

Give Me Liberty Or Give Me Death

The Second Virginia Convention met March 20, 1775 inland at Richmond — in what is now called St. John's Church. Delegate Patrick Henry presented resolutions to raise and establish 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.

Relations between the colonists and the government back in Great Britain had steadily deteriorated over the decade since the Stamp Act was passed in 1765. Violence related to the Tea Act and the Boston Tea Party in 1773 led to the imposition of the Coercive or Intolerable Acts a year later.

On September 5, 1774, the first Congress in the United States met in Philadelphia to consider its reaction to the British government's restraints on trade and representative government after the Boston Tea Party raid. In all, 56 delegates from 12 colonies came to Philadelphia including John Adams, his cousin Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, Roger Sherman, John Jay, John Dickinson, Richard Henry Lee, and George Washington.

During their session in Philadelphia, which ended after about seven weeks of debates, the group agreed to a boycott of British goods within the colonies as a sign of protest, spelled out in the Continental Association. The Association also called for an end of exports to Great Britain in the following year if the Intolerable Acts weren't repealed.

Henry spoke to the second Virginia convention in March 1775, to discuss the events in Philadelphia and the need to form armed militias in Virginia in case British troops attempted to control the area.

Patrick Henry, (born May 29 [May 18, Old Style], 1736, Studley [Virginia]—died June 6, 1799, Red Hill, near Brookneal, Virginia, U.S.), brilliant orator and a major figure of the American Revolution.

Patrick Henry was the son of John Henry, a well-educated Scotsman who served in the colony as a surveyor, colonel, and justice of the Hanover County Court.

Before he was 10, Patrick received some rudimentary education in a local school, later reinforced by tutoring from his father, who was trained in the classics.

As a youth, he failed twice in seven years as a storekeeper and once as a farmer; and during this period he increased his responsibilities by marriage, in 1754, to Sarah Shelton.

The demands of a growing family spurred him to study for the practice of law, and in this profession he soon displayed remarkable ability.

Within a few years after his admission to the bar in 1760 he had a large and profitable clientele. He was especially successful in criminal cases, where he made good use of his quick wit, his knowledge of human nature, and his forensic gifts.



In 1765, at the capitol in Williamsburg, where he had just been seated as a member of the House of Burgesses (the lower house of the colonial legislature), he delivered a speech opposing the British Stamp Act.

During the next decade Henry was an influential leader in the radical opposition to the British government. He was a member of the first Virginia Committee of Correspondence, which aided intercolonial cooperation, and a delegate to the Continental Congresses of 1774 and 1775. (Britannica)

On the 23rd, Henry presented a proposal to organize a volunteer company of cavalry or infantry in every Virginia county. By custom, Henry addressed himself to the Convention's president, Peyton Randolph of Williamsburg. (Colonial Williamsburg)

Henry's speech on that day served to finalize support in Virginia to oppose any British military intervention in that colony; but what remains unknown is what Henry actually said in his speech. Henry's words were not transcribed.

Years later, biographer William Wirt in 1817 reconstructed the speech based on the recollections of Thomas Jefferson and others. Wirt's account ends with the famous lines, "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!" (Constitution Center)

Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775.

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.

