



The “inconsistency not to be excused”: Slavery and the American Founding

Student Name _____ Date _____

Activity One. “My only unavoidable subject of regret”: views of founders on slavery

Reading Set A: Views of the founders on slavery

Directions: Read the following documents and complete the questions on the worksheet.

Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774)

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jeffsumm.htm>

For the most trifling reasons, and sometimes for no conceivable reason at all, his majesty [King George III] has rejected laws of the most salutary tendency. The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa; yet our repeated attempts to effect this by prohibitions, and by imposing duties which might amount to a prohibition, have been hitherto defeated by his majesty’s negative: Thus preferring the immediate advantages of a few African corsairs to the lasting interests of the American states, and to the rights of human nature, deeply wounded by this infamous practice...

Thomas Jefferson, Draft of the Declaration of Independence (1776)

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=4>

He [King George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of distant people, who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished dye, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crime committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

George Washington to Marquis de Lafayette (5 April 1783)

http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=848&chapter=101868&layout=html&Itemid=27

The scheme, my dear Marqs. which you propose as a precedent, to encourage the emancipation of the black people of this Country from that state of Bondage in wch. they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart. I shall be happy to join you in so laudable a work.

John Jay to R. Lushington (15 March 1786)

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=2186>

I have been favoured with your letter of the 22nd ult., and immediately communicated it to the committee of our society for promoting the liberation of slaves, and protecting such as may be manumitted. They are taking proper measures on the occasion, and I flatter myself that our Legislature will interpose to prevent such enormities in future.

It is much to be wished that slavery may be abolished. The honour of the States, as well as justice and humanity, in my opinion, loudly call upon them to emancipate these unhappy people. To contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused.

Whatever may be the issue of the endeavours of you and others to promote this desirable end, the reflection that they are prompted by the best motives affords good reasons for persevering in them.

George Washington to Robert Morris (12 April 1786)

http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=848&chapter=101934&layout=html&Itemid=27

I give you the trouble of this letter at the instance of Mr. Dalby of Alexandria; who is called to Philadelphia to attend what he conceives to be a vexatious lawsuit respecting a slave of his, which a Society of Quakers in the city (formed for such purposes) have attempted to liberate... And if the practice of this Society of which Mr. Dalby speaks, is not discountenanced, none of those whose *misfortune* it is to have slaves as attendants, will visit the City if they can possibly avoid it... I hope it will not be conceived from these observations, that it is my wish to hold the unhappy people, who are the subject of this letter, in slavery. I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it; but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, and that is by Legislative authority; and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting. But when slaves who are happy and contented with their present masters, are tampered with and seduced to leave them; when masters are taken unawares by these practices; when a conduct of this sort begets discontent on one side and resentment on the other... it introduces more evils than it can cure.

George Washington to Francis Mercer (9 September 1786)

http://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/docs_print/print_wash2.html

I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by the Legislature by which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptible degrees.

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787)

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jevifram.htm>

Query XVIII. There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do... The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to the worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances. And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who, permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriae of the other.

George Washington, Reflection of Slavery (c. 1788)

<http://www.pbs.org/georgewashington/classroom/slavery3.html>

The unfortunate condition of the persons, whose labor in part I employ, has been the only unavoidable subject of regret. To make the adults among them as easy and comfortable in their circumstances as their actual state of ignorance and improvidence would admit, and to lay a foundation to prepare the rising generation for a destiny different from that in which they were born, afforded some satisfaction to my mind, and could not I hoped be displeasing to the justice of the Creator.