
The Contested History of American Freedom

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The Contested History of American Freedom

As we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, we are prompted to consider the meaning of freedom and the role freedom—its promise, its contradictions, and its consequences—has played in American identity and American history. In 2013, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania will launch a new digital history project, with generous funding from Bank of America, entitled “Preserving American Freedom.” This web project will highlight fifty documents from the Historical Society’s collections that illuminate key moments, conflicts, and ideas in the history of American freedom. Prominent among these is a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln as well as numerous emancipation- or abolition-related documents such as Pennsylvania’s Gradual Abolition Act of 1780, records of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, an excerpt from the Underground Railroad journal of William Still, and a “Declaration of Liberty” dictated by John Brown and his compatriots. Users will be able to explore not only detailed digital facsimiles of the original documents but transcriptions, annotations, biographies, illustrations and other related media, a timeline, lesson plans, and contextual essays. Some of the most prominent scholars of American history have contributed essays to this exciting project—Evan Haefeli, Pauline Maier, Gary Nash, Richard Newman, Walter Licht, Emily Rosenberg, and Thomas Sugrue—and a longer, thematic essay by Eric Foner, the foremost historian of American freedom, ties this project together. A special, for-print version of Foner’s essay, “The Contested History of American Freedom,” is presented here. Look for the final version—and the documents referenced below in footnotes—online soon at <http://hsp.org/preserving-american-freedom>.

NO IDEA IS MORE FUNDAMENTAL to Americans’ sense of ourselves as individuals and as 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 record of our history and the language of everyday life. The Declaration of

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Independence lists liberty among mankind's inalienable rights; the Constitution announces securing liberty's blessings as its purpose.¹ Freedom has often been invoked to mobilize support for war: 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 recently concluded war in Iraq was given the title "Operation Iraqi Freedom." Americans' love of freedom has been represented by liberty poles, caps, and statues and been acted out by burning stamps and draft cards, fleeing from slave masters, and demonstrating for the right to vote. Obviously, other peoples also cherish freedom, but the idea seems to occupy a more prominent place in public and private discourse in the United States than in many other countries. "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.'"²

Despite, or perhaps because of, its very ubiquity, freedom has never been a fixed category or concept. Rather, it has been the subject of persistent conflict in American history. The history of American freedom is a tale of debates, disagreements, and struggles rather than a set of timeless categories or an evolutionary narrative toward a preordained goal. And the meaning of freedom has been constructed at all levels of society—not only in congressional debates and political treatises, but on plantations and picket lines, in parlors and even in bedrooms.

If the meaning of freedom has been a battleground throughout our history, so too has been the definition of those entitled to enjoy its blessings. Founded on the premise that liberty is an entitlement of all mankind, the United States, from the outset, blatantly deprived many of its own people of freedom. Efforts to delimit freedom along one or another axis of social existence have been a persistent feature of our history. More to the point, perhaps, freedom has often been defined by its limits. The master's freedom rested on the reality of slavery, the vaunted autonomy of men on the subordinate position of women. By the same token, it has been through battles at the boundaries of freedom—the efforts of racial minorities, women, workers, and other groups to secure freedom as they

¹ Declaration of Independence: First Newport Printing by Solomon Southwick, Ab-1776-25, and US Constitution, Second Draft, James Wilson Papers (Collection 721), both in Historical Society of Pennsylvania Treasures (Collection 978). All original documents cited in this essay are found in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania unless otherwise noted.

² Quoted in Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), 4.

understood it—that the definition of freedom has been both deepened and transformed and the concept extended to realms for which it was not originally intended.

* * *

The early settlers of Great Britain's North American colonies brought with them long-standing ideas about freedom, some of them quite unfamiliar today. To them, freedom was not a single idea but a collection of distinct rights and privileges that depended on one's nationality and social status. "Liberties" meant formal, specific privileges—such as self-government or the right to practice a particular trade—many of which were enjoyed by only a small segment of the population.

Freedom did not mean the absence of authority or the right to do whatever one pleased—far from it. One common conception understood freedom as a moral or spiritual condition; freedom meant abandoning a life of sin to embrace the teachings of Christ. What was often called "Christian liberty" meant leading a moral life. It had no connection with the idea of religious toleration. Religious uniformity was thought to be essential to public order. Every country in Europe had an official religion, and dissenters faced persecution by the state and religious authorities. Liberty also rested on obedience to law. Yet the law applied differently to different people, and liberty came from knowing one's social place. Within families, male dominance and female submission was the norm. Most men lacked the economic freedom that came with the ownership of property. Only a minute portion of the population enjoyed the right to vote.

