

GREAT MOMENTS IN AMERICAN ORATORY

A DRAMATIC READING
BY VAL R. CHEATHAM

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PRODUCTION NOTES

CHARACTERS

The reading is scored for 4 narrators and distributes the quotes among them, but can be adjusted to accommodate any number.

Playing time: 15-20 minutes

Staging: 4 podiums facing audience

Properties

American flag for flag salute
No special costuming or lighting.

NARRATORS:

- 1: From the first
- 2: Land Ho!
- 3: to the final countdown,
- 4: America has poured forth a vocal clamor the likes of which the world has never heard before.
- 1: Foolish words,
- 2: trivial words,
- 3: forgotten words,
- 4: inspired words.
- 1: Words of hate,
- 2: words of faith,
- 3: words of sorrow,
- 4: words of wisdom,
- 1: But, through it all -
- 2: never quavering -
- 3: America remained ever dedicated to the basic human right that all people should have freedom of speech.
- 4: Many words were forgotten even as they were spoken.
- 1: Others had meaning for listeners at just that moment.
- 2: Some lasted a lifetime.
- 3: A few will live forever,
- 4: Let us now go back in history to relive
- 1: those times,
- 2: those settings
- 3: those ideas,
- 4: those "Great Moments in American Oratory"!
- 1: James Otis of Massachusetts established himself as an early spokesman for the revolutionary cause with his inflammatory speeches.
- 2: It is not recorded when or where he first uttered the famous:
- 3: **"Taxation without representation is tyranny!"**
- 4: But, the phrase soon appeared scrawled on fences, walls, and public buildings, not only in Boston, but other colonies as well.
- 1: The grumbling set the stage for the voice that became the bugle call of American independence.

- 2: On March 22, 1775, the Second Revolutionary Convention, meeting in St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond, frittered away the time with fruitless bickering and endless debate.
- 3: The voice of Patrick Henry cut through the murk of doubt and indecision to deliver the words that have thrilled the hearts and souls of generations of Americans:
- 4: **"Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"**
 - 1: One group of words,
 - 2: actually a document,
 - 3: written during the hot summer of 1776,
 - 4: deserves a special place in American oratory since in the early years these words were as often spoken as read.
- 1: What American does not tingle at the very sound of Thomas Jefferson's stirring Declaration of Independence?
- 2: **"We hold these truths to be self evident - that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."**
 - 3: But, declaring independence,
 - 4: and winning it,
 - 1: were two far different matters.
 - 2: By September, 1776, things were going badly for the new cause.
 - 3: Washington was defeated in the Battle of Long Island.
 - 4: He was uncertain as to which direction the next attack would come.
 - 1: He needed information desperately.
 - 2: Nathan Hale,
 - 3: 20 years old,
 - 4: a captain,
 - 1: volunteered for the dangerous role as spy.
 - 2: Disguised as a school teacher, he penetrated British lines and secured valuable information.

- 3: Within steps of safety, he was recognized, arrested, and taken to General Howe's headquarters, where he was condemned to death.
- 4: On the early morning of September 22, 1776, Nathan Hale was escorted under a brilliant blue sky to a dangling noose where he spoke the words forever engraved on American honor:
 - 1: **"I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."**
 - 2: America was down, but not out.
 - 3: On September 23, 1779. our leadership became founded in the 'Against All Odds/Will to Win' tradition when John Paul Jones proclaimed the immortal:
 - 4: **"I have not yet begun to fight!"**
 - 1: Before leaving the colonial period, one more great statesman deserves a special place in American oratory -
 - 2: author,
 - 3: educator,
 - 4: scientist,
 - 1: inventor -
 - 2: Benjamin Franklin was America's first Citizen of the World.
 - 3: Known for many speeches, we instead speak here to a few of the hundreds of maxims that have peppered America's oratory for over 200 years.
 - 4: We would be speechless without:
 - 1: **"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."**
 - 2: **"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."**
 - 3: **"A penny saved is a penny earned."**
 - 4: "One today is worth two tomorrows."
 - 1: No account of American oratory could overlook the brilliant Hayne-Webster debates of 1830.
 - 2: The burning questions of the day threatened the very existence of the United States as states "united."
 - 3: For days the Senate chamber echoed with their fiery rhetoric.
 - 4: Every seat on the floor was filled;
 - 1: every inch of standing room was crowded.

- 2: On January 26, Webster,
- 3: having spoken for 4 solid hours,
- 4: capped his ending with the climactic,
- 1: **“Liberty and union, now, ... forever, one and inseparable!”**
- 2: On November 19, 1863, it had been a mere four months since the sleepy little hamlet of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, had been rocked by the thunder of battle as Lee’s Great Army of the south had dashed its last hope in a blood-bath against Union lines.
- 3: Now the torn nation had gathered to dedicate the battlefield as a final resting place for those
- 4: on both sides
- 1: who had so gallantly given their lives.
- 2: Many lesser presidents might have used the occasion for glittering oratory, for words of triumph or glorification. Instead,
- 3: Abraham Lincoln,
- 4: speaking less than five minutes,
- 1: in a rasping, backwoods voice,
- 2: resolved that,
- 3: **“...this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”**
- 4: To mark the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, John Upham of Youth Magazine, conceived a flag raising ceremony to promote a new consecration of patriotism.
- 1: The result was a proclamation by President Benjamin Harrison declaring Columbus Day a national holiday.
- 2: Assigned to write an oral declamation suitable for the occasion,
- 3: Francis Bellamy,
- 4: also with Youth Magazine
- 1: penned the sequence of ideas that has become a ritual in public schools from that day forth. (*Present flag.*)

- ALL: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."
- 2: Before moving to the 20th century, we must pay tribute to the last of the old-time oratorical giants;
- 3: a man whose eloquence dominated every Democratic gathering for more than thirty years;
- 4: a man who played on emotions as skillfully as a conductor orchestrates his musicians.
- 1: His famous "Cross of Gold" speech delivered in Chicago at the National Democratic Convention of 1896, propelled William Jennings Bryan to the party's candidate for president when he proclaimed:
- 2: **"You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this Crown of Thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a Cross of Gold!"**
- 3: From colonialism to provincialism. America lived in isolation.
- 4: Then came the 20th century and Teddy Roosevelt.
- 1: Speaking at the Minnesota State Fair in 1901, he warned the world that a strong, healthy America would.
- 2: **"Speak softly and carry a big stick."**
- 3: As a world power, America had new responsibilities.
- 4: War had raged in Europe for three years.
- 1: Blockades and attacks on neutral ships had closed down the freedom of the seas.
- 2: On April 2, 1917, Woodrow Wilson brought us into the conflict when his message to Congress declared that:
- 3: **"The world must be made safe for democracy."**
- 4: Now America could honor its commitment to its first and oldest ally.
- 1: On July 4th. 1917, Charles Stanton,
- 2: speaking for General Pershing and the newly arrived American Expeditionary Force,
- 3: stated that America was ready to repay its debt to France,
- 4 and the young general who came to our aid during the Revolution, by announcing:

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