**Patrick Henry's Speech in the Virginia Convention, St. John's Church, Richmond, Virginia / March 23, 1775.**

*Background: The Second Virginia Convention met March 20, 1775 at Richmond--in what is now called St. John's Church--instead of the Capitol in Williamsburg. Delegate Patrick Henry presented resolutions to raise a militia, and to put Virginia in a posture of defense. Henry's opponents urged caution and patience until the crown replied to Congress' latest petition for reconciliation. Several of these opponents spoke immediately before Henry’s speech.*

*Henry presented a proposal to organize a volunteer company of cavalry or infantry in every Virginia county. Henry addressed himself to the Convention's president, Peyton Randolph. Henry is credited with having swung the balance in convincing the convention to pass a resolution delivering Virginian troops for the*[*Revolutionary War*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Revolutionary_War)*, which would begin in June of 1775. For his efforts, Henry has come to be known as the “Orator of Liberty.”*

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 5 House is one of awful\* moment to this country. For my own part, I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery. [ . . . ] Should I keep back my opinions at such a time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings. [ . . . ]

We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth. [ . . . ] Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous 10 struggle for liberty? [ . . . ] 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 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, 15 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 these war-like preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation? [ . . . ] 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 20 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, we have been trying that for the last ten years. [ . . . ]

Sir, we have done everything that could be done, to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have 25 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 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.

30 If we wish to be free, if we mean to preserve 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, [ . . . ] [then] we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight! [ . . . ]

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 35 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 has 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 40 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, 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 clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come.

45 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!

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| sentiments (4): thoughts or feelings; ideas | awful (5): here meaning inspiring a mixture of wonder and fear (full of awe) | solace (14): comfort or consolation in a time of grief or anguish |
| insidious (14): treacherous; crafty. Seemingly safe but having deleterious effects. | “. . . betrayed with a kiss” (15): Allusion to Judas’ betrayal of Jesus | comports (16): conduct oneself; behaves |
| subjugation (18): the act of bringing someone under dominance or control | remonstrated (25): protested | supplicated (25): asked or begged |
| inestimable (30): too great/large to calculate | election (42): here meaning choice | extenuate (45): to draw out; to lengthen |

1. How does Henry establish ethos in the opening paragraph (lines 1-8)?

2. Henry claims that the question of whether to begin a military campaign against the British is one of “freedom or slavery” (5-6). How will this metaphorical language appeal to his audience?

3. To whom would Henry consider himself “guilty of treason” if he did not speak his mind (7)?

4. What “truth” is Henry discussing in the second paragraph (9-11)? Why is it easier to avoid facing that truth?

5. In the third paragraph (12-15), Henry logically explains why he cannot trust the British. Explain his rationale for not trusting them.

6. What effect do you think the biblical allusion at the end of the third paragraph would have on his audience?

7. Explain Henry’s logical argument in the fourth paragraph (16-22).

8. The final sentence of the fourth paragraph returns to an image Henry has already brought up in the speech. Connect this part of the speech to that earlier part.

9. Paragraph 8 (33-37) acknowledges a possible counterclaim to Henry’s argument. What is that counterclaim and how does Henry refute it?

10. The final paragraph again recalls the metaphorical language of slavery/chains Henry has filtered throughout his entire speech. Be sure you understand why Henry was using these metaphors (the British weren’t literally going to enslave Henry) and how his final, dramatic line emotionally sums ups his feelings.