

LETTER TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATION GEORGE WASHINGTON (1732-1799)

from *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, pp. 137-138

The Constitution of 1787 said little directly about religion, with the notable exception of a ban on religious tests as a requirement for federal office. When George Washington was elected president, the Bill of Rights had not yet been adopted. Despite this, in his response to a congratulatory note sent to him by a group of Jewish Americans, President Washington characterized religious liberty not as a gift of government or a matter of toleration, but as a natural right possessed by every human being.

AUGUST 18, 1790

GENTLEMEN:

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain 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

George Washington, "To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island," August 18, 1790, in W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington, 1748-1799*, "Presidential Series," Vol. 6 (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1976-present), 284-85.

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.

GEORGE WASHINGTON