

Rethinking the U.S. Constitutional Convention

A Role Play

BY BOB PETERSON

THE U.S. CONSTITUTION has been called one of the great documents of human history. In my own schooling, however, I recall the study of the Constitution as a source of great boredom. Sterile descriptions of the three branches of government dominated much of the study of that period each time I was cycled through American history—in 5th, 8th, and 10th grade. U.S. history textbooks gave the Constitution considerable space and probably share blame for the lifeless rendition of what was undoubtedly a very exciting time in our nation’s history.

It was only years later when I returned to the classroom as a teacher that I realized the Constitution’s importance and its potential as a learning tool. In fact, the study of the American Revolution and the struggle over the Constitution in my 5th-grade classroom helps set the basis for the rest of the year. I pose questions such as: Who benefited most (and the least) from the American Revolution? Who wrote and ratified the Constitution for the new nation? Who benefited most (and least) from the Constitution? Since the Constitution was finally ratified in 1787 how have people struggled



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Howard Chandler Christy’s painting, “The Signing of the Constitution,” can help students visualize the lack of racial or gender diversity at the Constitutional Convention.

to expand the democratic impulses of the American Revolution?

This article describes a role play that I use as part of my U.S. history curriculum on the American Revolution and the Constitution. It brings the above questions to life, energizes the class, and helps me assess my students' knowledge and skills. The structure of this role play and some of the parts are taken directly from a role play developed by high school teacher and Rethinking Schools editor Bill Bigelow. [See Bigelow's "Constitution Role Play: Whose 'More Perfect Union'?" at the <http://www.zinnedproject.org> site.]

I do this role play after my students have studied early European colonialism in the Americas (using many materials from *Rethinking Columbus*) and also the American Revolution. It could, however, be part of a government class, or just a stand-alone lesson, depending on students' background knowledge.

Students like this role play of the Constitutional Convention because it is done with a twist—we include many groups who were not invited to the original one in Philadelphia in 1787. In the role play, I divide the class into seven social groups, and have students focus on the key issues of slavery and suffrage. The groups negotiate among themselves to get others to support their positions, and then hold a debate and a final vote at a mock Constitutional Convention. The issues that students address in the role play are:

- Should slavery and the slave trade be abolished, and should escaped slaves be returned to their owners?
- Who should be allowed to vote in our new nation, especially what role should gender, race, and property ownership play in such a decision?

I have several objectives for students:

- To learn about the social forces active during and immediately following the American Revolution.

- To explore two burning questions that confronted the new American nation: slavery and suffrage.
- To develop strong oral presentation skills, including both persuasive and argumentative skills.
- To develop critical skills of examining arguments and social reality.

Setting the Stage

I start this mini-unit by showing an overhead or poster of a painting that depicts the Constitutional Convention (the one by Howard Chandler Christy works well [see p. 1], and in a pinch "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence" by John Trumbull is a passable substitute, given that the same types of people are represented). We then make a composite list of our observations. Students observe everything from the men's long hair, to "funny" pants, to most of them looking old, to the participants being white and male. I ask why they think only those people were involved in the writing of the Constitution. I explain

the importance and the difficulty of the task of writing a set of laws that would govern a new nation, especially considering that this was the first time in human history that a revolution had been won with the express purpose of having the governed—or at least some of them—involved in determining how they were to be governed. I explain that these people were wrestling with the difficult issues of slavery, taxation, suffrage, and how much power the federal government should have compared to the states.

I tell students that we are going to have our own constitutional convention to discuss some of these issues, but that we are going to invite groups of people who weren't invited to the real convention. I tell them that in addition to the southern slave owners and the northern merchants who attended the first Constitutional Convention, we

*I ask the students:
What do you think
might have happened
if other people were
really given a voice at
the convention?*

will invite white indentured servants, women of different nationalities and social classes, free African Americans, enslaved African Americans, and Iroquois. I describe the two issues we will focus on—slavery and suffrage.

I also mention that there are key vocabulary words for the role play. I go through the list and then have students, working in groups, write out individual definitions. For homework that night they finish their vocabulary sheets and practice the words. (The words include: unfair, just, justice, wealthy, property, merchant, trader, suffrage, Constitution, abolitionist, fugitive, convention, Bill of Rights, taxes, abolish, prohibit, resolve, indentured servant, slavery, Iroquois, and plantation owner.)

