

Speech in the Virginia Convention

by Patrick Henry



READING & LANGUAGE STANDARDS

- 3 Read with comprehension informational materials
- 9 Analyze for parallelism in selections

NOTABLE QUOTE

"If this be treason, make the most of it."

FYI

Did you know that Patrick Henry . . .

- had 16 children—6 by his first wife, who died, and then 10 by his second wife?
- owned slaves?
- advocated the right to bear arms later guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution?
- strongly supported states' rights?

Author Online

For more on Patrick Henry, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.



Patrick Henry

1736–1799

Known as “the Orator of Liberty,” Patrick Henry made a name for himself with his speeches supporting American democracy. He was one of the earliest opponents of British rule in the American colonies. In 1765, after the British Parliament passed a tax bill called the Stamp Act, Henry was among the members of the Virginia legislature that challenged the legality of a British tax on the colonies. But he went farther than his colleagues by making a threat against the king. In his argument, so the story goes, he used a loaded analogy: “Caesar had his Brutus, Charles the First his Cromwell, and George III . . .”—at this point, shouts of “Treason!” erupted in the hall, but Henry continued—“may profit by their example.” He ended his speech with the defiant words, “If this be treason, make the most of it.” Henry did indeed make the most of his “treason,” becoming a tireless and influential leader both before and after the Revolution.

Profitable Law Career Henry was born in Virginia to a prosperous landowner. His father, who had attended the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, gave him a classical education at home. His mother, Sarah Winston Syme, was from a wealthy family. Henry went out on his own at age 15. Although smart and industrious, he couldn't find success as a storekeeper or later as a tobacco planter. After marrying and starting a family, he decided to teach himself law, and in 1760, at the age of 24, he was admitted to the bar. Henry's eloquence, quick wit, and rhetorical gifts served him well, and his law practice grew increasingly profitable.

Popular Virginia Politician Henry is best known for his fervent “Speech in the Virginia Convention,” which narrowly convinced the assembled leadership to prepare for war with Britain. In addition, he organized a Virginia militia that became part of the new Continental Army after independence was declared. He helped write the new state constitution and the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was a major influence on the Bill of Rights added to the U.S. Constitution. He also served several terms as governor of Virginia and as a state legislator. Although President Washington offered him positions as secretary of state and Supreme Court justice, Henry declined and always remained suspicious of the federal government. In 1799, after being elected again to the state legislature, he died at his 700-acre plantation, Red Hill, before he could take office.

Virginia House of Burgesses