Giving "Timeless Effect to the Farewell Address"

Repetition and Reflection in the United States Senate

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"Read in accordance with resolution of the Senate by [signed] J. B. Forsaker, Feb. 22nd 1900."

First entry in the Senate's book of signatures on Washington's Farewell Address

The third week in February brings formal observance of George Washington’s birthday in the United States Senate. The ceremony, which has endured for more than a century, marks the first president's birthday with an institutional gift of declamation. As public memorializing goes, however, the display appears to be all for naught: a lone speaker recites the 1796 Farewell Address in a nearly vacant Senate chamber while printed copies of the text sit atop unattended desks. Clocked at nearly one hour, the ritual is challenging for even the most accomplished speakers. Senators begin smoothly—even confidently—but eventually succumb to the paragraph-long sentences that constitute the text's typographic style. As the speaker rounds his or her way past Washington's praise of union, warning against parties, and advice on the national tenets of public virtue, the task is finally completed, and relief comes in the form of a well-deserved quaff of water. The text has been recited, and the ritual is complete—or so it seems. In the Senate cloakroom, outside the view of C-SPAN cameras, a second dimension of remembrance begins. Engaging a new text, the senator scrawls his or her name and personal response to the Farewell Address in a leather-bound notebook, adding a new page to an ongoing chronicle of prior speakers dating back to 1900. Alone again, our senator has concluded commemoration of George Washington's birthday in the deliberative body of the U.S. Congress. Both the Farewell Address and the chronicle of responses are retired until the cycle recommences the following year.

Unorthodox in form and neglected in historical observation, the Senate's commemorative ritual nevertheless speaks to a distinctive question of effect. Indeed, next to the sparse display of reciting the words of Washington's well-known political adieu, the commemorative energy that constitutes the ritual's contemporary form is in the written reflection: a written text is orated; the act of speaking begets writing. While senators might occupy the discursive space of the Farewell Address through an open recital, it is in the expansive pages of the journal that we discover the meaning of the text as the practitioners of the ritual imagine it.

The Farewell Address notebook is an austere text, comprising blank pages with no formal instruction for use. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century the text was a mere log noting who read the Farewell Address and when. The reading of the Farewell, at the time, spoke for itself. Since the late 1940s, however, the Senate has utilized the journal to revive the relevancy of its own institutional identity against the memory of Washington's iconic text. The ritual, in short, has become an opportunity to read and write effect into the text and to record a relational dialogue between the Senate and the memory of Washington.

The contents of this institutional palimpsest offer insight to the distinctive question of effect, namely that rhetorical effect can derive from what the editors of this volume call "agency residing in the audience" and the audience's continuation of a text's legacy. Rather than scrutinize exact consequences achieved by the Farewell Address in later arguments (searching for evidence that the Farewell Address influenced senators' appeals, or effect as a noun), the Senate's ritual of recital and reflection invites analysis on the constructive interactions between reader and text (effect as a verb, or something done to a text via appropriation and interpretation). Herbert Wichelns's well-known concern with "effect" over "permanence" or "beauty" relative to "speech as communication to a specific audience" has been a touchstone for gauging the impact of discourse. However, this study seeks to expand an alternate premise offered by James Jasinski that "a one-dimensional view of rhetorical effect" is unlikely to remain predominant or useful to rhetorical studies.

The Senate's example affirms the importance of studying extensional rhetoric and also expands our sense of how effect is utilized. As my analysis of the Senate's journal demonstrates, senators have increasingly turned attention away from potential conflicts with the Farewell Address and have opted instead to reaffirm the attachment to the text, even to the point of making the act of reading itself a statement both affirming Washington's memory in the Senate and celebrating the institutional and personal values of the reader. To interpret the effect inherent in the Farewell Address, in other words, is to also understand the institutional philosophy of the contemporary Senate emerging over time. Rhetorical effect is detectable by how responding rhetors utilize ideas of an author, as well as the degree to which they feel constrained to abide by the message despite their obvious aversion to faithfully maintaining its principles. In a related sense, the long-term potency of rhetorical effect, this study suggests, is equally attributable to a communal attachment to the memory of the author and to the text itself.
The remainder of this piece proceeds as follows. First, I present a general overview of Washington's Farewell Address and the emergence of the institutional ritual in the Senate. Next, I clarify the presuppositions and premises of extensional constitutive rhetoric and clarify how the Senate's palimpsest of signatures fits into the act of expanding the meaning of Washington's text, followed by an analysis of the document itself. Finally, I consider the relevance of this case study against conceptions of effect and the relationship between institutional philosophies and the actualizing of a text.

