This guide contains two short essays offering very different views of the early American republic (1789–1850). On pages 2–3 you will find instructions on taking notes on these essays and planning to debate them as a class. Your first task is to decide which essay you agree with and why. Your second task is to understand and be ready to defend the other essay as well. This will help you get ready to debate the essays in class. This guide will also offer some guidelines for the classroom debate.
Suggestions for the Student

YOUR OVERALL OBJECTIVE
The essays in this guide present two conflicting views of the history of the early republic (1789 to 1850). Your task is to read the essays, take notes on them and prepare to take part in a debate about them in class. Doing this will help you learn something very important about the field of history, namely, that history is really an ongoing discussion or dialogue. Facts are important. Truth is important. Many matters can be settled and agreed upon, and many are. Yet the really exciting part of history is in the debates that keep it going. These debates are what guide historians in trying to answer the most interesting and important questions about the past.

1. Review any Debating the Documents notes you have.
The two essays in this guide will each mention some of the primary sources in the eight Debating the Documents sets on the early republic. To judge each essay, it will help to refresh your memory about the topics and sources used in those sets.

2. Read both essays in this guide.
Each essay argues in favor of one overall view of the early decades in the history of the United States as an independent nation. The two views are strongly stated and clearly opposed to each other. Each essay states its viewpoint in its first one or two paragraphs. The rest of the essay supports this view by discussing specific features of early U.S. history. The essays are strongly biased, but they back up their claims with facts and sources. You do NOT have to agree with either essay entirely. Your goal should be to read the essays carefully and use them to clarify your own views about the history of the early American republic.

3. Take notes on each essay using the Checklist on page 3 of this guide.
This checklist will help you think through all parts of each essay, and it will help you prepare for your role in the class debate about the essays.

4. Follow your teacher’s instructions for holding a class debate on these essays.
You will have a set task or role to play. It will be to defend one of the essays, ask questions of the defenders or try to settle differences between the two groups of defenders. You will get a chance to state your own views. However, the debate will work best if you also play the role you are assigned.

5. Here are some further rules for taking part in the debate.
- Use your notes and other worksheets as guides for the debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the overall meaning of each essay.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the two essays.
- Listen closely in the debate to all points of view about each essay.
- Focus on the strengths of each essay, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with it.
Essay Analysis Checklist

Use this check list to take notes on each essay in this guide.
As you read each essay, take a few notes on the topics listed below. Use these when preparing for your role in the debate on these two opposing views of the early republic. (Use other sheets of paper as needed.)

State the essay’s thesis. That is, state its main idea as presented in the first paragraph.

What key statements of fact best help back up the essay’s thesis or main idea?

Do any statements of fact seem false or unlikely to be accurate? List them.

Which statements are most biased? That is, which are one-sided opinions not based on facts or clear reasons? List some.

How well are the primary sources used? Which sources are used to most clearly back up the thesis?

Is the logic of the argument clear? Why or why not?

Overall, how strong a case does this essay make? Why?
In 1776, the stirring words of the Declaration of Independence raised a high standard for a new nation, the United States of America. Sadly, that young republic’s long journey to freedom did not get very far in its earliest decades. Instead, a deeply flawed republic failed to live up to its own ideals. In 1860, it went down in flames of secession, followed by five years of civil war in which 600,000 Americans would die.

The fatal flaws of the early republic were clear from the start. They were on display even at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 where the blueprint for the republic was drawn up. There, 55 delegates struggled to forge a new federal government. The plan they produced was designed to balance the national government against the state governments, and to balance the national government’s three branches — legislative, executive and judicial — against one another. It was meant to be a perfect machine that could check any effort by future leaders to misuse its power.

Yet this new system rested on terrible compromises that would cause the nation decades of grief. The most important was the “Grand Compromise.” It included the shameful notion that a slave was “three-fifths” of a person. That’s because three-fifths of the slaves were to be counted along with all non-slaves to decide each state’s numbers in the House of Representatives — though slaves could not vote at all! This ugly idea gave the South more members of Congress than it otherwise would have had. For decades, this helped to keep Congress from doing much at all about the very worst of the nation’s flaws, slavery.

Setting slavery aside, it is true that the Constitution seems admirable. When the founders’ work was done, a women supposedly asked Ben Franklin what he and the other delegates had given the people. He told her, “a republic, madam, if you can keep it.” Of course, this woman, like every other woman in America at the time, would have little to say about that republic and little ability to “keep it,” or not. At first, only some white males had a right to vote in most elections. Women, slaves, Native Americans, many free blacks and even many white males without property had few political rights and no right to choose their own leaders.

