



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

### Handout A: Narrative

#### BACKGROUND

The 1830s and 1840s saw a deepening polarization between North and South over the issue of slavery. Although the Missouri Compromise—which 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.

Many northerners and southerners developed intense feelings about the institution of slavery. Inspired by the American ideals in the Declaration of Independence, abolitionists formed 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. Although he did not embrace radical abolitionism, he believed 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 decided to fight the “gag rule” that was preventing petitions from being considered.

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In February 1836, Henry Laurens Pinckney of South Carolina 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 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, stating, “The freedom of debate has been stifled in

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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 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.” Adams decided to fight the gag rule and defend the just cause of the right to petition.

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. This right was not the exclusive provenance of the “virtuous, the great, and the mighty,” he asserted. “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, arguing, “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, but still his fellow representatives shouted him down. Later that year, he resorted to a 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 “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. However, the

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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, after suffering a stroke on the floor of the House of Representatives, the place of his greatest achievement for justice in his long public career.