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Freedom in the Curriculum

By Paul Rich

President of Policy Studies Organization and Westphalia Press

Professor Max Skidmore has kindly responded to our request to provide pithy and succinct introductions to possible courses on freedom. So he has. We were frankly somewhat startled when our search for the concept turned up little in the syllabi of several hundred colleges and universities.

We wonder if this is because freedom, despite its importance, is taken for granted and simply isn't on the list of topics believed central to the humanities and social science curricula? Or like a car on a cold winter's morning, does it perhaps need a kickstart? We certainly hope that providing these essays by Professor Skidmore will encourage more scholars to consider courses on the topic.

Essentially, much of the recent and often depressing news touches on issues concerning what seemed basic to the Founding Fathers of the United States: the constitutional protection of freedom that they sought to enshrine. The struggle in Ukraine is about freedom, and the tumult in Venezuela and the Middle East also relates to freedom. So does the discussion of what is taught or not taught in classrooms.

The Policy Studies Organization is completely nonpartisan, but public policy certainly isn't for ostriches. Our major journals are used by leaders who need scholarship rather than innuendo to make decisions, and we believe policy studies are a discipline that belongs in the curriculum.

One of the peculiarities of academic publishing is the general absence of the ammunition needed for constructing classes, and the Proceedings attempt to remedy that by giving academia a place for materials that can help build courses. Let us make the strongest possible case for courses having essays like those in this issue which can be the place settings for the main courses, so to speak. A brief survey of the topic at the very start is the doorbell or portico, as you will, for what a teacher will be driving across during the semester.

Do we think freedom belongs in the curriculum? We certainly do, more than ever. Thank you, Professor Skidmore.

Keywords: Freedom, Public Policy, Higher Education Curriculum, Policy Studies, Academic Publishing, Constitutional Protection

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Freedom in the United States

By

Max J. Skidmore

Abstract

This article considers the nature of freedom as it exists in the United States, with attention both to academic freedom and to freedom in general. It gives special emphasis to the threats freedom faces currently, some that are of long duration, and others that have emerged, and are emerging, uniquely reflecting the current era.

Academic Freedom

Recently, the *New York Times Magazine* published an article by Sarah Viren, “Can Academic Freedom Survive?” It reflected serious concern about the atmosphere repressing speech on campus that had been developing for some years. That atmosphere had intensified considerably after Trump took office for the second time, and began his overt attacks upon higher education in America.¹ By so doing, he was following the practices of many tyrants who seek to control education. The article also was a reflection of today’s overall threats facing the very notion of general American freedom.

Viren provided an excellent capsule presentation of the history of academic freedom in the United States. She noted that, rather than being a time-honored tradition, our current notion of academic freedom is of relatively recent vintage. It has always had its opponents, and in recent years has weathered threats from both left and right.

Currently, the Trump administration seeks to destroy the Department of Education. Beyond that, his policies condemning affirmative action and anything that pertains to equity, diversity, or inequality are attacks upon any measures that seek fairness. They are clear demonstrations of how an intellectual Jim Crow of sorts will prevail if Trump’s administration succeeds in securing control of education at all levels.

The bulk of Viren’s article, though, pertains to the case of Maura Finkelstein, an anthropologist who specializes in urban India, and who held a tenured position at Muhlenberg

¹ Sarah Viren, “Can Academic Freedom Survive?” *The New York Times Magazine*, (June 8, 2025), pp. 30ff.

College, in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Finkelstein became the target of stringent criticism because of her support for Palestinians in their conflict with Israel. She did express opposition to violence from both sides, but her sympathies were clearly in opposition to the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, and its occupation of Gaza.

The administration of the College, without following its own procedures for due process and over the objections of a faculty committee, fired Professor Finkelstein *from her tenured position*. She had offended some Jewish students (although being Jewish, herself), and allegedly made them “feel insecure.” Demands that she be fired came from Jewish students, alumni, wealthy donors, from the Trump administration and from other right-wing adherents all of whom alleged that Muhlenberg maintained an anti-Semitic atmosphere.

The example of Muhlenberg College, and its disregard for academic tenure, is sufficient to cause considerable concern regarding the condition of that institution’s academic freedom. The threat, though, is far greater than the inappropriate action of a single college, however outrageous. It is a harbinger of much broader things to come. It is not alarmist to recognize and declare that the influence in American politics of the conservative ascendancy—and especially the bullying role of Trump—is likely to become the standard for the country’s education in general. The threat to academic freedom is existential.

Much of the media coverage of higher education gives a warped picture of reality. The Ivy League does not represent the whole of America’s colleges and universities. In fact, most of the country’s college and university students are outside—far outside—the Ivy League institutions, or even Ivy League plus certain other prestige institutions. There are many colleges and universities across the country, both private and public, and often of good, and sometimes great, quality.

The conservative criticism of America’s colleges and universities initially was not a call for academic freedom. Conservatives began their attack long ago with the charge that higher education is biased in favor of “liberals.” They called for the institutions to add more “conservatives,” in order to provide “balance.” I can verify this from personal experience.

It was 1969, and academic positions still were plentiful. Newly-minted PhDs for a time then could easily find jobs. I was head of a political science department in a regional university in Missouri, located in a heavily Republican area. The university president, along with the chief academic officer, called me to a meeting to complain that the department had “too many Democrats.”

To deal with the complaints that they said came from the local business community, they demanded that the next three recommendations that I and the department made for faculty additions be to add “conservative Republicans” to the department. They were careful not to put their demand in writing. They also defined “conservative,” at my request, as one who held a belief that government should be too limited to maintain a program of social security. That was a time when there was hardly any open opposition to America’s very popular Social Security program; certainly none to my knowledge of any significance among the ranks of political scientists.

I resisted, saying that the departmental faculty did not care what an applicant’s political views might be, and that we could not quiz them on the subject without driving them away. I won, in that the demand dwindled. At year’s end, though, I was the only faculty member on campus who did not receive a pay increase. I made no complaint, since my punishment was rather mild, and I avoided having to find another position.

Note that the Muhlenberg College situation was worse; there was no call for “balance.” There was an open call for censorship; for suppression of speech. No support for the Palestinian cause was to be permitted. That absolutist demand now characterizes the conservative position across the curriculum. It’s “Our way or the Highway.”

The demand for “balance” had been designed to pretend that conservatives would have been content if their ideas were to receive equal treatment. Ideas, or political positions, according to the terms of the “balance” argument, presumably are equal, and all (or at least all ideas accepted as “mainstream”) deserve to be considered along with other positions.

Now that conservatives are in power throughout American government, though, they have become forthright about their absolutist position. They oppose including any ideas other than their own. The Trump administration, for example, demands that institutions defer to their demands in order to qualify for federal funding. Their demands tend to be twofold.

They generally masquerade as cleansing institutions of “anti-Semitism.” By anti-Semitism, though, they mean anything other than firm support of Israel’s Netanyahu-dominated foreign policy of vengeful violence. It is not permissible to take a nuanced approach to a conflict in which both parties have been violent, and in which both parties have committed atrocities. It is absolutely forbidden to be perceived as pro-Palestinian.

The other thrust of their demands is that institutions eliminate any policy that seeks “DEI;” that is, diversity, equity, or inclusion. Such policies are designed to give equal

opportunity to women and those from ethnic minorities. The conservatives, though, in their quest for control, cynically decry them as being “unfair to White, Christian, males.” What they propose is to shape the curriculum to suit the attitudes and prejudices of those White, Christian, Males and where Israel is concerned, to include Jews as well.

It’s a form of granting honorary membership to pro-Netyanahu Jews into the club representing what the right assumes to be the monolithic views of said White, Christian, Males; otherwise known to them as “real Americans.” In other words, they are those who demand that universities strip their curricula of critical analysis, and in addition that museum exhibits praise White culture. The icing on their poisonous cake is to demand that the Smithsonian Institution stop presenting displays representing slavery’s evils, and instead present a “happy face” of America’s development.

It should be impossible to overlook the radical nature of the right’s demands. Those demands are no so extreme that they go beyond even granting Trumpist politicians control of university and college employment. Despite the frequent instances of profound ignorance prevalent on the part of right-wing office holders—Trump, for instance, once said that he had just discovered that Lincoln had been a Republican. He followed by saying that most people don’t know that—they would even be given control of what America’s institutions of higher learning teach. Colleges and universities, along with museums and National Parks, if they ultimately have their way, would become purveyors of nothing but propaganda.

They would present all of American institutions and their development, and all of its historical figures, only in a “favorable” light. That includes even figures whose policies flirt with treason, Confederate enslavers, and probably those who committed genocide against the native populations. Racism, they seem to welcome as having become “cool” again.

It bears repeating that there is a companion, of sorts, to American colleges and universities, a companion that like the country’s higher education is a model to the world. That is America’s splendid program of National Parks. The parks also function to educate. Sadly, also like higher education, the National Parks are facing existential threats from the current reactionary administration. According to orders from Trump and his henchmen, National Parks as well as universities must censor their presentations in order to avoid anything negative regarding American history or major figures in the nation’s development. All must toe the administration’s line, however ignorant the administration is of history, or of academic matters in general.

The more extreme exponents of far-right ideologies have even been known to argue on behalf of America's former—and venomous—system of chattel slavery. That was the world's largest and harshest program of bondage that imposed enslavement of human beings in order to benefit the wealthy. Nothing could present greater threats to freedom than moving toward nuanced views of history's most oppressive system.

Harvard, to its great credit, has resisted curricular control by ideologues on the right. The Big Ten universities, similarly, have pledged to aid one another to fend off any Trumpist attack. A writer recently provided a delightful description of this: “An Academic NATO.”² As for Harvard, subsequent reports sadly are that this, the country's oldest and most wealthy university, is seeking some way to adjust to the administration's demands. It is disturbing to note that this is an indication that even Harvard appears to be weakening. It has joined Columbia in adopting a policy that criticizing Israel's behavior as similar to Nazism is “antisemitic.” One of the journals it publishes is the *Harvard Educational Review*. Its editors had planned a special issue on “the scholarly conversation on education in Palestine amid repression, occupation, and genocide.” The journal issued a call for papers, received and reviewed submissions, and set about preparing to publish. Then, the journal's publisher, the Harvard Education Publishing Group, announced, not that the issue would be censored, but that the entire issue would be cancelled.³ This action was unprecedented, and suggests that academic publishing now is, and will be, at the mercy of Trump's authoritarians who are busily attempting to establish another Know Nothing Party.

The Big Ten universities indeed do deserve another look. It may be that they, not the Ivy League, will be the force that will save American higher education and its linchpin, academic freedom. Media coverage of education, by and large, would not give that impression, but occasionally a more realistic view may creep into their coverage. The *New Republic*, for example, recently went against the mainstream in a fine article by Virginia Heffernan, “The Big Ten Rises Up Against Trump.”⁴ Although discussions of the Big Ten tend to label it Midwestern, and it once was, its members now include institutions from the far eastern US to the Far West. Despite the name, the Big Ten now includes 18 institutions in 16 states. All but two (Northwestern and Southern California) are state institutions. Collectively,

² Virginia Heffernan, “The Big Ten Rises Up Against Trump,” *The New Republic*, (July 29, 2025).

³ Jonathan Zimmerman, “Academic Freedom: How Universities Lost Their Way,” *Washington Monthly*, (August 5, 2025).

⁴ Heffernan.

as Heffernan points out, they have some 810,000 students “potential foot soldiers,” she calls them, and its own Big Ten Network, owned jointly with Fox, that will have \$1.4 billion revenue this year. “Academically, the Big Ten’s assets are even greater: \$18.4 billion in annual research and 145 million library volumes, more than twice the holdings of the Ivy League. Five of the Big Ten universities—Illinois, Penn State, Ohio State, Purdue, and Wisconsin—have nuclear reactors. There are more quantum computing facilities in the Big Ten than in all of Europe.”⁵

As of late April, half of the Big Ten’s faculty senates had signed on to a Mutual defense Compact, and they are setting an example.⁶ “Since then, faculty at 44 non-Big Ten universities, from the University of Massachusetts to the University of Arizona have signed their own analogous resolutions.”⁷

With regard to the Big Ten itself, as one professor described it to Heffernan, the Big Ten has “a broad public service mission, vast intellectual resources, and unyielding ethical responsibilities.” Faculty statements, of course, are not the same as support from administrations, but The American Association of Colleges and Universities has issued a statement, signed by 659 university and college presidents indicating that “we speak with one voice against the unprecedented government overreach and political interference now endangering American higher education.”⁸

As the holder of a Ph.D. in American Studies from Minnesota during its “Golden Age of American Studies” (1964), I can speak to the quality available at a Big Ten institution. The program then was still strongly influenced by a major founder Tremaine McDowell, along with academic pioneers and superb teachers Mary Turpie and Bernard Bowron. I studied with world-class professors: these included my dissertation adviser Mulford Q. Sibley (political philosophy), John Turner (political science), David W. Noble (history), Alice felt Tyler (history); and with visiting professors: poet Howard Nemerov, and Straussian Morton Frisch. With Frisch, a student of Leo Strauss, I was impressed by Straussian brilliance, exceptional teaching, and rather strong elements of absurdity.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Michael T. Nietzel, “Half of Big Ten Faculty Senates Have Voted For a Mutual Defense Compact,” *Forbes* (April 26, 2025).

⁷ Heffernan.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The current website of American Studies program at the University of Minnesota suggests that it remains a program of the highest quality:

We have taken a lead at the national level, diversifying our traditional curriculum in disciplinary terms—embracing feminist studies, media studies, popular culture, anthropology, sociology, history, literature, and queer studies—and by the pluralist cultures to which the word "American" refers, including African/African American, Chicano/a and Latino/a, Native/Native American, and Asian/Asian American perspectives.

We are a leader in advancing these areas of inquiry. At the same time, we are one of the oldest and most highly regarded American studies programs in the nation, consistently ranked among the top four in the country, along with Harvard, Yale, and Brown.

This, of course, is a small example, but does suggest the quality available outside of the Ivy League—and in the heartland. It may serve as a source of strength to maintain the freedom that is so threatened by Trump and his henchmen.

As students of fascism recognize, self-censorship may be the most effective of all, and the least subject to correction. Harvard's action in the academic world is consistent with the action of Paramount in the entertainment world when it announced that Steven Colbert's Tonight Show will be cancelled after his criticism of Trump, and Paramount's executives.

Harvard already had a president resign under pressure—notably, its first Black president—as did presidents of Columbia and Pennsylvania. The most recent incident of a university president being forced out is outside the Ivy League: Despite his having surrendered to Trump's demands, the president of the University of Virginia resigned under pressure from the Trump administration.

Regarding the equality of ideas, although this will offend many, objective examination makes clear what should be obvious: all ideas are not equal, and all do not deserve equal treatment. To say that "conservative" ideas deserve equal treatment is to say that in terms of merit, both "liberal" and "conservative" ideas are the same. They are not. Advocating "small government conservatism" should not be grounds for firing a political scientist, but it also

should not demand equal time. Small, limited, government manifestly results in poorer government.

Civilization's major advances have resulted from liberal reforms, not from small and strictly limited government. As Stephen Colbert put it in his previous incarnation, "reality has a well-known liberal bias!"

Moreover, the ideological equality argument can even assert that some ideas that have no merit whatsoever deserve the same status as those that are valid. Biology should not be required to give equal time to "creation science," however strongly some, or many, people believe it. Study of anthropogenic climate change should not be "balanced" with studies aimed at supporting continued dependence on fossil fuels. Physicians should not be trained to give equal time to anti-vaxxers, even if the secretary of health and human services (who is a noted crank) advocates nonsense.

The attacks by the authoritarian right upon higher education clearly have weakened academic tenure. The attackers will not stop until they are countered forcefully and defeated, or until they achieve their goal of curricular control. Unless the midterm elections in 2026 and the next few subsequent electoral contests weaken the Republican Party so drastically that it withers away, or at least experiences a drastic refutation of its extremism, America's system of higher education will suffer wrenching changes.

These changes would almost assuredly cause higher education in America to lose the academic freedom that has led it to become an inspiration to other lands. Instead of attracting many of the finest scholars from around the world, it would lead to a brain drain that will deprive the United States of its most talented researchers and teachers. Reports as 2025 was nearing its end, in fact, were already indicating that the exodus had begun.

Some American professors are moving to Canadian universities, where the academic climate is far more congenial. Others are likely to continue departing for more welcoming situations elsewhere. Canada is benefitting from the chaos that Trump's heavy, and clumsy, hand is creating in the U.S. That result will almost inevitably be greatly intensified if Trump's version of Making America Great Again were finally to be fully implemented.

