

The Idea of Freedom in American History

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I wish to begin today with a single episode in the history of American freedom. On September 16, 1947, the 160th anniversary of the signing of the U. S. Constitution, the Freedom Train opened to the public in Philadelphia. A traveling exhibition of some 133 historical documents, the train, bedecked in red, white, and blue, soon embarked on a 16-month tour that took it to over 300 American cities. Never before or since have so many cherished pieces of Americana -- among them the Mayflower Compact, Declaration of Independence, and Gettysburg Address -- been assembled in one place. After leaving the train, visitors were exhorted to dedicate themselves to American values by taking the Freedom Pledge and adding their names to a Freedom Scroll.

The idea for the Freedom Train, perhaps the most elaborate peacetime patriotic campaign in American history, originated in 1946 with the Department of Justice. President Truman endorsed it as a way of contrasting American freedom with "the destruction of liberty by the Hitler tyranny." Since direct government funding smacked of propaganda, however, the project was turned over to the non-profit American Heritage Foundation, whose board of trustees, dominated by leading bankers and industrialists, was headed by Winthrop W. Aldrich, chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank.

By any measure, the Freedom Train was an enormous success. It attracted

over 3.5 million visitors, and millions more took part in the civic activities that accompanied its journey, including labor-management forums, educational programs, and patriotic parades. Unlike a more recent celebration, the 1986 Statue of Liberty centennial, the Freedom Train did not succumb to commercialism – there were no product endorsements or brand-name sponsorships.

The powerful grassroots response to the train, wrote The New Republic, revealed a deep popular hunger for "tangible evidence of American freedom." Behind the scenes, however, the Freedom Train demonstrated that the precise meaning of freedom was hardly uncontroversial. The liberal staff members at the National Archives who proposed the initial list of documents had included the Wagner Act of 1935, which guaranteed labor's right to collective bargaining, and President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech of 1941 listing freedom of speech and religion, freedom from fear, and the vaguely socialistic freedom from want as the Allies' aims in World War II. These, however, were eliminated by the more conservative American Heritage Foundation. Also omitted were the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the constitution, which had granted civil and political rights to blacks after the Civil War, and Roosevelt's order of 1941 establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission. In the end, nothing on the train referred to organized labor or any 20th-century social legislation and of the 133 documents, only three related to blacks: the Emancipation Proclamation, Thirteenth Amendment, and a 1776 letter criticizing slavery.

Black Americans, indeed, had virtually no voice in planning the exhibit and many were initially skeptical about it. On the eve of the train's unveiling, the poet Langston Hughes expressed the hope that there would be "no Jim Crow on the Freedom Train." "When it stops in Mississippi," Hughes wondered, "will it be made plain/ Everybody's got a right to board the Freedom Train?" In fact, with the Truman administration about to make civil rights a major priority, the train's organizers announced that they would not permit segregated viewing. In an unprecedented move, the American Heritage Foundation canceled visits to Memphis and Birmingham when local authorities insisted on separating visitors by race. But the Freedom Train visited forty-seven other Southern cities without incident and was hailed in the black press for breaching, if only temporarily, the walls of segregation.

If the Freedom Train reflected a growing sense of national unease about overt expressions of racial inequality, its journey also revealed the impact of the Cold War. Conceived in the wake of World War II to underscore the contrast between American freedom and Nazi tyranny, the Freedom Train quickly became caught up in the emerging ideological struggle with communism. In the spring of 1947, a few months before the train was dedicated, president Truman had committed the United States to the worldwide containment of Soviet power. Soon, attorney general Tom C. Clark was praising the Freedom Train as a means of preventing "foreign ideologies" from infiltrating the United States and of "aiding the country in its internal war against

subversive elements," and the FBI began compiling reports on those who criticized the train or seemed unenthusiastic about it. The Freedom Train inaugurated a period when the language of freedom suffused American politics and culture. At the same time, it also revealed how the Cold War subtly reshaped freedom's meaning, identifying it with anti-communism, "free enterprise," and the defense of the social and economic status quo.