Deliberative Epideictic: The Senate's Farewell

Congress, as can be seen in this remark, was meant to argue: "Read pursuant to the standing order of the Senate at the request of Vice President Curtis—February 22, 1933—[signed] Oris F. Glenn, Illinois." The bulk of the U.S. Senate's prescribed institutional protocol is to advise and consent on issues pertaining to public law and government appointments. In crucial cases, the upper house assumes a forensic position by ruling on articles of impeachment against the president. Designed to deliberate or determine past fact, the U.S. Senate is an unexpected environment for an epideictic encounter. Though senators participate in "end of session valedictorys and eulogies," the annual tribute to George Washington remains the institution's "oldest non-legislative ritual" and a rare time of reflection and reaffirmation of collective values.10 Epideictic rhetoric presents a way to establish a common sense of the present and to frame an occasion by wrapping "its participants in reminders of excellence and therefore to rescue it in memory."11 Though rare, the "full potential of epideictic," Celeste Condit claims, arises from the presence of the following: speeches that explain understandings, "allow the sharing of community," and display "eloquence for the judgment of the community."12

Tensions between praise of the past and the presence of a community have defined the Senate's tradition of repeating the Farewell Address since the beginning. Like most occasions of remembrance, the annual reading of the text arose from neither institutional obligation nor constitutional provision. In 1888, George Frisbie Hoar (R-MA) introduced the original resolution affirming the Farewell Address in the Senate with little debate or contest. Hoar would eventually propose a permanent resolution on reading the Farewell Address, which passed in 1901. The Senate's order, as it remains today, prescribes the following: "Resolved, That unless otherwise directed, on the 22nd day of February in each year, or if that shall be on Sunday, then on the day immediately after the reading of the Journal, Washington's Farewell Address shall be read to the Senate by a Senator to be designated for the purpose by the presiding officer; and that thereafter the Senate will proceed with its ordinary business."13 Hoar's 1901 resolution ensured that the Farewell Address would take oral form in the Senate in near perpetuity. What could not be determined, however, was the diminished interest and participation of the Senate as years progressed.14

What the Senate collectively lacked in communal commitment to witnessing the Farewell Address in performance, it made up for in the expressive energies recorded in written remembrances of individual participants. The motive for maintaining the notebook is unclear. Its centrality to the contemporary ritual of repetition is undeniable. The leather-bound text, embossed with the title "Washington's Farewell Address, Senate Official Copy," functions as a text in perpetual progress, always incomplete and awaiting a new page to collect the thoughts and insights of readers. Regardless of its origin or purpose, the significance of the text is undeniable to the evolution of the institutional ritual. Beginning in 1900, early entries reflect an objective, factual, and rudimentary acknowledgment of the Senate custom and the date of the recitation. Signatures of this sort are stacked upon one another, sometimes up to four on a single page. Beginning in the late 1940s and ever since, senators have taken to offering thoughtful, trite, and sometimes controversial observations about Washington, the relevance of the Farewell Address, and the appropriateness of recent political happenings in the text, often taking up a single page or more.

Did waning attendance to the Senate ritual trigger a greater use of the notebook as a repository of public remembrance? The historical record cannot sustain such a causal claim. What is clear, however, is that the notebook was a constant fixture in the ceremony and was also available to senators throughout major controversies of the early twentieth century that, one might expect, invited some perspective on resonant themes central to Washington's Farewell Address, such as the League of Nations debate, the Great Depression and New Deal legislation, or the lead-up to World War II. Did the Farewell Address fail to resonate in these public debates? We could not suspend such disbelief.15 By simple observation, these historical eras are unaccounted for in any detail within the Senate's chronicle of participants. The more convincing explanation is that the notebook is a medium that became functionally important in commemorating Washington at a certain point in the Senate's institutional culture. This increased emphasis on private remembrance, I suggest, represents a material form of rhetorical effect: documented evidence of speakers' appropriation of the text.

