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The Changing Face of American Freedom

Americans care more about freedom than any other concept or value. From the inclusion of liberty as an "unalienable Right" in the Declaration of Independence to visitors at the National Constitution Center leaving Post-Its equating being American to being free, freedom has suffused Americans' understandings of the United States and of themselves for well over two centuries. In fact, as will be seen, Americans' fascination with freedom preceded the birth of the nation.

That freedom has been a nearly constant topic in American discourse does not, however, mean that freedom has meant the same thing to all Americans at all points of time. On the contrary, understandings of exactly what rights are attached to "freedom" have shifted dramatically over time, as have the precise groups of people entitled to the benefits of freedom. At times, "freedom" has had political overtones. At other moments in history, economic freedom proved to be the major concern of Americans. In the years following the Revolution and independence, freedom was largely understood (at least by elites) as being an entitlement belonging to white males (thus belying Jefferson's famous claim that "all men" were endowed with liberty). The passage of time saw a general expansion of those who were considered free, though this process was far from inexorable and took place in starts and stumbles. As eminent historian Marc Bloch wrote, "The idea of liberty is one which each epoch reshapes to its own liking."[1] In short, freedom has been a constant yet dynamic component of American culture.

Any narrative of American freedom must capture the complexities of American freedom and its flexible significance. In exploring freedom in the United States over the past several centuries, a few crucial questions help guide our understanding. First, what did it mean to be

[1] Quoted in Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), xiv-xv.

free at a given point in time? What benefits were associated with freedom? Second, what did it mean to lack freedom? Was "un-freedom" held up as a counterpoint to what the United States should be? Third, who was free and (just as importantly) who wasn't? Were all Americans entitled to freedom? Not all of these questions are equally illuminating at all points in history, but taken together they provide a useful means of exploring the meaning of freedom throughout American history.

Pre-revolutionary understandings of freedom differ significantly from current conceptions of what freedom means. To residents of the American colonies, freedom signified the ability to act in a virtuous manner. In the words of minister Jonathan Boucher, freedom meant "a liberty to do every thing that is right, and being restrained from doing any thing that is wrong."[2] Freedom had its limits, and those limits could be imposed and enforced by an outside authority.

Freedom and liberty, therefore, were not incompatible with a strong government. Quite to the contrary, a governing authority could guarantee the rights associated with freedom and limit those that could lead to immoral behavior. In fact, alternatives to some sort of government association proved virtually inconceivable. In the pre-revolutionary era, group membership was taken for granted; men and women were born into a society where "going it alone" was impossible.[3] Limits on their behavior formed an essential portion of early Americans' understanding of freedom.

During the American Revolution, American conceptions of freedom shifted dramatically. The Revolution was fought, after all, in the name of liberty and independence. The older view of

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[2] Quoted in Ibid., 5. It should be noted that Boucher became a noted loyalist during the revolution and might have had a healthier-than-normal respect for authority.

[3] Oscar Handlin and Lillian Handlin, *Liberty and Power, 1600-1760*, vol. 1, *Liberty in America, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 7.

freedom as submission to authority no longer seemed appropriate. That Jefferson included liberty as one of the "unalienable rights" in the Declaration of Independence, primarily a list of grievances against the Crown, reveals just how strongly the status quo failed to provide Americans with an adequate sense of freedom. Over one quarter of the complaints included in the Declaration can be viewed as instances when Americans, through the pen of Jefferson, saw their freedoms being needlessly and dangerously restricted. Virginian Patrick Henry perfectly captured the spirit of the Revolution with his famous proclamation, "Give me liberty or give me death!" In the simplest terms, the American Revolution proved to be the casting off of old authority in the name of freedom.[4]

It should come as no surprise that this momentous event was accompanied by similar dismissals of restrictions on liberty in different spheres of society. Developments within the various Jewish communities of the new country provide a superb example of the consequences of a new national fascination with freedom. In the colonial era, synagogue communities paid little attention to freedom, instead viewing tradition and deference as the foundations of a successful community. Synagogues faced a considerable challenge, then, when freedom attained its high status in the American psyche. In the years following the Declaration of Independence, all of the nation's synagogues rewrote their constitution. These new constitutions reflected and incorporated the rhetoric and ideas of the revolution, affirming popular sovereignty and guaranteeing specific rights.[5] Power no longer resided in the synagogue but in its members, just

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[4] There were, of course, a substantial number of loyalists in the nascent United States who disagreed with Jefferson's and Henry's sentiments. Not all Americans agreed on the meaning of the Revolution. The account given here is a bit simplistic and fails to incorporate the experiences of a number of groups, including loyalists and blacks, to name only two. Nonetheless, the ideas discussed here are the ones the revolutionaries themselves explored and those best known to the general public today.

