

How to Start a War: Patrick Henry's Call to Action

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In 1775, one year before America's independence was declared, Virginia leaders met at the Second Virginia Convention, where a heated debate took place as to whether or not Virginians should be prepared to fight Britain (Vitale, 2008, ¶13-5). England had liberally imposed taxes and restriction on American trade, and had equally limited American representation in British Parliament. Among the leaders present at the convention were those who loyally clung to the motherland, England, and felt that the sovereign king had a right to impose such laws upon them. They were known as loyalists. Others at the convention believed that the king did not have the right to impose such laws. They believed that the taxes and restrictions, as well as the limited representation in Parliament, were unjust measures. They called themselves patriots, and demanded that America separate itself from Britain. The loyalists may not have liked England's imposed restrictions, but they felt that starting a war would be going too far. In addition, England had a sizable and well-proven army. It was during this Virginia debate that Patrick Henry, a patriot, stood up and delivered his famous "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech. In the speech, he contends for a war of independence by choosing words that successfully establish a religious basis for the war, alluding to well-known texts, using logical reasoning, and speaking calculated words that create a sense of fear and urgency. His intent is to convince the leaders of Virginia that they, along with the other colonies, must take action against Great Britain.

Throughout the speech, Henry chooses his words carefully to establish credibility and give hope to his listeners. In so doing, he continually appeals to the religion of those he is addressing: most of the colonists, and members of the Second Virginia Convention, were Christian. Henry refers to God often in his speech. In the first paragraph, he calls for action

against Britain due to “the great responsibility which we hold to God and our country” (Henry, 2008, ¶2). Good Christians are taught obedience and have a strong sense of duty towards God. Therefore, if they accept this assertion by Patrick Henry as valid, they feel to join the cause of American independence.

Later on, in the second-to-last paragraph, Henry uses the word “holy” to justify war (¶6). “Holy” means sacred, or set apart by God as important. Henry says: “[M]illions 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” (¶6). Essentially, Henry is asserting that the cause of liberty is supported by God; therefore, the war is justified. Henry continues, in saying that there is “a just God” who will “raise up friends to fight our battles for us” (¶6). Henry has already established that the cause for war is just, and now he implies that because God is just, He will ensure the war’s success. Henry is convinced that the land is protected by divine providence.

Divine protection in just causes is a common theme throughout the scriptures. Henry’s Christian audience was familiar with the Bible. Several examples of God protecting those who obey Him can be found in the Bible; for example, the righteous prophet Elisha reassured his servant in the Second Book of Kings: “Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them” (2 Kings 6:15-17, King James Version). God had sent warriors from Heaven to defend Elisha and his servant. Throughout the Bible, God continually promises that He will protect His people. Henry expects that his listeners will be reassured by scriptural accounts and promises of God’s protection. So, he tells them that because their cause is just, God will help them. This no doubt comforts the members of the convention and makes it easier for them to accept the fight.

The second technique used by Patrick Henry is allusion to well-known sources to establish credibility. By alluding to the Bible, Henry tries to justify his assertion of divine protection (as in the above Biblical examples). An especial example of Biblical allusion in the speech is the statement, “Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss” (¶5). In the Gospel of Luke, Judas (one of Jesus’ apostles) identifies the Christ to the enemy by the sign of a kiss (Luke 22:47-48). Using this allusion, Henry puts Judas and Britain in the same category: enemies of God. Henry infers that God will not be on England’s side, but rather that He will fight against it and defend the colonies. In the second paragraph, Henry alludes to Homer’s *The Odyssey*: “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). The “sirens” were mythical creatures described in *The Odyssey*. Any person who listened to their enchanting song would be rendered insane. Henry is comparing England’s oppressions to the sirens, asserting that if the oppressions were not ended, the colonists would eventually lose their sanity. In addition to providing striking comparisons, these allusions give Henry credibility as a well-informed and educated speaker.

The next technique that Patrick Henry uses to convince his audience to go to war is the use of coherent reasoning and experience. He describes Britain’s actions against the colonies in the past as evidence that the situation will continue to get worse, until something is done (Henry, 2008, ¶4). Henry implies that America’s ties with Great Britain are only doing damage to the people of the colonies. So, he says, the colonies should break away. Next Henry tells of how Britain has been organizing armies and preparing for battle (¶5). He reasons with his audience that such preparations are obviously not for peaceful purposes, nor are they meant to fight any other country, therefore these “implements of war and subjugation” (¶5) are certainly meant to

be used against the colonies. To Henry the war is “inevitable,” (¶6) meaning that it is bound to happen, so the people of Virginia must prepare themselves to fight.

The final technique that Patrick Henry uses throughout the speech is a choice of words that vividly paints a scene of fear and urgency. In the fourth paragraph, Henry uses the word “subjugation” (¶5). “Subjugation” is a word that carries with it the image of inescapable slavery and servitude. The people Henry is addressing do not want to be slaves to Britain. Therefore, Henry skillfully uses this powerful imagery of subjugation to create a sense of urgency and fear in his audience. “Our chains are forged!” he continues. “Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston!” (¶6). By referring to chains, Henry tries to evoke an image of being bound and imprisoned, devoid of freedom. In paragraph five, the hope of the colonists has become as a “phantom” (¶6): unreal and fleeting, a thing to fear.

Henry contends that the time to fight is now, if they are to ever avoid slavery. He poses to them a rhetorical question: “...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?” (¶6) This call to immediate action is used to create a sense of urgency in the listeners. It is not enough, Henry implies, to sit passively until something bad happens. The colonists must do something to prevent it. And, says Henry, “Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle?” (¶7). The word “brethren” is used to emphasize the unity that should exist among the colonists. Brothers are members of the same family, so Henry is in a sense calling the American colonists a family. Some in the “family” have already begun to fight. Family members should defend and protect their families. So, Henry uses this analogy of family and brotherhood to convince the Virginians that they must organize themselves and begin to fight as a united people.

By using rhetorical techniques such as these, Patrick Henry has put together a very convincing speech. The speech was accepted by the body that was addressed; the Second Virginia Convention did vote in favor of independence (Gavin, 1998, ¶2). Subsequently, Virginia joined with the other colonies to fight Britain. Patrick Henry's speech was therefore completely successful. The Revolutionary War was fought, and America won independence from Britain. It can be seen that, although the speech did not of itself bring about independence, its influence was vital: Patrick Henry's speech revolutionized America.

References

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Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death

Speech by 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 the 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 numbers 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 gentlement 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, and when a British guard shall be stationed in every house? Shall we gather strength but 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!”

**Note: paragraph numbers referenced in the Rhetorical Analysis do not correspond with paragraph numbers in the speech itself, because the speech source web page had an introductory paragraph preceding the speech.*