



*Patrick Henry Arguing the Parson's Cause* (c. 1830), attributed to George Cooke. Oil on canvas.

## Speech to the Virginia Convention



Patrick Henry

**M**r. President:<sup>1</sup> 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 that it will not be

1. **Mr. President:** Peyton Randolph (1721–1775), president of the Virginia Convention.

thought disrespectful to those gentlemen, if, entertaining<sup>2</sup> 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. ❶ The question before the House is one of awful moment<sup>3</sup> 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. ❷

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.<sup>4</sup> Is this 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.

2. **entertaining** v.: having in mind; considering.

3. **awful moment**: great importance.

4. **listen . . . beasts**: In Greek mythology, the sirens are sea maidens whose seductive singing lures men to wreck their boats on coastal rocks. In the *Odyssey*, Circe, an enchanter, transforms Odysseus's men into swine after they arrive at her island home. Henry's allusion combines these two stories.

❶ In his opening remarks, Henry makes a respectful appeal to his audience. He anticipates their objections to what he is about to say.

? What effect might his appeal have on his audience?

❷ Simply put, how does Henry describe the question or debate that is before the Convention?

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<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup> with these 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;<sup>7</sup> the last arguments to which kings resort. ❸

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 motives for it? Has Great Britain any enemy, in this quarter of the world, to call for all this accumulation

❸ Henry asks his listeners to look back on past experiences. He lists the recent actions of King George III and the English army to support his main idea—that the colonists are mistaken in thinking that the British are ready to compromise.

5. **our petition**: The First Continental Congress had recently protested against new tax laws. King George III had withdrawn the laws conditionally, but the colonists were unwilling to accept his conditions.

6. **comports** v.: agrees.

7. **subjugation** n.: conquest; domination.

### Vocabulary

**solace** (säl'is) v.: comfort.

**insidious** (in·sid'ē·əs) adj.: sly; sneaky.

**martial** (mär'shəl) adj.: warlike.

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. Have we anything new to offer on 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. <sup>4</sup> Sir, we have done everything that could be done, to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated;<sup>8</sup> we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup> 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

8. **remonstrated** *v.*: objected; complained.  
 9. **interposition** *n.*: intervention; stepping in to try to solve the problem.  
 10. **fond** *adj.*: foolishly optimistic.

**4**  
 Note Henry's use of rhetorical questions, or questions asked for effect with no answer anticipated.

**?** How do these questions help anticipate the arguments of his opponents?

God of Hosts is all that is left us! <sup>5</sup>

They tell us, sir, that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable<sup>11</sup> 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<sup>12</sup> 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 the 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, we have no election.<sup>13</sup> If we were base<sup>14</sup> 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—

11. **formidable** *adj.*: powerful; difficult to defeat.  
 12. **delusive** *adj.*: deceptive; misleading.  
 13. **election** *n.*: choice.  
 14. **base** *adj.*: showing little courage, honor, or decency.

#### Vocabulary

- supplication** (sup'lə·kā'shən) *n.*: plea; prayer.  
**avert** (ə·vɜrt') *v.*: prevent; turn away.  
**spurned** (spɜrnd) *v.*: rejected.  
**inviolable** (in·vi'ə·lit) *adj.*: uncorrupted.  
**adversary** (ad'vər·ser'ē) *n.*: opponent.  
**vigilant** (vij'ə·lənt) *adj.* used as *n.*: those who are watchful.  
**inevitable** (in·ev'i·tə·bəl) *adj.*: not avoidable.

**5**  
 What appeals to reason does Henry make in this paragraph? What does he want the colonists to understand?

and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come! ⑥

It is in vain, sir, to extenuate<sup>15</sup> 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

15. extenuate v.: weaken.

⑥  
? What fiery language and loaded words does Henry use in this paragraph? What effect do you think his words would have had on the audience?

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! ⑦

⑦  
To wrap up his speech, Henry uses a final strong appeal to emotion.  
? What makes his conclusions so powerful?

## Response and Analysis

### Reading Check

1. According to the first two paragraphs of this speech, why is Henry speaking out?
2. In the third paragraph, what facts does Henry offer to convince his listeners that Great Britain will not respond to peaceful petitions?
3. In the fourth paragraph, what facts does Henry offer to prove that the colonists have tried everything and that war is now the only solution?
4. According to the fifth paragraph, what answers does Henry give to those who say that the colonists cannot win the war?
5. In the sixth paragraph, how does Henry wrap up his argument?

### Thinking Critically

6. Review your two-column chart, noting especially the appeals you starred and those you marked with an X. What made these appeals powerful or weak? Explain whether you are more convinced by Henry's appeals to **reason** or his appeals to **emotion**.
7. In the fourth paragraph, what **metaphors** does Henry use to describe the coming war?

8. Henry makes use of the **rhetorical question**—a question that is asked for effect. Rhetorical questions, which are often used in **persuasion**, presume that the audience agrees with the speaker on the answers and so no answer is expected or required. Find the series of rhetorical questions in the fifth paragraph of this speech. How does this technique make Henry's speech more persuasive?
9. Because his audience knew the Bible, as well as classical mythology, Henry knew he could count on certain **allusions** to produce emotional effects. Look up the classical or biblical passages that Henry alludes to in each of the following statements from his speech. How would each allusion relate to the conflict in Virginia in 1775? Could any of them relate to life today? Explain.

- "We are apt to . . . listen to the song of that siren, till she transforms us into beasts." (*Odyssey*, Books 10 and 12)
- "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?" (Ezekiel 12:2)

### SKILLS FOCUS

**Literary Skills**  
Analyze the use of persuasion.

**Reading Skills**  
Analyze modes of persuasion, including appeals to reason and appeals to emotion.

**Writing Skills**  
Write an essay comparing and contrasting a speech with a sermon.

**Vocabulary Skills**  
Understand synonyms.

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