“Freedom” is a simple word, but its meaning is not; it is deceptively complex. Americans tend to use “freedom,” and “liberty,” interchangeably. Liberty, though, in most correct usages refers to absence of institutional restraint. Freedom is the broader term, meaning positive liberty; i.e., freedom (or positive liberty) not only means the ability to make uncoerced choices, but to make those choices under external conditions that make those choices meaningful.

One person’s “freedom” can be another person’s oppression. A person exercising “freedom of speech” for example, under certain considerations, could restrict another person’s freedom. Moreover, freedom can be illusory unless conditions are appropriate for its exercise. Employees may be “free” to leave and find other employment, but that cannot be considered “freedom” if there is no other comparative employment available. Definitions are important. Conservatives, often purport to favor “religious freedom” when they argue for employers’ right—employers’ “religious freedom”—to require certain religious behaviors from their employees, yet the employees are denied their own freedom to choose.

Americans have long been told that they live in the “land of the brave,” which is “the home of the free.” However brave Americans may be (and current congressional Republicans unquestionably have demonstrated a lack of courage in situations when bravery would have demanded challenging their leader, Donald Trump), recent developments certainly have raised questions about the extent of their freedom. The second Trump administration is rushing madly, and openly, toward dismantling democratic, free, institutions, replacing them with authoritarian rule by a leader, himself. What could be more destructive of freedom than subjecting people to the tactics of a bully? Imposing masked, unidentified, armed, and powerful police forces upon American streets authorized to kidnap people at will, and to deport them to countries that those in power choose, is only one manifestation of such tactics. Among many others, one that stands out as especially dangerous is the use of governmental power against Trump’s opponents.

The Republican Party in recent years had been systematically chipping away at the vital Voting Rights Act of 1965, and reshaping American institutions—adopting severe gerrymandering, packing the judiciary including the Supreme Court, suppressing the vote in many ways including harsh, and unequally-applied prison sentences that remove large numbers of people with black and brown skins from cities and into prisons in rural areas where they count toward the local population but do not affect the votes in the area because of

“felony” convictions. Felony convictions usually deny them the vote. Thus, the GOP readied itself for an authoritarian leader, and seized upon Trump when he became available.

There clearly has been a flaw in America’s political system when it ignored even provisions of the Constitution designed to prevent what has happened. The Fourteenth Amendment, by any objective reading, should have eliminated Trump’s eligibility to run again for office. The language of that clause is self-enforcing; it does not require congressional action to enforce it. Similarly, the Supreme Court has weakened the Constitution’s clear dictate regarding birthright citizenship, and is considering Trump’s attack on the general principle. It already has limited nationwide injunctions, thereby creating the absurd potential for birthright citizenship to exist for one born in some states, but not in others. The dismantling of tradition and accepted conduct also enabled the new dictatorial leader to pardon those who committed—and who no doubt then will also go on to commit—crimes on his behalf, and on behalf of his family and henchmen.

Typically, Americans appear mostly to have operated with an exclusively negative conception of freedom, or liberty. They are free, they tend to believe, if government leaves them alone. This puts them at the mercy of private forces; of the privileged. One should note that those who are privileged—corporations and the ultra-wealthy—are hardly known for operating mercifully.

They, the privileged, generally have maintained their status by supporting the notion that in a “land of the free,” anyone can become rich. The poor should oppose “share the wealth” policies, because such policies would impede their freedom after they become wealthy. “Only in America,” becomes their mantra when they note a very rare person who does succeed apparently by individual effort. Even when individual effort has played a major part in success, it requires an entire infrastructure, and considerable support from others. No one has, or could, succeed solely by individual effort in a modern complex society; the structure that society and the economy it provides is key, as is a large measure of luck. Think of what would (or would not) happen if there were no patents, copyrights, legal enforcement of contracts, currency system, protection of property, and on and on.

We hear “individual effort” even applied to Donald Trump. Remember, Trump failed manifestly as a businessman (we voted for him, we hear people say, because we need a good businessman as president!). He was wealthy as a child and has inherited his wealth. He has never been a part of—or sympathetic to—the working class. He managed even to bankrupt

casinos, of all things. One would think that doing so would require an unusual measure of incompetence.

“Rising by your own bootstraps,” society tells workers, occurs because of the “free market.” The market, though, free or otherwise, has little to do with success except to enable the wealthy to become far more wealthy. A few decades ago, the very wealthy were multi-millionaires. Now, they are multi-billionaires—with one presumably soon to receive personally one *trillion* dollars! No private citizens should have the power—absolutely including the power to restrict the freedom of others—that such astronomical fortunes create.

Even a cursory examination of the data in the US demonstrates that those who are wealthy tend to come from wealthy backgrounds, inherit their wealth, and graduate from elite universities. Social mobility, despite conventional assumptions, is severely limited in America. It began to become more limited under Reagan, and becomes increasingly more limited under the regime of Trump. Timothy Snyder put it brilliantly when he noted that the United States had “won the Cold War with social mobility,” but then “cast it away.”⁹ As for Trump, he is using the presidency to add enormous amounts to his personal fortunes and to those of his family.

In fact, there is no such thing anywhere as the truly free market. Markets exist, and are shaped by, the policies of the societies that establish them, and by those societies’ governments that implement and regulate them.

Such an interpretation of “freedom” and a worshipful attitude toward a mythical “free market” may explain much about American public policy. To assume that your future includes something that is extremely unlikely (if not completely impossible; say, vast wealth for those who currently are poor), leads you to oppose sensible policies that would be to your benefit. You may oppose sharply progressive taxation, for example, because it would restrict you later, “when” you become a multi-billionaire.

Similarly, to use language without examining it closely, regardless of customary usage, makes it likely that you will accept nonsensical arguments. These tendencies certainly explain why the United States, the wealthiest of all advanced countries, is the only one without universal health coverage. Many Americans oppose it because of fears of “government medicine” that they are convinced would be inferior to that provided by the “free market.” Actually, however, “government medicine” is quite rare among universal healthcare systems,

⁹ Timothy Snyder, *On Freedom*, New York: Crown, 2024, p. 146.

and America's "free market" system already severely restricts freedom by requiring care in "networks," and often by refusing to permit treatments even when they are supposedly covered. What it has provided, is the world's most expensive health care system, by far, with outcomes in the aggregate that tend often to be inferior to those in universal systems.

Government medicine does exist here in the military and sometimes for veterans, but usually universal healthcare does not mean that government "provides medicine," it only pays for that medicine. Opposing universal healthcare because of fears of "government medicine" makes no more sense—truly it makes *less* sense—than opposing America's healthcare delivery system because it is "insurance company medicine."

III Attention to Freedom as Counter to Totalitarianism

The rise of totalitarianism in the early twentieth century brought about new emphases on freedom. The most notable examples of attempts to implement totalitarianism, of course, then were under Germany's Nazis, the USSR's Stalin, and later China's Mao.

Totalitarianism is authoritarianism to the maximum degree—including control not only of action, but even of thought. In democratic theory, in contrast to authoritarianism, rights are inherent in the people. Freedom exists to the greatest extent practical.

Under authoritarianism, any rights that exist are granted by the government. Any privacy that exists is granted by government. Generally, people are secure in their daily lives so long as they stay away from politics. The government cares little what people think or do otherwise, and grants considerable privacy. Normal life under a mildly authoritarian system may not seem much different from life under a democratic one.

Under a more authoritarian system, the people are more highly regimented. The amount of privacy they may exercise is more limited.

Under totalitarianism, though, the authoritarianism is, as the name implies, total. The government seeks not only to control behavior fully, but to control even the innermost thoughts of each citizen. There is no privacy. In Orwell's *1984*, a totalitarian government, portraying itself as "Big Brother," controls every facet of life, public or personal. It enforces its control with terror and pain, and attempts so to warp the language that it becomes impossible to express (or possibly even to think) of opposition. Big Brother names this "Newspeak." This was Orwell's most brilliant insight. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the control is equally complete, but the enforcement is by a hardly less humiliating infliction, involuntarily, of pleasure. This was Huxley's equally brilliant insight.

It matters little whether some theorists deny that there is such a phenomenon as totalitarianism. It also matters not whether in practical terms a complete totalitarianism is impossible. As intrusive as our technology is, it probably cannot exert perfect control over every person. What does matter are the intentions of the power holders. They do not need to have perfect control if they have considerable control over a substantial part of the population. This, Donald Trump intends to secure, and his corrupt and compliant Court works to help him secure what he indicates that he thinks of as a kingship.

Going back nearly a century to the rise of totalitarian (or would-be totalitarian) threats from Nazi Germany and the rise of a totalitarian ideology in the USSR under Stalin,

America's Newly-inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt worked to inaugurate his New Deal to combat the Great Depression. For several years he faced the country's economic troubles while reassuring Americans. In his first inaugural, he said that the only thing Americans had to fear was fear itself. Countering domestic threats from fascist elements on the right and communist groups on the left, both of which advocated replacing democracy, he succeeded in convincing Americans that we needed instead a *stronger* democracy; one based on freedom. All the while, he was observing and preparing for direct military threats from abroad.

The president wisely had emphasized continuity with the past while incorporating a policy of change to deal with new conditions. Note his famous "Four Freedoms" declaration. I have noted elsewhere that "freedom" has always been central to American beliefs, and thus when FDR's Four Freedoms began first with "freedom of speech," and "freedom of religion," he was being fully consistent with American tradition. He departed from that tradition, or perhaps it is better to say that he enlarged on it, when he added "freedom from want," and "freedom from fear," He was adding an emphasis on security. He therefore "had embraced new ideas and practices but had, by rhetorical means, linked them with tradition."¹⁰

FDR's Four Freedoms influenced the Charter of the United Nations and its emphasis upon preservation of human rights. Similarly, it influenced numerous international agreements such as the Atlantic Charter between The US and the UK in 1941, somewhat prior to America's entry into World War Two; and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN in 1948. It also evolved in FDR's mind into his proposals in his 1944 and 1945 messages on the state of the union for a "Second Bill of Rights," or an "Economic Bill of Rights," for the United States.

That "Economic Bill of Rights" evolved from FDR's recognition that "Necessitous men are not free men."¹¹ Our language today would be somewhat different—necessitous people—but clearly we should accept the observation that dictatorships thrive by securing support from people who lack basic necessities; are hungry, have no jobs, or simply believe for whatever reason that they have no hope without radical change.

¹⁰ Max J. Skidmore, *Medicare and the American Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 1970, p. 4; See also David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954, pp. 137-138.

¹¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "1944 State of the Union Address Text," (January 11, 1944), *FDR Library and Museum*, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/address-text> (retrieved June 29, 2025).

FDR had sent a written copy of his address to Congress, and read the content to the entire country via radio in one of his “Fireside Chats.” He stressed directly that it was American freedom that was responsible for the country’s success. “This Republic,” he said, “had its beginning, and grew to its present strength, under the protection of certain inalienable political rights—among them the right of free speech, free press, free worship, trial by jury, freedom from unreasonable search and seizures. They were our rights to life and liberty.”

Nevertheless, said FDR, as the country had developed guarantees of new freedoms were needed. These included “for all regardless of station, race, or creed,” and were: the right to a well-paying job; the right to earn enough to have adequate food, clothing, and recreation; the right of a farmer to earn enough for a good living; the right of all in business “to trade in an atmosphere of freedom;” the right to a decent home; the right to adequate medical care; the right to adequate protection from economic hardship; the right to a good education.

Certainly, the country would be stronger, more just, and less receptive to fascist misinformation if FDR’s proposals had been implemented, and freedom had been expanded and protected. As it was, his tragic death, and the Republican takeover of Congress after the 1946 elections, made it impossible for his successor, President Harry Truman, to secure the New Deal’s expansion by adopting FDR’s Economic Bill of Rights. Truman was able, however, to protect the New Deal’s reforms, and prevent them from being rolled back, despite Republican efforts. He deserves considerable credit for protecting FDR’s reforms from Republican elimination.

Sadly, Trump and his Republicans now are striving mightily to accomplish that elimination, almost a century later. In 2025 they passed a draconian bill that succeeded in making lives more miserable for those of limited means while boosting the fortunes of the very rich. They called it officially (to jeers and laughter) One Big Beautiful Bill!

The outcome will depend ultimately upon the 2026 mid-term election results, and the results of the next few elections after that. The crisis American democracy faces at this moment is as great as the one it faced immediately prior to the Civil War; arguably even greater.

As freedom was receiving new attention in the early twentieth century when totalitarian regimes were rising abroad, questions emerged regarding whether freedom itself was attractive enough to counter the repressive ideologies (from both the extreme left, Marxism-Leninism, and the extreme right, fascism and its even worse variant, Nazism) of those

regimes. The classic and definitive study, *On Totalitarianism*, by the brilliant political philosopher Hannah Arendt recognizes that they represent the same phenomenon in practice, however widely separated their histories and philosophies.¹² There is a tendency of those who hold enormous power to suppress freedom across the board, and that tendency tends to grow whatever the intention initially. Another valuable study—too little remembered—is highly relevant. That book emerged in 1941 when war was raging in Europe. It was *Escape from Freedom*; Erich Fromm's best-known work.¹³ Fromm was a psychoanalyst who had fled from the Nazis, and escaped to the U.S.

Fromm identified a human ambivalence toward freedom, that tended to result from alienation in a capitalist society, and from other psychological factors. He delves deeply into the psychology that led historically to fascism in general, and to Nazism in particular. *Escape From Freedom* is difficult to read today without recognizing factors of current American politics that make fascism's presence here difficult to deny. If one is uncomfortable with Freudian analysis, that analysis can be set aside and the rest of Fromm's analysis still works; if one is uncomfortable with blaming capitalism, that criticism of capitalism, too, can be set aside, and again the analysis still works.

Going beyond, and adding to Fromm's analysis, though, it would seem that a factor Fromm doesn't mention may be at work. Freedom requires free agents to be responsible for the results of their actions. Rejecting freedom eliminates personal responsibility, transfers it elsewhere, and exchanges the ability to choose for a guilt-free life; one in which a person might be comfortable in saying "it isn't my fault. I'm only following orders."

Recently there have been other works examining freedom. The most prominent are books by Joseph Stiglitz (Nobel Prize winning economist at Columbia University), and Timothy Snyder (Professor of History and Global Affairs at Yale; he now, however, is leaving the country to go to the University of Toronto). Stiglitz's *The Road to Freedom* and Snyder's *On Freedom* each came out in 2024.

Stiglitz's title is an obvious rejoinder to Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, a favorite of the American right since its American publication in 1944. Hayek, an exponent of the Austrian school of economics, argued that planning destroyed freedom. Essentially his argument in its most simple form was that for a plan to work, it had to be kept in place for

¹² Hannah Arendt, *On Totalitarianism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1951.

¹³ Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, New York: Rinehart, 1941.

years, and protected from change; that is, it had to be beyond the reach of voters, thus destroying their freedom. The mere act of planning, he asserted, was totalitarian. Herman Finer, a British political scientist who came to the U.S. as Professor at the University of Chicago, took on Hayek's arguments in *Road to Reaction*.¹⁴ Employing pointed prose—which, along with his content served to rile those on the right—he accused Hayek of contradicting himself, of misreading history, and of manipulating facts. He wrote that “we have no reason to be afraid of our social strength, or the strength we care to lend to the government or of the freedom we obtain as the result of using it through the recognized medium—the social manager—which is government.”¹⁵

Conservatives rushed to condemn Finer, saying he wrote an angry book based on nitpicking. Others said that Finer's work was an important, and needed, correction.

A much more measured reaction came from Barbara Wootton, a British sociologist (and later president of the British Sociological Association). She answered Hayek in her *Freedom Under Planning*.¹⁶ Rather than seeking philosophical sophistication, she made her book highly accessible by employing plain language and concentrating on practical applications. It is unfortunate that it cannot be made mandatory reading for Republican office holders—and many of their voters as well—who argue, for example, that only those sick people who can pay, or only those who willingly seek and find employment, deserve to have health care.

The cruelty that motivates much of the conservatives' public policy obscures the fact that in an economy of abundance, such as that in today's United States, no one should go hungry; no one should be without health care; no one should be without shelter. This is true regardless of who they are, and regardless of their personal actions. We cannot have a free society if we maintain the public position that of those with few resources only the ones whom the elite deem “deserving” should be free from starvation, from untreated illness, or from exposure to the elements. Recently, a Republican member of the US House of Representatives conducting a “town hall” meeting responded to the idea of requiring recipients of Medicaid to have jobs if they were able. He asked a question in return. He asked if the questioner thought a man in his late twenties who doesn't work should receive health care? The question was broadcast; the answer was not.