Nonetheless, conditions in colonial America encouraged the development both of a greater enjoyment of freedom than was possible in Europe at the time and of alternative ideas about freedom. The wide availability of land meant that a higher percentage of the male population owned property and could vote. Unlike the French and Spanish empires, which limited settlement to Roman Catholics, the British encouraged a diverse group of colonists to emigrate to their colonies. Thus, religious pluralism quickly became a fact of life, even though nearly every colony had an official church. William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania and a member of the Quakers, who faced severe restrictions in England, envisioned his colony as a place where those facing persecution in Europe could enjoy spiritual freedom. His Charter of Privileges of 1701 guaranteed that no resident of Pennsylvania who believed in "one almighty God" would be

punished for his religious convictions or “compelled to frequent or maintain any religious worship.”³ Some English settlers, such as the authors of a petition from Pennsylvania complaining to London authorities about Mennonites settling in the colony, found the growing diversity of the colonial population disturbing.⁴ But while it did not establish complete religious toleration (it required belief in God), Penn’s charter was, nonetheless, a milestone in the development of religious liberty in America.

The struggles in England that culminated in the Civil War of the 1640s and, half a century later, the Glorious Revolution, gave new meanings to freedom. Alongside the idea of “liberties” that applied only to some groups arose the notion of the “rights of Englishmen” that applied to all. The idea of “English liberty” became central to Anglo-American political culture. It meant that no man was above the law and that all within the realm enjoyed certain basic rights of person or property that even the king could not abridge.

* * *

The belief in freedom as the common heritage of all Englishmen was widely shared by eighteenth-century Americans. Resistance to British efforts to raise revenues in America began not as a demand for independence but as a defense, in colonial eyes, of the rights of Englishmen. The Stamp Act Congress of 1765 condemned the principle of taxation without representation by asserting that residents of the colonies were entitled to “all the inherent rights and liberties” of “subjects within the Kingdom of Great Britain.”⁵ But the Revolution ended up transforming these rights—by definition a parochial set of entitlements that did not apply to other peoples—into a universal concept. The rights of Englishmen became the rights of man. The struggle for independence gave birth to a definition of American nationhood and national mission that persists to this day—an idea closely linked to freedom, for the new nation defined itself as a unique embodiment of liberty in a world over-

³ *The Charter of Privileges, Granted by William Penn, Esq; to the Inhabitants of Pensilvania and Territories* (1701; repr., Philadelphia, 1741).

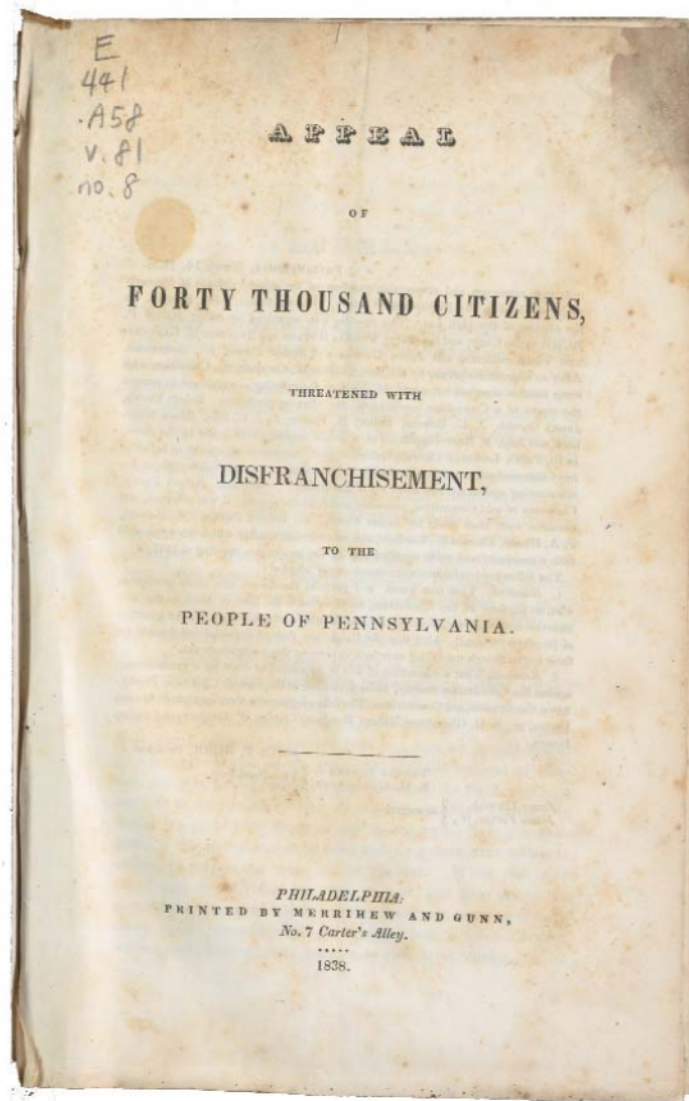
⁴ Memorial against Non-English Immigration, Dec. 1727, box 4A, folder 2, Historical Society of Pennsylvania Miscellaneous Collection (Collection 425).

