



## A Diplomatic Incident

Grades: 9-12 Time Frame: 4-5 days

### Overview

It's 1839. The uprising of enslaved Africans on the Amistad has become an international incident involving the United States, Great Britain, and Spain. International treaties, trade pacts, and national sovereignty and laws are under scrutiny.

Yes, there are moral issues to discuss, and abolitionists are loudly making them known. But there are also laws and complex diplomatic and political relationships to consider. This same year, British naval vessels will escort six American slave ships to New York City and formally request the traders be charged with piracy. But so far the U.S. has declined to help Britain and other countries patrol for slavers, even though the slave trade has been illegal for more than 30 years.

And what of Spain? Slave trading was outlawed there in 1821. Yet the Amistad Africans were sold by a Spanish slaver operating along the Guinea Coast of West Africa to a Portuguese slave trader who sold them to Cuban slaveholders.

Why wasn't the Amistad Incident a quick open and shut case? For this project, you'll represent the ambassador or leader of an interested nation. You will research the legal and diplomatic issues and debate them based on the needs of the group you represent.

### Learning Objectives

- Research the impact of Amistad events on diplomatic relations between the United States, Spain, and Great Britain.
- Learn when and why countries outlawed the slave trade and eventually slavery, and how in practical terms they accomplished both.
- Understand how leaders of countries weigh political pressures, economic goals, and diplomatic interests and obligations.
- Advocate a position in a class debate.



Struggle for Colonial Domination, 1700-1763. Perry-Castañeda Library, University of Texas

## Activities and Student Work

### A BIT OF BACKGROUND

The legal complexities of the Amistad events involve more than U.S. law. You will need to be familiar with international laws and treaties. Familiarize yourself with the Amistad case and the status of the slave trade at the time of the case by reviewing the following sites in your list of project resources:

- Brief Narrative of the Amistad Incident
- Amistad Trial - Famous American Trials - "A Trial Account"

Keep notes on any countries, laws and treaties mentioned.

### INTRODUCING THEIR EXCELLENCIES

Your teacher will ask you to form teams of 3-5 and will assign you one of the following five groups:

- Spain/Pedro Argaiz, Foreign Minister to the U.S.
- Spanish Administrators of Cuba
- Britain/Henry S. Fox, Foreign Minister to the U.S.
- U.S./John Forsyth, Secretary of State
- Leaders of the U.S. and British Abolitionist Societies

Your task is to represent interests at an upcoming meeting of ambassadors and dignitaries. Specifically, you've been asked to debate a resolution proposed on behalf of the Amistad captives.

### RESOLVED

*Resolved. The United States government should free the Africans captured in the schooner Amistad.*

Your team must decide if your interest group would support or oppose the resolution. You must have evidence to support your decision. Research your position carefully. Address the following questions in the case you present.

1. What relevant treaties or international obligations has your nation signed? How are they working in reality?
2. What is your relationship to the other delegations preparing to debate? Use the Relations among Nations handout to record notes on this.
3. What was the legal status of the slave trade and slavery in your country?

**Activities** (continued)

**RESOLVED** (continued)

4. What are your main interests (economic, political)?
5. What other pressures do the leaders of your country face?
6. If the case does not go your way, what consequences does your group foresee?

Additional instructions:

- Review the Debate Rules handout for important information on team tasks and the format of the debate.
- Your team will have two class periods to prepare.
- Use the websites listed in the Resources section as well as print and other resources in the library and classroom. Remember that the resolution is being debated based upon legal issues, not emotional issues. Stick to the facts and find documentation to support your points.
- The Abolitionist group may have history on its side. However, in this debate they represent an international coalition without formal legal standing.

**DEBATE AT THE ASSEMBLY OF THE AMBASSADORS**

Your teacher is the chairperson for the debate and will also decide which team presents the best case. Do not assume that the groups arguing for the resolution have the edge! The winning team will be the group that best presents and supports its case.

