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Extreme Factionalism and President Washington's Warning

Archer Hobson Fehlhaber, Guest Contributor

Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene tweeted the following Feb. 20: "We need a national divorce. We need to separate by red states and blue states and shrink the federal government. Everyone I talk to says this. From the sick and disgusting woke culture issues shoved down our throats to the Democrat's traitorous America Last policies, we are done."

This tweet calling for a "national divorce" highlights the dangers of extreme factionalism, which poses a serious threat to our unity as a nation.

Perhaps most alarming is the amount of bipartisan public support this proposal has received. According to a poll conducted from March 10-13, approximately 20% of Americans would be in favor of national separation. In another survey, 72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats regard members of the other party to be "immoral." According to that same study, 72% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats believe the opposition to be more dishonest than other Americans. This exacerbated polarization can (in part, at least) be attributed to the divisive rhetoric of politicians and the sensationalism of the media, which often portray political opponents as evil or corrupt.

As the upcoming election season approaches, it is crucial to heed the warnings of history and recognize the dangers extreme factionalism pose to our national unity. The deep-seated mistrust between opposing parties during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections serves as a stark reminder of this threat, and without vigilance from the public, history may repeat itself.

George Washington was keenly aware of the corrosive power of political factions. In fact, the very first political parties formed within his own cabinet, with Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican party and Alexander Hamilton's Federalist party at odds with each other. The tension between the two groups grew so intense that cabinet meetings occasionally devolved into blatant antagonism. Recognizing the danger of factionalism to the young nation he helped build, Washington took up the role of a unifying figure, desperately trying to keep the country from being destroyed from within.

As the end of his second term approached, Washington, aided by Hamilton, wrote a farewell address to the nation. In it, he gave numerous suggestions to his countrymen regarding policy, domestic affairs and foreign entanglements. Washington dedicated a significant portion of this address to warning of "the baneful effects of the spirit of party," directly addressing the aspect of human nature that facilitates participation in political parties.

"This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind," Washington wrote. "It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but in those of the popular form it is seen in its greatest rankness and is truly their worst enemy."

In this passage, Washington warns about the dangers of political parties, which are fueled by powerful passions inherent in human nature. While present in all governments, parties pose a greater risk to democracies or republics where the majority's desires can threaten minority rights.

Continuing his warning, Washington says that factionalism “agitates the community with ill founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one party against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions.”

He emphasizes his belief in the potential for parties to undermine the stability and integrity of the democratic process, and create conditions that are conducive to division, conflict and corruption. Political parties can create unnecessary fear and suspicion among members of the community, even if those fears are not based on reality. This can create division and conflict, as parties quite often produce a sense of “us versus them.” Hostility between different groups undermines our sense of shared purpose and national identity. In extreme cases, this conflict can lead to unrest, violence, and even insurrection. In addition, parties can be vulnerable to foreign interference or manipulation, particularly if one is seen as more sympathetic to a foreign power. This can undermine national security and the integrity of the democratic process.

As the election approaches, we must heed the lessons of history and remain vigilant in protecting our democracy from the corrosive effects of extreme factionalism. During this upcoming election season, it is in our collective interest as Americans to promote independent thinking and understanding between political parties. Failure to do so may place our union—and our futures—in grave peril.