

“Injustice to the Southern States or Human Nature?”

Analyzing the debate surrounding the 3/5ths compromise

By Mark Foley, M.Ed., Urbana High School

American History Teachers Collaborative Summer Institute Lesson Plan 2008

Urbana School District – Urbana, Illinois

Abstract:

The issue of the representation of slaves in the United States Constitution led to some of the most heated debates of the Constitutional Convention. The roots of this debate, and the subsequent compromise, illustrate some of the key motivations for creating a constitution that can be viewed by our students as both brilliant and morally corrupt at the same time. In this lesson students will use James Madison’s Notes from the Constitutional Convention to analyze the 3/5ths compromise debates and summarize the different viewpoints about the representation of enslaved African-Americans. Students will then draw conclusions about the moral choices made by the founders in their pursuit of compromise and a unified government.

Essential Questions:

1. Why were slaves counted as 3/5ths of a person when the Constitution was created?
2. What was the role of compromise in the creation of the U.S. Constitution?
3. How did compromises affect the creation of the Constitution and thereby the history of the United States?

Assessment:

Students will demonstrate their mastery of the learning goals by:

1. Analyzing the notes from the debate and summarizing both sides in a +/- chart.
2. Writing a two-paragraph response which draws conclusions about the moral justifications for the 3/5ths compromise.
3. Including themselves in a class discussion of the quotes from Madison’s text and the compromise.
4. Correctly answering questions about the 3/5ths compromise and the debate surrounding it on formative and summative assessments.

Setting the Purpose:

As students enter the room, teacher should have “Number of Representatives in First United States Congress” graph projected. Ask students to open their notebooks and write down three things from the graph that they find intriguing.

After a couple of minutes of work time, teacher should lead a discussion about the graph, emphasizing the states with the most representatives, specifically Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Next, project “Total Number of White Citizens in Each Colony, 1790”. Ask students to compare this graph with the first graph and to draw conclusions through their comparisons. Why, for example, does Pennsylvania have more citizens than Virginia, but fewer Representatives? Why does New Hampshire, which has twice as many white citizens as Georgia, have the same number of Representatives (3)? What might explain these discrepancies?

Analysis of Primary Sources:

After introductory activity, place students in mixed-ability pairs and give each pair two copies of the excerpts from Madison's Notes on the Convention, and two copies of the +/- T chart. Project the +/- T chart and explain how students are to complete this assignment. Then project the first page of Madison's Notes and lead the class in a reading of the first page of the transcript. Help students with any confusing passages or words and carefully model how to summarize arguments in favor and opposed to the 3/5ths compromise. Check for understanding repeatedly, and ask students to begin working as pairs to read through the rest of the transcript and complete the T-Chart (could be assigned for homework).

After students have read through the transcript and completed the T-Chart, conduct a class discussion and complete a class T-Chart together, asking students to defend the points they make on either side of the chart with arguments or quotes from the source. When chart is completed, develop class summaries for each side of the debate, and discuss what happened during this debate. Was this a moral decision on the part of the founders? Why did they make this choice? Would you have made the same choice? Why or why not? What does this choice say about the advantages and disadvantages of compromise? What were the long-term effects of this compromise in American history?

Finally, ask students to complete the backside of the worksheet in class or for homework. Collect papers and analyze answers for understanding. Revisit this lesson if further clarification is needed.

Annotated list of materials and resources for the lesson:

1. Bar Graph 1: Number of Representatives in First United States Congress
2. Bar Graph 2: Total Number of White Population in Each Colony, 1790
3. 3/5ths Compromise T-Chart and Discussion Questions Worksheet
4. Transcript from Madison's Notes