The constructive effect of language as appropriation has been well established in rhetorical studies.16 As James Jasinski has noted, the extensional constitutive capacity of language is apparent by reorienting the traditional roles assigned to speaker and audience. Audiences don't passively read a text but instead "actualize the constitutive potential of the text, thereby generating extensional force, without necessarily sharing in the intentions of the author or speaker."17 If the Senate's effort to scrawl out interpretations of the Farewell Address counts as an extensional molding of the text in memory, then Washington's text was itself a lasting constitution of public virtue for citizenship for the young United States. Inasmuch as citizens of the colonies saw their revolutionary struggle as an effort to break free from "the worse than Egyptian bondage of Great Britain," Washington was appropriately eulogized and admired as the "Moses of America."18 The end of his two terms in the new country's presidency marked the end also of a new era of American time.
The letter declaring the voluntary conclusion of his public life would explain how “The PEOPLE of the United States” would carry on.

Following Washington’s death, in 1799, the Farewell Address took on an important function in a country now deprived of guidance from its original leader. What remained through newspaper and print was a political testament for the future: “advice, which if scrupulously observed, might, under the smiles of Providence, ensure numerous blessings to this happy country for future ages.” Though Washington’s address was clearly intended as an eloquent defense of Federalist policy, its impact as a touchstone of American civic virtue is undeniable. Stephen Lucas and Susan Zaeske note that Washington’s parting message ranks with the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address as “the most honored of American political discourses.” Garry Wills minces no words in his assessment: the text is Washington’s “masterpiece.” As Matthew Spalding and many other students of the Farewell Address note, the text emphasizes “union at home and independence abroad,” though each goal spoke to the larger message of the testament: “the development of what Washington called a national character.” Michael J. Hostetler defines the enduring quality of the Farewell through its timeless task: “Over two hundred years after its publication, it still calls Americans to the unfinished process of national character building.”

The gravity of the text is not lost on the Senate’s readers. Multiple participants have attested to the spiritual euphoria of the reading experience. Senator John Rockefeller (D-WV) wrote in 1986 that “one is carried back in spirit to the first years of this great nation,” further observing, “One feels, in reading his words aloud, the urgency of love and concern he felt for the fragile young nation.” Senator Ralph Flanders (R-VT) went even further when he wrote, in 1951, “A careful reading discovers its wisdom as no recital of words taken out of context can do.” Indeed, as Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) noted in 1956, the text is not only “immortal and enduring” but also accessible in performance. “Indeed, for a few moments, half way through the address, it was as if ‘these councils of an old and affectionate friend’ had come alive!” Bill Frist (R-TN) wrote in 1997.

Within this new euphoric dialogue with Washington, the journal reveals a keen insight into the institutional culture of the U.S. Senate: as political time and culture have moved further from Washington’s council, the institutional response has been to increasingly forge association with the Farewell Address and Washington, even to the point of memorializing the personal fulfillment of reading the text when institutional practice have failed to match. The Senate’s effect on the text, insofar as its commemorative ritual is concerned, has been to fortify institutional identity in reading the Farewell Address anew.

February 24th, 1993. To read the words of our nation’s first president on the floor of the U.S. Senate is a distinct honor. The fact that his words were written as a guiding light for the future of this nation makes the actual moment of the delivery of the speech timeless. Thank goodness this has become a tradition because as citizens we must never lose our exposure and connection to the principles of wisdom of our founding fathers. The fact that Madison, Hamilton, and Jay all contributed to this speech reflects the sentiment of this group of dedicated patriots. God bless America! (signed) Dirk Kempthorne, USS Idaho.

Change from Washington: Relevance of the Farewell

Following the 1949 reading by Margaret Chase Smith several senators throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s represented a world of contrast to the themes of the Farewell Address and considered the text a corrective measure of political guidance. Exceptions exist, to be sure. Frank Moss (D-UT), for instance, wrote in 1960 how Washington’s words “retain their vigor,” elaborating that the “course he charted has served us well and we are today the great united and powerful nation of which he spoke.” James Pearson (R-KS) offered a bland assessment of the address in 1965, noting a “hope that the words of Washington—heard again in the Senate of the United States,—will serve the ‘purpose’ of understanding the past to plan for the future.

