
Happy Thanksgiving

Segment Length: 4:08 minutes

Lesson Description:

Americans love celebrating Thanksgiving, but if it weren't for private property, would we be celebrating "Starvation Day" instead? In this video, John Stossel looks back at the Pilgrims, explains how private property rights were instrumental in their survival, and how the "tragedy of the commons" almost put an end to the United States of America long before it began.

Concepts & Key Terms:

Tragedy of the Commons— A term used to describe a situation in which shared resources are depleted or spoiled due to the actions of some individuals acting on their own self-interest.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- discuss the role of incentives in people's actions.
- explain why sharing resources had negative results for the Pilgrims.
- evaluate the arguments for private property vs. shared resources.

Preview Activity:

Have your students engage in an experiment similar to the one in the video. Show them a large, clear bag of small candies, such as M&Ms. (Count the number of candies ahead of time, but do not reveal this number to the students.) Explain to your class that each student can claim any number of candies by writing the number and their name on a piece of paper; afterwards, the papers will be collected and each student will receive the number of candies they claimed, but *only if the total amount claimed by the class does not exceed the total number of candies*. What is the result? Ask students to explain their thought process when determining how many candies to claim.

Viewing Guide:

It is recommended that teachers show the video twice: once to allow students to view it and focus on the issues presented, and once to allow them time to complete the viewing guide. After they complete the viewing guide, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs sharing and verifying answers.

Answers to Viewing Guide

1. commons
2. property
3. producing
4. Starvation

Happy Thanksgiving

Viewing Guide

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

Directions: As you watch the video, fill in the blanks with the correct words.

1. Communal farming creates what economists call the “tragedy of the _____.”

2. I divided the land into segments, so each person had his own _____.

3. When you own property, you take care to preserve it, to allow it to keep
_____ good things.

4. Had that continued, Thursday would be known as “_____ Day.”

Now, take a few moments to reflect on the video and answer the questions below:

What does “the tragedy of the commons” mean? _____

How might the tragedy of the commons apply to people’s yards and public parks? _____

Why do you think some Pilgrims didn’t work as hard when the resources were being shared?

What do you think is the main lesson of this video? _____

Discussion and Analysis:

1. The corporation that funded the Pilgrims originally ordered them to grow food together and divide the harvest equally. Why?
2. To fix the problems caused by the tragedy of the commons, each family was assigned their own parcel of land so they could grow their own food. Was this the right solution? Can you think of any alternatives?
3. Give an example of a time when you had to share something with a group. What were the results? Did you experience your own tragedy of the commons?
4. Do you view property—even a small item—differently when it belongs to you, as opposed to when you're sharing it with others?
5. In the first part of John Stossel's experiment, each person rushes to grab as many coins as he or she can. Were they right to do so? Why or why not?
6. What are some modern examples of the tragedy of the commons? What should be done about them? (Examples: overfishing of the oceans, air pollution, littering in public parks.)
7. What are some of the benefits of sharing resources? How can we maintain those benefits under private ownership?
8. Are there negatives to private ownership? If so, how can we compensate for them?
9. Some politicians want to enact legislation which would make people share more of their wealth and resources. Is this a good idea?
10. Are we better off with or without private property? Explain.

Discuss These Lines from the Video:

1. The tragedy is that no individual rancher is much motivated to try to preserve that land.
2. At that moment, I wanted it now. Whereas this [money] is going up, and it's mine.
3. When you own property, you take care to preserve it, to allow it to keep producing good things.
4. When you share the results of your work, some people don't work hard.
5. So this Thanksgiving, if you have a good meal, thank private property. Every day it protects us from the tragedy of the commons.

Quotes for Discussion:

Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit -- in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.

– Garrett Hardin

What is common to the greatest number gets the least amount of care.

