

2017 Shreveport Bible Conference

Liberty or Death!

The Orations of Patrick Henry

East Ridge Bible Church
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Joe Griffin
Grace Doctrine Church
Joe Griffin Media Ministries
1821 South River Road
St. Charles, MO 63303-4124

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Liberty or Death!

The Orations of Patrick Henry

PART I Motivations of Henry's Orations

1. Background

During the colonial period leading up to the War for Independence, the king of England was George III of the House of Hanover who ruled from 1760–1820.

His rule was a personal tragedy. He was very emotional and considered to be slow intellectually. During his reign he made repeatedly bad decisions whose consequences compounded an inherited nervous disorder that in old age drove him insane.

He was a man who from his youth was beset with problems. His mental development was slow and he was easily led. His father, George II, died when young George was 12 years old. He ascended to the throne at age 22.

His mental deficiencies contributed to his inability to trust himself and he sought assistance from John Stuart who became his chief minister. As king of England, he was in need of a wife for the sole purpose of providing an heir for the House of Hanover. To that end he instructed Stuart to evaluate eligible German Protestant princesses.

From this group, the king chose Charlotte Sophia and married her on September 8, 1761. The motivation was solely for the purpose of appearances, but due to Charlotte's integrity the union lasted for better than a half-century.

Among George's idiosyncrasies were feelings of inadequacy. His reign was complicated further by his efforts to overcome feelings of incompetence by trying to do the impossible.

He prided himself on being born an Englishman and had the best interest of his country at heart, but lacked the qualities necessary to be a great ruler.

PRINCIPLE: Sincerity does not insure good leadership. Decisions sincerely made are not necessarily good decisions.

George was a Tory, similar to today's liberal politicians who support a strong central government. He was opposed by the Whigs in Parliament, analogous to today's conservative politicians.¹

George was determined to assert royal authority, secure a government that would reflect his principles, and have a ministry to whom he could dictate.

2. Taxation on the Colonies²

Two previous wars had increased the British national debt to £114 million. The government resolved to compel the American colonies to share in a more direct way than they had done before.

One of King George's incompetents was Lord George Grenville, Britain's prime minister and best known for his imposition of the Stamp Act on the colonies in 1765. It was the first in a string of decisions made by the crown that led to the War for Independence.

The colonist's resident agent in London was Benjamin Franklin who argued that such a tax was not necessary insisting that all the crown had to do was ask the colonies in the traditional way and they would respond.

¹ "The party names of *Whig* and *Tory* were first used in New York, in 1774, and rapidly spread throughout the Colonies. The name of *Tory* was applied to the American royalists, and the name of *Whig* was assumed by the patriots. The origin of these names, (which were copied from the English) is obscure. Sir Richard Phillips defines the two parties thus: "Those are *Whigs* who would curb the power of the Crown; those are *Tories* who would curb the power of the people" (B. J. Lossing, *Biographical Sketches of the Signers of the Declaration of American Independence* [New York: George F. Cooledge & Brother, 1849, repr. Aledo, Tex., WallBuilder Press, 1995], 73fn[†]).

² George F. Willison, "Treason!" in *Patrick Henry and His World* (Garden City, N.Y.: 1969), 113–32, passim.

In the past the colonies were presented with a decree from the king expressing his “royal desire for funds.” The provincial legislature would consider the request and as always make a generous grant.

Franklin inquired as to how much was desired from the colonies and was told by Grenville that he hoped to raise 1.8 million dollars [£60,000].

Franklin assured him much more money could be raised with less disturbance if he would just approach the colonies in the long-accepted manner.

What Franklin soon learned was that Grenville was really interested in showing the colonies that Britain could tax them in any way it saw fit.

Once the tax was made public, the American population challenged it immediately. Nevertheless, Grenville persisted. He introduced the bill in the House of Commons early in 1765. Here is a representative list of the things that must bear a stamp to be legal:

Animal skins, vellum, parchment, or paper, if engrossed, written or printed upon. This included legal documents of all kinds, mortgages, transfers of property, land grants, wills, testaments, marriage licenses, liquor licenses, preachers' licenses, diplomas, appointment to public office, customs receipts, newspapers, handbills, advertisements, calendars, almanacs, pamphlets, publications, decks of cards, and pairs of dice.

Few in the House chose to debate the proposal but one who did was Colonel Isaac Barré, an aide to General James Wolfe. Each fought at the victorious Battle of Quebec in 1759 that ensured British control of Canada.

Charles Townshend, Chancellor of the Exchequer,³ rebutted the colonel:

³ “The department or office of state in Great Britain and Northern Ireland charged with the receipt and care of the national revenue” (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “exchequer”).

“And now will these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished by our indulgence until they are grown up to a high degree of strength and opulence and protected by our arms—will they now grudge to contribute their mite to relieve us from the heavy weight of that burden which we lie under?”

