



## PROFILES IN COURAGE

Teacher's Guide

# THOMAS HART BENTON

### CREDITS:

Starring Brian Keith, Geraldine McEwan, Russell Collins, and Carl Benton Reid. Written by A.J. Russell. Directed by Lamont Johnson. Produced by Gordon Oliver and Robert Saudek Associates. Inspired by John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. **50 minutes.** Guide prepared for Social Studies School Service by Robert D. Barnes, 1983.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To discuss Congress's right to legislate slavery.
- To explore the debate over sectional vs. national issues.
- To debate the responsibility that politicians have in following the wishes of their constituents.
- To understand the meaning of moral courage.

### BACKGROUND:

By 1844, Missouri, a slave state, had become convinced that her loyalty belonged to her sister slave states; it was therefore with increasing mistrust that Missourians viewed the position of Thomas Hart Benton, Missouri's senior Senator. Benton, who had already served 24 of his 30 years in the United States Senate, supported slavery and was himself a slave owner, but he was unalterably opposed to the spread of slavery into the Western territories. Benton broke sharply with his state by working to defeat the treaty to annex Texas, believing it a "plot hatched by Calhoun...for secessionist and slavery purposes."

Opposing his state and party on the Oregon issue (he viewed "fifty-four or fight" as dangerously unrealistic), he narrowly won re-election to the Senate in 1845.

In 1849, California and New Mexico became issues in the battle over the spread of slavery. While Calhoun warned of secession, and Clay and Webster

fought for "compromise," Benton saw no room for compromise. Would he initiate a convention of all Missouri Democrats to settle his differences with the pro-slavery camp?

"I would sooner," raged Benton, "sit in council with the six thousand dead who have died of cholera in St. Louis than go into convention with such a gang of scamps!"

### SYNOPSIS:

We watch Thomas Hart Benton, senior senator from Missouri, refuse to obey the instructions of his constituents concerning the admission of California, arguing that Congress has the right to decide the issue of the spread of slavery. Denouncing the spread of slavery and those who would compromise on the issue, Benton thunders, "I shall abide by the fate of the South in everything in which she has the right on her side, but I will vote sectionally on sectional interests and nationally on national interests."

While Benton is unsuccessful in his cause, and is turned out of office by the Missouri legislature, he has forced Missourians to carefully consider the slavery issue. When states touching her borders, Arkansas and Tennessee, leave to join the Confederacy, Missouri remains in the Union.

**VOCABULARY:**

The following words and phrases appear in the program. Teachers may wish to check for student understanding:

imminent	fossilized
unequivocal	constrained
pussyfoot	inevitable
synonymous	demagogue
fratricidal	unscrupulous
emigrate	calumny
immigrate	contemptuous
constituents	rhetoric
extremity	insidious
dogma	invoke
abstractions	instigation
firebrands	incendiary
flaunt	usurpation
"54-40 or fight"	animosity
alliteration	oracular
cronies	scamp
conciliation	array
cantankerous	preconceived
cheeky	adversity
tyrant	capitulate
thin skinned	invariably
Whig	imperative
rancor	repudiate
Clay Compromise	equity
melliflously	caucus

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. "Joseph, let me ask you a question," Benton begins, "You are a slave..." What question does Benton address? How does he feel about the spread of slavery? Explain.
2. Congress has no right to pass any laws preventing citizens from "immigrating with their property." Who should make this decision? Why deny Congress this right to decide?
3. Seven of Benton's "old friends" from the Missouri legislature, representing many others, write to Senator Atchison, Missouri's junior senator. What is their message? Why not write directly to Benton? What do you think Benton means when he says, "Calhoun faces the past, Benton looks to the future?"

4. Jessie Benton Fremont says, "Father, are you acquainted with the Llama?" What does she say about the Llama? What is her analogy? Is Benton "acquainted"? Explain. Is he receptive to her point?
5. "I am Southern by birth, I am Southern in convictions, interests and connections. I will abide by the fate of the South in everything where she has the right on her side, but I will vote sectionally on sectional interests and nationally on national interests." What is the issue? Why does Benton see it as national in scope? Why is compromise so inappropriate in Benton's view?
6. "If my fire warms them, they are welcome to stand close to it," says Benton. Can you explain this philosophy? Who is he talking about?
7. Senator Foote of Mississippi discusses Benton's "puny eight vote majority" in the legislature. What are these remarks, made on the floor of the Senate, designed to accomplish? What memorable incident follows?
8. After stumping Missouri, but by now sensing defeat, Benton explains to his daughter Jessie his feelings toward his constituents. How does he view the people of Missouri?

**ACTIVITY:**

Compromise is part of the American democratic process. Most important legislation and many decisions come only after compromise. Sometimes a person not willing to compromise is labeled an "obstructionist" or a "poor sport." Hold a class discussion where you consider the importance of compromise. After a few minutes, raise the question: Are there some situations where compromise is inappropriate, even dishonest? Try to get the members of the class to consider issues where compromise is, for them, inappropriate.

**FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION:**

1. Conduct research to find out the provisions of the Compromise of 1850. Find out why secession and war became inevitable.
2. Benton's son-in-law was John C. Fremont. What contribution did he make to American expansion? Do you suppose he had any influence on his father-in-law? Might Benton have influenced him?

