Bismarck
Blood and Iron Speech

In September 1862 there was a crisis in Prussia where the Prussian Landtag, or lower parliamentary house, was refusing to approve increased military spending in defiance of the King's wishes. King Wilhelm I was advised by his Minister of War, Roon, to send for Bismarck as a formidable personality who might secure the passing of the military budget in the Landtag.

On the 17 September the crisis had reached such a pitch that Wilhelm I seriously considered abdicating his throne. That evening Roon sent by telegraph to Bismarck suggesting that he, Bismarck, should hurry to Berlin and that there was danger in delay. The message in French and Latin read: - Depechez-vous; Periculum in mora.

On 22 September Bismarck met Wilhelm I and assured him that he could form a ministry and carry through the army reforms as he desired, if necessary against the will of the deputies in the Landtag. Given this assurance the Wilhelm I decided not to abdicate. Bismarck was appointed acting chief minister of Prussia.

Bismarck made an appearance before the Landtag on 29 September where he spoke expressing his regret at the hostility of the deputies to passing of the military budget and stressed the need for progress to be made on the military proposals favoured by the king. The next day at a meeting of a Budget Committee Bismarck went perhaps further than he his better judgement might have intended in asserting that: -

The position of Prussia in Germany will not be determined by its liberalism but by its power ... Prussia must concentrate its strength and hold it for the favourable moment, which has already come and gone several times. Since the treaties of Vienna, our frontiers have been ill-designed for a healthy body politic. Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided - that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849 - but by iron and blood.

This Speech by Bismarck has entered into popular understanding of history as ending blood and iron rather than as iron and blood.
The Conflict is viewed too tragically, and presented too tragically in the press; the regime does not seek war. If the crisis can be ended with honor, the regime will gladly do so. The great independence of the individual makes it difficult in Prussia to rule under the Constitution. In France it is otherwise; there, individual independence is lacking. The constitutional crisis, however, is no shame, but rather an honor. We are perhaps too educated to put up with a constitution - we are too critical. Public opinion wavers; the press is not public opinion; we know how that arises. There are too many Catilines, who have revolution at heart. The members [of the House], however, have the task of standing over public sentiment, and of guiding it. Our blood is too hot, we prefer armor too great for our small body to carry, but we should put it to service. Germany does not look to Prussia's liberalism, but to its power. Bavaria, Wurttemberg, and Baden would like to turn to liberalism, but they shall not assume Prussia's role. Prussia must collect its forces for the favorable occasion, which has several times been neglected; Prussia's borders are not favorable to a healthy national life. Not by speeches and decisions of majorities will the greatest problems of the time be decided - that was the mistake of 1848-49 - but by iron and blood. This olive branch (he drew it from his memorandum book) I picked up in Avignon, to offer, as a symbol of peace, to the popular party: I see, however, that it is still not the time for it
Bismarck responds to [Max von] Forckenbeck's lengthy arguments about appropriation rights and Art. 99 of the constitution and the people's wish for a shortened military service:

He would like to go into the budget for 1862, though without making a prejudicial statement. An abuse of constitutional rights could be undertaken by any side; this would then lead to a reaction from the other side. The Crown, e.g., could dissolve [parliament] twelve times in a row—that would certainly be permitted according to the letter of the constitution—but it would be an abuse. It could just as easily reject cuts in the budget, immoderately; it would be hard to tell where to draw the line there; would it be at 6 million? At 16? Or at 60?—There are members of the National Association [Nationalverehr]—of this association that has achieved a reputation owing to the justness of its demands—highly esteemed members who have stated that all standing armies are superfluous. Well, what if a public assembly had this view! Would not a government have to reject this?!—There was talk about the "sobriety" of the Prussian people. Yes, the great independence of the individual makes it difficult in Prussia to govern with the constitution (or to consolidate the constitution?); in France things are different, there this individual independence is lacking. A constitutional crisis would not be disgraceful, but honorable instead. Furthermore, we are perhaps too "well-educated" to support a constitution; we are too critical; the ability to assess government measures and records of the public assembly is too common; in the country there are a lot of catline [conspiratorial] characters who have a great interest in upheavals. This may sound paradoxical, but everything proves how hard constitutional life is in Prussia. Furthermore, one is too sensitive about the government's mistakes; as if it were enough to say "this and that [cabinet] minister made mistakes," as if one wasn't adversely affected oneself. Public opinion changes, the press is not [the same as] public opinion; one knows how the press is written; parliament has a higher duty, to lead opinion, to stand above it. We are too hot-blooded, we have a preference for putting on armor that is too big for our small body, and now we're actually supposed to utilize it. Germany is not looking to Prussia's liberalism, but to its power; Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden may indulge liberalism, and yet no one will assign them Prussia's role; Prussia has to coalesce and concentrate its power for the opportune moment, which has already been missed several times; Prussia's borders according to the Vienna Treaties [of 1814-15] are not favorable for a healthy, vital state; it is not by speeches and majority resolutions that the great questions of the time are decided—that was the big mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by iron and blood. Last year's appropriation has been carried out; for whatever reasons, it is a matter of indifference; he*** is sincerely seeking the path of agreement: whether he finds it does not depend on him alone. It would have been better if one had not made a false accomplishment on the part of the Chamber of Deputies. —If no budget comes about, then there is a tabula rasa; the constitution offers no way out, for then it is one interpretation against another interpretation; sumnum ius, summa iniuria****; the letter killeth. He is pleased that the speaker's remark about the possibility of another resolution of the House on account of a possible bill allows for the prospect of agreement; he, too, is looking for this bridge; when it might be found is uncertain. —Bringing about a budget this year is hardly possible given the time; we are in exceptional circumstances; the principle of promptly presenting the budget is also recognized by the government; but it is said that this was already promised and not kept; and now it's "You can certainly trust us as honest people." He does not agree with the interpretation that it is unconstitutional to make expenditures whose authorization had been refused; for every interpretation, it is necessary to agree on the three factors.

* Note: the following summary of Bismarck's speech employs a mode for verbs called "indirect" speech, which is used in German by journalists or stenographers to record "reported"—as opposed to precisely quoted—speech. The document therefore does not always reproduce Bismarck's speech word for word, although on occasion it comes close to a verbatim transcript. In the opening sentence, and in a few other places toward the end of his remarks where Bismarck strikes a conciliatory pose, the Prussian prime minister is referred to in the third person as the "he" who is delivering this reported speech—trans.
** Note: the reference is to Bismarck himself—trans.
*** Cicero's "the highest law [can be] the greatest injustice"—trans.