

Handout E: Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island (1790)

Gentlemen,

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of

citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

Comprehension and Critical Thinking Questions

1. What does Washington believe will maintain Americans as a “great and happy people”?
2. What does Washington declare that all in America possess?
3. What, according to Washington, are the only requirements of citizenship?
4. Keeping in mind that “toleration” refers to a government policy, was Washington correct that Americans had moved from religious toleration to religious liberty?
5. Is there any significance in the fact that Washington closed his letter with a blessing?

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6. One historian has described Washington's letter as articulating the "conscience of a nation" with respect to religious liberty. How would you assess that claim? Explain.
7. Religious conflict has been prevalent and bloody throughout world history. Why do you think that, with a few exceptions, Americans of various faiths have been able to live side by side in peace? Explain.