

What is the significance to the historian of Joseph Warren's 'The Boston Massacre Oration' (1772)?

Joseph Warren's Boston Massacre Oration is a valuable source given the contemporary narrative of pre-revolutionary tensions it was produced in; and can tell us a great deal about the socio-political landscape it contextualised. Aimed at the eager ears of colonials and patriots, Warren's oration tells a story of unrest and opposition to the authority of Britain and her crown at a time where colonial-British tensions mounted in social, political, and economic terms. Warren's narrative attempts to both villainize the British with its policies of tyranny and violent oppression as well as romanticise the colonial ethos, one craving liberty. Warren's narrative goes on at great length to embed the American Patriot agenda into a mass colonial audience, using a basis of unjust political action and violent oppression as a means to voice concern and broaden the patriot ethos. Using the iconic Boston Massacre as a catalyst for the growing movement which would lead to revolution, Warren's primary goal is to consolidate a collective colonial desire to hold "all the liberties and immunities of British subjects, [which] were confined to this province, as fully and as absolutely as they possibly could be by any human instrument which can be devised."¹ Warren's oration is significant not only in inferring the historian towards concerns that faced colonial opposition (for example unconsented taxation), but also as a means of understanding the use of propaganda to slander and undermine the British, helping us to see how and why the colonial stance was consolidated into the anti-British, soon to be revolutionary movement it was.

From both colonial and British perspectives, the Boston Massacre was undoubtedly perceived as a grim and unwelcome event. On the one hand, the British understood that the use of violence against Bostonians, regardless of its provocation, would be received with further hostility and exacerbate current mounting tensions. Similarly, it is crude to suggest

¹ Dr Joseph Warren, 'Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772'.

that the voice of colonial opposition would welcome the death of its constituents as a means to an end of putting pressure on British authority. However, this is not to suggest that events of such a nature could not be used to a critical degree, and the Boston Massacre did indeed heavily influence the revolutionary narrative in the following months and years. It offered a method of creating leverage against British occupation and political authority, and in addition promoted an American patriot agenda which would ultimately sweep the colonies into revolution and war. As Henry J. Halko posits, “in the aftermath of the massacre the troops were withdrawn from the town, and in the aftermath of the trials no one seemed to remember the acquittals. The massacre, commemorated until 1784, quickly became enshrined in patriotic folklore and unprovoked butchery, the spilling of innocent blood.”² Undoubtedly, the massacre was used to the advantage of colonial opposition, who clouded the event through an interpretation of anti-British propaganda, and Joseph Warren's oration encapsulates this agenda wholeheartedly. Throughout his narrative, Warren takes articulate consideration in depicting British authority across the Atlantic, as well as its branches within the colonies as abusive, tyrannical, and repressive whenever he can.

In terms of violent brutality, no one segment reflects this sentiment more so than his account of the Boston Massacre itself. He claims, “The horrors of THAT DREADFUL NIGHT are but too deeply impressed on our hearts. Language is too feeble to paint the emotions of our souls, when our streets were stained with the BLOOD OF OUR BRETHERN; when our ears were wounded by the groans of the dying, and our eyes were tormented with the sight of the mangled bodies of the dead.”³ Warren projected a brutal and malicious British occupation and used graphic and somewhat glorified descriptions such as this to promote patriotic sentiments and inspire the masses by juxtaposing them personally into the cause. A. Schlesinger has argued that “the fomenters of direct action traded on the

² Henry J Halko, ‘Review of, ‘The Boston Massacre’ by Hiller B. Zobel, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Oct., 1970), pp. 677.

³ Dr. Joseph Warren, ‘Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772’.

fact that the bulk of mankind are more led by their senses than by their reason.”⁴ Warren capitalises on the use of an emotive narrative here that certainly consolidated feelings of anger, loss and disassociation with the British to reinforce a growing notion of revolutionary entitlement. Whilst undoubtedly that night resonated in infamy with Bostonians, its underlying legacy was one that could be perceived as a celebration; of opposition, unity, and sacrifice, which aided the progression of a revolutionary goal. Warren's description of the Boston Massacre utilizes a victimising embodiment of its colonial constituency, strengthening gains to the collective patriotic cause by highlighting and romanticising the “innocent blood” which had been spilled to achieve it.⁵ The massacre itself, “quickly penetrated the mainstream of American mythology, if not history, its victims transformed into the first martyrs of American independence,” and its living memory moulded around an ethos of social change and uprising.⁶ Warren's oration channelled this movement and used victimising representations of Bostonian-British interaction. His suggestion that “whilst in a naked defenceless state, [colonials] are frequently insulted and abused by an armed soldiery” would validate resultant patriot actions as just in a cause against British oppression.⁷