The predominant theme of remembrance in the mid-twentieth century, however, was one of openly questioning the relevance of what the Farewell Address means in the context of the actions of the Senate. Though some found it fitting to read the Farewell Address not only on Washington’s birthday but, more specifically, “in the Senate,” as Prescott Bush (R-CT) wrote in 1935, others offered more pointed contrasts between the principles perceived in the text and the reality of the present. Reading the Farewell affirmed Senator Barry Goldwater’s (R-AZ) belief in 1957 that the “troubles of mind and conscience” in the United States could be alleviated with “documents left to us” by the founding generation, foremost among them Washington’s text. Frank Church (D-IN) defined the Farewell Address in 1958 as a set of “admonitions” that remain “ageless” and that the people must measure “against the living facts of our own times.” For Gordon Allott (R-CO), Washington’s Farewell Address offered sage advice for a moment “when the mind of the people seems confused and even frustrated” in the present. “His advice with respect to the dominance of Party over Union was never more appreciable than today,” Allott continued in 1959. In more pointed contrast, Winston Prouty (R-VT), writing in 1963, perhaps responding to the Cuban Missile Crisis six months prior, contrasted the existing political context with the belief that, if Washington were alive, he would, among other things, “[r]ecognize that the luxury of isolation is no longer possible but that in formulating our relations with other nations the question must be asked: is this the best interest of the United States of America?” Even when Washington’s principles were revised to support a new ideology, his words clashed with modern occurrences.

Political unity also becomes a key concern for senators writing soon after the mid-twentieth-century turn toward elaborated interpretation of the text. Senator Lee Metcalf (D-MT), writing in 1966, dismissed the idea that the text embodies a vision
“against foreign entanglements” and instead read the central theme as “national unity,” an especially important observation in an age of "strife over civil rights": “This wise advice,” he continued, alluding to political unity, “is to be heeded.” The relationship between religion and government was also a key concern in some of the early decades of the Senate’s elaborated form of commemoration through writing: “[W]hen Washington talks about religion,” Senator S. I. Hayakawa (R-CA) penned in 1977, “it seems to me he was better able than any political leader living today to appeal to common understandings, common assumptions about morality and duty such as existed in his time but exist precariously, if at all, today.” Lest, the morality of political actors is read from the address, especially in moments when political virtue is in question. In the fallout of the Iran-Contra investigation in 1987, newly elected senator John McCain (R-AZ) noted the contrast between Washington’s advice and the happenings in the present, defining the Farewell Address in a prescriptive light: “closer adherence to his words is the surest path to a restored institution of the presidency and a renewal of faith of the American people in their system of government.” What has been lost—or separated from the purity of the text—may be reunited with reverence to Washington’s model.

These examples illustrate the common theme throughout the initial decades of reading and writing Washington through commemoration that find the relevancy of the Farewell in drawing a contrast between it and the needs of the present. Speakers, in short, readily acknowledged a separation between the hopes of the text and the events of political life. In contradiction to this theme popular in the mid-twentieth century, contemporary practice finds a repetitive turn to confirm the actions of the present as in conjunction with the ideals of Washington and, indeed, the founding generation.

Continuity with Washington: Relevance of the Farewell

Contrary to the reflection in the previous section that Washington might question the actions of the present, recent decades of reading the Farewell Address in the Senate reflect a strong trend toward affirming either the importance of the present as a continuation of the past or the problems faced in the present as having strong relevance to the ideals of Washington. Indeed, an oft-repeated sentiment found throughout the Farewell Address notebook is summarized in Walker Huddleston’s (D-KY) 1978 claim that “the wisdom” of the text “is just as certain today as when originally delivered.” Craig Thomas’s (R-WY) 1995 recital, fast on the heels of the Republican Party’s successful midterm elections in 1994, found in Washington’s words approval for the new majority: “In a time when the American people have sent us to this place with a mandate for a smaller government more responsible to the need of its citizens—we are in this speech reminded of ideals and principles that lead us down the path of democracy.” Thomas, who somehow managed to commemorate a text centrally concerned with avoiding political disunion and party loyalty, nonetheless saw the new Republican majority as vindication of Washington’s ideals. Such willful misunderstanding signaled a new phase of the text’s effects wherein political occurrences in the present are read anew through the Farewell Address, given a new legitimacy, and tied to the original formation of government.

