

## **Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death (1775)**

### **Patrick Henry**

#### **Historical Background**

Patrick Henry was a planter, merchant, and lawyer in colonial Virginia. Elected to the House of Burgesses in 1765, Henry was a vocal critic of King George III's increased taxation of the colonies. One of his earliest acts as a Burgess was the introduction of resolutions against the Stamp Act, written in language strong enough to make some of the other legislators uncomfortable and fearful of being accused of treason.

Throughout the next decade, Henry remained a vocal opponent of taxation without representation, and in 1773 he took the lead in creating Virginia's Committee of Correspondence to coordinate information with the other colonies on the activities of Royal appointees and military in the colonies. In 1774, after George issued a series of punitive laws against the colonies, known as the Intolerable Acts, Henry was elected to the First Continental Congress. The question facing the First Continental Congress was not one of independence, but one of freedom, as many colonists believed that their liberties and rights as English subjects were being impinged upon. Some favored approaching the King obsequiously, but others wanted to demand the rights they sought. Henry, in a speech to the House of Burgesses in 1775, detailed his position clearly.

#### **Historical Significance**

The debate about how to redress colonial grievances was long and complex. Some colonists were content with "virtual representation" in Parliament, and considered themselves obedient subjects of the king. Some felt that with calm and continued petitioning, the king and parliament could be swayed toward granting equal rights of representation to the colonies. Still others believed that the colonies should be treated as fully equal partners in the empire. Although at the time of Henry's speech there had been no formal consideration of separating from the British Empire, his fiery rhetoric swayed many towards a more radical approach. As evidence, more or less immediately after hearing the Speech, the House of Burgesses passed a resolution to raise a militia to defend Virginia.

#### **Key Concepts and Learning Objectives Concepts:**

Causes of the American Revolution; Loyalists; Patriots; Colonial Legislatures; Intolerable Acts; Battles of Lexington and Concord; Slavery and Freedom