It’s true that by the 1820s, the right to vote was being extended to all white males. Yet in spite of that, the “republic” Franklin dreamt of was becoming even more, not less, flawed.

In part, that is because of how rapidly the country grew, both in size and population. The America of the “founding fathers” was a rural land of villages and farms in which the largest “city” had only about 25,000 people. By the 1850s, New York alone had 700,000 or 800,000 people. In the founders’ America, everyone knew and respected the few leaders in each community. As the nation grew, it became much harder to see who the best men in the community were. In reality, conflict and partisan politics always existed, even in the founders’ simpler America. But those founders wanted something better. They wanted a society in which the best men would lead mainly out of a sense of duty and honor. Even by 1800, they could already see this older ideal fading away.
A new, bitter partisan politics sprang up. Political parties formed, first the Federalists versus Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans. Later, partisan politics became even more aggressive in the battles between Andrew Jackson's Democrats and the Whigs. These organized parties were run by professionals from behind the scenes, with the support of partisan newspapers, parades, simple slogans and all the hoopla of the modern political campaign. Leaders far less wise and without the public spirit of the founders rose to power through this system.

This new more aggressive form of party politics grew up along side a much more competitive and ruthless economy. The decades after the Constitution was written are also the decades of the early Industrial Revolution in America. New devices of all sorts changed the nature of work and production. Machinery began to replace older forms of work based on hand tools. The factory emerged. Many new devices sped up production and gave the nation a sense of accelerating change. A new industrial order of textile mills, iron foundries, coal mines, railroads, canals and the telegraph began to tie the nation together into one huge national market.

This all sounds good. Except that it only benefited a few. In some cases, it added greatly to the misery of mankind. Ely Whitney's cotton gin, for example, gave a new birth to slavery at a time when many hoped it might soon start to die out. By simplifying the processing of cotton, it made it far more profitable for Southerners to open up new cotton plantations in their relentless drive westward through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and beyond.

At Lowell, in Massachusetts, some businessmen hoped to create an ideal factory town where young women from rural areas could work, learn and benefit from some time on their own before returning to their rural villages and families. This dream could not survive for long. In time, the textile mills of Lowell, like factories elsewhere, lowered wages and forced long hours on the workers. More and more, desperately poor immigrant laborers were hired to do the work the “Lowell girls” had done. As in other factory towns, poverty and labor discontent spread. True, the new machine production was amazing in many ways. It gave us the ability to produce goods with interchangeable parts, especially in government-funded armories. However, it also deprived crafts workers of skilled jobs. It gave us the start of a consumer society of advertising, social and economic inequality and our ever more lethal kinds of weapons.

As new gaps between rich and poor opened up, and as the economy grew more complex, the U.S. Supreme Court led the way in making America safe for capitalism. It did this by acting to limit the powers of state government to regulate economic life, all in the name of protecting private contracts and property. It also strengthened the power of the federal government over the states, in cases such as McCulloch v. Maryland. This could have been helpful if that federal government had used its power wisely. Unfortunately, that was rarely the case in those decades. The government was unable to act on the most important issue of all — slavery. Instead, it tried to compromise over slavery, put it off or ignore it entirely. Meanwhile, America's leaders took actions in other areas that were often unwise or even brutal, leaving a legacy of shame in their wake.

In 1812, a growing nationalistic spirit led the nation into a questionable war with England.
Supposedly, the war was fought over the issue of freedom of the seas. Yet its biggest boosters were leaders in the Western states whose real motives had to do with land greed and a fear of Great Britain’s Indian allies in North America. As a relentless tide of settlers moved into the Ohio valley and the southern states of Alabama, Mississippi and elsewhere, the demand to do something about Native Americans became unstoppable.

The president who did the most to meet this demand was Andrew Jackson, the same president who is often celebrated as a champion of the “common man.” Many whites knew Jackson as “Old Hickory.” To the Indians, he was “Sharp Knife,” an Indian fighter whose attitude toward Native American peoples, simply put, was that they needed to get out of the way.

