

FOCUS QUESTION: Were abolitionist's responsible reformers or irresponsible agitators?

- Examine the strategies employed by various Abolitionists
- Evaluate the success of each in bringing about the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Frederick Douglass

The premier black abolitionist of the nineteenth century, Douglass was born a slave on Maryland's eastern shore. After his escape in 1838, he adopted his new surname to evade pursuit and began to forge his career as an orator, writer, and campaigner against slavery. By the time President Lincoln welcomed him personally to the White House on inauguration day in 1865, Douglass was arguably the most influential black man in America. While most famous for his "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, A Slave" published in 1845 the excerpts below demonstrate his tremendous gift for spoken word and come from two speeches.

"If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to freedom and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without plowing. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its might waters.

This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them; and these will continue till they have resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they suppress."

- **Frederick Douglass, 1857, *An address on West Indian Emancipation (3 August 1857) delivered at Canandaigua, New York***

"For a white man to defend his friend unto blood is praiseworthy but for a black man to do precisely the same thing is a crime. It was glorious for Americans to drench the soil and crimson the sea with blood to escape a threepenny tax upon tea; but it is a crime to shoot down a monster in defense of liberty of a black man and to save him from bondage one minute of which (in the language of Jefferson) is worse than ages of that which our fathers rose in rebellion to oppose."

- **Frederick Douglass, 1854, *Frederick Douglass' Paper, June 2, 1854. In response to the slaying in Boston of James Batchelder, a truckman serving as a U.S. Marshall who was killed during an attack by a crowd seeking to release Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave held in the Court House.***

William Lloyd Garrison from *To the Public*

*No sampling of the voluminous writings of William Lloyd Garrison could do justice to his importance in American history as a radical abolitionist. In 1831, in Boston, he launched *The Liberator*, the weekly paper that published thousands of pieces of abolitionist writing in every genre and was Garrison's primary vehicle for thirty-five years. In its inaugural essay, "To the Public," Garrison repents his prior gradualism, and vows to campaign relentlessly for immediate abolition.*

"...Assenting to the "self-evident truth" maintained in the American Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights—among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population. In Park-street Church, on the Fourth of July, 1829, in an address on slavery, I unreflectingly assented to the popular but pernicious doctrine of gradual abolition. I seize this opportunity to make a full and unequivocal recantation, and thus publicly to ask pardon of my God, of my country, and of my brethren the poor slaves, for having uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice and absurdity... My con-science is now satisfied.

I am aware, that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; —but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead..."

William Lloyd Garrison

Boston, January 1, 1831

Nat Turner from *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrections in Southampton, VA. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray*

These confessions were narrated to lawyer Thomas R. Gray in prison where Nat Turner was held after his capture on October 30, 1831. His confessions were published on November 5, 1831 for his trial.

[To the Public]

Thomas R. Gray: **“Public curiosity has tried to understand Nat Turner’s motives behind his diabolical actions. Everything connected with the rebellion was wrapped in mystery, until Nat Turner the leader of the violent and savage band, was captured. I was determined to end public curiosity and write down Nat Turner’s statements, and publish them, with little or no change, from his words.**”

Nathaniel Turner: **“As a child, I knew I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had showed me visions of things that had happened before my birth. My father and mother said I was intended for some great purpose. I was a child of uncommon intelligence and I knew I was never meant to be a slave. To a mind like mine, restless, curious and observant of every thing that was happening, religion became the subject that occupied all of my thoughts.**”

Thomas R. Gray: **“Nat Turner is a complete fanatic. The calm way he spoke of his late actions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm, still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him. I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.”**

Angelina Grimke from *An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States*

*Younger sister of the abolitionist Sarah Grimke, Angelina Grimke also left behind a life of privilege in the slaveholding upper class of South Carolina when she moved to Philadelphia in 1829 and joined her sister in the Quaker Community there. Her antislavery writing first found expression in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, published in the *Liberator* in 1835, and then in her pamphlet *An Appeal to the Christian women of the South* in 1836.*

“[PART] II. WOMEN THE VICTIMS OF SLAVERY”

“Out of the millions of slaves who have been stolen from Africa, a very great number must have been women who were torn from the arms of their fathers and husbands, brothers and children, and subjected to all the horrors of the middle passage and the still greater sufferings of slavery in a foreign land...They are our country women – *they are our sisters*, and to us, as women, they have a right to look for sympathy with their sorrows, and effort and prayer for their rescue. Upon those of us especially who have named the name of Christ, they have peculiar claims, and claims which *we must answer, or we shall incur a heavy load of guilt.*

Women, too, are constituted by nature the peculiar guardians of children, and children are the victims of this horrible system. Helpless infancy is robbed of the tender care of the mother and the protection of the father. “

Henry Highland Garnet from “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” (1843)

Garnet was born in 1815 a slave in Kent Country, Maryland but escaped with his parents and seven siblings in 1824, moving to Wilmington, Delaware and Bucks County, Pennsylvania to settle in New York City. In 1843 he delivered an address to the National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, NY. His passionate call for violent resistance was too much for even the staunch abolitionists as Frederick Douglass, and the convention voted 19-18, not to endorse the address.

“Brethren, the time has come when you must act for yourselves. It is an old and true saying that, ‘if hereditary bondmen would be free, they must them-selves strike the blow.’ You can please your own cause, and do the work of emancipation better than any others...Fellow men! Patient sufferers! Behold your dearest rights crushed to the earth! See your sons murdered, and your wives, mothers and sisters doomed to prostitution. In the name of the merciful God, and by all that life is worth let it no longer be a debatable question whether it is better to choose Liberty or death....Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and they days of slavery are numbered. You can be more oppressed than you have been – you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die free-men than live to be slaves. Remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS!...You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces and defile them before your eyes. In the name of God, we ask, are you men?..Let your motto be resistance! Resistance! RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.”

