

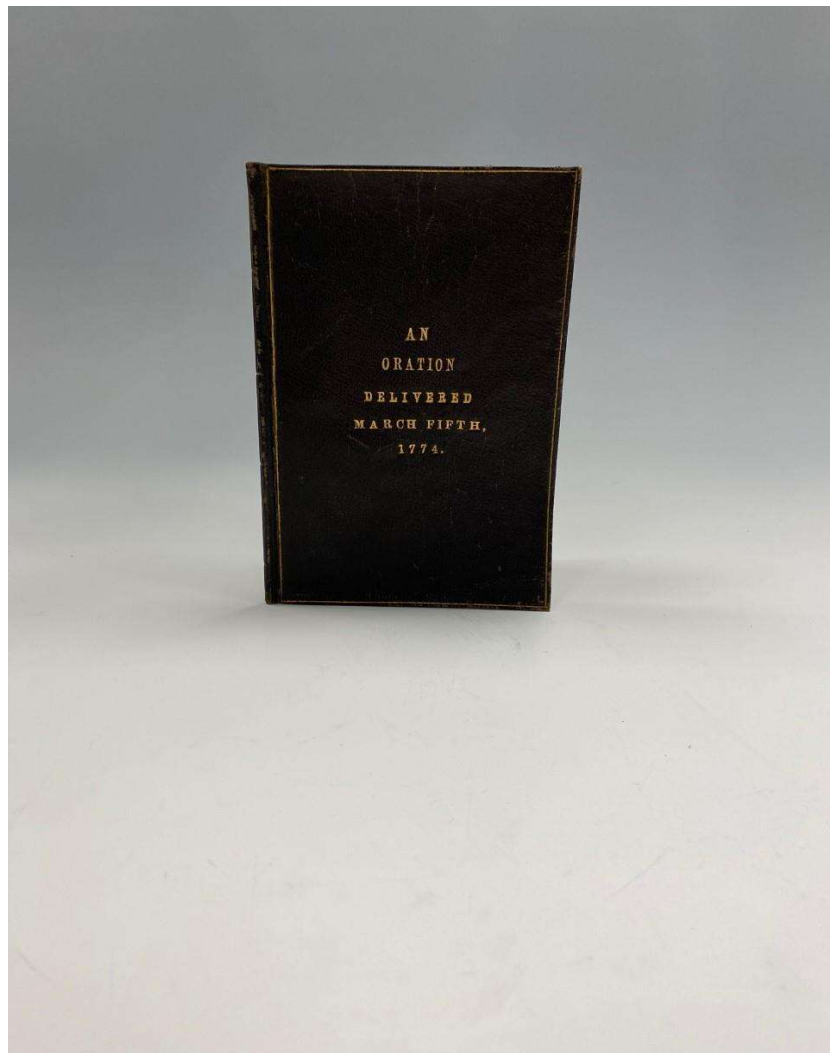
"An Oration, Delivered March 5, 1774, by John Hancock, about the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770 (published 1774): A Canonical Publication"

