

## John Quincy Adams and His Struggle Against Slavery and the Gag Rule

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can you make protecting justice for yourself and others a priority in your life?
- **Virtue:** Justice
- **Definition** – Justice is the capacity to determine and preserve our common rights.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - By completing this lesson, students will understand how John Quincy Adams fought against injustice of the gag rule in the House of Representatives and how they can fight for justice in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will examine John Quincy Adams' fight against the gag rule
  - Students will analyze how John Quincy Adams' actions were just
  - Students will apply their understanding to how they can act justly in their own lives
- **Background**
  - The 1830s and 1840s saw a deepening polarization between North and South over the issue of slavery. Although the Missouri Compromise that established a line dividing free and slave states in the territory acquired from France in the Louisiana Purchase, kept the peace for more than a decade, the sectional rivalries resurfaced. The continuing expansion in the West stirred up sectionalism when Texas declared its independence and applied for statehood in the Union. The United States and Mexico soon went to war over the territory. When the United States won the war, it acquired a great deal of additional territory from Mexico. The question of whether that territory would come into the United States as free or slave deeply divided the country. Meanwhile, other events such as the *Amistad* case before the Supreme Court addressed divisive issues such as whether slaves who rebelled against their owners were free.

Many northerners and southerners developed intense feelings about the institution of slavery. Inspired by the American ideals in the Declaration of Independence, Abolitionists created anti-slavery societies and launched a massive campaign against slavery through newspapers, speeches, pamphlets, and petitions to Congress. Many southerners defended their “peculiar institution” against the barrage of assaults. They developed the idea that slavery was a “positive good” that was beneficial for slaves, masters, and the country because it preserved a natural order rooted in the inequality of the races. Southerners began blocking abolitionist literature from reaching southern states and sought to prevent abolitionists from flooding Congress with petitions seeking the end of slavery.

In 1830, former Senator, Secretary of State, and President, John Quincy Adams was elected to the House of Representatives. He was the only former president to serve in Congress up to that point. Although he did not embrace radical abolitionism, he did think that slavery was a moral evil that contradicted the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. He opposed the idea that “color operates as a forfeiture of the rights of human nature.” He not only served as a lawyer defending the slaves involved in the *Amistad* case, but started a crusade to force Congress to respect the right of petition by abolitionists. He fought the “gag rule” preventing petitions from being considered in order to pursue the ideal of justice, fighting to preserve American ideals of free speech and the right of petition for all Americans and to stand for the natural rights of enslaved Americans.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Sectionalism
  - Divisive
  - Abolitionists
  - Referral
  - Resolution
  - Gag Rule
  - Exasperated
  - Deliberative
  - Censure
  - Averred
  - Irate
  - Provenance
  - Manifested
  - Parliamentary
  - Oppressed
  - Vengeance
  - Deterred
  - Sovereignty
  - Tyrannical
  - Grudgingly
  - Acutest
  - Astutest
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - What was John Quincy Adams’ identity in relation to the fight against the House’s gag rule?
  - What was John Quincy Adams’ purpose in fighting against the gag rule?
  - How did Adams fight against the injustice of the gag rule?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**

- Kaplan, Fred. *John Quincy Adams: American Visionary*. New York: Harper, 2014.
- Miller, William Lee, *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress*. New York: Knopf, 1996.
- Nagel, Paul C. *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life*
- Wheelan, Joseph. *Mr. Adams's Last Crusade: John Quincy Adams's Extraordinary Post-Presidential Life in Congress*. New York: Public Affairs, 2008.
- U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, The Gag Rule. <http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/archives/images/992>

## Handout A: The Gag Rule

### Background

The 1830s and 1840s saw a deepening polarization between North and South over the issue of slavery. Although the Missouri Compromise that established a line dividing free and slave states in the territory acquired from France in the Louisiana Purchase, kept the peace for more than a decade, the sectional rivalries resurfaced. The continuing expansion in the West stirred up sectionalism when Texas declared its independence and applied for statehood in the Union. The United States and Mexico soon went to war over the territory. When the United States won the war, it acquired a great deal of additional territory from Mexico. The question of whether that territory would come into the United States as free or slave deeply divided the country. Meanwhile, other events such as the *Amistad* case before the Supreme Court addressed divisive issues such as whether slaves who rebelled against their owners were free.

