

Speech in the Convention

Benjamin Franklin

After having met for several months, by June 28, 1787, the delegates had come to an impasse at the Constitutional Convention. Monday, September 17, 1787, was the last day of the Constitutional Convention. Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Franklin, one of the few Americans of the time with international repute, wanted to give a short speech to the Convention prior to the signing of the final draft of the Constitution. Too weak to actually give the speech himself, he had fellow Pennsylvanian James Wilson deliver the speech. It is considered a masterpiece.

Mr. President

1 I confess that there are several parts of this constitution which I do not
at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them: For
having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged
by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even
5 on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be
otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow, the more apt I am to
doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of
others. Most men indeed as well as most sects in Religion, think
themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ
10 from them it is so far error. Steele a Protestant in a Dedication tells the
Pope, that the only difference between our Churches in their opinions of
the certainty of their doctrines is, the Church of Rome is infallible and
the Church of England is never in the wrong. But though many private
persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as of that of their
15 sect, few express it so naturally as a certain french lady, who in a
dispute with her sister, said "I don't know how it happens, Sister but I
meet with no body but myself, that's always in the right — Il n'y a que
moi qui a toujours raison."

20 In these sentiments, Sir, I agree to this Constitution with all its faults, if
they are such; because I think a general Government necessary for us,
and there is no form of Government but what may be a blessing to the
people if well administered, and believe farther that this is likely to be
well administered for a course of years, and can only end in Despotism,
as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so
25 corrupted as to need despotic Government, being incapable of any
other. I doubt too whether any other Convention we can obtain, may

be able to make a better Constitution. For when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudices, their
30 passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that
35 our councils are confounded like those of the Builders of Babel; and that our States are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another's throats. Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure, that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I
40 sacrifice to the public good. I have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. If every one of us in returning to our Constituents were to report the objections he has had to it, and endeavor to gain partizans in support of them, we might prevent its being generally received, and
45 thereby lose all the salutary effects & great advantages resulting naturally in our favor among foreign Nations as well as among ourselves, from our real or apparent unanimity. Much of the strength & efficiency of any Government in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends, on opinion, on the general opinion of the
50 goodness of the Government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its Governors. I hope therefore that for our own sakes as a part of the people, and for the sake of posterity, we shall act heartily and unanimously in recommending this Constitution (if approved by Congress & confirmed by the Conventions) wherever our influence
55 may extend, and turn our future thoughts & endeavors to the means of having it well administered.

On the whole, Sir, I can not help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would
60 with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.

Questions: Speech in the Convention, Benjamin Franklin, June 28, 1787

1. Who is the audience?
2. What is the context of this speech? What had happened in recent years in the colonies?
3. Why is the time – the last day of the Constitutional Convention – significant? How might that influence the audience?
4. What is Franklin's reputation at that time? How could his image/reputation affect his audience?
5. What is the purpose of Franklin's speech?
6. What tone does he use to achieve that purpose? Cite evidence of that tone.
7. What is Franklin's argument?
8. Logic: What is the quality of the reasoning? What types of appeals are being used?
(Logos, pathos, ethos)
9. Language: What stylistic and rhetorical devices are being employed? For what purpose.

Speech in the Virginia Convention by Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775.

Background: The Virginia Conventions were a series of five political meetings in the Colony of Virginia during the American Revolution. Because the House of Burgesses had been dissolved in 1774 by Royal Governor Lord Dunmore, the conventions served as a revolutionary provisional government until the establishment of the independent Commonwealth of Virginia in 1776. The second convention opened in Richmond and met at St. John's Church on March 20, 1775. At the convention, Patrick Henry proposed arming the Virginia militia. His public denunciation of the British king and his urging the colonists to fight for independence took tremendous bravery. If the colonies had failed to win independence, Henry could have been executed for treason.

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 questing 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 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 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 of 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
70 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. The millions of
75 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
80 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.

85 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
90 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!

Whatever the exact words of Henry were, there can be no doubt of their impact. According to Edmund Randolph, the convention sat in silence for several minutes afterwards. Thomas Marshall told his son John Marshall, who later became chief justice of the Supreme Court, that the speech was "one of the most bold, vehement, and animated pieces of eloquence that had ever been delivered." Edward Carrington, who was listening outside a window of the church, asked to be buried on that spot. In 1810, he got his wish. And the drafter of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, George Mason, said, "Every word he says not only engages but commands the attention, and your passions are no longer your own when he addresses them." More immediately, the resolution, declaring the United Colonies to be independent of the Kingdom of Great Britain, passed, and Henry was named chairman of the committee assigned to build a militia.

Questions:

Speech in the Virginia Convention by Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775.

1. Who is the audience?
2. What is the context of this speech? What had happened in recent years in the colonies?
3. What is the purpose of Henry's speech?
4. What tone does he use to achieve that purpose? Cite evidence of that tone.
5. What is Henry's argument?
6. Logic: What is the quality of the reasoning? What types of appeals are being used? (Logos, pathos, ethos)
7. What emotional appeals does Henry use? (Appeal to authority, to fear, to tradition, sympathy, patriotism, bandwagon appeal, etc.)
8. Does he use logical fallacies? If yes, cite examples.
9. Language: What stylistic and rhetorical devices are being employed? (allusion, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy, etc. Other techniques: syntactical decisions, diction (connotative words), choice of details, imagery) For what purpose?

Questions: Speech in the Convention, Benjamin Franklin, June 28, 1787

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