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

John Hancock, Oration on the Boston Massacre, 1774

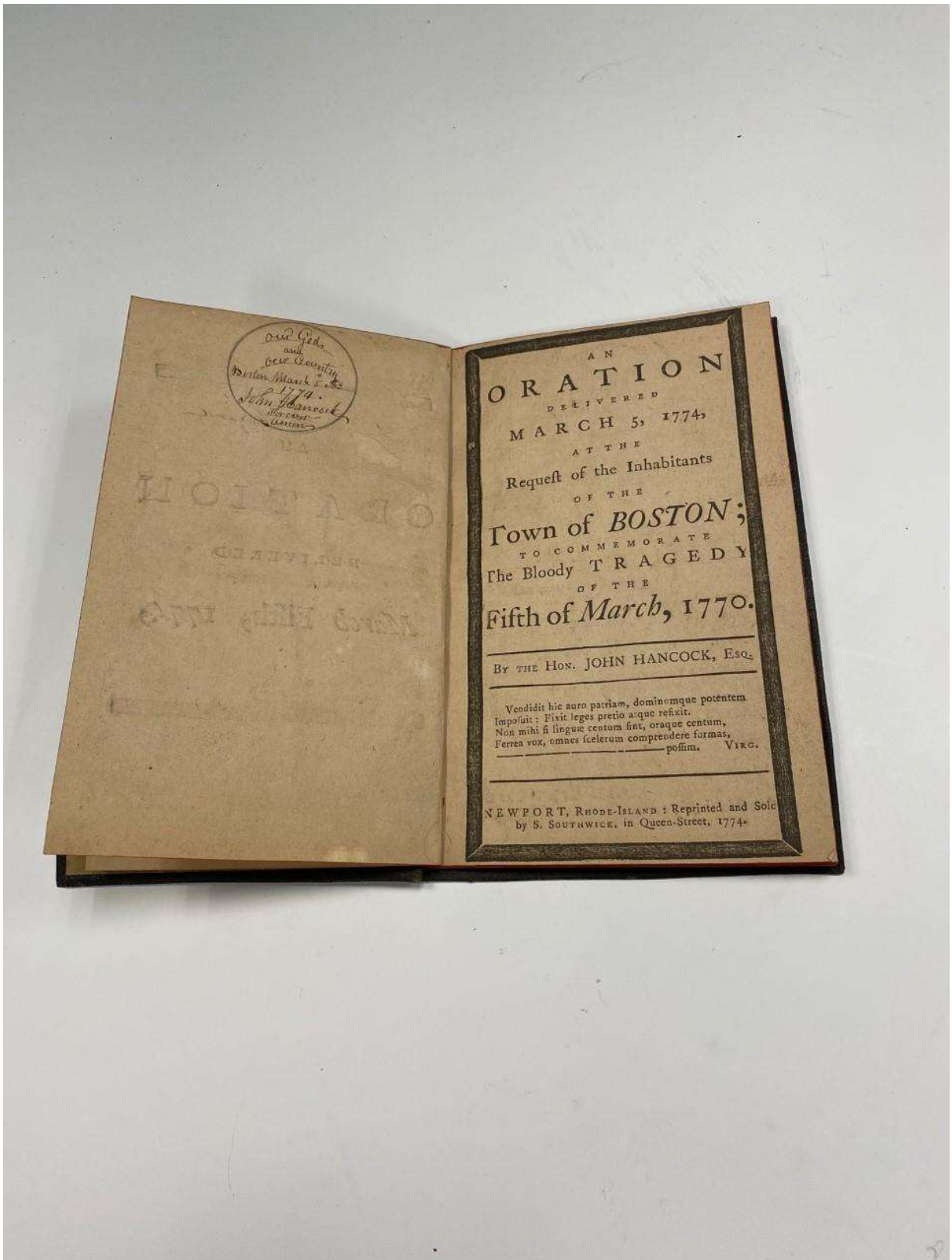


AN
ORATION
DELIVERED
MARCH 5, 1774,
AT THE
Request of the Inhabitants
OF THE
Town of *BOSTON*;
TO COMMEMORATE
The Bloody TRAGEDY
OF THE
Fifth of *March*, 1770.

BY THE HON. JOHN HANCOCK, Esq.

Vendidit hic auro patriam, dominumque potentem
Imposuit : Fixit leges pretio atque refixit.
Non mihi si linguæ centum sint, oraque centum,
Ferreæ vox, omnes scelerum comprehendere formas,
_____possim. VIRG.

NEWPORT, RHODE-ISLAND : Reprinted and Sold
by S. SOUTHWICK, in Queen-Street, 1774.



1774

Sylvester H. Hazard
AN

ORATION

DELIVERED *By*
John Hancock
March Fifth, 1774.

sifted by a standing army, can lead a traitor to commit.

