George Washington and the Problem of Slavery

Overview

This lesson discusses George Washington’s commitment to the principles of freedom and equality in light of the fact that he also owned slaves. The reading examines the problem of slavery in Washington’s world as well as writings and actions by Washington related specifically to the issue of slavery. Discussion questions follow the reading.

Objective

Students will analyze historical evidence including primary sources to understand George Washington in relationship to the issue of slavery.

Standards

National Council for the Social Studies: Thematic Strands II, V, VI, X
Arizona Academic Standards, Social Studies: 1SS-E16, E17, E18; 2SS-E3, P1
California History-Social Science Content Standards: 8.1, 8.2, 8.4; 11.1; 12.1
Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills: Social Studies 8.1, 8.4, 8.8, 8.16, 8.21, 8.23; U.S. Government 1, 2, 3, 16

Bibliography

Thomas G. West, Vindicating the Founders (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

Suggestion on how to use this lesson plan:

Print copies of the lesson and distribute them to the students. Divide the number of students in the class by three, and have the students count off up to that number. (For example, if there are 30 students in class, 30÷3=10, have the students count off 1 through 10, so that there are three #1’s, three #2’s, three #3’s, etc.) Remind the students to remember their number (or have them write it down) because they will later form a group with the other students of the same number.

Next have the students form three groups or circles, preferably in separate corners of the room. Ask the students in one group to read through part one of the essay below and discuss it with each other. Ask the students in the second group to read part two of the essay below and discuss it with each other. Ask the students in the third group to read part three of the essay below and discuss with each other. The students in each of the three groups should possess a fair understanding of the material in the essay section assigned to them before leaving the group. The students should be allowed 10-15 minutes for this part of the lesson. Now have the students break into smaller groups of three with those who share assigned numbers. That is, all the #1’s form a group, all the #2’s form a group, all the #3’s form a group, all the #4’s form a group, etc. In each group there will be one student who read through part one of the essay, one student who read through part two, and one student who read through part three. Ask the students to share with each other the information they learned from their section of the essay. The students should be allowed approximately ten minutes for this part of the lesson. At this point all the students in the class should have a fairly comprehensive understanding of the material presented in the essay. Ask the students to return to their own seat. Go through the eight questions at the end of the essay in class, writing the answers given by students on the chalkboard. This should facilitate a general discussion of the material presented in the essay. Total time for this exercise is approximately one hour. **As an extra exercise, a teacher can print off copies of George Washington’s Last Will and Testament, or have the student read it online, and identify the language in that document by which Washington declares his slaves to be freed.

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George Washington and the other Founders are often criticized for speaking and writing about freedom and equality while at the same time owning slaves. Some critics claim that the Founders did not really believe that all men were created equal. Abraham Lincoln on the other hand disagreed with this view. Rather than reject Washington and the other Founders, Lincoln embraced the principles of the American Founding in his own attacks against slavery, as well as his defense of the Constitution. In his famous Gettysburg Address, Lincoln referred to the Declaration of Independence when he said that the United States was “conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

In order to understand George Washington and slavery one needs to consider several things:

1. The problem of slavery in Washington’s world.
2. Washington’s writings about the problem of slavery.

1. THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY IN WASHINGTON’S WORLD

It is important for Americans living over one hundred years since slavery ended in this country to understand slavery in the world of Washington. Slavery has existed in various forms throughout most of the world, and throughout most of human history. Traditionally, slavery had nothing to do with “race” or skin color. Many people were enslaved by neighboring tribes or cities—by people who often looked very similar. For example, natives in North America had enslaved each other long before Europeans arrived. And at the time of the American founding, and for long after, slavery existed throughout Africa, where blacks were enslaving blacks. America was one of the few places where, by chance, most of the free people looked different than most of those we enslaved. But even in America, on the eve of the Civil War, there were almost 4,000 black slave owners—blacks who owned black slaves—living in the southern United States.

By these examples we come to understand that the injustice of slavery does not depend on the color of the skin of the master any more than the color of the slave. Slavery was not wrong only in America, where whites enslaved blacks. Rather, slavery is wrong in all places, by all people, at all times because of the principle of human equality. The difficulty is that this principle has been unknown or denied throughout most of human history.