The story of the Freedom Train is one episode in my recent book, The Story of American Freedom, which traces the idea of freedom in the United States from the Revolution to the present. I begin with it today because it reveals in microcosm my major premise -- that far from being fixed, the definition of freedom is the subject of persistent conflict in American history. It also points 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.

No idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves 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 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 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. The ubiquitous American excuse invoked by disobedient children and assertive adults -- "it's a free country" -- is not, I believe, familiar in other societies. "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.'" And as groups from the abolitionists to modern-day conservatives have realized, to "capture" a word like freedom is to acquire a formidable position of strength in political conflicts.

Perhaps because of its very ubiquity, the history of what the historian Carl Becker called this "magic but elusive word" is a tale of debates, disagreements, and struggles rather than an a set of timeless categories or an evolutionary narrative toward a preordained goal. 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 a 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.

If freedom has been a battleground throughout our history, so too has been the definition of those entitled to enjoy its blessings. It is hardly original to point out that the United States, founded on the premise that liberty is an entitlement of all humanity, 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 -- the efforts of racial minorities, women, workers, and other groups to secure freedom as they understood it -- that the meaning of freedom has been both deepened and transformed, and the concept extended to realms for which it was not originally intended. Time and again in our history, the definition of freedom has been transformed by the demands of excluded groups for inclusion.

These themes are powerfully illustrated by the changing meaning of freedom in American history, and especially during the past century -- an era dubbed the American Century by the prominent American publisher Henry Luce during World War II. Americans in the 20th century were inheritors of ideas of freedom forged in the previous century and, indeed, during the struggle for American independence. The Revolution 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 overrun with oppression. The rest of the world, proclaimed Samuel Williams, in A Discourse on the Love of Our Country (1775), was sunk in debauchery and despotism. In Asia and Africa, “the very idea of liberty” was “unknown.” Even in Europe, Williams claimed, the “vital flame” of “freedom” was being extinguished. The fate of liberty thus rested with what Thomas Jefferson would soon call this “empire of liberty.” 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 alive and well even today as a central part of our political culture.

But the Revolution also revealed the persistent inner contradiction of American freedom, by giving birth to a republic rhetorically founded on liberty but resting economically in large measure on slavery. Slavery helped to define American understandings of freedom in the colonial era and the nineteenth century. Even as Americans celebrated their freedom, the "imagined community" of the American republic -- those entitled to enjoy the "blessings of liberty" protected by the Constitution -- came to be defined by race. No black person, declared the Supreme Court on the eve of the Civil War, could ever be an American citizen. Yet at the same time, the struggle by outcasts and outsiders -- the abolitionists, the slaves and freed people themselves -- reinvigorated the notion of freedom as a universal birthright, a truly human ideal. The principles of birthright citizenship and equal protection of the law without regard to race, which

became central elements of American freedom, were products of the antislavery struggle and Civil War.

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. By the 1880s, the British visitor James Bryce was struck by the power not only of Americans' commitment to freedom, but by their conviction that they were the "only people" truly to enjoy it. 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 Civil War.

At the turn of the century, what I have called its social conditions dominated discussions of freedom. American disciples of Herbert Spencer like William Graham Sumner argued that law by definition restricts freedom and that not politics but the free market is the true domain of liberty. Critics, however, raised the question whether meaningful freedom could exist in a situation of extreme economic inequality. In the 19th 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 this century, they insisted that in a modern economy, economic freedom meant not so much

the ownership of productive property, but economic security -- a living wage, the right to a say in management, or -- in a phrase that became ubiquitous in these years -- an American Standard of Living. To secure economic freedom thus defined required active intervention by the government.

This belief achieved a remarkable popular reach, especially during World War I and again in the 1930s. In the coal mines of West Virginia, company managers during the war worried that workers were "taking the idea of emancipation" too literally. "It has been impossible to fight Kaiserism abroad without some introspection at home," one wrote. The rhetoric of democracy and liberty used to promote World War I echoed among workers seeking "industrial emancipation" at home.