Continuing with this focus on Warren's interpretation of the Boston Massacre, his feelings towards the British soldiers involved, and by extension the entirety of British occupant soldiers, holds a completely unsympathetic view. He argues that, “they are instructed implicitly to obey their commanders, without inquiring into the justice of the cause they are engaged to support: hence it is, that they are ever to be dreaded as the ready engines of tyranny and oppression.”⁸ He depicts them not only as extensions of the crown's tyranny, but the willing limbs of British oppression, sent with an iron fist to suppress a growing

⁴ A. Schlesinger in, Jesse Lemisch, “Review: Radical Plot in Boston (1770). A Study in the Use of Evidence”, *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Dec., 1970), pp. 487.

⁵ Dr. Joseph Warren, ‘Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772’.

⁶ Henry J Halko, ‘Review of, ‘The Boston Massacre’’, pp. 675.

⁷ Dr. Joseph Warren, ‘Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772’.

⁸ Dr. Joseph Warren, ‘Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772’.

colonial voice concerned with the restrictions of their liberties. This lent to dehumanize them and the rest of Britain in the eyes of colonists and project them, in a sense, as slaves to the crown; mindless drones in lieu of the liberty to think or to choose, which in turn reinforced ideas surrounding America's own liberties and the necessity of fighting for them. Considering the contemporary "patriot claim that Massachusetts was the victim of a political plot against its liberties,"⁹ British soldiers were then defined as the enforcers of this oppression and would be met with the same hostility as the policies they were tasked with implementing. As we know from the trials that followed the massacre, from a British perspective, the ethos that culminated in bloodshed of March 5 1770 was one of fear and provocation rather than maliciousness. This coincides with the view that "the soldiers thought they were about to be assaulted in such a manner that their lives were threatened."¹⁰ Indeed whilst Bostonian unrest was founded on "a ministerial conspiracy aimed at their liberties... the troops on the other hand, confronting a hostile people not above verbal abuse, physical assault, and legal harassment, similarly felt aggrieved... Both town and soldiery believed the other determined on revenge."¹¹ Warren disregards the vulnerability that the British soldiers endured, as if to suggest these unwelcome and impoverished men relished the position they had been faced with, of whom many sentries "slept with loaded guns in fear of attack."¹² Choosing to overlook the aggressive provocation suffered in the lead up to the infamous incident, Warren's account is shaped to fit into an anti-British and pro-revolutionary agenda. Without question, the voice of British authority across the Atlantic viewed the colonial political landscape as one concerned solely with the preservation and reinforcement of crown interests, one where Lord Chatham's view that "Great Britain protects America; America is

⁹ O. M. Dickerson, 'The Commissioners of Customs and the "Boston Massacre"', *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Sep., 1954), p. 308.

¹⁰ John Phillip Reid, 'A Lawyer Acquitted: John Adams and the Boston Massacre Trials', *The American Journal of Legal History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Jul., 1974), pp. 198.

¹¹ Halko, 'Review of, 'The Boston Massacre'', pp. 676.

¹² Dickerson, 'The Commissioners of Customs and the "Boston Massacre"', pp. 310.

bound to yield obedience” was common among Britain's influential constituents and political elite.¹³ However, Warren's unsurprising opposition aims to villainize not just the policy makers, but the country as a whole, in particular Britain's representative soldiers stationed in the colonies. This would strengthen the divide between colony and mother-country on a new emerging social level, which compounded the already familiar political and economic spectrums; in turn reinforcing tensions as well as helping to consolidate America's own developing national image.

Importantly, provocations for violence sprung from both sides of the colonial-British divide and whilst each would argue that its hand had been forced by opposition action, it cannot be denied that in instances it strengthened the revolutionary cause. Historians have gone as far as to argue that events such as the Boston Massacre were the result of colonial impetus more carefully engineered than a melting pot tension reaching its natural culmination. Halko remarks that by the time of the massacre, “gone are the law-abiding Bostonians, the wronged citizenry bearing the oppression of military occupation. Mobs and riots... were virtually a tradition with them... which taught Boston’s radical leaders the political uses of calculated terror.”¹⁴ Firstly, the immediate aftermath of the Boston Massacre marked a success for the patriots by instigating, “with united efforts... the immediate departure of the troops from the town... with a resolution which ensured success.”¹⁵ With British occupation being seen as a restriction of colonial liberties, a paradoxical effect of this was the consolidation of patriot authority in Massachusetts. Among the wealth of Warren's anti-British narrative, he brings up an interesting comparison between contemporary Britain and the fallen Roman empire, the importance of which cannot be understated in undermining the crown and rallying support for the revolutionary cause. Drawing similarities between the two, Warren's assessment is significant for several reasons. Firstly, he claims that it was “a

¹³ Lord Chatham, House of Commons, January 14th 1766.