Explaining Each Group

The following day I review the words by having kids first in pairs and then in foursomes explain the words to each other. I observe how well the kids do and then as a whole group go over a few words that seem the most confusing. I then give mini-lectures on each of the seven groups and encourage students to take notes. I use the handouts and other materials as background. We discuss these roles drawing on what they've learned in our previous study of the American Revolution.

At the end of the lesson I explain the role play format. I then re-list the seven groups on the overhead and ask students to write down their top three choices. Then I divide the class into seven groups, trying to balance each group with strong readers, speakers, thinkers, and a racial and gender diversity. (In my classroom I also mix children by language dominance.) I attempt to place students in one of their top three choices.

Brainstorming in Groups

I post the categories in the morning so that if any changes need to occur, they can be negotiated by that afternoon. In the afternoon I review the format and explain what the groups will have to

do to prepare for the role play. Each group is to read over the explanation of their positions (see pp. 6-13) and then decide how they are going to argue their case on slavery and suffrage. I explain that my expectation is for each group to brainstorm a list of arguments they can use during the role play. I give them a manila folder with enough copies of the “position” paper for each group member, one copy of a brainstorming sheet, and additional reading materials. I explain that one person should write down the group's ideas, but that soon each person will have to write his or her own speech. I encourage them to use other sources to find additional background information about their group.

If there is time, I bring students back together as a whole group and ask for an argument that they think can be used either to support or oppose slavery or the right to vote for a certain group. I write that argument down on the overhead and ask if anyone can think of a counterargument. I then ask for a counter-counterargument. In this way I try to get children to think more critically about their positions and anticipate opposing arguments. For example, in the past students have argued that slavery is necessary to produce cotton and tobacco, two items essential to the well-being of the nation. Countering this, students have argued the “well-being” should include everyone; and that even if the nation as a whole benefits it doesn't warrant enslaving a whole race of people. At the end of the lesson I collect the manila folders.

Alliance-building

As a prelude to the role play, I have the students engage in an “alliance-building” session in which they make arguments and try to win groups over to their positions. I explain that the purpose of this session is to sharpen their arguments and thinking skills and to seek alliances with other groups. One or two designated “negotiators” from each group travel to other groups to seek alliances around the issues that will be debated at the convention. The negotiators wear 4-by-6 cards identifying their group and their role as

a negotiator. The other students sit grouped together with signs identifying their group. This exchange of ideas whets students' appetite for more conversation and further encourages them to start thinking about arguments and counterarguments. It should also help them become clearer as to what they want to put in their speeches. The length of this alliance-building session varies according to each class. Sometimes I bring people together and we briefly discuss how the session went. Other times I go immediately into the next activity of creating speeches.

Preparing Individual Speeches

I review what we did previously and tell the students that in their groups they will each write a speech about one or both of the two key questions: "Should slavery be abolished?" and "Who should have the right to vote?" I say that they must first introduce themselves (as either a fictitious or real historical figure), tell a little about who they are, and then present their arguments. I prepare a formatted sheet with headings for each student to help facilitate this process. I model writing one speech for one individual in the class (usually one with weak English language skills so he or she can get a jump start on the task). (A prototype of the blank speech form I use is available online at <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/roc2>.) I encourage them, when possible, to choose real people who fit the category of their group, reminding them that examples (both fictitious and real) are contained in the original statements that they received earlier.

Students then work in groups writing their individual speeches. I circulate to help where needed. After about a half hour I have one or two people present their speeches in front of the class. We give positive feedback and constructive suggestions. For homework that night the students are to finish writing their speeches, rehearse them and ask an adult for feedback and suggestions.

Practicing Speeches and Final Preparations

I usually have the students practice their speeches in pairs or in their entire group once or twice before the final role play. Sometimes I have students make signs or posters for their group, highlighting their main concerns. I ask them to develop questions to counter arguments that they anticipate will be made against their positions. At the end of this session I call the groups together and have a few people present at least part of their opening statement. I also pull out my drama box and show some possible hats and vests that students might wear, which usually animates kids to think of what they might bring from home to dress the part. (Using props in role plays is tricky—on

the one hand it can stimulate genuine student interest, on the other hand it can distract them from the real purpose of the project, and may even contribute to stereotyping.) I explain how the class will be rearranged so that delegations sit together. I also tell students that I will assess their work by the content of their opening statements, their interactions, and their behavior. I explain that I won't permit any put downs or insults of individuals or groups,

but that one can be very critical of the ideas of individuals or groups. Homework is to practice their presentations and to think up two arguments and counterarguments for at least one of the two issues.