Jackson wiped out the warriors of the mighty Creek nation at Horseshoe Bend in 1814. He later fought the Seminoles in Florida. As president, his Indian Removal Act of 1830 was one of the low points in the sad history of U.S. dealings with Native Americans. In time, it was used to clear the entire United States east of the Mississippi River of all major Native American nations. This included the forced removal of the Cherokees along the infamous “Trail of Tears,” during which 18,000 Cherokees were forced to march from their homes hundreds of miles to present-day Oklahoma. More than 4,000 died on the way. The Cherokees were perhaps the most civilized of the famous “Five Civilized Tribes” of the Southeast, a group also including Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws and Seminoles. They were in fact a farming people who had adopted many Western ways, including a written language, a constitution and their own laws. None of this did them any good. Jackson forced all of them to move out of the way of the onrushing tide of settlers.

Along with Indian removal, the spirit of expansion and conquest took the form of a more warlike attitude toward the rest of the world as well. The War of 1812 may have produced an outpouring of patriotic pride. However, Great Britain’s ability to burn down Washington, D.C., in 1814 frightened the nation’s leaders. Later, as the former Spanish colonies won their independence, U.S. leaders decided to bluff their way out of their sense of weakness. The result was the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Even Thomas Jefferson wanted to accept the British suggestion that the U.S. and Great Britain act together to warn off other nations not to interfere in the Americas. That was not acceptable, however, to a more aggressive nation already feeling “destined” to dominate the entire hemisphere.

As the nation developed and spread west, its three main sections grew more and more suspicious of one another. In early crises such as the one over Missouri and slavery in 1819, or in battles over the tariff in the 1820s and ’30s, some saw a nation splitting apart. The old Northwest (today’s Midwest) was a region of small family farms and some industry. The Northeast was the center of trade and the heaviest industrialization. The South was the land of plantation slavery.

The two political parties kept trying to put the lid on the big differences between these sections. Yet some political leaders always seemed ready to blow that lid off.

Whig leader Henry Clay dreamt of an orderly kind of social and economic growth. He said his “American System” of tariffs, a U.S. Bank and federally funded “internal improvements” would enable the federal government to guide the nation as it grew. This dream of a more rationally guided national economy...
died, however, when President Jackson attacked the Second Bank of the United States and finally vetoed its renewal. Meanwhile, the South opposed Clay's tariffs, since it wished to keep the prices of its foreign imports low and did not want to give other nations reasons to raise tariffs on its own cotton exports. At one point, South Carolina, led by John C. Calhoun, sought to undo Clay's high tariff through the extreme idea of "nullification." This was the claim that a state could nullify, or overrule, an act of Congress it saw as unconstitutional. In this case, Jackson led the way in stopping this effort, but it would return later in an even more dangerous form as Southern states began seceding in 1860.

As the nation became more modern and complex, it produced a rising spirit of discontent. Some of this discontent took the form of badly needed reform movements seeking to deal with the nation's many deep problems. These reform movements focused on schools, prisons, alcoholism, the unequal treatment of women and, of course, slavery. They revealed how far America had fallen short of its own ideals.

This discontent can also be seen in the revivalist spirit, which gave birth to a wide variety of bizarre and even extreme religious sects cults, creeds and utopian communities. Some of these survived. Others failed. Some expressed a deep spiritual faith in the individual, as for example was the case with the "Transcendentalists" or the revival movements of the Second Great Awakening. Others showed an equally deep longing for order and for a very rigid social life, as in the Shaker communities or the utopian New Harmony experiment. Whatever their merits or defects, however, these movements also reveal a deep discontent with America. It is a discontent with the flawed republic the revolutionary generation tried to create. It helps to show that no matter what that generation hoped or intended to do, those who followed it failed tragically to carry out its noble sounding ideals.
No nation is perfect. Certainly, the United States has not been perfect. Yet the Declaration of Independence does state ideals that seem to describe a perfect society. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” No society has ever lived up to this ideal perfectly, not even the one that set down these phrases in the first place.

Nevertheless, the fact is that from the start, the United States has tried hard to live up to these words. However imperfectly, it has worked to make its republican ideals a new reality for its millions of citizens. Because humans are imperfect, the nation’s founders never expected a completely perfect society. They were very practical men. One of their great strengths was their readiness to compromise and settle arguments by splitting the difference. Americans, in other words, have been ready to accept many bumps in the road on the way to a “more perfect union,” as the U.S. Constitution puts it.

