

# African Americans and American Freedom

**N**o 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 its "twin," liberty) 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, and the Cold War to defend the "free world." "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' . . . 'the cradle of liberty.'"

Too often, Americans, including many historians, assume that freedom has had a fixed definition throughout our past. Generally, they ground American freedom in ideas that have not changed essentially since the ancient world or in forms of constitutional government and civil and political liberty inherited from England and institutionalized by the founding fathers. Such an approach fails to recognize that the history of what the historian Carl Becker called this "magic but elusive word" is a tale of debates, disagreements, and struggles rather than a set of timeless categories or an evolutionary narrative toward a preordained goal. Freedom has always been a terrain of conflict, subject to multiple and competing interpretations, its meaning constantly created and re-created. Debates over freedom in American history have involved all of the con-

cept's myriad dimensions—including political, economic, and personal freedom—as well as the boundaries of freedom: Who, in other words, is entitled to enjoy it?

Freedom has been as central to African-American political culture as to that of other Americans, and black Americans have embraced definitions of freedom shared by the society at large—freedom as economic autonomy, for example, or freedom as the opportunity for individual self-fulfillment. But because of their unique historical experience, freedom for African Americans has taken on a distinctive aura. Surveying public opinion during World War II, political scientist Horace Gosnell concluded that "symbols of national solidarity" had very different meanings to white and black Americans. If in whites' eyes, freedom was a birthright, a "possession to be defended," to blacks and other racial minorities, it remained a "goal to be achieved." Although many whites throughout American history have felt their freedom to be endangered, whether by large corporations, political machines, or a too-powerful federal government, Gosnell's point is well taken. Whatever their specific political agendas and ideologies, black Americans have seen freedom as an aspiration, whose full enjoyment lay in the future and whose attainment involved struggle of both an individual and collective nature. Blacks' quest for freedom as they themselves understood it has inspired movements as diverse as abolitionism and Garveyism. And this quest has been crucial to the evolution of freedom for the society at large. Blacks' struggle to achieve free-

# and the Story of

*Eric Foner*

dom has not only helped to redraw freedom's boundaries, by bringing nonwhites within its purview, but has transformed the meanings of freedom for all Americans.

These points can be illustrated by looking briefly at some of the key turning points in the history of freedom in the United States, beginning with the birth of the republic itself. In the eighteenth century, freedom and slavery were frequently juxtaposed as "the two

extremes of happiness and misery in society." Yet despite the presence of half a million slaves in Britain's North American colonies in 1776,

slavery was primarily a political category, shorthand for the denial of one's personal and political rights by arbitrary government. Only a few patriotic writers, such as James Otis, made a direct connection between slavery as a reality and slavery as a metaphor. Despite the universalist language of the Declaration of Independence, slavery for blacks did not necessarily contradict white Americans' understanding of freedom—a point driven home by a 1780 Virginia law that rewarded veterans of the War for Independence with 300 acres of land—and a slave. But the slaves themselves appreciated that by defining freedom as a universal right, the revolutionists had devised a rhetoric that could be deployed against chattel bondage. Living amid freedom but denied its

substance, slaves appropriated the patriotic ideology for their own purposes. The most insistent advocates of freedom as a universal entitlement were African Americans, who demanded that the leaders of the struggle for independence live up to their professed creed, thus extending the concept of liberty into unintended realms. If liberty were truly "an innate principle" for all mankind, declared black

minister Lemuel Haynes in 1776, "even an African [had] as equally good a right to his liberty in common with Englishmen." Such claims helped to alter the language of politics, forcing the nation to under-

stand slavery as a concrete, brutal reality, not an abstract condition or metaphor.

The revolution revealed the contradiction, which has persisted to the present, between America's self-proclaimed image as an "empire of liberty" and the reality of severe racial inequality. And throughout the ensuing decades, African Americans would seize upon the nation's official rhetoric to claim for themselves the benefits of liberty while giving their own distinctive cast to the idea of freedom. The long contest over slavery gave new meaning to personal liberty, political community, and the rights attached to American citizenship. Abolitionists, black and white alike, insisted that the inherent natural, and absolute, right to personal lib-

---

**Debates over freedom in American history have involved all of the concept's myriad dimensions—including political, economic, and personal freedom—as well as the boundaries of freedom: Who, in other words, is entitled to enjoy it?**

---

erty took precedence over other forms of freedom, such as the right of citizens to accumulate and hold property or self-government by local political communities. Even as slavery spawned a racialized definition of American freedom (reflected, among other things, in the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, which decreed that no black

person could be a citizen of the United States), the struggle for abolition gave rise to its opposite, a purely civic understanding of nationhood. Abolitionists maintained that "birth-place," not race, should determine who was an American and therefore entitled to the blessings of liberty. Seeking to define the core rights to which all Americans were entitled—the meaning of freedom in concrete legal terms—abolitionists invented the concept of equality before the law regardless of race, one all but unknown in American jurisprudence before the Civil War.

