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WASHINGTON AND THE CONSTITUTION

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IN 1888 appeared John Fiske's *Critical Period of American History*, probably the most successful of all his ventures into the field of history. The title was happily chosen. If any period in the eventful story of these United States was a crisis of the first magnitude it was that which intervened between the end of the Revolution and the adoption of the Federal Constitution. Apparently anything, however catastrophic, might then have happened. The Articles of Confederation had no cohesive power worth speaking of and came to be described as a "rope of sand". The Confederation was the most unsteady and ramshackle of political structures, liable at almost any moment to topple over. The root of the trouble was that Congress had no coercive powers and a secular government without coercive powers is a plain futility. And so the new-born states were going their several ways, levying import duties on one another and otherwise indifferent, in the last degree of selfishness, to any interests but their own. If life, liberty, and the pur-

suit of happiness were the objectives in the revolutionary struggle, it was plain to everybody that the Revolution had been sadly defrauded of its aims.

Meantime, from the classic retirement of Mount Vernon the most distinguished of all the revolutionary fathers looked on at the contemporary scene with undisguised alarm. "No morn ever dawned more favorably than ours did and no day was ever more clouded than the present," wrote George Washington to James Madison, November 5, 1786. "Wisdom and good examples are necessary at this time to rescue the political structure from the impending storm."¹ To his one-time military aide, Colonel Humphreys, he wrote December 26, of the same year: "That the federal government is nearly if not quite at a stand none will deny. . . . I would wish anything and everything essayed to prevent the effusion of blood and to avert the humiliating and contemptible figure we are about

¹David M. Matteson, *Washington and the Constitution*, Washington, D. C., 1931, p. 6.