**Analysis of Patrick Henry’s “Speech to the Virginia Convention”**

**English III**

**Background:** In 1775, as the colonists assembled at the Virginia Convention debated whether to mobilize forces against the British, Henry gave an impassioned speech in support of the resolution from his pew in a Richmond church.  
  
These dramatic words were received in initial silence, but shouts of support soon rang out. By a narrow margin, the delegates voted to begin military preparations, joining Massachusetts, which had taken similar action earlier, in the forefront of Revolutionary activity.

Less than a month later, fighting would break out at Lexington and Concord.

**Directions:**

* Answer the questions that follow the speech.
* **Then**, find the places in the speech you believe demonstrate ethos, pathos, or logos. Tell which lines you are referring to (lines 3- 7, for example). Quote the first 5 or six words of the line, so we all can find them easily. Then, with your group, explain how these lines appeal to ethos, pathos, or logos as described below.

**Group One:** Find FOUR examples in the speech that make you believe Patrick Henry knows what he is talking about AND that we should listen to his ideas. You will be looking for ways in which he demonstrates his respectability and believability. (Ethos)

**Group Two:** Find FOUR examples of how Patrick Henry appeals to the emotions of his audience. What emotions is he trying to arouse (stir-up) in his listeners? (Pathos)

**Group Three:** Find FOUR logical appeals. How is Patrick Henry trying to use reason in an orderly, logical way to show that we need to go to war? What is his actual argument for going to war? (Logos)

**All groups:** Do you believe Patrick Henry’s speech was effective? If you had NOT wanted to go to war, would you have been convinced by him that war was inevitable (no way to avoid it) and necessary? Were you more convinced by Henry’s appeals to logic or by his appeals to emotion? What conclusions can you draw about the art of persuasion? 

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| 5  10  15  20  25  30  35  40  45  50  55  60  65 | Mr. President[[1]](#footnote-1): 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[[2]](#footnote-2) 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 moment1 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 time, through fear of giving offense, 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[[3]](#footnote-3). 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?[[4]](#footnote-4) 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 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[[5]](#footnote-5) themselves and the House? Is it that insidious smile with which our petition[[6]](#footnote-6) 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[[7]](#footnote-7). Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports with these war-like 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 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 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. 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 the 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! |

**Speech to the Virginia Convention Questions:**

**Paragraph 1**

1. Reread the first sentence. Whom is Patrick Henry addressing?
2. Reread lines 5-12. Underline what Patrick Henry sees as the nature of the question before the house.
3. What reason does Henry give for speaking his mind?
4. Henry says, “different men often see the same subject in different lights.” What does the word *light* mean here? Why do you think he uses it?

**Paragraph 2**

1. Reread lines 13-14. What does Henry say people usually do when faced with a painful truth?

**Paragraph 3**

1. Rhetorical questions are persuasive device that pose questions to which no answers are necessary, and they point out obvious truths. Locate and underline two rhetorical questions in the paragraph.
2. What evidence does Henry give in this paragraph, which supports his call to action to fight the British?

**Paragraph 4**

1. According to Henry, why has the army of Great Britain been sent?
2. Henry uses a parallel structure (repeated words and phrases) to hammer his point home. Locate and underline examples of parallel structure in lines 39-48.
3. In lines 44-49, Henry repeats the main point of his persuasive argument. Find and circle his main point.
4. What metaphors does Henry use to describe the coming war?

**Paragraph 5**

1. Reread lines 50-56. What counterargument is Henry preparing to tear down?
2. According to Henry’s argument, what two strengths do the colonists have?
3. Again, Henry makes use of the rhetorical question—a question that is asked for effect. Rhetorical questions, which are often used in persuasion, presume the audience agrees with the speaker on the answers, and so no answer is expected or required. Find a series of rhetorical questions in the fifth paragraph of this speech and underline them. Why do you think Henry uses this device, rather than straightforward statements of fact, to make his points? How does this technique make his speech more persuasive?
4. What will happen if the war is NOT fought?

**Paragraph 6**

1. What does Henry say he is willing to die for?
2. How does Henry appeal to his audience’s emotions (pathos) in the final paragraph? Underline this appeal to emotion and explain its effect on Henry’s audience (how does his audience respond?).

1. Petyon Randolph, president of the Virginia Convention [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Entertaining: considering [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "We are apt to . . . listen to the song of that siren, till she transforms us into beasts" (Odyssey, Books 10 and 12). In Greek mythology, the sirens are sea-maidens whose seductive singing lures men to wreck their boats on coastal rocks. In the Odyssey, Circe, an enchanter, transforms Odysseus’s men into swine after they arrive at her island home. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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?" (Ezekiel 12:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Solace: comfort [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. our petition: The First Continental congress had recently protested against new tax laws. King George III had withdrawn the laws conditionally, but the colonists were unwilling to accept his conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. "Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss" (Luke 22:47-48). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)