

# Freedom: America's Evolving and Enduring Idea

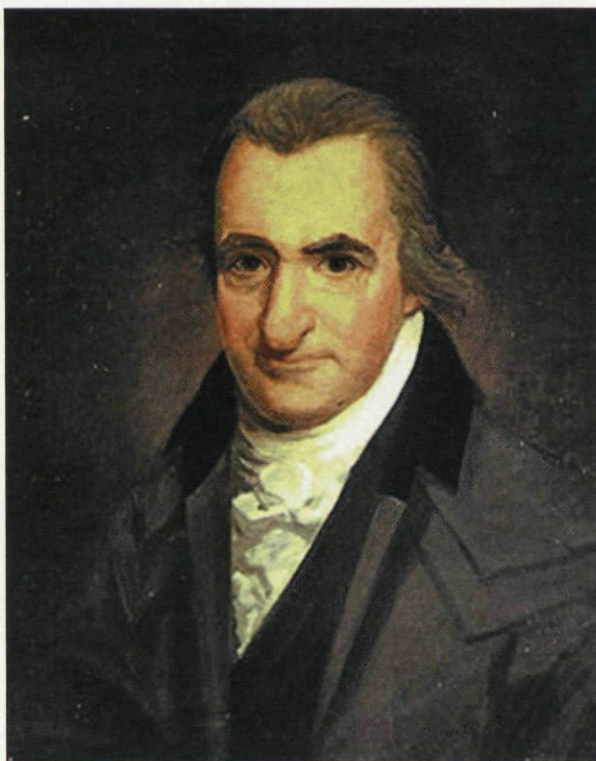
No idea is more central to American identity—that is, Americans' conception of themselves as a people and a nation—than freedom. The central term in our political vocabulary, freedom—or liberty, with which it is almost always used interchangeably—is deeply embedded in the documentary record of our history and the language of everyday life. The Declaration of Independence lists liberty among mankind's inalienable rights; the Constitution announces as its purpose to secure liberty's blessings. The United States fought the Civil War to bring about a new birth of freedom, World War II for the Four Freedoms, the Cold War to defend the Free World. The current war in Iraq has been given the title "Operation Iraqi Freedom." Americans' love of freedom has been represented by liberty poles, caps, and statues, and acted out by burning stamps and burning draft cards, running away from slavery, and demonstrating for the right to vote. Obviously, other peoples also cherish freedom, but the idea does seem to occupy a more prominent place in public and private discourse in the United States than elsewhere. "Every man in the street, white, black, red or yellow," wrote the educator and statesman Ralph Bunche in 1940, "knows that this is 'the land of the free' . . . [and] 'the cradle of liberty'" (1).

Rather than seeing freedom as a fixed category or predetermined concept, I view it as what philosophers call an "essentially contested idea," one that by its very nature is the subject of disagreement. Use of such a concept automatically presupposes an ongoing dialogue with other, competing meanings. And the meaning of freedom has been constructed not only in congressional debates and political treatises, but on plantations and picket lines, in parlors and even bedrooms.

In a recent book, *The Story of American Freedom* (2), I traced the idea of freedom in the United States from the Revolution to the present. The five documents cited below exemplify the changing meanings of freedom in American history. They also point to the three major issues that debates about freedom have revolved around in the American past—the **meaning** or definition of freedom, the **social conditions** that make freedom possible, and the **boundaries** of freedom, who, that is, is entitled to enjoy it.

*Common Sense*, published in January 1776, is best known as a clarion call for American independence (3). Written by Thomas Paine, a recent emigrant from England, it went through 25 editions and reached literally hundreds of thousands of readers. What was unique in Paine was not simply his ideas, but his mode of expressing them. Paine was the conscious pioneer of a new style of political writing, one designed to extend political discussion beyond the narrow bounds of the eighteenth century's "political nation." His savage attacks on kingship, and his careful exposition, in language common readers could understand, of democratic republicanism, were two sides of the same coin: both were meant to undermine the entire system of deferential politics. Paine also outlined a stirring vision of the historical im-

portance of American independence. The new nation would be "an asylum for mankind," a democratic experiment in a world of monarchies, a symbol of freedom in a world overrun by oppression. The sense of American uniqueness, of the United States as an example to the rest of the world of the superiority of free institutions, remains deeply embedded in our political culture.



