

## Two Views of the Relationship of Church and State

### Overview:

The American Revolution ushered in a dramatic shift in the relationship of church and government. In the American colonies, a majority (nine of thirteen) had official churches established by the government. The effects of established churches tended to affect individual rights and liberty negatively as citizens were required to pay taxes to support a denomination other than their own, attend services in the official church, and were banned from holding office by religious tests. The established churches in the colonies also tended to foster repression of religious minorities, who were often banned from preaching, were jailed for their beliefs, or suffered violence.

In 1776, with the adoption of the Declaration of Independence and state constitutions with bills of rights, an immediate change occurred. Religious liberty was seen increasingly as an inalienable right of all humans and at odds with established churches. Some state constitutions disestablished their churches, some states stopped collecting taxes for the established churches, and much of the former repression ended. Over the next few decades, the established churches of the original thirteen colonies would all topple in favor of religious liberty for citizens of all beliefs about religion.

In 1791, the Bill of Rights was ratified including the First Amendment with its guarantee that the Congress could not create a national establishment of religion. State establishments of religion were not considered unconstitutional and continued to exist for four decades after the First Amendment. However, the general trend was for states to disestablish their official churches voluntarily as the movement for religious liberty continued to grow. The national debate over “separation of church and state” would be reignited after World War II especially by the Supreme Court especially over prayer in local schools, but the debate was rooted in the American Founding.

### Objectives:

Students will:

- Read and discuss the founding documents related to the relationship of church and state.
- Compare and contrast the eras in which states disestablished their official churches.
- Compare and contrast the views of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson regarding their understanding of the relationship between church and state through analyzing documents and scenarios.

### Materials:

Handout A: The Relationship of Church and State in America

Handout B: Quotes from the Founding about the Relationship of Church and State

Handout C: Map of Disestablishment in the United States

Handout D: George Washington, “Farewell Address”

Handout E: Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to the Danbury Baptists”

Handout F: Scenario Cards

### Lesson Plan

**Background/Homework:** [15 minutes]

- A. Have students read **Handout A: The Relationship of Church and State in America.**

## DAY ONE

### Activity I

- A. Prior to class, make posters of the passages on **Handout B: Quotes from the Founding about the Relationship of Church and State**, and post them around the room.
- B. Have students go around the room, read the quotes, and write whether the quote supports a close relationship between church and state or whether it supports a separate relationship between church and state.
- C. Assign students to pairs; have them compare and discuss their answers.
- D. Ask students to share their answers and discuss the differing views the Founders had regarding the proper relationship of church and state and of religion in the public square.

### Activity II

- A. Students will color the map on **Handout C: Map of Disestablishment in the United States** to show when each state disestablished its official church.

### Wrap-Up

- A. After the students have filled out their maps, have students complete the questions at the bottom of the map and discuss as a class.

## DAY TWO

### Activity III

- A. Divide the class into two groups. Half the class will read **Handout D: George Washington, "Farewell Address,"** and the other half will read **Handout E: Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to the Danbury Baptists."**
- B. Each group of students will write a five- to ten-sentence paragraph answering the guiding questions on their respective handouts exploring the relationship between church and state.
- C. Pair the students up with a partner who read and completed the other handout. The partners will compare and contrast the views of Washington and Jefferson regarding the relationship of church and state.
- D. Choose groups to report on the differences and similarities regarding the views of the two Founders OR have the groups write a brief role play debating the views of Washington and Jefferson.
- E. Ask students the following questions:
  1. How do Washington and Jefferson differ in the proper amount of government involvement in promoting religion?
  2. Even though there are differences regarding the proper amount of government involvement in promoting religion, explain how both men then agree that the government must not violate freedom of conscience?

### Wrap-up

- A. Distribute a card to each group from **Handout F: Scenario Cards** and have them assess how Washington and Jefferson might have responded to the scenario based upon their views from **Handouts D** and **E**. Discuss the scenarios with the entire class.
- B. As a large group, discuss the questions:
  1. Did Thomas Jefferson use the principle of "separation of church and state" to keep religion out of the public square or to protect freedom of conscience?
  2. What role for religion did the Founders unanimously agree upon in a republic?
    - a. To what extent did the Founders agree on the concept of religious liberty for all?

**Homework**

- A. Have students write a paragraph analyzing what they think is the proper relationship between government and religion in today's society. Students should defend their answers with evidence.