For us he bled, and now languishes. The wounds by which he is tortur'd to a lingering death were aimed at our country! Surely the meek-eyed charity cannot ever behold such sufferings with indifference. Nor can her lenient hand forbear to pour oil and wine into these wounds; and to assuage, at least, what it cannot heal.

PATRIOTISM is ever united with humanity and compassion. This noble affection which impels us to sacrifice every thing dear, even life itself, to our country, involves in it a common sympathy and tenderness for every citizen, and must ever have a particular feeling for one who suffers in a public cause. Thoroughly persuaded of this, I need not add a word to engage your compassion and bounty towards a fellow citizen, who, with long protracted anguish, falls a victim to the relentless rage of our common enemies.

YE dark designing knaves, ye murderers, particides! How dare you tread upon the earth, which has drank in the blood of slaughter'd innocents, shed by your wicked hands? How dare you breathe that air which wafted to the ear of heaven the groans of those who fell a sacrifice to your accursed ambition? But if the labouring earth doth not expand her jaws, if the air you breathe is not commissioned to be the minister of death; yet, hear it, and tremble! The eye of Heaven penetrates the darkest chambers of the soul, traces the leading clue through all the labyrinth which your industrious folly has devised; and you, however you may have screen'd yourselves from human eyes, must be arraigned, must lift your hands, red with
the

the blood of those whose death you have procur'd, at the tremendous bar of God.

But I gladly quit the gloomy theme of death, and leave you to improve the thought of that important day, when our naked Souls must stand before that Being from whom nothing can be hid.—I would not dwell too long upon the horrid effects which have already follow'd from quartering regular troops in this town; let our misfortunes teach posterity to guard against such evils for the future. Standing armies are sometimes, I would by no means say generally, much less universally) composed of persons who have rendered themselves unfit to live in civil society; who have no other motives of conduct than those which a desire of the present gratification of their passions suggest; who have no property in any country:—Men who have lost or given up their own liberties, and envy those who enjoy liberty; who are equally indifferent to the glory of a GEORGE or a LEWIS; who, for the addition of one penny a day to their wages, would desert from the Christian cross, and fight under the crescent of the Turkish Sultan; from such men as these what has not a state to fear? With such as these usurping Cæsar pass'd the Rubicon; with such as these he humbled mighty Rome, and forc'd the mistress of the world to own a master in a traitor. These are the men whom scepter'd robbers now employ to frustrate the designs of God, and render vain the bounties which his gracious hand pours indiscriminately upon his creatures. By these the miserable slaves in Turkey, Persia, and many other extensive countries, are render'd truly wretched, though their air is salubrious, and their soil luxuriously fertile.—By these, France and Spain, though blessed by nature with
all

SURELY you never will tamely suffer this country to be a den of thieves. Remember, my friends, from whom you sprang.—Let not a meanness of spirit be unknown to those whom you boast of as your Fathers; excite a thought to the dishonor of your Mother; conjure you by all that is dear, by all that is Fatherly, by all that is sacred, not only that ye shun that you act; that, if necessary, ye fight, and die for the prosperity of our Jerusalem. Break in chains, with noble disdain, the bonds with which the lusts have bound you. Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed by the soft arts of luxury and effeminacy to the Pit digged for your destruction. Despise the glare of wealth. That people who pay greater respect to a wealthy villain, than to an honest, upright man in poverty, almost deserve to be enslaved; they plainly shew that wealth, however it may be acquired, is, in their esteem, to be preferred to virtue.

