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Patrick Henry: From Strong Statements to a Strong Cause

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Justice, domestic tranquility, a common defense and the blessings of liberty are all established by the Constitution of the United States of America. Without the Revolutionary War, these blessings of liberty would have been crushed under the heel of the British Empire; and without Patrick Henry and his address to the Virginia House of Burgesses on March 23, 1775, there would not have been a Revolution, and there certainly would not have been any semblance of the United States of America. Through his unique use of style, rhetorical questions, and emotional appeal Patrick Henry's speech "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" stands as one of the greatest rhetorical contributions to freedom and liberty of the 18th century.

Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech is considered to be one of the primary motivations behind the Revolutionary War. The events preceding this historic revolution include the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, Patrick Henry's "If This Be Treason" speech, the Townshend Acts, the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech, and the initial battle of Lexington and Concord. With only two speeches being attributed to the birth of America, and both having been presented by Patrick Henry, one can safely assume that this man was influential not only upon the minds of men, but upon the face of the globe as well.

Before his entry into colonial politics, Patrick Henry gained public notoriety as a fiery lawyer and orator. This success was not achieved without a fair amount of failure. Having failed as both a shop keeper and a farmer within seven years, Henry set his sights on law in 1756 and was certified to practice law in 1760. Having gained experience and empathy for the locals and their hardships as a result of his past failed endeavors, Henry quickly established a highly successful country clientele. His experience in business and farming provided him with the experience necessary to relate with his clients while his family's educated background provided him with the knowledge necessary to succeed as a lawyer and as a politician. Having been tutored by his father, a county justice, from a very young age, Henry was well versed in both the law and politics from a very young age. This background allowed him the ability to not only argue his cases eloquently, but also to argue them in a manner that everyone present from the highest educated to the hard laborer would understand and be motivated by his message.

Fearing the personal liberties of the colonists to be at risk, Henry spoke at the Virginia House of Burgesses on March 23, 1775 in defense of those liberties. In the eyes of “many of the wealthy, respectable, conservative planters, Henry has come close to treason in many of his utterances” (Young 346). Despite these allegations, Carter Glass, a contemporary Virginia Senator states in a speech given at the Patrick Henry Bicentennial Celebration that: “Patrick Henry was misinterpreted and misunderstood. Even Thomas Jefferson at one time thought he was guilty of apostasy. But that was not true, because Henry never identified himself with any political party. He was for liberty” (Carter 688). Not only did Henry have to contend with claims of apostasy during his address to the Virginia House of Burgesses, he also had to address a newly elected session president who was outwardly opposed to revolution as well as preceding speakers who were in favor of compromise and consolation rather than conflict (Beeman 64). During the three days preceding his address, speakers such as Edmund Pendleton spoke before the House offering such “resolution[s] that asserted colonists rights without calling for violence” (Beeman 64). During a time in which speech against the crown was treasonous, Henry’s call for violence was nothing short of suicidal. With the aristocrats of the time alleging treason against one of America’s greatest proponents, one must think that leaders of rebellious parties such as Henry are just what America needed: those who were willing to risk not only their careers but their lives for her sake. Henry stood up and quite literally blasphemed the crown, all for hopes of a better world for their fellow man.

Delivering this address to the Virginia House of Burgesses was no coincidence. The first pieces of legislation in colonial America were passed in Virginia, and more specifically, the Virginia House of Burgesses. It is only fitting that the final words to spoken on the revolution occurred in this historic monument to the legislative body of the colonies one month before the first shot of the war was fired at the battle of Lexington and Concord. Audience members of interest included such notable patriots as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Henry was not the first to speak that fateful day in March, but was the last in a precession of speakers imploring the House to cooperate with the crown. Following such men is not easy for any speaker, but Patrick Henry is “the greatest orator that ever lived,” and his coming speech would cement him as such (Glass 689). After having witnessed this speech through an open window, Colonel Edward Currington “reportedly exclaimed, ‘Right here I wish to be buried’ – a desire his widow later satisfied” (Cohen 702). Having been so moved with patriotism for his budding country and the men associated with it, Colonel Currington wished to be interred on the spot at which he witnessed the initial steps in the birth of his newfound country. He was not the only audience member moved: “another listener remembered feeling ‘sick

with excitement.” (Cohen 702). Henry not only swayed the audience with his intellectual and emotional appeals, he infused them with an intense passion and patriotism for their young country. Such emotional responses to Henry’s orations are what have propelled him to the fame and notoriety he still holds to this day.

With sentence length ranging from the lengthy, highly formatted sentence to sentences comprised of a single word Henry quickly and easily notifies his audience as to the statements of increased importance. The first example of how this works can be found in the following excerpt:

“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 character very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments freely and without reserve” (Henry 95).

