

Slavery and Defiance

In the PBS documentary *Africans in America*, historian Margaret Washington says, “In some ways, when you enslave a person, you enslave yourself.” If everyone in pre-Civil War society was victimized by slavery, it should come as no surprise that some Americans, both black and white, resisted the “peculiar institution.” Yet these stories of resistance are largely omitted from traditional classroom discussions about slavery in pre-Civil War America.

When resistance is examined in many classroom settings, all too often it is from the perspective of the white abolitionists—those who supported Frederick Douglass and made the Underground Railroad a reality. The voices and actions of ordinary free and enslaved African Americans who defied the system—who risked their lives for freedom—are rarely included in traditional classroom analyses of slavery. “How can their voices be silenced?” students ask. “Why have I never heard of Nat Turner before this class?” These are good questions. Students usually determine that the fear engendered in many Americans tells them that if we learn about and celebrate defiance of the law, and if we question the actions of our historical leaders who made the laws, we are being unpatriotic. Yet, in the spirit of revolutionary America, what could be more patriotic than fighting for freedom?

Document-Based Questions

DAVID WALKER'S *APPEAL*

1. What parts of this appeal do you think were especially inflammatory to Southern slaveholders? Explain.
2. Do you think Walker makes an effective argument in regard to the hypocrisy in the language and promises of the Declaration of Independence? Explain.
3. If you had lived in 1830 when this appeal was published, how would you

have answered Walker's question, "Now, Americans! I ask you candidly, was your sufferings under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you?"

HARRIET A. JACOBS AND JAMES NORCOM

1. What was Nat Turner's "insurrection"? How and why did it affect Harriet Jacobs' life and the lives of other slaves throughout the south?
2. What was the goal of the Reverend Pike's message to his enslaved congregation? What is your response to this message?
3. Why were Jacobs and her friends "amused at brother Pike's gospel teaching"? What are the moral and ethical implications of a minister's endorsement of slavery?
4. How would you respond to James Norcom's statement that Jacobs "absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation"? Do you think it is possible that slaveholders truly believed that there were not reasons for the enslaved to run away? Explain.

JAMES R. BRADLEY

1. How does James Bradley feel about being owned by someone who was called "a wonderfully kind master"? How do you think the southern states were able to convince people in the so-called free states that the enslaved were "happy and contented"?
2. Do you agree with Bradley that "there was never a slave who did not long for liberty"? Explain.
3. What does Bradley's letter tell you about the relationship between white and black people in pre-Civil War society?

REVEREND THEODORE PARKER

1. What are Reverend Parker's main objections to the Fugitive Slave Act? How does he think its passage has changed the manner in which the Constitution was interpreted?

2. What did the Reverend Parker mean when he claimed that the Bostonians were “subjects of Virginia”? How does this support the idea of a “slave power” in the South that determines the law for the rest of the nation? Do you think slave power existed? Explain.
3. What does Parker describe as “*deeds* done for liberty”? Do you agree with his statement that when “liberty is the end . . . sometimes peace is not the means towards it”? Explain. What kinds of “deeds for liberty” might be used in today’s society? Do you think the Founding Fathers would approve of such deeds?

TWO LETTERS FROM SLAVES

1. By legally defining the enslaved as property, how were slave owners able to justify enslavement?
2. What common complaints do these formerly enslaved men share in regard to their masters? Do you think Henry Bibb would agree with Jermain Wesley Loguen that he pities his former master “from the bottom of my heart”? How do their feelings about their former masters compare and contrast?
3. Do you think that slave masters truly believed that they raised their slaves “as we did our own children”? Explain.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

1. What are Douglass’s objections to celebrating the Fourth of July? What did he mean when he said, “Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us”?
2. How do you think the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society responded to Douglass’s speech? What do you think would especially resonate with them? To what parts of the speech do you think they may have objected? Explain.
3. Do you agree or disagree with Douglass’s statement that “[t]here is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour”? Explain. What other injustices were going on in the United States in 1852 that could further justify Douglass’s statement?