BUT I thank God that America abounds in men who are superior to all temptation, whom nothing can divert from a steady pursuit of the interest of their country; who are at once its ornament and safe-guard. And sure I am, I should not incur your displeasure, if I paid a respect so justly due to their much honored characters in this public place; but when I name ADAMS, such a numerous host of Fellow-patriots rush upon my mind, that I fear it would take up too much of your time, should I attempt to call over the illustrious roll: But your grateful hearts will point you to the men; and their revered names, in succeeding times, shall grace the annals of America. From them, let us, my friends, take example; from them let us catch the divine enthusiasm; and feel, each for himself, the God-like pleasure of diffusing happiness

on all around us; of delivering the oppressed from the iron grasp of tyranny; of changing the hoarse complaints and bitter moans of wretched slaves, into those cheerful songs, which freedom and contentment must inspire. There is a heart-felt satisfaction in reflecting on our exertions for the public weal, which all the sufferings an enraged tyrant can inflict will never take away; which the ingratitude and reproaches of those whom we have saved from ruin cannot rob us of. The virtuous assertor of the Rights of mankind merits a reward, which even a want of success in his endeavor to save his country, the heaviest misfortune which can befall a genuine Patriot, cannot entirely prevent him from receiving.

I HAVE the most animating confidence, that the present noble struggle for liberty will terminate gloriously for America. And let us play the man for our God, and for the cities of our God; while we are using the means in our power, let us humbly commit our righteous cause to the great Lord of the universe, who loveth righteousness, and hateth iniquity.—And having secured the approbation of our hearts, by a faithful & unwearied discharge of our duty to our country, let us joyfully leave her important concerns in the hands of HIM who raiseth up and putteth down the empires and kingdoms of the world as HE pleases; and, with cheerful submission to HIS sovereign will, devoutly say,

“Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no bird in the stalls: Yet we will rejoice in the LORD, we will joy in the GOD of our salvation.”

**EXCEEDINGLY SCARCE 1774 EDITION OF JOHN HANCOCK'S FIERY BOSTON
MASSACRE *ORATION*—SEMINAL IN THE EMERGENCE OF "THE BASIC
ELEMENTS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE REVOLUTIONARY
PERIOD"**

Early edition, published the same year as the first edition, of John Hancock's electrifying March 5, 1774 Boston Massacre Oration, delivered only a few months after the Boston Tea Party, an eloquent call for opposing British rule in which Hancock, famed as the first signer of the Declaration, anticipates a "strategy, which Jefferson later used to formulate the Declaration," in describing Americans as voices of "order and justice" and the British as "agents of chaos" (Hurm, Fourth of July). Boston Massacre orations "are some of the very few Revolutionary political speeches to survive in printed form" (Gustafson, Eloquence is Power). Boldly inscribed on the half title by John Hancock: "Sylvester N Hazard By John Hancock," and with an additional inscription inside a circular stamp: "Our God and Our Country. Boston March 5th 1774. John Hancock. Forever Amen."

Angry American colonists carried an undimmed recollection of the bloody 1770 Boston Massacre, seeing it as a turning point in "a deliberate assault of power upon liberty" (Bailyn, 117). "The Massacre—it was called that almost immediately—compelled attention all over again to the question of what British power was doing in America" (Middlekauff, 206). Famed as the first signer of the Declaration of Independence and unanimously elected as President of the Continental Congress, Revolutionary leader John Hancock—a "key figure in securing independence and creating the republic"—makes a powerful call for America's cause in this first edition of his March 5, 1774, Boston Massacre *Oration* (ANB). In March 1771, a committee of Boston leaders "that included Samuel Adams and Hancock recommended an annual oration, which the town meeting approved. Beginning the next month and repeated each March 5 or 6 (if the 5th fell on a Sunday) thereafter for the next 12 years, there would be massacre oration... Edes and Gill subsequently published the oration. Either they or the individual authors added aphoristic Latin epigraphs from Virgil's Aeneid or like sources" (York, *Boston Massacre*, 215-16). Delivered in Old South Meeting House, Hancock's eloquent "speech, coming so soon after the Boston Tea Party (16 Dec. 1773), created a great stir in the town" (ANB).

