



PATRICK HENRY

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PATRICK HENRY, American orator and patriot-statesman, was born at Studley, Hanover Co., Va., May 29, 1736, and died in Charlotte Co., Va., June 6, 1799. Educated to some extent by his father, who was a nephew of Robertson, the historian, he became a lawyer when in his twenty-fourth year and entered upon a successful and lucrative practice, his ability manifesting itself in a local suit known in Virginia as "the Parsons' Cause." In 1765, he was elected a member of the House of Burgesses, and called attention to himself by his fiery resolutions against the obnoxious Stamp Act. His influence at once became great, which was justified by his after-career in the cause of colonial liberty, and not only in the Virginia House, but in Congress, and while serving for a number of years as governor of his own State. As a lawyer, his eloquence made a great impression in the courts, and in 1774 his gifts in this respect, as well as his attitude and influence as a patriot, led to his being chosen speaker of the General Congress at Philadelphia. In the following year, in the Virginia Convention, he made his famous appeal on behalf of putting the Colonies in a state of defence—a speech which is here appended. This notable speech became a powerful force in moulding the public mind of the time. He was appointed by the Convention colonel of the first regiment, and commander of all the forces to be raised in Virginia, but a misunderstanding with the "Committee of Safety" led to his resignation. He was a member of the second Continental Congress of 1775 and of the Virginia Convention of 1776, which framed a new Constitution, and elected Henry the first Republican governor. He was reelected in 1777 and 1778. In 1780, he became a member of the Legislature, where he continued to serve until he was again elected governor in 1784. In 1787, he was chosen a delegate to the Federal Constitutional Convention which met at Philadelphia, but he did not attend. After his first incumbency of the office of governor of Virginia, he strongly opposed in the Virginia Convention the ratification of the Federal Constitution, as being fraught with peril to State sovereignty. Henceforth he gave his attention to his profession and repeatedly declined office, including invitations to enter Washington's cabinet, to act as ambassador to France, and he even rejected the offer of the chief-justiceship. Though he suffered himself to be elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, he was unable to take his seat and died in June, 1799, at Redhill, Va.

“GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH”

DELIVERED IN THE VIRGINIA CONVENTION, ON A RESOLUTION TO PUT THE COMMONWEALTH INTO A STATE OF DEFENCE, MARCH 23, 1775

*Mr. President:*

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 fulfil 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 offence, 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 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 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 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!

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 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!

“WE, THE PEOPLE” OR “WE, THE STATES”?

DELIVERED IN THE VIRGINIA CONVENTION, JUNE 4, 1788, ON THE PREAMBLE  
AND THE FIRST TWO SECTIONS OF THE FIRST ARTICLE OF THE  
FEDERAL CONSTITUTION

*Mr. Chairman:*

THE public mind, as well as my own, is extremely uneasy at the proposed change of government. Give me leave to form one of the number of those who wish to be thoroughly acquainted with the reasons of this perilous and uneasy situation, and why we are brought hither to decide on this great national question. I consider myself as the servant of the people of this Commonwealth, as a sentinel over their rights, liberty, and happiness. I represent their feelings when I say that they are exceedingly uneasy, being brought from that state of full security, which they enjoy, to the present delusive appearance of things. Before the meeting of the late Federal Convention at Philadelphia, a general peace and a universal tranquillity prevailed in this country, and the minds of our citizens were at perfect repose; but since that period they are exceedingly uneasy and disquieted. When I wished for an appointment to this convention, my mind was extremely agitated for the situation of public affairs. I conceive the Republic to be in extreme danger. If our situation be thus uneasy, whence has arisen this fearful jeopardy? It arises from this fatal system; it arises from a proposal to change our government—a proposal that goes to the utter annihilation of the most solemn engagements of the States—a proposal of establishing nine States into a confederacy, to the eventual exclusion of four States. It