During the 1920s, this expansive notion of economic freedom was eclipsed by a resurgence of laissez-faire ideology. But in the following decade, Franklin Roosevelt sought to make the word "freedom" a rallying cry for the New Deal. As early as 1934, in his second "fireside chat," Roosevelt juxtaposed his own definition of "liberty" as "greater security for the average man" to the older notion of freedom of contract, which served the interests of "the privileged few." Henceforth, Roosevelt would consistently link freedom with economic security and identify entrenched economic inequality as its greatest enemy. "The liberty of a democracy," he declared in 1938, was not safe if citizens were unable to "sustain an acceptable standard of living."

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. The fight for possession of the "ideal of freedom," the New York Times reported, was the central issue of the presidential campaign of 1936.

Opposition to the New Deal planted the seeds for the later flowering of an anti-statist conservatism bent on upholding the free market and dismantling the welfare state. But as Roosevelt's landslide reelection indicated, most Americans by 1936 had for the time being come to accept the view that freedom must encompass economic security, guaranteed by the government.

If, in the 19th century, America's encounter with the outside world had been more ideological, as it were, than material, the 20th saw the country emerge 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 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. It also gave birth to a powerful rhetoric, the division of the planet into a "free world" and an unfree world, which would long outlive the defeat of Hitler.

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, 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. It was only in 1939 that the Department of Justice established a Civil Liberties Unit, for the first time in American history, according to attorney general Frank Murphy, placing “the full weight of the department . . . behind the effort to preserve in this country the blessings of liberty.” In 1941, the Roosevelt administration celebrated with considerable fanfare the 150th anniversary of the Bill of Rights (whose 50th anniversary and centennial had passed virtually unremarked).

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 one scholar has called 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. During World War II, the Nazi counterexample was frequently cited by defenders of civil liberties in the United States, among them the Supreme Court when it reversed an earlier precedent to overturn the conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to salute the American flag. Freedom of speech took its place as one of the "four essential human freedoms" – President Roosevelt's description of allied war aims endlessly reiterated throughout the conflict. Not only did the Four Freedoms embody the "crucial difference" between the allies and their enemies, but in the future, Roosevelt promised, they would be enjoyed "everywhere in the world," an updating of the centuries-old vision of America instructing the rest of mankind in the enjoyment of liberty.

If World War II presaged a transformation, in the name of freedom, of the country's traditional relationship with the rest of the world, it 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. At the turn of the last century, not only the shifting condition of blacks, but the changing sources of

immigration spurred a growing preoccupation with the racial composition of the nation. Of the three and a half million immigrants who entered the United States during the decade, over half hailed from Italy and the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Among middle-class native-born 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. In 1900, the language of "race" -- race conflict, race feeling, race problems -- occupied a central place in American public discourse, and the boundaries of nationhood, expanded in the aftermath of the Civil War, contracted dramatically. 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.

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 associated with the Popular Front. During the Second World War, this 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 the Four Freedoms 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.

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 opposing camps, one representing freedom and the other slavery, was reinvigorated in the worldwide struggle against communism. Once again, the United States was the leader of a global crusade for freedom against a demonic, ideologically-driven antagonist, and American exceptionalism now suggested a national responsibility to lead the forces of the Free World in the containment of Soviet power. From the Truman Doctrine to the 1960s every American president would speak of a national mission to protect freedom throughout the world, even when American actions, as in Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s, seemed to jeopardize freedom rather than enhancing it.