Hancock movingly proclaims: "Tell me, ye bloody butchers, ye villains high and low, ye wretches who contrived, as well as you who executed the inhuman deed, do you not feel the goads and stings of conscious guilt pierce through your savage bosoms... Do not the injured shades of Maverick, Gray, Caldwell, Attucks and Carr... fill even your dreams with terror." Throughout the Revolution "Boston Massacre orations set off American colonial virtue against British imperial vice" and many would cite entire passages from Hancock's influential *Oration* that "anticipated the strategy, which Jefferson later used to formulate the Declaration... For Hancock, the American side represented order and justice, whereas the legal rulers were aggressors and agents of chaos. A 'faithful subject' of 'righteous government,' he had to oppose 'tyranny' and its 'traitorous plot'" (Hurm, *Fourth of July*, 60-64). In 1775 Hancock was with Samuel Adams in Lexington when Paul Revere "arrived to warn them of the approach of

British troops. Hancock and Adams escaped, and within a few days of the events at Lexington and Concord they were en route to Philadelphia to attend the Continental Congress" (ANB).

This scarce early edition, issued in 1774 (the same year as the first edition), affirms both the resonating power of the Boston Massacre and the signal importance of the pamphlet in generating "the most important and characteristic writing of the American Revolution... it was in this form that 'the basic elements of American political thought of the Revolutionary period appeared first" (Bailyn, 3). Boston Massacre orations "created a distinctive colonial identity from the experience of suffering and death at the hands of British soldiers... Massacre orations are some of the very few Revolutionary political speeches to survive in printed form" (Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, 187, 187n). While Hancock's *Oration* was "said to have been largely written by Samuel Adams" (Church 1104), verifiable documentation remains elusive and "in all probability a number of Boston radicals had a hand in its composition" (Adams 117a). Included the same year in an issue of *Royal American Magazine*. Preceded by the first edition and second editions, both published in Boston in 1774. Evans 13317. Adams 74-35a. Adams, *American Independence* 117c. Church 1104. ESTC W21491. See Sabin 30177 and 73781-82; Streeter II:743. OCLC cites 43 institutions with copies, including the Library of Congress, American Antiquarian Society, Harvard, Yale, and Columbia. Sylvester Hazard was a member of the prominent Hazard family of Newport. Ink correction to page 9 changing "compel" to "expel," possibly in Hancock's hand. Crossed out ink notation and pencil shelf number also on half title.

HANCOCK, John. *An Oration; Delivered March 5, 1774, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston; to Commemorate the Bloody Tragedy of the Fifth of March 1770*. Newport, Rhode Island: Reprinted and Sold by S. Southwick, 1774. Slim octavo, later limp gilt-stamped brown Morocco; pp.19.

Top edge trimmed closely occasionally affecting running title, interior generally quite clean, only light wear to binding.

Introduction

"An Oration; Delivered March 5, 1774" stands as one of the most inflammatory and influential pre-Revolutionary War publications in American history. This fiery speech was delivered by John Hancock at the request of the inhabitants of Boston to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the Boston Massacre, a pivotal event in which British soldiers killed five colonists on March 5, 1770. The oration was subsequently published by Edes and Gill in Boston in 1774, with advertisements for the publication appearing in local newspapers around March 24th of that year⁴.

The timing of this publication was particularly significant, coming just a few months after the Boston Tea Party of December 1773 and immediately preceding the punitive Intolerable Acts, beginning with the Boston Port Act passed at the end of March 1774¹. These circumstances

created a powder keg of tension between the American colonies and Great Britain, with Boston at the epicenter of revolutionary sentiment.

While Hancock delivered the speech, its authorship has been subject to debate, with various attributions to Samuel Adams, Benjamin Church, Joseph Warren, and Samuel Cooper. Historical consensus suggests that "in all probability a number of Boston radicals had a hand in its composition"[14](#). This collaborative effort reflects the unified resistance forming among colonial leaders against British rule.

The cultural and political climate surrounding the publication was one of escalating tensions and revolutionary fervor. The Boston Massacre had become a rallying point for colonial resistance, with annual commemorative orations established to "perpetuate the memory of that wanton and bloody massacre to all Generations"[1](#). By 1774, these commemorations had evolved from simple remembrances into powerful political platforms for revolutionary rhetoric, with Hancock's oration representing the most provocative iteration yet.