[5] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 42-43, Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Revolution in the American Synagogue," in *Creating American Jews: Historical Conversations About Identity*, ed. Karen S. Mittelman (Philadelphia: National Museum of American Jewish History, 1998), 14-15.

as the base of political authority had shifted from the Crown and Parliament to the people of the new nation.

What, then, did freedom mean to the key figures of the American Revolution? Again, examining the Declaration of Independence is instructive. The vast majority of the grievances contained therein deal with the exercise of political power. The following objection is representative: "He [King George III] has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures." To the founders of the new nation,[6] the Crown had placed unjust restrictions on the free exercise of political power in the colonies. During and immediately following the Revolution, freedom was a fundamentally political concept. A North Carolina petition summed up this sentiment when it declared, "The suffrage" was "a right essential to and inseparable from freedom."[7]

Yet, in spite of the inclusive rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, freedom was not equally available to all residents of the United States. Recall that the Declaration asserted that "all men are created equal," thus leaving the status of women unclear. As it turned out, women were almost universally denied the right to vote in the years following the Revolution.[8] Setting aside the question of gender and freedom, large segments of the male population were also excluded from direct political participation, namely black slaves and those men who failed to meet the property qualifications required for voting. Propertied white males held the monopoly on political freedom in the years following the Revolution. While the rhetoric of

[6] Recall, however, that, at this point, each of the former colonies effectively became independent states. To speak of the "new nation" is to project a later political reality.
[7] Quoted in Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 18.
[8] New Jersey proved the sole exception to this phenomenon. The language of its state constitution did not explicitly exclude women (or blacks, for that matter) from the suffrage. There is evidence that some New Jersey women exercised their right to vote in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Within a few decades of the Revolution, this "loophole" was closed and the women of New Jersey lost the right to vote.

freedom asserted that all were entitled to its benefits, in practice only a small segment of society actually reaped the rewards of political representation.

Though political liberty stood at the center of most Americans' understandings of freedom, freedom in the political realm was not the alpha and omega of American freedom. The Bill of Rights, enacted in 1791, guaranteed certain freedoms to Americans by curtailing the power of the federal government. Best known are those in the First Amendment, which declared that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." Here was a formal declaration as to the precise limits of governmental power.[9] Whereas earlier conceptions of freedom took for granted that the government had the power to enforce restrictions on behavior, the new understanding of freedom as expressed the Bill of Rights saw freedom as something to be protected from the interference of the government.[10]

The First Amendment guarantee that Congress would enact "no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" helped create one of the most prevalent images of America over the next 200 years: America, the bastion of religious freedom. The right to worship according to the dictates of one's conscience perfectly captured "the revolutionary generation's definition of 'rights' as private matters that must be protected from governmental interference."[11] Religion came to be seen as a personal matter, one that the state had no power to influence or affect.

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[9] Or imprecise, as the current debates surrounding the 2nd Amendment reveal.

[10] Though these freedoms were enshrined in the Constitution, they were not always guaranteed in practice. The right to free speech, for example, was not enforced in any meaningful way until the 1920s. See Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 163-4.

[11] Ibid., 27.

The greatest beneficiaries of the new guarantees of religious freedom were religious minorities who had faced persecution in the past. American Jews, whose rights had previously been restricted on the basis of their religion (even Pennsylvania, William Penn's "Holy Experiment" in religious toleration, effectively prevented Jews from holding political office), were now granted, by the supreme law of the nation, were now free to be Jews without discrimination at the hands of the government.[12]

Significantly, many American Jews of the first half of the 19th century recognized and commented on the importance of religious freedom in the United States. Uriah Phillips Levy, the first Jew to attain the rank of commodore in the U.S. Navy, pointed out the unique status accorded to the United States due to its guarantee of religious freedom:

> "The first article of the amendments to the Constitution […] show[s] by its place, no less than by its language, how highly freedom of conscience was valued by the founders of our republic. […] In this respect, we have been honored by the friends of liberty and of human rights as 'the sole exception in Christendom.'"[13]

In addition to enhancing the reputation of the United States abroad, freedom of religion also endeared America's Jews to their country. As Mordecai Manuel Noah wrote, "Forty years of freedom have strengthened and secured their [Jews'] attachment and devotion to a country which had broken down the barriers of superstition in proclaiming and perpetuating civil and religious liberty."[14] Isaac Mayer Wise, one of the most prominent American Jews of the 19th century went even farther, declaring that "Freedom is Elijah and the Messiah."[15]

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[12] The true picture was not this rosy. Originally, the restrictions placed on the government in the Bill of Rights applied only to the federal government. Thus, discrimination could still occur at the state level. For example, it was not until 1826 that the legislature of Maryland enacted the "Jew Bill" that allowed Jews to serve. Nonetheless, the First Amendment set an important precedent and established the image of America as a safe haven for religious minorities.

