

## Chapter 1 Debate: Resolved: The Suffering of Native Peoples in the Age of Exploration was the Price of Progress

### Introduction

Teachers can use class debates to help students understand conflicting perspectives of a past time and place *or* of a contemporary issue. This often involves dividing the class into two or more parts and assigning each group a role. Students are then encouraged to take on that role and argue their position. They need to argue the position they are assigned, *regardless* of whether or not they agree with that position. Sometimes, teachers may encourage students to know both sides of the argument and have the two sides switch roles midway through the debate.

### Objectives of This Debate

- Students will discuss the benefits and tragedies that came to the new world during the Age of Exploration.
- Students will reflect on the importance of “progress” – is it always automatically a positive thing? How do we define “progress?”
- Students will make connections between the cost of progress in the Age of Exploration to issues in our own day in which progress must be balanced against its price.

### Background

When one looks at the early contacts between Europe and native cultures in the new world, one is struck by the suffering experienced by the peoples of the western hemisphere. Europeans arrived, claimed lands for their crowns, and often enslaved native peoples to enrich themselves. Of course on top of this exploitation, the Europeans unintentionally brought diseases for which the indigenous peoples had no immunity, leading to perhaps the greatest depopulation disaster in world history. Some people minimize this suffering or choose not to focus on it because it is seen as a price of “progress.” Was this suffering worth the price? Are there decisions we make today where the price of progress is balanced against other concerns and needs?

### Procedures

This debate can be done in one class period. The teacher should divide the class into two parts, each side making arguments either for or against the resolution. Students should be reminded that they should stick to their role and argue *passionately* for their position, despite what they personally may believe. They should also be encouraged to base their points on factual information, rather than opinion and emotion.

Each side of the debate should research both their position AND the position of their opponents. This is important in the event the teacher elects to have the sides change positions. It also makes for a better debate because each side is better able to counter arguments of their opponents.

Students should be able to use *America: The Last Best Hope* to find dual perspectives on these issues, but teachers will also need to provide background through short lectures or explanations. Students can also do research on their own to find arguments to support their point of view. Primary sources from the period can be particularly valuable as a side builds its case.

The following chart represents basic points that should be covered by both sides. Teachers should not immediately give students these points. They might be offered to each side after students have had time to research on their own, or they might be withheld until after the debate and used as a summary or to debrief the debate.

A blank version of the chart is offered at the end of this debate. Students may use this blank chart to take notes as they research their positions in the debate.

When the debate takes place, arrange student desks or chairs with the two debate factions on opposite sides of the classroom *facing each other*. The teacher should serve as a moderator, beginning the proceedings, laying out the resolution, and calling on members of each side in alternating order. If the debate begins to lag, the teacher may call a short break and have each side “caucus” to rethink their positions and prepare responses to arguments made by the other side.

**Resolved: The Suffering of Native Peoples in the  
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| Affirmative  | Negative  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The impact of exploration and settlement on native peoples was tragic, but necessary for the progress of western civilization.</li> <li>• Yes, many died, but in the long run, the quality of life for all peoples increased as western technology and knowledge came to the new world.</li> <li>• Remember, not all was peaceful in the new world; look at the suffering and death imposed on native peoples by cultures like the Aztecs. Europeans stopped that.</li> <li>• The lands in the new world were grossly underdeveloped. It took European knowledge to develop those lands and ultimately feed the people of Europe. How many millions of Europeans would have suffered had not the resources of the new world been available to them?</li> <li>• The world we enjoy today is the result of the beginnings made in the Age of Exploration. America, freedom, opportunity – all were born in that day.</li> <li>• It is naive to think progress will not have a price. Just like today, we do have environmental problems such as pollution, but that pollution represents the production of things we all need.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress is not always worth the price. Millions enslaved and millions more dying of disease in the new world was not worth the price of progress.</li> <li>• To say that Europeans brought a better way of life is an ethnocentric view. The peoples of the new world were very content to lead their lives in peace, without the “progress” brought by the West.</li> <li>• There were other options for the Europeans than total domination. Simply contrast the way the Spanish dealt with native peoples vs. the way the French did so. The French partnered with the natives.</li> <li>• Europeans did indeed develop the resources of the new world, but did so to a large degree on the backs of slaves captured in Africa and dragged across the Atlantic – more suffering.</li> <li>• Just because our life today had its roots in the Age of Exploration does not mean we need to accept all that happened then as “necessary.” It was not.</li> <li>• We have to get beyond the idea, even today, that progress is always worth the price. We think we “need” things we actually do not need. In the process we damage the earth.</li> </ul> |

**Student Debate Sheet**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

As your group researches their position on these issues, use the following table to record your views and prepare for the debate. You should research and prepare for *both* sides of this debate. As the debate progresses, make notes made by the opposing side that your side did not anticipate.

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| <b>Affirmative</b> | <b>Negative</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------|
|                    |                 |