession to the small states that would severely weaken the national character of the new government.¹⁵

Washington’s attitude toward the Constitution at the close of the convention is difficult to discern, as there is little record to go by. James Madison later recalled that “no member of the Convention appeared to sign the Instrument with more cordiality than he did,” and there was never any doubt that Washington supported ratification, given that the alternative—continuing to muddle through under the Articles of Confederation—was, to him, unthinkable.¹⁶ On the other hand, Abraham Baldwin, a delegate from Georgia, reported that Washington told him on a morning stroll around this time that “he did not expect the constitution would exist more than 20 years.”¹⁷

Washington’s letters over the ensuing months reflect a similar ambivalence. A week after the convention’s close he forwarded a copy of the

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proposed charter to several leading Virginia politicians, commenting, “I wish the Constitution which is offered had been made more perfect, but I sincerely believe it is the best that could be obtained at this time.”¹⁸ Given that it would always be possible to amend the document in the future if needed, he told one of his aides-de-camp from the war years, “I think it would be wise in the People to adopt what is offered to them.”¹⁹ To the Marquis de Lafayette—whom he regarded almost as an adopted son—Washington enthused that “it appears to me . . . little short of a miracle, that the Delegates from so many different States (which States you know are also different from each other in their manners, circumstances and prejudices) should unite in forming a system of national Government, so little liable to well founded objections.” Yet he still felt compelled to stipulate that he was not “such an enthusiastic, partial or indiscriminating admirer of it, as not to perceive it is tinged with some real (though not radical) defects.”²⁰

Though Washington’s correspondence made clear where he stood on the question of ratification, he never said a word in public on behalf of the Constitution during the state ratification debates. Having presided over the convention, he believed that it was his duty to at least formally continue playing the role of neutral arbiter. He may have also worried that speaking out in favor of the Constitution might smack of self-promotion, since his election as the nation’s first president, in the event that the new government in fact materialized, was certain.²¹ Still, the common knowledge that he supported ratification, and the assumption that he would abandon his retirement if called on by the nation to do so, were key factors in the debates. When the Constitution squeaked through the Virginia ratifying convention in the face of intense opposition from Patrick Henry and others, James Monroe wrote to Thomas Jefferson in France, “be assured [Washington’s] influence carried this government.”²²

Washington was pleased by the Constitution’s ratification, as well as by the fact that supporters of the new charter won an overwhelming majority in the initial congressional elections. He reported happily to Lafayette that “federal sentiments seem to be growing with uncommon rapidity. . . . This encreasing unanimity is not less indicative of the good disposition than the good sense of the Americans,” adding, “I think, I see a *path*, as clear and direct as a ray of light” leading to the

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nation's "permanent felicity."²³ Yet Washington was also filled with a sense of foreboding. Partly this was because he was genuinely reluctant to reenter the public arena. When he had resigned his commission as commander of the Continental Army in 1783 he had assumed—and indeed pledged to the world—that he would be retiring for good. Now he felt that he was past his prime and was being forced to go back on his word and risk his cherished reputation, all to "quit a peaceful abode for an Ocean of difficulties." He told Henry Knox—who had taken over command of the army upon Washington's resignation, and who would soon become his secretary of war—that "my movements to the chair of Government will be accompanied with feelings not unlike those of a culprit who is going to the place of his execution."²⁴ Washington knew that he had little real choice in the matter, as the country needed his presence and leadership, but he hoped to sit at the head of the government for as short a time as possible—ideally less than a full four-year term.

Washington's sense of foreboding was redoubled by the daunting prospect that awaited him upon his inauguration in April 1789.²⁵ The new government had to be developed almost from scratch, with only the fuzziest blueprint to guide the newly elected officeholders. A bill of rights needed to be added to the Constitution to placate its opponents. Commerce was lagging, and the nation and many of the states faced crushing debts. The western frontier was far from secure, and the peace with Britain remained precarious. Moreover, the young republic initially encompassed only eleven somewhat disjointed states, as North Carolina and Rhode Island had yet to ratify the Constitution—nor was it entirely clear when, or even if, they would. (North Carolina ultimately ratified that November, while Rhode Island held out until May of the following year.) Washington hinted at his greatest fear of all in his Inaugural Address: that "local prejudices" or "party animosities" would "misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great Assemblage of communities and interests"—that is, the newly reconstituted American republic.²⁶