Etching continuity with Washington is especially difficult in times of political controversy, yet senators have shown a keen adeptness in finding enduring relevance in uncertain moments. In the early fallout of Watergate in 1973 as well as the aftermath of the Clinton impeachment trial of 1999, Senators Charles Mathias (R-MD) and George Voinovich (R-OH) cited Washington’s ideals of law and order in making the present matter to the past. Though Mathias’s assessment of the Farewell Address was “clearly dated,” his recitation of the address prompted the thought that the American ideal that “government of law” and “accepted rules” still matters, observations no doubt influenced by President Richard Nixon’s recent resignation. Judgment of a president, though difficult, is affirmed through a reading of the Farewell. Similarly, Voinovich rationalized the recent impeachment trial of President Clinton by noting that Washington’s emphasis on oaths of office remained relevant in 1999: “The oaths of judicial system he [Washington] refers to were the basis of the recent United States Senate Trial on the Articles of Impeachment against President Clinton.” Support for Clinton’s trial by the Senate may seem to be a stretch for readers of the 1796 text but not the only theme affirmed in contemporary practice. “I suspect [Washington] would be shocked at the role that the United States plays today in maintaining world peace—that the nation he helped found is the most powerful in the world,” Voinovich added. Political spectacle and virutol forgotten, Washington’s vision is still embodied in the trials of a president, albeit through a new focus on which ideals remain central to the reading.

Recent readings of the address have also shown a consistent turn toward acknowledging the relevance of Washington without indulging specific elements of the text of Washington’s ideals. Writing in 1997, Bill Frist (R-TN) saw the importance of the Farewell Address in Washington’s vision of “restraint, balance, justice, self-imposed term-limits,” which he believed was relevant in the present day: “As I read aloud, the words, I was moved by the expressed spirit of liberty which has flourished over the past 200 years,” Frist added. Following the events of September 11, 2001, Jon Corzine’s (D-NJ) 2002 reading of the address culminated in the expressed belief that, “[l]ike Washington and his fellow citizens,” Americans would have to work toward their freedom. The nation “must remember,” Corzine wrote, interpreting the message in light of the recent tragedy, “that our freedom isn’t free.” “America is a great and free nation because of leaders like Washington and his words are still inspiring,” Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) wrote one year later, alluding to nothing specific. When events are elaborated upon, such as when Senator John Breaux (D-LA) wrote in 2004, the application to political issues and situations remains vague, often clouding the intended advice and warning of the Farewell Address to affirm the present: “I think Washington would be proud of America today as he was in 1796 A.D.” Was Washington “proud” in 1796
or offering a prescriptive warning? As the Senate's record of readings indicates, the predominant view of the Farewell Address has been increasingly one of approval, regardless of how judiciously selective one must be to find in it confirmation of the contemporary political culture.

From artifact of admonition to an articulation of American pride, Washington's Farewell Address has been made especially malleable through over a century of recitation in the U.S. Senate. While themes of congruity and clash that define the temporal relationship between the political culture of the Senate and Washington's political testament are important, the final observation of this analysis is the most important to crafting a judgment on the Senate's ceremonial repetition of the text. In both recent decades and before, the theme of continuity with the Farewell Address has taken a new form of expression for reciters and writers: a focus on the personal.

The Farewell Address as Individual Experience

Washington's text has spurred reflections of both association and dissociation in decades of recitation. However, no theme resonates more strongly in recent reflections on the Farewell Address than the personal affirmation of the individual speaker. The personal focus of the reading has not always been a sense of selfish interest. "It was a great honor to have been asked to read these historic words," wrote Elbert Thomas (R-UT) in 1944. "I appreciate deeply the honor the Senate has thus done me." A similar tone of grateful thanks pervades entries written in the 1950s, though such content was later replaced with a more purposeful inward turn of written reflection. Frank Church (D-IN) noted that he would "cherish and remember this occasion" when he was given the "privilege to deliver Washington's historic address, in honor of his birthday, to the Senate of the United States."

For others, however, the honor was personal in a sense beyond one's association to the Senate. "Today has been a truly significant one for me!" wrote Jennings Randolph in 1962. Being "the second West Virginian" to have read the text was important for Randolph, whose entire entry is dedicated to the presence of his son and staff in the galleries as he read the text. Randolph's focus on state identity marks the start of a strange episode of ritual observance: Washington's text—affirming the bonds of national unity—is remembered through the lens of attachment to one's state identity. Senators Bill Frist (R-TN, 1997), Saxby Chambliss (R-GA, 2003), Richard Burr (R-NC, 2005), Bob Corker (R-TN, 2007), Mark Pryor (D-AR, 2008), Mike Johanns (R-NE, 2009), and Roland Burris (D-IL, 2010) each underscored the honor of speaking the address in the context of how many previous state representatives had preceded them. "I understand that I am the first senator from Arkansas to read this address as part of this Senate tradition," wrote Pryor (D-AR) in 2008, further noting, "That surprises me since there have been so many strong senators from my state over the years—Robinson, McClellan, Fulbright, Bumpers, Donald Pryor, and Lincoln—to name just a few. Knowing I am the first makes this honor all the more special to me." It has been 60 years since an Ohioan Robert Taft read Washington's Farewell Address," George Voinovich (R-OH) began his entry in 1999. "I am carrying on a Tennessee tradition," wrote Bob Corker (R-TN), making a rare allusion to an 1862 reading that predated Hoar's implementation of the ritual, penning, "It was Tennessee Senator Andrew Johnson who first introduced the petition in the Senate as a morale boosting gesture during the Civil War" and further luring home-state readers prior to 2007. From the brief remarks of thankfulness and reverence for procedure, these contemporary compliments to one's position relative to individual state histories add a new shape to the recollection process beyond an institutional or political community.