Should Henry have comprised his speech entirely of sentences of this caliber, his style would have surely overshadowed his message. By following this sentence with the simple, strong, assertive, declaration “This is no time for ceremony,” Henry quickly reigns in his audience (Henry 95). The sharp contrast of these sentences illustrates Henry’s ability to reach those of the highest intellect along with those of the simplest minds all the while getting his message across in the strongest manner possible. The sheer force of Henry’s vocabulary contained in this style makes his point for him. What separates his speech from countless others is the way in which he highlights such forceful assertions. By preceding this sentence with one containing forty seven words and six sentence breaks Henry sets the shorter sentence apart in his audience’s mind. The stark contrast alone is enough to heighten the shorter sentence’s importance, even without its forceful vocabulary. Henry’s style allows for the establishment of ethos, pathos and logos simultaneously.

Henry’s choice of vocabulary is intertwined with his style. While his longer sentences carry on with such neutral words as “gentlemen,” “entertaining,” and “sentiments” his shorter statements tear down predicated norms and exposes them as blights against the existence of liberty. His first use of such a sentence perfectly illustrates this technique. His statement “This is no time for ceremony” completely destroys his previous comment politely asking for his audience’s attention by demanding for their focus. Such a command abolishes the decorum of the gathered representatives, immediately placing the room into a heightened sense of awareness. In a House governed by ceremony, such a statement certainly draws credence for what is to follow.

To establish his credibility as a speaker, his ethos, Henry recognizes and respects the opinions of those that have addressed the House before him in the lines “different men often see the same subject in different lights; and,

therefore, I hope that it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen” (95). Having established his credibility, Henry then seeks to establish his logical appeal, his *logos*, by stating his intent to provide his own unique opinion. By establishing his *ethos* before his *logos*, Henry has informed his audience of his respectability as a speaker and therefore has granted himself the ability to begin offering opinions. *Ethos* and *logos* are both important in getting the audience to listen to the material, but what makes Henry’s address to timeless is his emotional appeal, his *pathos*. Henry’s ability to reach an audience hostile to his ideas and not only persuade them but empower them to action is possible through his manipulation of emotion.

Henry’s next use of such style also brings his use of rhetorical questions into use. As he implores the representatives present to consider the actions taken in the past to appease the British Empire, he augments this question with another, more specific rhetorical question: “And what have we oppose to them? Shall we try argument?” to which he answers for them with his short, succinct response, “Sir, we have been trying that for the past ten years” (Henry 96). Rather than directly commenting on the proposals of those who addressed the House before him, Henry reduces their pleas of compromise and consolation to a single statement of defeat. The language compacts countless hours of debate and proposed resolutions to a succinct statement of failure. Having introduced this statement with a pair of questions, Henry validates his assertion with historical precedent. Not leaving the subject without further provocation, he asks the following rhetorical question: “Have we anything new to offer on the subject?” (96) To which he replies with the single word, “Nothing” (96). This single word lays the foundation upon which Henry will erect his edifice of emotion later in this speech. After this sharp declaration, Henry makes use of his *pathos* in two additional rhetorical questions: “Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? What terms shall we find that have not been already exhausted?” (96). These rhetorical questions bolster Henry’s *logos* by referencing the failed attempts at peace in the past while also drawing upon the hurt and distrust that the colonists have been harboring against the crown for many years. This line of questioning provides Henry with the ammunition necessary to propel his audience into patriotic fervor. Having reminded them of their past attempts at civil discourse with their British oppressors, he begins to outline their only possible course of action: revolution.

To inspire his audience into the emotional state necessary for such action, Henry continues to use his style as a means in which to affect his audience’s emotions. His control over the audience’s emotions is what grants his speeches such astounding power. After witnessing one such speech, George Mason remarks “your passions are no longer your own when he addresses them” (Wilstach 84). His speech begins to exponentially gather emotional weight

with the utterance of the sentence: “Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves longer” (96). This sentence draws upon every man, woman and child’s desire for justification. Everyone wants to be right, and this sentence plays to this desire. Here, Henry tells his audience that they have known the correct course of action all along, the only thing that has prevented their action was the imposition of deceit. This intellectual and emotional appeal primes his audience for one final reference to the failed actions of old which have done nothing to establish freedom and liberty in the colonies. The vocabulary of degradation present in the passage:

“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; out contempt, from the foot of the throne”

seeks to remind the audience of the failed attempts at diplomacy but also remind them of the tyranny and oppression wrought by the crown upon them (Henry 96). Once Henry has convinced his audience of diplomacy’s failure, he begins to fan the flames of revolution in their hearts and minds.

Before his call to arms, Henry educates his audience to what it means to truly be free: “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” (96). This sentence serves to inform the audience as to the true nature of freedom. By using such lofty prose and vocabulary as “inestimable” and “noble” Henry portrays freedom as a universal good of which all men should aspire. Defining the struggle for freedom as the “noble struggle” for “those inestimable privileges” Henry insures that his audience is aware of the goals in which his coming plan of action will hope to achieve.

