

Lesson Four

The Right To Choose

LESSON IDEA

The right to choose is a key element of freedom. We exercise it so often each day, in matters large and small, that we tend to take it for granted. Yet throughout history, when freedom has been at stake, the opportunity to make choices has often involved life and death decisions affecting millions of people.

VISUAL AID

Optional: newspaper clippings and magazine articles about life in Red China.

IT WAS a sunny, pleasant day in Virginia as dozens of delegates from throughout the colony assembled St. John's Church in Richmond. The date was March 23, 1775, and the gathering is known to history as the Virginia Provincial Convention.

A few months earlier, in September 1774, the First Continental Congress had convened in Philadelphia, where representatives from the original 13 colonies drafted a petition to King George III of England, reminding him of their rights as British subjects. For nearly a decade, the complaint that "taxation without representation is tyranny" had been periodically raised by the colonists. What did "taxation without representation" mean? [The colonists were being compelled to pay import duties on such items as cloth, glass, paper, paint, lead, and tea. But they had no voice in how the applicable laws were made. The money went into England's coffers, and the colonists resented having no say in the matter.]

By March 1775, many colonial leaders feared that the King, rather than heeding their appeals, would send troops to force compliance with his demands. The colonists faced a choice that would change the course of history.

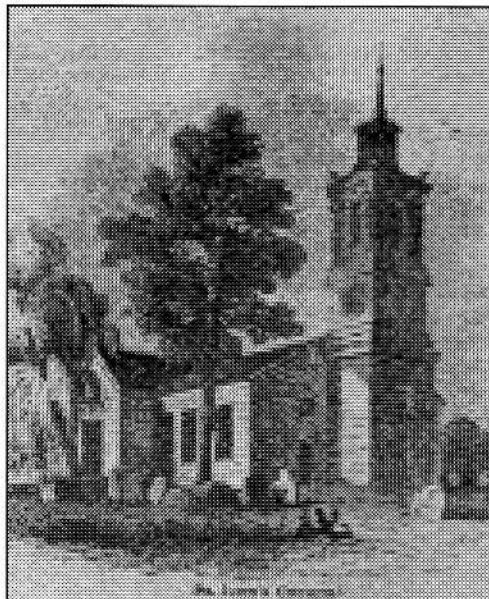
Many delegates at the Richmond meeting did not want to offend the King. They were English citizens who had built homes, farms, and businesses in the colonies, and they knew that if war broke out, they might lose not only their possessions, but their lives.

During the meeting a tall, slender delegate requested permission to speak. His name was Patrick Henry, an attorney elected to represent Culpepper County in Virginia's frontier area. Henry, who had been a delegate to the First Continental Congress, was an outspoken opponent of England's oppression of the colonies. His colleagues, aware of his fighting spirit, were anxious to hear what he had to say.

Looking over his audience, which included George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Henry began by reminding the delegates of the many wrongs suffered by the colonies under the King's "taxation without representation" strategy. He asserted that further appeals and petitions were useless, that compromise or surrender was unthinkable for men of honor, and that the time for action had come. He concluded with this ringing declaration:

Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

The words of this fiery orator jolted his audience. The hall was virtually silent as he made his way back to his seat. Then, from scattered points throughout the assembly, delegates began rising in agreement. It quickly became apparent that Patrick Henry's fervent appeal had carried the day.



St. John's Church, Richmond, Virginia