¹⁴ Herman Finer, *Road to Reaction*, Boston: Little Brown, 1945.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁶ Barbara Wootton, *Freedom Under Planning*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945.

Following Wootton, though, the answer, especially in a society characterized by great abundance, should have been, “yes he should. All people who need health care should receive it.” Part of the difficulty is our constant stress on “the taxpayer’s money,” always used in connection with public policy. It implies that citizens pay taxes directly that go to assist the downtrodden—or as they might put it, to assist the shiftless and the lazy. Regardless of popular assumptions, the system does not work that way. There is no direct relationship at the national level between the taxes one person pays and the benefits that another person receives. More broadly, there is little or no direct relationship between the government’s income and its outgo. The national government is a currency issuer. Its ability to issue currency remains the same whether it has, on the one hand, huge income from taxes or other resources, or whether, on the other hand, it has no income at all.

Wootton discusses the moral position that should obtain in an economy of abundance. She cites the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms. “Eventually,” she says, “we shall, I think, have to accept these statements at their face value, and to interpret freedom from want as freedom from want, not as freedom from want for the industrious, the stable, and the adaptable.” Admittedly, this seems unrealistic at the current time, at least in America, when Republicans, at the urging of the bully who sits in the Oval Office, succeeded in passing an obscene set of policies: an expansion of misery for the general population in order to provide additional comfort to the already super-comfortable. At the time Wootton wrote, however, even though war was raging it was easier to be optimistic. One can hope that once more optimism will be justified, and her additional statement will again be realistic. That is, “we are, in fact, constantly driven by pressure of public sentiment though very slowly, along that road. The introduction of social insurance, the separation of unemployment assistance from public assistance, and the proposed final abolition of all the old poor law machinery—every one of these changes is a reluctant admission that he who cannot or will not work shall, nevertheless, eat.”¹⁷

She was speaking of the British population. That population for whatever reason has brought about public policies that even after Thatcher’s cutbacks were and are far less harsh—not to say less bloodthirsty—than those in America.

Jumping ahead to contemporary times, Joseph Stiglitz has given renewed attention to Hayek in *Road to Freedom* and to the economist who stepped in to fulfill Hayek’s role later in

¹⁷ Wootton, p. 99.

the 20th century, Milton Friedman. Friedman, like Stiglitz, was a recipient of the Nobel Prize in economics. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* likely would not have continued to be influential were it not for the Americans on the right who found that it fit their prejudices—and who certainly loved the title. Stiglitz's study, however, is valuable as a correction of disinformation regarding freedom that came from Hayek and then from Friedman. As he put it brilliantly, Hayek and Friedman “were the leaders of a pack of conservative economists who have tried to preempt meaningful discussions by the very vocabulary they use. They talked of ‘free markets,’ as if imposing rules and regulations results in ‘unfree markets.’ They relabeled private enterprises. . . as ‘free enterprises,’ as if giving them that appellation would bestow a reverence and suggest that they should not be touched and their freedom should not be curtailed even if they exploit people and the planet.”¹⁸

This is far from merely an academic controversy. It has had direct economic and political effects, all highly undesirable. Stiglitz points out that President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were “at the forefront of the political battle that reshaped economic policy and Western economies in the last third of the twentieth century.” Hayek and Friedman, and their fellow members of the “Mont Pelerin Society” had already spread anti-state doctrines that were “far more radical than even the Republican Party at that time.”

Whether Friedman truly favored political freedom, though, is doubtful. As Stiglitz noted, he was “only too willing” to assist Chile's brutal dictator Augusto Pinochet and his oppressive regime. Other free-market adherents similarly “often seemed to be more focused on order than freedom.”¹⁹

As he put it in a chapter aptly titled, “How Economists Think About Freedom,” the practical result of this distorted emphasis on free markets and disinformation regarding political freedom were dire. “By the early years of this century, America had become the country marked by the highest level of inequality and some of the lowest levels of opportunity of any of the advanced countries.”²⁰

¹⁸ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Road to Freedom: Economics and the good Society*, New York: Norton, 2024, p. 21.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 27-28.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p, 33.

Stiglitz was careful to point out the key role of education. It often is distorted, presenting history in a glorified manner in order to prepare students to be conservative citizens, but ideally, if taught accurately, it inculcates a common language and enables effective thought and communication. It also teaches students to be mindful of “how one’s actions affect others,” whether because of pressure from peers, or because of empathy. It is part of “social cohesion,” and where there is social cohesion, “a requirement to act for the good of society is not coercion.” Trump presents a prime example of what results from a failure of education. The “individual does not become socialized. . . . Trump, with his brazenness, may force us to define the presidential limits more precisely by putting them within laws and regulations.”²¹ This presumes, of course, that we will have the opportunity to do so. Our ability to act accordingly would be difficult under any circumstances, but it is made vastly more difficult by a compliant—one might justifiably say corrupt—Supreme Court. If the Democrats do have the chance to return the executive to its intended role, it will require immediate expansion of that Court, despite bleats from many quarters that this should never be done. They decry any effort, as they put it, to “pack” the Court.

The Court, though, *is already packed* as the deliberate result of decades of ideologically extreme Republican appointments. The Court is in desperate need of expansion so that it will be *unpacked*. If this is not done, there can be no hope. Consider, among the many extreme examples, the Court decision that Trump cannot be held responsible for any act, however unconstitutional, that he commits as part of his “official duties.” Consider also that gerrymandering to gain or retain political superiority is wrong, says the Court, but beyond the power of the federal judiciary—even the Supreme Court—to do anything about it. Consider even that the Court ruled that police forces can stop and question anyone whose looks, or whose race or ethnicity, they don’t like.

Whether Stiglitz agrees that the Court needs to be unpacked or not is immaterial, and I would not attribute to him a position that he does not hold. Nevertheless, his comments suggest that he might, indeed, agree. He puts it boldly: “free and unfettered markets advocated by Hayek and Friedman and so many on the Right have set us on the road to fascism.” Developments since he wrote—threats to arrest and prosecute political opponents; threats to arrest and deport American citizens whom Trump does not like to foreign lands; threats to strip them of their citizenship; putting masked and unidentified thugs on the streets to kidnap and deport people indiscriminately (or perhaps discriminating by skin color) to meet a goal of

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-153.

3000 deportations per day; deporting or denying entry to those who have expressed opposition to Trump. Such actions and threats, and others that are similar, demonstrate that fascism is already here.

Although it may be too late, we can hope that Stiglitz is right when he says that educational systems—interpreted broadly, to include research universities and think tanks—“play a central role in creating sustainable, free societies by inculcating the kinds of values that are required and by helping free individuals from social coercion and enhancing their autonomy.” The current academic trend toward minimizing or eliminating everything that does not bring grants to universities, that is reducing or cutting things other than STEM and business subjects, is pernicious. Stiglitz is correct when he says that a good liberal arts education helps to create understandings of the forces affecting the lives of citizens. Such an education also “allows us to see the flaws in current economic arrangements and to understand why . . . unfettered markets are the problem and not the solution.” This also is why liberal arts have become the targets for those on the far right who have so completely dominated Trump’s administration; why “regardless of the merits [they] fight so strongly against a liberal education.”²²

Timothy Snyder’s *On Freedom* joins Stiglitz’s *Road to Freedom* as the most recent, comprehensive, treatise on freedom. Snyder joins other thoughtful writers on freedom by stressing that it means far more than the negative definition that many Americans appear to hold. That is, they think of freedom as nothing more than being left alone by government.

To be free requires one to affirm, as Snyder put it, not simply to deny. He lists five “forms of freedom.” Those include “*sovereignty*, or the learned capacity to make choices; *unpredictability*, the power to adapt physical regularities to personal purposes; *mobility*, the ability to move through space and time following values; *factuality*, the grip on the world that allows us to change it; and *solidarity*, the recognition that freedom is for everyone.”²³ These “forms” are insightful, although his definitions for unpredictability and factuality are clumsy, and add unnecessary complications. They do not fit well among rather simple and widely understood terms.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 290-193.

²³ Snyder, pp. xiii-xvii.

Regardless, Snyder is thoughtful, and has especially broad international experience. His analyses are important—even vital. They enhance our understandings of “freedom,” a term that is far more complex than is often understood.

He noted, perceptively, the effects of negative freedom. In Russia, we can observe a shift, he said, from freedom as the absence of barriers to “a politics of fascism in which there are no barriers to the Leader’s whims.”²⁴

I join in Snyder’s observation, and add to it that “freedom as no barriers” is identical to the conservative’s definition of freedom. He concluded far earlier than did other Americans, even specialists, that Russia would invade Ukraine, and that Zelinsky would remain and fight, rather than flee.

Snyder said that he was astonished (and his Russian and Ukrainian friends were too) “by how well Russian social media functioned in American politics.” He said it was bad enough that Americans were fooled by Russia about Ukraine, but far worse that “in 2015 and 2016 Americans were fooled by Russians about other Americans. In 2016, the oligarchical American presidential candidate won, with Russian assistance.” This should have been clear to anyone who heard, or heard about, Trump’s open campaign comment to the world: “Russia—if you are listening” Russia was, and immediately began to do what Trump urged: to hack into “Hillary Clinton’s emails.” Similarly, the Russians used social media to charge that Hillary was a racist, while saying to others that she “liked Black criminals. The contradiction did not matter, just as it had not mattered with respect to the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine.” Trump, nevertheless, could complain (with the utmost cynicism) over and over about the “Russia hoax—Russia, Russia, Russia.” Snyder rightly named Donald Trump as “Putin’s submissive client,” and said that Trump “is a hero of negative freedom, wealthy through undertaxed inheritance and comfortable denying everything. In 2018 he [Trump] traveled to Helsinki and told the world that he trusted a Russian dictator more than his American advisers.” Beyond even that, the next year he “tried to bully an elected Ukrainian president to get dirt on his rival in the coming presidential election.” When he decisively lost that 2020 election, he lied about it, and claimed victory while trying to “stage a coup d’état to stay in power. Despite a constitutional ban on insurrectionists holding office,” he ran again in 2024 *with support from the judiciary!*²⁵ In that election, he succeeded in misleading the voters sufficiently to be returned to the office that in his first term he had so

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17 and 91.

defiled. This time, it was indeed the voters. It was not the fault of the electoral college for 2024, as it had been in 2016. Trump's victory was welcomed by Putin who saw it as increasing his chances of winning his war against Ukraine.

Snyder and Stiglitz agree that true freedom is positive, and that negative freedom, boosted by misinformation, is a portal to degradation. Snyder goes into greater detail, and categorizes positive freedom as “freedom to,” and negative freedom as “freedom from.” This makes sense at one level, but in order to avoid confusion, Snyder might have employed different language. “Freedom from” isn't always bad, or even negative. In the Four Freedoms, for example, “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear” are positive, and mean something on the order of “freedom to be able to choose and use adequate resources” or “freedom to exercise choice, and to live in an atmosphere in which choice is meaningful.”²⁶

The United States has had a mixed relationship with freedom from the very beginning of colonization. A philosophical commitment to human rights did not lead to a large measure of freedom in any of the colonies at their beginnings, except for Rhode Island, under the initial influence of its founder, Roger Williams. As the colonies had grown and ultimately had come together under the umbrella of the Articles of Confederation, and then the U. S. Constitution, they had produced the principles that culminated in that magnificent statement of freedom, the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration's principles became the founding justification for a new nation, the United States, despite the many instances in which the new country failed to live up to the Declaration's spirit and its essential principles.

The question today is less whether a philosophical commitment to the principles of the Declaration can overcome the difficulties in adhering to them, and more whether there even remains such a philosophical commitment sufficient to become the foundation to combat the MAGA movement. It may be naïve to be optimistic, but the successful progressive movements throughout history were initially all derided as naïve. Disregarding skepticism and stressing the possibilities for improvement are prerequisites for progress.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 31.

Presidents' Effects on Freedom in the United States

By

Max J. Skidmore

Abstract

This article looks briefly at the history of each presidential administration in the United States, and considers its effect on freedom's development in the American political system.

A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between government and freedom in the United States requires at least a minimal knowledge of freedom's status under the country's presidents. There is much of significance to American politics and political history in general, of course, and to American freedom in particular, beyond presidential policy. A comprehensive overview would have to include scrutiny of Congress and its debates; actions of the judiciary, especially the Supreme Court; actions of the states; the development and evolution of public opinion; the effects of immigration and internal movement; the role of technology and especially communication; and considerably more.

Regardless, a look at presidential policy, and the practical effects those policies have had on freedom, can provide a good beginning to a fairly comprehensive understanding. Such an examination of the real world of politics, rather than theoretical effects, should help to develop insights that can guide further, and broader, studies. Thus, I include the following capsule review of each president, and of his relationship to freedom. I leave it to someone else to do the same for congressional and judicial actions, for general cultural, and other relevant developments.

George Washington (April 30, 1789-March 4, 1797), as commanding general of the Revolutionary forces could have set himself up as king, rather than standing for election to the presidency. In fact, a faction of his officers urged him to do so, but he refused, declaring his support for what we would call a democratic republic that elected its executive. Moreover, after he became president, he opted to be addressed simply as, "president of the United States," instead of assuming a title suggesting majesty or monarchy. This was to inculcate a democratic spirit and to avoid misunderstanding as to the nature of the office. Similarly, after two terms, he declined to run again, thus surrendering power voluntarily. He did not intend

this to bind his successors, but for a powerful leader to choose to leave office on his own volition reassured skeptics, even Thomas Jefferson, as to the nature of the new government.

In addition, as president, in order for citizens actually to see him, he toured all the states to demonstrate to Americans that he was their president, not separate from them. Although these actions today may appear as minor, they were not. They helped to demonstrate to the people at the very beginning a commitment to their freedom. He did take measures to encourage respect for the office, but it was the office that commanded respect. The office holder was a citizen himself. Thus, Washington contributed to the development of a spirit of freedom among the populace.

John Adams (March 4, 1797-March 4, 1891) was Washington's vice president, and was one of the few vice presidents to succeed directly to the presidency. President Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts into law, and enforced the Sedition Act in a way that involved violation of the freedom of Jefferson's Republicans. That was a low point for his administration, and also for his commitment to freedom, although his actions were certainly not unusual for the time.

On the other hand, when he narrowly lost the election to his own vice president, Thomas Jefferson, and even though Jefferson was his political enemy, Adams did not seek to overturn the election results and continue in office. No leader before him had voluntarily turned power over to a political rival.

Thus, Adams began one of the most valuable traditions of America's governmental processes: the peaceful transition from one government to another, even to its rival, after electoral defeats. This added strength to a budding tradition of freedom. Every president since Adams has followed this tradition willingly, until the defeated Trump sought to undo his massive loss to Joseph Biden in 2020. Trump at that time and continuing later attempted to convince the country that he had won by a landslide.

Adams has received far too little credit for the splendid tradition that he began, which helped secure political freedom. Trump has received too little condemnation for his unscrupulous efforts to destroy confidence in America's elections. In fact, rather than condemning him, the voters in 2024 cast votes that returned him to office. His candidacy was a clear violation of the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment. However clear the

Constitution's language, though, no court had the courage to rule that a violation had taken place.

Thomas Jefferson (March 4, 1801-March 4, 1809) made his greatest contribution to freedom before he became president. He was the primary author of the great Declaration of Independence, one of the foremost assertions of freedom in the world's history. His overall record, despite being the "apostle of liberty," in practice was little different from what was typical at the time, including violations of personal freedom, among which owning slaves was foremost. His views regarding women, similarly, were those of his time. Nevertheless, because he was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, one of the prime political documents of history, thus becoming the "apostle of liberty," he must have a prime spot as an architect of freedom despite displaying a healthy serving of hypocrisy.

James Madison (March 4, 1809-March 4, 1817) frequently was called "Father of the Constitution," and certainly his greatest contributions to American government did not come from his presidency. He was not a great president, and his presidency is usually interpreted as having been rather weak overall. There are some who dispute this—including Presidents John Adams and John Kennedy, who knew much about the presidency! In one respect, though, perhaps he did make his greatest contribution to freedom when he was president. During the War of 1812, he did not use repressive measures against his opponents. He demonstrated clearly that it was possible to conduct a war—even a war that included invasion of the United States—without violating the constitutional principles of a democratic republic. He maintained freedom for citizens far more successfully than any other wartime president has, and the country would have been better—and better off—if other presidents had followed his example in that regard.

