

Winter February 4, 2013

Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death," A National Call to Arms

David C Taylor, Jr, *Liberty University*

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HIUS 221-B13 LUO

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On March 23 1775, Patrick Henry gave a speech that resounded through the American Colonies as a call to arms against the oppressive British. His cry to Virginians was to no longer let the tyranny of the British Monarchy reign over them. He did not wish to have war, but war seemed to be the only viable option to get the results he so desperately desired.

Henry had already made a name for himself years earlier by writing what would become the “Virginia Resolves.” These written resolutions were in direct answer to the Stamp Act of 1765. This act placed a tax on printed matter that the American Colonies produced. It effectively taxed the colonies with everything they had to do from licenses, to games.¹

Henry knew that war was already upon the Colonists. He boldly proclaimed that they had no choice but to go to war for it had already begun. It was happening whether they wanted it to or not.

During the speech, and his life, Patrick Henry was not afraid of offending others. His convictions were strong enough that it did not matter to him if he upset someone. He knew that he had to take a stand for what he believed in, and he wanted the rest of the colony to do the same. There was no hint of a coward inside of him. Henry knew the stakes were high, but he also knew that the cost of doing nothing was even greater than the risk he was asking them to take.

It was for these reasons that Henry believed his request of the fight to be justified. The Colonists had become slaves to England. They were not free. They had taxes on them that were unjust and in which they had no control. They had been abused and harassed by the British Army and it was time to put that to an end. Henry knew that his cause was just and true. He knew that no man should have to live as slaves under a rule of tyranny.

In his heart, Henry knew that the British would never treat the Colonists as first class citizens. They would always be inferior in the eyes of the Monarchy. This is what led him to say that the only path he knew was the path of experience.² He knew, and tried to explain that the taxes would not cease, and the King would continue to use the Colonies to his benefit without their interests in mind.

Henry also knew that some of the other Colonists did not believe things had gotten as out of hand as he was portraying. To them, he pleaded that they not be betrayed with a kiss. The reference was clearly a reference to Christ as Judas betrayed him with a kiss. Judas was one of the twelve disciples, someone who was supposed to be on Jesus’ side. Just like Judas, some Colonists viewed the Monarchy to be on their side, they were blinded.

To open their eyes, Patrick Henry brought into question why there was such a military presence on display by the British in times of peace. He wanted to know why the King felt the

¹ H. W. Brands et al., *American Stories: A History of the United States*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New Jersey: Pearson, 2012).

² “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!,” in *Chambers Classic Speeches*(Chambers Harrap, 2006).

need to supervise them with the army. He wanted the other Virginians to see that there were no good or valid answers to these questions. They needed to understand that these were already acts of war.

Henry explained they had already tried peaceful measures. Benjamin Franklin had suggested that Parliament should not govern the colonies in 1773.³ Peaceful measures were not working, and would not work in the future either. Henry knew this and was ready to make the charge.

Henry also knew that protests and demonstrations would not send the message to the King. The Boston Tea Party, though it was a great rally cry, had only angered the King and Parliament. The result of their demonstrations was more taxes in the form of a requirement to pay back the East India Company.⁴ The fact that these demonstrations had not worked signaled to Henry this was a just act. War, though not favorable, was the only answer.

He pleaded in his speech that peaceful measures had been tried for a decade, and they were not working. All of the efforts were in vain. The crown would not listen. He did not want the Colonists to be deceived into believing that these actions would ever work.

To those who still doubted, Henry proclaimed that if they were not ready today, they would never be ready. His point was that to stall was death. Time is of the essence and they must act now! He knew that any delay would only mean more invasions by the British army.

At this point, the fighting had already begun. The Boston Massacre had occurred five years earlier. Colonists were dying at the hands of the British. Patrick Henry saw this going on all around him. He was tired of seeing his fellow Colonists killed by the British Army. He was tired of the unfair taxation without any representation. He was tired of the threats, tired of the anguish, tired of the slavery. He was tired of the pompous acts by the King and by Parliament. All of these things had built an intense emotion inside of him that he finally declared the words that are known by heart to all Patriots, "Give me Liberty, or give me death!"

³ Brands et al.

⁴ Ibid.

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