As the USSR replaced Germany as freedom's antithesis, freedom from want -- central to the Four Freedoms of World War II -- slipped into the background. Whatever Moscow stood for was by definition the opposite of freedom -- and not merely

one-party rule, suppression of free expression and the like, but anything to which the word “socialist” could be attached, such as public housing, universal health care, full employment, and other claims that required strong and persistent government intervention in the economy. If freedom had an economic meaning, it was no longer economic autonomy, as in the nineteenth century, “industrial democracy” (a rallying cry of the Progressive era), or economic security for the average citizen, as Roosevelt had defined it, but “free enterprise” and consumer abundance -- the ability to choose from the cornucopia of goods provided by the modern American economy. Or, to put it more precisely, the goal of the United States became to remodel Europe and eventually the entire world on the model of modern American capitalism, in which increased production and mass consumption, not governmental intervention aimed at economic redistribution, would constitute the definition of economic freedom. Among the slogans employed to popularize the Marshall Plan in Europe in the dark days of 1947 and 1948 was, “Prosperity Makes You Free.”

The high or low point of this equation of freedom with consumerism came in 1959 at the famous Kitchen Debate, an icon of Cold War America. Vice-President Richard Nixon's speech opening a U. S. exposition in Moscow, "What Freedom Means to Us," focused not on political and civil liberties but on the country's 56 million cars and scores of labor-saving devices. Pointing to a little robot that swept the floor in the model of a suburban kitchen that was the exposition's centerpiece, the vice president remarked,

"In the United States you don't even need a wife." It was left to Khrushchev to suggest that freedom involved political ideals and national purpose larger than consumption. Yet in announcing that the Soviet Union would soon surpass the United States in economic production, Khrushchev in effect conceded the debate. If the battleground of freedom was the consumer marketplace, American triumph was inevitable.

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 rides, freedom schools, freedom marches, and the insistent cry freedom now. The movement greatly expanded the meaning of freedom. When Martin Luther King, Jr. ended his great oration on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with the words, "free at last, free at last thank God almighty, I'm free at last," he was not referring to getting the government off his back or paying low taxes. Freedom for blacks meant empowerment, equality, recognition -- as a group and as individuals. 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. Most white Americans believe that freedom is something they possess, and that some outside force is trying to take away. Most African-Americans view freedom not as a possession to be defended, but as a goal to be achieved.

From what the political theorist Nikolas Rose calls a "formula of power," the black movement made freedom once again "a formula of resistance," a rallying cry of

the dispossessed. It strongly influenced the New Left and the social movements that arose from it, in which 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 60s 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. And while the political impulse behind 60s 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 not only in the consumer marketplace, but in a whole range of private matters from sexual preference to attire to what is now ubiquitously called one’s personal "lifestyle."

Although Cold War rhetoric eased considerably in the 1970s, it was reinvigorated by Ronald Reagan, who effectively united into a coherent whole the elements of Cold War freedom – limited government, free enterprise, and anti-communism -- all in the service of a renewed insistence on American exceptionalism and American mission. Consciously employing rhetoric that resonated back at least two centuries, Reagan proclaimed that “by some divine plan . . . a special kind of people --

people who had a special love for freedom,” had been chosen to settle the North American continent. This exceptional history imposed on the nation an exceptional mission: “we are the beacon of liberty and freedom to all the world.”

Today, at least in terms of political policy and discourse, Americans still live in the shadow of the Reagan revolution. “Freedom” continues to occupy as central a place as ever in our political vocabulary, but during the 1990s it was almost entirely appropriated by libertarians and conservatives of one kind or another, from advocates of unimpeded free enterprise to armed militia 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. A search of the Internet for sites associated with freedom in the late 1990s yielded striking evidence of how fully the word had come to be associated with the free market and hostility to government. The largest number of sites were those of anti-government libertarians, groups promoting the sanctity of private property and the ideology of free trade, and armed patriot and militia organizations. Sites promoting the virtues of “big government” were conspicuous by their absence.

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.