Most adamant in contending that the struggle against slavery required a redefinition of both freedom and Americanness were black members of the abolitionist crusade. "He who has endured the cruel pangs of slavery," wrote Frederick Douglass in 1847, "is the man to advocate liberty." Black abolitionists like Douglass laid claim to the nation's rhetorical heritage of freedom. In their desire for freedom, he insisted, the slaves were truer to the nation's underlying principles than the white Americans who annually (and hypocritically) celebrated the Fourth of July. Even more persistently than their white counterparts, black abolitionists articulated the idea that egalitarian constitutionalism and color-blind citizenship were essential elements of

freedom. "The real battleground between liberty and slavery," wrote Samuel Cornish, "is prejudice against color." More than white

abolitionists, as well, black abolitionists identified the widespread poverty of the free black population as a consequence of slavery and insisted that freedom possessed an economic dimension. It must be part of the "great work" of the anti-

**Slaves saw themselves simultaneously as individuals deprived of their rights and as a people lacking self-determination. Thus, freedom meant both escaping the myriad injustices of slavery . . . and collective empowerment . . .**

slavery crusade, insisted Charles L. Reason, "to abolish not only chattel slavery, but that other kind of slavery, which, for generation after generation, dooms an oppressed people to a condition of dependence and pauperism."

The reality of emancipation posed freedom as a historical and substantive issue rather than a philosophical or metaphorical one. The struggle over the meaning of freedom was central to the complex social and political crisis of Reconstruction. Slaves saw themselves simultaneously as individuals deprived of their rights and as a people lacking self-determination. Thus, freedom meant 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. Having received their freedom through an unparalleled exercise of national power, moreover, African Americans identified fully with the new nation-state created by the Civil War. To this day, few African Americans share the instinctive sense among so many whites that freedom requires reining in federal authority.

Also crucial to the former slaves' definition of freedom was economic autonomy. Slavery, said black minister Garrison Frazier, was "re-

ceiving . . . the work of another man, and not by his consent." Freedom meant "placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor." Genuine economic freedom, Frazier insisted, could only be attained through ownership of land, for without land, blacks' labor would continue to be exploited by their former owners. Although the freed people failed to achieve full freedom as they understood it, their expansive definition did much to shape the nation's political agenda during the turbulent era of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. Their economic aspirations were largely thwarted, but it was the actions of African Americans, along with white allies in the North, that placed the issues of civil and political equality on the national agenda, resulting in the passage of civil rights laws and constitutional amendments that established the principles of birthright citizenship and equality before the law. As a result, the meaning of freedom was expanded for all Americans.

The remarkable political and social gains of Reconstruction, of course, proved short-lived. By 1900, a new racial system, resting on disenfranchisement and segregation, and reinforced by a coercive legal system and widespread extralegal violence, had been imposed in the South. Black leaders struggled to find a strategy to rekindle the national commitment to equality that had flickered brightly, if briefly, during Reconstruction. No one thought more deeply, or over so long a period, about the problem of black freedom and the challenge it posed to American democracy than W.E.B. Du Bois. "All my life," Du Bois later wrote, "I have been painfully aware of the dichotomy between American freedom for whites and the continuing subjection of Negroes." In 1906, Du Bois helped to organize the Niagara movement, which sought to reinvigorate the traditions of abolitionism and Reconstruction. "We claim for ourselves," Du Bois wrote in the group's manifesto, "every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil,

and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America." Five years later, he joined with a group of white reformers in creating the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which launched a long legal struggle for the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

With the notable exception of the militant Boston editor William Monroe Trotter, most black leaders saw American participation in World War I as an opportunity to make real the promise of freedom. The black press rallied to the war, insisting that the service of black soldiers would result in the dismantling of racial inequality. Du Bois himself, in a widely reprinted editorial in the NAACP's monthly magazine, *The Crisis*, called on black Americans to "close ranks" and enlist in the segregated army, to help "make our own America a real land of the free."

