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JOHN A. RAGOSTA, *For the People, For the Country: Patrick Henry's Final Political Battle*

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023, 212 pages, ISBN 978-0813950228.

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Texte intégral

- 1 In the last decades, the historiography of the American Revolution has incorporated a more diverse range of actors, including women, African Americans, and the working classes. Simultaneously, the perception of the Founders has been tarnished by recent scrutinies of their complex connection to slavery. Yet the genre of the biography of the key figures of the Revolution remains widely popular in the academic world and among the general public.
- 2 Despite his pivotal role in Virginia from the 1770s to the 1790s, where he served two terms as governor, Patrick Henry remains somewhat overshadowed by the more renowned "Founders" of the U. S. Republic. The reasons for this neglect are, first, that Henry systematically declined national-level positions and, secondly, that his personal papers have not been preserved. Moreover, William Wirt, his first biographer, shaped the enduring image of a not well-read politician while modern conservatives often



leverage Henry's legacy to underpin their criticism of the federal government.¹ However, recent studies have explored the complexity of Henry's thought and character. Kevin J. Hayes has reconstructed the contents of Henry's library at his Red Hill plantation, proving that it offered a substantial cultural foundation to Henry's thought.² In their biographies, published simultaneously in 2017, Jon Kukla and John Ragosta have unveiled Henry's multifaceted contribution to the Revolution, revealing the man beyond the talented orator mostly remembered for a few iconic quotes.³

3 A historian based at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello, John Ragosta has focused his research on Virginia and its foremost revolutionaries. He has authored significant works such as *Religious Freedom: Jefferson's Legacy, America's Creed* (UVA Press, 2013), and *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped to Win the American Revolution & Secured Religious Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2010). He is also co-editor of *The Founding of Thomas Jefferson's University* (UVA Press, 2019) and *European Friends of the American Revolution* (UVA Press, 2023).

4 In his second work on Patrick Henry, titled *For the People, For the Country: Patrick Henry's Final Political Battle*, he builds upon his previously released biography to address one specific moment in the life of the Virginian statesman. On March 4, 1799, shortly before he died, Henry delivered his ultimate public speech at Charlotte Courthouse. According to those who attended and recalled the speech – whose exact content has not gone down to us – Henry denounced the bold actions taken by Democratic-Republicans, or Jeffersonians, against the national government in response to the *Alien and Sedition Acts* which limited freedoms of speech and of the press.⁴ He thus distanced himself from the stance he had championed since the Constitution's ratification campaign in 1787-88, when he fervently defended states' rights against a centralized national government. Henry's condemnation of the Democratic-Republican campaign was misunderstood by some as a departure from his prior Antifederalist position. However, Ragosta argues, it was instrumental in the acknowledgment by Jeffersonians that they had exceeded acceptable bounds in their assault on the federal government.

5 Henry's return to the political arena in defense of the Constitution of 1787 is commonly presented as a direct response to an appeal from George Washington. Both men shared a concern about the *Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions* drafted in 1798-99 by Jefferson and Madison, which contended that the Federal Constitution was a compact allowing any state to secede and that the *Alien and Sedition Acts* were unconstitutional, thus advocating against their implementation in Virginia. George Washington and Patrick Henry both feared that these Resolutions could set in motion a chain of events leading to sedition and civil war.

6 Ragosta's book opens with a scene picturing the former President sitting at his desk at Mount Vernon, writing the letter in which he asked Henry to stand up for federal law and the 1787 Constitution. The following six chapters recount the events leading to Patrick Henry's final speech, starting with the Constitution's ratification debate. They explore the path followed by Henry from his opposition to the Federal Constitution in 1787 to its endorsement a decade later. After describing, in the first chapter, the evolution of Henry's understanding of centralization from the colonial era to 1787, in the next two chapters Ragosta dwells on the political battles that Henry fought and lost from 1787 onwards as a politician and as a "moderate commentator on the leading controversies of the day" (102). Ragosta reminds us how Henry campaigned in vain against the ratification of the Federal Constitution by the Virginia Convention in 1788 and failed to obtain a second convention. The Tenth Amendment fell short of his expectations for a Bill of Rights that would significantly circumscribe federal power, and



