

THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY: DIVERSITY

How Should We Judge Our Nation's Founders?

Overview

In this lesson, students read a short text that poses questions and describes differing viewpoints about honoring Founding Fathers of the United States, as well as other historical figures, who were slave owners. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation based on the reading. In this structured discussion method, under the guidance of a facilitator (the teacher), participants are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

Standards and Topics

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A
Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C
Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

Topics: Founding Fathers, slavery, historical memory

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Consider opposing arguments about how Americans should remember historical figures who were slave owners.
2. Participate in Civil Conversation, which will enable them to:
 - Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
 - Use close reading skills to analyze a text.
 - Present text-based claims.
 - Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.
 - Identify common ground among differing views.

Materials

Handout A: How Should We Judge Our Nation’s Founders? (one per student)

Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide (one per student)

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

- A. Ask students if they recall recent stories in the news that showed divided opinion about how the United States should remember significant figures from its history who were slave owners.

They may recall high-profile national debates and protests over the removal of statues of Confederate leaders, including the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 that resulted in the murder of counter-protester Heather Heyer; or they may have heard about the removal of other statues in cities like Durham (NC), New Orleans (LA), and Baltimore (MD). They may even have dealt with or heard about similar debates in communities closer to home, or in their own state.

- B. Tell students that today they will be looking at some of the arguments on either side of this issue; then they will have the chance to evaluate these positions reflecting first on their own and then in a small-group discussion.

II. Reading: How Should We Judge Our Nation’s Founders?

- A. Briefly provide students with an overview of the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the Overview above to help you.

Give each student a copy of **Handout A: How Should We Judge Our Nation’s Founders?**

- B. Civil Conversation Guide

Distribute a copy of **Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide** to each student to complete as they read. (Each student should fill in his/her own guide.)

III. Activity: Civil Conversation

- A. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.
- B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (You will know what’s best for your students, depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)
 - **Time:** Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with.

- **Small Groups:** This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group students who will use the same text together.
- C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation (listed under Step 3 on the Guide) and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the Guide to get started.
 - D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.
 - E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:
 - What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
 - What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
 - Ask all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.
- B. For assessment, look for the following on each student's Civil Conversation Guide:
 - Step 2 – A, B: Basic understanding of text.
 - Step 2 – C, D: Text-based arguments.
 - Step 2 – E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
 - Step 4 – A: Level of participation (should be “about the same as others”).
 - Step 4 – B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
 - Step 4 – C, D: Specificity/text-based.
- C. For additional assessment, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

How Should We Judge Our Nation's Founders?

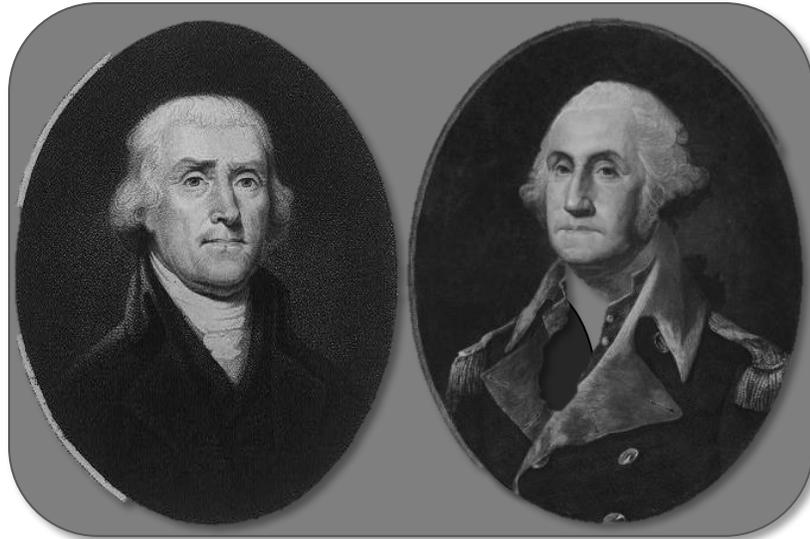
Every generation reinterprets history. People, events, and institutions from the past are continually examined and re-examined. Their meaning and importance often cause debate. One question that has emerged recently concerns slavery.

