

## **Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death (1775)**

**Patrick Henry**

### **Historical Background**

Patrick Henry was a planter, merchant, and lawyer in colonial Virginia. Elected to the House of Burgesses in 1765, Henry was a vocal critic of King George III's increased taxation of the colonies. One of his earliest acts as a Burgess was the introduction of resolutions against the Stamp Act, written in language strong enough to make some of the other legislators uncomfortable and fearful of being accused of treason. Throughout the next decade, Henry remained a vocal opponent of taxation without representation, and in 1773 he took the lead in creating Virginia's Committee of Correspondence to coordinate information with the other colonies on the activities of Royal appointees and military in the colonies. In 1774, after George issued a series of punitive laws against the colonies, known as the Intolerable Acts, Henry was elected to the First Continental Congress. The question facing the First Continental Congress was not one of independence, but one of freedom, as many colonists believed that their liberties and rights as English subjects were being impinged upon. Some favored approaching the King obsequiously, but others wanted to demand the rights they sought. Henry, in a speech to the House of Burgesses in 1775, detailed his position clearly.

### **Historical Significance**

The debate about how to redress colonial grievances was long and complex. Some colonists were content with "virtual representation" in Parliament, and considered themselves obedient subjects of the king. Some felt that with calm and continued petitioning, the king and parliament could be swayed toward granting equal rights of representation to the colonies. Still others believed that the colonies should be treated as fully equal partners in the empire. Although at the time of Henry's speech there had been no formal consideration of separating from the British Empire, his fiery rhetoric swayed many towards a more radical approach. As evidence, more or less immediately after hearing the Speech, the House of Burgesses passed a resolution to raise a militia to defend Virginia.

### **Key Concepts and Learning Objectives**

Concepts: Causes of the American Revolution; Loyalists; Patriots; Colonial Legislatures; Intolerable Acts; Battles of Lexington and Concord; Slavery and Freedom

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Describe the causes of the American Revolution;
- describe the role of colonial legislatures in the lead-up to the American Revolution;
- evaluate the usage of freedom and slavery imagery in Henry’s speech;
- identify and describe key features of revolutionary speech and rhetoric.
- Analyze the text to determine which features were especially likely to persuade his fellow legislators given Henry’s context and audience

## Questions to Explore

Henry said, “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience.” What do you think he meant by this? Explain and elaborate your answer.

What do you think was so persuasive about Henry’s argument? The tone? His logical argument? The evocative language? Explain your answer.

Henry equates the potential subjugation of the colonies to slavery. In light of the fact that he was a plantation slave-owner, how do you evaluate this claim? How are the claims of slaveholders more broadly to be evaluated in the context of the frequent invocations of the power of freedom and liberty in the speeches of the Founding Era? How does Henry’s invocation of slavery as a condition to be avoided at all costs, even death, affect arguments emphasizing that we should judge historical actors by the standards of their day?

The speech you read was not recorded in contemporary sources, but was instead recounted from memory and reported to William Wirt (who was writing Henry’s biography) many years later in 1816. Does the fact that Henry may not have actually said the famous words attributed to him “Give me liberty...” change the significance of this speech? How does historical evidence change the impression we get of those who were the heroes of the American Founding? Is it possible for the speech to be important even if we are not certain that it is accurate? Why or why not?

Henry suggests that the oppression of unjust taxes, lack of representation, and the threat of force justifies war. While every unjust law does not justify violent resistance, at some point it seems that certain levels of oppression justify recourse to violence. How much injustice should a people resist only with peaceful and ordinary means? Which types or degrees of injustice justify a response such as “give me liberty or give me death?” Does it make a difference that the British had not yet attacked Virginia? To what extent should prudential considerations, such as the military weakness of the colonies, weigh into the decision as to when to resist oppression? Defend your answer.