In fact, one of the nation’s most famous compromises helped bring the Constitution itself into being. Delegates at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 had to make several compromises to come up with a final plan for the nation’s government. The most important of these was the so-called “Grand Compromise.” In it, the delegates at the Convention agreed on a unique form of representation for each of the two parts of Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Each state would get two Senators, no matter how large or small that state’s population was. Its number of House members, however, would be based on the state’s population. This arrangement satisfied both large and small states.

No one today complains about this arrangement, but they are shocked about one other part of the Grand Compromise. That part was the so-called “three-fifths clause.” By this clause, states would count three-fifths of their slaves for purposes of representation in the House and for taxation. The clause horrifies many today because it appears to regard each slave as only three-fifths of a person. Of course, the Southern slave states wanted each slave counted as a whole person, whereas Northerners opposed to slavery wanted each slave counted as zero. The Northerners took this stand because the three-fifths clause gave the South more members in the House than it otherwise would have had.

Many people today say this clause shows that the Constitution accepted slavery and even used it to make the South more powerful. Yet others say that without this compromise, the South might never even have joined the union to begin with. Had that happened, slavery could have lasted far longer than it did. These defenders of the Constitutional Convention also point out that the Constitution set a year, 1808, after which Congress could act to stop the slave trade. Defenders of the Constitutional Convention say it did what it could to limit slavery without endangering the very birth of the republican society that might one day end slavery. The founders could not even bring themselves to use the word “slave.” Even Abraham Lincoln said that the Constitution’s framers had actually put slavery “in course of ultimate extinction.”

In the decades that followed the Constitutional Convention, American leaders would try several times to compromise over slavery. The first big crisis came when the territory of Missouri asked to be admitted as a slave state. In the vote over the Missouri Compromise, it was clear that Northern anti-slavery feeling was growing stronger. The Compromise almost failed to work because of how united Northern House members were against accepting slavery in Missouri. Had these early compromises over slavery failed, the nation would have split apart earlier than it did, well before the North’s industrial wealth and population growth
made it strong enough to win the civil war that would follow.

The surging population and industrial growth were themselves the result of the more open society Americans were creating. First, there is the matter of innovation and invention itself. The new republic's respect for individual effort, practical knowledge and freedom to experiment encouraged skilled crafts workers to strive for a better life in all sorts of ways. Self-trained go-getters like Samuel Morse, Eli Whitney, Robert Fulton, Samuel Slater, Cyrus McCormick and others totally altered American life with a growing flood of new devices — the steamboat, new plows, reaping machines, the elevator, the sewing machine and all sorts of machine tools and new methods of production.

Samuel Slater's textile mill and those of Waltham, Lawrence and Lowell in Massachusetts pioneered America's early Industrial Revolution. The nation's vast spaces gave that Industrial Revolution a unique American character, as new means of transportation and communication (canals, railroads, roads, the telegraph) knit the nation together into a vast national market. In 1825, the Erie Canal made transportation much cheaper and faster for shippers of products from the Great Lakes regions, through the Canal, to the port of New York. Innovators got a big boost from the nation's open, free-market economy. This was strengthened even more by John Marshall's Supreme Court, which prevented the states from interfering with contracts and other laws protecting property. The new federal patent system gave hundreds of skilled mechanics the desire to innovate by protecting their right to benefit from the machines and new products they were creating.

The explosive growth of cities like New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati and St. Louis demonstrated how much new wealth the nation was producing. True, these cities created a whole range of big problems — slums, polluted water, disease, crime and violence. Factory production forced some skilled crafts workers to give up trying to compete against machines and accept low wage work in mills and mines. Labor conflict began to spread as the gap between wealthy owners and poor workers widened. Irish immigrants took some of the least appealing jobs, provoking the ethnic and religious prejudices of others in the process.

These challenging problems created a mood of deep concern, especially during economic slow downs. Nevertheless, the economy grew rapidly overall. As it did it began to lift more and more Americans above the survival level and into a new middle-class lifestyle.

Today, many feminists complain about the way this lifestyle trapped some women in the home while their husbands and fathers took on the challenges of public life and the business world. Yet it was this "domestic sphere" that also enabled a new generation of female writers, social reformers and women's rights advocates to appear and start working to improve life in all sorts of ways. Home life may have been confining for some women, but it also gave new comforts and greater security to many of them, as well as to their children and their husbands.