⁵ Declaration of the Congress Held at New York, Oct. 7, 1765, Historical Society of Pennsylvania Autograph Collection (Collection 0022A).

run with oppression. This sense of American uniqueness—of the United States as an example to the rest of the world of the superiority of free institutions—remains alive and well even today as a central part of our political culture. Over time, it has made the United States an example, inspiring democratic movements in other countries, and has provided justification for American interference in the affairs of other countries in the name of bringing them freedom.

The American Revolution, together with westward expansion and the market revolution, destroyed the hierarchical world inherited from the colonial era. As the expanding commercial society redefined property to include control over one's own labor, and the opening of the West enabled millions of American families to acquire land, old inequalities crumbled and the link between property and voting was severed. Political democracy became essential to American ideas of freedom. This was a remarkable development. "Democracy" in the eighteenth century was a negative idea, a term of abuse. The idea that sovereignty rightly belongs to the mass of ordinary, individual, and equal citizens represented a new departure. With its provisions for lifetime judges, a senate elected by state legislatures, and a cumbersome, indirect method of choosing the president, the national constitution hardly established a functioning democracy. But in the new republic, more and more citizens attended political meetings, became avid readers of newspapers and pamphlets, and insisted on the right of the people to debate public issues and to organize to affect public policy.

By the 1830s, a flourishing democratic system had emerged, based on popular control of local governments and distrustful of the faraway national state. American democracy was boisterous, sometimes violent, and expansive—it largely excluded women, at least from the voting booth, but could incorporate immigrants from abroad and, after the Civil War, former slaves. It engaged the energies of massive numbers of citizens, producing voter turnouts that reached 80 percent in some elections. The right to vote became an essential element of American freedom. Yet, even as the suffrage expanded for white men, it retreated for others. New states did not allow black men to vote. In the older states, some groups lost the right to vote even as others gained it. Women who met the property qualification (mainly widows, since married women's property belonged to their husbands) enjoyed the suffrage in New Jersey beginning in 1776, but it was taken away in 1807. In Pennsylvania, African American men lost the right to vote when a new state constitution was adopted in 1838,



Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania, 1838, protesting the amendment of Pennsylvania's constitution to restrict voting rights to white freemen. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/7558.

prompting Philadelphia's black leaders to protest.⁶ In New York State, the same constitutional convention of 1821 that eliminated property qualifications for white men imposed so high a qualification for black men that almost all were stripped of the franchise. Overall, for American men, race replaced class as the dividing line between those who could vote and those who could not.

* * *

Democracy, in Lincoln's famous formulation, means "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."⁷ But this begs the question of who constitute "the people." The Revolution had given birth to a republic rhetorically founded on liberty but resting economically in large measure on slavery. Slavery had been central to colonial development, and slavery helped to define American understandings of freedom in the colonial era and the nineteenth century. From the very first meeting of Congress, when the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery presented a petition for universal liberty, slavery was a source of division in the new nation.⁸ Of course, as ubiquitous newspaper advertisements seeking the return of fugitives attested, slaves and indentured servants (bound to labor for a specific number of years, not life) sometimes expressed their own commitment to freedom by running away.⁹ Later, northern abolitionists organized "vigilance committees" to assist fugitives; Philadelphia's was run by the free African American William Still, who carefully recorded the details about runaway slaves who arrived in the city and later published a book, *The Underground Rail Road*, that bore witness to the many acts of self-emancipation.¹⁰

Nonetheless, slavery helped to shape the identity—the sense of self—of all Americans, giving nationhood from the outset a powerful exclusionary dimension. Even as Americans celebrated their freedom, the

⁶ *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1838).