he unsuccessfully opposed Alexander Hamilton's proposals for a National Bank and the federal management of state debts, considering these measures as encroachments on state authority. Furthermore, Henry viewed the 1795 Jay Treaty with Britain as disastrous. Ragosta points out that Henry accepted all these defeats and abided by federal law for it represented the will of the people. He quotes Henry's final speech to the Ratification Convention in Richmond, Virginia, on June 25, 1788 which set the path he followed: "My head, my hand, and my heart shall be at liberty to retrieve the loss of liberty, and remove the defects of that system – in a constitutional way. [...] I shall therefore patiently wait in expectation of seeing that Government changed so as to be compatible with the safety, liberty and happiness of the people" (60). After discussing the *Alien and Sedition Acts* and the resulting *Kentucky and Virginia Resolves* produced by the Democratic-Republicans (chapter 4), the book describes how Henry was drawn back to politics after retirement. Ragosta expounds what Henry contended for in his last speech in Charlotte and the reactions it triggered. The final chapter eventually assesses the consequences of the crisis on American political life and on Jefferson.

7 This study of Henry's final political struggle primarily relies on a meticulous examination and contextualization of his speeches and letters, the correspondence of other leaders, notably Jefferson's, as well as newspapers. It provides a reassessment of Henry's role in the first years of the republic and a better understanding of how his thought evolved in these crucial times. It also aims to redress Henry's image, which was damaged by Jeffersonians who caricatured him either as a senile old man manipulated by the Federalists, or as a dangerous demagogue driven by personal interest.

8 John Ragosta's central argument is that Henry embodied "loyal opposition" as he consistently remained faithful to the Federal Constitution although he disapproved of it and resented the policy implemented by the Washington and Adams Administrations. Ragosta contends that Henry's last speech resonates with the 2020 presidential elections, claiming that Henry's legacy to American democracy lies in the principle of acknowledging political defeat at the ballot box. He insists that Henry did not betray his Antifederalist convictions but instead embraced the establishment of a national government as an expression of the people's will. This undeniably echoes the political crisis following the assault on the Capitol by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021. Ragosta urges his fellow citizens to reflect on the lessons history offers, emphasizing the importance of considering the precedent set by one of the creators of the U.S. political system. He thus brings to his study a perspective that goes beyond the scope of a historian, also addressing the topic as a former lawyer and as an American citizen who sets Patrick Henry as an example in the struggle to safeguard democracy. In his effort to portray Henry as an exemplary figure, Ragosta tends to cast him as a hero embodying political virtue but he does not underplay Henry's imperfections. He does not overlook the fact that Henry was a slave-owner who did, at times, resort to ungraceful methods such as the reshaping of Virginia's constituencies to thwart the election of James Madison – a strategy that ultimately missed its target.

9 *Patrick Henry's Final Political Battle* brings new light not just on Patrick Henry's contribution to Early American politics but also on the process of forging federal institutions through experiments and debates. One of its most interesting perspectives is the way it vividly portrays the doubts and fears of the men who created a republic grounded in the rule of law. The pedagogical quality of this detailed and clearly stated narrative of the beginnings of the United States will be appreciated by students wanting to grasp the context of the 1790s as well as by the academic and wider public who will enjoy Ragosta's in-depth study of Henry's political thought when confronted to the republic's first crisis.



Notes

1 William Wirt, *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (Philadelphia: James Webster, 1817).

2 Kevin J. Hayes, *The Mind of a Patriot: Patrick Henry and the World of Ideas* (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 2008).

3 Jon Kukla, *Patrick Henry: Champion of Liberty* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017). John Ragosta, *Patrick Henry: Proclaiming a Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

4 The *Alien and Sedition Acts* were passed by the Federalist-dominated Congress in the summer 1798 to repress France's supporters during the Quasi War (undeclared naval war with France). The *Naturalization and Alien Acts* made it more difficult for immigrants to become citizens and allowed the president to expel any alien he considered dangerous while the Sedition Act made it a crime to criticize the president or Congress (see 108).

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