Colonel Barré’s reply was both forceful and prophetic:

“*They planted by your care!*” No, your oppressions planted them in America. They fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated and inhospitable country. *‘They nourished by your indulgence!’* They grew by your neglect of them. As soon as you began to care for them, that care was exercised in sending persons to rule them in one department or another, ... to spy out their liberties, to misrepresent their actions, and to prey upon them—men whose behavior on many occasions has caused the blood of these sons of liberty to recoil within them. *‘They protected by your arms!’* They have nobly taken up arms in your defense and have exerted a shining valor amidst their constant and laborious industry for the defense of a country whose frontier was drenched in blood while its interior parts yielded all their little savings for your [advantage].

The people, I believe, are as truly loyal as any subjects the king has—but a people jealous of their liberties. And believe me—remember I this day told you so—that the same spirit of freedom which actuated that people at first will accompany them still.”

Yet, petitions of protest arrived from the colonies, but they were ignored by the House. The Bill was passed by the House by a five-to-one margin. It was quickly approved by the House of Lords and signed by the king on March 2, 1765.

Virginia’s burgesses assembled on May 29, 1765 to consider how to address the Stamp Act. Patrick Henry presented seven resolutions in opposition to the Act. The ones that stoked the most rabid debate and earned for him one of his most famous responses are found in resolutions five through seven.

5. *Resolved*, therefore, That the General Assembly of this colony have the only and sole exclusive right and power to lay taxes and impositions upon the inhabitants of this colony; and that every attempt to vest such power in any person or persons whatsoever other than the General Assembly⁴ aforesaid has a manifest tendency to destroy British as well as American freedom;

6. *Resolved*, That his Majesty's liege people, the inhabitants of this colony, are not bound to yield obedience to any law or ordinance whatever, designed to impose any taxation whosoever upon them, other than the laws or ordinances of the General Assembly aforesaid;

7. *Resolved*, That any persons who shall be writing or speaking assert or maintain that any person or persons have any right or power to impose or lay any taxation on the people shall be deemed an enemy to his Majesty's colony.

Henry offered his resolutions to the House sitting as Committee of the Whole, precipitating violent all-day debate. Toward the end of the day, the House ceased sitting as Committee of the Whole and went into regular session. John Robinson, speaker of the House, resumed the chair.

For two days debate raged in what Henry called a "long and warm contest." It was during these exchanges that Henry was violently denounced and personally vilified.

Observing the debate was a 22-year old Thomas Jefferson, not at that time a burgess, but remarked afterward, "Henry spoke as Homer wrote, with torrents of sublime eloquence."

One of those "torrents of sublime eloquence" became famous:

⁴ "Here, Henry was referring to specific terms in the original Virginia charter of 1606 and in the Great Charter which had given the colony the right to a considerable degree of self-government to be exercised through its General Assembly. If a measure was approved by both houses of the Assembly, it was still subject to veto by the royal governor (Lord Dunmore), or by the Lords of Trade, or by the Privy Council, or by the Crown itself. Even with such limitations, Virginians prized what they called their 'inalienable rights,' and Henry went on to specify some of them" (Willison, *Patrick Henry and His World*, 120-21).

“Tarquin^S and Caesar had each his Brutus; Charles the First, his Cromwell; and George the Third ...”

At this, the speaker of the House, John Robinson, the most powerful man in the colony, shouted, “Treason!”—a shout picked up by many more until the chamber echoed treason! Treason! Treason! When the clamor subsided, Henry resumed, quietly”... and George the Third may profit from their example. If this be treason, make the most of it.”

At New York, early in October 1765, a Stamp Act Congress convened. In its “Declaration of Rights and Grievances,” it repeated the arguments that the Stamp Act was “unconstitutional,” that it had a “manifest tendency to subvert the rights and liberties of the colonists,” that only the colonial legislatures had a right to levy direct taxes on their people, that the Stamp Act should be repealed, at which time the colonists would be happy to return to loving obedience as loyal subjects of the Crown.

The refusal to buy stamps had less effect than the colonists’ refusal to buy any more British goods. The boycott struck the imperial system where it hurt most—in the pocketbook. New York merchants instructed their agents in Britain not to ship them any more goods till the Stamp Act was repealed. Merchants in Boston, Providence, and Philadelphia did likewise.

Women joined the boycott movement. They gave up buying imported fineries and dressed themselves in woolen or other homespun.

Trade with the Mother Country declined steeply, falling some £500,000 [\$15,000,000] during the five months after agitation began.

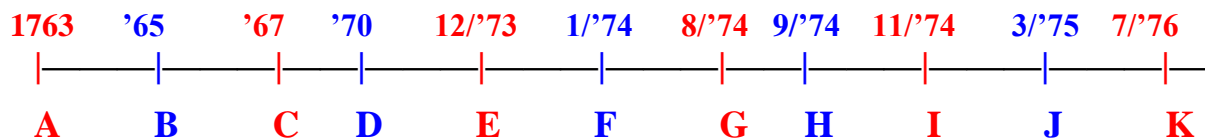
The situation, both politically and economically, had obviously become serious. Everybody agreed that things could not go on as they were. Either British authority had to be asserted by enforcing the Stamp Act unreservedly, or the Stamp Act had to be repealed.