James Monroe (March 4, 1817-March 4, 1825), regarding domestic policy, may well have been the "hidden hand president" (to use Fred Greenstein's phrase for Eisenhower) that some scholars believe, but his strengths usually are identified with foreign policy. In any case Monroe does not generally come to mind when one considers presidents whose policies advanced freedom. Nevertheless, he, like President Washington, did travel throughout the country to demonstrate his connection with the people.

John Quincy Adams (March 4, 1825-March 4, 1829) as president faced bitter opposition on all fronts (especially from Andrew Jackson and his supporters). So extreme were his opponents that he was able to accomplish virtually nothing, despite his enormously enlightened proposals. In his post-presidential career, however, he accepted election to the House of Representatives, and until his death served there with great distinction—and with great contributions to freedom—by strenuously opposing southern efforts to expand slavery. There he was known as “Old Man Eloquent.”

Andrew Jackson (March 4, 1829-March 4, 1837) was a vigorous and highly successful president in many ways, and was less an ideologue than a pragmatist. Considering his policies toward slavery and the native populations, though, in spite of the expansion of the vote to classes of white men during his presidency who previously had not been eligible to vote, his mixed record creates limitations on his contributions to an expansion of freedom. It therefore is difficult to classify him as an exponent of freedom in general.

Martin Van Buren (March 4, 1837-March 4, 1841) was a highly successful politician in New York, but was much less successful as president. He succeeded Andrew Jackson, whose record is shattered by his policies toward America’s indigenous populations, especially for his harshness that led to the “Trail of Tears.” That hideous expulsion of North Carolina’s native population, though, actually took place largely under Van Buren. Anticipating the horror that would result from expulsion of the Cherokees, the great Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, departed from his general avoidance of political action. He wrote a letter to President Van Buren urging him not to conduct a policy that was immoral and unjust. The letter had little or no effect.

Van Buren, moreover, in a futile attempt to get re-elected, did his best to curry favor with southern enslavers. That attempt failed.

Later, he changed once again, and sought to return to the presidency by aligning with the Free Soil Party opposing slavery’s expansion into the territories. He was that party’s presidential candidate in 1848, becoming the first former president to attempt to regain the office. In that race, he vigorously advocated banning slavery in the territories, Regardless, his presidency cannot be judged to have had a positive effect on freedom.

William Henry Harrison (March 4, 1801-April 4, 1841) has the distinction of having served the shortest time in office of any president. He died a month after his inauguration. He had no time to have a significant influence on policy, or on freedom itself.

John Tyler (April 4, 1814-March 4, 1845) was vice president, and succeeded to the office when Harrison died. He was the first vice president to step into a presidential vacancy. He was a slaveholder from Virginia, and governed with an eye to support slavery and its expansion. He cannot be judged to have had a positive effect on freedom, although he did sign into a law granting certain squatters on federal land the right to purchase up to 160 acres. That, of course, was not favorable to the indigenous population.

James K. Polk (March 4, 1805-March 4, 1849) was unquestionably a strong president—the strongest and most successful between Jackson and Lincoln—and a superb administrator. He identified strongly with former President Andrew Jackson and his policies. Jackson was popularly known as “Old Hickory.” Polk appeared to many as “Young Hickory.” He announced what he intended to accomplish, and also that he would serve only one term. He achieved his goals, and, as he indicated that he would not, he did not run for a second term.

Polk’s successes had to do primarily with introducing efficiency, adding territory (including Texas), and creating the Department of the Interior. His administration’s achievements were highly significant, but in many respects were detrimental to freedom. His administration also undoubtedly poisoned US relations with Mexico to the extent that it still is reflected today. Polk took the US to war with Mexico, and his acquisition of territory provided far more areas into which slavery could expand. His critics (including the young Abraham Lincoln, who later in Polk’s time in office was serving his single term in the U.S. House of Representatives) opposed the war and tended to consider it the result of southern demand to spread slavery.

In one respect, and one only, Polk did inadvertently expand freedom. His postmaster general, Cave Johnson, introduced the use of postal stamps into the U.S. postal system, thus making America’s postal system far more effective. Previously, the addressee had to accept the letter, and pay the postage.

It can be difficult today, with our numerous systems of communication, to understand how important the post office was. Creating a better postal system was an enormous achievement. Before the telegraph and afterward it helped create national unity. The telegraph did not become transcontinental until 1860.

The availability of an inexpensive, and effective, mail system greatly helped families by making it possible for people to communicate despite long absences and over huge distances. Previously, a son or other family member might travel far, and never again be able to communicate back home.

Thus, this one development can credit the Polk administration with enhancing freedom, however unintentionally, and without concern for freedom per se. Even today, despite our other methods of communication, the postal system is vital. It is the only agency that delivers to every address in the United States, and those deliveries include packages as well as letters. Considering only prescription drugs, its deliveries can often be lifesaving, and economical.

Zachary Taylor (March 4, 1849-July 9, 1850) served the third shortest time in office. He and Harrison were the only Whigs to be elected president. Both died before their terms ended. Taylor was a Louisiana slaveholder, and that gave cheer to southern slaveholders. They quickly discovered, to their great horror, that Taylor opposed slavery in the territories. Moreover, when Texans threatened to march westward extending the then rather vague western boundaries of their state all the way to Santa Fe, he vowed to halt them, and to send federal troops if necessary.

Although many historians condemn Taylor for failing to support the package of legislation, the Omnibus Bill, that came to be called the Compromise of 1850, his opposition should bring him praise. The compromise included the infamous Fugitive Slave Bill that forced all Americans, if called upon, to support the actions of southern enslavers. Taylor certainly was no antislavery activist, but he maintained friendships with outspoken opponents of slavery, and sought their views.

Despite owning slaves, he therefore did contribute to freedom in America.

Millard Fillmore (July 9, 1850-March 4, 1853) was the second vice president to step into a presidential vacancy, and the final Whig to be president. He signed the Compromise of

1850 package into law that permitted slavery to continue in the District of Columbia, and included a draconian Fugitive Slave Law that that permitted no judicial review by federal courts, provided no protection for civil liberties, and compensated designated commissioners twice as much for ruling in favor of enslavers as for ruling against them. It infuriated the north by requiring any person to assist “slave catchers” in seizing any black person they declared to be an escaped slave. Although Fillmore’s personal views were more moderate than some who fit into the category of “doughface” (someone from the north who had the views of someone from the south), his policies justify placing him in the doughface category.

Fillmore was not a candidate for re-election in 1852. In 1856, though, he did his reputation no good by becoming the Know Nothing Party’s presidential candidate. That “American Party” was anti-immigrant, and especially anti-Catholic. Thus Fillmore neither as president nor afterward was a contributor to American freedom; quite the contrary.

Franklin Pierce (March 4, 1853-March 4, 1857) was from New Hampshire, but his strong support of slavery placed him squarely into the category of “doughface” (a northerner with southern attitudes). In his inaugural address, he said that slavery was part of the Constitution. The south’s system of human bondage thus should receive support from all quarters. Support for slavery, in fact, he said abrasively, should be given “not reluctantly, but cheerfully.” He appointed the fiery slavery supporter Jefferson Davis as his secretary of war, and appears to have viewed Davis as his closest adviser, and friend.

Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, thus installing “popular sovereignty,” permitting a state’s voters to determine whether or not to have slavery, and repealing the Missouri Compromise. He was a capable administrator, despite being a heavy drinker. He had little success as president, and can in no way be considered an advocate of human freedom; quite the contrary, in fact.

James Buchanan (March 4, 1853-March 4, 1857) joins Pierce as a full-fledged “doughface.” He supported the south’s position on slavery (its “Peculiar Institution”), and conspired with friends on the Supreme Court to bring forth the worst decision in its history, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. That decision declared that a person of African descent was not, and could never be, a citizen. Such a person had no rights—and could never have any rights—that white people were obligated to recognize. He thought that the decision would prevent a civil

war. It did not. He also thought secession was unconstitutional, but that he as president had no power to do anything about it. In this, his reasoning was similar to that of Chief Justice John Roberts more than a century later in 2019. The *Rucho* decision conceded that partisan gerrymandering was wrong and unjust, but that federal courts had no authority to do anything about it. Roberts's decision has led to attacks on democracy, such as the action by Texas pursuant to a Trump request, to employ a harsh pro-Republican gerrymander intending to produce five additional Republican seats in the U.S. House. Buchanan's decision facilitated a civil war. He was a failure as president, and could in no way be considered a supporter of freedom, properly defined; again, as with Pierce, quite the opposite would be correct.

Abraham Lincoln (March 4, 1861-April 15, 1865) has certainly had more written about him than any other president. There are those who disagree (almost invariably neo-confederates), but Lincoln generally is conceded to be the most outstanding president in America's history. Although he recognized that slavery was evil, in his First Inaugural he assured the south that he would not, and could not under the Constitution, take action against the south's system of human bondage unless the south committed aggression.

I have written about this elsewhere, but it is worth repeating here. Lincoln's assurances did not placate the south. Its leaders had come to insist not only that enslavement continue to prevail in southern states, but that it be permitted to expand through the territories. Additionally, the rest of the country should accept southern bondage, and stop criticizing the south. Finally the rest of the country should declare that it had accepted slavery as a moral institution. This the nation refused to do. This President Abraham Lincoln would not, and could not, do. And, as he said, "the war came."

To a large extent, as Frederick Douglass and others had observed, this attitude reflected the pernicious "code of honor" that the south had developed. One did not question, let alone contradict, a "southern gentleman." To do so would likely lead to a duel. If the rest of the country condemns you, though, you must find some way to sooth your hurt feelings. A civil war might be the mega result of an affront to the south's "honor."

But, one might add, are there not always at least two sides to any question? Not always. A later, and also outstanding, president gave an answer that should have settled that issue. "Theodore Roosevelt, who also was an accomplished historian," took issue with a friend who asked that question. It was at a time when history itself was under attack (and revision) by

southern “vindicators,” who praised the south as the aggrieved party. Roosevelt, though, said, “as regards the actual act of secession. the actual opening of the Civil War, I think the right was exclusively with the Union people, and the wrong exclusively with the secessionists.” In fact, he continued, “I do not know of any struggle in history in which the division between right and wrong can be made in quite so clear-cut a manner.”²⁷

Garry Wills has documented the manner in which Lincoln handled the war, shifting it from a war for Union to a war for human equality based on the principles of the Declaration of Independence.²⁸ Lincoln had begun his presidency under strict limitations from the Constitution. The war, though, created more presidential authority. LaWanda Cox, an especially perceptive Lincoln scholar, wrote that “war and the participation of blacks as soldiers made it possible to ‘do better.’ And Lincoln did.”²⁹ Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, and worked diligently to get the 13th Amendment, banning slavery, through the House with a two-thirds vote (it already had passed the Senate by the required two-thirds). Moreover, although proposed constitutional amendments go directly out to the states, not through the president, so concerned was Lincoln for its passage that he signed the proposal before it went out for ratification by three-fourths of the states.

Lincoln, more than anyone else, put America on the road toward becoming a bi-racial democracy, “or more broadly toward the fundamental goal of political democracy” and human freedom.³⁰ He also signed into law a number of significant pieces of legislation not directly related to the war, including the Homestead Act (expanding freedom for Americans if not for the indigenous population), and the Morrill Act. The latter law provided the groundwork for America’s great land grant colleges (now universities), thus democratizing higher education. He thus, in many ways, contributed immensely toward expanding freedom in its most positive sense.

Andrew Johnson (April 15, 1865-March 4, 1869) was the poor choice of the Republican National Convention that sought “unity,” by putting a Democrat on the ticket as

²⁷ See Max J. Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004, p. 129; see also Louis Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt*, Times Books/Henry Holt, 2002, p. 104.

²⁸ Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

²⁹ Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, p. 130; see also LaWanda Cox, “Lincoln and Black Freedom,” in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *The Historian’s Lincoln*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. P. 182.

³⁰ See Skidmore, *Ibid.* p 134

the vice presidential candidate replacing the excellent Vice President, Hannibal Hamlin (that was before presidential candidates chose their running mates). With Lincoln's assassination Johnson became president.

As governor of Tennessee, Johnson had supported public schools. As president, he opposed federal aid to schools as unconstitutional. He was one of the last Jacksonian Democrats, and had fared well in the rough and tumble Tennessee politics of the day, but did not have Jackson's ability to grow, nor to handle the far different politics in Washington.

His policies were worse than tainted by his extreme racism, as he moved to thwart any civil rights for the newly-freed Black population. Johnson's reputation recently has plunged to the depths of presidential rankings, as the pro-Confederate infection of much American history in the early twentieth century has itself tumbled. Earlier, Johnson received somewhat more favorable treatment for a couple of reasons. First, racism caused historians (at least most white historians) to ignore his racist policies that poisoned politics in the south. Second, the great popularity of John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* was itself strongly influenced by the carefully engineered pro-southern tilt of much American history of the early twentieth century.

Largely because of Johnson's policies, the south did not develop a strong two-party system, and for decades imposed Jim Crow on a large part of its people. His legacy stifled, rather than enhanced, freedom, and it still lingers in the south.

Ulysses S. Grant (March 4, 1869-March 4, 1877) is easy to criticize, because Confederate sympathizers and other biased sources, such as those from disappointed reformers and disappointed office seekers (e.g., Henry Adams), spent decades seeking to destroy his reputation. Their efforts, built on a foundation of open racism, were successful, and led Grant to be the most underrated president in history. Many recent scholars, generally historians, have worked to overcome the unfair treatments, treatments that usually followed the pro-southern—and thus, heavily racist—school led by William A. Dunning of Columbia University. Scholars of the Dunning School tended to condemn Reconstruction, accept white nationalism, and believe that people of African ancestry are inferior intellectually, morally, and socially.

Examples of recent, unbiased, scholars include Jean Edward Smith,³¹ Brooks Simpson,³² and Joan Waugh.³³ “Most aggressively, Frank Scaturro provides a concise, but thorough reassessment of the Grant presidency dealing point by point with the case against him; the case that his enemies, including, among others, a strong contingent of neo-Confederate ‘Lost Cause’ romanticists built” over an extended period.³⁴ Gary Gallagher and Alan Nolan also have produced a splendid collection of articles documenting the deliberate attempts to discredit Grant.³⁵ Authors included are Gallagher and Nolan themselves, Charles Holden, Keith Bohannon, Peter Carmichael, Jeffery Wert, Simpson, Lesley Gordon, and Lloyd Hunter.”³⁶ Although their works, and the works of others, have demolished the Dunning school, public attitudes regarding Grant have yet to change to the extent that is warranted.

As it is, though, Grant made substantial contributions to freedom, and was far from the naïve, bumbling, incompetent that the “Lost Cause” ideologues portrayed. He actually was among the country’s better presidents despite the formidable forces arrayed against him. He strongly supported the Fifteenth Amendment eliminating race as a criterion for citizenship and voting, and successfully encouraged the states to ratify it. He then issued a proclamation asserting that the Fifteenth Amendment completely repudiated the *Dred Scott* decision. One reason he receives so little praise for his role in securing the amendment’s ratification is that “so much commentary on Grant” has come from those who “who placed little importance on—or entertained no sympathy for—suffrage for the emancipated slaves, or for other persons of African descent.”³⁷ He signed and vigorously enforced civil rights laws, and secured the creation of the Department of Justice, with the attorney general as its head, to back up the

³¹ See, e.g., Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 2001; the distinguished Lincoln scholar David Herbert Donald provided a blurb calling this book a “remarkable achievement,” and said it was by far “the best life of Grant ever written.”

³² See Brooks Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997; see also *The Reconstruction Presidents*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998.

³³ See Joan Waugh, *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

³⁴ Frank Scaturro, *President Grant Reconsidered*, Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999.

³⁵ Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

³⁶ Skidmore, *Maligned Presidents*, pp.26-27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

enforcement. No less an imposing figure than Frederick Douglass said of Grant that had he “not acted to crush the Klan, the Negro would have been remanded to a condition worse than that from which the Civil War delivered him.” Grant’s policies and action demolished the Klan, which was no longer a force for the rest of the Nineteenth Century. Here, too, Grant rarely receives respect, because “securing creation of the Department of Justice does not fit the narrative of a hapless Grant who sat back and let Congress proceed without him.”³⁸ Similarly, Grant appointed a Seneca, Ely S. Parker, to be commissioner of Indian affairs, a dramatic move that raised the question of whether an indigenous person was even eligible. Grant had received assurance from the attorney general prior to making the nomination that Parker was qualified. Grant also appointed the first American diplomat of African descent when he named Ebenezer Bassett as ambassador to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In addition to these, and other powerful actions, Grant had a major influence on the judiciary, in supporting passage of the Judiciary Act of 1869, and carefully appointing appeals court judges under the act who promised to enforce the new civil rights amendments.³⁹ Grant was among the most forceful presidents in having a positive effect on the growth of American freedom.