**Extension**

- A. Have students go the Library of Congress online exhibit: Religion and the Founding of the American Republic and examine the documents in "Religion and the State Governments" and "Religion and the Federal Government." Then, have students develop a chart of arguments for and against government involvement in religion.  
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel06.html> .

## A

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH & STATE IN AMERICA

Most governments in colonial America were closely tied to official churches. Americans followed the model inherited from Europe. In most colonies, religious minorities were persecuted for their beliefs and suffered violation of their essential liberties. The ideals of the American Revolution and Founding led to a movement to disestablish, or remove the preferential treatment for, those official churches. Disestablishment at the state level began with North Carolina in 1776. At the national level, the First Amendment protected religious liberty and limited government's role to the protection of that right. Even so, the issue of the proper relationship between the government and religion in America continues to be debated into the twenty-first century.

Throughout the history of the American colonies, religious minorities experienced persecution for their religious beliefs. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were banished from Massachusetts for their unorthodox beliefs. A few Quakers in Massachusetts were executed for their religious beliefs. Maryland severely curtailed the civil liberties and religious practices of Roman Catholics after the Glorious Revolution of 1689. In Virginia, the government and established Anglican Church persecuted Baptists during and for decades after the Great Awakening. Baptist preachers could only preach with a license and were arrested, fined, and physically assaulted. They were whipped and ritually dunked in a "mock baptism" to the point of near drowning. Such actions in early 1774 shocked a young James Madison, who wrote to a friend: "Persecution rages among some and to their eternal infamy . . . There are at this in the adjacent County not less than 5 or 6 well meaning men in close Goal [jail] for publishing their religious Sentiments . . . [I] pray for Liberty of Conscience to revive among us." In colonial America, dissenters could usually attend their own religious services but often had to pay

taxes to support the official church and sometimes the law required them to attend the established church.

The principles of liberty and limited government led five states to disestablish their churches by the mid-1780s. In Virginia, the Declaration of Rights claimed the right of conscience, and taxes to the established church were suspended. In 1784, Patrick Henry proposed the Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers [Ministers] of the Christian Religion for a general tax that would allow citizens to choose a Christian church to receive their support, or the money could go to a general fund to be distributed by the state legislature. Henry proposed the bill to support religion because religion promotes morality, virtue, and social order essential to self-government. Supporters included George Washington, Richard Henry Lee, John Marshall, and several Christian denominations. James Madison responded with his "Memorial and Remonstrance," arguing for religious liberty and disestablishment, and won passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786). The law stated: "That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief . . . and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the delegates did not create an established church. Instead, in Article VI, Section 3, the Constitution banned religious tests for national office. Federal employees thus did not have to belong to a specific church or profess a certain religious belief. In 1791, the states ratified the Bill of Rights, which prohibited Congress from establishing a religion at the national level. The first part of the First Amendment, known

## Handout A: Page 2

as the Establishment Clause, read, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” President George Washington thought religion was important for a self-governing people to be virtuous and moral. He thought his powers included proclaiming national days of thanksgiving as well as encouraging religious practice among several denominations and promising them government protection of their religious liberty and conscience.

The Constitution, moreover, specially banned Congress from establishing a religion and thus did not prevent states from legally having religious establishments. Connecticut did not disestablish its official church until 1818, and Massachusetts followed suit in 1833. The Bill of Rights was not applied to the states until after the Civil War.

President Thomas Jefferson took a different position than Washington regarding presidential authority to issue thanksgiving proclamations and refused to do so while president. In 1802, Jefferson wrote a letter to the Danbury Baptists in which he stated that the First Amendment built “a wall of

separation between church and state.” In the letter, Jefferson defended freedom of conscience (much as Washington had) because, “Religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions.” In addition, Jefferson acknowledged that the First Amendment specifically stated that the national legislature could not establish a religion. The states were constitutionally allowed to have official churches, Jefferson recognized, but he hoped to see “the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to men all his natural rights,” and the disestablishment of all established churches in the states.

The debate about the proper relationship of the government and religion at the local, state, and national levels would continue after the Civil War related to such issues as school prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. Americans would also continue to debate the proper role of religion in the public square.

