

**[Powhatan, as related by John Smith]
“What Can You Get By War?”
ca. 1614**

[The following conversation takes place in the aftermath of a Virginian provocation against Powhatan Indians: starving English colonists in the area around Nansemond raided a Powhatan temple to steal its hoard of corn, intended as a sacred offering. Powhatan summoned Smith—who he considered to be a subordinate werowance—to his capital at Werowocomoco to remind the English of their duties as tributaries in his chiefdom; Smith broke Powhatan political protocols by bringing an armed escort of Virginia soldiers, indicating possible hostile intent.]

... Powhatan began to expostulate the difference of Peace and War after this manner.

Captain Smith, you may understand that I having seen the death of all my people thrice, and not any one living of these three generations but myself; I know the difference of Peace and War better then any in my Country. But now I am old and ere long must die, my brethren, namely Opitchapam, Opechancanough, and Kekataugh, my two sisters, and their two daughters, are distinctly each others successors. I wish their experience no less then mine, and your love to them no less then mine to you. But this brute from Nandsemond, that you are come to destroy my Country, so much frightened all my people as they dare not visit you. What will it avail you to take that by force you may quickly have by love, or to destroy them that provide you food. What can you get by war, when we can hide our provisions and fly to the woods? whereby you must famish by wronging us your friends. And why are you thus jealous of our loves seeing us unarmed, and both do, and are willing still to feed you, with that you cannot get but by our labours? Think you I am so simple, not to know it is better to eat good meat, lie well, and sleep quietly with my women and children, laugh and be merry with you, have copper, hatchets, or what I want being your friend: then be forced to fly from all, to lie cold in the woods, feed upon Acorns, roots, and such trash, and be so hunted by you, that I can neither rest, eat, nor sleep; but my tired men must watch, and if a twig but break, every one cries there comes Captain Smith: then must I fly I know not whether: and thus with miserable feare, end my miserable life, leaving my pleasures to such youths as you, which through your rash unadvisedness may quickly as miserably end, for want of that, you never know where to find. Let this therefore assure you of our loves, and every year our friendly trade shall furnish you with Corn; and now also, if you would come in friendly manner to see us, and not thus with your guns and swords as to invade your foes.

To this subtle discourse, the President [Smith] thus replied.

Seeing you will not rightly conceive of our words, we strive to make you know our thoughts by our deeds; the vow I made you of my love, both myself and my men have kept. As for your promise I find it every day violated by some of your subjects: yet we finding your love and kindness, our custom is so far from being ungrateful, that for your sake only, we have curbed our thirsting desire of revenge; else had they known as well the cruelty we

use to our enemies, as our true love and courtesie to our friends. And I think your judgment sufficient to conceive, as well by the adventures we have undertaken, as by the advantage we have (by our Armes) of yours: that had we intended you any hurt, long ere this we could have effected it. Your people coming to James Towne are entertained with their Bowes and Arrowes without any exceptions; we esteeming it with you as it is with us, to wear our arms as our apparel. As for the danger of our enemies, in such wars consist our chiefest pleasure: for your riches we have no use: as for the hiding your provision, or by your flying to the woods, we shall not so unadvisedly starve as you conclude, your friendly care in that behalf is needlesse, for we have a rule to find beyond your knowledge.

Source: Smith, John. *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles...* (1624). In *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580-1631)*, ed. Philip L. Barbour. 3 vols., 2: 195-197. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.