Rutherford B. Hayes (March 4, 1877-March 4, 1881) came to office after a disputed election that was almost tied, with a slim popular vote majority that went to his opponent, Democrat Samuel Tilden. Also a handful of electoral votes were disputed. Southern “Rifle Clubs” had threatened to come to Washington to install Tilden, until President Grant assured them that were they to attempt to do so, they would meet him at the head of a defensive Union army.

Southerners wanted no more confrontations with Grant. Hayes then won the electoral vote—by one vote—based on the decision of an electoral commission that Congress appointed (Democrats controlled the House; Republicans the Senate). Some called this the “Compromise of 1877.” Hayes then faced snide comments of “your fraudulency,” and jeers that his name should be “RutherFRAUD B. Hayes.”

A few authorities have concluded that Tilden was the true winner. Others point out that the race would not even have been close except for the south’s suppression of the Republican vote, and the overall denial of Black citizens of their rights to civil participation—definitely

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, pp 35-36.

including preventing them from voting. At any rate, southern leaders agreed to accept victory for the Republican, Hayes, if he would agree to withdraw the remaining federal troops from their territory. Those leaders assured Hayes that they would protect their Black citizens' ability to exercise their rights.

Grant was not fooled; the well-meaning Hayes was. L.Q. C. Lamar of Mississippi, former slaveholder, Confederate officer, current member of Congress (the House and then the Senate), bitter foe of Reconstruction and of Black rights, and, one should note, one of John Kennedy's heroes in his 1956 book, *Profiles of Courage* said of Hayes that he was "full of the idea of being a great Pacificator," and that he was well meaning, but that he was "very ignorant of the South."⁴⁰ So he was.

Hayes in office strengthened the presidency by managing to overcome Senate resistance to his nominees to the cabinet. There can be little doubt that he had advanced views on such matters as women's suffrage, a merit-based civil service, and the like, and he certainly was a person of integrity. He had announced earlier that he would serve only one term, and he adhered to that promise. He was a strong president with notable successes and failures, and he appointed the "great dissenter," John Marshall Harlan, to the Court. Harlan was one of the most distinguished justices in the Court's history, and was the only dissenter in the 1896 shameful *Plessey v. Ferguson* decision that approved of racial segregation, so long as the facilities for each race were "equal." It was that decision that introduced "separate but equal" into America's political language and social policy—although everyone knew that "separate" was the important word, and things were never "equal."

Hayes's policies toward the south tended to dominate the reputation of his administration, and those policies clearly failed. Although he did seek assurances from southern leaders regarding Black rights, the withdrawal of the last few federal troops abandoned the formerly enslaved population, and opened the way for the imposition of harsh Jim Crow policies throughout the former slave states. These were so contrary to human rights for an enormous group of American citizens that his greatest effect on overall freedom—despite his post-presidential efforts at prison reform and education for Black children—was great damage. It should be a source of huge embarrassment to the United States and its heritage of equality and human rights that a generation or so later Germany's Nazis studied

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 57.

Jim Crow laws in the southern U.S. and made them models for their racial laws that culminated in the Holocaust.

James A Garfield (March 4, 1881-September 19, 1881) served the second shortest time of the presidents. A deranged assassin shot him four months into his term, and he died two months later. It was the country's loss. Candace Millard has produced a splendid study of the assassination; it also was made into a television series.⁴¹ Millard's book, as I have written elsewhere, "was a fine biography of the man and a valuable examination of his truncated administration. Millard not only is a fine writer, but she also is a thoughtful, dedicated, and meticulous researcher who composes with deep understanding. Her book leaves us in a far better position to appreciate an extraordinary man who might well have been an equally extraordinary president had he lived."⁴²

Garfield asserted unequivocally in his inaugural address that the "Constitution proclaimed 'liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof.'" And that Black citizens must "exercise the full rights of citizenship." He strongly advocated universal free education, and "absolute religious freedom."⁴³ Because of his brief time in office, he had little time to implement his reforms, but he did succeed in appointing a number of Blacks to federal positions, including Frederick Douglass, the champion of equal rights, who became recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia.⁴⁴ Freedom, under Garfield, would likely have been expanded considerably had it not been for an act of violence by a madman.

Chester A. Arthur (Sept. 19, 1881- March 4, 1885) had never held elective office before his election to the vice presidency on the Republican ticket with Garfield. With Garfield's death, Arthur became the fourth vice president to fill a presidential vacancy. He had been associated with New York's machine politics, and many observers expected the worst. "It was a common saying at the time among those who knew him best, 'Chet Arthur? President of the

⁴¹ Candace Millard, *Destiny of the Republic*, New York: Doubleday, 2012.

⁴² Skidmore, *Maligned Presidents*, p. 65

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

United States? Good God!”⁴⁵ Arthur had attempted to influence Garfield in ways that would help the machine politicians. Astonishingly, though, when Garfield died, Arthur was shaken, and cut ties with the machine. He functioned as president to do the best he could. He still welcomed his political cronies, but refused to do them special favors. One complained that “he has done less for us than Garfield, or even Hayes.” Another lamented that “He isn’t ‘Chet’ Arthur anymore; he’s the president.”⁴⁶

Nearly all who study Arthur’s presidency remark that he was a stronger, and more successful, president than anticipated. He paid attention to detail, and did not hesitate to use his veto when he considered it warranted. He is best known for the Pendleton Act of 1883, that he encouraged, and which established the basis for the merit-based civil service—an act certainly not in the interests of machine politicians that had thrived under the spoils system with its many government jobs filled on a partisan basis. From the standpoint of freedom, though, his signature on a bill excluding Chinese from citizenship was a huge flaw. True, he did veto an earlier version of the bill as being too harsh, and the fault was as much that of the country as a whole, rather than solely his own. Both parties favored exclusion, as apparently did popular opinion which was enormously racist. Nevertheless, Arthur’s excellent performance overall—including his effect on freedom—was flawed by his signing such an outrageous measure.

Grover Cleveland I (March 4, 1885-March 4, 1889) was a bachelor, but the same year he took office, he became engaged. The next year, 1886, the 49-year-old married his fiancée, a 21-year-old student at Wells College, Frances Folsom (she actually had been named “Frank”).⁴⁷ The new Mrs. Cleveland became enormously popular with the public. The marriage took place in the executive mansion, and Cleveland remains the only president to have been married there. He also was the first Democrat elected to the presidency since before the Civil War.

As such, it was perhaps inevitable that he would favor the south, which contained the party’s base. Despite the war and Republican dominance of the executive, the Democrats had maintained strength in Congress. More often than not they had controlled the House, and

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

occasionally the Senate. Their control of the House, ironically, reflected the additional strength the south gained by counting the formerly enslaved population as full citizens, not limited to three fifths. This despite Jim Crow when it arose that imposed the southern suppression and continued to deny Blacks the right to vote.

Thus, it probably was to be expected that the Republicans were more favorable to civil rights than were the Democrats, a phenomenon that continued until the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s. FDR's administration adopted programs favorable to workers and lower-income people. Then, after Truman desegregated the armed services in 1948, and LBJ in 1964 and 1965 signed civil rights and voting rights, bigoted southern Democrats shifted as a group to become bigoted southern Republicans.

Cleveland was the last of the classic Jacksonian small government, strong president, Democrats. Cleveland had no specific program, other than integrity and efficiency, but he sought national unity. Pursuant to that, he appointed former Confederates to his cabinet, and even appointed one (L.Q.C. Lamar) to the Supreme Court. Cleveland's governing philosophy may be discerned from one of his veto messages. A severe drought in Texas was driving farmers off their land. Congress passed a "Texas Seed Bill" to provide a modest appropriation to a group of farmers to buy seeds for the forthcoming season. He said that he could find nothing in the Constitution to authorize such assistance, and that he did not think that the "power and duty of the General Government should be expended to the relief of individual suffering."⁴⁸ That certainly was not the only interpretation of the Constitution, but it was the one most detrimental to freedom. For freedom to be meaningful, conditions had to be such that choice of actions could lead to positive results. Cleveland was an effective president, and a man of integrity. He also was not a fierce partisan. Despite his conservative approach to government activism, he was concerned about the increase of income inequality. Although that concern seems not to have affected his policies, it is perhaps surprising that in his fourth annual message to Congress (1888), he said that government intervention was essential to ensure social justice.⁴⁹ Sadly, the public, and Congress, took little notice of the comment. It did not affect freedom as it might have done.

As the Clevelands left the White House, Frances said to the usher that he should keep everything as it was, because in four years, they would be back. They were.

⁴⁸ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Benjamin Harrison (March 4, 1889-March 4, 1893) lost the popular vote in a close election, but won where it counted, the electoral college, returning the presidency to the Republicans. Comments about Harrison—even from presidential scholars—frequently refer to him as “whiggish,” or believing that Congress should act, and the president should only follow its lead. This is nonsense.

No Whig would have worked with Congress to shape forthcoming legislation, as Harrison did quietly. When he found that his formal powers were too limited to accomplish his purpose, he skillfully used the president’s prestige and other informal abilities to do so. Once again, that clearly is something that is the antithesis of “whiggish.” Moreover, Harrison used the threat of veto to achieve his ends, and was not reluctant actually to employ it when circumstances indicated. He cast 44 vetoes, an unusually high number for the time, and had only one overridden.⁵⁰ He used the veto and its threat, in a decidedly non-whiggish manner. Whigs had opposed the veto, and some of them went so far as to advocate its abolition.

It seems safe to say that only Grant has been more misrepresented than Harrison. In Grant’s case the misrepresentation was the result of deliberate campaigns against him. In Harrison’s case, it probably reflects how little knowledge there is about him, and how much simpler it is to follow other “authorities,” assuming that they are correct, than actually to do the research and see what the facts truly are.

Grant had broken the color barrier when he appointed Eli Parker, a Seneca, to be commissioner of Indian affairs, and Ebenezer Bassett, who was Black, to be ambassador to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Harrison followed Grant’s lead, and appointed Frederick Douglass to be minister to Haiti. Bassett’s ambassadorship had been truly superb, and he accompanied Douglass back to Haiti as his assistant. Grant’s and Harrison’s appointments were the beginnings of emphasizing human rights as an important part of foreign relations.

Harrison, in his inaugural address, took issue with Cleveland’s position that the need was for less government. Harrison, instead, rejected laissez-faire, and called for an activist agenda that was based on the idea that the remnants of slavery should not be permitted to restrict progress. He advocated increased veterans’ pensions, and pointed out the good that government can do. There was less to be feared, he said, in a free country from too great an

⁵⁰ “Presidential Vetoes,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-vetoes>, (retrieved July 20, 2025).

exercise of government's power than from the possibility that government will exercise its power "too sparingly."

Absolutely, he was convinced that the south's discrimination against its Black citizens was a moral issue. Democrats of the day would have scorned such an idea, joined even by some Republicans. He favored enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment's penalty against the south to punish it for suppression of the Black vote, but southerners controlled the House. What they called "the force bill" did not—could not—pass.⁵¹

The record makes it clear that in contrast to Cleveland's passive approach, Harrison was alert to the potential—and desirability—of presidential aid to citizens in need. He was quick to employ that potential when the Johnstown Flood wiped out several small cities in Pennsylvania. Harrison was operating under precisely the same constitutional limitations that Cleveland cited to justify his inaction in the Texas drought disaster, but Harrison demonstrated that it was possible not only to use power, but to use it effectively, and legally, to assist after the flood damage. He directed the Army Corps of Engineers to repair or build new bridges in the affected area, and went beyond the specific grant of authority, ordering the Corps to provide flood control measures. He also recognized, and used, his authority as a private citizen (a unique citizen, of course, with a president's prestige), and encouraged private donors and organizations to create relief organizations.

Thus, a president's view of the office is vital. A president who sees needs, and finds ways to marshal the government's power to assist in meeting them, is a president who recognizes the role of freedom and is able to expand it for the good of the country and its people. Harrison did just that.

Grover Cleveland II (March 4, 1893-March 4, 1897) was the first president to be returned to office after having been voted out. This time he won both the electoral and the popular votes. During their term out of office, the press continued to cover the Cleverlands as celebrities. This was especially true for the birth of their daughter they named Ruth.

Second terms, though, are notoriously difficult, and Cleveland's non-consecutive second term was no exception. Much of it was characterized by a fiscal panic (today we would say depression). When he sent troops to Illinois in 1894 to break up the Pullman

⁵¹ Skidmore, *Maligned Presidents.*, pp. 96-97.

strike—acting in spite of Governor Altgeld’s objections—he lost labor’s support. Also, southern Democrats had taken control of Congress, and passed measures removing the protections against voter suppression that Republicans earlier had put into place. Cleveland signed those measures, ensuring that the south could proceed with Jim Crow.

Cleveland recognized that he had no chance to be renominated, so he did not run for a third term. The Democrats—to Cleveland’s dismay—nominated the fiery populist William Jennings Bryan after his famous “Cross of Gold” speech that stampeded their nominating convention. The Republican nominee William McKinley, though, won a resounding victory.

Cleveland had substantial success, moved effectively against corruption, and was not overly partisan. He had retained the young Republican activist, Theodore Roosevelt, who Harrison had placed on the civil service commission. Cleveland’s ideological rigidity, though, and certainly his favoritism toward the south’s voter suppression, ensured that he would not become a pioneer who expanded human freedom.

William McKinley (1897-September 14, 1901) was the fifth president to die in office, and the third to be assassinated. He was far more progressive than his reputation would have it, and did not hesitate to appoint Blacks to office. His prominent biographer, Lewis Gould, refers to McKinley as the first modern president.⁵² He was a strong leader, but does not stand out as an innovator in racial justice, perhaps because the country at the time was so racist that any such efforts would have been futile. Regardless, insofar as he affected human freedom, he was a supporter, and certainly would not have impeded it.

Theodore Roosevelt (September 14, 1901-March 4, 1909) was the most vigorous president in American history, physically and mentally. He was the first vice president to step into a presidential vacancy, and then to be elected in his own right. His re-election came in 1904. He announced at the time that he would not run again in 1908, and he did not do so. Theodore Roosevelt, at 42, was the youngest person ever to have held the presidential office. As boisterous as he was, as president he was measured, generally discreet, and successful at diplomacy—even to the extent of winning the Nobel Peace Prize, the first American to do so (his successors Wilson, Carter, and Obama received the Nobel also and Trump tries

⁵² Lewis Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley*, Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1980.

desperately to join them). The prize came to Roosevelt for his negotiation of peace during the Russo-Japanese War. He expressed caution, saying that “we are too big a people to be careless in what we have to say.”⁵³ This remains good advice.

Although the first President Roosevelt was hardly a pioneer advocating civil rights—the country remained so racist that no such pioneer would likely have been able to survive politically—he did criticize Jim Crow. His children, he said, attended school along with Black children, and he invited the noted Black leader, Booker T. Washington, to lunch with him and his family at the White House. As a sign of the times, that luncheon brought a firestorm of absolutely absurd condemnation from newspaper editorials throughout the south. Roosevelt did entertain some racist ideas. These, he softened with the passage of years, and he expressed regret that he had ever used the term “race.” In any case, his ideas had never been based on notions of genetic inferiority.

He operated under what he termed his “Stewardship Theory” of the presidency. That rejected the notion that a president could act only if he could find specific authorization for that act. Rather, a president should do all that he could for the people. “My belief,” he said, was that it was the president’s right, and also “his duty to do anything that the needs of the Nation demanded unless such action was forbidden by the Constitution or by the laws.”⁵⁴ Thus, he gave due respect to the Constitution and the laws, but justified a highly activist presidency based upon the people’s needs. Moreover, he operated on his “Great Rule of Righteousness.” That is, “every man—or woman—be treated as an individual based on his or her merits.”

The thrust of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency centered upon the good of the people, control of corporations to prevent abuse of power, and the recognition of individual merit, regardless of race, creed, or ethnicity. In the 1912 race, he, the third-party candidate seeking to regain the presidency, was the only one of the three candidates to support the vote for women (Taft, the incumbent, and Woodrow Wilson, the governor of New Jersey, were the others). In both theory and practice, he recognized what true freedom is, and that it requires government protection.