The Role Play

During lunch time the day of the role play I have some students rearrange and decorate the room (with red, white, and blue crepe paper). We group the desks according to the number of students in each delegation and affix the group's sign. We decorate the school podium and hang a banner "Constitutional Convention—Philadelphia, 1787." I have students go to their places and put

These conflicts of exclusion and power are what make studying U.S. history and learning from the past so important.

on their costumes if they have something to wear.

I introduce the role play and act as chair. I start by thanking everyone for attending this historic convention, quickly introduce the delegations, and then repeat the two burning questions:

- Should slavery, as well as the entire slave trade, be abolished, and should escaped slaves be returned to their owners?
- Who should be allowed to vote in our new nation, and especially, what role should gender, race, and property ownership play in such a decision?

I explain that the meeting will consider each question separately, and that we'll debate one after another. I restate the first question and then ask for comments. Once a representative has spoken, I allow feedback in the form of questions and counter-statements. When I feel that students have thoroughly debated the slavery question, I cut it off and ask for a group to make a formal proposal for what our constitution should say about the issue. Sometimes we vote on the issue right then; other times, I wait for all the voting to take place at the end of the convention. I then pose the second question. At the end I ask for another formal proposal. I allow for closing arguments.

During the role play I take notes—including a tally of who speaks and key arguments and rebuttals. At the end, I distribute written ballots for everyone to vote—in character. While two people count the ballots in the hall, the rest of the students reflect on the experience by writing on questions such as: What did you learn from your participation in the role play and the preparation? Given the different social groups in the United States at the time what do you think might have happened if other people were really given a voice at the convention? In what ways did the arguments at our class convention remind you of controversies in our community, nation, or world today? (For a sample, visit the Rethinking Schools website at <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/roc2>). I also encourage them to write additional reflections in their journal during the next journal time.

Follow-up

Sometimes I have a students videotape the role play. This makes the role play seem all the more special and occasionally helps them realize why only one person should speak at a time. However, it has the disadvantage of requiring time on my part to edit or choose sections of the role play to show—as re-showing the whole thing is not a valuable use of class time.

On the day following the role play I have students reflect in groups and as a whole class. We focus on two aspects: content and process. In terms of process, we talk about how such role plays could be improved; how we can encourage broader participation; how arguments can be more effective. In terms of content, we compare our convention with what really happened in 1787. Students naturally think it is not fair that such an exclusive group of people crafted the Constitution. (See the handout written by Bill Bigelow, “Who Wrote the Constitution?” available at www.zinnedproject.org, for a listing of who actually attended the Constitutional Convention and their social positions.) I point out that it has been precisely these conflicts of exclusion and power that make studying U.S. history and learning from the past so important. I explain that throughout the rest of the year we are going to examine other exciting conflicts in which those who have been excluded and oppressed throughout history—working people, women, enslaved African Americans, Native Americans, and others—fought, sometimes to the death, for their freedom. ■

This article is offered free to the public as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials.

For more information:

Rethinking Schools
www.rethinkingschools.org
800-669-4192

Teaching for Change
www.teachingforchange.org
800-763-9131

White Workers/Indentured Servants

YOU ARE SHOEMAKERS in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. Before this you were indentured servants for seven years. (At the beginning of the Revolution there were 200,000 indentured servants in the colonies.) You came to the 13 colonies from England because you were promised a good life. In order to pay for your boat trip here, you agreed to work for a wealthy person for seven years for no pay. It was a hard seven years. You were almost like slaves, although your white skin allowed you freedom. Because of your experience as indentured servants, you understand more what it must be like to be a slave. You don't think anyone should have to be a slave or servant to anyone else.

You have families with small children. You barely make enough money to live. You want the right to vote so that you can make sure that the government represents people like you, and not just rich people. The rich are the ones who should pay more taxes, not poor and working people.

You fought in the Revolutionary Army, unlike the rich plantation owners or the bankers who either sent their sons or paid someone else to take their place. You didn't do it for the money. In fact, the government didn't pay you in money. They gave you IOUs, which weren't worth anything.

Now that there is talk about writing a new constitution, you're concerned about how the new government will deal with people like you who are poor and own no property. You've also heard

that some people at the Constitutional Convention don't even want to allow people like you to be able to vote in elections. No property, no vote, they say. Who do they think they are? When people were dying in the war, it was the farmers and workers who did most of the bleeding, not the rich plantation owners, bankers, and merchants.