[13] Uriah Phillips Levy, "Stormy Petrel of the Navy," in *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775-1865*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), 114-15.

[14] Mordecai Manuel Noah, "Ebullient Politician," in *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775-1865*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus (Philadelphia: Jewish Publican Society of America, 1955), 137.

[15] Isaac Mayer Wise, "Organizer of American Jewry," in *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775-1865*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), 128.

The Civil War, fought from 1861 to 1865, proved to be the next major event following the Revolution to dramatically alter the meaning of freedom in America. Before the war, over a dozen states allowed slavery to flourish within its boundaries. Ratified in December of 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment prohibited slavery within the United States. In just over four years, slavery moved from an essential component of the economy and society of the South to extinction. Americans' understandings of freedom inevitably changed as a result.[16]

This change largely manifested itself as a new conception of who was entitled to freedom in America. Prior to the Civil War, as discussed above, freedom, at least in the political sense, was restricted to white males.[17] Following the Civil War, a whole new class of people became, by law, free Americans. Previously enslaved blacks were now free. There was more to the redefinition of freedom than an expansion of its beneficiaries. For blacks, freedom came to mean "both escaping the myriad injustices of slavery – punishment by the lash, the separation of families, denial of access to education, the sexual exploitation of black women by their owners – and collective empowerment, a share in the rights and entitlements of American citizens."[18]

During Reconstruction, discussions about freedom and the role of the government took a new turn. The government once again had a role to play in guaranteeing freedom, by enforcing the post-war constitutional amendments which ended slavery, established the citizenship of all native-born residents of the United States, and prohibited limiting the voting rights of Americans on the basis of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." The Bill of Rights had explicitly limited the powers of the federal government. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments all had some version of the following clause: "Congress shall have power to

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[16] While debates have raged between historians for decades regarding slavery and the origins of the war, it cannot be denied that slavery was a crucial issue in national politics in the first half of the 19th century and that the war would likely not have been fought if the question of slavery were not present to divide the country so intensely.
[17] By the Civil War, property qualifications for voting were no longer on the books.
[18] Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 101.

enforce this article by appropriate legislation." Government power had previously been seen as antithetical to freedom; following the Civil War, the federal government became a guarantor of freedom. [19]

This relationship between government power and freedom would soon be challenged and redefined. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, discussions of freedom centered on the economic sphere. Two main strands of thought emerged in this period. One, espoused by Social Darwinists, called for an end to government interference in economic affairs. In this view, liberty of contract (i.e., the freedom to enter into economic arrangements of one's own choosing) was the supreme freedom. To limit the ability of workers and corporations to independently establish agreements regarding working conditions and wages was to trample upon freedom. Such advocates of a laissez-faire economic policy recognized that this brand of freedom was fundamentally incompatible with other key American values. As William Graham Sumner wrote, America was faced with two options: "liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest."[20] Freedom, argued Social Darwinists, was more important than equality, for only through such inequality would the best members of society reach their full potential and the wheat separated from the chaff.

The Progressive movement presented a strikingly different vision for the workings of the American economy. Where as individualism was a key feature of laissez-faire philosophy, unionism and an active state proved hallmarks of the Progressive program. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis declared that without "freedom in things industrial," the United States would be "a nation of slaves." As historian Eric Foner has written, "To many Progressives, the key to industrial freedom lay in empowering workers to participate in economic decision-making

[19] Ibid., 107.
[20] Ibid., 121-22.

via strong unions freed from managerial hostility and court injunctions."[21] Laws limiting child labor and the establishment of the Food and Drug Administration are representative of Progressive achievements in promoting a government which actively tended to the welfare of its citizens. In other words, Progressives sought to curtail the "liberty of contract" that formed the crux of the freedom so beloved by Social Darwinists and other proponents of a laissez-faire economic policy.

