
Thomas S. Kidd. *Patrick Henry: First Among Patriots*. New York:
Basic Books, 2011
Book Review

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Mesmerizing, soaring oratory marked Patrick Henry's political career, while unfortunately for historians, writing meticulous notes did not. Henry's well-known speech of March 23, 1775, which was purported to end with the stirring phrase "give me liberty or give me death," has been the subject of much historical debate, as no extant copy of the speech exists. What Americans today understand to be the most rousing speech of the Revolutionary War era was pieced together years after the fact. Nevertheless, historian Thomas Kidd has found extensive primary source material from which to craft his portrait of Virginia's famed son, Henry.



Figure 1. *Patrick Henry* by George Bagby Matthews (1857-1943), based on a portrait by Thomas Sully. Oil on canvas, c. 1891.

Unlike his more celebrated countrymen, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, Henry did not seek a national stage; his home and his country remained Virginia. For that state and its citizens he was a steadfast and devoted statesman and hero. Kidd sets out to examine whether Henry can indeed be considered one of the leading Founding Fathers, regardless of the role he played igniting the War for American Independence, since he exerted strenuous efforts to defeat Virginia's ratification of the Constitution in 1788. Through an in-depth analysis of the political and social framework of the late colonial and Revolutionary War period, Kidd depicts Henry as a true patriot, albeit one who defined his country as Virginia and not the nascent United States of America.

Kidd's work is at its weakest in the first chapter; however, through the remainder of the book he writes with confidence and clarity. As a specialist on American religious history, Kidd expertly portrays Henry's experience as a youngster during America's first Great Awakening which proved to be a critical, formative period for his later life. Exposure to the thundering sermons of evangelical preachers not only shaped Henry's lifelong Christian faith and sense of providential design but also acted as a key influence on the development of his oratorical skills. In a similar manner to historian Charles L. Cohen, Kidd traces the biblical influences evident in Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech and outlines the manner in which these references spoke to Henry's compatriots, who would easily have recognized the political inferences in its scripture-inspired passages.¹ Unlike the citizens of secular twenty-first century America, most eighteenth-century American colonists were imbued with a deep religious conviction and shared a common ethos, regardless of the Christian denomination they practiced.

Kidd traces Henry's military and political career during the Revolutionary War and notes that despite the legislative restrictions in place, during his five terms as Virginia's governor, Henry was as effective as circumstances allowed; much more so than his rival, Thomas Jefferson. Kidd portrays the harsh realities of war and its effects on Virginians, many of whose actions did not honorably reflect upon their character. Jefferson's flight from the British in the late spring of 1781 left Virginia without a leader during a very dark hour, and as Kidd notes, was an act "nothing short of cowardly" (p. 158). Kidd states that Henry's reaction to Jefferson's actions as governor led to a life-long breach between the two men.

Kidd also treats the relationship between Henry and George Washington to extensive analysis; while strained at times, the mutual respect between these two great Virginians remained in place until their deaths in 1799. It was Henry's

opposition to the Constitution Convention of 1787 and the subsequent proposed Constitution that led to the rift between him and Washington. Kidd demonstrates how each man's patriotism led him to a different political position; Washington, who had operated on the national platform since assuming command of the Continental Army in June 1775, sought a stronger central government, while Henry, who through choice limited his stage to Virginia, desired to protect the interests of his state. To Henry's credit, however, once the Constitution became a *fait accompli*, he reconciled with both Washington and the new republic. Together with the anti-Federalists who also opposed the Constitution, Henry's resistance to its ratification led to the creation of the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution which clearly lay out Americans' most "basic [political] rights" (p. 211).

As noted above, a number of weaknesses are found in the first chapter of the book, which lacks sufficient detail and context in a number of areas. Kidd refers to "well-known British opposition figures" but fails to provide sufficient background for his readers to appreciate the then current state of Britain's constitutional government, as well as the political ideologies of its Whig and Tory factions. He fails to identify that many colonists adopted the English "country Whig" political philosophy with its definition of personal liberty opposed to monarchical power ideally managed through a balanced government design which pitted legislative against executive authority. The Whig philosophy adhered to in the colonies was not mainstream political thought in Britain, but rather that espoused by the more radical British element. He misquotes a description of a St. Andrew's Day festival on page 12 by referring to "diverse" prizes, when the original quote was "divers;" leading to a different meaning. Likewise, he extracts from historian Fred Anderson's *Crucible of War* the story of George Washington's mishandling of a military encounter with a French scouting party which ended brutally in the death of its leader and ignited war between the British colonists and the French. Kidd includes a quote "Thou art not yet dead, my father" without context (p. 20); it is the same quote which Anderson explored in depth as it reflected the motivation behind the savage act of Tanaghrisson, who accompanied Washington and murdered the French commander.

Regardless of its faults, Kidd has created a scholarly, yet accessible introduction to Patrick Henry, one of America's most important, yet least understood founding fathers. By placing Henry's actions within the religious, social, political and military context of revolutionary Virginia, Kidd leaves his readers much better prepared to understand the factors which shaped one of America's greatest orators.

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The original review may be found at:

<https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=39474>

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Notes

1. Charles L. Cohen, "The 'Liberty of Death' Speech: A Note on Religion and Revolutionary Rhetoric," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (October 1981): 702-717, accessed October 2, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1918911>.