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Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Address to Congress on Resigning His Commission

General George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army • December 23, 1783

Delivered to the Confederation Congress in the Old Senate Chamber of the Maryland State House, Annapolis

BACKGROUND

After eight years of war, the Treaty of Paris (1783) confirmed American independence, and George Washington was the most admired man in the country. Many people expected a victorious general to keep his army and take power for himself, as Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell had done. Instead, Washington rode to Annapolis and handed his commission back to Congress, proving that in the new nation the military would answer to the people's elected representatives.

Key Vocabulary

Word	What it means
commission	the official document giving an officer his rank and authority
diffidence	a lack of confidence in oneself; modesty
arduous	very hard and tiring
rectitude	moral rightness
sanguine	hopeful and optimistic
Providence	God's care and guidance over the world
my family	here, Washington's personal staff of officers and aides
august	respected and dignified

The Address

Complete text. Washington's capital letters are kept; two spellings are modernized ("oppertunity," "encreases").

[1] Mr. President: The great events on which my resignation depended having at length taken place; I have now the honor of offering my sincere Congratulations to Congress and of presenting myself before them **to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me**, and to claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service of my Country.

[2] Happy in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable Nation, **I resign with satisfaction the Appointment I accepted with diffidence**. A diffidence in my abilities to accomplish so arduous a task, which however was superseded by a confidence in the rectitude of our Cause, the support of the Supreme Power of the Union, and the patronage of Heaven.

[3] The Successful termination of the War has verified the most sanguine expectations, and my gratitude for the interposition of Providence, and the assistance I have received from my Countrymen, increases with every review of the momentous Contest.

[4] While I repeat my obligations to the Army in general, I should do injustice to my own feelings not to acknowledge in this place the peculiar Services and distinguished merits of the Gentlemen who have been attached to my person during the War. It was impossible the choice of confidential Officers to compose my family should have been more fortunate. Permit me Sir, to recommend in particular those, who have continued in Service to the present moment, as worthy of the favorable notice and patronage of Congress.

[5] I consider it an indispensable duty to close this last solemn act of my Official life, by commending the Interests of our dearest Country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the superintendence of them, to his holy keeping.

[6] Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of Action; and bidding an Affectionate farewell to this August body under whose orders I have so long acted, **I here offer my Commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life.**

Guiding Questions

Answer in complete sentences. Cite the paragraph number [ ] where you found your evidence.

1. What does Washington come to Congress to do? Whose "trust" was he given, and to whom does he return it? [1]

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2. Washington says he accepted command "with diffidence." What does that tell you about how he saw himself? What three things gave him confidence anyway? [2]

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3. Whom does Washington thank for the victory? List at least three. [3–4]

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4. Washington calls Congress the body "under whose orders I have so long acted." Why is it important in a free country that the army takes orders from elected leaders? [6]

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5. Many generals in history used a victorious army to seize power. Why was Washington's choice so unusual? Why do you think people called him the "American Cincinnatus"?

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6. Earlier in 1783, at Newburgh, some officers threatened Congress over unpaid wages, and Washington talked them out of it. How does this speech continue what he did at Newburgh?

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Source: George Washington, "Address to Congress on Resigning His Commission" (December 23, 1783), in The Writings of George Washington, vol. 27, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1938), 284–85. Public domain. Online: Founders Online, National Archives, founders.archives.gov.