It is crucial to recognize that Social Darwinists and Progressives, in spite of their opposing philosophies, both saw themselves as defenders of American freedom. They differed not in their attitudes towards "freedom" per se, but rather their definitions of what freedom meant. Did freedom mean complete liberty from government intervention? Or was it the case that a basic component of freedom, as Progressive David Phillips wrote, was the guarantee that "every American" could find, "as his right" a decent job and wage?[22] The debates between Social Darwinists and Progressives reveal just how malleable a concept freedom has been in the course of American history.

Sydney Stahl Weinberg's study of Jewish women who immigrated to America in the early years of the 20th century provides an engaging snapshot of how ideas about freedom could vary even within a single social group. Not meant to be representative, the following quotations instead suggest that freedom encompassed a wide array of meanings.

- Frieda W.: "That time was slavery. Fifty-seven years ago when I came to America, it was slavery. We used to work until nine o'clock at night. We began at eight in the morning, sometimes seven-thirty. Slavery! How can I go to night school? How can I live even?"[23]

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[21] Ibid., 141-2.
[22] Ibid., 144.
[23] Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 194.

- Miriam M.: "I was sitting and practicing, and a man came and picked me out for a job, like he picked out on the auction block when they were selling slaves."[24]
- Yetta Brier: "I got married for one reason, to get out of the house and become independent."[25]
- Rose Chernin: "I was in the kitchen. I picked up a plate. 'No more, it's all over,' I shouted. I smashed the plate against the sink. Right away I snatched up another. 'There's got to be more to life,' I shouted. I grabbed a cup. But that was enough. Two plates and a cup and I had my resolution. 'A woman,' I said, 'is not the same thing as a slave.'"[26]

Two women, Frieda W. and Miriam M. explicitly compared working to slavery; for Frieda the long hours restricted her ability to improve her education, while Miriam felt as if she had no choice in where she would end up working. Yetta Brier saw marriage as a means of obtaining freedom, while Rose Chernin rebelled against gender norms which, implicitly or otherwise, asserted that women's entitlement to freedom was limited compared to their husbands. Weinberg's study is too limited to draw any definitive conclusions about the meaning of freedom to immigrants, Jews, or women in the early 20th century, but the diversity of opinions she found reveal just how the meanings of freedom had multiplied.

Economic freedom remained at the forefront of American conceptions of liberty during the Great Depression of the 1930s. President Franklin Roosevelt ushered in new understandings of both liberalism and freedom. Previously a term used to denote laissez-faire economic policy, "liberal" came to describe those who sought to create an activist state. Freedom became a government guarantee that employment would always be available. Roosevelt declared that "true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence."[27] Roosevelt's New Deal, a massive economic intervention by the government, sought to ensure that all U.S. had access to jobs. Through New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, and Social Security, Americans were provided with

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[24] Ibid., 197.
[25] Ibid., 208.
[26] Ibid., 216.
[27] Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 234.

new avenues of employment and guaranteed economic security. As Foner has noted, "Roosevelt's landslide reelection indicated, most Americans by 1936 had come to accept the view that freedom must encompass economic security, guaranteed by the government."[28] In short, the government had a positive role to play in securing freedom in America.

As the 1940s opened and the United States entered World War II, Franklin Roosevelt couched the decision to go to war in terms of freedom. The war, Roosevelt declared, was to be fought to preserve a set of freedoms to which all Americans, indeed, all humans, were entitled. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms - freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear - became the official justification for the war.[29] The battles to defeat Germany and Japan were understood as battles for freedom, freedom from further attacks, freedom to worship according to one's conscience, and freedom to live in an economically stable world.

In the years following World War II and throughout the 1950s, one of the Four Freedoms, freedom from want, took precedence over the rest as America became an increasingly consumerist culture. It was at this point in history that suburban America truly came into its own. Foner summarizes the transformation in American living patterns and its consequences as follows:

> "By 1960, suburban residents of single-family homes outnumbered both urban and rural dwellers and the detached house had become the physical embodiment of hopes for a better life. Even more than in the past, homeownership became an American creed. For beneficiaries of postwar prosperity like Rica Kartides, a maintenance man who made heroic sacrifices to move his family to the suburbs of Boston, the home became 'the center of freedom.'"[30]

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[28] Ibid., 205.
[29] Ibid., 221-3. Roosevelt first presented the doctrine of Four Freedoms in a speech to Congress in January 1941, over eleven months before the United States entered the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Nonetheless, the war had been going on for almost a year and a half and it was widely believed that the United States would eventually enter the conflict.
[30] Ibid., 260.

