

Name: _____ Class: _____

Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death Speech

By Patrick Henry
1775

On March 23, 1775, Patrick Henry delivered this rousing speech to the Virginia House of Burgesses (including future U.S. Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson) at St. John's Church. His speech convinced the colony of Virginia to organize a militia to fight against British tyranny. As you read, take notes on the rhetorical devices that Henry uses in order to deliver his message.

- [1] 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,¹ till she transforms us into beasts. Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous² 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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1. A mythic creature similar to a mermaid, but whose enchanting song lures sea-travelers to their deaths
2. **Arduous (adjective):** difficult to accomplish or achieve

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 solace³ themselves and the house? Is it that insidious⁴ 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.⁵ Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports⁶ with those warlike preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation?⁷ 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 subjugation⁸, 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 rivet⁹ 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 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?¹⁰ 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 remonstrated¹¹, we have supplicated, we have prostrated¹² ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical¹³ 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. If we wish to be free, if we mean to preserve inviolate¹⁴ 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!

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3. **Solace** (*verb*): to find consolation or comfort
 4. **Insidious** (*adjective*): treacherous; crafty
 5. A biblical allusion to the betrayal of Jesus by his disciple Judas, who kisses Jesus at the moment of his betrayal.
 6. **Comport** (*verb*): to fit or agree
 7. **Reconciliation** (*noun*): the restoration of harmony or of alliance
 8. **Subjugation** (*noun*): to bring under control and governing as a subject; to conquer or subdue
 9. **Rivet** (*verb*): To pin down or put in chains
 10. **Supplication** (*noun*): humble entreaties or pleas
 11. **Remonstrate** (*verb*): to say or plead in protest of
 12. **Prostrate** (*verb*): to lie flat on the ground, usually in a form of submission
 13. **Tyrannical** (*adjective*): describing a ruler who exercises absolute power oppressively
 14. **Inviolable** (*adverb*): free from injury or violation

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 supinely¹⁵ 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 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 base¹⁶ 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!

- [5] It is in vain, sir, to extenuate¹⁷ 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!

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15. **Supinely** (*adverb*): passively, inactively

16. **Base** (*adjective*): low in character

17. **Extenuate** (*verb*): to make something seem less serious; to underestimate or make light of

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Patrick Henry believed that there was no way to know the future, only to anticipate its potential.
 - B. When peace and reconciliation are not options, fighting for freedom is the only other way.
 - C. Great Britain truly wanted reconciliation and partnership with the colonies.
 - D. Hope is the only comfort people can turn to in times of revolution and change.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "It is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided; and that is the lamp of experience." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "If we wish to be free...we must fight!" (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "...after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation." (Paragraph 3)

3. What alternatives did the colonists already try in their appeal to Great Britain, according to the text? [RI.3]
 - A. They have attempted to reason with the British as equal citizens.
 - B. They have pledged eternal loyalty to the crown, in hopes of perhaps gaining British favor.
 - C. They have tried many things, including minor insurrections and conflicts.
 - D. They have tried many things, including petitions, argument, and pleas to parliament and to the crown.

4. PART A: According to Henry, what are the "means" (Paragraph 4) the colonies have to defeat the British? [RI.4]
 - A. The colonies have resources and knowledge of the land on their side.
 - B. Henry believes they have the sense of justice and reason on their side.
 - C. Henry believes they have God and faith on their side to assist them, implying that he thinks the British do not.
 - D. The colonies have the people willing to fight, as well as allies, and a just cause on their side.

5. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "lying supinely on our backs"
 - B. "hugging the delusive phantom of hope"
 - C. "which the God of nature has placed in our power"
 - D. "Three millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty"

6. Which of the following does NOT identify a rhetorical device used in the speech? [RI.8] [RI.5]
- A. Henry relies on exaggeration, especially of diction and tone, to make his points about the British and the state of affairs the colonies face.
 - B. Henry uses repetition throughout the speech to emphasize his points and show the Virginia House of Burgesses how repeated actions for peace have gotten them nowhere.
 - C. Henry appeals to emotion (i.e. pathos) by reminding his audience of the injustices they have experienced and of the fearful future they face in shackles.
 - D. Henry asks a number of rhetorical questions in order to get his audience thinking and to lead them to what he considers are the correct answers.