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### Narrative

In February 1836, Henry Laurens Pinckney offered a resolution stating that the House of Representatives would table any petition mentioning slavery and ban any discussion or referral to committees. In May, the House soon passed the resolution by a vote of 117 to 68 in favor of this “gag rule.” Former president and now representative John Quincy Adams immediately rose from his seat to protest the gag rule. When he was shouted down by colleagues and not recognized by the Speaker of the House, James Polk, Adams was exasperated and yelled, “Am I gagged?” He argued that the gag rule was a “direct violation of the Constitution of the United States, the rules of this House, and the rights of my constituents.” He declared the gag rule a threat to free, deliberative government: “The freedom of debate has been stifled in this House to a degree far beyond anything that ever has happened since the existence of the Constitution.”

For Adams, the right to petition was essential to self-government by the consent of the governed and was a sacred, traditional right. He asserted, “The right of petition . . . is essential to the very existence of government; it is the right of the people over the Government; it is their right, and they may not be deprived of it.” As he reflected in his diary, he thought the “cause is good and great.” Adams would persist in battling the gag rule and defending the just cause of a right to petition for the rights of others.

In February 1837, the House renewed the gag rule, and Adams immediately protested the rule by introducing hundreds of petitions including those from women and even free blacks and slaves. The southerners in the House were irate and declared their honor insulted. The House moved to censure (a formal reprimand) Adams for his supposed outrages. Adams quickly seized the opportunity to defend the right of petition. It belonged not merely to

the rich and powerful, but most especially to the powerless. The right of petition was not the exclusive provenance of the “virtuous, the great, and the mighty,” he averred. “The right of petition belongs to all.”

In early 1838, when the House voted to renew the gag rule yet again, Adams stood and argued that it violated “my right to freedom of speech as a member of the House.” He also made the courageous stand to fight for women’s right of petition even though they could not vote. “Are women to have no opinions or action on subjects relating to the general welfare?” he asked. Perhaps thinking of his own mother, Abigail Adams, he praised women for participating in public life during the American Revolution: “They loved their country . . . they felt the pulse of patriotism, and manifested it in action; they entered into the hottest political controversies of the time.”

Adams continued to present petitions with hundreds of signatures from citizens opposed to slavery, and still his fellow representatives shouted him down. Later that year, he resorted to a parliamentary trick by avoiding the word “petition” and stated he was introducing a “prayer” that all would enjoy their God-given rights. “Petition was prayer,” he argued. “It was the cry of the suffering for relief; of the oppressed for mercy.” Therefore, to the great shock of southerners, he asserted that he would therefore “not deny the right of petition to a slave.”

When he stated that summer that slavery was “a sin before the sight of God,” Adams received several death threats. “I promise to cut your throat from ear to ear,” read one. Another had a picture of a large Bowie knife, threatening, “Vengeance is mine, say the South!” Finally, one warned of a “hangman to prepare a halter for John Quincy Adams.” He confided to his diary that, “I walk on the edge of a precipice in every step that I take.” Sometimes, he felt overwhelmed by the burden he was assuming for the cause of justice. “I stand in the House of Representatives . . . alone.” But he was not deterred from his just path and only fought harder against the gag rule and for the right to petition against slavery.

Over the next two years, Adams introduced thousands of petitions. All were tabled without debate. Pro-slavery representatives even instituted a harsher gag rule in 1840 to shut Adams up. The House agreed that it would not even receive the petitions. But, the new gag rule was barely passed by a narrow majority of six votes. Adams saw that his perseverance was bearing fruit.

On December 3, 1844, Adams’s efforts were finally rewarded when the House voted to abolish the gag rule. He had fought a long struggle for constitutionalism and for the rights of others. He wrote in his diary that evening: “Blessed, forever blessed, be the name of God!” Meanwhile, his fellow citizens who supported his cause were praising his name. Even his enemies grudgingly admitted his diligence to the cause of justice. Henry Wise of Virginia called Adams “the acutest, the astutest, the archest enemy of Southern slavery that ever existed.” The former president died only a few years later, in the House of Representatives, the place of his greatest achievement for justice in his long public career.