



AMERICAN LIVES Patrick Henry

Passionate Orator Full of Contradictions

Section 3

"Here is a revolution as radical as that which separated us from Great Britain. . . . Our rights and privileges are endangered, and the sovereignty of the states . . . relinquished."—Patrick Henry, speech against ratification of the Constitution (1788)

In 1775, Patrick Henry spoke passionately for Independence: "I know not what course others may take; but as for me . . . give me liberty or give me death!" In 1788, he also spoke passionately against the new Constitution: "It is said eight states have adopted this plan. I declare that if twelve states and a half had adopted it, I would with manly firmness, and in spite of an erring world, reject it." Henry's oratory propelled him to a major role in Virginia and national politics, but his vivid speech-making often revealed contradictions.

Patrick Henry (1736–1799) failed in two attempts to become a merchant and chose a career in law. He relied on his intelligence and speaking skill to pass the bar exam. He became a successful lawyer, gaining wealth and some fame throughout Virginia. He soon entered politics.

Henry joined Virginia's House of Burgesses in May 1765 as the Stamp Act became an issue. He quickly shattered custom—new members were supposed to sit and watch—by introducing resolutions condemning the act. One said that the Burgesses, not Parliament, had the "sole exclusive right and power to lay taxes" in Virginia. Speaking in their favor, Henry compared King George III to rulers who had been overthrown. The assembly erupted in angry cries of "treason!"

In 1774, Virginia sent Henry and six others to Philadelphia as delegates to the First Continental Congress. His main contribution was, typically, a stirring speech urging united action: "The distinctions between Virginians, Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers and New Englanders are no more. I am not a Virginian, but an American." Back in Virginia, Henry again offered bold resolutions. They said that Virginia should "be immediately put into a position of defense" and "prepare a plan" for creating and arming a military force. Here he gave his famous "liberty or death" speech.

During the Revolution, Henry focused on Virginia politics, serving as governor five times. Hoping to secure Virginia's claim to western lands,

he sent George Rogers Clark with an armed force to Illinois territory to drive out the British. During this period, he and Thomas Jefferson began a feud that lasted the rest of Henry's life. Henry feuded with James Madison as well. These personal quarrels soon had an impact on politics.

While Henry was governor, John Jay negotiated a treaty with Spain that gave up American rights to trade on the Mississippi River. Henry—who felt the loss of trade would weaken Virginia's power—was infuriated. From then on he opposed national power.

This position—and the feud with Madison—came together when the Constitution was submitted to the states for approval. Henry spoke for 18 of Virginia's 23 days of debate. He objected to the lack of a guarantee of individual rights, and his objection is credited with the Bill of Rights being added to the Constitution. However, contradicting his words of 1774, Henry also objected because Virginia would lose power under a federal system: "This government is not a Virginian, but an American government." In the end, Virginia voted to ratify the Constitution. But Henry used his influence to get Antifederalists named as Virginia's two senators, denying James Madison a seat in the first Senate.

After the defeat, Henry retired for a time. Ironically, his last public role came in support of the Federalist Party—which Jefferson and Madison now opposed. The year he died, Henry, the great Antifederalist, was elected to Congress as a candidate of the Federalist party.

Questions

1. What contradictory stands did Henry take?
2. What actions and positions of Henry reveal concern with Virginia's power?
3. Support the argument that Henry should be as well known for his insistence on a Bill of Rights for the Constitution as for his "liberty or death" speech.