**Resources**

**WEBSITES**

- Brief Narrative of the Amistad Incident  
[www.yale.edu/glc/curriculum/amistad/incident.html](http://www.yale.edu/glc/curriculum/amistad/incident.html)
- Amistad Trial - Famous American Trials  
[www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/amistad/AMISTD.HTM](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/amistad/AMISTD.HTM)
- Amistad Cases - Legal Information Institute - Cornell Law School  
[www.law.cornell.edu/background/amistad/summary.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/background/amistad/summary.html)
- African American Voices - Digital History  
[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/black\\_voices/voices\\_display.cfm?id=26](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/black_voices/voices_display.cfm?id=26)
- American Diplomacy - 1778 to the Present - Avalon Project  
[www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerdipl.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerdipl.htm)
- "However unjust...the slave trade may be" - John Forsyth Statement to Congress  
[www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1046.htm](http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1046.htm)
- Judgment Day -Africans in America  
[www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/narrative.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/narrative.html)

**HANDOUTS**

- Relations among Nations Worksheet
- Diplomatic Debate Rules

**Assessment**

- You can explain the legal issues debated during the Amistad case. You can identify the specific rights or treaties leaders in key countries used as the basis of their arguments.
- You can summarize the positions of the Spanish, American, and British governments on the case. You can explain the domestic interests that affected each government's international stance.
- Your team researches its position thoroughly, using multiple web and library sources, primary and secondary.
- You complete all tasks outlined in the Debate Rules and are well-prepared to debate. Each team member plays a role in preparing for and participating in the debate.
- Your questions and answers for opposing teams reflect a solid understanding of their positions.

**Reflection Questions**

1. If you could decide the winner of the debate, which team would you choose? Why?
2. How clear cut do you think the fundamental legal questions of the Amistad case were? What factors complicated matters? Did they have legal merit?
3. What might have happened had the Amistad captives lost the case and been returned to Cuba or Spain? Would diplomatic ties between Great Britain, Spain, and the U.S. have been affected?
4. In your view, what considerations weighed most heavily on the minds of leaders in each country? In the end, what factor(s) most shaped their positions?
5. Were these countries well led by leaders during the incident? What criteria are you using to make this judgment?
6. Can you think of examples today where trade - or illegal trade - strains or strengthens relationships between countries? How about human rights issues?

**About Amistad America**

AMISTAD America, Inc. promotes relationships between races and cultures by acknowledging our common experience and encouraging dialogue based on respect. Freedom Schooner *Amistad* serves as a floating classroom, icon, and monument to the millions of souls broken or lost as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

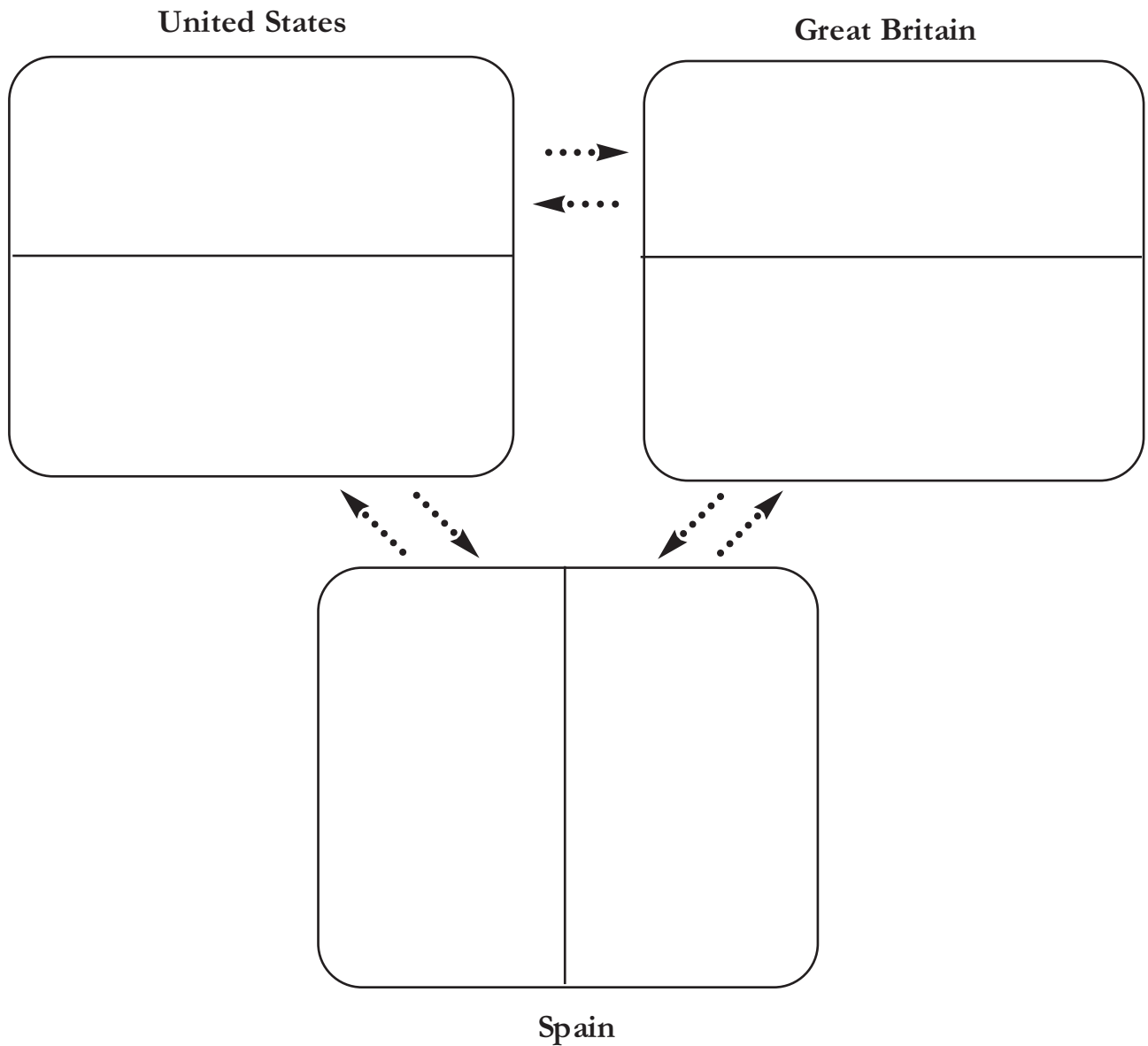
[www.amistadamerica.org](http://www.amistadamerica.org)