⁷ Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address" (Nov. 19, 1863), available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp.

⁸ Memorial of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery to the Senate and Representatives of the United States [Feb. 1790], box 5B, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers (Collection 490).

⁹ Advertisements, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 6–13, 1738.

¹⁰ Journal C of Station No. 2 of the Underground Railroad, Agent William Still [1852–57], Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers (Collection 490)/Historical Society of Pennsylvania Treasures Collection (Collection 978); Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1872).

definition of those entitled to enjoy the “blessings of liberty” protected by the Constitution came to be defined by race. No black person, declared the US Supreme Court in 1857, could ever be an American citizen.

Yet, at the same time, the struggle by outcasts and outsiders—the abolitionists, the slaves, and free blacks themselves—reinvigorated the notion of freedom as a universal birthright, a truly human ideal. The antislavery crusade insisted on the “Americanness” of both enslaved and free blacks and repudiated not only slavery but the racial boundaries that confined free blacks to second-class status. Abolitionists pioneered the idea of a national citizenship whose members enjoyed equality before the law, protected by a beneficent national state. And the movement offered a way for those excluded from the suffrage, most notably free blacks and women, to participate in political life in other ways—by circulating petitions, delivering speeches, and seeking to change public sentiment about slavery.

The abolitionist movement also inspired other groups, especially women, to stake their own claims to greater freedom in the young republic. The long contest over slavery gave new meaning to personal liberty, political community, and the rights attached to American citizenship. Abolitionism, wrote Angelina Grimké, the daughter of a South Carolina slaveholder who became a prominent abolitionist and women’s rights activist, was the nation’s preeminent “school in which *human rights* are . . . investigated.”¹¹ Leaders of the movement for women’s suffrage, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, arose out of the abolitionist movement. After the Civil War, however, when Congress (including Radical Republicans who had supported women’s suffrage) moved to enfranchise black men but not women, white or black, many women’s suffragists concluded that women could not place their trust in male-dominated political movements. Women, Stanton and Anthony now insisted, must form their own organizations to press the case for equal rights.¹² It would take another half century of struggle for women to win the right to vote. But in an ironic reversal of the situation in Reconstruction, when the rights of black men took precedence over those of women, leaders of the women’s suffrage movement assured southern legislatures that the Nineteenth Amendment, added to the Constitution

¹¹ Angelina Grimké to Catherine Beecher, Oct. 2, 1837, in *Letters to Catherine Beecher*, by Grimké (Boston, 1838), 114, at http://books.google.com/books?id=KSWzlG7UHnsC&pg=PA114&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹² Constitution of the National Woman Suffrage Association, with note from Susan B. Anthony [May 17, 1874], case 7, box 19, Simon Gratz Collection (Collection 250A).



“Come and Join Us, Brothers,” 1864. This broadside lithograph, printed for the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments, depicts recruits at Camp William Penn, the first training ground for African American troops. Historical Society of Pennsylvania Medium Graphics Collection. http://digital.library.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/5493.

in 1920, would not affect laws disenfranchising blacks, male or female, through property and literacy tests and poll taxes.¹³

The Civil War, of course, destroyed slavery and placed the question of black citizenship on the national agenda. Although the Confederacy’s vice president, Alexander H. Stephens, identified slavery as the “cornerstone” of the Confederacy at the war’s outset, many Southerners, such as

¹³ For more on the women’s suffrage movement of the twentieth century, see Dora Kelly Lewis Correspondence (Collection 2137), particularly Dora Kelly Lewis to Mrs. Henry K. Kelly, July 4, 1917, Dora Kelly Lewis to Louise Lewis, Jan. 10, 1919, and Dora Kelly Lewis to Louise Lewis, Apr. 14, 1920.

