Slavery Arguments

Pro- and Anti-Slavery Arguments 1830-1860
Pro and Anti-Slavery Arguments
The Political Argument

- The 1840s saw the continuing debate over the issue of slavery.
- This debate ushered in an era of politicization over the heated topic with the creation of several political parties and the proposal of slavery-related legislation.
- The political debate over slavery centered around the newly acquired territories—should slavery be permitted in the new territories?
- The country's politicians were divided over the issue with both sides fervently defending their stance.
Anti-Slavery Political Arguments

- Anti-slavery organizations had existed in America for some time, yet until the 1840's such organizations were not political by nature.
- This was to change in 1840 with the creation of the Liberty Party.
- Born out of a discontent with the famed abolitionist organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, the Liberty Party was determined to fight slavery through political means.
- Participating in presidential elections in both 1840 and 1844, the Liberty Party prominently placed the issue of slavery in the new territories in the forefront of American politics.
- The following document contains an excerpt from the Liberty Party Platform of 1844.
- "Resolved, That the party ... will demand the absolute and unqualified divorce of the General Government from slavery, and also the restoration of equality of rights, among men, in every State where the party exists, or may exist."
The expansion of the American territories grew considerably after the War with Mexico.

Concerned with ensuring prohibition of slavery in the newly acquired territories, David Wilmot, a politician from Pennsylvania proposed before Congress the Wilmot Proviso.

This provision called for a prohibition in the territories recently acquired from Mexico. While the Wilmot Proviso was passed by the House in 1846, it was rejected by the Senate.

"Provided that, as an express and fundamental condition to the acquisition of any territory from the Republic of Mexico by the United States, by virtue of any treaty which may be negotiated between them, and to the use by the Executive of the moneys herein appropriated, neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of said territory, except for crime, whereof the party shall first be duly convicted"
Daniel Webster, U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, also spearheaded a movement against slavery in Congress.

In 1848, Webster, discomforted by the idea of slavery extending into the new territories, issued a statement before the Senate in which he claimed that slavery laws, while legally binding in the states in which they were enacted, are merely local laws and have no bearing or legality in the new territories.

In this way, Webster hoped to rally others behind his essentially legal argument.

"It is a peculiar system of personal Slavery, by which the person who is called 'Slave'... I am not at the present moment aware of any place on the globe in which this property of man in a human being, as a slave transferable as a chattel, exists, except America."
The Free Soil Movement

• While successful as the first entirely anti-slavery political party, the Liberty Party lost both the 1840 and the 1844 elections.

• Determined to rally more people to their cause, the Liberty Party joined forces in 1848 with anti-slavery Democrats and Conscience Whigs to form a new political party, the Free Soil Party.

• The new party pushed strongly for the abolition of slavery in the new territories, rather than advocating for a general abolition of slavery throughout the country.
The pro-slavery political argument, like the anti-slavery argument, was essentially a legal and territorial one.

Concerned with the new territories, pro-slavery political leaders pushed for legislation which would permit slavery in said territories.

Focusing their argument on the rights of slave-holders to transfer their "property" (in other words, their slaves), to the new territories, the debates were heated.

Such arguments were born out of earlier political thought, provided largely by the influential Senator from South Carolina, John Calhoun.
The anti-slavery political sentiment growing within Congress was a cause for alarm amongst the pro-slavery political figures, particularly the Southern Democrats.

Southerners were especially enraged with the growing abolitionist sentiment embodied in the Wilmot Proviso.

In reaction, the outspoken and Senator from South Carolina, John Calhoun issued his "Southern Address".

The address, in defense of slavery, calls for a uniting of the southern states in order to defend what Calhoun deemed their "right" to own slaves.

The address seems to indicate that Calhoun, representing Southern interests, viewed the southern slave states as the actual victims of the northern abolitionists. Calhoun claimed the Proviso unconstitutional, ushering in debate concerning the constitutionality of anti-slavery laws in the new territories.
• Pro-slavery political debates during this time were led largely by an outspoken Senator from Illinois, Stephen Douglas.

