

## POSSIBLE CIVIL WAR RELATED TOPICS FOR NATIONAL HISTORY DAY

These are suggested to illustrate the complexity of history as it relates to rights and responsibilities and how and why people think differently about them over time. Each also shows that historical figures of the past had constellations of beliefs that do not fit neatly into 21st century categories.

### Ben Butler

In May 1861, General Butler commanded the Federal garrison at Fort Monroe, Virginia when three escaped slaves entered the fort. At the time, there was no Federal government policy on how to handle escapees. In 1861, the war, from the U.S. perspective was to restore the Union, not emancipation, though the preservation of slavery was the cause of Secession. Butler refused Confederate demands to return the slaves, coming up with the solution of declaring them lawfully acquired "contraband". This was the first step in a series of actions eventually leading to emancipation.

Butler, a poor field general and corrupt, became a leading advocate for abolition and the valor of U.S. Colored Troops. Before the war, Butler, a Massachusetts Democrat, opposed abolition and, at the 1860 Democratic Convention, voted for Jefferson Davis to be the Democratic nominee for President.

National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/fort-monroe-and-the-contrabands-of-war.htm>

Mariners Museum: <https://www.marinersmuseum.org/2021/05/ben-butler-and-the-contrabands/>

### Reverdy Johnson

On April 5, 1864, the Democratic senator from Maryland, breaking with his party, rose to give a speech supporting the proposed Constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. The speech skillfully wove statesmanship, pragmatism, and morality into a compelling and moving case in support of the amendment:

*"To manumit at once nearly four millions of slaves, who have been such by hereditary descent during their lives, and who because they were such, it being one consequence of their condition, have been kept in a state of almost absolute ignorance, is an event of which the world's history furnishes no parallel. Whether it will be attended by weal or by woe, the future must decide. That it will not be followed by unmixed good or by unmixed evil, is perhaps certain; and the only questions in my view for a statesman to consider are, first, whether the measure be right, independent of its possible consequences, and secondly, whether those consequences may be such as to render it improper to do what is right."*

Prior to the war, Johnson opposed abolition and argued on behalf of Dredd Scott's owners in the Supreme Court (though his arguments were different from those set forth in Justice Taney's controversial decision). He opposed secession and supported preservation of the Union, helping to keep Maryland from seceding.

After the war Johnson supported the Reconstruction Act of 1867 but opposed the 14th Amendment and defended Klu Klux Klan members against federal prosecution.

Senator Johnson's speech

<https://ia600802.us.archive.org/2/items/speechofhonreve00john/speechofhonreve00john.pdf>

### Sam Houston

In 1861, as Governor of Texas, Houston campaigned against secession. When voters supported secession, Houston refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy and was forced to resign.

Houston was a slaveowner who opposed the extension of slavery. He was also one of the few Southern senators to support the Compromise of 1850, and the only Southern senator to oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Charles Sumner, the Massachusetts senator and fierce abolitionist, told Houston he would support him for President in 1856 if he chose to run.

Houston was also the greatest 19th century political supporter of the rights of American Indians, having lived with the Cherokee for six years, and speaking several Indian languages. On the floor of the Senate he stated:

*“The honorable Senator from Indiana says in substance that God Almighty has condemned [the Indians], and made them an inferior race, that there is no use in doing anything for them. . . Sir, it is idle to tell me that. We have Indians on our western borders, whose civilization is not inferior to our own . . . The Indian has a sense of justice, truth and honor that should find a responsive chord in every heart. If the Indians on the frontier are barbarous . . . who are we to blame for it? They are robbed of the means of sustenance; and with hundreds and thousands of them starving on the frontier, hunger may prompt to such acts as prevent their perishing . . .*

*We should be careful if it were with a power able to war with us; and it argues a degree of infinite meanness and indescribable degradation on our part to act differently with the Indians, who confide in our honor and justice, and who call the President their Great Father, and confide in him.”*

Yet Houston's political mentor was Andrew Jackson, an opponent of Indian rights.

At various times Houston was a citizen of the United States, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and Cherokee Nation.

Served as Governor of Tennessee and Texas. Congressman from Tennessee and Senator from Texas. First President of the Republic of Texas. Commander of the Texan Army in the war for independence against Mexico.

Texas State Historical Association: <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/houston-sam>

Sam Houston State University: <https://www.shsu.edu/today@sam/T@S/article/2020/houston-choke-citizen>