¹⁴ Halko, ‘Review of, ‘The Boston Massacre’’, pp. 676.

¹⁵ Dr. Joseph Warren, Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772.

free constitution, which raised ancient Rome from the smallest beginnings... the loss of this which plunged her from that summit, into the black gulf of infamy and slavery.”¹⁶ This influences the reader on multiple levels; by projecting the demise of civil order, authority, even society in a colonial context without the liberty of a free constitution, arguably also hinting at a looming collapse of British imperial authority in its entirety, each feeding into his anti-British agenda. Without question, “the patriots exhibited extraordinary skill in manipulating public opinion, playing upon the emotions of the ignorant as well as the minds of the educated,” and Warren's oration does this brilliantly.¹⁷ Whilst the colonial masses could feed off the notions of martyrdom and revolt brought up in his expression of the Boston Massacre, the educated and politically influential would have no doubt been sucked into Warren's empirical comparisons. This was surely a fascinating prospect for ordinary colonists, they feeling as if they had some historically significant understanding of the contemporary ‘bigger picture’, which was also theirs to mould.

He goes on to say, “when this degenerated into tyrants and oppressors; her senators forgetful of their dignity, and seduced by base corruption, betrayed their country.”¹⁸ This breeds two obvious contextual comparisons; relating the tyranny of Roman political authority with that of the crown and government, in addition to exemplifying measures of violent oppression to embody events such as the Boston Massacre more broadly. More subtly, it condemns other instances of violence, one of which resulted in patriot James Otis being “so severely beaten that he might have been killed had not a passer-by rushed in.”¹⁹ Warren's comparative analysis reflects contemporary tensions with both crown authority, its military and political limbs in occupancy of the colonies, reinforcing a colonial aim for the liberty of a free constitution. Colonials felt betrayed by their mother country due to the inequality of their

¹⁶ Dr. Joseph Warren, ‘Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772’.

¹⁷ A. Schlesinger in, Jesse Lemisch, ‘Review: Radical Plot in Boston’, pp.487.

¹⁸ Dr. Joseph Warren, ‘Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772’.

¹⁹ Dickerson, ‘The Commissioners of Customs and the "Boston Massacre"’, pp. 309.

liberties with that of the British mainland populace, in response to which a growing notion of unity brewed among patriot constituents that helped in turn to mould a national image separate to Britain; rather than an extension of it. Indeed there are notions of American national identity that emerge from Warren's oration; however, his narrative chooses not to allude to a complete loss of hope for a colonial-British reconciliation. He states, "it is our earnest desire that she [Britain] may still continue to enjoy the same emoluments... only, let us have the pleasure of calling it our own... but this it seems is too great a favour: we are to be governed by the absolute commands of others."²⁰ This touches on a central topic of political tension between Britain and the colonies, in that taxation without representation was taken as an infringement of the liberties of the colonial constituency. Yet it is clear that in many cases it was not so much the policies colonials received from the crown that oppressed them (granted that additional taxes would unlikely be welcomed), so much as the fact that these policies were forced by crown authority; prior to the 1760s, government legislature pertaining to the colonies was weakly enforced and simply evaded or ignored.

In conclusion, Joseph Warren has produced an inspiring and historically important source that embodies much of the prevalent tensions between Britain and the colonies in the context of the build up to revolution. Warren's oration can be identified as a solidifying precursor to the revolutionary cause justified in a pursuit of "all the liberties and IMMUNITIES of British subjects."²¹ In the months and years thereafter the Boston Massacre and Warren's oration two years later; tensions grew, violence erupted, revolution was strived for and America emerged. Whilst taking every opportunity to undermine and villainize Britain, Warren's oration also reflects a constituency that in contemporary terms still somewhat sheltered themselves under the umbrella of crown protection. However, as the narrative also tells us, these sentiments were receding as the political and economic divide

²⁰ Dr. Joseph Warren, 'Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772'.

²¹ Dr. Joseph Warren, 'Boston Massacre Oration, Boston, March 5, 1772'.

between Britain as her colonies grew, until they became so alienated the social divide compounded into a cultural one, which saw America's own national identity stand to fight for its liberties rather than wait for Britain to grant her them.

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