# B

## QUOTES FROM THE FOUNDING ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH AND STATE

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**Directions:** Read the quotes and explain whether the quote supports a strong relationship between church and state or whether it supports a separate relationship between church and state.

### MASSACHUSETTS CONSTITUTION, ARTICLE III, 1780

“As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality; and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community, but by the institution of the public worship of God, and of public instructions in piety, religion and morality: Therefore, to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require . . . the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of God, and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality, in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.”

THOMAS JEFFERSON, NOTES ON THE  
STATE OF VIRGINIA, 1781

“The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

PATRICK HENRY, “A BILL  
ESTABLISHING A PROVISION FOR  
TEACHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN  
RELIGION,” 1784

“Whereas the general diffusion of Christian knowledge hath a natural tendency to correct the morals of men, restrain their vices, and preserve the peace of society . . . It is judged that such provision may be made by the Legislature . . . for the support of Christian teachers.”

## GEORGE WASHINGTON LETTER TO GEORGE MASON, 1785

“Altho, no man’s sentiments are more opposed to any kind of restraint upon religious principles than mine are; yet I must confess, that I am not amongst the number of those who are so much alarmed at the thoughts of making people pay towards the support of that which they profess, if of the denomination of Christians; or declare themselves Jews, Mahomitans or otherwise, and thereby obtain proper relief. As the matter now stands, I wish an assessment had never been agitated, and as it has gone so far, that the Bill could die an easy death; because I think it will be productive of more quiet to the State, than by enacting it into a Law; which, in my opinion, would be impolitic, admitting there is a decided majority for it, to the disquiet of a respectable minority.”

## JAMES MADISON, MEMORIAL AND REMONSTRANCE AGAINST RELIGIOUS ASSESSMENTS, 1785

“Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects? That the same authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of any establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?”

## NORTHWEST ORDINANCE, 1787

“Article I: No person, demeaning himself in a peaceable and orderly manner, shall ever be molested on account of his mode of worship, or religious sentiments, in the said territory.

Article III: Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

## OLIVER ELLSWORTH, LANDHOLDER, No. 7, 1787

“A [religious] test in favour of any one denomination of Christians would be to the last degree absurd in the United States. If it were in favour of either Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, or Quakers, it would incapacitate more than three-fourths of the American citizens for any public office; and thus degrade them from the rank of freemen.”

JOHN LELAND, “RIGHT OF  
CONSCIENCE INALIENABLE, AND  
THEREFORE RELIGIOUS OPINIONS NOT  
COGNIZABLE BY THE LAW,” 1791

“Is conformity in matters of religion essential to the happiness of civil government? Not at all. Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men than it has with the principles of mathematics.”

THE FIRST AMENDMENT, 1791

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

# C

# MAP OF DISESTABLISHMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

**Directions:** Based upon the information provided for each state, color the map on the next page according to the information below and then answer the questions that follow.

