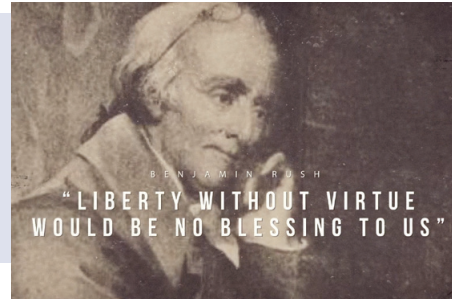


BENJAMIN RUSH

Benjamin Rush

Lesson Length: 45 Minutes

Grade Levels: Recommended for high school grades, though elementary and middle school teachers may be able to incorporate concepts from this lesson plan into their teaching



Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about Benjamin Rush, an unheralded member of the Founding Generation, by exploring the myriad ways he contributed both to American Independence during the Revolutionary War, and to the moral and physical health of the fledgling American Republic. In so doing, students will consider why Rush's accomplishments haven't received the same level of attention from historians, and will examine Rush's role in the great political, governmental, and healthcare debates of his time.

Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze the role played by Benjamin Rush both during and after the Revolutionary War
- Explain why Benjamin Rush has received less attention from historians than other Founding Fathers
- Identify tensions that existed both during the Revolutionary era and in modern American society
- Wrestle with contradictions between one's actions and one's moral beliefs
- Consider why the pursuit of the truth is often times unpopular

Historical Background

On July 4th 1776, the Declaration of Independence was ratified by the Second Continental Congress amidst the backdrop of the Revolutionary War, which had commenced the year prior. Benjamin Rush, a signatory to the Declaration, had established himself as a prolific writer, both of medical treatises and of political philosophy, and joined the Sons of Liberty in the 1770's. As he enmeshed himself in the Revolutionary movement, he became a close correspondent of fellow revolutionaries such as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, advocating for equality, liberty, and republican self-government.

Benjamin Rush wasn't brave simply because he served his nation during the Revolutionary War. Afterwards, he pioneered innovations in the field of medicine, championed women's education, and advocated for the abolition of both slavery and capital punishment. Rush's political and medical contributions weren't necessarily well-received during his own time, even if his role during the American Founding has been positively reappraised by historians and within the medical field. His bold pursuit of the truth has perhaps contributed to him receiving less acclaim than other members of the Founding Generation for his role in the Revolutionary War and the formation of the early Republic. Some speculate that his work has been hidden because it exposed many of the tensions inherent in the American experiment, for example, the tolerance of racial prejudice, and the separation of church and state in a religious society.

Primary Source

"Let every man exert himself in promoting virtue and knowledge in our country, and we shall soon become good republicans."

Teacher Note: Cited from Benjamin Rush's address to the people of the United States in January 1789

BENJAMIN RUSH

Lesson Flow (45 Minutes)

Warm-Up (5 minutes)

Quick-write: “who are the 2-3 most prominent Founding Fathers, and what were their contributions to the American Founding?”

Historical Context (10 minutes)

Teacher gives presentation of Benjamin Rush’s upbringing, education, and accomplishments prior to the Revolutionary War, and the principles that undergirded the Revolution.

Primary Source Analysis (10 minutes)

Students analyze the primary source quotation, considering how Rush defines the terms virtue and knowledge, and how they inform citizens’ understanding of their role in a free society.

Small Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Students discuss their response to the quote, and answer the observation and walk-in-the-shoes questions.

Whole-Class Discussion (10 minutes)

As a class, students share any interesting responses from their small group discussions, before teacher guides larger conversation based on the discussion questions above. Teachers should focus on Rush’s bravery in pursuing unpopular truths and championing unorthodox medical methods and use Rush as an example to show that the early Republic and the men who founded it were brilliant people, yet also products of their time.

Guiding Questions

Walk-In-The-Shoes

- What are the risks a combat medic such as Benjamin Rush would face on the battlefield? How are these different to the risks faced by conventional soldiers?
- Benjamin Rush’s calls for compassion, dignity, and care were unorthodox. Would you feel comfortable going against the grain and speaking your mind as he did?
- How did Benjamin Rush’s role in the Revolution differ from the role of Army Generals such George Washington and Alexander Hamilton?

Observation

- What did Benjamin Rush think about the impact of illness on military capabilities?
- What relationship did Benjamin Rush envision between education and virtue?
- Did Benjamin Rush view the truth as relative or objectively fixed?
- How did Benjamin Rush’s perspective on mental illness and addiction, plus his views on physical diseases such as yellow fever, influence his prescribed solutions?

Discussion

- Why has Benjamin Rush received far less attention praise and attention from the public and historians alike than other Founders (such as Washington, Adams, Franklin, Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson)?
- How can we reconcile Benjamin Rush’s stated opposition to slavery with the fact that he himself owned slaves?
- Benjamin Rush identified several tensions that needed to be reconciled, for example, between science and faith. What are some other balances that societies and government need to strike?
- Benjamin Rush wore several hats during his lifetime-physician, government official, humanitarian, philosopher. How did his knowledge in different fields interact, and help him serve his nation?
- Benjamin Rush believed liberty entailed responsibility: what are some of our responsibilities as free people, to our society, and fellow citizens?
- Are there political figures today who, like Rush, will be treated differently by history, either more or less favorably?

Research Base and Source Documentation

- CBS News, “Why isn’t this guy more famous?”: The Founding Father you may have never heard of” - <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/benjamin-rush-the-founding-father-you-may-have-never-heard-of-2018-09-22/>
- American Battlefield Trust, “Benjamin Rush - <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/benjamin-rush>
- *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, ed. John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber and Margaret A. Hogan. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009 - https://archive.csac.history.wisc.edu/Benjamin_Rush.pdf
- University of Pennsylvania, “Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813” - <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/benjamin-rush/>