The Author

John Hancock (January 23, 1737 – October 8, 1793) was one of the most prominent figures of the American Revolution, best remembered today for his oversized signature on the Declaration of Independence—so distinctive that his name has become synonymous with the act of signing one's name[2](#).

Born in Braintree, Massachusetts (in an area that later became Quincy), Hancock was orphaned at a young age when his father died in 1744. He was subsequently raised by his uncle and aunt, Thomas and Lydia Hancock. Thomas Hancock was a wealthy merchant who operated the House of Hancock, a successful import-export business that traded manufactured goods from Britain for rum, whale oil, and fish. This privileged upbringing provided young John with both wealth and social connections that would later serve him well in his political career[2](#).

After graduating from Harvard College in 1754, Hancock joined his uncle's business, eventually inheriting the enterprise and becoming one of the wealthiest men in the American colonies. His transition from merchant to revolutionary leader began in the 1760s as tensions with Great Britain increased. Hancock became a protégé of Samuel Adams, though the two would later become estranged. His popularity in Massachusetts soared after British officials seized his sloop *Liberty* in 1768 on smuggling charges, which were eventually dropped[2](#).

Hancock's political career was distinguished and extensive. He served as the president of the Second Continental Congress from May 1775 to October 1777, making him the longest-serving president of the Continental Congress. He was also the first and third governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, winning his first gubernatorial election in a landslide with over 90% of the vote[2](#).

As a leader, Hancock was known more for his popularity and symbolic importance than for his intellectual contributions to revolutionary thought. Historian James Truslow Adams noted that Hancock's "two chief resources were his money and his gout, the first always used to gain

popularity, and the second to prevent his losing it"². Nevertheless, his willingness to use his wealth and influence to support the colonial cause made him an indispensable figure in the American Revolution.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"An Oration; Delivered March 5, 1774" must be included in the canon of essential American texts for several compelling reasons that speak to its profound impact on American political thought and revolutionary action.

First, this oration represents a critical inflection point in pre-revolutionary rhetoric, marking a shift from respectful petitioning to open calls for resistance against British authority. The speech explicitly encouraged colonists to "act" and, if necessary, to "fight, and even die" for their liberties¹. This transition from diplomatic discourse to revolutionary rhetoric helped establish the intellectual foundation for American independence.

Second, the publication exemplifies the power of commemorative oratory in shaping public memory and political consciousness. By annually revisiting the Boston Massacre through formal orations, colonial leaders like Hancock transformed a tragic event into a powerful symbol of British oppression and American victimhood. These commemorations, which continued until 1784 when they were replaced by Fourth of July speeches, served as crucial rituals in the development of American political identity⁴.

Third, Hancock's oration articulates fundamental American values that would later be enshrined in the nation's founding documents. His emphasis on liberty, resistance to tyranny, and the right of self-governance prefigured core principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The speech's call for a "Congress of Deputies from the several Houses of Assembly on the Continent" directly anticipated the formation of the Continental Congress that would guide America through revolution⁴.

Fourth, as a collaborative work likely involving multiple revolutionary thinkers, the oration represents the collective intellectual effort that drove the American Revolution. Rather than emerging from a single mind, American revolutionary thought was the product of ongoing dialogue among colonial leaders, making this publication a testament to the collaborative nature of the founding era.