**Green:** Never created an established church during the colonial era before 1776.

**Blue:** Disestablished the official church between 1776 and 1800.

**Yellow:** Disestablished the official church after 1800.

**Connecticut:** 1818

**Delaware:** Never created an established church

**Georgia:** 1798

**Maryland:** 1810

**Massachusetts:** 1833

**New Hampshire:** 1819

**New Jersey:** Never created an established church

**New York:** 1777

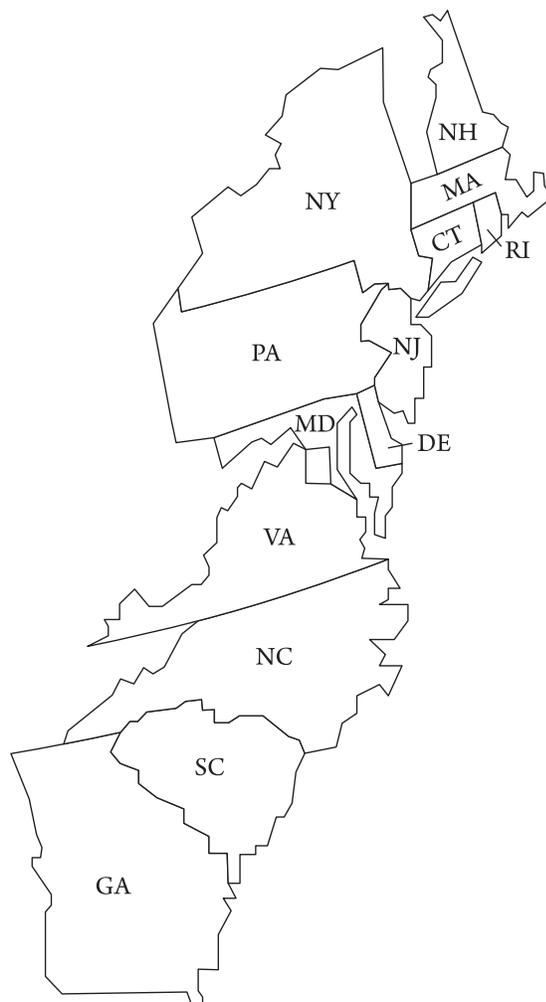
**North Carolina:** 1776

**Pennsylvania:** Never created an established church

**Rhode Island:** Never created an established church

**South Carolina:** 1790

**Virginia:** 1786



## LEGEND

GA—Georgia

SC—South Carolina

NC—North Carolina

MD—Maryland

DE—Delaware

PA—Pennsylvania

NJ—New Jersey

NY—New York

CT—Connecticut

RI—Rhode Island

MA—Massachusetts

NH—New Hampshire

*critical*  
THINKING

1. Why did states disestablish their churches at different times in history?
2. How do you explain that certain states continued to have established churches after the First Amendment was ratified?
3. Did the principles of the American Founding lead toward a movement for establishment or disestablishment of official churches? Why? Refer to the quotes in Handout B or the map in Handout C to support your answers.

## D

GEORGE WASHINGTON,  
“FAREWELL ADDRESS,” 1796

**Directions:** Read the excerpt and write a 5-10 sentence paragraph addressing the questions below.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. ’Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it, can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?”

*critical*  
THINKING

1. How does George Washington relate religion to self-government in the document?
2. Is there a strong separation of church and state, or is religion encouraged in a republic? Explain your answer with evidence from the text.

**E**

# THOMAS JEFFERSON, “LETTER TO THE DANBURY BAPTIST ASSOCIATION, 1802

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**Directions:** Read the excerpt and write a 5-10 sentence paragraph addressing the questions below.

“GENTLEMEN,

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist Association, give me the highest satisfaction.

My duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, and in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common Father and Creator of man, and tender you for yourselves and your religious association, assurances of my high respect and esteem.”

*critical*  
THINKING

1. What does Thomas Jefferson mean by “a wall of separation?”
2. Does the document support the separation of church and state to keep religion out of the public square, or does it seek to protect religious liberty? Explain your answer with evidence from the text.

# F

## SCENARIO CARDS

**Directions:** Assess how Washington and Jefferson might have responded to each scenario below based on their views.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 1</b></p> <p>A local public school reads a non-denominational prayer that no player is hurt and that all players exhibit good sportsmanship at a high school football game.</p> <p>Washington</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>Jefferson</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 2</b></p> <p>A civic group wants to place a Ten Commandments plaque outside a state courthouse to promote civic virtue and morality.</p> <p>Washington</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>Jefferson</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 3</b></p> <p>Congress passes an act allowing taxpayer money to support vouchers for students to attend Catholic schools.</p> <p>Washington</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>Jefferson</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 4</b></p> <p>Congress passes an act stating that Presbyterianism will be the official Church of the United States.</p> <p>Washington</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>Jefferson</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

# TWO VIEWS OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH AND STATE ANSWER KEYS

## HANDOUT A: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH AND STATE IN AMERICA

The American colonies were generally characterized by established churches by the government and various forms of religious persecution. The American Revolution and Founding, however, introduced the idea of religious liberty. Most states disestablished their official churches by 1800, and the Constitution banned religious tests while the Bill of Rights banned Congress from creating a national establishment of religion. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson took two different stances on the proper relationship between the church and state. Washington believed that religion was vital to the virtue of citizens and necessary to self-government. Therefore, he encouraged private religious belief and practice while a general and later as president. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson believed that the spheres of government and religion should be as separate as possible and coined the phrase “wall of separation” that would later be used by the Supreme Court and in popular discussions of the issue.

## HANDOUT B: QUOTES FROM THE FOUNDING ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH AND STATE

**Massachusetts Constitution, Article III, 1780:** The Massachusetts Constitution illustrates the close ties that many Americans at the time of the Founding saw between the promotion of religion for morality, virtue, and the public good. The Massachusetts Constitution provided for freedom of conscience within a limited establishment of religion.

**Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” 1781:** Jefferson thought that government should take no cognizance of religious belief at all unless it did harm to others.

**Patrick Henry, “A Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion,” 1784:** Henry introduced this bill to support public virtue through a general establishment of religion through a public tax that could be allocated to any denomination or to a school.

**George Washington, Letter to George Mason, 1785:** Washington expresses his support for Patrick Henry’s “Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion” to elevate public morality and thinks it is consistent with religious liberty. However, he expresses regret for his support because of the contention over the bill in public.

**James Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, 1785:** Madison warns that a general establishment of the sort Patrick Henry proposed was dangerous and could lead to re-establishing a particular Christian sect and destroy religious liberty.

**Northwest Ordinance, 1787:** Article I of the Northwest Ordinance established the principle of religious liberty in the Northwest Territory, and Article III tied together religion, morality, and self-government which were linked to education and schools.

**Oliver Ellsworth, Landholder, No. 7, 1787:** Ellsworth opposes religious tests for office because they would favor one particular Christian sect and injure the rights of all others.

**John Leland, “Right of Conscience Inalienable and Therefore Religious Opinions Not Cognizable by Law,” 1791:** Leland argues that morality, virtue, and happiness are not dependent upon religion and that government must not be involved in religion.

**The First Amendment, 1791:** The First Amendment bans Congress from creating an official church at the national level or from violating religious liberty.

#### HANDOUT C: MAP OF DISESTABLISHMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

**Connecticut:** Yellow

**New York:** Blue

**Delaware:** Green

**North Carolina:** Blue

**Georgia:** Blue

**Pennsylvania:** Green

**Maryland:** Yellow

**Rhode Island:** Green

**Massachusetts:** Yellow

**South Carolina:** Blue

**New Hampshire:** Yellow

**Virginia:** Blue

**New Jersey:** Green

#### Critical Thinking

1. States had local autonomy in deciding whether to establish and disestablish their churches.
2. The First Amendment banned Congress, not the states, from having an established church.
3. The revolutionary idea of religious liberty led to the movement for disestablishment in the United States at the state and national level. However, the principle of federalism meant that the states and national government could decide when this occurred.

#### HANDOUT D: GEORGE WASHINGTON, “FAREWELL ADDRESS,” 1796

Washington thinks that religion is essential for virtue and morality which in turn are necessary for republican self-government to thrive and endure. Therefore, he supports government promotion of religion as well as religious liberty.

#### Critical Thinking

1. Religion promotes morality and virtue and makes good citizens necessary for a republic.
2. Washington states, “Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government” and supports the notion that government should help promote religious belief and practice.

HANDOUT E: THOMAS JEFFERSON, “LETTER TO THE DANBURY BAPTIST ASSOCIATION,” 1802

Jefferson thinks that the powers of government do not involve religious opinions because they are a private, individual matter. Therefore, he advocates a “wall of separation” between the church and state.

**Critical Thinking**

1. Jefferson wants the church and state to be separate, and the government to have no role in supporting any religion. He believes the First Amendment’s establishment clause supports his view and advocates it in the states, which were not bound by the First Amendment.
2. Answers will vary. Jefferson was at the forefront of the fight for disestablishment in Virginia and supported a “wall of separation” while president, but he did not seek to ban all connections between government and religion.

DOCUMENT F: SCENARIO CARDS

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 1</b></p> <p>Washington would probably support because the non-denominational prayer promoted virtuous behavior and citizenship, and it did not create an official church. Jefferson would probably oppose the prayer because it was an expression of religion sponsored by public schools.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 2</b></p> <p>Washington would probably support because the Ten Commandments supported a code of moral behavior among citizens. Although Jefferson supported the principle of separation of church and state, the scenario states that a civic group was paying for the plaque. Also, there were similar kinds of religious or biblical imagery around the capital when Jefferson was president. Therefore, he might support it.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 3</b></p> <p>Washington would probably support the public tax especially if it was available to other denominations as well such as with Henry’s general assessment. Jefferson would probably oppose using taxpayer money to support a particular denomination or religion in general.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SCENARIO 4</b></p> <p>Both Washington and Jefferson would oppose the act for violating the First Amendment and freedom of conscience.</p>