• Douglas, like his colleagues, viewed the question from a geographical and territorial standpoint. The issue, argued Douglas, was one that should ultimately be decided by the people within that particular region, and not an issue to be decided by Congress.

• This notion, coined "popular sovereignty" placed slavery into the hands of the residents of the new territories.
The Economic Debate

- Economic debates over slavery abounded during the 1840's. As abolitionist sentiment grew, much attention began to be focused on whether slavery was beneficial or detrimental to the American economy.
- The argument was based largely on the concept of free versus slave labor.
- Free labor, argued anti-slavery groups, would be more economically sound in that it would encourage competition and foreign investment, as well as acting as a lure for immigrants.
- Slave labor, countered the pro-slavery groups, was the crux of the American economy, and without it, the economy was likely doomed to failure.
• The anti-slavery economic debate largely centered around the notion that slavery was actually a detriment to the economy of Southern states.

• In this way, slavery discouraged competition and did not allow for free and open trade with northern, anti-slavery states and businesses.

• Hinton Rowan Helper, a southern writer disparaged the institution of slavery in the south in his book entitled "The Impending Crisis of the South".

• In the book, Helper argues that the South need abolish the practice of slavery in order to further the economy of the southern states.
• The pro-slavery economic argument focused on the criticism of free labor.
• Free labor, slavery advocates argued, resulted in high costs, costs farmers would not be able to afford.
• A notable proponent of slavery from an economic standpoint was Edmund Ruffin, a farmer from Virginia.
• In his work entitled "Slavery and Free Labor Described and Compared", Ruffin concedes the long-term benefits of free labor, yet insists that the immediate shock would be too much for farmers to bear.
• Thus, the transition from slave to free labor would not be worth the initial impact it would cast on the economy.
Religious arguments against and for the institution of slavery have existed for some time.

Questions concerning the morality of slavery have plagued many an American; the undercurrent of every slavery debate seems to actually be centered on the moral ramifications of the institution.

The following sections are devoted to the often sensitive discussion of religious arguments for and against slavery.
The Religious Argument: The Pro-Slavery Position

- The pro-slavery religious position is mired in biblical interpretation which proponents see as a defense for the forced servitude of fellow human beings.
- While biblical interpretation has long been debated, the pro-slavery position asserted that because the Christian Bible lacked a clear and concise admonition against slavery, the institution was surely deemed appropriate.
- Advocates also argued based on precedence; ancient biblical texts contained passages in which religious leaders in antiquity owned slaves, thus contemporary forced servitude was deemed acceptable.
The following document provides excerpts from a sermon given by George Freeman, a Protestant minister and pro-slavery advocate. The words used by Freeman offer insight into the argument used by religious leaders to advocate for slavery.

"Slavery, it appears, is of great antiquity. It has existed in the world, in some form or other, even from the times immediately following, if not before the flood. It may be regarded as one of the penal consequences of sin--an effect of that doom pronounced upon the human race in consequence of the disobedience of our first parents, whereby perpetual labour was entailed upon man as the only means of sustaining life--"Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. In the swat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground."

"To such a state of things had the world advanced long before the establishment of the Mosaic Institutions. Subordination in society existed everywhere. Servitude was recognized as a necessary condition, and patiently, if not cheerfully, submitted to, in every variety of form. Patriarchs, or heads of families, held in subjection to their authority, not only the inferior branches of their respective tribes, together with their hired labourers and menials, but also servants "bought with their money," or "born in their houses"--that is, slaves.* (See Genesis xiv. 24, 25--svi. 6,90--xvii. 12. 13.)"
The next document provided comes from an essay by Thornton Stringfellow called "A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery".

Stringfellow, a Baptist pastor from Virginia, provided in his essay actual scriptural reference to what he perceived to be God's approval of slavery.

The excerpts below also provide insight into the commonly used religious argument as to the "Christian mercy" bestowed on slaves by their slave-holders.