The individual, not the traditional reverence or the institution, occupies written reflections in more ways than one. Senators Carol Mosley-Braun (D-IL) and Daniel Akaka (D-HI), writing in 1994 and 1996, respectively, each paid tribute to their status as the first African American and the first "senator of Native Hawaiian and Chinese descent" to have read the address. This sentiment is echoed in similar expressions. "As the third Illinoisan to read Washington's Farewell Address before this chamber and [also] a great grandson of a slave, I am deeply honored to share this historic message with my colleagues," wrote Roland Burris (D-IL) in 2010, further noting the importance of the tradition as a way to "reflect upon the things that all Americans hold dear—liberty, equality, justice, and patriotism." Personal honor and reflection on one's role in the commemoration are expressed, finally, in Jake Garn's (R-UT) 1975 contribution to the journal, here quoted in full.

I have been greatly honored to be asked to present to the Senate George Washington's Farewell Address. I am especially pleased due to the fact that I am a direct descendant of George Washington's youngest Brother[,] Charles Washington. My paternal grandmother[,]s maiden name was Martha Virginia Washington and my great grandfather[,]s, Charles Augustine Washington.

He was a great, great, great, great grandson of George's youngest full brother. Because of the relationship to the Washington family it was a great thrill to present president Washington's Farewell Address.

Few entries achieve the level of base absurdity that defines Senator Garn's entry, though his exclusive focus on his role in the ceremony underscores a key interpretative application of the text: reading the Farewell Address has moved from a collective ritual of observance to a mode of personal reflection, self-discovery, and bland affirmation.

Were Garn's entry the exception and not the rule, one might find value in such individual ruminations. However, along with the trend toward the individual experience of reading has also emerged a parallel phenomenon of the ritual: the vague attribution of its "timeless" quality. In 1986, Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) heard himself "giving truths as meaningful today as then." Senator John Warner's (R-VA)
second recital, in 1989, revealed “principles” that are “as true today as then.” Indeed, the extensional claim of the “timeless” quality of Washington’s words directed the reflections of senators in 1990, 1991, 1993, 1996, 1997, and 1999. By 2004, Senator John Breaux (D-LA) thought “Washington would be proud of America today as he was in 1796 A.D.,” mistaking, perhaps, the functional purpose of the Farewell as one of beaming approval rather than deliberate warning. “Washington would be astounded,” Senator Mark Pryor (D-AK) reflected in 2006, by the way the United States was poised for “greatness in ways” the first president would find “hard to imagine.” Even when a disjunction exists between past words and current deeds, the end result, contemporary senators find, is near blanket approval of contemporary actions. Earlier reflections found opportunity to both praise Washington and question the application of his principles. By contrast, more contemporary readers increasingly turn praise to the Senate—or themselves—and downplay the distance between past word and current deed.

The missed opportunity for reflexively interpreting Washington’s Farewell Address is by far the most dominant theme emerging from the past two decades of this ritual in the Senate. Obvious misunderstandings and disjunctions between Washington’s prescriptions and the Senate’s behavior are no longer witnessed through a sense of continuity or halting difference but instead are glossed over with vague and often inward-looking praise of Washington the person, the Revolutionary age, or the broad-reaching principles of the founding generation. In this regard, the most astounding result of the Senate’s effect on the Farewell Address is an elevation of the text to such regard that ideas both broad and precise are used to create an apparent relevance to whatever constitutes the institutional business, even if it means praising platitudes of political unity or finding a cut against the grain in managing public debt. One cannot imagine a time or circumstance in which senators reading this text would see the Farewell Address as irrelevant or, more important, see a disconnect between Washington’s words and the current political culture. As the Farewell Address remains a “timeless” fixture in the Senate’s discursive space, the extensional rhetorical energy attributed to the text reflects less certainty in following its tenets, not more—more concerned with individual fulfillment and bland platitudes, not collective commitment to its political virtues. The price of lasting effect, it seems, resides in the diminished attention to abiding practice.

