

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS: **PATRICK HENRY SPEAKS!**

Patrick Henry (1736-1799), a Virginia delegate to the First and Second Continental Congress

In early 1775, American colonists were still debating whether to go to war with Great Britain. Many colonists wanted to avoid a war. Other colonists believed that a war was necessary and that Britain was already preparing to attack.

On March 23, 1775, Patrick Henry delivered a speech urging his fellow delegates in the Virginia Convention to see “the whole truth” about Britain’s intentions to wage war against the colonies.

Read this excerpt from the beginning of Patrick Henry’s speech. Then answer the question.

No man thinks more highly than I do of **patriotism**. . . . But different men often see the same subject in different lights. . . . 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.

patriotism: loyalty to Great Britain
anguish of spirit: disappointment
provide: prepare

1 What is the main idea of this excerpt?

- a. Henry thinks the colonists need Great Britain as a ruling power and should not question Britain’s loyalty.
- b. Henry thinks colonists should trust that Great Britain will never harm them.
- c. Henry wants to know the truth about Great Britain’s plans for the colonies and be prepared for the worst.
- d. Henry is concerned that too many colonists already know Great Britain plans to invade.

In the next part of the speech, Henry asks several questions. Read the following excerpt. Then complete the sentence.

Has Great Britain any enemy, in this quarter of the world, to call for all this **accumulation** of navies and armies? . . . **They** are meant for **us**: they can be meant for no other. . . . And what have we to oppose to them? Shall we try **argument**? Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years.

accumulation: gathering together large quantities
They: the weapons
us: the American colonies
argument: discussing why the colonies deserve independence, instead of taking action

2 Complete the sentences based on the excerpts above.

Henry believes Great Britain’s navies and armies are there to force the American colonists to cooperate. Henry is encouraging the colonists to stop arguing with Britain and to start taking action.

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Henry’s speech concludes with advice about the actions colonists in Virginia should be willing to take. Read the following excerpt. Then answer the questions.

Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace-- but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! . . . Our **brethren** are already in the field! Why stand we here **idle**? . . . Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me **liberty** or give me death!

brethren: fellow colonists in Massachusetts who have already fought against the British
idle: doing nothing
liberty: freedom from Great Britain’s rule

3 What is Henry urging his fellow Virginians to value above all else?

- a. Great Britain
- b. Liberty**
- c. Peace
- d. Idleness

4 Why does Henry say “The war is actually begun!” in this passage?

- a. Great Britain declared war against the colonies months ago.
- b. He believes Virginians should remain idle.
- c. He believes a war will help maintain peace.
- d. People in other colonies are already fighting against the British.**

5 What does Henry mean when he says “give me liberty or give me death”?

- a. He wants to avoid war by continuing to discuss peaceful options with Britain.
- b. It is more important to live than to have liberty.
- c. He is willing to fight and die in a war to preserve his liberty.**
- d. Death is too high a cost for liberty.

6 Which parts of the speech above do you find most convincing? Why?

Answers may vary.
