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The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution - Year 2

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Proslavery Thought

Historical Background

In my five short years of teaching U.S. History to eighth graders, I have made a few observations about myself. When I teach about slavery, too often I have students read from U.S. History textbooks that slavery was an inherently bad institution, and that the North - especially President Lincoln - helped to bring it to an end. While I am working towards building my repertoire in this area, I am limited until now to the textbook. In general, middle school students seem to get a glossed-over version of the antebellum period. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Civil War period is customarily covered during the final weeks of school as I am rushing to finish the curriculum. Perhaps it is due to the complex nature of the compromises and legislation passed in the decades leading up to the war. Perhaps I, like many elementary school teachers, find it easier to tell students that “slavery caused the Civil War.” Whatever the reason, in my few short years of teaching the subject, I have not been able to provide students with a balanced approach to the concept of slavery.

Imagine my discomfort whenever I was faced with the student who asked, “How could our country have slavery if the Declaration of Independence states that ‘all men are created equal?’” As Finkelman states in his opening pages, “slavery was an oddity that surely was in conflict with the professed political ideals of the nation” (p. 1). This conflict not only made for awkward societal situations, it helped to create a document in the Constitution that at once both supported and ignored slavery. The founding document supported slavery in the 3/5 Compromise, for example. But nowhere in the document is the word “slave” mentioned; thus it ignores the institution. Up to now I have had a difficult time resolving this issue. Then I read Defending Slavery.

As I read Professor Finkelman’s book, Defending Slavery, I realized what my approach has been lacking. I have not been exposing my students to the other side of the argument: *Proslavery Thought*. As I read about the stakeholders of the antebellum South and their various and passionate defenses of slavery, it

occurred to me that I need to do more to show students why many thought slavery was not just good, but absolutely essential. “Defenders of slavery argued that the sudden end to the slave economy would have had a profound and killing economic impact in the South where reliance on slave labor was the foundation of their economy. The cotton economy would collapse. The tobacco crop would dry in the fields. Rice would cease being profitable” (ushistory.org). Thus, proslavery thinkers “offered, for the most part, practical, economic, political, and historical arguments in favor of slavery” (Finkelman p. 23). I had no idea of the broad range of defenses proslavery thinkers used to support the institution. I realized I could capitalize on the reading.

In developing this lesson, I wanted to give students a chance to learn about some of the proslavery perspectives that existed during the mid 1800s. At the same time, I wanted to engage students in more complex thinking situations. In the end, students should be able to logically defend slavery as the proslavery thinkers of the 19th century did. As Finkelman points out, “the proslavery delegates did not ask their Northern colleagues to support slavery, to like it, or even to acknowledge that it was morally legitimate. Instead, they set out why, from a practical standpoint, it was in the self-interest of Northerners to accept and even to protect slavery” (p. 23). In addition, students should be able to make the connection of proslavery thought as it pertains to events like the Wilmot Proviso, or even John Brown’s raids.

The more comfortable students become with the radical defenses made by Southern proslavery thinkers, the better they are to grasp how deep-rooted the problem was. When students learn that some in the South actually believed that banning slavery was unconstitutional, they may become better able to figure out for themselves what is right and what is wrong, what is economically feasible and what is not, what will keep our nation together and what will divide it.

At the conclusion of the initial lesson, I will present students with a statement from ushistory.org.

“When a society forms around any institution, as the South did around slavery, it will formulate a set of arguments to support it. The Southerners held ever firmer to their arguments as the political tensions in the country drew us ever closer to the Civil War.”

Summary Including Objectives

This lesson addresses a facet of U.S. history which previously went unaddressed in my classroom:

There were several very plausible and logical arguments FOR slavery during the antebellum period in the U.S. Students will brainstorm several ways to defend the concept of slavery in the 19th century. Given a category of defense (religious, political, economical, etc.), students will list as many ways as they can to defend the “peculiar institution.” After reviewing student responses, the teacher will show and discuss the attached slideshow based on the book Defending Slavery, by Paul Finkelman. Later, as students learn about the many events that led up to the Civil War, students will reflect on how Southern Proslavery thinkers would react to such events. In so doing, students will gain a better perspective of the issue of slavery. Students will also be able to argue for and against the institution.

Following this lesson, students will know and/or be able to do the following:

1. Identify and discuss at least 3-5 reasons some people in the 19th century thought slavery was needed;
2. Identify at least 3-5 people who were leading proslavery thinkers during the 19th century;
3. Be able to discuss how and why perspectives on slavery have changed since the 19th century.
4. Will be able to predict how Southern Proslavery proponents would react to events from history.

Content Standard Alignment: Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework:

USI.36 Summarize the critical developments leading to the Civil War. (H)

- A. the Missouri Compromise (1820)
- B. the South Carolina Nullification Crisis (1832–1833)
- C. the Wilmot Proviso (1846)
- D. the Compromise of 1850
- E. the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851–1852)
- F. the Kansas-Nebraska Act(1854)
- G. the Dred Scott Supreme Court case (1857)
- H. the Lincoln-Douglas debates (1858)
- I. John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry (1859)
- J. the election of Abraham Lincoln(1860)

Procedures (2-3 Class Periods)

This lesson is best presented before students learn about the events that led to the Civil War (see above standards). Once students develop a balanced perspective on both sides of the slavery issue, they may be better able to approach each event in a more unbiased way.

1. Students will be placed into groups of 4.
 2. Each group will receive a piece of paper with a category of defense of slavery written on it. The category will be chosen from the following list:
 - RELIGIOUS
 - POLITICAL
 - ECONOMIC
 - HISTORICAL
 - PHILOSOPHICAL
 - SCIENTIFIC
 - RACE THEORY
- In addition, each group will be given a piece of chart paper and a marker and a place in the classroom or surround area (hall, other room, etc.)
3. Students will be asked to brainstorm with their group to defend the institution of slavery based on the issue that they received. Students will list on their chart paper any/all arguments they can that defend slavery on the basis of the category they received.
 4. After brainstorming, students will come back together as a class and review the responses.
 5. Teacher will lead class discussion around the feasibility and/or likelihood of each argument.
 6. Teacher will then present the slideshow "Proslavery Thought." Students will take notes.
 7. During the slideshow, teacher will point out similarities and/or differences in student responses vs. actual 19th century theories.
 8. As students read and learn about the events that led to the Civil War (beginning with the Missouri Compromise of 1820), they will be asked to reflect on the event from the perspective of a Southern Proslavery thinker. From time to time, students may be asked to reflect on the event from the perspective of a Northern Antislavery thinker as well. The goal here is to get students to see both sides of the issue as they encounter the mounting crises of the 19th century.

Assessment

Students will be assessed informally:

- * On their ability to work cooperatively as a group and follow instructions during the brainstorming session;
- * Students will be assessed on their class participation and discussion responses;
- * Students will be assessed on their reflections on the different events leading up to the Civil War.

Bibliography/ Sources Cited

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