South Carolina plantation owner Thomas Drayton, insisted, “We are fighting for home & liberty.”¹⁴ But when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the cause of the Union became inextricably linked to the promise of freedom for the slaves.¹⁵ The Proclamation also authorized for the first time the enrollment of black men in the Union army. Initially paid less than white troops, the black soldiers mobilized to demand equal compensation, which Congress granted in 1864 and 1865. Black men, one officer wrote, had moved “one step nearer owning their rights as men.”¹⁶

In the crucible of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the abolitionist principles of birthright citizenship and equal protection of the law without regard to race were written into the Constitution—an attempt to strip American freedom of its identification with whiteness. But these changes affected all Americans, not just the former slaves. The Fourteenth Amendment made the Constitution what it had never been before—a vehicle through which aggrieved groups can take their claims that they lack equality and freedom to court. Reconstruction failed to secure black freedom and was followed by a long period of inequality for black Americans. But the laws and amendments of the Civil War era remained on the books waiting to be awakened in the twentieth century by another generation of Americans in what they would call the “freedom movement.”

* * *

After decades of the slavery controversy, which had somewhat tarnished the sense of a special American mission to preserve and promote liberty, the Civil War and emancipation reinforced the identification of the United States with the progress of freedom, linking this mission as never before with the power of the national state. Even as the United States emerged, with the Spanish-American War of 1898, as an empire akin to those of Europe, traditional American exceptionalism thrived, yoked ever more tightly to the idea of freedom by the outcome of the

¹⁴ Thomas F. Drayton to Percival Drayton, Apr. 17, 1861, box 24, folder 3, Drayton Family Papers (Collection 1584); Alexander H. Stephens, “Cornerstone Speech,” In *Alexander H. Stephens in Public and Private: With Letters and Speeches, Before, During, and Since the War* (Philadelphia, 1886), 717–29, at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=76>.

¹⁵ Emancipation Proclamation, Ab-1863/Historical Society of Pennsylvania Treasures Collection (Collection 978).

¹⁶ Lieutenant N. H. Edgerton to Thomas H. Webster, chairman of the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Troops, June 27, 1864, box 1, folder 13, Abraham Barker Collection on the Free Military School for Applicants for the Command of Colored Regiments (Collection 1968).

Civil War. To be sure, anti-imperialists such as Moorfield Storey of Boston could condemn American rule in the Philippines for depriving the people of those islands of “the freedom which in this very city our fathers declared the inalienable right of every human being.”¹⁷ But the majority of Americans appeared to see the expansion of national power overseas as, by definition, an expansion of freedom.

At the turn of the twentieth century, debates over freedom were dominated by the question of what social conditions make enjoyment of freedom possible. The question of how to secure “opportunity for free men” in the face of vastly unequal economic power between employer and employee, wrote Philadelphia businessman Joseph Fels, was the major question of the age.¹⁸ One outlook defined the free market as the true domain of liberty and condemned any interference with its operations. One supporter of Philadelphia transit companies confronting a strike called trade unions “diabolical” interferences with the “liberty [of] your company to transact its own business.”¹⁹

Critics, however, raised the question of whether meaningful freedom could exist in a situation of extreme economic inequality. In the nineteenth century, economic freedom had generally been defined as autonomy, usually understood via ownership of property—a farm, artisan’s shop, or small business. When reformers forcefully raised the issue of “industrial freedom” in the early years of the twentieth century, they insisted that in a modern economy, economic freedom meant economic security—a floor beneath which no citizen would be allowed to sink. To secure economic freedom thus defined required active intervention by the government. During the 1920s, this expansive notion of economic freedom was eclipsed by a resurgence of laissez-faire ideology. But in the following decade, Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to make freedom a rallying cry for the New Deal. Roosevelt persistently linked freedom with economic security and identified entrenched economic inequality as its greatest enemy.

¹⁷ Moorfield Storey, “Statement against Acquiring the Philippine Islands” (typescript draft of speech, Philadelphia Conference of American Anti-Imperialist League, Feb. 22, 1900), Historical Society of Pennsylvania Autograph Collection (Collection 0022A). Storey’s speech, entitled “Is It Right?” was later published by the American Anti-Imperialist League as *Liberty Tracts* 8, no. 1 (1900).

¹⁸ Joseph Fels to C. W. Post, Oct. 5, 1909, box 1, folder 4, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers (Collection 1953).