JOHN BROWN'S LAST SPEECH

1. Why do you think large numbers of black and white people did not join in John Brown's struggle?
2. In 1859, most Americans thought that John Brown was a treasonous murderer. Why do you believe such famous Americans as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Douglass thought John Brown was a hero?
3. How does John Brown try to justify his actions? Do you think he is convincing? Why, or why not? What did his death accomplish?

OSBORNE P. ANDERSON

1. What is the purpose of Osborne Anderson's statement about John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry? Do you think he accomplished his purpose?
2. What do you think accounted for Anderson's observation that "the free blacks [of the] South are much less reliable than the slaves, and infinitely more fearful"?
3. Did Anderson's prediction come true—that the "future historian will record" that John Brown's mistakes at Harper's Ferry "were productive of great good"? How have historians dealt with Harper's Ferry and John Brown?

MARTIN DELANY'S ADVICE

1. Delany describes the passive resistance he would have used had he been a slave. What is passive resistance? How does he describe it? How do other voices in this chapter describe their use of passive resistance? How did slaveholders interpret acts of passive resistance?
2. What advice does Delany offer the freedmen and women? What is it that he most fears that freedmen and freedwomen will do?
3. Who does Delany most mistrust? How and why?

HENRY MCNEAL TURNER

1. For what “crime” is Turner being tried? What rights does Turner demand before the Georgia legislature? Do you think his arguments are convincing? How and why do you think his fellow legislators decided as they did?
2. Three years after the end of the Civil War, the Georgia legislature had been “reconstructed”—yet it found Turner guilty of the “crime” of being black and forced Turner to conclude that freedmen and freedwomen were “strangers in the land of our birth.” What does this attitude tell you about the success and failure of reconstruction in Georgia?
3. To what constitutional rights were the freedmen and freedwomen entitled? Why was the state of Georgia able to ignore these rights?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 9, “Slavery and Defiance”

After reading Chapter 9 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points.

1. Enslaved African Americans resisted slavery from the moment it was institutionalized into colonial law until it was constitutionally prohibited by the Thirteenth Amendment.
2. The political, economic, and religious nature of southern society, all reinforced the belief that slavery was a benevolent institution as well as one that was endorsed by God.
3. The federal government not only failed to challenge the system of institutionalized slavery created by each Southern state; it also legitimized the system through passage and enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act.
4. The abolitionist movement consisted of whites and free blacks, all of whom challenged and sometimes defied the laws upholding slavery.
5. While the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments promised previously enslaved African Americans their freedom and equality, that promise was negated by the end of Reconstruction.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 9, “Slavery and Defiance,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 9, “Slavery Without Submission, Emancipation Without Freedom”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 9 in both books. Following are four additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. The events before, during, and after the Civil War continue to shape race relations in the United States today.
7. The Emancipation Proclamation declared slaves in the Confederate states still fighting against the Union to be free but failed to free slaves living behind Union lines.
8. The end of institutionalized slavery led to a reconstruction of national politics and economics that was both safe and profitable for the Northern and Southern elite who supported the war.
9. Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation only when many of his supporters began to act against slavery.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 9, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. What common experiences are recorded in the voices of the enslaved? Do you think all slaves had similar experiences? Explain.
2. Why do you think there were few voices of resistance to slavery among poor southern whites—most of whom had no slaves? Why do you think more poor southern whites did not unite with blacks to attack the plantation system?
3. How were some slaves able to buy their own freedom and/or the freedom of their family members?

4. What does liberty mean to the people whose voices you heard? Do you think liberty meant the same thing to white Americans as it did to the enslaved African Americans? To poor white Americans versus wealthy white Americans? What does liberty mean to? Would you be willing to fight for your liberty? Under what circumstances?
5. What was the Freedman's Bureau? How did it help the newly emancipated African Americans? Did it achieve as much as its creators hoped it would? Explain.
6. Many historians of this period have concluded that the agricultural and industrial foundations of the United States were built largely on the backs of enslaved African Americans. How do the voices in this chapter support or refute this allegation? What is your opinion? Explain.
7. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in "Main Points in *Voices*"?
8. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read chapters 9 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

9. How do you think slavery influenced the lives of white people in Southern slave-holding regions?
10. How do you think slavery influenced the lives of white people in the Northern states? What incentives did whites in the North have for joining the abolitionist cause?
11. How and why have some historians tried to downplay or dismiss the effects of slavery?
12. How do Howard Zinn's descriptions of Abraham Lincoln compare and contrast with your previous knowledge about Lincoln?

