

Part II **Recitation of the Oration**

Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" Oration

The Proceedings of the Virginia Convention

Held on the 23rd of March, 1775

Saint John's Church
2401 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia

The president of the Convention, Payton Randolph, recognized Patrick Henry as, "The gentleman from Hanover":

"Mr. President. 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 it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen if, entertaining 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 moment 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 the 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 towards 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. 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? 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 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 themselves and the house. Is it that insidious smile with which our petition 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. Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports with those warlike 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 motive 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 upon 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. 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 those 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.”¹⁴

¹⁴ I describe this paragraph as Patrick Henry’s formula for freedom. It contains three necessary establishment principles: (1) a Pivot of mature believers, (2) a military armed in defense of the country, and (3) client nation status.

“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!¹⁵

Henry’s first biographer, William Wirt, described the response of the burgesses when the gentleman from Hanover concluded his speech:

He took his seat. No murmur of applause was heard. The effect was too deep. After the trance of a moment, several members started from their seats. The cry, “To arms!” seemed to quiver on every lip and gleam from every eye. Richard H. Lee arose and supported Mr. Henry, with his usual spirit and elegance. But his melody was lost amid the agitations of that ocean which the master spirit of the storm had lifted up on high. That supernatural voice still sounded in their ears, and shivered along their arteries. They heard, in every pause, the cry of liberty or death. They became impatient of speech—their souls were on fire for action.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lecky, Jr., *The Proceedings of the Virginia Convention*, 11–13.

¹⁶ William Wirt, *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry*, 15th ed. (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1832), 142.

With this reading of Henry's oration we now turn to the task of analyzing it. We will do so incrementally by observing the structure of rhetoric, making explanatory comments, and observing his references to famous writers and biblical passages.

To do the speech justice we will do so by systematically inserting analyses, explanations, definitions, and references. After having done the busy work of exposition, we will then have the necessary inventory of ideas to appreciate the content, structure, and power of Henry's speech. It is a masterpiece of oratorical brilliance.

Part 3: Principles on Oratory:

A. The Elementary History of Oratory and its Development by Greek and Roman Rhetoricians:

The traditional rhetoric is limited to the insights and terms developed by rhetoricians, in the Classical period of ancient Greece, about the 5th century BC, to teach the art of public speaking to their fellow citizens in the Greek republics and, later, ... the Roman Empire. Public performance was regarded as the highest reach of education proper, and rhetoric was at the center of the educational process in western Europe for some 2,000 years. *Institutio oratoria* (“The Training of an Orator”), by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian,¹⁷ perhaps the most influential textbook of education ever written, was in fact a book about rhetoric.

In Athens early teachers of rhetoric were known as Sophists. These men did not simply teach methods of argumentation; rather, they offered rhetoric as a central educational discipline.

The Platonic-Socratic ideal is more specialized in its focus on creating discourse, nonetheless, like the Sophistic ideal, it sought a union of verbal skills with learning and wisdom. In this way Plato and Socrates resolved one of the most serious intellectual issues surrounding the subject: the relationship between truth and rhetorical effectiveness.

Aristotle, too, presupposed and maintained the same division between truth, which was knowable to varying degrees of certainty, and verbal skills, which for Aristotle were primarily useful in assisting truth to prevail in a controversy.¹⁸

Quintilian incorporates rhetoric into a total educational system. This is perhaps the greatest significance of his work. Rhetoric is to him, following Cicero, the centerpiece in the training of the leaders of society and the responsible citizen.

The goal of education to Quintilian is training of a great orator. This orator must be morally good, and ethics is never far from Quintilian’s mind; but the orator he envisions is more a part of the sophistic tradition as envisioned by Isocrates than the philosophical tradition from Plato and Aristotle. What Quintilian stresses is the orator’s ability to lead, to influence, even to dominate a situation.¹⁹

¹⁷ “Quintilian \kwin-til'-yen\ (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus \kwin-til-ē-ā'-nes\, c. 35–c.100 A.D. Roman rhetorician; taught oratory in Rome (68–c.88); author of *Institutio oratoria* containing, in addition to principles of rhetoric, a practical exposition of the whole education of a Roman and a description of methods used in the best Roman schools” (*Merriam-Webster’s Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. “Quintilian,” 858).

¹⁸ Thomas O. Sloane, “Rhetoric,” in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia* (2010), 26:758, 759.

¹⁹ George A. Kennedy, “Quintilian’s Education of the Orator” in *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, 2d ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 166, 117.

B. The Definition of Oratory

1. **Oration:** A formal speech intended to inspire listeners to some action. Carefully prepared and eloquently delivered, the oration carries its greatest power in the union of rational thought with emotional appeal.
2. Rufus Choate was an eminent American lawyer and orator of the 1800s. He was a member of the House of Representatives and U. S. Senator from Massachusetts. Choate said of true oratory: “It embodies and utters not merely the individual genius and character of the speaker, but a national consciousness to which you listen to the spoken history of the time.”
3. The purpose of the orator is persuasion. Through an eloquently presented system of rationales he seeks to strengthen convictions and attitudes.
4. He uses argument, lines of reasoning, appeals, and anecdotes. He accomplishes his objective by using various literary devices.
5. In the oral presentation there is an appeal to the motives and habits of the audience.
6. If the speaker simply presents facts without an appeal to action, then he has failed as an orator.
7. If the speaker simply appeals to the audience for action without presenting facts, he also fails.
8. The true orator presents a well thought out rationale and course of action and follows that with a very emotional appeal to join him in that action.
9. When the audience possesses absolute principles in their souls they will individually respond in unison when those principles are challenged.
10. A people without absolutes do not live on principle. When challenged their individual responses differ. United we stand, divided we fall.

C. The Structure of an Oration:

Exordium: The introductory part of a speech. Classical rhetoricians established rules for the order of material presented in an oration: first, the introduction (exordium), followed by the statement, the argument, and the conclusion (peroration).

Statement: The presentation of facts or opinions the speaker proclaims he will address in the course of his orientation.

Argument: The presentation of rationales to convince a listener by establishing the truth or falsity of a proposition.

Peroration: The conclusion of a formal speech, in which the previous points are summed up in a forceful appeal to the audience.

D. The Three Modes of Persuasion in Oratory.

1. In the rhetorical argument, there are three modes of persuasion the orator may use: (1) ἦθος (*ēthos*): the character of the individual speaking or of the one referenced. This appeals to our volition. (2) λόγος (*lógos*): rational appeal of the Argument based on evidence presented. This appeals to our intellect. (3) πάθος (*páthos*): the passion elicited from the souls of the audience. This appeals to our standards to which we emotionally respond.
2. These three elements of a rhetorical presentation are designed to present truth supported by the speaker's integrity or those he quotes, the validity of the rationales presented and known to the audience, and soliciting a positive response.