Questions for Thought

1. How do you make your living?
2. What are some of the similarities between being an indentured servant and being enslaved? What are the differences?
3. If a runaway slave appeared at your home, what would you do? What is your position on slavery?
4. Who should have the right to vote?

Possible Historical Figures:

Very few have been recorded in historical records. Please make up your own name.

Additional Reading:

Hansen, Joyce. *The Captive*. Scholastic, 1994. In this fictionalized account inspired by the capture and enslavement of Olaudah Equiano, Olaudah befriends a white indentured servant and they escape together.

Enslaved African Americans

THE YEAR IS 1787. Eleven years ago the Declaration of Independence stated that, “all men are created equal.” And yet because your skin is black, and you were born in slavery, you still remain enslaved. Obviously the American Revolution didn’t mean freedom for everyone. In fact the man who wrote those words in the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, is himself a Virginia slave owner. And the man who led the Continental Army, George Washington, is also a slave owner. There are about 700,000 enslaved Africans in the new United States.

Your life in slavery is harsh. Up when the sun rises, you must work until it is dark. Then there are more chores when you return from the fields. You are under constant control by your master, though with your family you have tried to make the best out of your life. However, you know the owner could sell you to South Carolina or wherever he wanted, away from your family, if he felt like it.

The Constitutional Convention raises the possibility of freedom. Slavery might be outlawed. A number of states in the North have already abolished slavery, and there is much talk about abolishing the slave trade—the bringing of new enslaved Africans into the country. Thousands of enslaved people have been allowed to buy or earn their freedom in Virginia in recent years. Maybe slavery will not be outlawed in every state, but perhaps slaves would be allowed to keep their freedom if they escaped into a free state. True, the Revolution didn’t really free you, but the talk of liberty and justice makes you want your fair share.

Questions for Thought

1. What things worry you?
2. What do you hope the Constitution will do for you?
3. Who do you think should have the right to vote?

Possible Historical Figures

Slaves who fought for the Americans became free after the war, so there are few records of slaves in 1787. Please make up your own name.

Additional Reading

American Revolution (Voices in African American History series) by Sharon Harley and Steven Middleton, Modern Curriculum Press, 1994.

“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (speech by Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852).

Black Heroes of the American Revolution, by Burke Davis. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

(For teacher reference: *Chronology on the History of Slavery*, by Eddie Becker, 1999. Includes hundreds of websites: <http://innercity.org/holt/slavechron.html>.)

Free African Americans

YOU ARE FREE AFRICAN AMERICANS. There are over 59,000 of you in the 13 colonies. (Unfortunately, there are nearly 700,000 enslaved African Americans!) You know that African Americans—both free and enslaved—make up 20 percent of all the non-Native American people in the colonies. And yet you have virtually no rights:

- You are not allowed to own property in many of the 13 colonies.
- You are not allowed to vote.
- You are not allowed to speak in court.
- You are not allowed to serve on a jury of any kind.
- You are not allowed to attend most schools.

Even though you are free, if a slave catcher catches you and takes you back to the South or sends you to the Caribbean, it would be very difficult for you to prove that you are free. Some people argue that the Constitution should allow slave owners to come into Northern states where there is no slavery and take runaways back South. The “runaway” may be you—even though you are free. If slavery exists anywhere in the United States, it is a threat to free African Americans, such as yourselves.

Over 5,000 African American men fought in the Revolution. They were promised their freedom if they fought. After the war, some of them were not given their freedom and had to fight their former owners to get it. Remember that the first American killed by the British in the War was Crispus Attucks—whose father was African and whose mother a member of the Massachusetts (Indian) tribe. He was killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770. African Americans have petitioned the

government to end slavery. And between 1780 and 1786, the states of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey passed laws against slavery.

Questions for Thought

1. Did most Africans want to be brought to the United States?
2. What role did Africans—enslaved and free—have in creating the wealth of the 13 colonies?
3. What arguments can you use to convince people to oppose slavery?
4. Who do you think should have the right to vote? Why?

Possible Historical Figures

Phyllis Wheatley, Peter Salem (fought at Bunker Hill), William Lee (aide to General Washington), Oliver Cromwell (with Washington at Delaware).

Additional Reading

Black Heroes of the American Revolution, by Burke Davis. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

“Essay on Slavery,” by Caesar Sarter, August 17, 1774. From *The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet*, available on the Rethinking Schools website at www.rethinkingschools.org/roc2.