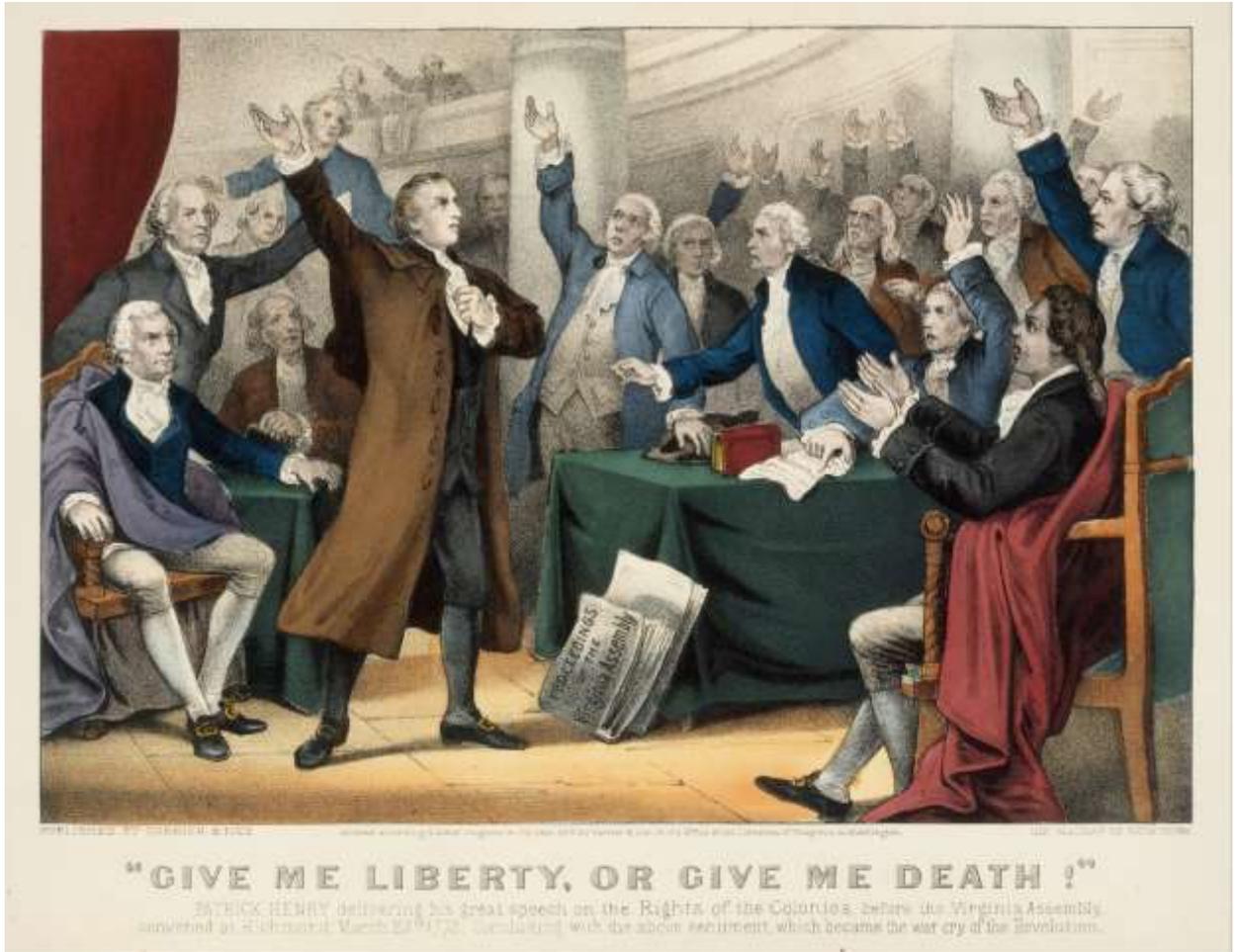
But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen if, entertaining as I do opinions of a character very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments freely and without reserve.

This is no time for ceremony. The question before the House is one of awful moment 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 towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward the Majesty of Heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.

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 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.



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, 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? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves.

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 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. The 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 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.

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!

The convention passed the resolution offered by Henry to form militias to defend Virginia, and in the following month, fighting broke out at Lexington and Concord between British troops and the colonists, marking the official start of the Revolutionary War. (Constitution Center)

Henry was appointed commander of the Virginia forces, but his actions were curbed by the Committee of Safety; in reaction, he resigned on February 28, 1776. Henry served on the committee in the Virginia Convention of 1776 that drafted the first constitution for the state.

He was elected governor the same year and was reelected in 1777 and 1778 for one-year terms, thereby serving continuously as long as the new constitution permitted. As wartime governor, he gave Gen. George Washington able support, and during his second term he authorized the expedition to invade the Illinois country under the leadership of George Rogers Clark.

After the death of his first wife, Henry married Dorothea Dandridge and retired to life on his estate in Henry county. He was recalled to public service as a leading member of the state legislature from 1780 to 1784 and again from 1787 to 1790. From 1784 to 1786 he served as governor.

He declined to attend the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention of 1787 and in 1788 was the leading opponent of ratification of the US Constitution at the Virginia Convention. Henry was reconciled, however, to the new federal government, especially after the passage of the Bill of Rights, for which he was in great measure responsible.

Because of family responsibilities and ill health, he declined a series of offers of high posts in the new federal government. In 1799, however, he consented to run again for the state legislature, where he wished to oppose the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions, which claimed that the states could determine the constitutionality of federal laws; he won. He died on June 6, 1799 at his home, Red Hill, before he was to have taken the seat. (Britannica)

Information here is primarily from Britannica; Constitution Center; Yale Law School

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young