A portrait of Thomas Paine, author of *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*, by John Wesley Jarvis, circa 1806-1807. (Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.)



Of course, the idea of a special American mission to preserve and promote liberty was somewhat tarnished by the existence of slavery in the young republic. Only with emancipation during the Civil War could the United States truly claim to be a free republic. Yet the end of slavery unleashed a contentious debate over the meaning of freedom, which centered on the fate of the four million newly emancipated slaves. What kind of freedom would they enjoy? To African Americans, freedom meant many things—being released from the numerous restrictions and hardships of slavery, reuniting families, enjoying the same civil and political rights as white Americans. But central to their definition of freedom was economic independence. In their view, the social conditions of freedom rested on ownership of land. Only land would enable them to establish flourishing communities independent of white control.

One of the most striking expressions of this understanding of freedom came in an interview with 20 leaders of Savannah's black community conducted by General William T. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton in January 1865, soon after Sherman's forces captured the city. The group, mostly made up of ministers, and including free-born blacks and those who had only now gained their freedom, chose the Reverend Garrison Frazier as their spokesman. In response to Sherman's questions, Frazier explained that to blacks, slavery above all was theft of labor—"receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent." Freedom, he continued, meant placing blacks in a position to "reap the fruit of our own labor, and take care of ourselves." The only way to accomplish this was "to have land." Otherwise, blacks would remain dependent on their former owners, and not truly free (4).

Sherman was so impressed by the conversation that he soon issued Special Field Order 15, setting aside a large swath of land along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia for settlement by black families. But Andrew Johnson, who succeeded to the presidency after Lincoln's assassination, ordered all this land restored to its former owners. Although Congress shortly thereafter clothed blacks with equal civil and political rights (subsequently abrogated in the South after the end of Reconstruction), the former slaves remained largely

dependent on white employers for a livelihood. They failed to achieve the economic independence they, like so many white Americans in the nineteenth century, believed essential to genuine freedom.

Another debate about the boundaries of American freedom took place in the early twentieth century, as immigrants from southern and eastern Europe flooded into the country. Immigration heightened awareness of ethnic and racial differences and spurred among many native-born Americans demands for "Americanization." To fully enjoy American freedom, immigrants should abandon their Old World ways and become absorbed into a homogenous national culture—the American "melting pot." Among those who questioned Americanization efforts and insisted on a vision of American society as one in which many groups could enjoy freedom without surrendering their distinctive cultural traditions and values, was the young writer Randolph Bourne. His essay, "Transnational America," published in 1916, counterposed a standard of cultural pluralism to the demands of Americanization (5). No single national culture existed, Bourne pointed out, and in a democratic, free society it was precisely the interaction between individuals and groups that produced artistic creativity and political progress. Bourne's arguments were soon drowned out by the intensification of Americanization efforts once the United States entered World War I. The war galvanized fears that immigrants were not truly loyal to the United States and inspired efforts to restrict entry from abroad, culminating in the immigration restriction laws of 1921 and 1924. But his pluralist vision of freedom would be rediscovered by subsequent generations of Americans.