Henry David Thoreau, lecturer and author, from "Resistance to Civil government," (Civil Disobedience), 1849

Thoreau was an American author, poet, philosopher, naturalist, tax resister, surveyor, historian, leading transcendentalist, and abolitionist. He is best known for his book Walden, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay in which is excerpted below.

"There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both."

"Unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not... no-government, but... a better government..."

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right...

There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war [with Mexico] who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them...

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison... If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison or give up war and slavery, the state will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure... This is... the definition of a peaceable revolution."

Sojourner Truth from *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*

The famous black abolitionists and women's right advocate was born a slave named Isabella in Ulster County, New York and didn't rename herself Sojourner Truth until a pivotal moment of spiritual awakening in 1843. Illiterate but a gifted speaker, she dictated the narrative of her life to Olive Gilbert in 1850 and William Lloyd Garrison arranged for it to be published in Boston. In this passage from the Narrative, "Isabella" is the young Sojourner, helpless to relieve the miseries of her aged father's final destitution (dying).

"The last time she did see him, she found him seated on a rock, by the road-side, along, and far from any house...His hair was white like wool – he was almost blind – his gait was more a creep than a walk...he spoke in tones of anguish...'why should I live and not die?' Isabella, whose heart yearned over her father and who would have made any sacrifice to have been able to be with, and take care of him, tried to comfort, by telling him that 'she had heard the white folks say, that all the slaves in the State would be freed in ten years, and that then she would come and take care of him...' 'Oh, my child,' replied he, 'I cannot live that long...' And although they were too old and infirm to take care of themselves they eagerly accepted the boon of freedom, which had been the life-long desire of their souls – though at a time when emancipation was to them little more than destitution, and was freedom more to be desired by the master than the slave."

Harriet Beecher Stowe from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852

Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Harriet Beecher Stowe is the most famous anti-slavery novel ever written. Abraham Lincoln, when he met the author referred to her as "the little lady who started this big war." The following excerpt tells about how Tom is ordered by his owner, Simon Legree, to whip another slave named Lucy. Lucy has not been able to pick enough cotton, so Tom has been putting some of his cotton into Lucy's basket. Two other slaves inform Legree about this, and Legree orders Tom to whip Lucy. Tom refuses and is punished for his refusal.

"And now', said Legree, 'come here, you Tom. You see, I telled ye I didn't buy ye jest for the common work; I man to promote ye, and make a driver of ye; and to-night ye may jest as well begin to get yet hand in. Now, ye jest take this yer gal and flog her; ye've seen enough on't to know how.'

'I beg Mas'rs's pardon,' said Tom; 'hopes Mas'r won't set me at that. It's what I an't used to, --never did, -- and can't do, no way possible.'

'Ye'll larn a pretty smart change of things ye never did know, before I've done with ye!' said Legree, taking up a cowhide, and striking Tom a heavy blow across the cheek, and following up the infliction by a shower of blows.

'There!' he said, as he stopped to rest; 'now, will ye tell me ye can't do it?'

'Yes, Mas'r,' said Tom, putting up his hand, to wipe the blood, that trickled down his face. 'I'm willin' to work, night and day, and work while there's life and breath in me; but this yer thing I can't feel it right to do; -- and Mas'r, I never shall do it, -- never!'

Tom had a remarkably smooth, soft voice, and a habitually respectful manner, that had given Legree an idea that he would be cowardly, and easily subdued. When he spoke these last words, a thrill of amazement went through ever one; the poor woman clasped her hands, and said, 'O Lord!' and every one involuntarily looked at each other and drew in their breath, as if to prepare for the storm that was about to burst.

Legree looked stupefied and confounded; but at last burst forth, -- 'What! Ye blasted black beast! Tell me ye don't think it right to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what's right? I'll put a stop to it!'

Harriet Tubman from *The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, 1856*

Unlike other former slaves who wrote narratives of their lives, the famous abolitionist Harriet Tubman never did, and thus this short reflection is the only text to capture anything of Tubman in her own voice. A woman of action, she led scores of slaves to freedom as a guide on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, she volunteered as a nurse among the Union wounded, and she organized and led networks of black spies behind Confederate lines.

“I grew up like a neglected weed, - ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it. Then I was not happy or contented; every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away. I had two sisters carried away in a chain-gang, - one of them left two children. We are always uneasy. Now I’ve been free, I know what a dreadful condition slavery is. I have seen hundreds of escaped slaves, but I never saw one who was willing to go back and be a slave. I have no opportunity to see my friends in my native land. We would rather stay in our native land, if we could be as free there as we are here. I think slavery is the next thing to hell. If a person would send another into bondage, he would, it appears to me, be bad enough to send him into hell if he could.”

John Brown

On October 16, 1859, John Brown and nearly two dozen comrades seized the armory at Harper's Ferry in West Virginia, hoping to use its massive arsenal in the struggle to forcibly end slavery. Captured and brought to trial, Brown was found guilty of treason and sentenced to die. One month before his execution, John Brown addressed the courtroom in Charlestown.

"...In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted, the design on my part to free the slaves...That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

...I believe to have interfered as I have done, . . . in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it be deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit: so let it be done..."

Although initially shocked by Brown's exploits, many Northerners began to speak favorably of the militant abolitionist. "He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. . . .," said Henry David Thoreau in an address to the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts. "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature..."