

Speech to the Virginia Convention

Speech by **Patrick Henry**



BACKGROUND

Patrick Henry was one of the earliest opponents of British rule in the American colonies. In 1765, after the British Parliament passed a tax bill called the Stamp Act, Henry was among the members of the Virginia legislature that challenged the legality of a British tax on the colonies. He organized a Virginia militia that became part of the new Continental Army after independence was declared. Known as “the Orator of Liberty,” Henry made a name for himself with his speeches supporting American democracy. In the spring of 1775, his “Speech to the Virginia Convention” convinced Virginia delegates to prepare for war with Britain.

SETTING A PURPOSE

As you read, look for Patrick Henry’s reasons for encouraging the colonies to fight.

1 **M**r. President:¹ 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 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 moment² 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

¹ **Mr. President:** the president of the Virginia Convention, Peyton Randolph.

² **of awful moment:** of very grave importance.



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 towards the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.

2 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.³ 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,⁴ 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.

3 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.⁵

4 Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports⁶ 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 subjugation⁷—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 motives 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.

5 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.

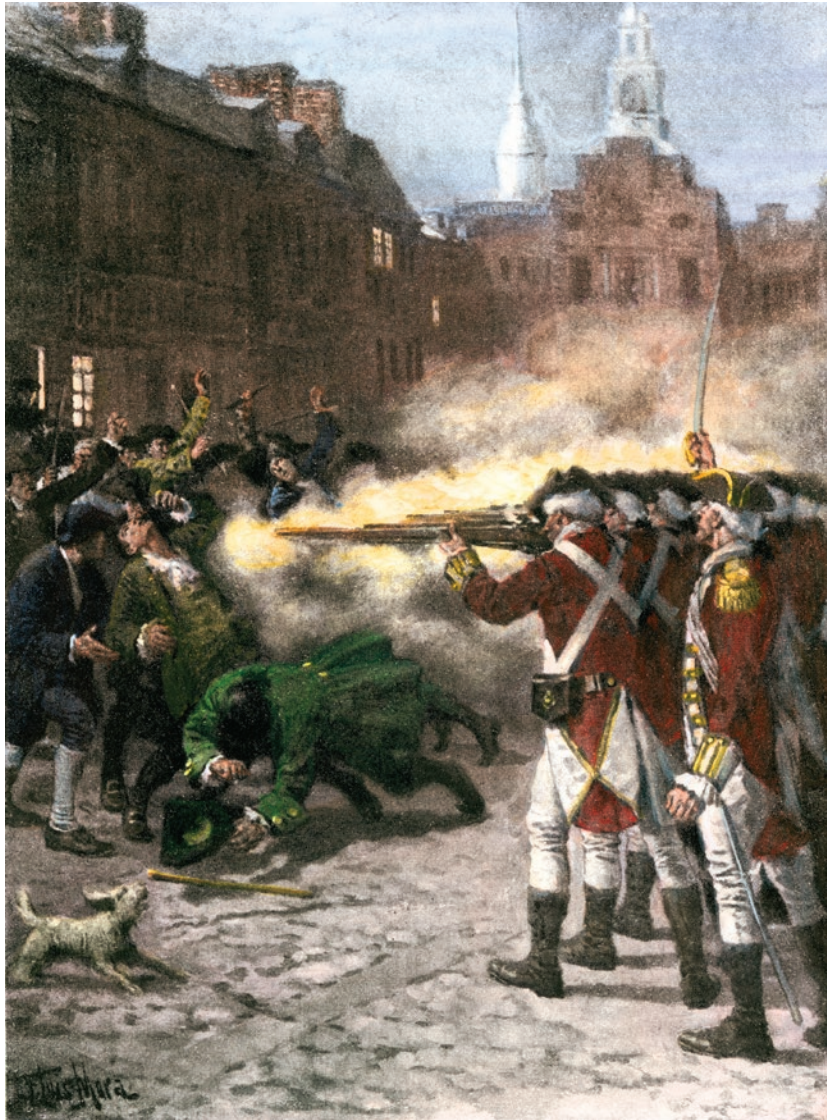
³ **the illusions of hope . . . into beasts:** In the *Odyssey* of Homer, the goddess Circe lures men to her island and then magically transforms them into pigs. Henry suggests that the “illusions of hope” may transform people in a similar way.

⁴ **having eyes . . . hear not:** an allusion to Ezekiel 12:2 in the Bible, which speaks of “who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not.”

⁵ **betrayed with a kiss:** an allusion to Luke 22:47–48 in the Bible, wherein Judas betrayed Jesus to the Roman soldiers by kissing him and thus identifying him.

⁶ **comports:** agrees or goes along with.

⁷ **subjugation:** control by conquering.



British soldiers shooting four civilians at the Boston Massacre 1770.

6 Sir, we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated;⁸ we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition⁹ 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.

7 If we wish to be free—if we mean to preserve inviolate those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending—if

⁸ **remonstrated:** to object; to protest strongly.

⁹ **we have prostrated . . . interposition:** We have thrown ourselves at the feet of the king and have begged for intervention.



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!

- 8 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?
- 9 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;¹⁰ it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election.¹¹ 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!
- 10 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 north¹² 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!

¹⁰ **battle . . . strong alone:** an allusion to Ecclesiastes 9:11 in the Bible, “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.”

¹¹ **election:** choice.

¹² **the next gale . . . north:** Some colonists in Massachusetts had already shown open resistance to the British and were on the brink of war.