With the suburban home as the chief site of American freedom, the marketplace provided a wide array of products and services – central heating, indoor plumbing, telephones, refrigerators, washing machines, cars, frozen meals - available for purchase that allowed Americans to make the most of that freedom.[31] If freedom was the ability to fulfill one's material desires through choosing products from myriad possibilities, Americans of the 1950s were more free than ever.

The freedom available to American consumers helped shape the rhetoric of the Cold War. Americans, convinced that they were the freest people in the world, understandably understood the U.S. as the champions of the "free world," battling the Soviet Union and its state-dominated economy. The 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, site of the famous kitchen debate between vice president Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, gave Nixon ample evidence to support his claim that America provided greater freedom to its citizens than the Soviet Union. Nixon proclaimed that "the right to choose, the fact that we have 1,000 builders building 1,000 different houses, is the most important thing." He went on to suggest that the Americans and Russians could learn from each other. America's lesson for the Soviet Union was to "Let the people choose the kind of house, the kind of soup, the kind of ideas they want."[32] Other Americans were less optimistic about the possibility of learning anything constructive from the Soviets. Government official Paul Nitze saw the Cold War as a conflict between "the idea of freedom" and the "idea of slavery under the grim oligarchy of the Kremlin." [33]

Not all Americans, however, saw the United States as the ideal representatives of the "free world." Instead, as Foner explains, "To many black Americans, the boundary between the

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[31] Ibid., 265-6.
[32] CNN.com, *Moscow 'Kitchen Debate': Nixon-Khrushchev Discussion, July 24, 1959* (1959 [cited 1 August 2004]); available from http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/14/documents/debate/.
[33] Quoted in Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 253.

free and the unfree worlds seemed to run along the color line, not the iron curtain."[34] It is not surprising, then, that freedom proved a central component of the rhetoric of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and the 1960s. The language of freedom suffused the movement, finding its most famous expression in the closing words of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28th, 1963. "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last." It is important to note here that King was not speaking about contemporary America, but rather a better future where more Americans were free. This view of America as still lacking sufficient freedom reflected the earlier observation of political scientist Horace Gosnell that for whites, freedom was a "possession to be defended," while blacks saw it as a "goal to be achieved."[35] As "freedom" became the primary goal of the civil rights movement, its meaning expanded. While it had previously signified particular rights or liberties, freedom had come to mean, according to civil rights activist Anne Braden, "an end to all that wrong."[36]

In recent decades, freedom has increasingly been identified with conservatives.[37] Among the founding principles of Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative group founded in 1960, are:

> "THAT foremost among the transcendent values is the individual's use of his God-given free will, […] THAT when government ventures beyond [its] rightful functions [of preserving internal order, providing national defense, and administering justice], it accumulates power, which tends to diminish order and liberty, [… and] that history shows periods of freedom are rare, and can exist only when free citizens concertedly defend their rights against all enemies."[38]

In short, Young Americans for Freedom views excessive government power as a threat American freedom. These libertarian principles have a long history in the United States,

[34] Ibid., 267.
[35] Quoted in Ibid., 244.
[36] Quoted in Ibid., 277.
[37] Ibid., 321.
[38] *Sharon Statement* (Young Americans for Freedom, 1960 [cited 11 August 2004]); available from http://www.yaf.com/sharon.shtml.

recalling the Bill of Rights and the arguments of Social Darwinists. The tradition of viewing government interference as detrimental to freedom, however, is hardly broken. At many moments in American history, the preservation and extension of freedom has required government action. Though the right currently holds a monopoly on "freedom," the meaning of freedom has shifted too frequently and too dramatically in the past several centuries to be identified with a single political philosophy.

No single idea has captured the American imagination like freedom. Freedom was the driving force behind at least three critical wars: the Revolutionary War, when Americans fought to assert their freedom from Britain and older forms of political authority, the Civil War, when Union soldiers soldier sang of dying "to make men free," and World War II, when the United States fought to defend and extend the Four Freedoms. Freedom has suffused both political and economic rhetoric, at some points justifying greater government action, at other times calling the restriction of governmental power. The groups entitled to American freedom have changed considerably over time; while the right to vote was initially limited to white men, the past 150 years have seen the expansion of the suffrage to include all races and women. Freedom has driven more discussion in the course of American history than any other concept. If America were to have a defining value, freedom would be it. It's a bit ironic, then, that American freedom has had so many definitions. Freedom has changed America, but America has also changed freedom.

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