– Aristotle

The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries. – Winston Churchill

You are forgiven for your happiness and your successes only if you generously consent to share them. – Albert Camus

Socialism, reduced to its simplest legal and practical expression, means the complete discarding of the institution of private property by transforming it into public property, and the division of the resultant public income equally and indiscriminately among the entire population. – George Bernard Shaw

At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. – Henry David Thoreau

If a man owns land, the land owns him. – Ralph Waldo Emerson

If history could teach us anything, it would be that private property is inextricably linked with civilization. – Ludwig von Mises

Activities:

1. Show the class “The Tragedy of the Commons Explained in One Minute.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSuETYEgY68>

2. Now that your class has seen how the lack of property rights impacted the pilgrims, show them the Stossel video “Property Rights and the Status of Native Americans” so they can learn how the same problem impacts Native Americans to this day.

https://stosselintheclassroom.org/videos/property_rights_and_status_of_native_americans/

3. Read the article “Thanksgiving Tragedy” by John Stossel (at the end of this guide).

4. Research and report on the early American Pilgrims.

5. Watch the Stossel video “Private Ownership & Conservation.”

https://stosselintheclassroom.org/videos/private_ownership_and_conservation/

6. Research and report on modern examples of the tragedy of the commons.

7. Watch the TED-Ed video “What is the tragedy of the commons?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxC161GvMPc>

8. The corporation’s policy to share the land was well-intentioned, but the unintended consequences were dire. Research and report on other historical examples of well-intentioned policies with unintended consequences.

9. John Stossel’s “Happy Thanksgiving” video features clips from Izzit.org’s “Yours and Mine: The Lesson of 1623.” Watch the full video here:

https://www.izzit.org/products/detail.php?video=yours_mine

Thanksgiving Tragedy

by John Stossel

Tomorrow, as you celebrate the meal the Pilgrims ate with Indians, pause a moment to thank private property.

I know that seems weird, but before that first Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims nearly starved to death because they didn't respect private property.

When they first arrived in Massachusetts, they acted like Bernie Sanders wants us to act. They farmed "collectively." Pilgrims said, "We'll grow food together and divide the harvest equally."

Bad idea. Economists call this the "tragedy of the commons." When everyone works "together," some people don't work very hard.

Likewise, when the crops were ready to eat, some grabbed extra food -- sometimes picking corn at night, before it was fully ready. Teenagers were especially lazy and likely to steal the commune's crops.

Pilgrims almost starved. Governor Bradford wrote in his diary, "So they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could ... that they might not still thus languish in misery."

His answer: He divided the commune into parcels and assigned each Pilgrim his own property, or as Bradford put it, "set corn every man for his own particular. ... Assigned every family a parcel of land."

That simple change brought the Pilgrims so much plenty that they could share food with Indians. Bradford wrote that it "made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been."

We see this principle at work all around us today. America is prosperous because private property is mostly respected, and people work hard to protect what they own. China rose out of poverty only when the Communist rulers finally allowed people to own property and keep profits from it.

But wait, you say, didn't the Native Americans live communally? Isn't that proof that socialism and collective property work?

No. It's a myth that the Native Americans had no property rules. They had property -- and European settlers should have treated those rules with respect.

Native American property rules varied. There wasn't much point trying to establish private property in rocky hinterlands where no one traveled. But, writes Terry Anderson

of the Property and Environment Research Center, "Private garden plots were common in the East, as were large community fields with plots assigned to individual families. Harvesting on each plot was done by the owning family, with the bounty stored in the family's own storehouse."

Today, however, many American Indians live in poverty. It's not because Native Americans are lazy or irresponsible. When Indians are allowed to own their own land, they prosper. The laws of economics are the same for all people.

I asked Manny Jules, chief of the Kamloops Indian Band for 16 years, why so many Indians are poor.

"Nobody chooses poverty," he said on my show. "We've been legislated out of the economy by the federal governments, both in the United States and Canada."

That sounds odd to people who know how much money governments spend to "care for" Indians.

"Well, by taking care of us, that means providing social welfare programs," says Jules. "The only way to break the cycle of poverty (is) real property rights."

The U.S. government, after killing thousands of Native Americans and restricting others to reservations, gave tribal governments control over Indians' lives, in collaboration with the government's Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Since then, no group in America has been more "helped" and "managed" by the federal government than Indians. Because of that, no group has done worse.

Homes on reservations are likely to lack electricity and indoor plumbing. There is serious alcoholism and drug abuse. A staggering number of American Indians are unemployed. Many commit suicide.

Jules says not being able to own your own land is part of the problem. "You can't borrow. You can't get a mortgage. You can't be bonded. There's nothing that you can have that'll allow you to be able to go to the bank on your own without the (government) minister co-signing that loan."

Tribal governments function about as badly as governments run by white people. They waste money, mismanage valuable resources and give sweetheart deals to crony businesses.

If we want to give people—all people—reason to celebrate this Thanksgiving, give them the proven formula for prosperity. Get government out of the way, and respect every individual's property rights.