

The Many Faces of Freedom

By Maximilian Gude

On January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a memorable speech that is known today as “The Four Freedoms.” This enduring speech, given during turbulent times, still rings true today. In fact, we are still struggling to fulfill these suggestions from one of our country’s most experienced leaders. This inspiring address was not only directed towards his fellow Americans, but also our allies in World War II. The fight to preserve liberty and democracy was injected with new spirit by Roosevelt’s unflinching conviction in the moral necessity of freedom for all people. This speech clarified and redefined what people were really fighting for. No longer was it simply a fight against fascism, it was something much larger than that. It was a battle to preserve that which makes human life meaningful, the will to be free.

The first freedom mentioned is “freedom of speech and expression--everywhere in the world.” Most Americans consider freedom of speech to be their most sacred of freedoms. It is passionately protected and stands as our first amendment right. Out of the ‘four freedoms’, the freedom of speech stands as the cornerstone of our society because it is precisely what makes us truly democratic. In the United States, people are able to speak their thoughts and openly express their ideas, regardless of how extreme these thoughts and ideas may appear. Compared to countries like China, where people have been sent to reeducation camps for openly criticizing the government, America is tolerant of different opinions. In fact, regardless of political affiliation or ideology, all Americans agree that freedom of speech is crucial for progress. America does not have a monopoly

on this concept, but without it we would not be what we are today. Without freedom of speech our democracy stands naked, void of dignity.

The second freedom is “freedom of every person to worship God in his own way-- everywhere in the world.” America is a deeply religious country. Since its founding, church pews have been full of devout Christian worshippers of different denominations. But recently, other religions have become more visible as well, especially Islam. The freedom to worship openly and freely ensures the freedom to express one of the most important aspects of a person’s culture. After the tragedy of September eleventh, America has become less open to the Muslim faith, and unfortunately, American Muslims have faced many abuses. They have become the subject of jokes, hurtful stereotypes, racial profiling and violence. We still have a long way to go to ensure that Muslims have the same rights as American Christians, Jews and other faiths.

The third freedom in Roosevelt’s speech is “freedom from want--which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings, which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants--everywhere in the world.” The president knew all too well that economic equality would lead to peace, while economic disparity would lead to war. In this famous speech, he was trying to explain the concept of equality in terms of freedom; for example, the freedom to live and work without fear of being exploited in the market place. Freedom is commonly misunderstood in America as the freedom of unbridled economic pursuit, but here the president clearly explains that ‘freedom’ does not include taking advantage of your fellow citizens, and if peace is to be maintained, there must be understanding between employee and employer, just as there

must be understanding between nations. The 'freedom from want' means that no citizen should be hinged by economic woes. Precarious economic and material conditions are the main causes of war. Poverty is the exact opposite of freedom. In order to let freedom thrive, economic conditions must be such that men and women are not plagued by basic needs.

Poverty is still very much a contemporary problem. The real wage of American workers has not increased since the 1970's. If Roosevelt were still alive today, he would be awfully ashamed at how we have neglected such an important issue. Economic inequality is the breeding ground for social instability.

Finally, the fourth freedom is "freedom from fear--which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor--anywhere in the world." When governments go to war, they must first convince their citizens that there is an enemy worth fearing. When citizens are fearful, they are easily manipulated. More importantly, it is precisely during time of war when citizens voluntarily give-up their freedoms. Because of this reason, Roosevelt emphasizes that in order for peace to be protected, the freedom from fear must be the first line of defense. If countries reduce their arms, they also reduce the potential for creating enemies. If citizens are not easily inclined to fear potential attacks from their neighbors, governments *cannot* easily drag their citizens to war.

Historically, America has always had an enemy. At first, it was the Native Americans, then the British, then the Mexicans, then the Spanish, then the German

Fascists, then the Russian Communists and now it is the Islamic terrorists. Whether it is the Russians, the terrorists or even a health pandemic like the recent H1N1 scare, Americans have had times when they lived in fear and have, at different moments, suspended their rights in the name of defeating an enemy. Roosevelt is asking the world, in the name of peace, to reduce not only the possibility of violence but also the active promotion of fear, which legitimizes violence. Obviously, you cannot create peace with fear. In order to have peace, we cannot be afraid of our neighbors.

This speech contains the four essential freedoms necessary to ensure a peaceful democratic society. These four pillars help to maintain our government and give authority to our basic ideals. Indeed, the general idea of freedom rests on these four clarifications. Roosevelt was not only speaking to fellow Americans, but was also speaking as a citizen of the world, conscious of the repercussions of American ideals on other countries and fully committed to creating a lasting peace for all nations. True freedom is simultaneously achieved and maintained if it is genuinely sought for all, and not just the few.