Up before dawn on September 19, 1796, George Washington signed 147 ships’ passes and half a dozen naval commissions, reviewed the rest of the day’s paperwork, and then met with his new minister to France, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, before climbing into his carriage to leave the capital. Anxious to get to Mount Vernon, he felt no need to wait to see the publication of what would become known as his Farewell Address.¹ The address, titled simply “To the People of the United States,” appeared on page 2 of the American Daily Advertiser. Washington informed his “Friends and Fellow-Citizens” that on March 4, 1797, they would have a new president. The man who had seen them through the revolution, was part of the creation of a republican form of government, and who served two terms as “First Magistrate” had earned, nearing 65, an honorable retirement. He was determined to have it.

Reluctant President

Washington had always answered his nation’s call—as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army in 1775, as president of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and as its unanimously elected first president in 1789. Being a gentleman, duty and honor left him little choice. Yet he seldom did so without reservations. As when he served in uniform, he had accepted the presidency with diffidence, declined a salary, and asked only that his expenses be paid.²

He was not pleased to risk his reputation for an infant government, but declining seemed a worse choice. “Be assured,” he had told
wartime general and friend Benjamin Lincoln in October 1788, after 11 states had ratified the Constitution: “Every personal consideration conspires to rivet me...to retirement...nothing in this world can ever draw me from it, unless it be a conviction that the partiality of my Countrymen had made my services absolutely necessary, joined to a fear that my refusal might induce a belief that I preferred the conservation of my own reputation and private ease, to the good of my Country.” At 57, with a family history of men who died early, Washington was sensible of his own mortality but cared more about his character.

As in commanding the army, when he became president he entered a position he had to define. “I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent,” Washington had written. Being a nationalist, he had set about forming a nation. From the selection of his cabinet (e.g. Alexander Hamilton from New York for Treasury, Thomas Jefferson from Virginia for State, Henry Knox from Massachusetts for Secretary of War) to his travels (a New England tour followed by a southern tour) to his efforts to tie the frontier West to the more established East, Washington had sought to unify the nation, not just his cabinet. The “united States” in the Declaration of Independence would not for quite some time be the “United States.”

His desired cabinet unity lasted about a year. When Hamilton proposed that the national government assume state war debts, Jefferson and James Madison accommodated him in exchange for support to locate the national capital on the Potomac River (Jefferson would later claim he was “duped”). But in late 1790, when Hamilton proposed the creation of a “Bank of the United States” to service the debt and make loans for major projects, Jefferson and Madison feared an everstrengthening, “monocratic” national government. Charging that the Constitution contained no enumerated power to charter a bank, they urged a Washington veto. Hamilton convinced Washington that a veto would render the national government impotent to meet future needs, and a week after Washington signed the bill, Jefferson quietly took steps to launch an opposition newspaper.

Hamilton responded in kind, leading a distraught Washington to plead with his secretaries for civility amid attacks that were “harrowing and tearing our vitals.” Used to being respected if not revered, by 1792 Washington had had enough. On May 5, he asked to see Madison, a trusted confidant, Constitutional architect, and drafter