That “peculiar institution,” as our nation’s founders often referred to it, contradicted our creed of liberty for all. Slavery was an inherently cruel and unjust practice that treated human beings as property. This institution divided our nation and led to the Civil War, the bloodiest war in our history. It continues to affect us today as we grapple with issues of prejudice, racism, intolerance, and inequality in America.

The legacy of slavery forces us to confront this question: How do we judge the founders of our nation who owned slaves? Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and our third president, owned slaves. George Washington, revolutionary hero and first president, was one of the largest slave owners in the nation. James Madison, the prime architect of the Constitution and fourth president, held slaves. So did Patrick Henry, best remembered for saying “Give me liberty or give me death.” The same is true of George Mason, one of the most eloquent advocates for individual rights. In fact, 17 of the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention owned a total of about 1,400 slaves. Of the first 12 U.S. presidents, eight were slave owners.

These men have traditionally been considered national heroes. Buildings, streets, cities, schools, and monuments are named in their honor. Does the fact that they owned slaves change our perception of them?

Some people believe that it should. They find it difficult to respect anyone who participated in slavery. They point out that many of the founders recognized slavery as evil but continued to own slaves. Instead of fighting the evil, they argue, these men actively participated in and benefited from it.



Founding Fathers Thomas Jefferson (left) and George Washington (right) helped establish principles of democratic governance for the nation but also owned slaves, a practice that contradicted those principles.

Library of Congress

Many school districts throughout the South have changed the names of schools named for Confederate leaders who fought for the South in the Civil War. A school district in New Orleans, which has close to 90 percent black enrollment, has gone a step further. It has ordered the renaming of any school named after a slave owner.

This has meant that, in addition to changing schools named for Confederate leaders, schools named after other prominent slave owners have been renamed. George Washington Elementary

School is now Dr. Charles Richard Drew Elementary, named for a prominent black surgeon. Carl Galmon, a civil rights leader who led the call for these changes asked, “How can we expect African-American students to pay homage and respect to someone who enslaved their ancestors?”

Others question this view. They contend that by honoring someone, we are not claiming the person is 100 percent perfect. Everyone has flaws. They say we must judge all persons by the age they lived in and by their achievements, looking carefully at their strengths and weaknesses. They point out that the founders lived in a society that allowed slavery, as had many societies up to that point in history. To hold this against them, they argue, would be unfair. Taking George Washington as an example, they see him as a great man of his era: Although he held slaves (which he freed at his death), he contributed greatly to America gaining its independence and to making America a democracy.

For Discussion

1. In a diverse society like America, there will always be debates over who we should or should not honor. When it comes to the men who founded our nation, what standards should we use to judge them?
2. Can we honor them for their contributions to our nation, or is the stain of slavery too great?



This mural adorns the Charles Richard Drew Intermediate School in the Bronx, New York. Around 16 public K-12 schools nationwide are named for this celebrated black surgeon whose research helped develop blood banks during World War II.

Hugo L. Gonzalez/Wikimedia Commons, used under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license

CIVIL CONVERSATION GUIDE

Name: _____

Class: _____

Title of Reading: _____

Step 1: Read.

A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.

B. Re-read the selection and annotate (“talk to”) the text:

- Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
- Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
- Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a “?”.
- Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...	B. The MAIN POINTS are:
C. In the reading, I agree with:	D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

Step 3: Discuss and listen.

RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
3. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

You will have _____ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

At the end of the reading, you will likely find at least one discussion question. Use that question to get started. If time permits, you can also discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

If the reading does not provide discussion questions, choose questions to discuss from Section E.

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? ___ Less than, ___ About the same as, ___ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the Civil Conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)