“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (speech by Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852).

Excerpts from “Appeal,” by David Walker, September 28, 1829, online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2931t.html>.

White Women

YOU LIVE IN BOSTON. Some of you are married to men who fought in the Revolution. Some of you are widows because your husbands were killed in the war. You and your women friends organized in favor of the American Revolution. Women built the organization “Daughters of Liberty,” which organized campaigns to refuse to buy British products. Abigail Adams was one leader of such activities. During the war many women continued their support of the Revolution through “Ladies Associations.” They donated clothing and medical supplies to the Continental Army led by George Washington. In Philadelphia alone, the Ladies Association collected about \$300,000 in Continental money. The money was used to buy shirts for the soldiers. The women organized sewing circles throughout the colonies to spin, weave cloth, and make clothing for troops. They also passed resolutions supporting the rebel cause and pledged not to do business with merchants who imported British goods or didn’t support the Patriots’ cause. On one occasion 500 Boston women held a protest against a merchant found to be hoarding coffee.

The women also kept the country going. While their husbands were off fighting the war the women kept small businesses open, kept the farms running, and took care of the children. You know that some women actually fought in the Revolution. Deborah Sampson fought in the army. Others like Lydia Darragh acted as spies. Why shouldn’t women benefit from the Revolution if they helped with it?

You also know that you pay taxes when you buy certain things. Wasn’t one of the main issues of the Revolution “no taxation without representation”? Right now in many ways you are little more than the property of your husbands or fathers. Even a decade after the Declaration of Independence you don’t have the right to do many things, just because you are a woman:

- You do not have the right to vote.
- You do not have the right to own property.
- You do not have the right to speak in court.
- You do not have the right to be a member of a jury in court.
- You do not have the right to be a government official.
- You do not have the right to go to most high schools and colleges.

In 1776, Abigail Adams wrote the following to her husband, John Adams:

Remember the Ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, no representation.

Questions for Thought

1. Should you have the right to vote? Why?
2. How is the position of women in our nation similar to that of being enslaved? How does it differ?
3. What do you think of slavery and the slave trade?

Possible Historical Figures

Abigail Adams, Deborah Sampson, Lydia Darragh.

Additional Reading

Hoobler, Dorothy and Thomas. *The Sign Painter's Secret: The Story of a Revolutionary Girl*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Silver Burdett Press, 1991. [The story of Annie Laurie MacDougal.]

McGovern, Ann. *Secret Soldier: The Story of Deborah Sampson*. New York: Scholastic, 1975.

Silcox-Garrett, Diane. *Heroines of the American Revolution*. Chapel Hill, NC: Green Angel Press, 1998.

Terrana, Joan Barton. "Remember the Ladies: Abigail Adams," in *Cobblestone Magazine*. November 1993.

Male Southern Plantation Owners

YOU LIVE IN VIRGINIA and are tobacco planters. Your family owns about 30 black slaves and you are quite wealthy. Your wealth, however, depends on your slaves. Slaves do all the hardest work. They plant, harvest, dry, pack, and load the tobacco to get it off for sale. You wouldn't know where you'd get people to do the work if you had no slaves.

From time to time a slave will run away. You hire a slave catcher and usually the runaway is brought back. Sometimes the slaves get up into the North before they're caught. But slaves are your property, and fortunately you usually get them back.

The American colonies defeated Great Britain in the Revolution but there are still lots of problems. One problem is that there is a lot of protest from the common people, the "rabble"—the poor farmers, the unemployed, and workers in the towns and cities. Up in the state of Massachusetts, Daniel Shays led a rebellion against the government and large property owners. As property owners yourselves, when these people talk about "equality" you wonder if they mean to take away your property so you'd be equal to them! These people scare you. In some places they're even allowed to vote and run for office. Sometimes they make laws that threaten the safety of private property: your property.

Questions for Thought

1. How do you make your money?
2. How do you feel about slavery?
3. Do you think that you should have the right to go to northern states and get your property (slaves) if they try to run away?
4. How do you feel about the common people?

Possible Historical Figures

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison.

Additional Reading

Olds, Bruce. "Slave Owner's Lament" in *Raising Holy Hell, A Novel of John Brown*. New York: Penguin, 1995, pp. 61-62.

Dudley, William (Ed.). *Slavery: Opposing Viewpoints*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1992.