¹⁹ R. G. Ashley to Charles O. Kruger, Mar. 22, 1910, box 17 5005 to 5019, folder JR-60-14, Harold E. Cox Transportation Collection (Collection 3158), unprocessed section.

If Roosevelt invoked the word to sustain the New Deal, “liberty”—in its earlier sense of limited government and laissez-faire economics—became the fighting slogan of his opponents. The principal conservative critique of the New Deal was that it restricted American freedom. When conservative businessmen and politicians in 1934 formed an organization to mobilize opposition to the New Deal, they called it the American Liberty League. Opposition to the New Deal planted the seeds for the later flowering of an antistatist conservatism bent on upholding the free market and dismantling the welfare state.

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During the twentieth century the United States emerged as a persistent and powerful actor on the world stage. And at key moments of worldwide involvement the encounter with a foreign “other” subtly affected the meaning of freedom in the United States. One such episode was the struggle against Nazi Germany, which not only highlighted aspects of American freedom that had previously been neglected but fundamentally transformed perceptions of who was entitled to enjoy the blessings of liberty in the United States.

Today, when asked to define their rights as citizens, Americans instinctively turn to the privileges enumerated in the Bill of Rights—freedom of speech, the press, and religion, for example. But for many decades after the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution in 1791, the social and legal defenses of free expression were extremely fragile in the United States. A broad rhetorical commitment to this ideal coexisted with stringent restrictions on speech deemed radical or obscene. Dissenters who experienced legal and extralegal repression, including labor organizers, World War I-era socialists, and birth control advocates, had long insisted on the centrality of free expression to American liberty. But not until the late 1930s did civil liberties assume a central place in mainstream definitions of freedom.

There were many causes for this development, including a new awareness in the 1930s of restraints on free speech by public and private opponents of labor organizing. But what scholars call the “discovery of the Bill of Rights” on the eve of American entry into World War II owed much to an ideological revulsion against Nazism and the invocation of freedom as a shorthand way of describing the myriad differences between

American and German society and politics. Americans who demanded American entry into the European war in 1941 called themselves the Fight for Freedom Committee. They insisted that the destruction of Nazism was necessary for the preservation of freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment—"freedom to think and to express our thought, [and] freedom of worship."²⁰

World War II also reshaped Americans' understanding of the internal boundaries of freedom. The abolition of slavery had not produced anything resembling racial justice, except for a brief period after the Civil War when African Americans enjoyed equality before the law and manhood suffrage. By the turn of the century, a new system of inequality—resting on segregation, disenfranchisement, a labor market rigidly segmented along racial lines, and the threat of lynching for those who challenged the new status quo—was well on its way to being consolidated in the South, with the acquiescence of the rest of the nation.²¹ Not only the shifting condition of blacks but also the changing sources of immigration spurred a growing preoccupation with the racial composition of the nation. In 1879, a referendum on the subject of Chinese immigration in California resulted in 154,000 registering opposition, with only 883 in favor.²² The Chinese Exclusion Act followed in 1882. Immigration from Europe also aroused controversy. In the early twentieth century, far more newcomers entered the United States from Italy and the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires than from northern and western Europe, the traditional sources of immigration. Among many middle-class, native-born Protestant Americans, these events inspired an abandonment of the egalitarian vision of citizenship spawned by the Civil War and the revival of definitions of American freedom based on race. The immigration law of 1924, which banned all immigration from Asia and severely restricted that from southern and eastern Europe, reflected the renewed identification of nationalism, American freedom, and notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

²⁰ Conyers Read, "The Fight for Freedom" (typescript draft of speech, Fight for Freedom Committee, Philadelphia Chapter, May 29, 1941), box 35, folder 3, Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection of World War II Papers (Collection 1479).

²¹ James S. Stemons, "Growing Antipathy and Antagonism between the White and Black Races: The Effect, Cause and Cure" (typescript draft of speech, Methodist Preachers' Meeting, Sept. 23, 1912), box 4, folder 14, James Samuel Stemons Papers (MSS 12).

²² Certificate of Vote on "An Act to Ascertain and Express the Will of the People of the State on California on the Subject of Chinese Immigration" [1879], case 3, box 1, Simon Gratz Collection (Collection 250A).

