Speech in the Virginia Convention

PATRICK HENRY

Background  In this speech, delivered in 1775, Patrick Henry publicly denounces the British king and urges the colonists to fight for independence. Making such a declaration took tremendous bravery. England was the world’s most powerful country at the time, and the odds against the colonists were overwhelming. If the colonies had failed to win independence, Henry could have been executed for treason.

Mr. President: No man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the house. But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen, if, entertaining, as I do, opinions of a character very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments freely and without reserve. This is no time for ceremony. The question before the house is one of awful moment1 to this country. For my own part, I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery. And in proportion to the magnitude of the subject ought to be the freedom of the debate. It is only in this way that we can hope to arrive at truth, and fulfill the great responsibility which we hold to God and our country. Should I keep back my opinions at such a time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason toward my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward the Majesty of Heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.

1. moment importance.

Literary Analysis
Speeches and Diction
Identify three phrases from this section that show Henry’s use of sophisticated diction.

Possible responses:
- “No man thinks more highly than I do . . . ”
- “I shall speak forth my sentiments . . . ”
- “in proportion to the magnitude of the subject ought to be the freedom of the debate”

Does Henry agree or disagree with those who spoke before him?

Answer: Henry disagrees with those who spoke before him.

Critical Viewing

Answer: Some students may say that the painting shows dramatic impact, with the speech causing incredulous characters to talk among themselves or to rise in reaction. Other students may classify those same depictions as examples of inattention.

Literary Analysis
Speeches and Diction
• Remind students that diction is a writer’s (or speaker’s) choice of words. A speaker’s word choice often depends on his or her subject, the occasion, and the audience.

• Ask students to identify both the speaker’s purpose and his audience. Then, in view of these, ask students to discuss what diction they would expect the speaker to use.

Answer: Henry is trying to persuade listeners to fight for independence. His audience is made up of Virginia statesmen. Henry’s diction would most likely be formal and sophisticated.

• Ask the Literary Analysis question: Identify three phrases from this section that show Henry’s use of sophisticated diction.

Reading Check

Answer: Henry disagrees with those who spoke before him.

Strategy for Special Needs Students
Have students work in pairs to read through the speech, stopping at the end of each paragraph to review Henry’s oratory techniques. Have students use the Two-column Chart in Graphic Organizer Transparencies, p. 315. In the left column, have them write the technique in each paragraph. In the left-hand examples of each technique as they read.

Enrichment for Gifted/Talented Students
Challenge students to write a speech to be delivered in the United States Congress on an important contemporary issue. Suggest that students write a persuasive speech that appeals to both reason and emotion and deliver it to the class in much the same way Patrick Henry may have delivered his speech.
In Luke 22:47–48, Jesus is betrayed with a kiss.

In Ezekiel 12:2, those “who have eyes to see, but see not, and having ears hear not,” the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst and to provide for it.

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past. And judging by the past, I wish to know what there has been in the conduct of the British ministry for the last ten years to justify those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace themselves and the house? Is it that insidious smile with which our petition has been lately received? Trust it not, sir; it will prove a snare to your feet. Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss. Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports with those warlike preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation? Have we shown ourselves so unwilling to be reconciled that force must be called in to win back our love? Let us not deceive ourselves, sir. These are the implements of war and subjugation—the last arguments to which kings resort.

I ask gentlemen, sir, what means this martial array, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? Can gentlemen assign any other possible motive for it? Has Great Britain any enemy in this quarter of the world, to call for all this accumulation of navies and armies? No, sir, she has none. They are meant for us: they can be meant for no other. They are sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging.

And what have we to oppose to them? Shall we try argument? Sir, have we been trying that for the last ten years. Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? Nothing. We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves longer. Sir, we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions

Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren till she transforms us into beasts. Is the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be of the number of those who having eyes see not, and having ears hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst and to provide for it.

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Remind students that asking a rhetorical question is one technique a speaker can use in a speech. Rhetorical questions are questions to which the answer is evident. Because the answer is evident, these questions are often used to stir the emotions of listeners.

Then, ask students the Literary Analysis question: What is the effect of the five rhetorical questions in this paragraph? Answer: These questions counter any possible argument from those who still hesitate about going to war. They also help to stir up the indignation and frustration of the listeners.

The Year 1775

The year 1775 was a momentous one in American history. It was on March 23 of 1775 that Patrick Henry rose to address the Virginia Convention. The issue before the legislative body was whether to arm the Virginia Militia in order to be ready to fight Great Britain. Less than a month after Henry’s speech, on April 19, British troops marched to Lexington and Concord in search of hidden colonial arms and leaders. Before the year was over, the colonists appointed George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. In Virginia, the local militia forced the Royal Governor to flee to the safety of a British warship off the coast. By the end of the year, it was clear to colonial leaders that there was no turning back. Patrick Henry’s call for freedom or death had become reality.
have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned with contempt from the foot of the throne! In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. There is no longer any room for hope. If we wish to be free, if we mean to preserve inviolate those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending, if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained—we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us!

They tell us, sir, that we are weak—unable to cope with so formidable an adversary. But when shall we be stronger? Will it be the next week, or the next year? Will it be when we are totally disarmed, and when a British guard shall be stationed in every house? Shall we gather strength by irresolution and inaction? Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance by lying supinely on our backs and hugging the delusive phantom of hope until our enemies shall have bound us hand and foot? Sir, we are not weak, if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power. Three millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us. The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, 6. fond foolish.

7. The battle . . . alone “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11)
we have no election; if we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. There is no retreat but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged! Their clanging may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable—and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come!

It is in vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, “Peace, peace”—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? 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!

Critical Reading

1. Respond: If you had been in the audience, how would you have responded to Henry’s speech? Why?

2. (a) Recall: What does Henry say about the previous speakers? (b) Infer: What does he hope to accomplish by commenting on the earlier speakers?

3. (a) Recall: What measures does Henry say the colonists have already tried in their dealings with England? (b) Analyze: What examples does Henry provide to support his position that compromise with the British is not a workable solution?

4. (a) Infer: What course of action does Henry want the colonists to take? (b) Draw Conclusions: What is Henry’s answer to the objection that the colonists are not ready to fight against the British?

5. (a) Speculate: Do you think Henry was prepared to stand behind his words when he exclaimed, “Give me liberty or give me death”? Why, or why not? (b) Deduce: What does his willingness to make such an assertion reveal about his character? (c) Extend: If you had been in his place, would you have made such an assertion? Why, or why not?

6. Speculate: What types of people living in the colonies at the time of Henry’s speech might have reacted negatively to his words? Why?

About the Selection

Benjamin Franklin uses his years of experience to urge his colleagues to accept the Constitution. Franklin admits that he does not entirely approve of the newly framed Constitution. He says that any legal document created by committee will have some inherent weaknesses although the government will more likely fail because of the people who administer it than because of the document that established it.

Enrichment

The Constitution

Following the American Revolution, the newly independent states created their own constitution that gave most of the power to each state’s elected legislative officials. Congress was able to pass limited laws, but it had no power to tax the states or to regulate issues regarding trade and boundaries between states. These problems and other weaknesses inherent in the confederation resulted in the states sending delegates to a Constitutional Convention. This convention gave national government more power.

During the debate over ratification, two major sides emerged: the Federalists and anti-Federalists. Anti-Federalists were worried that the Constitution would give too much power to the federal government. The Federalists promised to add a Bill of Rights, which helped win ratification.