

HIS TRUTH GOES MARCHING ON

by

James J. Kilpatrick

Born in 1736, Patrick Henry died just a year before the 19th Century dawned. There were giants on our earth in those days, and Henry both literally and figuratively stood tall among them. He was a big man, red-headed, brown-eyed, a country lawyer who became a statesman. He had an orator's voice, with the resonance of a bass viol and the range of a theater organ. There was a time in our own century when boys took lessons in elocution; we declaimed, with gestures, Henry's

Elliot's Debates. Henry was at his best. He was skeptical, cynical, suspicious. "That government is no more than a choice among evils is acknowledged by the most intelligent among mankind, and has been a standing maxim for ages."

The proposed government, he feared, would be dominated by a federal bureaucracy; "The salaries and fees of the swarm of officers and dependents on the government will cost this continent immense sums." The states would not be able to compete with the "rich, snug, fine, fat" allurements of federal office. "Who can cope with the excisemen and taxmen?" He scoffed at the notion of checks and balances: "What can avail your specious, imaginary balances, your rope-dangling, chain-rattling, ridiculous ideal checks and contrivances?"

With remarkable powers of prophecy, Henry saw what would be swallowed up. "What will the states have to do? Take care of the poor, repair and make highways, erect bridges, and so on, and so on." The powers granted to the national government were vast; the powers reserved to the states were petty. It was the nature of

power that absorbed Henry's most thoughtful attention.

"Human nature never will part from power. Look for an example of a voluntary relinquishment of power, from one end of the globe to another -- you will find none ...Can you say that you will be safe when you give such unlimited powers without any real responsibility? Will not the members of Congress have the same passions which other rules have had?"

Henry made no apologies for his suspicions: "I hope to be one of those who have a large portion of suspicion. Too much suspicion may be corrected. If you give too little power today, you may give more tomorrow. But the reverse of that proposition will not hold. If you give too much power today, you cannot retake it tomorrow, for tomorrow will never come for that purpose."

You will hear nothing at national conventions to match Henry's glorious command of the language, but you will hear the same fundamental issues debated. What is the proper role of the federal government in child care, labor relations, parental leave, economic regulation? What are wise limits upon executive and legislative power? Patrick Henry raised the right question 200 years ago. The old dissenter rests in his grave but his truth goes marching on.

(James J. Kilpatrick was the most widely syndicated political columnist of his time. This "Patrick Henry Essay" was originally published by NFL oratory sponsor Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation.)

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speech of 1765 against the Stamp Act ("If this be treason, make the most of it"), and we rose to forensic heights with his speech of 1775: "Give me liberty," we cried, with a pause in which the audience sat transfixed, "or give me death!" Every schoolboy knew the speeches.

It was not for Henry's role in the Revolution that the old gentleman was honored the other evening. It was rather for his role in the Virginia Ratification Convention of 1788. Two hundred years ago this week, 168 delegates met in Richmond to decide whether the Commonwealth should join eight other states in approving the new Constitution. By the time the convention ended on June 25, New Hampshire had become the necessary ninth state to bring the new union into being, but Virginia's decision was far from academic. Without Virginia's approval, the fledgling nation would have died aborting, with Georgia and South Carolina severed altogether from Delaware and Maryland.

The two leading players in the Virginia convention were James Madison, who earnestly favored the Constitution, and Patrick Henry, who bitterly opposed it. In the end, Henry lost. Virginia ratified by a vote of 89 to 79, but it was Henry's insistence upon amendments in the nature of a bill of rights that three years later would prevail.

A shorthand reporter took down the speeches. You may read them today -- and great reading it is -- in

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