

# SPEECH TO THE VIRGINIA CONVENTION

by Patrick Henry



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## A QUICK CHECK

Whom is Patrick Henry addressing?

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## B LITERARY FOCUS

So far, is Henry appealing to the audience's **emotions**, **logic**, or both? Explain.

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10 Mr. President:<sup>1</sup> 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. **A** 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<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> 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. **B** It is only in this way that

1. **Mr. President:** Peyton Randolph (1721–1775), president of the Virginia Convention.
2. **entertaining:** having in mind; considering.
3. **awful moment:** great importance.

**A** VOCABULARY

**Selection Vocabulary**

Considering how Henry feels about the British, what do you think the word *insidious* means?

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**B** LITERARY FOCUS

What course of action is Henry attempting to **persuade** his audience to take?

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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  
20 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.<sup>4</sup> 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  
30 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<sup>5</sup> has been lately received? **A** 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<sup>6</sup> with these warlike preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and  
40 reconciliation? Have we shown ourselves so unwilling to be reconciled, that force must be called in to win back our love? **B**

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- listen ... beasts:** In Greek mythology, the sirens are sea maidens whose seductive singing lures men to wreck their boats on coastal rocks. In the *Odyssey*, Circe, an enchanter, transforms Odysseus's men into swine after they arrive at her island home. Henry's allusion combines these two stories.
  - our petition:** The First Continental Congress had recently protested against new tax laws. King George III had withdrawn the laws conditionally, but the colonists were unwilling to accept his conditions.
  - comports:** agrees.



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Let us not deceive ourselves, sir. These are the implements of war and subjugation;<sup>7</sup> 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. **C** 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 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? **D** 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;<sup>8</sup> we have supplicated; we have prostrated

7. **subjugation:** conquest; domination.

8. **remonstrated:** objected; complained.

### C READING FOCUS

When Henry draws attention to the British navies and armies, is he using an **emotional** or a **logical appeal**? Explain your answer.

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### D LITERARY ANALYSIS

Why do you think Henry asks the questions in this paragraph? Do they help him to persuade his audience? Explain.

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**A** VOCABULARY

**Selection Vocabulary**

Use context clues to determine the definition of the word *spurned*.

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**B** READING FOCUS

In this sentence is Henry using an **emotional** or **logical appeal**? Underline words that helped you arrive at your decision.

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**C** VOCABULARY

**Selection Vocabulary**

Henry imagines being free from the corrupt, overbearing British throne. Considering this, what do you think *inviolate* means?

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**D** LANGUAGE COACH

In this sentence, *vigilant* is being used as a noun, but it is usually an adjective, as in “the vigilant people.” Adjectives that can also function as nouns are called **substantives**. Think of another substantive and write it below.

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ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition<sup>9</sup> 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. **A B** In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond<sup>10</sup> hope of peace and reconciliation.

70 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! **C** 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<sup>11</sup> 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  
80 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<sup>12</sup> 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 the 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  
90 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.<sup>13</sup> **D** If

9. **interposition**: intervention; stepping in to try to solve the problem.

10. **fond**: foolishly optimistic.

11. **formidable**: powerful; difficult to defeat.

12. **delusive**: deceptive; misleading.

13. **election**: choice.



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we were base<sup>14</sup> enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. **E** There is no retreat, but in submission and slavery! **F** 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!

100 It is in vain, sir, to extenuate<sup>15</sup> 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! **G**

**E** VOCABULARY

**Word Study**

*Contest* has multiple meanings. Look up the word in the dictionary and write down the definition that is used in this sentence.

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**F** LITERARY FOCUS

In attempting to **persuade** his audience, what does Henry identify as the alternative to going to war?

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**G** VOCABULARY

**Academic Vocabulary**

Consider the *perspective*, or point of view, of King George III. How do you think the British king would have reacted if he had heard this speech?

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14. **base**: showing little courage, honor, or decency.  
15. **extenuate**: weaken.