^S “Tarquin \ˈtär-kwin\, Latin in full Lucius Tarquinius Priscus \ˈlü-shē-us tär-ˈkwin-ē-us ˈpris-kas\, traditionally the fifth king of Rome [616–578 B.C.], was appointed guardian of the sons of King Ancus Marcius \ˈaŋ-kus ˈmār-shē-us\. Upon the king’s death Tarquin assumed the throne. Eventually Ancus’ sons had Tarquin murdered” (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. [Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010], 11:565–66).

Parliament, largely against the wishes of the House of Lords, repealed the act in early 1766. Simultaneously, however, Parliament issued the Declaratory Act, which reasserted its right of direct taxation anywhere within the empire, “in all cases whatsoever.”⁶

Over the course of the following decade, Parliament passed other Acts to which the colonies responded culminating in the Virginia Convention and ultimately the Declaration of Independence.

Acts Imposed by the British Government upon the Colonies



A. Navigation Act

B. Stamp Act

C. Tea Tax including glass and paper

D. Tea only

E. Boston Tea Party

F. Intolerable Acts

G. Colonies hold individual conventions

H. First Continental Congress

I. George III's response

J. The Virginia Convention at Richmond

K. Declaration of Independence

The centuries old Navigation Act was made stricter by Parliament the year before. It compelled the colonies to restrict their trade to England alone or to such foreign ports as England directed. Goods could only be shipped on English or colony-built ships. Parliament passed amendments forbidding the colonists from making their own woolen cloth, beaver hats, and iron furnaces.

Success on having the Stamp Act repealed did nothing to lessen British pressure on the colonies. Over the next ten years, a number of other “illegal acts” were imposed on the Americans.

⁶ Ibid., 11:207.

3. The Tea Tax

In 1767, Parliament enacted a law compelling the Americans to pay taxes on a number of imports, i.e., glass, paper, and tea. The colonists boycotted these items. In 1770, Parliament decided to drop the taxes on glass and paper, but left the one on tea in force.

There were two stated reasons: (1) They wanted the colonies to know they still had the power to tax, and (2) Tea was chosen because a major English Tea Company, the Great East India Tea Company, was facing bankruptcy.

Taxing tea sent to the colonies kept the badly mismanaged company in business. The colonies responded by refusing to buy tea at any price.

On December 16, 1773, Samuel Adams organized a raid known as the Boston Tea Party, dumping chests of taxable tea into Boston Harbor. Under the cover of darkness and poorly disguised as Indians, they destroyed a shipment of tea owned by East India.

This blatant act of violence and vandalism inspired someone to immortalize the deed in song as evidence by this verse of “Ballad of the Tea Party”:

Overboard she goes, my boys, heave ho where darkling waters roar
We love our cup of tea full well, but love our freedom more.

Even though this lawless act inspired the colonists for the moment, its ramifications were much worse than the temporary emotional high it evoked. Over a period of months, Parliament responded to the Boston Tea Party with what became known as the Intolerable Acts.

4. The Intolerable Acts

These acts consisted of four laws which were so severe the colonists nicknamed them “intolerable.”

NUMBER 1. The Boston Port Act. It closed the harbor to all trade until repayment was made for the destroyed tea.

NUMBER 2. The Massachusetts Government Act. It canceled the colonies charter of 1691, reducing it to the level of Crown colony status. It substituted a military government under the supervision of General Thomas Gage.

NUMBER 3. The Administration of Justice Act. Protected British officials charged with capital offences by allowing them to go to England or another colony for trial.

NUMBER 4. The Quartering Act. Made arrangements for housing British troops in American houses. It was a renewal of a similar quartering act which had expired in 1770.

Later a fifth was passed that precipitated in the colonists calling the First Continental Congress. It was called the Quebec Act. It declared all land north of the Ohio River and East of the Mississippi to be a part of Canada.

This area included what became the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Eastern Minnesota.

This act had a dual effect, one economic, the other religious. Economically the seized area became off limits to the colonies for fur trade, trapping, and hunting, each of which was big business in America.

The religious effect was that the area came under French civil law and the Roman Catholic Church. This was certainly intolerable for the Protestant colonies.

5. The First Continental Congress

The Intolerable Acts became the colonists' justification for the First Continental Congress.

On September 5, 1774, fifty-six delegates represented all the colonies except Georgia. Delegates included names that would become famous in American History: Patrick Henry and George Washington of Virginia, John and Samuel Adams of Massachusetts Bay, John Jay of New York and co-author of *The Federalist Papers*. Also included were John Dickinson of Pennsylvania and Peyton Randolph of Virginia who served as its President.

The congress rejected a plan for reconciling British authority with colonial freedom. Instead, it adopted a declaration of personal rights including life, liberty, property, assembly, and trial by jury.

It denounced taxation without representation and the maintenance of the British Army in the colonies without colonial consent. Parliamentary regulation of American commerce however was willingly accepted.