Given the many challenges that it faced, America's constitutional experiment got off to a surprisingly promising start, from Washington's

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perspective: the first few years of his first term went remarkably smoothly.²⁷ As Congress set about creating the various executive departments and approving what would become the Bill of Rights in its initial session in the summer of 1789, all was tranquil enough in New York—the temporary capital—for Washington to occupy himself mostly with questions of presidential etiquette: Should he throw parties? Make or receive visits? How often, in what style, and under what circumstances? He also settled on an exceptional group to form his small cabinet, including Henry Knox at the War Department, Alexander Hamilton at Treasury, Thomas Jefferson at State, and Edmund Randolph as the attorney general.²⁸ (Jefferson was still serving as minister to France at the time but eventually took up his post in March 1790.) Washington's closest advisor during these early days, however, was the leading figure of the new House of Representatives, James Madison—the separation of powers be damned.²⁹ Washington could not know that the seeds of future discord lay hidden within this group of luminaries, for they remained mostly dormant for the first year or two. Indeed, in June 1790 he informed Lafayette that “I feel myself supported by able Co-adjutors, who harmonise extremely well together.”³⁰

As far as Washington was concerned, then, the new government's first year was a marked success. As he embarked on a tour of the northern states—all but recalcitrant Rhode Island—in October 1789 he informed Gouverneur Morris, who had gone to France on business, that “the national government is organized, and as far as my information goes, to the satisfaction of all parties. . . . Opposition to it is either no more, or hides its head.”³¹ Back in New York in January, he added to the English historian Catharine Macaulay Graham that “so far as we have gone with the new Government (and it is completely organized and in operation) we have had greater reason than the most sanguine could expect to be satisfied with its success.”³²

That same month Hamilton submitted to Congress the first major component of his financial program, the Report on Public Credit, which produced the earliest hints of serious division within Washington's circle of close advisors. Hamilton proposed, among other things, that the federal government should assume and fund all outstanding

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government debts—both national and state—at full value, but Madison balked at the idea of repaying all debt holders equally. Many of the government-issued certificates, after all, were no longer in the hands of the deserving soldiers who had initially earned them, since they had been snapped up at deep discounts by speculators hoping to turn a profit. Conflict also emerged over the as-yet-undetermined site of the new, permanent national capital: most northerners backed Philadelphia or New York, while most southerners preferred a location on the Potomac River. Washington found that during Congress's second session “the questions of assumption—Residence—and other matters have been agitated with a warmth & intemperence; with prolixity & threats; which it is to be feared has lessened the dignity of that body, & decreased that respect which was once entertained for it.” Such “jealousies & distrusts,” he feared, would “have a most unhappy tendency to injure our public affairs—which, if wisely conducted might make us (as we are now by Europeans thought to be) the happiest people upon Earth.”³³

The two main sources of discord were, however, resolved in a grand bargain whose basic outlines were worked out during a now-famous dinner at Jefferson's house in June: Madison would allow the assumption bill to pass in the House in exchange for Hamilton's support for a capital on the Potomac.³⁴ The Compromise of 1790, as it is often called, delighted Washington, not just because he was a firm supporter of both sides of the deal—the full funding of government debts and the erection of a national capital conveniently near Mount Vernon—but also because it seemed to promise a reduction in the nascent divisions that so alarmed him. “The two great questions of funding the debt & fixing the seat of the government have been agitated, as was natural, with a good deal of warmth as well as ability,” he wrote that August. “These were always considered by me as questions of the most delicate & interesting nature which could possibly be drawn into discussion. They were in more danger of having convulsed the government itself than any other points. I hope they are now settled in as satisfactory a manner as could have been expected; and that we have a prospect of enjoying peace abroad, with tranquility at home.”³⁵ Washington's vision of amicable, disinterested politics seemed realizable once again.

