

Primary Source:

William Lloyd Garrison, “The American Union.” *The Liberator*, January 10, 1845

Was the Constitution a pro-slavery document or an anti-slavery document?

- I can interpret primary sources related to slavery and the Founding.
- I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.

Essential Vocabulary

Contemner	Someone who commits something contemptible.
Immolation	Sacrifice
Omniscience	The state of knowing everything.
Omnipotence	Having unlimited power.
Oligarchy	A small group of people having control of a country.
Stupendous	Astonishing
Imposture	The act of being deceiving.

Building Context

William Lloyd Garrison was one of the most uncompromising of North American abolitionists. His anti-slavery journal, “The Liberator”, was first published in 1831. Garrison used fiery rhetoric to condemn slavery, and his passionate writing style demanded his readers’ attention. Garrison argued for an immediate end to slavery, maintaining that the Constitution was an inherently flawed document because it permitted slavery and corrupted the Founding.

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<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-american-union/>

Tyrants of the old world! **contemn**ers of the rights of man! disbelievers in human freedom and equality! enemies of mankind! console not yourselves with the delusion, that Republicanism and the American Union are synonymous terms—or that the downfall of the latter will be the extinction of the former, and, consequently, a proof of the incapacity of the people for self-government, and a confirmation of your own despotic claims! . . .

Tyrants! know that the rights of man are inherent and unalienable, and therefore, not to be forfeited by the failure of any form of government, however democratic. Let the American Union perish; let these allied States be torn with faction, or drenched in blood; . . .

If nations perish, it is not because of their devotion to liberty, but for their disregard of its requirements. Man is superior to all political compacts, all governmental arrangements, all religious institutions. As means to an end, these may sometimes be useful, though never indispensable; but that end must always be the freedom and happiness of man, individual man. It can never be true that the public good requires the violent sacrifice of any, even the humblest citizen; for it is absolutely dependent on his preservation, not destruction. To do evil that good may come, is equally absurd and criminal. The time for the overthrow of any government, the abandonment of any alliance, the subversion of any institution is, whenever it justifies the **immolation** of the individual to secure the general welfare; for the welfare of the many cannot be hostile to the safety of the few. In all agreements, in all measures, in all political or religious enterprises, in all attempts to redeem the human race, man, as an individual, is to be held paramount . . .

Tyrants! confident of its overthrow, proclaim not to your vassals that the American Union is an experiment of Freedom, which, if it fail, will forever demonstrate the necessity of whips for the backs, and chains for the limbs of the people. Know that its subversion is essential in the triumph of

Notes

justice, the deliverance of the oppressed, the vindication of the brotherhood of the race. It was conceived in sin, and brought forth in iniquity; and its career has been marked by unparalleled hypocrisy, by high-handed tyranny, by a bold defiance of the **omniscience** and **omnipotence** of God. Freedom indignantly disowns it, and calls for its extinction; for within its borders are three millions of Slaves, whose blood constitutes its cement, whose flesh forms a large and flourishing branch of its commerce, and who are ranked with four-footed beasts and creeping things. To secure the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, it was agreed, first, that the African slave trade—till that time, a feeble, isolated colonial traffic—should for at least twenty years be prosecuted as a national interest under the American flag, and protected by the national arm; secondly, that a slaveholding **oligarchy**, created by allowing three-fifths of the slave population to be represented by their taskmasters, should be allowed a permanent seat in Congress; thirdly, that the slave system should be secured against internal revolt and external invasion, by the united physical force of the country; fourthly, that not a foot of national territory should be granted, on which the panting fugitive from Slavery might stand, and be safe from his pursuers—thus making every citizen a slave-hunter and a slave-catcher. To say that this “covenant with death” shall not be annulled, that this “agreement with hell” shall continue to stand, that this “refuge of lies” shall not be swept away, is to hurl defiance at the eternal throne, and to give the lie to Him who sits thereon. It is an attempt, alike monstrous and impracticable, to blend the light of heaven with the darkness of the bottomless pit, to unite the living with the dead, to associate the Son of God with the prince of evil.

Accursed be the American Union, as a **stupendous** republican **imposture**! . . .

Henceforth, the watchword of every uncompromising abolitionist, of every friend of God and liberty, must be, both in a religious and political sense—“No union with slaveholders!”

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. According to Garrison, which is more important: Individual rights or the American Union?

2. Garrison, a pacifist, calls for the nonviolent overthrow of government. According to Garrison, when should a government be overthrown?

3. What phrases does Garrison use in this speech to refer to the U.S. Constitution? How do his terms influence whether he sees the Constitution as a pro-slavery or anti-slavery document?

4. Summarize Garrison's argument in your own words.