

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

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“Curse of Heaven” speech, Madison’s Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention, August 8, 1787

7. “Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of Heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities.” – George Mason, Aug. 21, 1787
8. John Dickinson moved to make the slavery clauses more explicit by changing “persons” to “slaves.” Several delegates objected to this. Madison records his own objection: “Mr. Madison thought it wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men.” – Madison’s Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention, August 25, 1787
9. “The omitting the Word [slave] will be regarded as an Endeavor to conceal a principle of which we are ashamed.” – John Dickinson, draft of notes for a speech at the Constitutional Convention, August 25, 1787
10. “While there remained one acre of swamp land uncleared of South Carolina, I would raise my voice against restricting the importation of Negroes. I am . . . thoroughly convinced . . . that the nature of our climate, and the flat, swampy situation of our country, obliges us to cultivate our lands with negroes, and that without them South Carolina would soon be a desert waste.” – Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, South Carolina Ratifying convention, 1788
11. “Slavery is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation, if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils.” – Benjamin Franklin, “An Address to the Public from the Pennsylvania Society” 1789
12. “[W]hatever be their [Negroes’] degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others.” – Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Henri Gregoire”, 1809
13. “Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States...I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in...abhorrence.” – John Adams, 1819
14. “They [Africans] certainly must have been created with less intellectual power than the whites, and were most probably intended to serve them, and be the instruments of their cultivation.” – Charles Pinckney, 1821

What arguments for and against slavery do you see in these quotes? Be prepared to discuss your evaluation of these arguments.

Arguments For Slavery

Arguments Against Slavery