Meanwhile, a growing tide of settlers was bringing farming and small town life to vast new territories west of the Appalachian Mountains, across the Ohio Valley and new Southern states such as Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas. The opportunity this gave to millions came at the expense of some of the largest and most powerful Native American tribal groupings. Nothing can take away from the terrible
tragedy of Indian wars, violated treaties and the removal of tribes beyond the Mississippi River. Yet while recognizing this tragedy, we should not to be too quick to judge the nation for it.

Andrew Jackson was the nation’s most famous Indian fighter, both before and during his time as president. He clearly viewed Indians as inferior. Yet he also felt their removal west of the Mississippi was their only chance to maintain their traditional way of life. He may have only been making excuses. Yet it is not clear that he was wrong. With hindsight, it is easy to say he was wrong, and that he was cruel as well. Even at the time, many spoke out on behalf of Indian rights. They especially admired the efforts the Cherokees made to adopt new farming methods, written language and a modern political system. Still, huge numbers of European-Americans were pushing west. Many were poor, land-starved immigrants from Europe. It is far from clear the government could have turned back this rising tide even if it had wanted to.

With slavery, and with the treatment of Native Americans, the new nation’s flaws were real. So also, however, were the benefits of land and freedom for millions of settlers moving west. The flaws do not cancel out the enormous opportunities given to these masses of people.

Nor do they cancel out the gains in political freedom that developed in these decades. The political party system that the founders so disliked actually made it easier for all sorts of ordinary Americans to take part in the nation’s political life. The right to vote was extended to all white males. Many more citizens began to participate in the effort to govern themselves. A new spirit of the “common man” led ordinary people to be less easily swayed or awed by those of high status and wealth. Plus, as white men won the vote, women and non-white Americans became even more certain they should have it also. The idea of freedom simply could not be contained.

Another factor influencing the heavy-handed dealings with Native Americans was the issue of security on the frontier. Real national security concerns challenged the new nation. The War of 1812 again proved the U.S. could stand up to the British. Yet the burning of Washington D.C. also helped make clear how unprepared the nation was in the face of a strong foe with real sea power. Both Great Britain and Spain, at various times, sought out alliances with Native Americans in order to slow the nation’s westward growth. The Monroe Doctrine was in part a way to stand up against such interference, even though the nation really could not back it up yet. Despite this fact, the Monroe Doctrine put the nation squarely on the side of democratic independence movements in the Western Hemisphere and against any effort to revive European empire building.

Inside the nation, a growing divide was setting the North against the South. Sectionalism was a constant source of tension. Yet the nation was also being knit together by economic development, roads, canals and railroads. Henry Clay’s American System was never fully put into effect. Nevertheless, state governments and private businesses were actually building many of the “internal improvements” Clay hoped the national government would attempt. A new, more fully “American” culture and identity was taking root.

As the more complex and dynamic nation grew, so did its people’s hopes and dreams and their ideas about what was possible.
Even as urban and industrial life caused problems, a wealthier and more confident nation began to address those problems. Temperance, prison reform, the drive to establish the common school, the spread of colleges and universities, early forms of labor organization, the 1848 gathering at Seneca Falls in New York to call for women’s rights:

![Shakers in Lebanon, New York, dancing as part of a religious exercise.](https://example.com/shakers_dancing.jpg)

All these gave proof of a questioning, active citizenry seeking to make the world a better place.

In that deeply religious age, a “can-do” spirit was given voice by a huge religious upheaval known as the Second Great Awakening. Its religious revivals put the stress on each individual’s ability not only to save his or her own soul, but to perfect all of society as well. Among writers and artists, a more intellectual version of this mood took the form of “Transcendentalism.” At its core, this literary movement fostered a belief that each individual soul carries within it an ability to reach deep spiritual truths. For some, this hunger for a perfect world led them to withdraw into small experimental communities. For Shakers or Mormons, this took a religious form. Many members of such religious communities were overwhelmed with the sense of the soon-to-arrive second coming of Christ. Other utopian communities did not seek a religious renewal. They hoped to perfect life by purely secular means. All sought to achieve an ideal of complete equality here on earth on their own.

In a way, this sense of being “on their own” was the common mood of the age. Americans had launched a brave experiment in liberty. A long journey full of stumbling blocks lay ahead. The great crisis of the Civil War was yet to be faced. Nevertheless, freedom was on the march in the new republic. The strides taken in these decades before the Civil War meant the new republic was off to a vigorous start full of promise and hope.