American ideas of freedom now reverberate throughout the world, promoted by an internationalized mass media, consumer culture, and economic marketplace. As we enter the 21st century, the process of globalization itself seems to be reinforcing the prevailing understanding of freedom, at least among political leaders of both major parties and journalistic cheerleaders who equate freedom with the worldwide ascendancy of American commodities, institutions, and values. A series of presidential administrations, aided and abetted by most of the mass media, have redefined both American freedom and America’s historic mission to promote it for all mankind to mean the creation of a single global free market in which capital, natural resources, and human labor are nothing more than factors of production in an endless quest for greater productivity and profit. The prevailing ideology of the global free market assumes that the economic life of all countries can and should be refashioned in the image of the United States -- the latest version of the nation’s self-definition as model of freedom for the entire world.

Globalization is raising profound questions about the relationship between political sovereignty, national identity, and freedom. Indeed, the relationship between globalization and freedom may be the most pressing political and social problem of the 21st century. Historically, rights have been derived from membership in a nation state,

and freedom often depends on the existence of political power to enforce it. Perhaps, in the future, freedom will accompany human beings wherever they go, and a worldwide regime of “human rights” that know no national boundaries will come into existence, complete with supranational institutions capable of enforcing these rights and international social movements bent on expanding freedom’s boundaries. Thus far, however, economic globalization has occurred without a parallel internationalization of controlling democratic institutions.

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,” Bush announced in his speech to Congress of September 21, and he gave the title *Enduring Freedom* to the war in Afghanistan. Our antagonists, he went on, “hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to assemble and disagree with each other.” In his June 2002 speech to the International Brotherhood of Carpenters, the president asked why terrorists attacked America. His answer: “Because we love freedom, that’s why. And they hate freedom.” As recently as mid-September, 2002, in calling for increased attention to the teaching of American history so that schoolchildren can understand “why we fight,” Bush observed, “ours is a history of freedom, ... freedom for everybody.” Naturally, the invasion of Iraq was called *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. The recently-released *National Security Strategy* opens not

with a discussion of global politics but with an invocation of freedom, defined as political democracy, freedom of expression, religious toleration, and free enterprise. These, the document proclaims, “are right and true for every person, in every society.” There is no sense that other people may have given thought to the question of freedom and arrived at their own conclusions.

As during the Cold War, the invocation of freedom has proved a potent popular rallying cry, even as it subsumes local conflicts and complex motives throughout the world – in Central Asia, the Philippines, the Middle East, and elsewhere – into a simple either/or dichotomy. The war on terrorism also raises timeless issues concerning civil liberties in wartime, the balance between freedom and security, the rights of noncitizens, and the ethnic boundaries of American freedom. As has happened during previous wars, the idea of an open-ended global battle between freedom and its opposite has 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 origin have been curtailed. At least 5,000 foreigners with Middle Eastern connections were rounded up in the aftermath of September 11 and more than 1,000 arrested and held without charge or even public acknowledgment of their fate. An executive order authorized the holding of secret military tribunals for noncitizens deemed to have assisted terrorism, and in June 2002 the Justice Department argued in court that even American citizens could be held indefinitely and not allowed to

see a lawyer, once the government designates them “enemy combatants.” In the TIPs program announced in 2002, the government proposed to have cable tv installers, pizza delivery men, UPS employees and others report on anything “suspicious” they observed inside people’s homes.

Some of these measures -- especially the TIPs program that, if taken literally, would have resulted in a higher ratio of spies to citizens under surveillance than existed in East Germany before 1989 -- were curtailed after arousing public criticism. But one “surprise” of the last several months has been how willing the majority of Americans are to accept restraints on time-honored liberties, especially when they seem to apply primarily to a single ethnically-identified segment of our population. Like other results of September 11, this surprise needs to be understood in its historical context. That history suggests that strong protection for civil liberties is not a constant feature of our “civilization” but a recent and still fragile historical achievement. Our civil liberties are neither self-enforcing nor self-correcting. Especially in times of crisis, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