13. Do you think that Lincoln was being honest when he claimed that, as president, he was legally powerless to abolish slavery? Explain.
14. Why do you think that Congress needed to enact the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments? Why wasn't the Thirteenth Amendment sufficient to grant the slaves their freedom and all the rights of citizenship? Did the legal end to slavery and the legal granting of rights to the freedmen and freedwomen bring about their freedom? Why, or why not?
15. Who were the Radical Republicans? What was their political agenda? Were they successful? Explain.
16. What were some of the accomplishments of African Americans and their allies during the era of Reconstruction? Do you think these accomplishments will continue after the end of Reconstruction? Explain.
17. What was the compromise in the so-called Compromise of 1877? Who was involved in the compromise? Who was left out? Who benefited from the compromise?
18. How would you describe the "New South" that emerged after the end of Reconstruction? Do you really think it was new? Explain.
19. Do you agree or disagree with Howard Zinn's assertion that the end of slavery led to a reconstruction of national politics and economics? What were the limits of this reconstruction? Explain.

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. In William Styron's controversial, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House, 1967), the white

author—an ancestor of Southern slave owners—uses the final confession of Nat Turner as the focus of a biography of the famous African American revolutionary. Using a search engine of choice, learn as much as possible about this book and about Nat Turner. Who was Nat Turner, and what was his rebellion? What are the primary messages of Styron's book? How and why did Turner's rebellion change the lives of white and black people living in the Southern states? After reading some of the reviews of the book when it was published in 1967, why do you think it was so controversial? Why do you think it won a Pulitzer Prize?

2. Research the role that free blacks played in the abolitionist movement. What role did whites play in the movement? What evidence can you find of white and black abolitionists working together? What common bonds of resistance united them? Divided them?
3. Read the full text of the Fugitive Slave Act. What were its major provisions? What were the arguments posed in Congress for and against passage of the act? What states opposed it and why? How did the act benefit slave owners? How was the act resisted? How and why did the Wisconsin Supreme Court challenge the act in 1857? When the Supreme Court heard the case in 1859, how did it decide?
4. Historians who have researched the Ku Klux Klan have pointed to several stages in its evolutionary development. Research the goals and activities of the first Klan that arose after the Civil War, the second Klan that arose during World War I, the third that arose during the civil-rights movement, and the contemporary Klan. How do the goals and activities of each period compare and contrast across time? In particular, how is the contemporary Klan different from those of the past? Do you think the KKK is a terrorist organization? Explain.
5. In his recent book, *The Slave Power* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), historian Leonard L. Richards uses a rich array of primary and secondary resources to document his thesis that the Republicans correctly believed they were losing control over Congress because of the overwhelming influence of a southern Democrat "slave power." Learn more about the so-called slave power. Do you think there is enough evidence to support Richard's thesis? Explain.
6. In 1846, Dred Scott sued for freedom for himself, his wife, and his daughter.

His was but one of over 200 similar cases filed at the St. Louis, Missouri courthouse in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. In 1857, the Supreme Court handed down its famous decision in *Scott vs. Sanford*. What were the facts and the findings of this case? Why were so many cases filed in the St. Louis courthouse? What happened to Scott and his family after the case was decided.