Thus we begin to see the real challenge of eliminating slavery. Slavery was so established in most of the world that it was thought to be part of the natural order of things, and there were few if any public arguments made against it. In his 1995 book, The End of Racism, Dinesh D’Souza points to a powerful example from Africa:

Perhaps the fairest generalization is that no Africans opposed slavery in principle, they merely opposed their own enslavement. One English activist, who led a campaign to suppress slavery in the Sudan, found Africans unresponsive to his pleas and pressures. "It was in vain that I attempted to reason with them against the principles of slavery – they thought it wrong when they were themselves the sufferers, but were always ready to indulge in it when the preponderance of power lay upon their side." (p.106)

Unfortunately, what was true in Sudan in the 17th and 18th centuries is still true today: It is reported that slavery continues to this day in that part of the world.

That slavery existed at the time of the Founding, then, did not make America unique. Indeed, in this America was like most countries of the world. What was unique in America, however, was the fact that America was founded upon the principle that every human being possesses equal rights by nature, thus making the elimination of slavery a moral and political necessity.

2. WASHINGTON’S WRITINGS ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY

Washington explained his views on slavery in several different writings. In two letters to the Marquis de Lafayette, who had assisted the United States during the Revolutionary War, Washington expressed his desire to see the emancipation of the slaves in America. In 1783 Washington wrote, "The scheme, my dear Marquis, which you propose as a precedent, to encourage the emancipation of the black people of this country from the state of Bondage in which 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...." Later Washington wrote in 1786, “your late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country...."

In 1786, Washington wrote to two Americans expressing his desire to see the lawful end to slavery. In a letter to Robert Morris he wrote, "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..." To John Francis Mercer he wrote that it was among his "...first wishes to see some plan adopted, by the legislature by which slavery in this country may be abolished by slow, sure, and imperceptible degrees.”
In a letter on slavery from about 1788, Washington reflected personally on slavery: "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."

3. WASHINGTON'S ACTIONS IN RELATION TO SLAVERY

Finally, Washington’s actions demonstrate his devotion to the principles of freedom and equality. George Washington risked life and fortune to command the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War in an effort to secure liberty. Later he served as President of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to establish a government through which the principles of the Declaration of Independence could best be secured. According to James Madison, the problem of slavery was the most divisive at the Constitutional Convention. Even though slavery violated the principles of human freedom and equality that Washington and the other Founders had articulated and fought to defend, they had no other reasonable alternative but to compromise. Demanding an immediate end to slavery rather than agreeing to compromise on the issue would certainly have caused the slave states to reject union altogether, and establish a separate country more committed to continuing the institution of slavery. If that had happened, not one slave from a southern slave state would have been freed, and, perhaps worse, any prospects of ending slavery in the South would have been grim.

On the other hand, by securing the union upon the basis of human equality, the principles of the Revolution gradually influenced public opinion and political action. By 1798, slave importation had been outlawed by all thirteen states. Between 1777 and 1804, eight Northern states abolished slavery altogether: Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and New Jersey. In the South, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina amended their laws to make it easier to free slaves. Largely as a result, between 1790 and 1810, the number of free blacks in the South grew from 32,000 to 108,000.

Before having a public debate about ending slavery, first a union had to be formed in which such a debate could take place. In commanding the Continental Army, and presiding over the Constitutional Convention, George Washington did more than any other man to make that happen.

In addition to these heroic public acts are his actions as a private citizen. It was illegal in every slave state to simply let one’s slaves go free. Each state had laws regulating “manumission,” the legal process by which a slave owner could free his slaves. It was an expensive thing to do, requiring slave owners to pay fees and provide certain amounts of money, materials and education for the slaves. Thus many slave owners were unwilling to bankrupt their family because of a principle. Even for Washington, financial difficulties were an obstacle to the manumission of his slaves.

Nevertheless, in his Last Will and Testament, Washington ordered that his slaves be freed upon his wife’s death and that his heirs clothe and feed those slaves who were incapable of supporting themselves due to age or infirmity. Washington personally drew up his will in July 1799 and he died in December 14, 1799. His slaves were freed in December 1800, even before his wife died, and his estate cared for the aged and infirm for over three decades.

Discussion Questions:

How did Lincoln show his agreement with the Founders in relationship to the issues of freedom and equality?

How was the principle of human equality regarded throughout most of history?

Why is slavery wrong?

What does the D’Souza example indicate about African views of slavery?

Was slavery unique to America?

What was unique about the American Founding?

Why was there no reasonable alternative to the slavery compromises included in the Constitution by Washington and the other Founders?

What instructions regarding his slaves did Washington give in his Last Will and Testament?