Clipping of Note NUMBER 46

Patrick Henry's Choice

IN 1775, an American patriot stood before his neighbors in a small church in Virginia and challenged the tyranny of government – his own government – in a ringing statement on liberty and death.

While I subscribe wholeheartedly to Patrick Henry's choice of death in lieu of slavery to government, I would like to call your attention to another thought in the same sentence wherein he defied governmental encroachment upon the natural rights of man. Here are the familiar words with which he concluded that memorable address: "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

It is important to note that Patrick Henry did not say that he wanted a law to force everyone else to do as he wished. Nor was he trying to stampede a mob into following him. When he said, "I know not what course others may take," he was stating the very essence of liberty; for he was respecting the right of each person to be free to follow the dictates of his own conscience. And when he added, "but as for me," he was declaring for himself the same freedom of choice that he acknowledged for all others. Thus, having indicated that everyone should be free to decide for himself, he announced his own decision: "Give me liberty or give me death." And let us remember that when he spoke of liberty, he meant *freedom from the injustices imposed by his own legally constituted government which he had previously supported.*

This philosophy of Patrick Henry—his belief that individual liberty is more sacred than life itself—seems to be forgotten in America today. Now our leaders seem to direct their energies primarily to acquiring power over their fellow-men through government office. And once such political power has been obtained, the possessors of it seem to say to the rest of us: "We do not know what course you would follow if government were to leave you free to pursue it, but we strongly suspect that you would act in ignorance of your own best interests. Therefore, we will take no chances—we will pass a law that will force you to follow the course that we have decided is best for you. But as for us—give us more power to impose controls, rules, and regulations upon you for your benefit, and for our glory."

That philosophy is a far cry from the ideas that prevailed when Americans were demanding freedom from governmental dictation over their daily lives and business. And I believe that if we do not return to our original concept of a government of strictly limited functions, freedom in America will eventually be as dead as it now is in Russia and other totalitarian countries.

Extracted from an address by Admiral Ben Moreell,
Chairman of the Board of Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation,
before the Illinois Manufacturers' Association,
Chicago, December 11, 1951

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