



Great Americans: *Discussion Guide*

Overview

Liberty—the word graces every American coin, and the hope pulses in every American heart. In 1787, the preamble to our Constitution set forth a bold goal: “to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Americans ever since have debated, struggled, and even battled over exactly how to define “ourselves.”

This discussion guide invites students to reflect on four noted Americans who strove for liberty. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson helped Americans voice their yearning for freedom from colonial rule. Almost two centuries later, Jackie Robinson and Rosa Parks embodied African Americans’ hunger for full participation in American life.

Use these video segments and activities in your classroom to deepen students’ knowledge of the nation’s history and these heroic figures.

Classroom Activities

1. Show the segment “Program Introduction” from the video *The Real Ben Franklin*.
 - **Discussion:** The narrator describes Benjamin Franklin as “the quintessential American.” Invite students to agree or disagree with that characterization and challenge them to provide reasons for their views.
 - **History:** Divide the class into groups and direct each group to report on Franklin’s achievements in one of his many roles: abolitionist, diplomat, politician, postmaster, inventor, scientist, or writer.
 - **Language Arts:** Franklin is famous for pithy advice, much of which appeared in his periodical, *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Encourage students to craft their own versions of—or rebuttals to—these Franklin classics:
 - Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
 - When the well’s dry, we know the worth of water.
 - Lost time is never found again.
 - They that give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.
 - We must hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.

2. Show the segment “Program Introduction” from the video *The Real Thomas Jefferson*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Discussion:** Host Roger Kennedy, former director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, zeros in on the great paradox of Jefferson’s life: “How could a man who owned slaves, and sold them for profit, write about the rights of man?” Prod students to wrestle with that difficult question. Does Jefferson’s slaveholding devalue his work for American freedom, including writing the Declaration of Independence?
 - **Writing:** Jefferson, the segment tells us, spent 50 years trying to define the ideal American. Have students undertake their own efforts toward that elusive definition.

3. Show the segment “Jackie Robinson Joins the Brooklyn Dodgers” from the video *The Playing Field*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Vocabulary:** Challenge individual students or groups of students to research how the name Jim Crow (title of a minstrel song from the 1830s) became shorthand for segregation. The following Web sites address the topic.
 - Who Was Jim Crow?
<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/who.htm>
 - The History of Jim Crow
<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/creating2.htm>
 - Word of the Day: Jim Crow
<http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=20010215>
 - **Discussion:** Invite students to appraise the following assertions made during the segment. Do students find the statements convincing? Why or why not?
 - “Jackie Robinson did as much for erasing the color line of Jim Crow as any lawyer, lobbyist, or politician.”
 - “For the general population, baseball was the thing they could all relate to.”
 - **Creative Writing:** Have students imagine and dramatize a conversation during which Brooklyn Dodgers owner Branch Rickey invites Jackie Robinson to play in the major leagues.

4. Show the segment “The Events of December, 1955” from the video *Events of the Twentieth Century: A Conversation With Rosa Parks*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
- **Vocabulary:** Direct students to look up the following words from the segment and to use each term in a sentence.
 - boycott
 - catalyst
 - defiance
 - institutionalized
 - segregation
 - **History:** Assign individual students or student groups to create time lines featuring major events in the Civil Rights movement. Potential entries include the following.
 - 1954: *Brown v. Board of Education*
 - 1955–56: Montgomery bus boycott
 - 1957: School integration in Little Rock, Arkansas
 - 1963: March on Washington
 - 1964: Civil Rights Act
 - 1965: Voting Rights Act
 - 1968: Federal Fair Housing Law; murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Academic Standards

This discussion guide addresses the following national standards.

National Council for the Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Governance, and Authority
- Civic Ideals and Practices

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Civics

- Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government
- Understands the right to liberty as a value of American democracy



History

- Understands the ideas and interests involved in shaping the revolutionary movement
- Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

Language Arts

- Writing: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions; Gathers and uses information for research purposes
- Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