The war unleashed social changes that altered the contours of American race relations. The combination of increased wartime production and the cutoff of immigration from Europe opened thousands of industrial jobs to black laborers, inspiring a massive migration from South to North. Many motives sustained the Great Migration—higher wages in Northern factories (even if blacks remained confined to menial and unskilled positions), opportunities for educating their children, escape from the threat of violence in the South and the back-breaking work of sharecropping, the prospect of exercising the right to vote. All of these and more were understood as components of freedom. Indeed, even after the bloody Chicago race riot of 1919, when blacks were asked what they most prized about life in the North, nearly all of those interviewed by the city's Commission on Race Relations answered, "Freedom." Yet that riot, the worst of several violent confrontations that shattered cities throughout the country, also exposed the vast disappointments that migrants encountered—severely restricted

employment opportunities, exclusion from unions, rigid housing segregation, and machine control of urban politics that limited the impact of the right to vote. The result was a feeling of deep betrayal that affected everyone from Du Bois, who had traveled to Paris to plead the cause of colonial independence, to ordinary black Americans. In the new black ghettos of the North, the disappointed hopes of World War I kindled widespread support for the separatist movement launched by Marcus Garvey, a recent immigrant from Jamaica. Freedom for Garveyites meant national self-determination; they demanded for blacks the same internationally recognized identity now enjoyed by Poles, Czechs, and the Irish. "Everywhere we hear the cry of freedom," Garvey proclaimed in 1921. "We desire a freedom that will lift us to the common standard of all men . . . freedom that will give us a chance and opportunity to rise to the fullest of our ambition and that we cannot get in countries where other men rule and dominate."

Even more than World War I, World War II put the question of black freedom on the national agenda. Official rhetoric—FDR's Four Freedoms, the widespread repudiation of Nazi theories of a master race—emphasized freedom as a universal entitlement, without racial boundaries, and helped to inspire a new black militancy. Racism, a black steelworker declared in 1944, was "an evil characteristic of our fascist enemies," and when the president "said that we should have the Four Freedoms," he meant to include "all races." The Four Freedoms, however, took on a distinctive meaning for African Americans. To them, freedom from fear meant, among other things, an end to lynching; freedom from want included an end to the racial job ceiling that relegated most to low-wage unskilled employment.

An uncompromising demand for political, economic, and civil equality provided the unifying theme of *What the Negro Wants*, a

book of essays by fourteen prominent black leaders, edited by historian Rayford Logan and published in 1944. Virtually every essay called for the enfranchisement of black voters in the South, the dismantling of segregation, and access to "the accepted American standard of living." "The Negro," A. Philip Randolph insisted in the book's most impatient essay, "is not free. . . . He is not free because he is not equal to other citizens." Reflecting how the war had inspired among black Americans an intense identification with the struggles for independence of the "subject peoples" of the colonial world, several essays also insisted that with peace must come an end to European imperialism. "We want the Four Freedoms," wrote Logan, "to apply to black Americans as well as to the brutalized peoples of Europe and to the other underprivileged peoples of the world."

World War II was the seedbed of the modern civil rights movement. But it was not until the 1960s that the movement succeeded in revolutionizing American race relations. Freedom was its watchword. More than elevating blacks to full citizenship, declared the writer James Baldwin, the movement challenged the United States to rethink "what it really means by freedom." With their freedom rides, freedom schools, freedom songs, freedom marches, and the insistent cry "Freedom now," black Americans and their white allies reappropriated the central term of Cold War discourse—reduced during the 1950s to a sterile slogan encompassing little more than consumerism and anti-communism—and rediscovered its radical potential. The movement inspired a host of other challenges to the status quo, including a mostly white student movement known as the New Left, the "second wave" of feminism, and claims by other dispossessed minorities. Together, they made freedom once again the rallying cry of the dispossessed.

From the beginning, the language of freedom pervaded the black movement. It res-

onated in the speeches of civil rights leaders and in the impromptu declarations and hand-lettered placards of the struggle's foot soldiers. On the day of Rosa Parks's court appearance in December 1955, even before the bus boycott had officially been announced, a torn piece of cardboard appeared on a bus shelter in Montgomery's Court Square, advising passengers: "Don't ride the buses today. Don't ride it for freedom."

"None of us knew exactly what it meant," one participant later recalled, "but we were saying freedom." During the Freedom Summer of 1964, when the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) established "freedom schools" for black children across Mississippi, lessons began with students being asked to define the word. Some answers were specific ("going to public libraries"), some more abstract ("standing up for your rights"). Some youths associated freedom with "having power in the system," others with "hatred of restraint." Some insisted that freedom meant legal equality; others saw it as essentially a "state of mind." Freedom meant equality, power, recognition, rights, opportunities. It required eradicating a multitude of historic wrongs—segregation, disenfranchisement, exclusion from public facilities, confinement to low-wage menial jobs, harassment by the police, and the ever-present threat of extralegal violence.

To participants in the struggle, the goals of public and private freedom—strictly separated in the era's dominant liberal discourse—were inseparable. "Freedom of the mind," insisted SNCC, was the greatest freedom of all. And it was "in the very act of working for the impersonal cause of racial freedom," said James Farmer, a leader of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), that "a man experiences, almost like grace, a large measure of private freedom . . . an intuition of the expanding boundaries of his self."