Since the introduction of the Senate notebook, in 1920, the functionality of writing in conjunction with the reading of Washington’s Farewell Address has shifted from a matter of record to a matter of contrasting ideals, from a matter of complementary ideals to a matter of personal pride and state association with the political ritual. In the conclusion, I attempt to synthesize these observations and trends in the writing within the broader context of transcendental rhetoric and an institutional philosophy of discourse. Last, I speculate how proclaimed value and appreciation might provide greater opportunities for and limitations on understanding rhetorical effect.

“For all our citizens who are served by our Senate, I am incredibly honored to have been able to read George Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States. So much that President Washington said in his address is still relevant today. Our nation is incredibly fortunate to have had Washington’s leadership in founding the country. I hope that all of us who serve in the Senate—especially myself—will work hard to do justice to his spirit. [signed] Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (NH), Feb. 27, 2012.” Methods to account for rhetorical effect are multitudinous. This study supports the contention that effect is something that happens to a text and that the extensional discourse engaging and reimagining the words of another remains the conventional evidence of such work. For communities that revere an iconic text and seek constitutive identity of it, the study of how they effect the work runs parallel to the emergence of a group’s larger philosophy. In this case, the Senate’s effect of the Farewell Address mirrors the larger institutional philosophy that is part of the institutional body.

The extensional constitutive rhetoric of the Senate’s institutional palimpsest has shifted from themes of continuity and rupture with Washington’s intentions to an inward focus on individual experience and on the broad applicability of Washington’s counsel and the Senate’s action. Perhaps the most abiding effect of the Farewell Address resides in its seemingly necessary place in the Senate’s culture: senators feel the need to read their time and experience against or in conjunction with Washington’s words. Yet, this habit—available to earlier readers throughout the first half of the twentieth century—has become a mainstay only in recent decades. For texts with particularly rich ideals, such as the design of the Farewell, revolving on an axis of the future of American citizenship, therein lies the opportunity to probe the relevant ideals of a time as read through similar practice and application. Such application, moreover, provides critics with a tangible form of assessing effect: Washington’s Farewell Address has shifted attitudes in the sense that contemporary readers operate under a constraint (however fleeting) to abide by his counsel, even if only on a superficial level of patriotic generalizations.

According to the historian Richard Baker, the Senate is an institution in which “[c]hange comes slowly.” Indeed, given that the House of Representatives sustained a similar reading of the Farewell Address through the 1970s, when the practice was discontinued because “nobody showed up,” the Senate maintains its unique role as the sole government institution purposefully and proudly embracing Washington’s 1796 text. A slowness to change, however, does not mean intransigence in the face of change. Through this essay I have suggested that the unique appropriation and form of Washington’s Farewell Address through different textual forms gives us a glimpse into an institutional philosophy of rhetoric. The Senate’s rhetorical use of the Farewell Address cannot help but change the existing form and shape of the document, emphasizing a private and increasingly personal attachment to the text. The Senate’s
The Farewell is read aloud to all but understood and remembered and rationalized to the present through internal reflection. Herein lies our glimpse of the institutional philosophy of discourse in the United States Senate and the larger task of applying an effect to this “timeless” discourse. Reading the 1796 text distances the interactive and interpretive process from a collective or public view in favor of private reflection, similar to the internal turn of rhetorical theory under George Campbell. According to Thomas Miller, this shift in rhetoric and moral philosophy moved “from the sociological to the psychological, and rhetoric became more concerned with the workings of the individual consciousness.” Such a turn in commemorative form, as is apparent from the historical and institutional transitions in remembering Washington’s Farewell Address, coincides with several observers of the Senate who have noticed. For example, Ross Baker has noted that, on the basis of institutional size and protocol alone, the Senate remains distinctive from other government bodies (such as the House of Representatives) in that its procedures “magnify the role of the individual senator.” Wirls and Wirlds, in kind, define the contemporary Senate culture as one that “encourage[s] the exploitation of individual and minority interests (quite unlike the House),” leading to the “irony” of the Senate’s dominant practice in view of its intended design: “the enshrined ability to use the institution for purely individual (as opposed to collective) purposes,” leading to legislative gridlock and intransigence. As future transitions in institutional identity emerge, the connection between Senate protocol and laws of discourse should be explored more fully and elaborated in more detail. Treatments of iconic texts—such as the Farewell Address—may be useful barometers for measuring the institutional ethos of appropriating and effecting a text in the interest of furthering an institutional identity.