America, of course, has a long tradition of vigorous political debate and dissent, an essential part of our democratic tradition. Less familiar is the fact that, as I have noted, until well into the 20th century, a broad rhetorical commitment to this ideal coexisted with stringent restrictions on speech deemed radical or obscene. We ought to recall previous episodes -- the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, the massive repression of

dissent during World War I, Japanese-American internment during World War II -- to realize the dangers of stigmatizing unpopular beliefs or particular groups of Americans as unpatriotic and therefore unworthy of constitutional protections. We need to turn our attention to once obscure Supreme Court decisions – Fong Yue Ting (1893), the Insular Cases of the early 20th century, Korematsu during World War II -- in which the Court allowed the government a virtual *carte blanche* in dealing with aliens and in suspending the rights of specific groups of citizens on grounds of military necessity. We should not forget the ringing dissents in these cases. In Fong Yue Ting, which authorized the deportation of Chinese immigrants without due process, Justice Brewer warned that the power was now directed against a people many Americans found “obnoxious,” but “who shall say it will not be exercised tomorrow against other classes and other people?” In Korematsu, which upheld Japanese-American internment, Justice Robert Jackson wrote that the decision “lies about like a loaded weapon ready for the hand of any authority than can bring forward a plausible claim to an urgent need.”

In the aftermath of September 11, it seemed for a time that the Bush administration had put aside the unilateralism that marked its first months in office in favor of a cooperative approach to international affairs. But the idea that the United States as the world’s predominant power can ignore the opinions of other nations soon reappeared. This outlook is rooted in the time-honored and newly reinforced American self-image as the sole embodiment and defender of universal freedom.

To the historian, such an attitude runs the risk of reproducing traditional American exceptionalism on a global scale. This is a special temptation in the wake of September 11, which has produced a spate of commentary by television pundits and political commentators influenced by Samuel P. Huntington's mid-1990s book, The Clash of Civilizations. It is all too easy to explain September 11 as a confrontation between Western and Islamic civilizations.

But the notion of a "clash of civilizations" is monolithic, static, and essentialist. It reduces politics and culture to a single characteristic - race, religion, or geography -- that remains forever static, divorced from historical development. It denies the global exchange of ideas and the interpenetration of cultures that has been a feature of the modern world for centuries. It also makes it impossible to discuss divisions within these purported civilizations. The construct of "Islam," for example, lumps together over a billion people in diverse societies stretching from East Asia to the Middle East and Africa. And the idea that the West has exclusive access to reason, liberty, and tolerance, ignores both the relative recency of the triumph of such values within the West and the debates over Creationism, abortion rights, and other issues that suggest that commitment to such values is hardly unanimous. The difference between positing civilizations with unchanging essences and analyzing change within and interaction between societies is the difference between thinking mythically and thinking historically.

At the height of the Cold War, in his brilliant and sardonic survey of

American political thought, The Liberal Tradition in America, Louis Hartz observed that the internationalism of the postwar era seemed in some ways to go hand-in-hand with self-absorption and insularity. Despite its deepened worldwide involvement, the United States was becoming more isolated intellectually from other cultures. Prevailing ideas of freedom in the United States, Hartz noted, had become so rigid and narrow that Americans could no longer appreciate definitions of freedom, common in other countries, related to social justice and economic equality, “and hence are baffled by their use.”

Today, Hartz’s call for Americans to listen to the rest of the world, not simply lecture it about what liberty is, seems more relevant than ever. This may be difficult for a nation that has always considered itself a city upon a hill, a beacon to mankind. Yet American independence was proclaimed by those anxious to demonstrate “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.” It is not the role of historians to instruct our fellow citizens on how they should think about freedom. But it is our task to insist that the discussion of freedom must transcend boundaries rather than reinforcing or reproducing them. From the admittedly early vantage point of 2003, it seems that the next 100 years will be even more of an American century than the last. This makes it all the more imperative that the forever unfinished story of American freedom must become a conversation with the entire world, not a complacent monologue with ourselves. If September 11 makes us think historically, not mythically, about our nation and its role in the world, then perhaps some good will have come out of that tragic event.

