



The “inconsistency not to be excused”: Slavery and the American Founding

Student Name _____ Date _____

Activity One. “My only unavoidable subject of regret”: views of founders on slavery

Reading Set D: Economic self-interest and slavery

Directions: Read the following documents and complete the questions on the worksheet.

Constitutional Convention, 21 August 1787

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/debates/821.htm>

Mr. L. MARTIN, proposed ... to allow a prohibition or tax on the importation of slaves ... [S]laves weakened one part of the Union which the other parts were bound to protect: the privilege of importing them was therefore unreasonable ... [I]t was inconsistent with the principles of the revolution and dishonorable to the American character to have such a feature in the Constitution.

Mr. RUTLIDGE ... Religion & humanity had nothing to do with this question. Interest alone is the governing principle with nations. The true question at present is whether the Southern States shall or shall not be parties to the Union...

Mr. PINKNEY. South Carolina can never receive the plan if it prohibits the slave trade. In every proposed extension of the powers of the Congress, that State has expressly & watchfully excepted that of meddling with the importation of negroes. If the States be all left at liberty on this subject, S. Carolina may perhaps by degrees do of herself what is wished, as Virginia & Maryland have already done.

Constitutional Convention, 22 August 1787

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/debates/822.htm>

Mr. SHERMAN was for leaving the clause [*which did not give Congress the power to tax or prohibit the importation of slaves*] as it stands ... [A]s it was expedient to have as few objections as possible to the proposed scheme of Government, he thought it best to leave the matter as we find it. He observed that the abolition of Slavery seemed to be going on in the U. S. & that the good sense of the several States would probably by degrees compleat it...

Col. MASON. This infernal traffic originated in the avarice of British Merchants. The British Govt. constantly checked the attempts of Virginia to put a stop to it. The present question concerns not the importing States alone but the whole Union ... Slavery discourages arts & manufactures. The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. They prevent the immigration of Whites, who really enrich & strengthen a Country. They produce the most pernicious effect on manners. Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a Country. As nations can not be rewarded or punished in the next world they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes & effects providence punishes national sins, by national calamities. He lamented that some of our Eastern brethren had from a

lust of gain embarked in this nefarious traffic. As to the States being in possession of the Right to import, this was the case with many other rights, now to be properly given up. He held it essential in every point of view that the General Govt. should have power to prevent the increase of slavery.

Mr. ELSWORTH ... Let us not intermeddle. As population increases poor laborers will be so plenty as to render slaves useless. Slavery in time will not be a speck in our Country. Provision is already made in Connecticut for abolishing it. And the abolition has already taken place in Massachusetts. As to the danger of insurrections from foreign influence, that will become a motive to kind treatment of the slaves.

Mr. PINKNEY. If slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of all the world. He cited the case of Greece Rome & other antient States; the sanction given by France England, Holland & other modern States. In all ages one half of mankind have been slaves. If the S. States were let alone they will probably of themselves stop importations. He wd. himself as a Citizen of S. Carolina vote for it. An attempt to take away the right as proposed will produce serious objections to the Constitution which he wished to see adopted.

General PINKNEY declared it to be his firm opinion that if himself & all his colleagues were to sign the Constitution & use their personal influence, it would be of no avail towards obtaining the assent of their Constituents. S. Carolina & Georgia cannot do without slaves...

Mr. RUTLIDGE. If the Convention thinks that N. C. S. C. & Georgia will ever agree to the plan, unless their right to import slaves be untouched, the expectation is vain. The people of those States will never be such fools as to give up so important an interest...