



Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death!

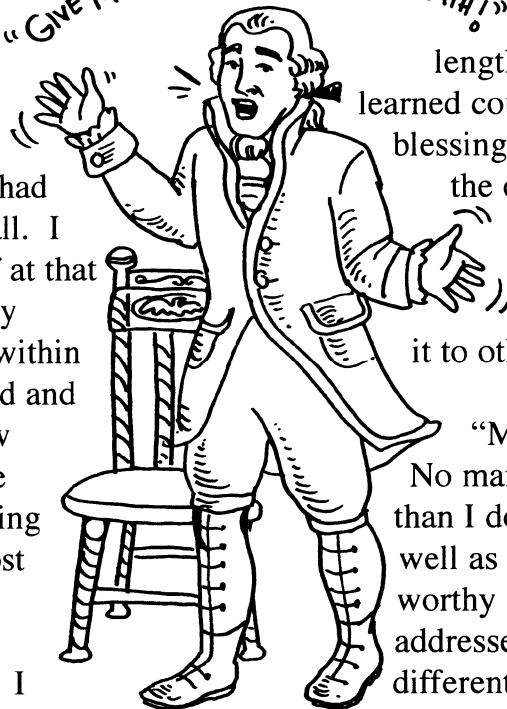
Several years ago, Alice and Larry Beebe visited Williamsburg, Virginia, and came into the room where the House of Burgesses met. The tour guides had them sit down and then the guides began to give a brief summary of what transpired in that great hall. Alice relates her following experience.

“Suddenly, I felt an enormous surge of energy. I felt an impassioned speech had been given in this hall. I wasn’t a history buff at that time and could hardly believe the feelings within me. I raised my hand and asked, ‘Do you know approximately where the delegates sat during conventions, and most particularly this convention?’ The response was, ‘Yes.’ I quickly asked the next question, ‘Where did Patrick Henry stand when he uttered his incredible *Give me liberty or give me death* speech?’ The guide’s response was, ‘Approximately where you are sitting.’ I was on fire and felt the power of his words. From that experience, I have come to believe it is vitally important that our children have the opportunity to read, listen

to and understand the passion of freemen in defense of liberty.”

Mr. Henry was a young man (29) when he was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses and it was on March 23, 1775, he delivered this impassioned speech before the Virginia Convention of Delegates. It is quite a lengthy speech, but once learned could be a significant blessing to our children. In fact, the entire family could be involved in learning this speech and acting it out—then presenting it to other families and friends.

“GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH!”



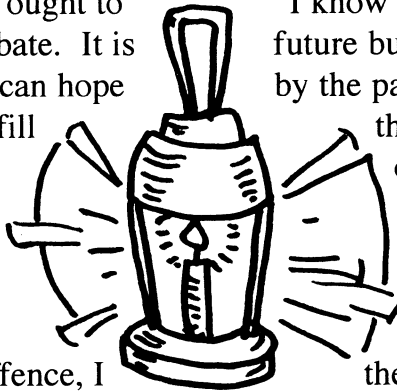
“Mr. President:
No man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the House. But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope that it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen, 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 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 offence, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty towards the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.”

“Mr. President, it is natural to men 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 number 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 yourself how this gracious reception of our petition comports with those 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 motive for it? Has Great Britain any



enemy, in this quarter of the world, to call for 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.”

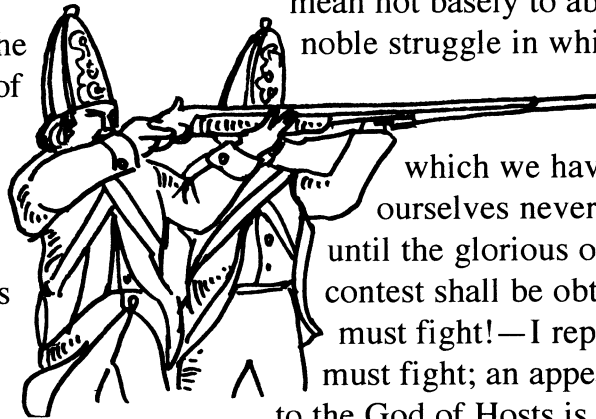
“And what have we to oppose to them? Shall we try argument? Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years. Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? Nothing. We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves 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 enemy shall have bound us hand and foot?"

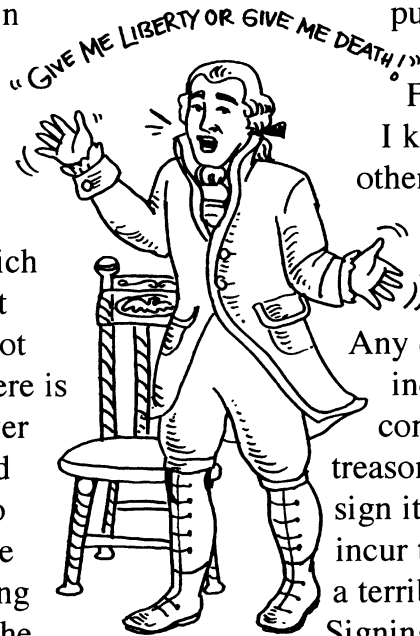
"Sir, we are not weak, if we make a proper use of those forces which the God of nature hath placed in our power. Three millions of people armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, 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 vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry peace, peace—but there is not 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!"

Any declaration of independence would be considered an act of treason, and those who dared sign it stood a good chance to incur the penalty for traitors—a terrible and painful death. Signing their names to any declaration of freedom would immediately make them a traitor in the eyes of the king and would place their families in serious jeopardy. They would literally be staking their lives, their families and property on the supposition of the colonies defeating the British. Also knowing, should they win the price, thousands would die or be injured in the process. Indeed the price of liberty would not come cheap and it would take special Americans *for such a time as this*.





Suggestions for Study

- Who was Patrick Henry?
- How old was he when he made this stirring speech?
- Where and when was the meeting held and for what purpose?
- What does the word 'supinely' mean? Let's talk about his use of this word.
- There are a number of points Mr. Henry made in this speech. Let's talk about some of them.
- Do you believe he was kind and yet strong regarding his belief? Let's give an example.
- What was happening in the country and what circumstances caused him to speak as he did?
- How do you feel about liberty and the price of freedom? Let's talk about it.