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# “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death”

by Eugene V. Debs.

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Patrick Henry of Virginia, at a time when King George of England was engaged in massing the resources of his kingdom to subjugate his American colonies and reduce the American people to slavery, immortalized his name by exclaiming, “Give me Liberty or give me Death.”

Patrick Henry was not, by birth or education, one of Virginia’s aristocracy. He had no landed estate. He was eminently a poor man. He was one of the “plain people.” He was not, in a university sense, an educated man. Unsuccessful in various business ventures, he was a reader of books and a student of affairs, and finally became an advocate, a lawyer, and in that profession found his rightful place in the list of patriots of his time, and with the stride of a giant became the peer of Washington, Hancock, Adams, Quincy, and Lee,<sup>1</sup> and by his fearless courage and unequalled eloquence, called the American nation to arms in the defense of liberty and independence.

On one occasion, when the perils of his country were being discussed, when the shadows of coming events spread out dark and appalling from Massachusetts to Georgia, when the choice was between fight or flight, liberty or slavery, British subjugation or American independence, Patrick Henry grasped with prescient genius, cause and effect, the perils and the sacrifices involved, and accepting them all with a courage as dauntless as ever inspired a patriot, and with hope and faith aflame, uttered the imperishable words, “Give me Liberty or give me Death.”

What did he mean, and what do men now mean, who so often quote the words of the illustrious patriot?

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<sup>1</sup> **Charles Lee** (1731-1782) was an important general in the Continental Army.

Around him, far and near, from the North to the South, there was African chattel slavery. Is it to be supposed that the great Virginian meant five me death rather than chattel slavery? No one imagines such to have been Patrick Henry's idea, but rather than submit to a foreign potentate, aided and abetted by American Tories and traitors, rather than be the vassal of an English king and an English nobility and aristocracy, his choice was death.

History is repeating itself. True, England is not sending over her armies under her Burgoynes and Cornwallises.<sup>2</sup> Her fleets of warships are not hovering upon our coasts. She is not taking armed possession of our cities, but, nevertheless, she is plotting to overthrow the liberties of American citizens.

in the days of the Revolution, days that "tried men's souls,"<sup>3</sup> England bought 30,000 Hessians, "dumb driven cattle," armed and equipped to subjugate the American colonies. She does not now use her gold to buy Hessians; but she does use it to transform Americans into Hessians, and where there was one Benedict Arnold to betray is country in the dark days of the Revolution, there are not a thousand in alliance with England's money-lenders, ready, for gold, to betray their country and establish in the United States, English domination in financial affairs.

Whom are these Benedict Arnolds, these Tories, these Hessian cattle? The answer is on every American patriot's tongue. It is borne on every breeze. It glows in every patriot's eye. It is voiced from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the lakes to the gulf. It is, that they are the ones who manage trusts and syndicates, banks and factories, railroads and mortgages; those who employ workingmen and workingwomen, and ceaselessly strive to reduce wages, that they may grow rich and still richer by their piracies, the millionaires, the men who constitute the money power, who speculate in bonds and gamble in stocks, who contract the currency and create panics at their will, who persuade Grover Cleveland to issue gold bonds for gold barons, and pocket millions by their cunning and their knavery, who grasp the President and his cabinet and transform them into mere automata,

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<sup>2</sup> **John Burgoyne** (1722-1792) and **Charles Cornwallis** (1738-1805) were leading British Generals in the American revolutionary war.

<sup>3</sup> "These are the times that try men's souls" is the opening line from "The Crisis" (Dec. 1776) by **Thomas Paine** (1737-1809).

and compel them to dance to the jingle of gold in Lombard and Wall Streets.<sup>4</sup>

I unhesitatingly affirm that the subject is eminently and preeminently appropriate for Labor Day discussion.

Those whom I have referred to as being in alliance to secure English domination in American finances, have been in alliance also with English capitalist to take possession of vast areas of American land, and to control numerous American industries, especially American railroads, many of which are operated in the interest of English, Holland, and German capitalists, so that now multiplied thousands of American toilers are the vassals of European capitalists and aristocrats, and are being plundered in their interests.

What more do these English lords and Tories want? What further humiliation and degradation of workingmen do they contemplate? The answer is easy. They expect to rob them of their ballots, or what is the same thing, by bulldozing, intimidating, and blacklisting methods, compel them to make their ballots not only record a lie, but that under the lash of their masters, their ballots shall record the fact that American workingmen are like Benedict Arnold and his associate Tory apostates, traitors to truth, to manhood, to liberty and independence, and traitors to their families, their fellow-men, and country.

The issue is squarely made. It is up for debate. British emissaries are here.

The alliance between American Tories and English enemies of America, is to be perpetuated, and workingmen are to be enslaved.

In view of such things, what will Labor Day orators say? I do not know, but this I do know, if they are true to themselves and to their country, true to liberty and independence, true to their fellow workingmen and to free institutions, free speech, and undebauched judiciary, and to the great body of the people, they will rise and expand with their theme and exclaim as did Patrick Henry, a hundred years ago, "Give me Liberty or give me Death."

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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<sup>4</sup> Lombard Street in London was the center of British finance capital, akin to its American cousin, Wall Street.