

Member, American Anti-Slavery Society

You are a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), an organization founded in 1833 to end slavery in the United States. Your members include both blacks and whites. To you, slavery is the central evil in American life. Of all the injustices, this one—that allows human beings to own other human beings and to treat them purely as property—is far and away the worst.

David Walker, the son of an enslaved father and a free mother, wrote a pamphlet in 1829, “Walker’s Appeal,” denouncing slavery. You were especially influenced by this pamphlet. Walker condemned the idea that somehow whites were inherently superior and had the right to control blacks: “God has been pleased to give us two eyes, two hands, two feet, and some sense in our heads as well as they. They have no more right to hold us in slavery than we have to hold them.” Walker insisted that slavery could not last forever: “Our sufferings will come to an end, in spite of all the Americans this side of eternity.” But the year after these words were published, Walker was found dead in Boston. Some think he was poisoned, as slaveowners had put a bounty on his head.

In 1831, there was an incident that shocked the nation and forced everyone to think about slavery. Nat Turner was an enslaved man who was a preacher. He led an uprising against whites in Southampton County, Virginia. About 70 enslaved people went from plantation to plantation killing whites—men, women, and children. In the end, about 60 whites and more than 100 blacks were killed. For slaveowners, the lesson was that they needed to crack down, and pass more laws restricting the freedom of slaves. For people like you, Turner’s revolt was just another piece of evidence that slavery is an evil that must be abolished.

But you know that slavery won’t disappear on its own. Slavery is a huge industry in America—indirectly in the North as well as directly in the South. Obviously, the people who benefit the most are the slaveowners, who get free labor to pick their cotton and do countless other tasks on their plantations. But there are others who benefit: textile manufacturers in the North who get cheap cotton, bankers, railroad companies, insurance people, owners of the ships that bring goods to and from the South. There is more money invested in slavery in the United States than in any other industry.

However, it’s one thing to oppose slavery and quite another thing to know what to do about it. There is sharp debate among abolitionists—people who want to end slavery. How can we end this enormous evil? That is the question we face.

Autobiography of an Abolitionist

How did you become an abolitionist? Write an autobiography describing the experiences that led you to dedicate your life to the fight against slavery. You can choose your gender, your age, your race, your social class, the region where you live. Give yourself a name and a history. Be imaginative and very detailed in your descriptions. Give yourself a history. Tell the story of the events that made you who you are: an anti-slavery activist.

Here are some possible general scenarios, but feel free to invent your own:

- Your father was a slaveowner. You witnessed firsthand the conditions of enslaved African Americans.
- You are an escaped slave. You know from your own experience the horrors of slavery. Every day of your life you can't stand the fact that people just like you are still in slavery, still being whipped, still being sold away from their families, still being abused—just because of the color of their skin.
- You are a free black living in the North. Although you personally have never been enslaved, you are mistreated in the North because of your race. This has sensitized you to the conditions of black people everywhere, especially those living in the South.
- Your parents were strong Christians. You absorbed their religious commitments, but were frustrated by the fact that they didn't act on their religious values when it came to the most important moral concern of our age: slavery.
- You worked on the docks in New Orleans, and witnessed slave ships coming into port. You watched slave auctions, saw families sold apart. Slowly you began to change.
- You are a white woman. You can relate to the conditions of slaves in America, because as a woman, even a white woman, you sometimes feel yourself to be a kind of slave: you can't own property, you can't vote, you can't speak in public, you are not allowed to attend any college in America. According to one court of law, you may be legally whipped by your husband to stop you from "nagging."

Role Play: Ending Slavery

American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1833

1. Situation: Earlier this century an organization formed called the American Colonization Society. The aim of this group is to free slaves and to pay for them to be relocated in Africa. Recently, people favoring colonization approached your organization. They have asked you to contribute funds to support buying some people out of slavery and sending them to Africa. They also would like to use your organization's name in their publicity.

Question: Will the American Anti-Slavery Society contribute funds for colonization and allow its name to be used in this effort?