Currie, Stephen. *Slavery*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1999.

Northern Merchants and Bankers

YOU ARE RICH. Some of you own ships, some own mills, and some own banks. You were strong supporters of the Revolution because the British didn't let you trade and make deals with countries other than Britain. Now you can trade with the French, the Dutch, the Spanish, and Portuguese. You are getting richer and richer. While you didn't fight directly in the battles, your son served as a leader in the Continental Army (George Washington's army).

While you are not as set in your ways as the southern plantation owners, you still have many questions regarding who should vote and how slavery should be handled. While slavery may not be OK in Boston, the South is different. The slaves in the South harvest the tobacco you smoke and the cotton that comes to your mills. If it wasn't for them you wouldn't be so well off.

Very upsetting things have been happening recently. Many state legislatures have passed laws allowing "debtors"—people who owe money—to pay their debts "in kind" with corn, tobacco, or other products whether or not they may be of any value. In other words, a banker might lend \$100 and get paid back two cows and a bushel of

corn. That's outrageous! There is very little respect for property anymore. The state legislatures have entirely too much power. Maybe if all those poor people didn't vote, this kind of unfairness would not happen.

You were educated in school and speak English and French. You believe in democracy and the right to vote, but really only for those who have the schooling and money that give them the knowledge and time to understand the issues.

Questions for Thought

1. How do you make your money?
2. Why might it be against your interests if lots of people could vote?
3. How do you benefit from slavery and slave trade?

Possible Historical Figure

John Hancock.

Native Americans: Iroquois Nation

YOU ARE MEMBERS of the great Iroquois League of Nations. You live with your families in a Seneca village on the Genesee River in New York. You live in a longhouse with your families and grandparents. You have attended the Grand Council—the meeting of leaders from the original Five—now Six—Nations of the Iroquois. At that council the leaders tried to solve their differences peacefully. The American War of Independence changed all that. Some of the Iroquois—the Oneida and Tuscarora Nations—generally supported the Americans. But many Iroquois—under the leadership of Mohawk Chief Joseph Bryant and Seneca Chief Red Jacket—fought on the side of the British. They were so angry at the Americans for taking their land that they hoped that the British would win, and the Americans would no longer be able to steal Iroquois land. Even though you fought on the British side, you feel people at the Constitutional Convention should listen to you and your ideas for several reasons:

- Some members of the Iroquois Nation met Benjamin Franklin many years ago when Franklin was a young journalist who made a study of the Iroquois governmental system. Franklin was impressed with the fine workings of democracy among the Iroquois—with its checks and balances among different “branches” of government. Franklin was so impressed that he drew up a similar plan for the 13 colonies (called the Albany Plan) but few people paid attention to it. The Iroquois’ “League of Nations” has six tribes or nations. The government of the Iroquois includes three parts—executive, an assembly, and a judicial system. That’s the same as the proposal that the new United States government have a President (executive), a Congress (an assembly), and a court system (the judicial system). A key difference is that the Iroquois allow all people to vote, and in fact, women are the ones who run your court system—the ones who make the final decision when there is a disagreement.
- The American settlers have taken much of your land. They have paid you almost nothing. They keep breaking treaties. They say they won’t take any more land and then a few years later settlers start moving in. You need the right to vote in order to get laws passed to protect Native Americans.
- You have suffered under the armies of George Washington. During the War of Independence, Washington was angry at Iroquois support for the British and so he ordered an army into Iroquois lands specifying that it should “not merely be overrun, but destroyed.” The American army was to scorch the earth, and they did—burning towns, stealing things, uprooting crops, chopping down orchards, slaughtering cattle, and destroying grain supplies. He ordered the destruction of your villages and the killings of women and children.
- You know that your Native American relatives have suffered as slaves ever since the time Columbus came to this part of the world. The Europeans eventually decided

not to use Indians for slaves because you could run away so easily—you knew the land. Plus, by using Africans, their black skin was a way to identify them as property.

Questions for Thought

1. Whose land is this?
2. Why should you have rights even though you fought against the Americans in the War of Independence?
3. Who should be allowed to vote and why?

Possible Historical Figures

Red Jacket, Joseph Bryant.

Additional Reading

“George Washington: An American Hero?” in *Rethinking Columbus*, 2nd edition, pp. 56-57.

(For teacher reference: Johansen, Bruce E. *Forgotten Founders: How the American Indian Helped Shape Democracy*. Boston: Harvard Common Press, 1982.)