

Give me Liberty, or give me Death!

"Give me Liberty, or Give me Death!" is a quotation attributed to Patrick Henry from a speech he made to the Virginia Convention. It was given on March 23, 1775, at St. John's Church in Richmond, Virginia, and is credited with having swung the balance in convincing the Virginia House of Burgesses to pass a resolution delivering the Virginia troops to the Revolutionary War. Among the delegates to the convention were future US Presidents Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Reportedly, those in attendance, upon hearing the speech, shouted, "give me liberty or give me death!"^[1]

Overview

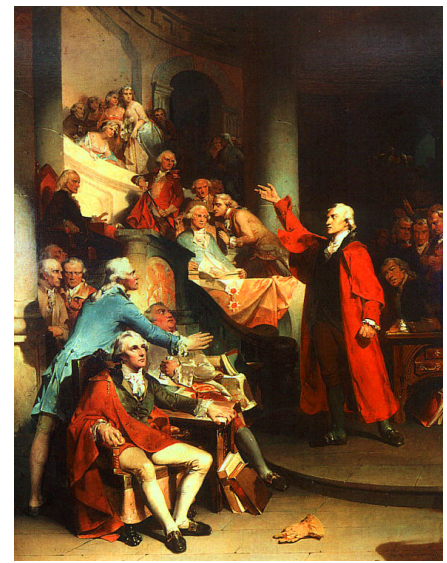
The text of this speech first appeared in print in *Life and Character of Patrick Henry* by William Wirt which was first published in 1816, seventeen years after Patrick Henry's death. In 1815, Wirt wrote to a friend, "from 1763 to 1789... not one of his speeches lives in print, writing or memory. All that is told me is, that on such and such an occasion, he made a distinguished speech".^[2] Wirt corresponded with men who had heard the speech and others who were acquainted with people who were there at the time. Wirt wrote to Judge St. George Tucker, who had been present for the speech, that "I have taken almost entirely Mr. Henry's speech in the Convention of '75 from you, as well as your description of its effect on you verbatim."^[3]

Tucker's account was based upon recollections and not notes. Tucker attempted a reconstruction of only the first two paragraphs of the speech. Tucker wrote, "In vain should I attempt to give any idea of his speech".^[4] While this implies a degree of uncertainty over the content of the speech, the amount of research done by Wirt in the process of creating his text strongly argues that he was able to accurately reconstruct the key points, especially the famous quote itself. It is generally agreed that it ended with, "It is in vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace — but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

Ear-witnesses to Henry's hypnotic orations remarked that while they always seemed to be convincing in the moment, they had a difficult time remembering exactly what he had said immediately afterwards: according to Thomas Jefferson, "Although it was difficult, when [Henry] had spoken, to tell what he had said, yet, while speaking, it always seemed directly to the point. When he had spoken in opposition to my opinion, had produced a great effect, and I myself had been highly delighted and moved, I have asked myself, when he ceased, 'What the devil has he said?' and could never answer the inquiry."^[5]

A more contemporary account is found in a letter of James Parker of Norfolk, written to his friend Charles Stuart on April 6, 1775: "You never heard anything more famously insolent than P Henrys speech. He called the King a Tyrant, a fool, a puppet & tool to the Ministry, Said there was now no Englishmen, no Scots no Britons, but a Set of Wretches Sunk in luxury..."^[6]

The text of the speech as presented by Wirt contains many biblical allusions and radical pronouncements, and ends by asserting that war has already begun, the only question being whether to fight. In Henry's delivery of the speech,



Patrick Henry "Treason" speech before the House of Burgesses in an 1851 painting by Peter F. Rothermel

Wirt compared Henry with the Roman statesman Cato, a proponent of Republicanism in opposition to the dictatorship of Julius Caesar. A leading proponent of the Stoicism philosophy in which it was believed that death was a guarantee of personal freedom, Cato chose suicide over living in a tyranny. Some scholars believe that this line was inspired by Cato.^[7] There is, however, some doubt as to whether Henry actually wrote the speech. Anecdotal evidence indicates that it was written by Lemuel Riddick, an associate of Henry's who fell ill and could not deliver the speech himself, and requested that Henry deliver it in his place.

The play *Cato, a Tragedy* contains the line, "It is not now time to talk of aught/But chains or conquest, liberty or death" (Act II, Scene 4). This play was popular in the colonies and was well-known by the Founding Fathers, who used quotes from the play. George Washington had this play performed for the Continental Army at Valley Forge.^[8] The phrase "Liberty or Death" also appears on the Culpeper Minutemen flag of 1775.

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation uses the Armenian translation of "Liberty or Death!" («Ազատութիւն Կամ Մահ:») as an unwritten motto.

Patrick Henry probably took this quote from several old struggles where people used this motto before:

During the Siege of Barcelona (25 August 1713 - 11 September 1714) the Barcelona defenders and the Maulets used black flags with the motto "Live free or die", in Catalan "*Viurem lliures o morirem*". Now it is used as a symbol of Catalan independentism.

Notes

- [1] William Wirt, p. 123. "No murmur of applause was heard. The effect was too deep. After the trance of a moment, several members started from their seats. The cry, 'to arms,' seemed to quiver on every lip, and gleam from every eye!... That supernatural voice still sounded in their ears, and shivered along their arteries... They became impatient of speech - their souls were on fire for action."
- [2] Raphael, p. 147.
- [3] Raphael, p. 148.
- [4] Raphael, p. 149.
- [5] Cohen.
- [6] Charles Steuart Papers, cited in Ivor Noel Hume, *1775: Another Part of the Field* p. 119.
- [7] Nelson.
- [8] Randall, p. 43.

References

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External links

- Text of Patrick Henry's speech to the Virginia House of Burgesses (<http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/henry.html>)
 - Audio of the speech (<http://www.history.org/media/audio.cfm>) by Richard Schuman, who interprets the character of Patrick Henry for The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
 - Cato (A Tragedy in Five Acts) (1713)
 - http://www.historicstjohnschurch.org/hist_reenactments.php
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