The use of repetition in two key areas in his cry for revolution insures that his audience will rise up and stand against the British. The first instance of such repetition is found in his call to arms. After having proven the need for action in light of failed resolutions, Henry exclaims, “we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight!” (96). Repeating the words “we must fight” is not only a call to arms, but a call to brotherhood (96). The “we must” call the audience to stand together in defense not of a wish, not of a passing fancy, but of a right, something that must be protected at all costs. Here in these words, Henry plants the seeds of patriotism which will erupt upon the second use of such repetition.

Another appeal to the brotherhood and patriotism of the colonists is evident in the excerpt: “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" (96). This description of the colonists is another example of how Patrick Henry uses emotion to rally supporters to his cause. Not only does Henry appeal to the colonists' strength of character, he also appeals to the strength of their cause. Referring to the establishment and defense of liberty as a "holy cause," Henry appeals to his audience's sense of religious obligation. Furthering this sense of religious obligation, Henry informs his audience that "we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations" (96). Henry bolsters his audience with the revelation that the battle is not won by "the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave" (96). This sequence of emotional and religious appeals demonstrates the full extent of Henry's ability to control the emotions of his audience.

As he looks out on his audience, Henry assures them of victory not only as a reward for their strength alone, but also for their vigilance and bravery. But to those who are unwilling to fight, he reminds them "there is no retreat, but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged! Their clanking can be heard on the plains of Boston!" (97). Here Henry likens the oppression of the British Empire to that of the cold, hard chains of slavery. As a consolation to such pacifists, Henry informs them that the coming conflict is inevitable. Nearing the roaring climax of his speech, Henry calls forth the seeds of patriotism to gloriously erupt and flourish within their hosts with the words: "The war is inevitable – and let it come! I repeat it, sit, let it come!" (97). Having reassured his audience of their valorous traits, Henry challenges fate, and demands it descend upon the young colonies. Now armed with their emblazoned sense of brotherhood and patriotism, his audience is now fully equipped with the necessary physical and emotional influences to make a stand against the British Empire. With the inferno of patriotism burning within them, the Virginia House of Burgesses and the colonies as a whole stand alongside "the Noble Patriot" and [pledge] "the last Drop of their blood" in his defense" and in defense of the ideals of freedom and liberty set forth in his cry, "give me liberty, or give me death!" (Cohen 715).

A mere 27 days later on April 19, 1775, the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired at the Battles of Lexington and Concord. It is no coincidence that initial skirmish of the war that would give birth to the United States of America was fought shortly after the impassioned words of the great orator Patrick Henry. After ten years of fiery debates and failed resolutions, Henry stands before the Virginia House of Burgesses and rallies the hearts, minds and souls of the delegates present to offer their lives and the lives of their neighbors and sons in the defense of liberty. Claiming two check points on the road to revolution as his own, Henry not only establishes but confirms himself as one of the greatest patriots and orators of the United

States of America. Despite having received negative reviews from Thomas Jefferson early in his career “by 1793 Patrick Henry has become a kind of living legend. His oratory moved even the ultra-rationalist Thomas Jefferson to wax romantically “He appeared to me to speak as Homer wrote” (Doyle 292). Additional praise as to Henry’s oratory ability can be found in the words of Founding Father George Mason: “He [Patrick Henry] is by far the most powerful speaker I have ever heard . . . But his eloquence is the smallest part of his merit. He is, in my opinion, the first man upon this Continent, as well in abilities as public virtues” (Wilstach 85). Henry’s ability to quickly and firmly establish ethos, logos and pathos grants him the near immediate attention of his audience. Once he controls their attention, he then manufactures deeply emotional aspects of patriotism through the establishment of brotherhood and an appeal to spiritual obligations. Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” speech fully defines all that America stands for: brotherhood, patriotism, religious obligation, freedom and liberty.

During my time researching and explicating Patrick Henry’s speech, I fell in love with my country all over again. With each reading of his speech, I could physically feel the patriotism radiating from his words. Basking in the warm glow of patriotism, I could not help but smile and think, “This is what it means to be an American. This is how someone stands up and risks their very being for something they believe in, something that is essential, something that is right.”

Patrick Henry’s speech was crafted with the specialized purpose of moving the Virginia House of Burgesses to risk not only their lives but their very existence in the defense of liberty. Despite the fact that this speech was performed in 1775 to address the direct threat of subjugation at the hands of an oppressive empire, it still serves to remind Americans to this day that the virtues and freedoms given to us by God are meant to be defended no matter the cost. Today, people are more concerned with maintaining the status quo, not about doing what is right. Many today will all too gladly trade their precious liberty for comfort and perceived security: and to them I say, remember the words of Patrick Henry, when faced with the tyranny of oppression stands strong and demands “give me liberty, or give me death!”

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