Arguments: Some people believe that because slavery will not end on its own, we'll need to end slavery one person at a time, by buying their freedom. True, this won't end slavery as an institution, but it will end slavery permanently for those people who are freed and allowed to return to Africa. They also argue that because of all the racism in the North and the South, it will be important that freed black slaves have their own homeland in Africa. American prejudice is so deep that it will never be possible for blacks to live freely in the United States. Others disagree. They argue that "colonization" is ridiculous and a waste of time—that your organization needs to end slavery forever, not buy just a few people's freedom. Besides, if this plan "worked" and began to buy substantial numbers of people their freedom, the price of enslaved people would simply increase. Finally, they argue that most enslaved Americans were born *here*, not in Africa, and that people who are enslaved deserve their freedom here in the land that they worked so hard to build. And if there is discrimination here, then we must work to change it.

2. Situation: In addition to the horrors of slavery in the South, racial discrimination in the North is also a huge problem. There is segregation in the North, especially in schools. There are laws in the North against intermarriage. There are even some Northern churches that oppose slavery but don't allow blacks as members. Blacks are discriminated against throughout the North. Not a single state in the country treats people equally regardless of one's race.

Recently, some members have proposed that to protest racism in the North, the AASS leaders should not accept speaking engagements in churches that refuse to allow blacks to be members.

Question: a) Should the American Anti-Slavery Society spend time and money opposing racial discrimination in the North as well as slavery in the South? b) Specifically, should the AASS prohibit its leaders from speaking in churches that refuse to allow blacks to be members?

Arguments: People in favor of the AASS working to oppose racism in the North argue that our aim should be to fight racial prejudice wherever it occurs—that our deepest aim is not just to end slavery, but to end mistreatment based on race as well. They also argue that the more freedom our black members have, the more effectively they'll be able to oppose slavery. If we refuse to speak in churches that don't allow blacks to become members, it would send a powerful symbolic message that we stand against all racial prejudice. Others say: Yes, prejudice in the North is a problem. But it is a *separate* issue and could divide the anti-slavery movement. They argue that there are people in the North who oppose slavery but don't yet believe in equality for blacks, and that we need to keep the movement as broad as possible. People will change slowly, and we must allow that slow change to occur. They believe that if we refuse to speak in churches that discriminate against blacks, we are doing cutting ourselves off from people we need to reach with our anti-slavery message. One fight at a time, these people urge—first we get rid of slavery, then we deal with racial discrimination in the North.

American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1848

3. Situation: Many of the people in the Abolition movement are white women. As they work against slavery, they've come to realize how much they are discriminated against. Even in some anti-slavery gatherings, women are not allowed to speak or to be leaders. In almost every state, married women cannot own property. Husbands even control the wages earned by women outside the home. In almost every state, the father can legally make a will appointing a guardian for his children in the event of his death. Should the husband die, a mother can have her children taken away from her. In most states, it is legal for a man to beat his wife. New York courts have ruled that, in order to keep his wife from nagging, a man can beat her with a horsewhip every few weeks! Women are not allowed to vote in any state.

A number of prominent women—many of them active in the Abolition movement—have organized a women's rights convention for Seneca Falls, New York in July of this year. This will be the first time that women in the United States have organized a meeting to discuss the condition of women. Some of the organizers would like the American Anti-Slavery Society to endorse this gathering.

Question: Should the American Anti-Slavery Society publicly endorse this gathering?

Arguments: Those in favor argue that the abolition movement should stand against all oppression, including the oppression of women. They argue that women abolitionists would be more effective if they were allowed to speak publicly. Some supporters also believe that the women's rights movement would bring in many people who have not been active in abolitionist work, and that this could ultimately strengthen the movement against slavery. And besides, they argue, we're trying to build a society based on equality and free from all oppression. Others argue that this is nonsense, that this threatens to divide anti-slavery forces. They argue that without question, the greatest evil of our time is the enslavement of black human beings by white human beings, and that as bad off as

some white women have it, this discrimination cannot be compared with slavery. Opponents argue that associating the American Anti-Slavery Society with women's rights will confuse and divide our supporters—and will weaken the anti-slavery movement.

