



## Victory at Richmond

WENDELL HIXSON

Wendell Hixson uses rhetorical vocabulary to analyze Patrick Henry's famous "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech, highlighting the Founding Father's strategic rebranding of the coming revolution, as well as his establishment of credibility and appeal to divine will. This essay was written for Writing I with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

**O**N MARCH 23, 1775, IN A SMALL Richmond church, one of the most influential speeches to ever grace the historical accounts of American patriotism was given. The capital of Virginia was consumed by a lieutenant-governor's Royal Marines, the British Navy lined the coast, redcoats coated the streets, rifles flooded every home and barrack, and war was nothing but imminent. Still, Americans desired reconciliation. Patrick Henry had been fighting against his fellow colonists for months upon months, and finally he took it upon himself to conquer his peers, to convince them to conquer the outside forces he saw threatening the freedom he so desired. With appeals to the heavenly power bestowed on them, in that church Henry let boom the words to shatter American naivety: "Give me liberty or give me death!" Henry's famous speech reads as an impassioned summary of the status of America and defines its only option, retaliation. Henry passionately and effectively

inspires his fellow colonists, especially the president of the council Peyton Randolph, by illuminating the urgent and foreboding war ahead, convincing them of the innate support of the just God above, and offering up himself to truly seal his wholehearted belief in their home's independence.

Henry illustrates the current situation and constructs his words to display the exigency of defense, appealing to pathos, specifically the shared fear of tyranny and importance of their ideological freedom, and logos, the implications of war demonstrated by an influx of the foreign military: "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." The freedoms of the Americans and their due respect were confiscated by a crowned despot, and their desire for representation or independence was not only denied but looked down upon. Henry appeals to the hatred and terror evoked by the evil king, who discards their liberties and only punishes in return: "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." He presents their wish for reinstated unity as a simple part of the British plan to lull Americans into, in his repeated words, "slavery" or "submission." The criticisms of this unreachable peace hold powerfully and force reality onto his audience of colonists, implying that they simply refuse to see the clear signs of hawkish oppression being pressed on them. Though Henry easily delves into their fears of a mad king and surrounding belligerence, he balances the fear with needed hope of overcoming a nearly all-powerful empire.

A man proposing such literally revolutionary ideas, must have the perceived authority to seem credible and certainly has to prove the virtually divine potential for a small, overtaxed colony to defeat a global superpower. Henry employs these strategies effectively and the latter repeatedly. His ethos is only explicitly addressed once, but

in a way that is undeniably effective when considering the respect these politicians wielded for Henry's intelligence in rhetoric: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided; and that is the lamp of experience." The shared experience these men hold in government and the building up of the nation they want to see thrive is undeniable, so to deny his experience as credible would be to deny the credibility of each and every man who has adamantly fought for avoidance or in defense of independence. Henry now needs support for his claim that they could succeed, and what better way than appealing to the God they all held dear? "... Chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God." "An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us." "Sir, we are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power." The godly support America still believes it holds had instated itself in the foundations of the nation and become a religiously based commonplace of the people, easily fortifying the established theory. God will help them win; Henry is equally credible to every man in saying so; and he believes this so strongly that he has no inhibition to lay his life on the line, as expressed in his most famous words.

Redcoats still lined the shores, roads, and capitals, but now independence surged through the red blood of the colonists. War was nothing but imminent, and America desired to prove their mettle. Henry's speech may have been an isolated event in a small church, but its implications spread past those walls through his audience of peers, through them the sentiments reached the states, and from there the words reached the people. *Common Sense*, George Washington, and "no representation" aided the battle to drive Americans to accepting the call to war, but one cannot deny the power of the words that summarized the sentiments of every man, woman, and child desiring to escape the king. Henry gave America something to live by, a summary of what emotion we held and have held since the great war of freedom. He formulated a speech to drive his peers to always believe that liberty is worth defending, and though in that time he may just have been addressing a few arguing colonists, he

led them and the country to cherish one unified belief: give us liberty or give us death. ▶▶

▶▶ WORK CITED

HENRY, PATRICK. "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death." *American Rhetoric*, [americanrhetoric.com/speeches/patrickhenrygivemeliberty.html](http://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/patrickhenrygivemeliberty.html). Accessed 5 Oct. 2018.