Indeed, during World War II, the struggle against Nazi tyranny and its theory of a master race discredited ideas of inborn ethnic and racial inequality and gave a new impetus to the long-denied struggle for racial justice at home. A definition of American society in which all Americans enjoyed

equally the benefits of freedom became the official stance of the Roosevelt administration. The government self-consciously used the mass media, including radio and motion pictures, to popularize an expanded narrative of American history that acknowledged the contributions of immigrants and blacks and to promote a new paradigm of racial and ethnic inclusiveness. What set the United States apart from its wartime foes was not simply dedication to the ideals of Roosevelt's Four Free-



Randolph Bourne's arguments for cultural pluralism were "drowned out by the intensification of Americanization efforts" during World War I. In this 1919 poster, designed for the YWCA's Division for Foreign Born Women, the female figure holds the flags of many nations, symbolizing the incorporation of immigrants into the United States. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-10651.)



doms but the resolve that Americans of all races, religions, and national origins could enjoy these freedoms equally. Racism was the enemy's philosophy; Americanism rested on toleration and equality for all. By the war's end, awareness of the uses to which theories of racial superiority had been put in Europe helped seal the doom of racism—in terms of intellectual respectability, if not its social reality.

Of course, the reality of wartime America belied this lofty ideal. For blacks, segregation remained rigidly intact, even within the armed forces. And the fate of Japanese-Americans—over 100,000 of whom (nearly two-thirds of them American citizens) were expelled from their homes and forced into detention camps—illustrated the racial boundaries of freedom. There were no court hearings, no right to habeas corpus, no due process of law. In 1944, the Supreme Court, in a 6-3 decision, upheld the legality of Japanese internment in the case of Fred Korematsu, who had refused to present himself for deportation to one of the camps. The dissent by Justice Robert A. Jackson was a stirring affirmation of a more inclusive ideal of American freedom and of the necessity to respect the rule of law even in wartime. The majority decision, he insisted, set an ominous precedent: "The principle . . . lies about like a loaded weapon ready for the hand of any authority that can bring forward a plausible claim of an urgent need" (6). Although Congress in the 1980s apologized for the internment and appropriated funds to compensate surviving victims, the *Korematsu* decision has never been overturned. It remains a warning of the fragility of civil liberties in the face of wartime hysteria.

This fragile freedom was the point around which the writers of the Port Huron Statement of 1962 rallied, decrying the over-reliance on government and proclaiming the need for individual contribution to the establishment and continuance of democracy. In this statement, Students for a Democratic Society, then a tiny organization of college students, created a manifesto of what would soon come to be called the New Left. The Old Left, whether communist, socialist, or liberal, had tended to focus on the economic conditions of freedom, and on uplifting the most downtrodden members of American society—factory workers, blacks, etc. It tended to think that social problems ought to be evaluated by experts and solved by governmental policy. The Port Huron Statement focused on the grievances of the young middle-class—especially a lack of social purpose in a conformist, bureaucratized, materialist society. It offered a new vision of social change: "we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation" (7).

Never defined with any precision, participatory democracy became the New Left's definition of freedom. It became a standard by which existing social arrangements—workplaces, schools, government, political parties—were judged and found wanting. And while the political impulse behind 1960s radicalism has long since faded, the idea that freedom means participation in the decisions that affect one's life, and



A Japanese-American family begins its trek to one of the internment camps to which they were evacuated during World War II. Fred Korematsu challenged the practice but lost his case before the Supreme Court. (San Francisco, California, 1942. Image courtesy of the United States Signal Corps and the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-133825.)

that each individual has a right to develop to his or her full potential free from the oversight of oppressive institutions, remains alive and well in American society today. □

#### Endnotes

1. Quoted in Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, (New York: Harper, 1944). Myrdal took the quote from a research memorandum Bunche prepared in 1940, entitled "Conceptions and Ideologies of the Negro Problem."
2. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).
3. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776. For full text with background information, see <<http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/>>.
4. Garrison Frazier, "Colloquy with Colored Ministers," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (January 1931): 88-94.
5. Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-national America," *The Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86-97.
6. Justice Robert A. Jackson, Dissent in *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944).
7. Students for a Democratic Society, *Port Huron Statement*, (June, 1962). For the full text, see <[http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/SDS\\_Port\\_Huron.html](http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/SDS_Port_Huron.html)>.

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