⁵³ Max J. Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004, p. 190.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.185.

William Howard Taft (March 4, 1909-March 4, 1913) had been Theodore Roosevelt's secretary of war and friend. As president, though, he was far more conservative, and considered TR's stewardship theory to be dangerously activist. He was a decent man and a decent president, but not a skilled politician. After his defeat for re-election, he accepted a position of chair of law at Yale. Subsequently, he became a successful chief justice of the Supreme Court, his lifelong ambition. Taft remains the only person to have held the presidency and also a position on the Court. He was not a failure as president, but also was not a pioneer in expanding personal freedoms.

Woodrow Wilson (March 4, 1913-March 4, 1921) had enormous successes, but also enormous failures. He was Governor of New Jersey when he was elected president, but had been born in Virginia and grew up in the south. Unfortunately, although he was not a race baiter such as Pitchfork Ben Tillman and the other southern demagogues and race baiters, he did retain the views on race, tending to prevail among white southerners, that Blacks were inferior. He praised the Confederacy and condemned Reconstruction. Segregation increased while he was president. In government agencies he discharged many Black government employees, replacing them with whites and giving the new employees civil service protection so that the jobs would no longer be available to the former job holders. He also screened the racist film "Birth of a Nation" in the White House, and praised it heartily.

He was an extremely effective legislative leader, and had a brilliant record of legislative accomplishment. He also deserves some credit, perhaps, for supporting the proposed Nineteenth Amendment giving women the vote, although he was belated in his support. In his successful presidential race of 1912, he had opposed the vote for women.

Wilson's early presidency was enhanced by his wife, Ellen Axson Wilson. She brought out the best in her husband, and had been active in many reform efforts around D. C., especially in low-income housing. Sadly, she died from Bright's disease, a fatal kidney ailment, then incurable, that had killed former President Chester Arthur, and T.R.'s first wife, Alice Lee. This was a tragedy on multiple fronts. As I have written elsewhere, "Wilson badly needed her influence. Intellectually, as committed as he was to humanitarian causes, he tended to think in global terms. Individual injustice often fell beneath his notice." She softened his "stiff and unbending" personality, by providing "strength and love. Her gentleness mellowed even his austerity; her thoughtfulness made him considerate beyond his inclinations." He needed her desperately, and her death "crippled him emotionally." That despair was overcome

when he met “Edith Bolling Galt, a widow, and in December 1915, married her. She, too, was a devoted wife, but she was no Ellen Axson.”⁵⁵ On the contrary, she brought out his worst qualities.

Although he had campaigned, and was re-elected, on the slogan “he kept us out of war,” in his second term he became a wartime president. Under his hyper-enhanced authority, liberties disappeared. He also subjected Americans to an intensive propaganda campaign under a new Committee on Public Information, under George Creel. He signed into law two acts, the Espionage Act, in 1917; and the Sedition Act, in 1918, that made freedom of speech a thing of the past as he enforced them vigorously. Criticizing the war effort or the government could lead to prison. One person was even sent to prison for declaring “War is contrary to the teachings of Christ.” It was the greatest oppression of speech since Jefferson’s Embargo policies, and pointed to way toward Trump’s authoritarianism. Instead of following Jefferson’s example in this regard, he should have followed Madison’s.⁵⁶

Wilson had great accomplishments; so much so that they came to influence the Charter of the United Nations, and brought him the Nobel Peace Prize. Nevertheless, his oppressive administration—and certainly his racism—offset his contributions to the expansion of human freedom. To an unusual degree his record regarding freedom is mixed.

Warren G. Harding (March 4, 1921-August 2, 1923) was certainly a better president than his reputation suggests. Much of the difficulty is that many of his papers were unavailable until relatively recently, making a more reasonable interpretation impossible.⁵⁷

The socialist leader, Eugene Debs, had been sent to prison under Wilson for speaking out against the war effort. After the war, Wilson denied his own attorney general’s recommendation that he should pardon Debs. He said vindictively that Debs was a seditionist, and should remain in prison. On Christmas Day, 1921, the far more kindly Harding ordered Debs released. He also pardoned others convicted of sedition on a case-by-case basis, studying each, and choosing those who had committed no act of violence.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 207-208.

⁵⁷ For a brief, cogent, and balanced interpretation-- see John W. Dean, *Warren G. Harding*, New York: Henry Holt, 2004.

Harding signed the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 that established the Bureau of the Budget, and he proceeded to put government on a rational fiscal basis. On October 21 of that year he journeyed to Alabama to give a major address on civil rights in Birmingham. This was when memories of the bloody Tulsa massacre of its Black residents were fresh. Considering those two horrendous days (May 31 and June 1) of that year, and the fact of presidential assassinations (Harding's predecessors Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley had been assassinated), Harding was displaying great personal courage. It would be decades before another president would give an address in the south on civil rights, but Harding was forthright. Black men, he pointed out, served their country just as patriotically in the Great War as had White men. Many of them, he said, migrated to Europe where their color aroused less antagonism than it did here.

He did not call for social equality, but argued fervently for absolute equality of education and of economics for both races. Blacks who are worthy of the vote, he said, should have it while Whites who are unworthy should be denied it. Whites in the segregated audience remained silent, while Blacks applauded loudly. There were newspaper stories of Harding's speech around the country. Those in the south, as one might imagine, argued that Harding did not know what he was talking about.⁵⁸ Harding did make appointments of Blacks to office as he was able, but was constrained in his ability to return to Blacks the positions they had lost under Wilson because of Wilson's having given their White successors civil service protection.

Harding was working toward creating a two-party system in the south, to replace the largely single-party south that worked much mischief in American politics (and continues to do so). The brevity of his time in office, however, his untimely death, made it impossible to achieve—if indeed it would have been possible at the time under any conditions.

Harding also supported international disarmament, calling an international conference in November, 1921. In addition he worked on behalf of other causes that would work to expand freedom.

This is contrary to the customary interpretation of this unfortunate president, but he tried, and did make some improvements. The corruption that came to light after his death

⁵⁸ For the text of Harding's address, see <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/warren-g-harding-address-at-birmingham-speech-text/> ; retrieved July 26, 2025.

sullied his reputation, but had not involved corruption on his part, nor was it a notable restriction of freedom in general.

Calvin Coolidge (August 3, 1923-March 4, 1929) has been noted by all sides for his passivity. Those who favor activist—effective—government criticize, while those who favor minimal government tend to praise him. He was reported to have been Ronald Reagan’s favorite president. Regardless, there is hardly any disagreement with the comment from the authors of a major textbook that Coolidge “raised inactivity to an art.”⁵⁹

He was, however, popular, and became (after Theodore Roosevelt) the second vice president to fill a presidential vacancy, and then to go on to achieve election in his own right. He was keenly attuned to public relations, was constantly in the news, and being photographed. Moreover, he had a good radio voice, and used the new medium effectively.

In 1927, along the Mississippi and its tributaries there were devastating floods so extensive and so long-lasting as almost to be unimaginable. From the Great Plains to West Virginia there were places with standing water some 30 feet deep where nearly one million people had lived; the floods did not subside for some four months.⁶⁰ President Coolidge’s response recalled that (mentioned earlier) from Cleveland, his Democratic predecessor, who refused to provide assistance to farmers being driven off their land by drought.

Coolidge did nothing until he had to. Then he appointed his secretary of commerce, Herbert Hoover, to take charge. Hoover believed in activity, but not from the government. The government’s role, he believed, was to encourage private activity to deal with such crises, so he worked with the Red Cross, and generated newspaper headlines, but little else. His flurry of activity accomplished nothing in the long run, hardly more than Coolidge’s hands-off approach.

⁵⁹ Sidney Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency, Origins and Development, 1776-2007*, 5th ed., Washington” CQ Press, 2008, p. 267; quoted in Max J. Skidmore, “Anti-Government is not the Solution to our Problem; Anti-Government is the Problem: Presidential Response to Earthquakes, Pandemics, and Violent Weather from San Francisco to Katrina,” *Journal of Risk, Hazards, and Crises in Public Policy*, 3:4 (December 2012).

⁶⁰ Skidmore, *Anti-Government*, *ibid.*

The government would not even establish a loan guarantee program, let alone provide direct assistance. That would have been “charity,” and charity would be damaging, officials believed, to those who received it.

Coolidge received a request from the governor of Mississippi to visit the state; he refused. The mayor of Chicago, a Republican, and the mayor of New Orleans, a Democrat, urged him to visit; he refused. Similarly, he refused requests from eight senators and four governors for visits. He refused a request from NBC to broadcast an appeal for assistance. He even refused to provide autographed photos of himself to the Duluth Cosmopolitan Club to be auctioned off for funds to provide aid for flood victims. Even the humorist Will Rogers received a rejection from Coolidge when he asked for a statement from the president to be read over national radio.⁶¹ Such uncaring responses typified Coolidge’s approach to government, and also characterized his approach to freedom. Laissez-faire is an apt description; damaging freedom, it says to the people, “you’re on your own.”

Herbert Hoover (March 4, 1929-March 4, 1933) was no Coolidge; he was not passive. Regardless of the ravages of the Great Depression, however, he maintained his belief in strict limitations on governmental, and presidential, action. His reputation suffered when he was willing to aid corporations in efforts to combat economic hardship, but not willing to aid individuals. Individual aid to the needy was too often believed to destroy their character. Hoover shared that belief. His tragedy was that he recognized the need for changes in society, he had a humanitarian commitment, but he adhered to a strictly limited view of government and a rigid interpretation of the Constitution. It was sad for him, and certainly for the country, that his acceptance of views more common in the Nineteenth Century made ineffective his commitment to social and economic measures essential to combat the economic troubles.⁶² His views cancelled one another, making him ineffective, and causing tragedy for the country, and for personal freedom.

Franklin D. Roosevelt (March 4, 1933-April 12, 1945), a fifth cousin to Theodore Roosevelt, is the only president to have served more than two terms. Because of the Twenty-

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶² Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, p. 228.

second Amendment limiting presidents to two elections, there is unlikely ever to be another; unless, that is, a rogue president were to be sufficiently power hungry to violate the Constitution openly, and would have support in so doing from virtually the whole of a corrupt political party.

FDR was married to Eleanor Roosevelt, who was TR's niece, the daughter of his brother. Presidents' wives tend to be important in their husbands' administrations. She, however, was far more influential even than other "first ladies."

Although FDR took office at the depth of the Great Depression, the most severe crumbling of the economy in the country's history, his inaugural address was one of optimism. He assured the people that fear, itself, was the only thing they had to fear, and pledged them a "New Deal. He led the Congress immediately to pass an enormous number of new programs, startling in their boldness, and skillfully kept the people informed, especially using radio. The most influential of his addresses he labeled "fireside chats." He successfully created for them the image of their president sitting with them by the fireside, and reassuring them while explaining public policy.⁶³

Examples of FDR's New Deal programs were the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the Rural Electrical Administration (REA). The CCC put youth to work under quasi-military conditions. They lived in camps run by military officers, "engaged in conservation projects, built roads in rural and forest areas, otherwise made substantial contributions, and in general got their lives in order."⁶⁴ The CCC began in 1933, and continued throughout the depression. Although conservatives complained bitterly about the New Deal, the CCC was highly popular, even with conservatives.

The effect on the environment was extraordinary, benefiting from the planting of enormous numbers—some *three billion*—of trees across the country. Moreover, "From inauguration day forward, Roosevelt ably projected the image of an openhearted liberal who cared mightily about the downtrodden, struggling families, and the homeless. Increasing the size and scope of the federal government to alleviate suffering blindsided the GOP opposition. The CCC was part of this expansion." FDR had hoped to create the CCC with no racial segregation, but the white south's fanatic insistence on Jim Crow required it to be segregated

⁶³ See *ibid.*, pp. 231-242.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.233; quotation pp. 182-183.

in order to be enacted. Still, Black youth did receive benefits from the program, albeit in separate, segregated, camps.⁶⁵

In 1935 came both the WPA and the REA. The REA brought electricity to vast rural areas of the country where private power companies had been unwilling, or unable, to provide it. The WPA became the employer of last resort. It provided jobs to millions of unemployed workers, and also enhanced the country's infrastructure. Vast numbers of public buildings (post offices, court houses, and the like), bridges, airports and runways, roads "thousands of roads in a country still lacking adequate highways," many miles of hiking trails, huge numbers of parks, sidewalks, and conservation projects. Many of its projects remain in use today throughout the country. The WPA also included a Writers' and Artists' Project that give employment to artists, who painted murals in public buildings, for example; musicians who provided free concerts and actors gave free dramatic performances where no such things had ever existed. The Writers' Project brought forth a remarkable series of guidebooks for every state and region in the US.

Critics, of course, were outraged. One Eugene Lyons of the *Reader's Digest* praised Hoover because he did none of those things. He lauded Hoover because he *did not* provide jobs for the unemployed! Regardless of the critics' motives and attitudes, though, the WPA put the unemployed to work, gave them paychecks, kept them in their homes, enabled them to eat regularly, and also enabled them to pay for medical care and other of life's necessities. No one should be condemned for lifting poor people from desperation, and keeping them from dying from poverty—however much conservatives may believe otherwise.

The most important long term achievement of the New Deal was Social Security. FDR signed the legislation creating it, the Social Security Act, in August of 1935. It has been enormously successful in lifting millions from poverty. Despite well-funded propaganda campaigns against it, alleging falsely that it is a Ponzi scheme and that it is unsustainable, it remains, arguably, the most popular government program ever adopted. The critics ignore that it has functioned, and functioned efficiently, for nearly a century. No Ponzi scheme could achieve that.

As noted earlier, in his State of the Union message in 1941, FDR made his famous declaration of the "Four Freedoms." Freedom of speech, and of religion; freedom from fear, and from want, he said were the "essential human freedoms." In addition to two traditional

⁶⁵ Douglas Brinkley deals with the CCC at great depth in his splendid book, *Rightful Heritage*, New York: Harper Collins, 2016

American emphases: freedom of speech and of religion, he added two additional ones, *from* want and *from* fear.⁶⁶ Snyder's general discussion of positive freedoms criticized "freedoms from." These, however, should have passed his muster. Much of the formulation depends simply upon linguistic choices. FDR's freedom from fear could have been stated as "having sufficient security to make free choices." Freedom from want could have been "having sufficient possession of life's necessities." The Four Freedoms should not be condemned because FDR stated two of them as freedoms *from*.

In his annual message of 1944, and repeated in the message of 1945, FDR called for a "Second Bill of Rights," or an "Economic Bill of Rights." He called for government to ensure, among other things, jobs with adequate pay; adequate food, clothing, and recreation; a climate that safeguards farmers and business owners the ability to function effectively in the economy; the right to a decent home; the right to adequate medical care; the right to a good education; the right to adequate protections "from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment;" and more.⁶⁷ Sadly, the Republican takeover of Congress following the elections of 1946 prevented passage of FDR's suggestions, and also prevented passage under President Truman. The country has suffered as a result, with FDR's proposal, even today (or especially today), sounding "radical,"

The wartime record regarding civil liberties was vastly better in World War II under FDR than it had been under Wilson during World War I. The major failure, to be sure, was horrendous: the relocation of thousands of people of Japanese ancestry, including US citizens, away from areas in California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona. They were permitted to take only what they could carry, and eventually lost their property. The record was shameful, and FDR who authorized the concentration camps following the advice from racist military authorities deserves the blame (as do the military authorities).

Undoubtedly, FDR was flawed. Nevertheless, he accomplished much of what Theodore Roosevelt had begun, and "implemented a new public philosophy that energized government to protect the public—at least to some extent—from want and repression by concentrations of private economic power." As historian Michael Bechloss has written, FDR's flaws were overshadowed by greatness.⁶⁸ Even considering the terrible Japanese relocation, his New

⁶⁶ See Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, p. 238.

⁶⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "1944 State of the Union Address," *FDR Library and Museum*, January 11, 1944, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/address-text>; retrieved August 1, 2025.

⁶⁸ Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, p. 241.

Deal enhanced and—in spite of bitter resistance seeking to eliminate its influence—continues to enhance, human freedom.

Harry S. Truman (April 12 1945-1953) was vice president when FDR died, replacing a president who figuratively was a giant. Most vice presidents who succeeded larger-than-life presidents—John Adams succeeding George Washington; Martin Van Buren succeeding Andrew Jackson; Andrew Johnson succeeding Abraham Lincoln, William Howard Taft succeeding Theodore Roosevelt, for example—suffer by comparison. Truman did as well, but possessed qualities that enabled him to overcome much of the difficulty (even though he could never fare well in direct comparisons with the eloquent FDR). Moreover, Truman's reputation for honesty, and for being a wise and decisive leader, has steadily grown. Ratings by presidential scholars (not to assume that such ratings have much inherent value) usually now place him within the group of outstanding presidents.