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 pluralist definition of American society, in which all Americans enjoyed equally the benefits of freedom, had been pioneered in the 1930s by leftists and liberals. During the Second World War, this became the official stance of the Roosevelt administration. The government used 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. One radio program asked listeners: "How can we expect to win a people's war if we maintain barriers against any group? For is not this great country dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal?"²³ What set the United States apart from its wartime foes was not simply dedication to the ideal of freedom but the resolve that Americans of all races, religions, and national origins could enjoy freedom equally. 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 American social reality.

Rhetorically, the Cold War was in many ways a continuation of the battles of World War II. The discourse of a world sharply divided into two camps, one representing freedom and the other its opposite, was reinvigorated in the worldwide struggle against communism. Even during World War II, when the Soviet Union was America's ally, anticommunist organizations insisted that communism posed a dire threat to American values such as freedom of religion and speech, not to mention the threat posed by communist advocacy of such dangerous doctrines as "absolute social and racial equality; intermarriage of Blacks and Whites; Promotion of Class hatred."²⁴ During the Cold War, the United States was once again the leader of a global crusade for freedom against a demonic, ideologically driven antagonist. From the Truman Doctrine to the 1960s, every American president would speak of a national mission to defend the Free World and protect freedom across the globe, even when American actions, as in Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s,

²³ *Lest We Forget: Eternal Vigilance Is the Price of Liberty*, 7th series, no. 5: *Eternal Vigilance in Business* (Washington, DC, 1943), box 1, disc 5, Philadelphia Fellowship Commission Recordings (Collection 3572).

²⁴ American Women Against Communism mailer to Mary Winder Morris, Sept. 28, 1944, box 33, folder 4, Morris Family Papers (Collection 2000B).



Masthead from the first issue of *Let Freedom Ring* (Nov. 1953), a newsletter published by the Pennsylvania Civil Rights Congress to combat McCarthyism. Box 3, folder 24, Thelma McDaniel Collection (Collection 3063), Historical Society of Pennsylvania. http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/8082.

seemed to jeopardize the freedom of other peoples rather than enhance it. The Cold War abroad led inevitably to an anticommunist crusade at home that placed in jeopardy core American freedoms. As the Pennsylvania Civil Rights Congress pointed out in 1953, the denial of freedom of speech to those who held unpopular opinions itself posed a threat to “American traditions of freedom.”²⁵

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The glorification of freedom as the essential characteristic of American life in a struggle for global dominance opened the door for others to seize on the language of freedom for their own purposes. Most striking was the civil rights movement, with its freedom walkers (arrested in Alabama in May 1963), freedom rides, freedom schools, freedom marches, and insistent cry, “freedom now!”²⁶ Freedom for blacks meant empowerment, equality, and recognition—as a group and as individuals. The flyer mobilizing and urging participation on the March on Washington of 1963, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, spoke not only of restoring the constitutional rights of black Americans but also of restoring “dignity and self-respect” by guaranteeing employment and adequate education to all Americans.²⁷

²⁵ Pennsylvania Civil Rights Congress, “Introducing *Let Freedom Ring*: An Editorial,” *Let Freedom Ring* 1, no. 1 (1953), box 3, folder 24, Thelma McDaniel Collection (Collection 3063).

²⁶ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee newsletter, vols. 17–19, May 21, 1963, box 3, folder 43, Thelma McDaniel Collection (Collection 3063).

²⁷ Flyer for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom [1963], box 1, folder 10, Thelma McDaniel Collection (Collection 3063).

Central to black thought has long been the idea that freedom involves the totality of a people's lives and that it is always incomplete—a goal to be achieved rather than a possession to be defended.

The black movement made freedom once again a rallying cry of the dispossessed. It strongly influenced the New Left and the social movements that arose in the 1960s. In that decade, private self-determination assumed a new prominence in definitions of freedom. The expansion of freedom from a set of public entitlements to a feature of private life had many antecedents in American thought (Jefferson, after all, had substituted “the pursuit of happiness” for “property” in the Lockean triad that opens the Declaration of Independence). But the New Left was the first movement to elevate the idea of personal freedom to a political credo. The rallying cry “the personal is political,” driven home most powerfully by the new feminism, announced the extension of claims of freedom into the arenas of family life, social and sexual relations, and gender roles.²⁸ The sixties also saw the rise of a movement for gay rights, exemplified by July 4 demonstrations at Independence Hall, to remind Americans that homosexuals were denied the “liberties and rights” that should, according to the Declaration of Independence, belong to all.²⁹ While the political impulse behind sixties freedom has long since faded, the decade fundamentally changed the language of freedom of the entire society, identifying it firmly with the right to choose in a whole range of private matters—from sexual preference to attire to what is now widely known as one's personal “lifestyle.”

