

“Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death,”

by Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775

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?

As human beings, we have a strong impulse toward denial. We would rather believe a situation is not that bad rather than admit a painful reality. People tend to assume that if they do nothing, the people with power—those in charge—will recover their senses and act appropriately. Patrick Henry understood that there was no reason to believe that Britain was going to begin acting reasonably.

The colonies had tried everything they could to peaceably make known their petition for representation in the British Parliament. Instead of listening to the people, however, the British government responded by sending troops to quell the colonial unrest.

To persuade his audience, Henry used well-known literary references.

First, he invoked *The Odyssey*—the story of Odysseus and his legendary voyage to Greece. According to the poet, Homer, the sirens were creatures with the bodies of huge birds and the chest and heads of human women. They would sing from the land, and their song would drive sailors so mad they would turn their ships toward the source of the song. But there were dangerous reefs in the way. When the ships broke upon the rocks, the sirens would fly to the drowning sailors, pick them from the water, and devour them.

The second story Patrick Henry used is found in the Bible. The prophet Jeremiah said, “Hear now this, O foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see

not; which have ears, and hear not” (Jeremiah 5:21; see also Ezekiel 12:2, KJV). Christ also spoke these words: “Having eyes, see ye not? And having ears, hear ye not? And do ye not remember?” (Mark 8:18, KJV).

By appealing to his audience’s common heritage, Patrick Henry was able to drive home the danger of the colonists denying reality at a time when the British government was about to invade and occupy the land.

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.

The source of the taxation problems for the colonies didn’t come from King George—it came from the British Parliament. As Englishmen, with the traditional rights of Englishmen, the colonists were outraged that a legislative body was claiming ownership of them—even though they had no representation in that body. So, the colonists had appealed to the king for protection. Unfortunately, the king sided with Parliament rather than with the colonists and traditional English law.

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!

The colonies were unwilling to be ruled and taxed by a legislative body that did not allow them to have elected representation. Presenting a clear choice, Henry argued

that, unless they took the step of armed resistance, the colonists would be giving up their rights.

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.

This paragraph contains a series of separate, short arguments:

1. The colonists were strong enough to fight Britain.
2. God was on their side and would help them.
3. God would make certain they had allies. There were other nations that would take their side, including France.
4. The limited military resources of the colonies were a problem, but there were positive factors as well. Immediate and decisive leadership was even more important, which necessitated quick and brave action.
5. Avoiding conflict was not an option; rather, the choice was to resist or to surrender to military domination.

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!

Henry wanted his audience to stop deluding themselves into thinking they could trust Parliament to restore their rights. He said that it would be better for them to die fighting for freedom than to live as slaves to England.



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