George Washington’s opinion of the Senate can be gleaned from the oft-repeated fable whereby he and Thomas Jefferson engaged in conversation on the merits of the country’s new deliberative body: “Jefferson asks George Washington why he consented to the idea of a Senate. ‘Why did you pour that coffee into your saucer?’ asks Washington. ‘To cool it,’ replies Jefferson. ‘Even so,’ replies Washington, ‘we pour legislation into the Senatorial body to cool it.’” For students of rhetorical studies or U.S. political culture who may or may not know about the Senate’s yearly reading of Washington’s Farewell Address or remember its continued practice, a look inside the commemorative form of discourse can reveal an institution transcending national ideals in its own distinctive way. As with legislation, the Senate’s transcendence of speech and meaning speaks to a longer process of using proclaimed reverence to display the effect of the Farewell. Such an interior, self-congratulating focus, however, beggs more questions on the essential importance of the rhetorical form of the deliberative body’s commemoration. When personal reflection of the Farewell Address turns inward and, by consequence, moves the discursive construction of effect toward the institutional and personal self, the Senate takes on the public voice of Washington while clandestinely participating in its effect. Such commemorative form, we should hope, extends and enriches the legacy of the Farewell Address and takes measures not to cool it.

Notes
1. United States Senate, Office of the Secretary, “Farewell Address Notebook,” http://senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.htm (accessed April 10, 2010). All additional entries found here unless noted otherwise.
3. The Senate’s website states the following on the length of the ritual’s proceedings: “In 1985, Florida Senator Paula Hawkins tore through the text in a record-setting 39 minutes, while in 1962, West Virginia Senator Jennings Randolph, savoring each word, consumed 68 minutes.” See “Washington’s Farewell Address,” United States Senate webpage, http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.htm (accessed April 10, 2010).
5. To my knowledge, four respected scholars from various fields have made the false assertion that the ritual has been discontinued. Michael Kammen noted, “the long-standing tradition of reading the entire Farewell Address out loud in the U.S. Senate on Washington’s birthday quietly vanished.” Barry Schwartz wrote, “Every year we are reminded that the United States House and Senate no longer assemble for the annual reading of Washington’s Farewell Address.” Finally, the rhetorical scholars Stephen Lucas and Susan Zaeske suggested that the Farewell Address “continued to be read in Congress each February 22 until the 1970s.” As of this writing (2013), the ritual has been ongoing for well over one hundred years. See Michael Kammen, “Some Patterns and Meanings of Memory Distortion in American History,” in Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past, ed. Daniel L. Schacter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 335; Barry Schwartz, George Washington: The Making of an American


20. Multiple scholars of the Farewell Address have noted the text’s response to immediate events, such as the Whiskey Rebellion, and public debate over the Jay Treaty. For a discussion of Alexander Hamilton’s influence in drafting the Farewell Address as a Federalist text, see Felix Gilbert, To The Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), especially 115-136.


25. Senator McCain’s entry was accessed from the United States Senate Historical Office. E-mail correspondence with Dr. Betty Koed, August 21, 2008.

26. Senator Chambliss’s entry was accessed from the United States Senate Historical Office. E-mail correspondence with Dr. Betty Koed, August 21, 2008.

27. Consider, for example, Randolph reading a line such as the following before affirming the importance of his state identity: “To the efficacy and permanency of Your Union, a Government for the whole is indispensable. No Alliances however strict between the parts can be an adequate substitute.” See George Washington, “Farewell Address,” in George Washington: Writings, ed John Rhodehand (New York: Library of America, 2004), 967.

28. Entries from Senator Chambliss, Senator Corker, Senator Pryor, and Senator Johanns were accessed from the United States Senate Historical Office. E-mail correspondence with Dr. Betty Koed, August 21, 2008.

29. Senator Shaheen’s entry was accessed from the United States Senate Historical Office. E-mail correspondence with Dr. Betty Koed, March 1, 2012.

30. Baker, Traditions of the United States Senate, 1.