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Although Cold War rhetoric eased considerably in the 1970s, it was reinvigorated by Ronald Reagan, who, consciously employing rhetoric that resonated back at least two centuries, united into a coherent whole the elements of Cold War freedom—limited government, free enterprise, and anticommunism—in the service of a renewed insistence on American mission. Today, at least in terms of political policy and discourse, Americans still live in the shadow of the Reagan revolution.

²⁸ See, for instance, brochure on the Equal Rights Amendment [1976], box 1, National Organization for Women (NOW), Philadelphia Chapter Records (Collection 2054).

²⁹ “Fourth Annual Reminder Day for Homosexual Rights” brochure, July 4, 1968, Homosexual Rights Flyer (Collection 3682).



Brochure in support of the Equal Rights Amendment, 1976. Box 1, National Organization for Women, Philadelphia Chapter Records, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/8084

Freedom continues to occupy as central a place as ever in our political vocabulary, but it has been almost entirely appropriated by libertarians and conservatives of one kind or another—from advocates of unimpeded free enterprise to groups insisting that the right to bear arms is the centerpiece of American liberty. The dominant constellation of definitions seemed to consist of a series of negations—of government, of social responsibility, of a common public culture, of restraints on individual self-definition and consumer choice. At the same time, the collapse of communism as an ideology and of the Soviet Union as a world power made possible an unprecedented internationalization of current American concepts of freedom. The “Free World” triumphed over its totalitarian adversary, the “free market” over the idea of a planned or regulated economy, and the “free individual” over the ethic of social citizenship.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the language of freedom once again took center stage in American public discourse as an all-purpose explanation for both the attack and the ensuing war against “terrorism.” “Freedom itself is under attack,” President George W. Bush announced in his speech to Congress on September 20. Our antagonists, he went on, “hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”³⁰ As during the Cold War, the invocation of freedom proved a potent popular rallying cry. But the seemingly endless war on terrorism also raised timeless issues concerning civil liberties in wartime and the balance between freedom and security. As happened during previous wars, the idea of an open-ended global battle between freedom and its opposite justified serious infringements on civil liberties at home. Legal protections such as habeas corpus, trial by impartial jury, the right to legal representation, and equality before the law regardless of race or national origins were curtailed and compromised.

America, of course, has a long tradition of vigorous political debate and dissent, an essential part of our democratic tradition. Less familiar are previous episodes—the arrest of those with a disloyal “disposition” during the American Revolution, the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, the massive repression of dissent during World War I, Japanese-American internment during World War II, anticommunist hysteria during the Cold

³⁰ “President Bush Addresses the Nation” (address to joint session of Congress, Sept. 20, 2001), available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

War—when unpopular beliefs or particular groups of Americans were stigmatized as unpatriotic and therefore unworthy of constitutional protections.³¹

Today, the idea of freedom remains as central as ever to American culture and politics—and as contested. One thing seems certain. The story of American freedom is forever unfinished. Debates over its meaning will undoubtedly continue, and new definitions will emerge to meet the exigencies of the twenty-first-century world, a globalized era in which conversations about freedom and its meaning are likely to involve all mankind. Thinking about the moment(s) of emancipation during the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation should remind Americans of the long and contested history of defining, determining, and defending freedom, and of their obligations to do so.

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³¹ For arrests of Quakers during the American Revolution, see “To the Congress: The Remonstrance of the Subscribers, Citizens of Philadelphia,” Sept. 5, 1777, in *Address to the Inhabitants of Pennsylvania by Those Freemen of the City of Philadelphia, Who Are Now Confined in the Mason’s Lodge, by Virtue of a General Warrant; Signed in Council by the Vice President of the Council of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1777), 31–35; for Japanese internment, see Shigezo and Sonoko Iwata Papers (MSS 53), particularly Sonoko to Shigezo Iwata, May 28, 1942 (box 1, folder 36), Shigezo to Sonoko Iwata, June 18, 1942 (box 1, folder 32), and Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, July 22, 1942 (box 1, folder 53).