7. In the last two decades, many historians have written about the emergence of a “Lost Cause Argument” that arose in the South after the Civil War. In their book, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), historians Gary Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan refute the argument and claim instead that it was more myth than fact. Learn as much as possible about the argument—what its supporters claim to have been the real cause of the war; about the role slavery played in the war; about the reasons the South lost the war; about the symbolism of the Confederate flag; about the role of liberty in the war. Why do you think Gallagher and Nolan call all these a myth? Which side do you support, and why?
8. The slave trade was abolished in the United States in 1808. However, despite the legal end of slave importation, slaves were still bought and sold in North America. Learn as much as possible about the slave trade before and after its abolition. What was the impetus for legally ending the trade? Who supported its abolition and why? How were slaves traded after 1808? Did ending the slave trade change the nature of slavery in North America? How and why?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Howard Zinn writes, “It would take either a full-scale slave rebellion or a full-scale war” to end slavery (*People’s History*, p. 171). Using examples from your reading in Howard Zinn’s books, agree or disagree with this statement. Do you think that slavery could have been ended without war? Explain.
2. It has often been argued that slavery was a regional problem, confined largely to the southern states. Using examples from Chapters 2 and 9 in your reading, write an editorial that would appear in a northern abolitionist newspaper in 1860 that either supports or refutes this contention.
3. How does the legacy of slavery continue to affect our society today?

4. Support or refute one of Howard Zinn's primary contentions in this chapter—that the United States government “would never accept an end to slavery by rebellion. It would end slavery only under conditions controlled by whites.”
5. What is the message behind the title of Chapter 9 in *A People's History*, “Slavery Without Submission, Emancipation Without Freedom”? Do you agree that the slaves neither submitted to the institution of slavery during its existence nor were they emancipated by its legal termination? Explain.
6. Historian Richard McMurray has argued in his essay, “The War We Never Finished” (*Civil War Times Illustrated*, November/December 1989), that the Civil War was a complex struggle between four groups: Confederates, Unionists, abolitionists, and egalitarians. He argues that by 1877, the first three were victorious and that only the egalitarians truly lost the war. What do you think he means? Learn more about this argument and then think about what you have read in Howard Zinn's books that might support or refute McMurray's position. Do you agree or disagree with McMurray? Explain.
7. What were some of the ways that enslaved African Americans fought for freedom before, during, and after the Civil War? What were some of the ways that whites and blacks worked together to ensure such freedom? What were the ways that whites tried to block that freedom?
8. How and why did the Compromise of 1877 continue to influence the lives of African American men and women through the end of the civil-rights movement? Do you think it still affects race relations in America today? Explain.
9. How did the “New South” of the late nineteenth century compare and contrast with the “Old South” in pre-Civil War America?
10. What voices of resistance in Chapter 9 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
11. How do the voices and information in this chapter (or these two chapters) improve your understanding of the Revolutionary War? What information was especially useful? How and why?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Stage a debate around the topic, “Historical and contemporary nonviolent actions of the Ku Klux Klan (rallies, marches, cross burnings, recruiting in schools, on-campus clubs) should be protected by the First Amendment.” Be sure to examine the role fear plays in communities where the KKK may be exercising its First Amendment rights.
2. Have students create a wall map that demonstrates the existence of slavery in the United States before the Civil War. Once the map is completed, have them discuss the following questions: What does the map tell us about the regional spread of slavery in the United States at the time of the war? Does the map add any evidence to the argument that slavery was a national, not a regional, problem? Why, or why not? Where do you think slavery would have spread next if the South had won the war? Using the answers to this discussion, as well as any other questions and answers that the students raise during the course of this assignment, have a small group of student volunteers take the map and the information it generated to an elementary classroom and conduct a similar discussion.
3. Conduct a series of conversations that would be held in several communities in the early 1850s after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Divide students into five communities, each of which would have the following representatives that will discuss the ramifications of the Act on their lives, as well as why they do or do not support its provisions: a wealthy white southern plantation owner, a middle class northern white abolitionist, an enslaved African American male, a free northern African American woman, a northern worker who wants to immigrate to the west, and a poor white southern farmer. Students should script and then hold their conversations.
4. Assign a creative writing project that consists of the following two components: a letter written by a white northern abolitionist to the Supreme Court after its decision in the Dred Scott case; and a letter written by Dred Scott to the Supreme Court after the decision.