As the new president, Truman worked closely with FDR's widow, Eleanor. In December he appointed her ambassador to the newly-formed United Nations. He had revealed to her that the Nazis had offered a separate peace with the West, and a continuation of war with the Soviet Union, but despite pressure from Churchill to accept the offer, he wisely refused. (Truman's later speech writer, Ken Hechler, said to me that shortly after the War, he had received the same offer from Goering, to be relayed to General Eisenhower; I asked him if he followed through, and he said "hell no"! Before joining the administration, Hechler [a historian with a Ph.D.] had been at Nuremberg, and had debriefed some of the major Nazi leaders).⁶⁹

Truman spoke to a small group of his staff not long before leaving office, saying that his initial lack of preparation, and numerous subsequent experiences, developed his commitment to clarity and consistency. As recounted by speech writer Hechler, "with the spread of atomic power to aggressor nations, the world had become too dangerous to allow any nation to be uncertain about the continuity of American policy."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ "Marching to Victory: 'The President is Dead, April 12, 1945,'" *WWII at 75, WWII Highlights From The Truman Library's Archives and Collections*, April 12, 2020; the first page of HST's letter to Eleanor Roosevelt is reproduced here, as is her reply, <https://www.trumanlibraryinstitute.org/wwii-75-marching-victory-7/>, retrieved August 20, 2022.

⁷⁰ Ken Hechler, *Working With Truman*, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1982, p. 248.

We have seen in recent years the dangers about which Truman was warning. We can hope that never again will the US have an administration pursuing the dangerous policy of keeping adversaries guessing; let alone friends.⁷¹

The next year, Truman announced the Marshall Plan, the largest foreign aid program in history. With bi-partisan support, it provided enormous amounts of aid to assist in rebuilding European countries ravaged by World War II. Cynics say that the purpose was to create markets for American products. Regardless, it reflected bi-partisan altruism, and unquestionably filled a huge need.

1948 was also the year in which Truman recognized the new state of Israel, and implemented the Berlin Air Lift. Germany was divided into zones that ultimately had become West and East Germany, with East Germany allied with the Soviets and under their control. Berlin was inside the East, but with guaranteed access from the West. The city, itself, was divided as was Germany, into east and west zones.

When the Soviets closed off access by road or rail to West Berlin, Truman acted quickly. The US, France, and Britain provided a constant flow of food and other necessities to the beleaguered city by air. The airlift continued for nearly a year—accompanied by prudent negotiation with the Soviets, who eventually removed their blockade. This was a huge project, a great success, and a solution apparently devised by Truman, and only Truman. It reflected the president's decisiveness, his willingness to innovate, and his courage to go beyond the ordinary.

Truman had support for these foreign policies, but domestic matters were a source of intense conflict with Republicans in Congress. They passed the Taft-Hartley Act, regulating and restricting labor unions. Truman vetoed it, and Congress overrode his veto. He had named his policies "The Fair Deal," to connote continuity with FDR's New Deal. He proposed, unsuccessfully, a full national health plan. Republicans and conservative Democrats, during a powerful lobbying campaign by the American Medical Association, saw to it that his plan got nowhere. Truman had some success with minimum wage and housing programs, but the bulk of the Fair Deal was never enacted. He had hoped to extend the New Deal, along lines that FDR had called for in his two final annual messages: his advocacy of an "Economic Bill of Rights." In the face of strong conservative resistance, unfortunately, Truman could not do so.

⁷¹ See Max J. Skidmore, "President Harry S. Truman," *Notes from Flyover Country: An Atypical Life and Career*, Washington: Westphalia Press, 2023, pp. 353-374.

The country has suffered as a result. For instance, it has evolved the world's most expensive healthcare delivery system, one that in many ways provides poorer overall outcomes than those of many other countries (while paying more for those inferior results). The United States, in consequence, is the only developed nation that fails to cover a substantial number of its people; it suffers by comparison with even some less developed countries.

Although he failed to expand the New Deal significantly, as he and FDR had hoped could be done, he nonetheless deserves considerable credit. He prevented the aggressive Republicans from rolling the New Deal back, or even eliminating, the “people-oriented” programs that FDR had given the nation.

Perhaps most significant, and ultimately the most strikingly successful, was arguably Truman's most impressive single accomplishment: his order to end racial segregation in America's armed forces. This could not have been done by legislation, since southerners committed to defending segregation controlled the levers of power in both the House and Senate, and had done so for most of the period since the Civil War. Moreover, racism was certainly not confined to the south. Its intensity varied according to location, but America as a whole was deeply—and undeniably—racist.

Although racism certainly has not been eradicated in the United States, it is difficult for many contemporary Americans, especially considering their rather weak grasp of history, to recognize just how racist the country was when Truman was president, and even later. Historian Avery Craven, active from the 1930s for three or more decades, was a Civil War “revisionist,” who argued that the war was a needless result of blundering politicians, and that slavery was a minor matter. The villains for Craven were not the slave holders; rather, they were the abolitionists. Craven had numerous followers, such as J. G. Randall, and the climate of the time was such that his views were widely accepted. Why else would he have received numerous honorary doctorates, and have served as president of The Organization of American Historians? As recently as July, 2020, in fact, the OAH gave an Avery Craven Award. Happily, that year the organization's governing board, embarrassed by Craven's role in perpetuating the “Lost Cause” myth, changed the name of the award.

A glance at a fairly typical review of one of Craven's books should be eye-opening. Richard Morton, a historian at the College of William and Mary reviewed *The Coming of the*

Civil War (Scribner's, 1942).⁷² Treating slavery as little more than a different labor system, Morton quoted Craven: "It is thus perfectly clear that slavery played a rather minor part in the life of the South *and of the Negro*" (!) [emphasis added].⁷³

Craven purported to produce "scientific" history, as opposed to the "amateur" works of his predecessors. Judge the degree to which this is "scientific": Morton says, following Craven, that "Most of the *Negroes were not resentful of being owned*" [again, emphasis supplied]; and according to Professor Craven, 'most of the incentives to honest, sustained, effort, to a contented, well-rounded life, might be found under slavery.'⁷⁴ Neither Morton nor Craven supplied documentation, nor does either one explain how "being owned" would not have engendered resentment—nor how such a conclusion could possibly come from the practice of "scientific history."

There was little pushback from white historians to the revisionists until Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in the late 1940s pointed out that there was no more sense in arguing that there should have been no abolitionists, than to have argued that there should have been no anti-Nazis under Hitler. He set about dismantling the revisionist argument, saying that in the "Randall-Craven view" there was "no legitimate moral power in the slavery argument, no profound conflict in values, for which men ought to kill and die. Rather a 'blundering generation' had transformed a 'repressible conflict' into a 'needless war.'⁷⁵

Sometimes the most fervent defenders of the least defensible portions of existing institutions unconsciously admit more than they recognize. The State of Mississippi provided a perfect example: Senator James O. Eastland. Eastland was among the most notorious segregationists. He was extreme across the board, raging that the young Elvis Presley, for example, should be jailed because Eastland was offended by what he thought were Presley's "obscene" movements. The senator's main obsession, though was race. Unfortunately, as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee he exercised enormous power. Considering his race hatred

⁷² Richard L. Morton, "Review of *The Coming of the Civil War*, by Avery Craven," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23:3 (July 1943), pp. 346-354.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

⁷⁵ From Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the 20th Century*, New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000, pp. 444-445; quoted, Max J. Skidmore, *Maligned Presidents: The Late 19th Century*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 6-7.

helps to understand just how much opposition Truman's determination to expand civil rights faced in Congress.

Eastland thundered that Truman's program was calculated "to secure political favor from Red mongrels in the slums of the great cities of the East and Middle West." The intention was to "defile the pure blood of the South." It is mind-boggling that any southern segregationist could keep a straight face in deploring "race mixing," considering slavery's history of rapes by white owners and overseers of enslaved Black women.

Eastland then proceeded to say surely more than he intended. He said this much is certain, "If the present Democratic leadership is right, then Calhoun and Jefferson Davis were wrong. If the present Democratic leadership is right, then Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner were right, and Lee, Forrest, and Wade Hampton were wrong. If the President's civil-rights program is right, then reconstruction was right. If this program is right, the carpetbaggers were right."⁷⁶

Well, yes.

Truman issued Executive Order 9981, July 26, 1948, mandating integration of the military solely on his own initiative, and solely on his own authority.

Truman's accomplishments are all the more astonishing when one considers his own background. He had grown up in Independence, Missouri, an especially racist area. He had been steeped in the racist history that was so common at the time, based on the romantic nonsense of the "Lost Cause," and had had to deal with his own personal feelings of racism.

Regardless, there is strong consensus among Truman scholars that his "conversion" to advocacy of civil rights was sincere. It may have been affected by his recognition that, as president, he represented all the people. Perhaps the strongest inducement was an incident that I am old enough to remember having read about, in newspapers, when it was current news.

As his biographer Robert Ferrell put it, President Truman was genuinely shocked by an outrage on the 12th of February, 1946, in Batesburg, S. C. "A black veteran, Isaac Woodard, yet wearing his uniform" as he was returning from the war, "was taken off a bus. . . and blinded by policemen who jabbed their night sticks into his eyes. Truman was visibly shaken, and

⁷⁶ Robert H, Ferrell, *Harry Truman: A Life*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1949, p 297/

exclaimed, ‘My God! I had no idea it was as terrible as that. We’ve got to do something.’⁷⁷ The fact that Woodard was wearing his sergeant’s uniform, and should have been respected, made the president even more angry, if possible. Wearing his uniform also no doubt made the returning soldier more likely to attract the ire of the local law enforcement, who found it offensive that a black man, rather than bowing and cringing, should have held a position of responsibility, honor, and authority.

The police chief who led his thuggish henchmen was brought to trial in federal court, and acquitted—of course by an all-white jury. The judge, J. Waties Waring, was shaken; he was appalled at the antics of the US attorney and the jury. As a result, despite being a privileged South Carolinian with a Confederate heritage, Waring spent the rest of his life working for civil rights.⁷⁸

One indication of the sincerity of President Truman is his timing. His order desegregating the military came just before the election. Given the spirit of the times, it could hardly have been expected to curry favor with the voters. Although it may seem obvious, it is necessary to stress repeatedly that some things must be done, regardless, simply because they are the right things to do.⁷⁹

Truman’s reputation, as indicated, has worn well through the years. Freedom, too, has persisted, and grown, through the years—at least until recently. “The man from Missouri,” especially for his courageous action banishing segregation from America’s military, deserves considerable credit for enhancing that freedom.

Dwight D. (Ike) Eisenhower (January 20, 1953-January 20, 1961) had been perhaps the most popular general of World War II, and became the first Republican president in two decades. He also brought the first Republican majorities in Congress in twenty years, both the House and the Senate. Eager Republicans sought to roll back the New Deal, but Eisenhower recognizing that times had changed, supported continuation of New Deal reforms.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* P. 293;

⁷⁸ See Judge Richard Gergel, *Unexampled Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening Of President Harry S. Truman and Judge J. Waties Waring*, New York: Sarah Crichton Books of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019; Gergel is a judge in the courtroom where Judge Waring sat.

⁷⁹ Much of the material here on Truman comes from my article “President Harry S. Truman,” in *Notes*, cited above.

In his first mid-term elections, those of 1954, the Democrats regained their majorities in both houses of Congress, and continued their legislative control through Eisenhower's two terms. He was able to work well with the Democrats, however, and got along well with Speaker Sam Rayburn and Senate majority leader Lyndon Johnson.

Eisenhower's critics, and most scholars at the time, considered him to be a passive president who was barely in control. Later scholarship changed this view, especially studies by political scientist Fred Greenstein. Greenstein made it clear that Eisenhower was a strong leader who knew how to be in charge without being obvious about it, and who definitely was in control. Greenstein popularized the term "hidden-hand president."⁸⁰

Eisenhower supported, and signed into law, legislation creating the Interstate Highway System. The Interstates had their drawbacks, but certainly enhanced the ability to travel by automobile. They literally made it possible, as the slogan went, to travel from coast to coast without encountering a traffic light. Despite being rather conservative on domestic policy, Eisenhower signed legislation increasing Social Security's benefits and expanding its coverage. Most important, in 1956 he signed legislation adding a crucial new benefit to Social Security: coverage for disability. Additionally, he signed a civil rights law in 1957. It was mild, and certainly inadequate, but it was the first civil rights law to make it through Congress since Reconstruction. In this, of course, Lyndon Johnson, the powerful Senate majority leader used his enormous skill to bring many reluctant senators around to support the bill. Also, although he was no civil rights pioneer, Eisenhower used the Arkansas National Guard to thwart Arkansas governor Orville Faubus from barring Black students from Little Rock's Central High School.

Somewhat surprisingly, Eisenhower's great Farewell Address was stirring, and prophetic. He warned, "we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex." We must never let it "endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted."⁸¹

Eisenhower's presidency was one of the more important in American history. His record was mixed, complicated by such matters as employing the CIA to engage in covert action, and

⁸⁰ Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader*, New York: Basic Books, 1982.

⁸¹ Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, p. 265; for the full text of the Farewell Address, see <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address>; (retrieved August 3, 20205); the Eisenhower Presidential Library also has the full text of the address, and an audio of President Eisenhower presenting the speech.

authorizing vigorous nuclear testing. Because of his enhancement of Americans' mobility, his providing additional Social Security protections, including for disability, taking some mild steps toward civil rights, and giving his powerful warning of the dangers to liberties Eisenhower should receive credit for expanding human freedom.

John F. Kennedy (January 20, 1917-November 22, 1963), at 43, was the youngest person to be elected president (Theodore Roosevelt was 42 when he became president following McKinley's assassination). Kennedy was bright, and learned quickly. He turned to history and named his programs the "New Frontier." Historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s had argued that it was the frontier that called forth the American character, and lamented that the 1890 census had declared the frontier to be closed. What, he had asked, will that closing of the frontier mean?" Kennedy responded with a New Frontier, that could mean scientific achievement, legal advances, a flowering of the arts, of sports, and of all forms of intellectual activity; including "putting a man on the moon by the end of the decade."

Kennedy was inspiring, and became the symbol for rational progress. Nevertheless, there is no indication that he would have become a skillful legislative leader. Those who argue that had he lived, he could have persuaded Congress, dominated by southerners, to pass civil rights, have little to support such a conclusion other than wishful thinking. He did put his prestige behind a Medicare bill, but it had not come to fruition before he was murdered in Dallas.

Kennedy did have some noteworthy achievements. Foremost among them were his executive order establishing the Peace Corps, a remarkably successful program of overseas assistance and good will. I can attest to this from personal experience. Having lived in India for a year in 1978-1979, although Kennedy had been dead some 15 years, I frequently saw his picture displayed alongside that of Gandhi. Also, I was acquainted with some who spoke no English, but had named their children "John Kennedy." Most important of all, though, was his securing of a treaty banning nuclear testing in the atmosphere. As for civil rights, he was late coming to the issue, but did ultimately submit a civil rights bill to Congress.

Regardless, an assassin cut short the brilliance of "Camelot" ("First Lady" Jacqueline Kennedy had popularized the term for JFK's administration). Kennedy had become a symbol to the world, and is owed that world's thanks for his test ban treaty that halted nuclear atmosphere testing, which was systematically poisoning the earth's atmosphere. His primary

influence on human freedom, however, was as a symbol of hope and liberty, not from great legislative contributions.

Lyndon B. Johnson (November 22, 1908-January 20, 1969) was one of the presidents who had a substantial element of greatness, however defined. He was the final such president in the view of McWilliams, who wrote an essay titled, "Lyndon B. Johnson: the Last of the Great Presidents" (the essay was from 1985, but the generalization remains accurate).⁸²

In the manner of a character in an ancient Greek play, Johnson's faults were huge, but so were his virtues; his presence, his abilities, and his determination to do good. Presidential scholars Landy and Milkis said that LBJ was the only president with an "element of greatness," and, they said, it was "undeniable." They defined "greatness" in a president as one who "engages the nation in a struggle for its constitutional soul." That was from a work dated 2000. Presidents since then are Clinton, G. W. Bush, Obama, Biden, and Trump. None of these likely would be designated Great, except for Trump boasting about himself as things crumble on his watch.