Slavery, the argument goes, provided the Africans forced into America with exposure to Christianity. In this way, Christian slave-holders were saving the souls of their slaves.

"All the ancient Jewish writers of note, and Christian commentators agree, that by the "souls they had gotten in Haran," as our translators render it, are meant their slaves, or those persons they had bought with their money in Haran. In a few years after their arrival in Canaan, Lot with all he had was taken captive. So soon as Abraham heard it, he armed three hundred and eighteen slaves that were born in his house, and retook him. How great must have been the entire slave family, to produce at this period of Abraham's life, such a number of young slaves able to bear arms. Gen. xiv. 14."
The Religious Argument: The Anti-Slavery Position

- Protestant dissent to the institution of slavery came to prominence after the Second Great Awakening.
- This Protestant revival, while not exclusively anti-slavery by nature, did act as a catalyst for many anti-slavery Protestant voices to emerge.
- One such advocate of abolition was William Wilson, Chancellor of the Protestant University of the United States.
- Wilson, in the "The Great American Question", calls for an abolitionist movement to take the 1848 election, thus cleverly linking politics and religion.
- Claiming that "slavery is irreconcilably at war", Wilson calls on his fellow Protestants to practice the basic tenets of their Christian faith.
- Slavery, argued Wilson, goes directly against all that is taught in the Christian Bible.
"An Anti-Slavery Manual", published in 1851 and written by John Fee, admonishes the institution of slavery, yet provides a slightly different religious argument.

Fee, the son of slave-holders, argues against slavery in terms of sin.

Like Wilson, Fee felt that slavery was an affront to Christianity, yet asserted that slave-holders need abolish the institution of slavery for fear for their souls.

Hell awaits those that do not renounce slavery, an argument used by many fundamentals within the Christian faith.
The women's movement at this time was beginning to grow in prominence. Often partnered with the anti-slavery movement, the women's movement shared many tenets with abolitionists. Basic human rights and the notions of equality and equity were expounded, and many of the most famous figures of the women's movement were outspoken abolitionists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, outspoken social activist and framer of the famed "Declaration of Sentiments", issued at the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Conference in 1848 was one such abolitionist who linked the anti-slavery and women's movement.
Lucretia Mott, another outspoken abolitionist within the women's movement addressed many groups, forging a connection between the women's movement and the anti-slavery movement.

The connection, asserted Mott, centered around the subjugation of both women and Africans by the white man, a subjugation that was both unfair and immoral.

In 1849, Mott addressed a group of medical students. The sermon, poorly received by many in the audience, espoused the need for the abolition of slavery.

Mott reminded her listeners of their responsibilities as care-givers, admonishing those medical-providers who refuse service to Africans. Slavery, like the poor treatment of women, argued Mott, was immoral and it was up to the new generation to combat the evil.
The Anti-Slavery Argument: Former Slaves

- The anti-slavery debate consisted of many elements, none more compelling than the arguments provided by former slaves.
- Former slaves provided realistic accounts of the institution of slavery by shedding light on the plight of those bound to servitude.
- Henry Highland Garnet, a former slave from Maryland who escaped to Pennsylvania in 1824 went on to receive an education and began work as a pastor in New York.
- Garnet was an outspoken abolitionist and orator who delivered moving speeches on the inhumanity of slavery.
William Wells Brown, a former slave from Kentucky, was a prolific writer and abolitionist as well.

The preface from Brown's monumental "Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave", written by J.C. Hathaway, expounds the anti-slavery views of Brown.

Slavery, argues the author, was a disreputable institution and should be immediately abolished, based on the very nature of forced labor.

Brown's work describes an extremely difficult life, illuminating for the country the corrupt nature of slavery.
Perhaps the most well-known of all former slave abolitionists was Frederick Douglass.

A former slave from Maryland, Douglass escaped from slavery to become possibly the most famous writer and orator in the cause of abolition.

In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass describes his visit to England. The letter displays an interesting argument; the treatment Douglass received in England became a model for how American attitudes need evolve.

The primary argument provided by Douglass was that slavery was inhumane.