

### “Liberty or Death”—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,

**Commented [BK1]:** Comes right out and states his purpose, and admits that not everyone is on the same side about this

**Commented [BK2]:** He feels that it is his duty to his country to speak out against the current actions being taken, and make this speech to encourage others to take immediate action

**Commented [BK3]:** Makes the delegates realize that after all their numerous efforts, nothing has been accomplished. Helps them to remember all that they have been through

**Commented [BK4]:** Adds greater emphasis and urgency to all that America has tried so far

**Commented [BK5]:** Refutes the opposition, who says continued efforts should be made to reach some sort of agreement. Britain is not going to cooperate, no matter what America tries to do

**Commented [BK6]:** The best course of action to take from this point, after all that has happened, is to take defensive action against Britain

**Commented [BK7]:** Britain is trying to convince America that they are too weak, in an effort to get them to give up. Therefore they cannot be trusted

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!

**Commented [BK8]:** Shift in tone

**Commented [BK9]:** Asks why shall America sit back and not stand against the wrongdoings of Britain

**Commented [BK10]:** He is passionate towards his stance, and for fighting for the freedom of his country

**Directions:** Use your annotated copy of Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech and answer the following questions. Use complete sentences and evidence from the text to support your analysis:

**1. What is the historical context of Henry's speech? What is the basic question being debated at the Virginia Convention?**

During the time in which Henry's speech was given, Colonial America was waiting to hear back from Britain on their latest negotiation deal, after many other attempts to reach some sort of resolution. The question being debated among the delegates was whether to continue peacefully trying to deal with the British, or take defensive action and go to war. Henry wrote this speech in an attempt to encourage his fellow delegates to take that defensive action against Britain.

**2. What evidence does Henry provide to support his claims? How effective would this evidence be to his audience?**

Henry makes the claim that Britain cannot be trusted, and that they are trying to fool America into giving in to them; to accede to the Crown. Because of that, America needs to take defensive action. Henry states, "*They tell us, sir, that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable an adversary.*" Britain is trying to convince America that they are too weak to fight, and should just give up; and him saying this helps the delegates to realize that truth. He also goes on to say, "*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.*" Despite all the grueling efforts to reach some sort of agreement, nothing is working. This evidence helps the audience to really think through all that they have been through. Yes, they want something to work out, but they need to realize that it is not going to without defensive action; which Henry helps them to realize.

**3. How does Henry refute the counterargument? Be specific and detailed.**

The counterargument to his speech is that through continued effort, there could be a deal reached between America and Britain.

Henry's entire speech for the most part is him refuting the counterargument from his opposition. His opponents have said that America should keep trying to find some way to create resolution with Britain through petitions, however Henry points out that "*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!*" Due to that, no resolution is going to be made. Therefore, the best course of action to take is that "*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!*"

**4. Observe the length of the sentences in the first and last paragraphs of the speech. What differences do you find? How do these differences affect the tone of the speech?**

In the first half of his speech, Henry's sentences are much longer and flowing; as opposed to the second half, in which his sentences are much shorter and direct to the point. His use of longer and flowing sentences sound smoother to the audience and forces them to work harder to understand the subject matter. The shorter sentences in the second half create a much faster and more assertive tone, as well as make the speech sound "snappier" to help Henry emphasize his main points.

**5. In the third paragraph, Henry uses a string of verbs: petitioned, remonstrated, supplicated, implored. They are arranged in a climactic order, flowing from the mildest to the strongest. What is the effect of this structure on the audience? Find four synonyms for these verbs, and rewrite Henry's sentence using your choices. Are they as effective as Henry's choices? Why or why not?**

The use of these verbs in this structure, from mildest to strongest, aids in giving greater meaning to his speech. Henry as well ties in repetition, stating "we have" before each verb to add emphasis and urgency to the statement.

We have *requested*, we have *protested*, we have *begged*, we have *called on*.

I do not believe that my choice of verbs are as effective as Henry's, as his choices add much more meaning and emotion, as well as give them more movement to his address.

**6. In a detailed paragraph, explain the overall effect of Henry's structure and how it advances his argument. Be sure to discuss the following:**

- Introduction and Conclusion
  - Paragraph Topics
  - Method of Development
    - Tone Shifts

The structure of Henry's speech helps to shine a light on Britain's true actions, and persuade the delegates that the best course of action to take is defensive action. He starts out by acknowledging there is disagreement as to what action needs to be taken with Britain, and states his purpose; that he feels it is his duty to make this speech on why defensive action needs to be taken. *"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."* Henry primarily uses facts to help support his claims. Throughout the speech, he goes back in history to explain how despite all efforts taken so far to reach resolution with Britain, nothing has worked; and that they are not helping in any way as well. On that subject he states, *"Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years. Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? Nothing."* Whether or not the delegates want to realize it or not, they have to accept the truth that their efforts are going nowhere, and much harsher action needs to be taken. The use of these facts helps Henry better persuade them, to engrave the truth into them. His use of tone shifts as well help to emphasize the urgency of the matter. He creates a more flowing smoother tone in the first half through the use of longer sentences, which forces them to work harder to understand his points. As Henry progresses further into his speech, he begins to transition into a faster and more assertive tone by using shorter sentences, which make the speech much snappier and directly to the point. To end it off, he evokes a powerful call to action. He points out the fact that *"Our brethren are already in the field!"* There is no more time to sit around trying to hope something miraculously works out, immediate action needs to be taken. He is passionate about his stance and fighting for his country, and that *"I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"*