Handout I: Founders’ Quotes on Slavery

Directions: As you read, note the arguments for and against slavery.

1. “He [the King] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation hither. 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 restrain this execrable commerce...” – Thomas Jefferson, original draft of the Declaration of Independence, 1776

2. “There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it.” – George Washington, 1786

3. “It is 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.” – John Jay, 1786

4. Article the Sixth. There shall be neither Slavery nor involuntary Servitude in the said territory otherwise than in the punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted; Provided always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid. – Northwest Ordinance, 1787

5. “We have seen the mere distinction of color made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.” – James Madison, Constitutional Convention, June 6, 1787

6. “He [Gouverneur Morris] never would concur in upholding domestic slavery. It was a nefarious institution. It was the curse of heaven on the States where it prevailed... Upon what principle is it that the slaves shall be computed in representation? Are they men? Then make them Citizens and let them vote. Are they property? Why is no other property included?... The admission of slaves into the Representation when fairly explained comes to this: that the inhabitant of Georgia and S.C. who goes to the Coast of Africa, and in defiance of the most sacred laws of humanity tears away his fellow creatures from their dearest connections and damns them to the most cruel bondages, shall have more votes in a Govt. instituted for the protection of the rights of mankind, than the Citizen of Pa. or N. Jersey who views with a laudable horror, so nefarious a practice.” – Gouverneur Morris
What arguments for and against slavery do you see in these quotes? Be prepared to discuss your evaluation of these arguments.

Arguments For Slavery

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Arguments Against Slavery

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