

PATRICK HENRY 1736-1799

"I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" These words have made Patrick Henry famous in American history, but he may not have spoken them. Although he delivered the two best-known speeches of the Revolution, no one printed them or fully wrote them down. We can read them only as reconstructions, pieced together, years after Henry's death, from the memories and notes of people who heard them.

Patrick Henry's speeches may be half legendary, but he was a real man, born on the Virginia frontier to a cultivated family. His father taught him Latin, so that he could read the classics, training that prepared him to become one among the many noted Southern orators. As a teenager, he ran a store with his brother and at the age of eighteen he married and took up farming. By twenty-three, he had several children and large debts. He began to study, and then practiced, law, gaining a reputation by winning most of his cases. Not yet thirty years old, he was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses.

The Revolution made Henry a prominent speaker. His listeners commented that he had a clear, powerful voice and that he used his tall, awkward body expressively. He delivered the first of his important speeches to the legislators of Virginia in 1765, in opposition to the Stamp Act. He closed by mentioning Julius Caesar and King Charles the First, who were assassinated and executed, respectively, for political reasons. When he warned the present English king to "profit by their example," his implied threat brought shouts of "Treason! Treason!" He replied, "If that be treason, make the most of it!" In his "liberty or death" speech ten years later, he urged armed resistance to England. This



Patrick Henry by an unknown artist.

time his boldness brought more than shouts. The governor of Virginia proclaimed him an outlaw.

Henry not only survived but was himself elected governor of Virginia, serving for five one-year terms. He remained active in politics until the end of his life, although his political views grew conservative and put him at odds with some earlier friends, especially Thomas Jefferson. Still, Henry helped to write the Virginia constitution and led the movement to add a bill of rights to the Constitution of the United States.

Virginia named a county after Patrick Henry, which was later divided into a part called Patrick and a part called Henry. It seems a fitting honor for the man we must still regard as the author of the Revolution's two most fiery speeches.

Speech in the Virginia Convention

In 1775 the Virginia House of Burgesses held a revolutionary convention at which Patrick Henry introduced the resolution that "Virginia be immediately put in a posture of defense." There was strong opposition. Some of the legislators feared a popular rebellion even more than they feared England. Henry rose to deliver his most famous speech in support of his resolution.

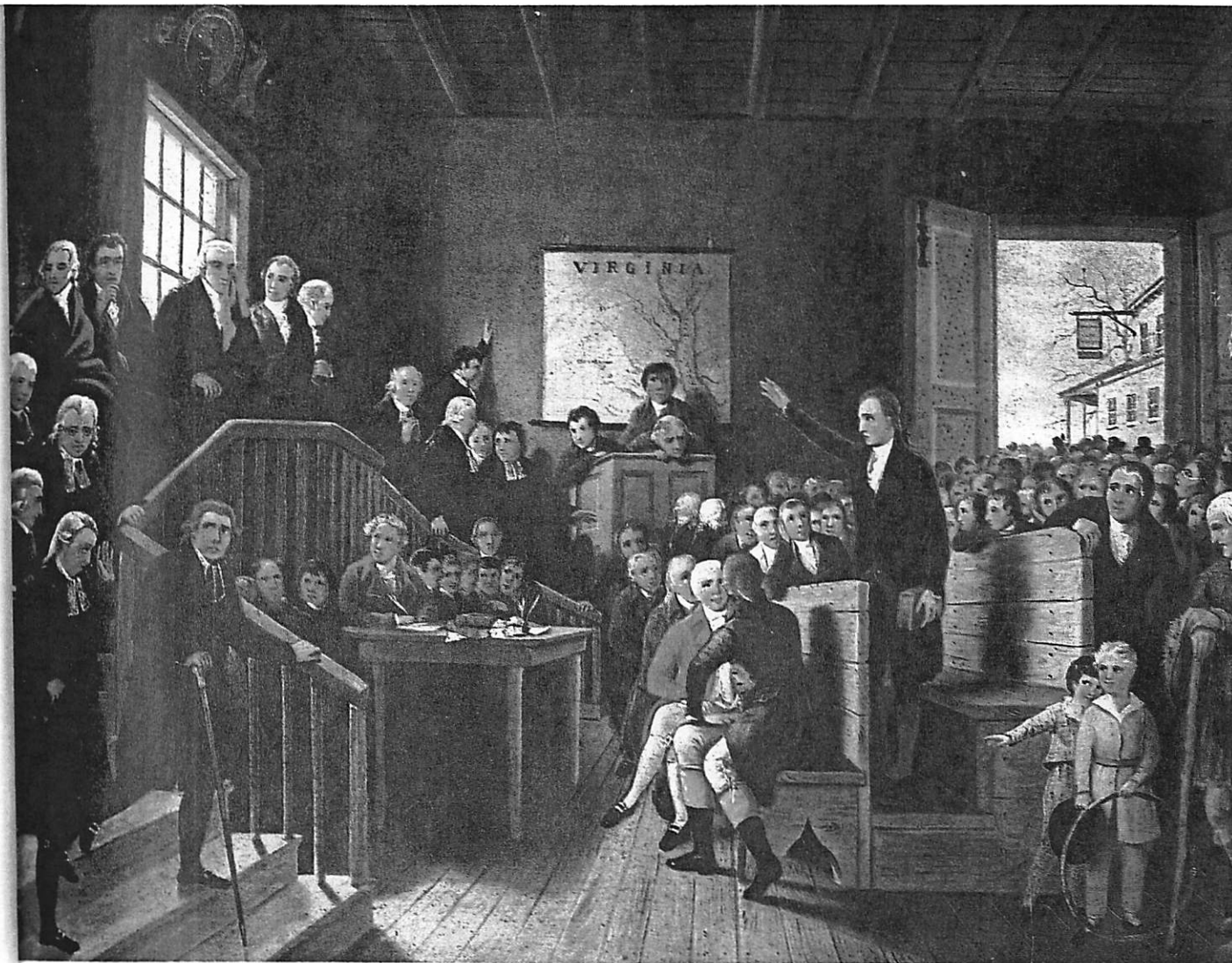
Mr. President: No man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the house. But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen, 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 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 toward 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 that 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



Patrick Henry Arguing "the Parson's Cause" (c. 1830). Oil painting thought to be the work of George Cooke (1793–1849). This work depicts Henry at Hanover Courthouse in 1763, when his brilliant oratory first brought him widespread recognition.

The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond

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 longer.

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 interposition¹ 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 fond² 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. 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 bat-

1. **interposition:** intervention; stepping in to help solve a problem.

2. **fond:** foolish.

tle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election.³ 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 clanging 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 north⁴ 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!

3. **election:** choice.

4. **The next gale . . . north:** Some Massachusetts colonists had already shown open resistance to the British.

For Study and Discussion

Analyzing and Interpreting the Speech

1. Henry's powerful call to arms is an example of oratory as literature. Two important persuasive devices used by Henry and other orators are (1) **repetition** of key points, and (2) **rhetorical questions** (questions to which the answers are obvious). Find one use of repetition and one rhetorical question in Henry's speech.
2. Like other persuasive writers, Henry uses vivid figures of speech. Interpret the following figures of speech: the “lamp of experience” (paragraph 3); “storm” (paragraph 6); the clanging “chains” (paragraph 7).
3. Throughout the speech Henry insists that Americans who trust Britain deceive themselves. Cite several metaphors for deception and illusion that appear in the speech.