



PATRICK HENRY WARNED ABOUT INFRINGEMENT ON LIBERTY

Thomas S. Kidd's op-ed column on anti-federalist Patrick Henry

Date published: 1/15/2012

WACO, Texas

--At the conclusion of Virginia's 1788 ratification convention, a meeting tasked with voting on the new Constitution, Patrick Henry strode to the assembly floor, convinced that the future of American liberty hung in the balance. In his mind's eye, the great orator warned, he could see angels watching, "reviewing the political decisions and revolutions which in the progress of time will happen in America, and the consequent happiness or misery of mankind--I am led to believe that much of the account on one side or the other, will depend on what we now decide."

To Americans familiar only with Henry's blazing "Liberty or Death" oration of 1775, it may come as a shock to learn that Henry opposed the adoption of the Constitution. Henry always had a flair for the dramatic, but on this occasion Mother Nature offered him an improbable assist: As he thundered against the dangers of the new centralized government, a howling storm rose outside the Richmond hall. Frightened delegates scurried to take cover.

A memorable scene, to be sure, but how could the man who cried "give me liberty or give me death," this patriot who penned Virginia's resolves against the Stamp Act in 1765, not support the Constitution? The answer was pretty simple: Henry thought that the American Revolution was, at root, a rebellion against the coercive power of the British government. In particular, it was a rebellion against unjust British taxes. Henry therefore thought it was madness for Americans to place that same kind of consolidated political authority over themselves again.

THE ALL-POWERFUL STATES

America already had a constitution in 1788, the Articles of Confederation, basically a continuation of the Continental Congress, the ad hoc body formed in 1774 to plan



Patrick

Henry argued against the new Constitution that would give greater power to a centralized government.

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resistance against British taxes. The Articles of Confederation government was composed of a single-house legislature. The states retained most of their power under the Articles, and it was very difficult for the national government to do much of anything without overwhelming support from the states.

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