Finally, the oration's widespread dissemination—published not only as a standalone pamphlet but also transcribed in periodicals like *The Royal American Magazine*—demonstrates the crucial role of print media in spreading revolutionary ideas throughout the colonies⁷. This publication helped forge a shared political consciousness that transcended local concerns and fostered a sense of common cause among colonists from different regions.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Let this sad tale of death never be told without a tear; let not the heaving bosom cease to burn with a manly indignation at the barbarous story, through the long tracts of future time; let every parent tell the shameful story to his listening children until tears of pity glisten in their eyes, and boiling passions shake their tender frames..."[3](#)

This passage demonstrates the power of historical memory in shaping political consciousness across generations. Hancock understood that sustaining revolutionary fervor required emotional connection to past injustices. Today, this quote reminds us of the importance of historical education in maintaining civic engagement and the responsibility of each generation to transmit foundational stories that define national identity.

2. "Death is the creature of a poltroon's brains; 'tis immortality to sacrifice ourselves for the salvation of our country. We fear not death."[3](#)

This stirring declaration speaks to the timeless concept of patriotic sacrifice. Hancock elevates civic duty above self-preservation, articulating a value system that would later inspire countless Americans to risk their lives for their country. In our current era, when civic engagement often requires little personal sacrifice, this quote challenges us to consider what we would be willing to risk for our principles and the common good.

3. "I would not dwell too long upon the horrid effects which have already followed from quartering regular troops in this town. Let our misfortunes teach posterity to guard against such evils for the future."[3](#)

Hancock's warning about standing armies resonates powerfully in contemporary debates about militarization, surveillance, and the proper limits of state power. His concern about the "horrid effects" of military occupation speaks to enduring tensions between security and liberty that continue to shape American political discourse.

4. "Ye dark designing knaves, ye murderers, parricides! how dare you tread upon the earth which has drunk in the blood of slaughtered innocents, shed by your wicked hands?"[3](#)

This rhetorical flourish exemplifies the emotional power of revolutionary oratory. Hancock's righteous indignation transforms political opposition into moral condemnation, a rhetorical strategy that continues to characterize American political discourse. This quote reminds us of the moral dimensions of political conflict and the powerful role of ethical judgment in mobilizing public opinion.

5. "At such a Congress, a firm foundation may be laid for the security of our Rights and Liberties."[4](#)

This prescient call for continental unity anticipates the formation of the Continental Congress and, ultimately, the federal system of government that would emerge from the Revolution. Hancock's recognition that securing rights required coordinated action across colonial boundaries

reflects the pragmatic institutionalism that would become a hallmark of American political thought.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Moral Illegitimacy of Standing Armies in Peacetime

Hancock's oration powerfully articulates the colonial fear of standing armies as instruments of oppression. He describes British soldiers as "men who have lost or given up their own liberties," suggesting that military forces divorced from the citizenry pose an inherent threat to freedom⁴. This idea would later influence the Second Amendment and American skepticism toward military establishments disconnected from civilian control. Hancock's critique of standing armies reflects a broader concern with arbitrary power that remains central to American political thought.

2. The Necessity of Continental Unity

The oration calls explicitly for "a Congress of Deputies from the several Houses of Assembly on the Continent," recognizing that effective resistance to British authority required coordination across colonial boundaries⁴. This vision of continental cooperation transcended local identities and interests, laying groundwork for the idea of America as a unified political entity. Hancock's advocacy for continental unity represents an early articulation of American federalism—the idea that local self-governance could coexist with broader political association.

3. The Power of Commemorative Ritual in Political Culture

By delivering his oration on the anniversary of the Boston Massacre, Hancock participated in a deliberate effort to create political meaning through commemorative ritual. These annual orations, which continued until 1784, transformed a moment of violence into a foundational narrative of American identity⁴. This practice established a template for American political culture, which continues to use commemorative rituals to reinforce shared values and collective memory.

4. The Moral Obligation to Resist Tyranny

Throughout the oration, Hancock frames resistance to British authority not merely as a political choice but as a moral imperative. His rhetorical question—"But what, my countrymen, withheld the ready arm of vengeance from executing instant justice on the vile assassins?"—implies that restraint in the face of tyranny requires justification³. This conception of resistance as moral duty would become central to the Declaration of Independence and remains a powerful current in American political thought.

