

On the Occasion of PA'LANTE's Fifteenth Anniversary - Why I Am Here

Tim Collins

It was an honor to give a brief testimonial at PALANTE's recent 15th Anniversary GALA. All were there to celebrate the amazing accomplishments of an organization conjured up from the passions and commitment of so many. The joy of celebrating PALANTE's success and the indomitable spirit of its founder and leader, Elsie Vasquez, was palpable – especially in these otherwise dark times. It was a great event!

I shared some impromptu thoughts, running on the tail end of a coffee fueled marathon of research and brief writing, with little sleep. As one infected with a love of history, I couldn't help but draw some historical analogies and connect some interesting dots. I am resharing my remarks here for those who couldn't attend and might be interested – after a few nights of sound sleep and with a bit more clarity.

PA'LANTE – People Against Landlord Abuse and Tenant Exploitation.

Why am I here? - the son of a working-class family from small city in Northern New England – a long way from home – a place with somewhat different demographics.

Let's take a brief trip - and do a little time travel – about 150 miles north and almost 250 years back in time. It's May 10, 1775. We're standing on the edge of Lake Champlain. We hear the waves lapping against the shore. It's 5:00 in the morning. The fog is slowly lifting. We see a number of wooden boats hitting the beach. Scrambling out and gathering before us are eighty-three men, volunteer militia, mostly farmers. They're carrying muskets.

Stepping out before them is a man who speaks quietly, but earnestly. He tells the men that they have become known far and abroad as the “scourge of arbitrary power”. He tells them that they are about to seize a nearby fort, and that none need go unwillingly. This is the first affirmative act of the American Revolution – the capture of Fort Ticonderoga. (The battles of Lexington and Concord a few weeks earlier having been defensive.) He instructs the men to “poise your firelocks”. They march toward the fort.

Why did their leader describe these men as the “scourge of arbitrary power”? Most of the same men had fought a multi-year struggle with New York landlords – landlords who insisted that none of them had valid titles to their land and that they had to pay rent. (The men held titles issued by another colony and, in reliance on those titles, had cleared land and settled there with their families.) Their fight with New York landlords had now morphed into a larger struggle against the British empire.

Their leader (Ethan Allen) described the ultimate enemy they faced: arbitrary power. Destroying arbitrary power would become the animating purpose of the American Revolution.

Whether the fight is against the arbitrary power of a king over distant colonists; the arbitrary power of a slave owner over a slave; the arbitrary power of a factory owner over an exploited worker; the arbitrary power of a male dominated society over women; or the arbitrary power of a landlord over tenants in an overheated housing market; it's all the same fight – all part of the same revolution.

Returning back to the lakeshore, I see the fog lifting and boats coming into view. Only instead of rough-cut men with muskets, I see Elsie Vasquez. I see all of you – all ready to fight against the same forces of arbitrary power, in small ways and large, over brief moments and over long years, continuing the same revolution.

That is why I am here to support PA'LANTE.