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Moreover, Hamilton's assumption bill soon helped to stabilize the nation's public credit, and with it the government itself. Washington told Thomas Paine, who was then in London, that "our new government answers its purposes as well as could have been reasonably expected. . . . We are gradually overcoming the difficulties which presented themselves in its first organization, and . . . our prospects in general are growing daily more favorable."³⁶

Just as the national capital moved to Philadelphia in December 1790—its second temporary site, where it would remain for a decade as Washington, DC, was being built—Hamilton issued the second of his great reports, this one proposing the establishment of a national bank. This proposal elicited even more strident opposition than the first one had, with Madison and Jefferson contesting it on constitutional as well as prudential grounds. Madison argued in the House, and Jefferson contended within the cabinet, that Congress did not have the authority to establish a bank, but Hamilton convinced Washington otherwise in a classic brief for an expansive reading of the Constitution. Yet even after this somewhat rancorous exchange Washington felt mostly heartened by Congress's third session. At the close of the session he commented that "especially on the subject of the Bank, the line between the southern and eastern interest appeared more strongly marked than could have been wished. . . . But the debates were conducted with temper and candor." Moreover, he went on, "our public credit is restored—our resources are increasing—and the general appearance of things at least equals the most sanguine expectation that was formed of the effects of the present government."³⁷

Washington then embarked on a tour of the South, and his warm reception throughout the country further convinced him that all was well and that the future was bright. His letters from the summer of 1791 positively radiate with confidence. "The United States enjoy a scene of prosperity and tranquillity under the new government that could hardly have been hoped for under the old," he told Catharine Macaulay Graham.³⁸ The next day he added to his friend David Humphreys that "each days experience of the Government of the United States seems to confirm its establishment, and to render it more popular."³⁹ To Lafayette he predicted that "the attachment of all Classes of citizens to the general Government seems to be a pleasing presage

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of their future happiness and respectability.”⁴⁰ And he rhapsodized to the French diplomat the Chevalier de la Luzerne that “it appears that the United States are making great progress towards national happiness, and if it is not attained here in as high a degree as human nature will admit of its going—I think we may then conclude that political happiness is unattainable.”⁴¹ Washington would not retain this unclouded optimism for long.

Washington’s long-term disillusionment began to set in during the election year of 1792. The prior autumn Jefferson and Madison had, unbeknownst to Washington, started taking steps to organize opposition to the Hamilton-led Federalist program.⁴² Their most consequential move was to reach out to Philip Freneau, a college classmate of Madison’s and a fiery journalist. Jefferson offered Freneau a sinecure as a translator in the State Department, and they gently suggested that he might also wish to start a national newspaper. Jefferson and Madison rightly regarded the leading periodical of the time, John Fenno’s *Gazette of the United States*, as a staunchly pro-Hamiltonian outlet—it received a sizable chunk of its advertising directly from the Treasury Department—and they hoped to counter its effects on public opinion with more critical commentary.

Freneau launched the *National Gazette* in October 1791, and within a few months it emerged as a fawning admirer of Jefferson and a vicious critic of Hamilton. Freneau was unrelenting in his attack: every aspect of Hamilton’s financial program was depicted as a deliberate ploy to fleece everyday Americans and further enrich greedy merchants, as well as a dangerous power grab on behalf of the federal government that would inevitably pave the road toward monarchy. It is difficult to see the covert initiation and ongoing subsidizing of a virulently anti-administration newspaper as anything other than an act of gross disloyalty on the part of Madison, who remained one of Washington’s close advisors, and especially Jefferson, who was an integral member of his cabinet. Certainly Washington would have seen it that way, had he known about their actions.

Freneau was soon joined in his onslaught by Benjamin Franklin Bache, also known as “Lightning Rod Junior,” a nod to his celebrated

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grandfather. Bache's *General Advertiser* (later renamed the *Aurora*) was, if anything, even more vehement than the *National Gazette* in its criticism of Hamilton and his sins against republicanism. Together these periodicals helped to galvanize the opposition to the Federalist program and unite it around a common creed. In response, the pro-administration papers grew ever more strident and colorful in their denunciations of the emerging Republican party. The result was an increasing spiral of invective, scandalmongering, and bald-faced lies that makes much of today's "fake news" appear rather tame by comparison. As Gordon Wood comments, "the partisan newspapers were truly scandalous. Indeed, never in American history has the press been more vitriolic and more scurrilous than it was in the 1790s."⁴³ By the fall of 1792, with congressional and presidential elections looming on the horizon, the latent divide among Washington's advisors had broken out into the open.

It was against this backdrop of increasingly visible and bitter partisanship that Washington pondered his own future. He had initially hoped to relinquish the presidency before serving even a full four-year term, but the pull of events had prevented him from doing so. Now as he felt himself growing old (he had just turned sixty), increasingly hard of hearing, and weary of the fatigues of office, Mount Vernon beckoned all the more. There was no question, of course, that he would win reelection in a landslide if he were willing to serve another four years, but he desperately hoped that he would be able to avoid doing so.