5. The Transformative Power of Political Rhetoric

The oration itself exemplifies the belief that powerful language can transform political consciousness and inspire action. Hancock's inflammatory rhetoric—calling British officials

"dark designing knaves" and "murderers"—was deliberately crafted to provoke emotional responses that would translate into political commitment³. This faith in the power of persuasive speech to change hearts and minds reflects an enduring feature of American political culture, which continues to place high value on oratorical skill.

Three Major Controversies

1. Disputed Authorship and Collaborative Creation

The authorship of Hancock's oration has been a subject of historical debate, with various attributions to Samuel Adams, Benjamin Church, Joseph Warren, and Samuel Cooper¹⁴. This controversy reflects broader questions about intellectual ownership in revolutionary America, where political ideas often emerged from collaborative processes rather than individual genius. The disputed authorship also raises questions about Hancock's intellectual contributions to revolutionary thought—was he primarily a figurehead whose wealth and status were useful to the revolutionary cause, or did he make substantive contributions to American political philosophy?

2. Propaganda vs. Historical Truth

Critics have characterized the Boston Massacre commemorations, including Hancock's oration, as propaganda that distorted historical reality for political purposes. The very term "massacre" has been contested as an exaggeration of what some describe as merely a "street brawl"⁶. This controversy reflects enduring tensions between historical accuracy and political narrative in American public memory. The question of whether revolutionary leaders like Hancock were principled freedom fighters or manipulative propagandists continues to divide historical interpretations of the American founding.

3. The Moral Legitimacy of Violent Resistance

Hancock's oration walks a fine line between encouraging resistance and explicitly advocating violence. While praising the restraint shown by Bostonians after the Massacre, he simultaneously questions whether that restraint was justified, asking: "But what, my countrymen, withheld the ready arm of vengeance from executing instant justice on the vile assassins?"³ This ambivalence toward violent resistance reflects a broader controversy about the moral legitimacy of revolutionary violence that continues to shape American political discourse. The question of when resistance to authority is justified—and what forms that resistance may legitimately take—remains contentious in American political thought.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read John Hancock's "An Oration; Delivered March 5, 1774" because it offers a window into the intellectual and emotional foundations of American independence. This powerful speech, delivered at a pivotal moment in pre-revolutionary America, articulates fundamental values that continue to shape American political identity:

resistance to arbitrary power, commitment to self-governance, and the moral obligation to defend liberty.

The oration demonstrates how revolutionary leaders used rhetoric to transform political grievances into moral imperatives, creating a framework of meaning that could sustain revolutionary action. By studying Hancock's words, contemporary Americans can better understand the persuasive strategies that mobilized colonial resistance and ultimately led to independence.

Furthermore, the publication illustrates the crucial role of commemorative ritual in American political culture. The annual Boston Massacre orations established a pattern of using public memory to reinforce political values—a practice that continues in American civic life today. Understanding this tradition helps citizens appreciate how shared narratives of the past shape collective identity in the present.

The collaborative nature of the oration's creation also offers important insights into the collective intellectual effort that drove the American Revolution. Rather than emerging from isolated genius, American founding principles developed through ongoing dialogue among colonial leaders. This collaborative model of political thought provides an instructive contrast to contemporary tendencies toward political polarization and intellectual isolation.

Finally, Hancock's oration raises enduring questions about the proper limits of governmental power, the moral legitimacy of resistance, and the responsibilities of citizenship—questions that remain central to American civic life. By engaging with these foundational debates through Hancock's words, citizens can develop a deeper understanding of the principles that underlie American governance and the ongoing challenge of realizing those principles in practice.

In an age of increasing civic disengagement, returning to foundational texts like Hancock's oration can reinvigorate our collective commitment to the democratic values that have sustained American self-governance for nearly two and a half centuries. The passionate conviction that animated revolutionary leaders like Hancock offers an antidote to contemporary political cynicism and a reminder of the moral seriousness with which earlier generations approached the responsibilities of citizenship.

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