

IN HIS OWN WORDS: PATRICK HENRY ON THE CONSTITUTION

Excerpts from Patrick Henry's Speech of June 5, 1788, in the Virginia Ratifying Convention

Directions: Each group should paraphrase its assigned passage in one to two sentences that convey Henry's main idea. Below each passage of Henry's speech are aids for understanding the document.

1. Majority Rule

This, sir, is the language of democracy—that a majority of the community have a right to alter government when found to be oppressive. But how different is the genius of your new Constitution from this! How different from the sentiments of freemen that a contemptible minority can prevent the good of the majority! . . . If, sir, amendments are left to the twentieth, or tenth part of the people of America, your liberty is gone for ever. . . . It will be easily contrived to procure the opposition of the one-tenth of the people to any alteration, however judicious. . . .

Vocabulary:

- a. genius = nature
- b. contemptible = disgraceful
- c. contrived = arranged
- d. procure = obtain
- e. alteration = change
- f. judicious = sensible

Relevant Section(s) of the Constitution:

Article V: Amendment Process

Clues to Understanding the Passage:

The amendment process states that the approval of three fourths of the states is necessary for any proposed amendment to be enacted. In a union of thirteen states, an amendment would require the approval of ten states. The opposition of any four states—even those with small populations—would kill an amendment.

Source: Speech made on June 5, 1788, in the Virginia Ratifying Convention. The American Revolution.org. <<http://theamericanrevolution.org/ipeople/pherry/pherryspeech1.asp>>.

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2. A Standing Army

A standing army we shall have, also, to execute the execrable commands of tyranny; and how are you to punish them? Will you order them to be punished? Who shall obey these orders? Will your mace-bearer be a match for a disciplined regiment? In what situation are we to be? The clause before you gives . . . an exclusive power of legislation, in all cases whatsoever, for ten miles square, and over all places purchased for the erection of forts, magazines, arsenals, dockyards, etc. What resistance could be made? The attempt would be madness. . . .

Vocabulary:

- a. execrable = repulsive
- b. mace = a primitive weapon
- c. regiment = a unit of soldiers in the army
- d. arsenal = place where weapons are stored

Relevant Section(s) of the Constitution:

- Article I, Section 8, Clause 12: “[The Congress shall have the power] to raise and support armies.”
- Article I, Section 8, Clause 17: “[The Congress shall have the power] to exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever, over . . . the seat of the government of the United States.”

Clues to Understanding the Passage:

Americans traditionally feared a “standing army,” a permanent force consisting of professional, paid soldiers. Instead, most Americans favored defending their country with militia, part-time citizen-soldiers.

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3. Liberty vs. Empire

If we admit this consolidated government, it will be because we like a great, splendid one. Some way or other we must be a great and mighty empire; we must have an army, and a navy, and a number of things. When the American spirit was in its youth, the language of America was different; liberty, sir, was then the primary object. . . . But now, sir, the American spirit, assisted by the ropes and chains of consolidation, is about to convert this country into a powerful and mighty empire. If you make the citizens of this country agree to become the subjects of one great consolidated empire of America, your government will not have sufficient energy to keep them together. Such a government is incompatible with the genius of republicanism. . . .

Vocabulary:

- a. consolidated = powerful
- b. splendid = magnificent
- c. convert = change
- d. sufficient = enough
- e. incompatible = unable to coexist
- f. genius = nature

Relevant Section(s) of the Constitution:

Henry is referring to many passages of the Constitution, and in particular to the following clauses:

- Article I, Section 8, Clause 12: “[The Congress shall have the power] to raise and support armies.”
- Article I, Section 8, Clause 13: “[The Congress shall have the power] to provide and maintain a navy.”

Clues to Understanding the Passage:

Opponents of the Constitution often charged that the document would create a consolidated government—one in which too much power would be concentrated in the central government and too little power would be given to the states. Henry voiced the concerns of many Americans that liberty and empire were incompatible. (Note that in the second sentence Henry is being sarcastic.)

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<<http://theamericanrevolution.org/people/pherry/pherryspeech1.asp>>.

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4. Good and Bad Rulers

This Constitution is said to have beautiful features; but when I come to examine these features, sir, they appear to me horribly frightful. . . . It is on a supposition that your American governors shall be honest that all the good qualities of this government are founded; but its defective and imperfect construction puts it in their power to perpetrate the worst of mischiefs should they be bad men; and, sir, would not all the world, blame our distracted folly in resting our rights upon the contingency of our rulers being good or bad? Show me that age and country where the rights and liberties of the people were placed on the sole chance of their rulers being good men without a consequent loss of liberty! I say that the loss of that dearest privilege has ever followed, with absolute certainty, every such mad attempt.

Vocabulary:

- a. supposition = assumption
- b. perpetrate = commit
- c. mischiefs = harm
- d. distracted folly = unthinking foolishness
- e. contingency = possibility
- f. consequent = resulting

Relevant Section(s) of the Constitution:

Henry is referring in general to the powers given to members of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches in Articles I, II, and III, respectively.

Clues to Understanding the Passage:

Opponents of the Constitution charged that the document did not include enough checks on the powers of those who held federal office.

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5. The President, a Tyrant

If your American chief be a man of ambition and abilities, how easy is it for him to render himself absolute! . . . If we make a king we may prescribe the rules by which he shall rule his people, and interpose such checks as shall prevent him from infringing them; but the president, in the field, at the head of his army, can prescribe the terms on which he shall reign master. . . . Can he not, at the head of his army, beat down every opposition? Away with your president! We shall have a king: the army will salute him monarch; your militia will leave you, and assist in making him king, and fight against you: and what have you to oppose this force? What will then become of you and your rights? Will not absolute despotism ensue?

Vocabulary:

- a. ambition = determination to have fame or power
- b. render = make
- c. absolute = total
- d. prescribe = set down
- e. interpose = to put between
- f. infringing = violating
- g. reign = rule as
- h. despotism = tyranny
- i. ensue = follow, develop

Relevant Section(s) of the Constitution:

Henry is referring to the powers given to the president in Article II and particularly to the following passage:

- Article II, Section 2, Clause 1: "The President shall be Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several States, when called into the actual service of the United States."

Clues to Understanding the Passage:

Many opponents of the Constitution feared that the president would become a king.

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