


250 years since 'Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death' speech

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It all began in Virginia.

On March 23, 1775, Patrick Henry uttered a line that would come to embody the spirit of defiance against oppression.

On Sunday, that pivotal moment was reenacted in celebration of its 250th anniversary.



Chris Yates poses for a picture with Chris Dunn, the Patrick Henry interpreter, on Sunday on the 250th anniversary of Henry's liberty or death speech.

Margo Wagner, Times-Dispatch

"Welcome to Richmond, Virginia. Welcome to St. John's Church. Welcome to March 23, 1775, 250 years ago, this very day, this very moment, this very space. I'm going to let that sink in for just a second," Dave Maier said to a packed congregation, portraying Robert Carter Nicholas in Sunday's afternoon reenactment. "250 years ago, this day, this moment, this very space."

There are weekly reenactments of this speech throughout the year but rarely is the fanfare as rich as Sunday's event.

The 1:30 reenactment of Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech was performed to a full crowd and was livestreamed to 3,154 viewers at www.VA250.org.

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Among the crowd was Gov. Glenn Youngkin; legendary filmmaker Ken Burns, who would make an appearance at the Altria Theater later that evening for a preview of his new docuseries, "The American Revolution"; and Carly Fiorina, national honorary chair of the Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission.



Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks at St. John's Church in Richmond on Sunday during the 250th anniversary of Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech.

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"I am humbled to stand here as the 74th Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia as we honor the first governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia in a history-changing moment, utterance of those most famous words, give me liberty or give me death. So as we celebrate Patrick Henry's legacy, we are also celebrating our nation's formation," Youngkin said as he addressed the crowd after receiving a standing ovation as he made his way up to the pulpit.

"America's history is Virginia's history; I dare say that someone could express a true sentiment that the United States was made in Virginia."

The next warm welcome went to Burns, the event's keynote speaker.

"We watch as those who've inhabited this strange foreign land we call past disappear with time, first gradually and then almost suddenly. Eventually we look back, no longer as witnesses, but as students. We ask questions, we do research, we write stories, a few of us make films, but we will never truly know and understand precisely what it was like," Burns said to the crowd.

"Henry's speech here marked a remarkable moment of transition as a war would soon begin in less than a month, that would transform how people thought about human liberty and what would lead to the creation of the United States of America."



Filmmaker Ken Burns speaks at St. John's Church on Sunday during the 250th anniversary of Patrick Henry's liberty or death speech.

Margo Wagner photos, Times-Dispatch

After a moment of silence, prayer, the singing of "God Bless America" and remarks by Fiorina, the church bell rang and the reenactment began, transporting the congregation from 2025's spectators to 1775's delegates.

All but a few of the rows filled, attendees sat shoulder to shoulder, the weight of independence now in their hands.

"So my understanding is, Mr. Patrick Henry, has a resolution, a proposal for the consideration of the house. Please listen carefully to the arguments for and against. You may surprise yourself, because you have an important choice to make with your vote, a choice between loyalty to the king or, you know, Liberty," Maier said.

Protesters, meanwhile, rallied against the Trump administration at Patrick Henry Park across the street from St. John's Church.

Under the context of "no kings," protesters lined the street and beyond, some holding signs while standing in the public graveyard right outside the church's doors. Their chanting and calls for democracy were often heard inside. Youngkin referred to them as "... enthusiastic friends outside."



Protest leader Nicole Subryan Bailey gives her own modified version of Patrick Henry's iconic speech outside of St. John's Church in Richmond on Sunday.

Margo Wagner, Times-Dispatch

Back inside the church, Fiorina elaborated a sentiment she shared in her speech to Sunday's crowd; "When we do not know our history, when we do not care who and what came before us, we no longer understand the foundations upon which our nation is built."

"One of the reasons I think commemorating time and place are important is because it makes things real. We live in a world where things are fast, fleeting, fake, false, and so when you can be present in the actual place, on the actual day at the actual time, it's hard to escape. You have to understand. I think understanding who we are, where we come from, is really important," Fiorina said.

Leaving the church, Youngkin's warm welcome turned into a chilling echo of boos.

As protesters dispersed, Bailey said that although it's fragile, America does still have democracy but that without a fight it could be lost.

"I really hope that we can get back to being a democracy that works and that Congress will not abdicate their power to the president," Bailey said. "They are three co-equal branches of government, and we need to act like it."



People protest outside of St. John's Church on Sunday during the 250th liberty or death speech.
Margo Wagner, Times-Dispatch

250th anniversary of "Give Me Liberty or Give me Death"



Gov. Glenn Youngkin sings the national anthem during the 250th anniversary of Patrick Henry's "give me liberty or give me death" speech at St. John's Church on March 23, 2025, in Richmond, Va.
Margo Wagner



People listen to Gov. Glenn Youngkin speak during the 250th anniversary of Patrick Henry's "give me liberty or give me death" speech at St. John's Church on March 23, 2025, in Richmond, Va.
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Protest leader Nicole Subryan Bailey gives her own modified version of Patrick Henry's iconic speech outside of St. John's Church in Richmond on Sunday.

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Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks at St. John's Church in Richmond on Sunday during the 250th anniversary of Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech.
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Carly Fiorina speaks at St. John's Church on Sunday during the 250th anniversary of Patrick Henry's liberty or death speech.

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People protest outside of St. John's Church on Sunday during the 250th liberty or death speech.
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Filmmaker Ken Burns speaks at St. John's Church on Sunday during the 250th anniversary of Patrick Henry's liberty or death speech.
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Chris Yates poses for a picture with Chris Dunn, the Patrick Henry interpreter, on Sunday on the 250th anniversary of Henry's liberty or death speech.
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Patrick Henry Jolly, a descendant of Patrick Henry, reenacts the famous speech at the church on Sunday.
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Patrick Henry Jolly, a descendant of Patrick Henry, reenacts the famous speech at St. John's Church in Richmond on Sunday.

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