*Relations among Nations Worksheet*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

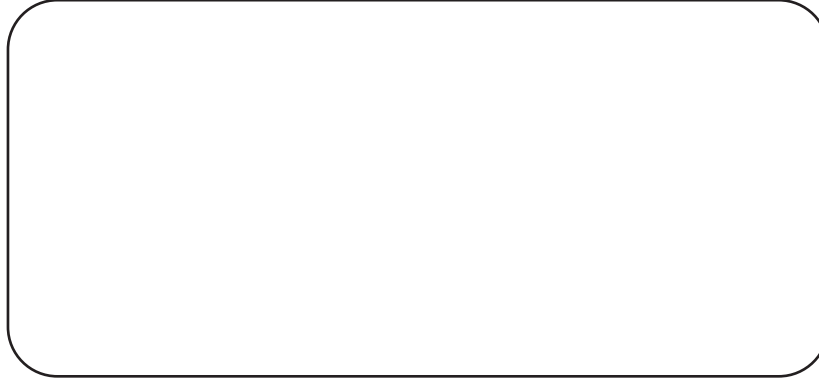
Your group/country: \_\_\_\_\_

How might the Amistad Incident affect relationships between each country? Use this page to record the shared interests or obligations you hold with other countries. For example: trade, immigration, territorial control.



On this page, note areas of tension or conflict.

United States ◀..... ▶ Great Britain



United States ◀..... ▶ Spain



Spain ◀..... ▶ Great Britain



## *Diplomatic Debate Rules*

Your team will be assessed as a whole, so it is important that each member be well prepared. There are five tasks for each team. Your team can determine how team members will take responsibility for tasks.

1. **Research and Preparation:** You must accurately represent the historical interests of your group. You should prepare specific examples based on historical fact or statements made by real people.
2. **Opening Statement:** Each team will make a three-minute opening statement which identifies the team's position about the topic and outlines your main argument.
3. **Questions for the Opposition:** Your team must write five questions for each opposing team. These are questions you will ask during the debate. They should be concise and clearly written.
4. **Answers to Questions:** Your team must prepare answers for questions the opposing teams may ask. You will not be given the questions ahead of time, so you must anticipate what they may ask. The discussion period for questions will be 20 minutes. Each team will have approximately 5 minutes to question opposing teams.
5. **Concluding Statement:** Your team will have 3-5 minutes for concluding statements. One team member must take notes during the debate to use during the conclusion.

The team that wins the debate will be the team that:

- Demonstrates a solid understanding of historical material.
- Uses evidence-based points in their arguments.
- Actively uses each team member.
- Shows strong teamwork and organization through their collaboration on and division of tasks.