**Henry, Patrick**

**Speech given March 23, 1775; excerpted from *Patrick Henry,* 1966**

"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!"

*Patrick Henry*

On December 16, 1773, a group of patriots from Boston, Massachusetts, disguised as Indians, dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor to show their disgust over British taxes. The act became known as the Boston Tea Party. In early 1774, Great Britain passed the Intolerable Acts to punish Boston and Massachusetts for the Tea Party. One of the Intolerable Acts closed the port of Boston. To show their sympathy for the citizens of Boston, who were suffering from having the port closed, members of the Virginia House of Burgesses (the colony's lawmaking body) declared a day of mourning. In response, the British-appointed governor of Virginia, John Murray (1732–1809), known as Lord Dunmore, dissolved the House of Burgesses. The House of Burgesses was still dissolved in early 1775, but its members continued to meet in secret.

Six months earlier, on September 5, 1774, delegates from twelve of the thirteen colonies met at the First Continental Congress to decide what to do about colonial relations with Great Britain. Congress asked that the delegates go home and meet with their fellow lawmakers to discuss the issue. Members of the Virginia House of Burgesses were assembled on March 20, 1775, when Representative Patrick Henry (1736–1799) gave his famous "Give me liberty, or give me death" speech.

By March 1775, American colonists were very angry over British taxation policies, but outright war with Great Britain was not a certainty. There was much discussion, in fact, about how war could be avoided. Henry, who had long been in favor of a break with Great Britain, disagreed with those who wished to avoid a war. Instead, he rose and made a motion regarding military matters. Some delegates objected, saying he was being premature and that his motion closed the door on any chances for peace. Henry then proceeded to give his speech in support of his motion, insisting that war was coming, and it was time to get ready for it.

Henry began by pointing out that every effort toward a peaceful resolution had been met with insults and violence in the form of punishments (like the closing of the port of Boston). As a result, he believed there was no longer any hope of peace. He answered the fears of those who said America was too weak to prevail against Great Britain by saying they would never be any stronger than now. Furthermore, Americans would gain strength from the knowledge that their cause was "holy" and God was on their side. He concluded by saying that not to fight now meant slavery.

**Things to remember while reading an excerpt from Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty, or give me death" speech:**

* Patrick Henry's biographer, educator Moses Coit Tyler (1835–1900), questioned the motives of the delegates who objected to Henry's military proposals and caused him to make this famous speech. Tyler pointed out that the Virginia convention was *not* a legal meeting of the Virginia legislature; it was a gathering of revolutionaries. "Not a man, probably, was sent to that convention, not a man surely would have gone to it, who was not in substantial sympathy with the prevailing revolutionary spirit," wrote Tyler. Henry's proposals were not unusual; similar measures had been passed in other colonies.
* Tyler suggested that Virginia lawmakers objected "to Patrick Henry himself, and as far as possible to any measure of which he should be the leading champion."
* Henry was thought by many to be too extreme. He was proposing a headlong rush into the unknown, possibly a bloody war. Many of Virginia's lawmakers were wealthy planters who feared that a war with Great Britain would have devastating consequences to their way of life. As Tyler put it:

"Down to that day, no public body in America, and no public man, had openly spoken of a war with Great Britain in any more decisive way than as a thing highly probable, indeed, but still not inevitable." Patrick Henry's famous speech stepped over the line dividing private grumbling about Great Britain from public declarations of war. "The war is coming," he boldly declared; "it has come already."

**Excerpt from "Give me liberty, or give me death!"**

*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 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.*

[Those who observed Henry's speech say that up to this point he was fairly calm. In the next part of the speech, according to Tyler, "his manner gradually deepened into an intensity of passion and a dramatic power which were overwhelming."]

*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 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 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! (Tyler, pp. 142–45)*

**What happened next …**

Following Henry's speech, his fellow delegates sat in stunned silence for several minutes. They had expected a speech about military preparations, and what they had gotten instead was fiery talk about God, Heaven, slavery, and death. To hold back from war, Henry had grandly said, would be "an act of disloyalty to the majesty of Heaven." Finally, his fellow delegates pulled themselves together and passed Henry's motion, which proposed that Virginia "be immediately put into a posture of defense." Henry was put in charge of the committee to draw up a plan for arming and training Virginia's army of citizen-soldiers.

When Governor Dunmore heard what had taken place at the Virginia Convention, he sent a small group of British soldiers to seize the gunpowder that the revolutionaries had already stored in Williamsburg, Virginia. When hundreds of armed and angry Virginians threatened to take back the powder, Dunmore agreed to pay for the gunpowder but to show who was boss, he declared Patrick Henry an outlaw just as Henry was about to set off for the Second Continental Congress. Unfortunately for Dunmore, he had too few soldiers to pose any real threat to Henry, who appeared and served as a delegate at the Congress in May 1775.

**Did you know …**

* Patrick Henry's reputation as a forceful speaker on behalf of liberty was made on the day he gave this speech. To this day, Henry's "Give me liberty, or give me death" speech continues to be memorized and recited by American schoolchildren. But the speech was never written down by Henry. Different versions were reported by spectators. Historians have debated whether the preceding excerpt contains Henry's actual words, or are only more or less his actual words.
* In his speech, Henry made his own declaration of war against Great Britain. He went on to serve briefly as a soldier in the American Revolutionary War. During the war and after, he served five terms as governor of Virginia. After the war, he argued for the return of property and rights to Americans who had remained loyal to King George III (1738–1820), saying they would make good citizens of the new country.

**Where to Learn More**

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