

# SPEECH IN THE *Virginia Convention*

Patrick Henry

**BACKGROUND** In the spring of 1775, delegates from the state of Virginia could not agree whether to press for a peaceful solution with Britain or to prepare for war. Patrick Henry introduced resolutions calling for military preparedness. After politely listening to his colleagues' objections to armed rebellion, he rose to deliver this impassioned appeal.

## ANALYZE VISUALS

This painting shows Patrick Henry speaking to the Virginia House of Burgesses. What different attitudes are reflected in the faces and postures of his audience members?

March 23, 1775

Mr. President:<sup>1</sup> 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 that 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<sup>2</sup> 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 fulfill the great responsibility which we hold to God and our country. Should I keep back my opinions at such a **A**

## **A** RHETORICAL DEVICES

Reread lines 1–11. What are some examples of **antithesis** and what kind of emphasis does it create?

1. **Mr. President:** the president of the Virginia Convention, Peyton Randolph.

2. **of awful moment:** of very grave importance.

*Patrick Henry Before the Virginia House of Burgesses* (1851),  
Peter F. Rothermel. Red Hill, The Patrick Henry  
National Memorial, Brookneal, Virginia.



time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty towards the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings. **B**

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.<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> the things which so nearly concern 20 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. **C**

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.<sup>5</sup>

Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition **comports** with these 30 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 motives 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 40 have been so long forging. **D**

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 on 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. **E**

## **B PERSUASIVE SPEECH**

Henry speaks respectfully of those with whom he disagrees in lines 1–14. What words might be vocally emphasized to show respect?

## **C RHETORICAL DEVICES**

What rhetorical device, besides a rhetorical question, is on display in lines 18–21? What point is he making about those who don't want to fight?

**insidious** (ĭn-sĭd'ē-əs) *adj.*  
treacherous

**comport** (kəm-pōrt') *v.* to agree

**subjugation**  
(süb'jə-gā'shən) *n.* control by conquering

**martial** (mār'shəl) *adj.*  
warlike

## **D RHETORICAL DEVICES**

Reread lines 29–40, answering each of the **rhetorical questions**. How is a listener likely to respond to Henry's final statements in lines 37–40?

## **E GRAMMAR AND STYLE**

Reread lines 43–46. Notice the use of **declarative, interrogative, and imperative** sentences.

3. **the illusions of hope . . . into beasts:** In the *Odyssey* of Homer, the goddess Circe lures men to her island and then magically transforms them into pigs. Henry suggests that the "illusions of hope" may transform people in a similar way.

4. **having eyes . . . hear not:** an allusion to Ezekiel 12:2 in the Bible, which speaks of "who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not."

5. **betrayed with a kiss:** an allusion to Luke 22:47–48 in the Bible, wherein Judas betrayed Jesus to the Roman soldiers by kissing him and thus identifying him.