

Speaking Truth to Power: The British Prime Minister Who Defended the American Colonies

The popular phrase, “speak truth to power,” implies that power is hostile to truth and that power might benefit from giving truth a hearing. It also suggests that the speaker runs some risk for speaking it.

People unafraid to speak truth to power are among the great heroes of history. They raise our standards and boost our courage. While tyrants fear them, the rest of us are inspired by them.

[The Roman orator Cicero](#) defied Marc Antony and paid the ultimate price but the world still admires Cicero’s eloquence and fortitude two thousand years later.

[Sophie Scholl](#), along with her brother Hans, founded the White Rose Movement to resist Hitler in their native Germany. They illegally printed and distributed anti-Nazi literature all over Berlin in the 1940s.

In the Soviet Union, giants from [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#) to [Andrei Sakharov](#) helped end an evil regime with the sheer power of their words.

[Malala Yousafzai](#) spoke out in support of women’s education in her native Pakistan. She was shot in the head in 2012, survived and renewed her activism, and then won a Nobel Peace Prize at 17 years of age for opposing the oppression of the Taliban, making her the youngest person to ever receive the award.

Examples like these are not superabundant but neither are they scarce, for which we ought to be grateful. The world would be a darker place without them.

Speaking truth to power is a theme I plan to revisit from time to time by spotlighting an exemplar I admire. My subject for this essay is one whose name once inspired near-universal admiration in America but has since, sadly, slipped into history's foggy mist: [William Pitt the Elder](#) (1708-1778).

Pitt is the man for whom Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is named though he never set foot in America. He masterminded Britain's brilliant military victory in [the Seven Years' War](#), also known as the French & Indian War, (1756-63) and served as Prime Minister. In a long public career as a Parliamentarian, he proved himself to be incorruptible, turning down positions and opportunities that others of lesser scruples eagerly grabbed for personal aggrandizement. Long after his death in 1778, he was revered in America and regarded in his own Britain as one of the country's most distinguished statesmen.

By the 1760s, Pitt the Elder had evolved into a principled devotee of liberty and an eloquent foe of concentrated political power. In April 1763, King George III delivered a speech in Parliament in defense of the Paris Peace Treaty (crafted to end the Seven Years' War). Libertarian journalist and Member of Parliament John Wilkes savagely criticized the King in his newspaper, *The North Briton*, prompting the King to issue a warrant for Wilkes' arrest. Wilkes fled the country, but William Pitt took the risk of defending him without hesitation. British liberty, Pitt declared, required vigorous support for freedom of speech.

In 1766, Pitt rose to defend American colonists in the dispute with Parliament's hated Stamp Act. "I rejoice that America has resisted," he declared. "Three million people so dead to all feelings of liberty as voluntarily to submit to be slaves would have been fit instruments to make slaves of the rest [of

us].”

As the rift between America and Great Britain headed toward war, Pitt repeatedly demanded peace and liberty. It is for his defense of America at this critical moment that I present him here as a hero who spoke truth to power. Though his life was likely never in danger for speaking up, he could have chosen to keep comfortably quiet and please the King, but he didn't.

Vera Muriel White [writes of him in Britannica](#) as follows:

His [classical](#) education made him think, act, and speak in the grand Roman manner. His favorite poet was [Virgil](#), and he never forgot the patriotic lessons of Roman history; he constantly read [Cicero](#), the golden-tongued orator who could [yet](#) lash offenders with his indignation. Later, in Parliament, his organ-like voice could be distinctly heard outside the House. This voice, perfect timing, and splendid gestures were worthy of [David Garrick](#), the greatest actor of the day and a personal friend; Pitt's lean, tall, commanding figure, combined with a Roman beaky nose and hawklike eyes—large and gray but turning black when he was roused—overwhelmed all onlookers. To his countrymen he was to become almost a divine portent, a voice from the Delphic oracle.

Perhaps the greatest oration of his life was the one Pitt delivered in the House of Lords on January 20, 1775. He rose to condemn [the Coercive Acts](#) enacted by Parliament the previous year. Aimed at punishing Massachusetts in general and Boston in particular for the famous Tea Party protest, the Acts ended local self-government and inhibited colonial commerce. In [The Cause: The American Revolution and Its Discontents, 1773-1783](#), historian Joseph J. Ellis writes of that moment:

Pitt spoke for over an hour...and a few years later, when every dire consequence he warned against came true, no penitent

figure in the British government could plead ignorance as a defense.

Where was it written...that "an Englishman can be deprived of the bread he eats without his consent?" How had it happened that a small group of colonists, gathered in Philadelphia, "seemed more alive to the true spirit of English liberty than the Lords of the realm gathered in these hallowed halls?"

The belief that two or three British regiments could control the New England countryside beyond Boston was always a pipe dream. Ten, twenty, or thirty regiments would also find themselves drowning in what Pitt described as "a dominion of eighteen hundred miles of Continent, potent in valor, liberty and resistance."

King George III, his ministers, and a large majority of Parliament were arrayed against Pitt on the matter of how to deal with the Americans. That did not deter the distinguished statesman from taking them on. Here are excerpts from that remarkable speech:

"But now, my Lords, we find that instead of suppressing the opposition in Boston, these measures have spread it over the whole continent. They have united that whole people by the most indissoluble of all bands—intolerable wrongs...

Let the sacredness of their property remain inviolate; let it be taxable only by their own consent, given in their provincial assemblies, else it will cease to be property...

Resistance to your acts was as necessary as it was just, and your vain declarations of the omnipotence of Parliament, and your imperious doctrines of the necessity of submission, will be found equally impotent to convince or enslave your fellow subjects in America who feel that tyranny, whether ambitioned by an individual part of the Legislature, or by the bodies which compose it, is equally intolerable to British principles...

Woe be to him who sheds the first—the inexpiable—drop of blood in an impious war with a people contending in the great cause of public liberty. I will tell you plainly, my Lords: No son of mine, nor any one over whom I have influence, shall ever draw his sword upon his fellow subjects...

I trust it is obvious to your Lordships that all attempts to impose servitude [on the American colonists], to establish despotism over such a mighty continental nation, must be vain, must be fatal. We shall be forced ultimately to retract, while we can, not when we must. I say we must necessarily undo these violent and oppressive Acts. They must be repealed!"

Moments later, Parliament voted 68-18 against Pitt's position. British troops would not be withdrawn from Boston. American independence was declared the following year.

Pitt succumbed to gout in May 1778 and was buried in [Westminster Abbey](#) amid great pomp and grief. As he had predicted, Britain lost the war. Most Brits came to regret it had ever been fought in the first place. Pitt spoke truth to power, but in this instance, power did not listen.

Five years after the death of William Pitt the Elder, his son (William Pitt the Younger) became Prime Minister at the age of 24. He served for nearly 19 years in that post. One of his singular accomplishments was to pave the way for Parliament to finally abolish the infamous slave trade. He spoke the truth of slavery to the powers that had long supported it—a deed of which his father, I believe, would have been very proud.

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