

LESSON 5: ABOLITIONISM

Student Handout 2: Arguments

Arguments about taking a public position in opposition to slavery:

1. Slavery is evil, and there should be no compromise with evil. Americans certainly should not say that slavery should be abolished gradually. Slaves are suffering every day that it continues. Likewise, compensating owners would essentially be paying them for their evil deeds.
2. The American Revolution stood for liberty for everyone (“All men are created equal”). Slaves could write a Declaration of Independence with a list of abuses longer and even worse than those in the original Declaration. Americans should feel ashamed of slavery—they are hypocrites if they don’t free all slaves immediately.
3. If slaves were white, Americans wouldn’t be talking about gradual emancipation or working within the limits of the Constitution; first, all Americans, even abolitionists, need to confront their own racist perspective.
4. The American Revolution was all about questioning and resisting those with power. In America, those with power are the slaveowners and their allies.
5. The Constitution was a compromise with slavery—it is part of the problem. Americans should change or eliminate the Constitution, since it is a compromise with evil. According to William Lloyd Garrison, Americans should not admire a document “dripping as it is with human blood.” True justice is a higher moral law than the Constitution.
6. There is no need to take too radical a position. Slavery is ending on its own. Slaveowners in Virginia are already selling slaves to other states. With slavery unprofitable in Virginia and with few slaves left, Virginia—once the cornerstone of the slave-owning South—will gradually come to support ending slavery.
7. Pushing too hard to end slavery will just cause a backlash against abolition. Using harsh language or calling the Constitution a deal with the devil is not going to be effective at ending slavery.
8. Some slavery proponents argue that slaves are better off than workers in the North. Are they proposing that Northern workers be enslaved in order to improve their conditions?
9. Slaves should be enraged by the evils of slavery and rise up in rebellion. Slaves in Santo Domingo and Haiti rose up to overthrow slavery; those in the U.S. can and should do the same.
10. The way to end slavery is through compromise with slaveholders, who have all the power in the South. The more trade the North and South have, the more interdependent the two regions will become. Needing Northern business, Southerners will be ready to compromise on slavery. Slavery is evil, but ending it requires a practical approach. Abolitionists have to negotiate with slaveowners. People of good will in both the North and South can unite to end slavery.
11. The state of Virginia debated a bill for the gradual emancipation of slavery, but defeated it. The idea of compromise on slavery is unrealistic.
12. Freedom is a universal ideal for the whole world, not just the United States

13. We have to support the Constitution, even though it compromised on slavery. The Constitution is the basis of our Union, our experiment in democracy, so it should not be attacked. Keeping our country united is more important than ending slavery. Henry Clay argued, "Their [slaves'] liberty, if it were possible, could only be established by violating the incontestable powers of the States, and subverting the Union. And beneath the ruins of the Union would be buried, sooner or later, the liberty of both races."

Arguments about the fate of African Americans after slavery:

1. The American Colonization Society feels that ex-slaves should be sent back to Africa. It is a charitable group, which has raised money to help African Americans make the journey. African Americans simply can't make it in American society, the ACS believes. There is great prejudice against them, and they won't be able to compete with whites for work or business. If freed slaves stay in America, there will be a race war at some point.
2. One of the advocates for re-colonization to Africa stated, "It is not right that men should possess that freedom, for which they are entirely unprepared, [and] which can only prove injurious to themselves and others." It is not right to simply free slaves and leave them on their own in America.
3. The idea of colonization continues prejudice against African Americans. It gives whites a solution—removing African Americans from the country—that avoids confronting racism. The country needs to abolish slavery and "to recognize people of color as brethren and countrymen who have been unjustly treated..." African Americans need to become full, equal citizens of the United States. How can the country do anything less than provide true equality for African Americans after slavery? The ideal in America is of equality for all people.
4. African Americans should be educated so they can achieve true equality

Arguments about strategies:

1. Publishing radical pamphlets and other written material might lead to lawsuits for libel, which could bankrupt the abolitionist movement. Better to be more moderate in opposition to slavery.
2. Options A thru I (Handout 1) are all rights protected by the Constitution. Abolitionists should offer their views, which will lead to a thorough discussion of slavery. That's the beauty of democracy.
3. Options J thru M (Handout 1) support violence, which is wrong and will only lead to a backlash against abolitionist ideas.