goes to the annihilation of these solemn treaties we have formed with foreign nations. The present circumstances of France, the good offices rendered us by that kingdom, require our most faithful and most punctual adherence to our treaty with her. We are in alliance with the Spaniards, the Dutch, the Prussians: those treaties bound us as thirteen States, confederated together. Yet here is a proposal to sever that confederacy. Is it possible that we shall abandon all our treaties and national engagements? And for what? I expected to have heard the reasons of an event so unexpected to my mind, and many others. Was our civil polity, or public justice, endangered or sapped? Was the real existence of the country threatened, or was this preceded by a mournful progression of events? This proposal of altering our Federal Government is of a most alarming nature; make the best of this new government—say it is composed of anything but inspiration—you ought to be extremely cautious, watchful, jealous of your liberty; for, instead of securing your rights, you may lose them forever. If a wrong step be now made, the Republic may be lost forever. If this new government will not come up to the expectation of the people, and they should be disappointed, their liberty will be lost, and tyranny must and will arise. I repeat it again, and I beg gentlemen to consider, that a wrong step, made now, will plunge us into misery, and our Republic will be lost. It will be necessary for this convention to have a faithful historical detail of the facts that preceded the session of the Federal Convention, and the reasons that actuated its members in proposing an entire alteration of government—and to demonstrate the dangers that awaited us. If they were of such awful magnitude as to warrant a proposal so extremely perilous as this, I must assert that

this convention has an absolute right to a thorough discovery of every circumstance relative to this great event. And here I would make this inquiry of those worthy characters who composed a part of the late Federal Convention. I am sure they were fully impressed with the necessity of forming a great consolidated government, instead of a confederation. That this is a consolidated government is demonstrably clear, and the danger of such a government is, to my mind, very striking. I have the highest veneration for those gentlemen; but, sir, give me leave to demand what right had they to say, "We, the People"? My political curiosity, exclusive of my anxious solicitude for the public welfare, leads me to ask who authorized them to speak the language of "We, the People," instead of "We, the States"? States are the characteristics and the soul of a confederation. If the States be not the agents of this compact, it must be one great consolidated national government of the people of all the States. I have the highest respect for those gentlemen who formed the convention; and were some of them not here, I would express some testimonial of esteem for them. America had, on a former occasion, put the utmost confidence in them—a confidence which was well placed; and I am sure, sir, I would give up anything to them; I would cheerfully confide in them as my representatives. But, sir, on this great occasion, I would demand the cause of their conduct. Even from that illustrious man, who saved us by his valor, I would have a reason for his conduct; that liberty which he has given us by his valor tells me to ask this reason, and sure I am, were he here, he would give us that reason: but there are other gentlemen here who can give us this information. The people gave them no power to use their name. That they

exceeded their power is perfectly clear. It is not mere curiosity that actuates me; I wish to hear the real, actual, existing danger, which should lead us to take those steps so dangerous in my conception. Disorders have arisen in other parts of America, but here, sir, no dangers, no insurrection or tumult, has happened; everything has been calm and tranquil. But notwithstanding this, we are wandering on the great ocean of human affairs. I see no landmark to guide us. We are running we know not whither. Difference in opinion has gone to a degree of inflammatory resentment in different parts of the country, which has been occasioned by this perilous innovation. The Federal Convention ought to have amended the old system; for this purpose they were solely delegated: the object of their mission extended to no other consideration. You must therefore forgive the solicitation of one unworthy member to know what danger could have arisen under the present confederation, and what are the causes of this proposal to change our government.

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"A NATION—NOT A FEDERATION"

DELIVERED IN THE VIRGINIA CONVENTION ON THE EIGHTH SECTION OF THE  
FEDERAL CONSTITUTION

*Mr. Chairman:*

IT IS now confessed that this is a national government. There is not a single federal feature in it. It has been alleged, within these walls, during the debates, to be national and federal, as it suited the arguments of gentlemen.

But now, when we have heard the definition of it, it is