American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1850

4. Situation: In 1850, the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act and President Millard Fillmore signed it into law. The law made it much easier for slaveowners to recapture slaves who had escaped into free Northern states. In fact, it made it easier for slaveowners to capture free blacks and to claim that they are escaped slaves. The law denies a jury trial to anyone accused of escaping. The law requires the national government to prosecute any Northern whites who help slaves escape to freedom, or who harbor them. This is going to lead to a bunch of bounty hunters running around the North, looking for escaped slaves. And it will make all free blacks in the North more insecure. In short, this is a terrible new law that puts the U.S. government even more clearly on the side of the slaveowners. There is now no doubt: the slaveowners are determined to keep slavery forever, and to strengthen it.

In response, many people active in the American Anti-Slavery Society believe that we must also step up our efforts. Some of our members want to organize armed groups to protect escaped slaves and to prevent slave catchers and government officials from re-enslaving people. One strategy would be to organize—and to arm—large groups of people to resist the bounty hunters, and to attack the courts and jails where fugitive slaves are being held.

Question: Should we support armed attempts to stop the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act? If not, how should we respond to this new law?

Arguments: Those in favor of using force to stop this new law from being enacted insist that we have no choice; we can't allow the slaveowners to come into our communities and harm free people. Nonviolence won't work, they argue, because the law and the government is on the side of the slaveowners, and their side is more than willing to use violence. It's suicidal to urge nonviolence when the people against us are armed to the teeth. This law is a potential disaster for the anti-slavery cause, and we need to become even more militant. These people also argue that even if we fail to stop escaped slaves from being captured, our resistance will inspire others, and our resistance may also discourage the enforcement of the law. Those who oppose this strategy argue that whatever we do, we must not use violence. We can continue our educational work—writing, speaking out, and building opposition to slavery. True, slavery has not ended, but there are more people than ever before who agree that slavery is evil. We risk turning these people against our cause if we use violence. We need to do what we do best: educate against slavery. These people argue that if we were to use violence, this would actually play into the hands of the government and slaveowners. If the game is violence, the government is sure to win.

American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1858

5. Situation: Last year, in 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott case that the western territories of the United States may not prohibit slavery. Chief Justice Roger Taney, wrote for the majority of the Court that no black person in the United States had “any rights which the white man is bound to respect.” To many people in the Abolition movement, this means that slavery cannot be ended with laws or through nonviolence. There are more slaves in the United States than ever before—more than 4 million of them. And slavery is the country’s biggest business—yes, *business*—with slaves valued at more than \$4 billion. Slaves in the United States are worth more than all the banks, railroads, and factories put together. To think that slavery can be argued away seems more and more ridiculous.

There is one man in particular who argues for action, not talk. His name is John Brown. He led the fight to have Kansas admitted to the United States as a free state rather than a slave state—and he killed pro-slavery people in the process. Brown is now raising money—as much as \$25,000—to “continue my efforts in the cause of freedom.” You know that Brown intends to physically confront the forces of slavery, although you’re not sure exactly how. Privately, Brown has been asking AASS members to donate guns if they have them. You know that Brown has approached anti-slavery blacksmiths, asking them to make pikes—ferocious-looking double-edged blades attached to long poles. He also is raising money to hire a military instructor.

Question: Should you and other members of the American Anti-Slavery Society support John Brown with either money or guns? If not, what’s your alternative?

Arguments: People who support Brown argue that despite all the nonviolent work for almost 30 years, slavery is more entrenched than ever. They argue that the traditional tactics of the AASS have failed—that pamphlets, newspapers, speaking, and organizing meetings may have increased the number of Northerners opposed to slavery, but so what? You can win public opinion, but not end slavery. These people argue that slavery must be ended with force, and that Brown has the credentials from his time in Kansas to do the job. Well-targeted raids into the South could encourage slaves to abandon the plantations and run away, or even spark slave rebellions. These people argue that we can’t turn our backs on one of the bravest and most determined anti-slavery activists in the United States. Those opposed to Brown argue that it is foolish to think that a few armed opponents of slavery—even a small army—could go up against the U.S. Army and hope to succeed. What would this accomplish? It would be crushed by the military, and if the government discovered any links between Brown and the AASS, then it could lead to your organization being attacked by the government or even outlawed. No, they argue, we may not be sure what *will* end slavery, but we know that this *won’t* end slavery. Brown may be committed and brave, but that doesn’t make him right.