But it was in the soaring oratory of Martin Luther King Jr., who more than any single in-

dividual came to lead and symbolize the movement, that the protesters' many understandings of freedom fused into a coherent whole. From the beginning of his national prominence as chief spokesman for the Montgomery movement, freedom was central to King's rhetoric. For the title of his first book, relating the history of the bus boycott, King chose *Stride Toward Freedom*. His most celebrated oration, the "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963, began by invoking the unfulfilled promise of emancipation ("one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free") and closed with a cry borrowed from a black spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" Central to his theology was the story of Exodus, a mainstay of black preaching that interpreted the African-American experience as a divinely guided progress toward Canaan, the promised land of freedom. Among other things, Exodus suggested that individual rights and group empowerment were interdependent and reinforcing, a point King drove home when he proclaimed, "We as a people will get to the promised land."

At a time when Cold War ideology had highlighted the danger to liberty from excessive government and made respect for the distinction between "civil society" and the realm of politics a cornerstone of liberal thinking, civil rights activists resurrected the vision of federal authority as the custodian of freedom. Despite the long history of federal complicity in segregation, blacks' historical experience suggested that they had more hope for justice from national power than from local governments or the voluntary acquiescence of well-meaning whites. This conviction was reinforced not only by Southern resistance to integration but by the failure of Northern states to enforce the fair employment laws of the late 1940s. Far from being a bastion of liberty, moreover, the institutions of civil society—businesses, unions, homeowners' associations, private clubs, and

the like—were riddled with racism, which only federal power could eradicate.

Yet even at its moment of triumph, the civil rights movement confronted a crisis as it sought to move from access to schools, public accommodations, and the voting booth to the intractable economic divide separating blacks from other Americans. In the mid-1960s, the economic dimensions of freedom rose to the forefront of the civil rights agenda. With black unemployment two and a half times that of whites and average black family income little more than half the white norm, the movement groped for ways to “make freedom real and substantive” for black Americans. In 1966, black unionist A. Philip Randolph and civil rights veteran Bayard Rustin proposed the Freedom Budget, which envisioned spending \$100 billion over a ten-year period for a federal program of job creation and urban redevelopment. In the same year, King launched the Chicago Freedom movement, with demands quite different from its predecessors in the South—upgrading black employment, ending discrimination by employers and unions, providing equal treatment in granting mortgages, and constructing low-income housing scattered throughout the region. His aim was nothing less than to dismantle the black ghettos and make Chicago an “open city.” But Southern tactics—marches, sit-ins, mass arrests—proved ineffective in the face of the less overt but no less pervasive structures of racial inequality in the North.

Together with the civil rights movement itself, government action opened doors of opportunity for black Americans, spurring an enormous expansion of the black middle class. But millions of African Americans remained trapped in poverty. By the 1990s, the historic gaps between white and black in education, income, and access to skilled employment had narrowed considerably. But the median wealth of white households remained quadruple that of blacks, unemployment was far lower, and

nearly one-fourth of all black children lived in poverty. Shortly before her death, Fannie Lou Hamer, who had risen from sharecropping obscurity in Mississippi to become a national symbol of the civil rights struggle, remarked to a friend, “Mac, we ain’t free yet.”

With the waning of the civil rights impulse, the language of freedom was increasingly appropriated by the Right. Ronald Reagan, who used the word in his official speeches and pronouncements more frequently than any other president, made “freedom” a byword for an unregulated market, limited government, and a triumphalist celebration of American exceptionalism. By the mid-1980s, many black Americans were extremely skeptical of Reagan and his definition of freedom, a reaction evident in the celebration of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty in 1986. “For us, the Statue of Liberty is a bitter joke,” wrote James Baldwin. Some black leaders, like John Jacob, head of the Urban League, urged blacks to take part in the ceremonies. “We must refuse to cede the symbols of liberty, freedom, and equality,” Jacob wrote, “to ideologues of the right.” His plea, however, may well have come too late.

Today, freedom is most insistently proclaimed by antigovernment libertarians, free market advocates, and upholders of consumer choice, in personal life as well as in the larger economy. It remains to be seen whether an understanding of freedom grounded in a series of negotiations—of government, of social citizenship, of restraints on individual self-definition, of a common public culture—can provide an adequate language for comprehending the world of the twenty-first century. One can hope that alternative traditions now in eclipse and closely associated with the black political tradition—freedom as economic security, freedom as active participation in democratic governance, freedom as social justice for those long disadvantaged—will be rediscovered and reconfigured to meet the challenges of the new century.