In the early months of 1792, Washington told his coterie of advisors—Hamilton, Jefferson, Knox, Madison, and Randolph—that he planned to step down at the end of the present term. Their immediate and unanimous response was that he could not. Hamilton and Jefferson agreed on little else, but they spoke with one voice in insisting that the country needed Washington's unifying presence now more than ever. Hamilton stressed that Washington's departure would be "deplored as the greatest evil, that could befall the country at the present juncture," and Jefferson memorably declared that "North & South will hang together, if they have you to hang on."⁴⁴ At least initially, Washington remained unconvinced. In May he asked Madison to help him prepare a valedictory address informing the people of his intention to retire. He wanted the address to stress in particular that

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“we are *all* the Children of the same country” and that “our interest, however deversified in local & smaller matters, is the same in all the great & essential concerns of the Nation.”⁴⁵

As the summer progressed, however, Washington’s stance began to soften. He asked his private secretary, Tobias Lear, who was traveling through New England, to assess the mood there about whether he ought to serve a second term, and Lear replied that the public preference remained beyond doubt: “no other person seems ever to have been contemplated for that office.”⁴⁶ Washington was even more moved, however, by the palpable growth in party spirit within his cabinet and around the nation. A small part of him longed to quit his post in disgust, but his sense of duty was ultimately too strong: deep down he knew, as his advisors had been telling him all along, that the fragile equilibrium within the still-new government would be impossible to maintain without him to manage the helm. Given how badly he wanted to return to Mount Vernon, the fact that Washington eventually consented to serve a second term is a testament to the depth and immediacy of his fears.

In late August, Washington sent long, heartfelt, and very similar letters to Jefferson, Hamilton, and Randolph, begging them to adopt a more conciliatory spirit and stressing that nothing less than the fate of the nation was at stake. To Jefferson he bemoaned the “internal dissensions” that were “harrowing & tearing our vitals,” calling them “serious,” “alarming,” and “afflicting.” “Without more charity for the opinions & acts of one another in Governmental matters,” he insisted, “it will be difficult, if not impracticable, to manage the Reins of Government or to keep the parts of it together: for if, instead of laying our shoulders to the machine after measures are decided on, one pulls this way & another that, before the utility of the thing is fairly tried, it must, inevitably, be torn asunder—And, in my opinion the fairest prospect of happiness & prosperity that ever was presented to man, will be lost—perhaps for ever!”⁴⁷ To Hamilton he expressed his hope that “liberal allowances will be made for the political opinions of one another; and instead of those wounding suspicions, and irritating charges with which some of our Gazettes are so strongly impregnated . . . there might be mutual forbearances and temporising yieldings *on all sides*. Without these I do not see how the Reins of

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Government are to be managed, or how the Union of the States can be much longer preserved . . . Melancholy thought!”⁴⁸ To Randolph he complained that the “attacks upon almost every measure of government with which some of the Gazettes are so strongly impregnated” were in danger of “rending the Union asunder. The Seeds of discontent—distrust & irritations which are so plentifully sown—can scarcely fail to produce this effect and to Mar that prospect of happiness which perhaps never beamed with more effulgence upon any people under the Sun.”⁴⁹

The shrill replies that Washington received from Hamilton and Jefferson could have only deepened his anxiety. They both expressed regret about Washington’s apprehensions but then quickly moved on to insist that *they* were the more injured party, to lay out a list of grievances, and to suggest that changes might have to be made to the cabinet soon. “I *know* that I have been an object of uniform opposition from Mr. Jefferson, from the first moment of his coming to the City of New York to enter upon his present office,” Hamilton complained. “I *know*, from the most authentic sources, that I have been the frequent subject of the most unkind whispers and insinuating from the same quarter. I have long seen a formed party in the Legislature, under his auspices, bent upon my subversion.”⁵⁰ Jefferson, for his part, protested that “I will not suffer my retirement to be clouded by the slanders of a man whose history, from the moment at which history can stoop to notice him, is a tissue of machinations against the liberty of the country which has not only recieved and given him bread, but heaped it’s honors on his head.”⁵¹ So much for cooperation, or indeed civility.

By not withdrawing his name from consideration, Washington implicitly consented to serve another term, and he was duly reelected on a unanimous vote in November 1792. At this point he was astonished by the level of rancor between his two brilliant lieutenants and worried that the republic itself was at risk, but far worse was yet to come.

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