In his first State of the Union Address (January 9, 1964, shortly after becoming president) LBJ announced his "War on Poverty" that would enhance justice, freedom, and abundance. He always had had a powerful determination to combat poverty and its companion, racism. As president he had the ability to act, and new programs came quickly.

There were Head Start; the college Work-Study program; affirmative action (one of the programs Trump works most visibly to overcome); fair housing measures, Community Action programs; consumer protections, and environmental protections (another kind of program that Trump does his strongest to eliminate). In May, LBJ announced the name to be applied to his program. They would constitute "The Great Society." There was ample precedent. Theodore Roosevelt called for a "Square Deal," FDR's programs were the "New Deal," Truman's were the "Fair Deal," and Kennedy's were the "New Frontier." On July ,1964, LBJ signed into law one of the most important pieces of legislation in American history, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Among other things, it overturned nearly a century of Jim Crow in the south, and was strengthened the bill Kennedy had sent to Congress.

⁸² Willson Carey McWilliams, "Lyndon B. Johnson: the Last of the Greet Presidents," in Marc Landy, ed., *Modern Presidents and the Presidency*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985, pp. 163-182.

Johnson ran for a full term in his own right in 1964. He won a smashing victory against arch-conservative Barry Goldwater. Only four presidents in history have received 60% of the popular vote: Harding in 1920, FDR in 1936, Nixon in 1972, and LBJ in 1964. LBJ was the only president ever to have received 61%.⁸³

On April 11, LBJ signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, providing assistance to school districts across the country, On July 30 he met with former President Harry Truman at the Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri and signed the act creating Medicare. He presented President Truman with Medicare card number one, and Truman's wife Bess with card number 2. On August 6, LBJ signed another vital piece of civil rights legislation, the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It remained highly effective until the Supreme Court began to unravel it. Now, with a hostile Court, a hostile chief justice, and a hostile Trump administration it is almost gone. It remains for the current Republicans to be defeated and the Court to be unpacked paving the way for a new progressive administration that can bring a new voting rights act protecting the rights of Americans, rights that Republicans and the Court have caused to wither away.

Because of LBJ, the country achieved a firm civil rights law, Medicare, and much more. As I have written elsewhere, "much of what we take for granted today as part of the American way of life," came from the programs that conservatives deride as the "failed Great Society." On the contrary, those programs made the US a better country. "Those who argue to the contrary should openly admit that they would prefer a nation without the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, Headstart Medicare, assistance to the arts, environmental protections, and on and on."⁸⁴ Sadly, so mainstream has right wing extremism become, that under Trump, the administration in power now does admit these preferences, and works vigorously to turn back the clock.

Lyndon Baines Johnson, however, will go down in history as a great supporter of freedom. He even signed into law in 1967 something that governments, in general, strongly oppose: the Freedom of Information Act!

⁸³ Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, pp.277-285.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Richard M. Nixon (January 20, 1969-August 9, 1974) in his 1972 bid for reelection became one of only four U.S. presidents to acquire 60% of the popular vote (LBJ in 1964 was the only one to achieve 61%). Subsequently, he was the only U.S. president to be forced from office after having been urged to resign by leaders of his own Republican Party, as well as by the Democrats. His resignation came as a result of “Watergate,” an effort by Nixon and his aides to increase their advantage by placing listening devices in the offices of the Democrat National Committee in the Watergate building. The comic line then was that Nixon had wanted to win in the worst way—and did so.

It was under Nixon that the Republican Party began to employ tactics that were certainly disloyal, if not treasonous. For years, rumors circulated that Nixon and his agents sabotaged the Paris Peace talks in order to prevent an “October Surprise” that might have brought an end to the Vietnam War shortly before the 1972 election; the election which he wished to win overwhelmingly. LBJ telephoned Nixon, who strenuously denied that he would ever do such a thing. In 1967, however, historian John Farrel discovered in some recently-opened papers at the Nixon Library that Nixon’s aide, H. R. Haldeman, revealed that Nixon had given direct orders to him, Haldeman, to “monkey wrench” the Paris talks. Haldeman also indicated that Nixon had assured southern leaders that, as president, he would “lay off the pro-Negro crap.”⁸⁵ That personified his “Southern Strategy.”

Nixon did have substantial accomplishments, generally trying to have it both ways. He enforced de-segregation, for example, but let southerners know that he was under court orders, and had no choice. In response to those who gave him considerable credit for enhancing civil rights, Joseph Califano, who had been an aide to LBJ and later was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under Carter, said in a letter to the *NY Times* that Nixon had engaged fully in a “southern strategy” in which he sent cultural signals to southerners assuring them that he sympathized with them. Califano quoted Roy Wilkins to the effect that Nixon’s actions made possible the later “presidency of Ronald Reagan with his ‘grotesque civil rights policies.’”⁸⁶

Regarding the environment, Nixon’s record was far better than those of later Republicans. Among other measures, he was responsible for creating the Environmental Protection Agency which Congress created at his urging. That is especially important, when

⁸⁵ Max J. Skidmore, *The Common Sense Manifesto*, Washington: Westphalia Press, 2020, pp. 5-7.

⁸⁶ See *Skidmore, Presidential Performance.*, p. 291.

one notes that Trump's EPA is attempting to eliminate its own authority to regulate the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Nixon's presidency is difficult to evaluate, because his achievements in both domestic and foreign policy were impressive, but so were his abuses of power and attacks on the constitutional order. In any case, our purpose here is to consider his effects on freedom. Although certainly he did not commit the worst assaults on freedom from a president, he did weaken freedom, and cannot be considered (as Jefferson was because of the Declaration of Independence and his views on separation of church and state) an "apostle of liberty."

Gerald R. Ford (August 9, 1974-January 20, 1977) received Nixon's nomination to be vice president when Vice President Spiro T. Agnew resigned from his office as part of a plea bargain to keep out of jail on charges of corruption. Ford then became president when Nixon himself resigned. Nixon became the first, and thus far only, president to do so; Ford thus became the only president who had not been elected president or vice president. One of his first acts, since the vice presidency had become vacant, was to nominate Nelson Rockefeller to be his vice president. Rockefeller was then confirmed by both houses of Congress.

Ford served as president for 895 days. Others had also served truncated presidencies: William Henry Harrison, James A. Garfield, Zachary Taylor, and Warren G. Harding served fewer days than Ford (Harding was in office nearly as long). Kennedy's brief time in office was longer than Ford's.⁸⁷

Ford was a decent man who became a decent president, but two of his actions generated enormous criticism. The one most remembered today was the sweeping pardon of former President Nixon, guaranteeing that he would not be prosecuted. Ford had made the decision to grant the pardon completely on his own, and it came as a surprise. His rationale was that the country had already faced so much turmoil because of Nixon that it needed a rest from all things Nixonian. Many people were outraged. I was among them, as was Ford's friend and press secretary Jerald terHorst who resigned in protest. After the passage of time, however, many

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 299.

changed their position, and agreed that Ford's decision had been a wise one.⁸⁸ I agreed with their reasoning, and changed my position as well.

Unfortunately, reality does not always proceed as one would expect. With the totally surprising rogue presidency of Donald Trump, I recognized that my original opposition to the pardon was the wiser one. Had Nixon been prosecuted as he deserved, perhaps the precedent would have resulted in the conviction of Trump following his impeachment (either one), and then possibly he might have faced the prosecution and punishment that he so absolutely deserved.

That might also have headed off the extremely dangerous immunity decision that Chief Justice John Roberts engineered to protect this president. That decision ignores the checks and balances of the Constitution that now effectively no longer exist. Moreover it not only opens the door to dictatorship, it encourages it.

The other controversial Ford decision was his decision to vaccinate the country against the emergence of a swine flu pandemic that seemed at the time to be threatening. His NIIP (National Influenza Immunization Program), with all its difficulties and roadblocks, demonstrated that it is possible to act quickly and effectively if government is involved, if it plans wisely, and is under the control of a president who works well with Congress and above all recognizes government's potential to do good. The pandemic did not develop, and the growing Reagan forces within the Republican Party jeered and scorned President Ford, as did the relevant personnel of the incoming Carter administration who guaranteed that the condemnation came from Democrats as well. Regardless, knowing what Ford knew at the time, it certainly was better to have a vaccination program without a pandemic, than to have a pandemic with no vaccine.⁸⁹

As I have said elsewhere, "Ford was a cautious fiscal conservative, but he accepted the necessity for an activist government. Moreover, he accepted the obligation of that government to contribute to the quality of the environment, and to the lives of America's citizens."⁹⁰ Freedom did benefit from his brief presidency.

⁸⁸ See *Ibid.*, pp. 300-301.

⁸⁹ Max J. Skidmore, *Presidents, Pandemics, and Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁹⁰ Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, pp 304-307.

James Earl Carter (January 20, 1977-Jaauary 20, 1981), a former governor of Georgia, brought an air of informality to the government; more, perhaps, than President Ford did, even to the extent of being called “Jimmy. ” Sadly, Carter also was the victim of bad luck. Nearly all presidents have the opportunity to fill at least one vacancy on the Supreme Court. Carter had no such opportunity. He was the only president who served a full term not to have been able to add to the Court. In fact, almost all presidents—even most of those who served for less than a full term—had that opportunity. That includes Garfield, who was in office only six months before dying from an assassin’s bullet. Of all the presidents, only William Henry Harrison (in office only one month), and Taylor (in office only sixteen months) along with Carter, had no Supreme Court appointments. Additionally, inflation began to be troublesome as a result of the oil embargo instituted by the oil producing nations (OPEC) during Nixon’s presidency. It was something over which Carter had no control.

Undoubtedly, though, the most damaging occurrence to Carter’s presidency came when militant students in Iran stormed the U.S. embassy and held American personnel hostage for the rest of the Carter presidency. Every day, that fact was drummed into the American audience by various news media. There was a rescue attempt that failed miserably, when the helicopters employed encountered an unanticipated sand storm and could not proceed with their mission. Iran released the hostages at the very moment Carter departed from the presidency.

Despite all this, Carter did have notable achievements. He was farsighted in adopting a comprehensive energy policy, that included both supply and demand. He had solar panels installed on the White House as a symbolic measure. Moreover, violating tradition, he made human rights central to his foreign policy. This was controversial, and had its drawbacks as well as its successes, but a president who successfully stresses human rights must receive credit for his influence that advanced human freedom.

Ronald W. Reagan (January 20, 1981-January 20, 1989), a former film actor, for more than three decades personified the far right in American politics. When he finally received the Republican nomination for president, it succeeded in converting what had seemed to be right-wing extremism into what seemed then to be the mainstream of American politics. Almost immediately, the public forgot that he had represented extremism. Much of his success can be attributed to his genial appearance, his sense of humor, and his ability to portray himself as anything but dangerous.

As a spokesman for the General Electric Company for almost a decade, over and over he gave a version of what he called simply “The Speech” to business groups all across the country. He was unexcelled in giving a prepared talk, and his constant repetitions of The Speech perfected his already skillful delivery. “The Speech” invoked the evils of communism, big government, and “liberalism.” He advocated low taxes, minimal regulation, and the least government. He especially alleged great dangers from governmental programs, arguing—against all historical experience—that they would lead to totalitarianism. Without using the term, he advocated privatization of Social Security.

In 1961, Reagan tailored The Speech to serve the interests of the American Medical Association that was bitterly opposing the proposed program of health care for the elderly. It became the core around which the AMA built its “Operation Coffeecup.” The AMA provided a skillfully produced LP phonograph recording, “Ronald Reagan Speaks Out Against Socialized Medicine,” and sent a copy to the presidents of the women’s auxiliaries of county medical associations throughout the country. They were to invite friends for coffee to listen to the recording and prepare individually-worded, hand-written letters to the US representative from their district, and to each of their state’s two senators. The letters were to condemn “government medicine,” and urge votes against the proposed Medicare program.

It was highly persuasive to those who were uninformed, who were already predisposed to accept a “conservative” message, or who were resentful of those who needed governmental assistance. To support Barry Goldwater’s doomed presidential campaign, Reagan adapted The Speech for the purpose, and broadcasted it as “A Time for Choosing” to a nationwide audience. His masterful performance made him immediately a national figure. Goldwater lost, but Reagan won. He went on to win two terms as governor of California.

In 1980, he became the Republican nominee for president. In the one debate that he and President Carter had, Reagan lied. Carter said that Governor Reagan had begun his political career campaigning against Medicare. Reagan was prepared for that. To laughter, he said, “there you go again.” He denied that he had worked against health care for the elderly, saying that instead he had supported a different program that was being considered; one that he thought would be better. Carter was thrown off balance, and failed to point out that there was no alternative program being considered, that Reagan and the AMA were demonizing the program as “socialized medicine,” which it was not, and condemned socialized medicine as the beginning of totalitarian dictatorship, which it obviously would not have been. Reagan commanded the doctors’ wives to write their letters, intoning: if you don’t do this, and if I don’t

do this, one of these days we will spend our sunset years telling our children, and our children's children "what it once was like in America, when men were free."

There is strong evidence that Reagan and his aides worked to delay release of the hostages that Iran captured when students swarmed the US embassy in Teheran. This, again, following Nixon's efforts to sabotage the Paris Peace Talks and prolong the Vietnam War, would have been designed to prevent an "October Surprise," fearing that it would have worked to Carter's advantage in the 1980 election. The evidence here is not so clear as it was for Nixon, but the timing and subsequent actions—selling arms to Iranian militants for them then to use against us, for example—are telling. There is no "smoking gun" against Reagan, but one reason there is not may be that Senate republicans blocked funding for an investigation into whether Reagan worked to keep the hostages as captives longer than they had to be.⁹¹

It is significant, too, that Reagan began his presidential campaign with a speech near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Southerners were well aware that this was near the site where civil rights workers had been murdered by segregationists. Reagan, the master of political symbolism, could not have been unaware that he was sending a coded message to the south that he would maintain Nixon's "southern strategy."

Reagan's presidency greatly lowered taxes on the wealthy, increased military spending, and cut back, or attempted to cut back, programs directly benefiting the people. Republicans have always opposed income redistribution. It turns out that what they opposed was only redistribution to benefit those of low income. Time after time since Reagan, Republicans have voted for income redistribution—upward; to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

Reagan reversed Carter's energy emphases. To demonstrate where he stood, this master of political symbolism sent a message that he was no "tree hugger." He removed Carter's solar panels from the White House.

Moreover, his FCC eliminated the very successful Fairness Doctrine. When Congress voted to reinstate it, it fell victim to a Reagan veto. "Fairness" has not appeared to be congenial to Reagan or Bush Republicans, and absolutely not to Trump's MAGA crowd. The result was the emergence of Fox News as an unofficial arm of the Republican Party, and the proliferation of talk radio, dominated by right wing discussion and misinformation.

⁹¹ Skidmore, *The Common Sense Manifesto*, pp. 17-19, 246,

Reagan was a realist who would compromise when necessary. His presidency, as a result, was more moderate, and more successful, than it might otherwise have been. He came to office as a staunch militarist, but came to recognize the horrors that nuclear war would bring, and worked with Soviet leader Gorbachev toward arms control. For that, he should be praised.

The reasons for his extraordinary success can well be summarized by a comment from a Democrat who had just listened to one of Reagan's talks. "I don't like Reagan's policies much," he said, "but he doesn't really seem like a Republican; he just seems like an American."⁹² The overall effect of his presidency, however, was to add threats to freedom—as all revisions that would minimize government would do—rather than to enhance it.

George H. W. Bush (January 20, 1989-January 20, 1993), at this writing is the only vice president since Martin Van Buren to be elected president while sitting as vice president (Al Gore and Kamala Harris would have been added to that list had they won their races for president). For eight years, he was a loyal vice president to Reagan. Despite Reagan's rhetoric, Bush was the more aggressive. It was his victorious (and vicious) campaign against Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, in which he constantly condemned Dukakis as a "liberal." That changed the view of liberalism that much of America had. Previously, to be liberal was a major advantage. In many parts of the country, it was essential for victory. After Bush's campaign, however, "liberal" became a political swear word to many voters. To be a liberal no longer meant Social Security, minimum wage laws, worker protection, and the like. Rather, it meant a politician who wanted to tax your hard-earned pay in order to give money to non-working welfare mothers. It was a code for Black or brown mothers, and followed Bush's notorious Willie Horton campaign. Horton was a prisoner who was on furlough because of a program that actually was in place before Dukakis became governor, but he nevertheless received the blame. Horton, it was said, raped a woman while he was temporarily out of prison. Lurid ads depicted him as especially dark, and made it plain it was warning against evil Black men. Bush did not apologize for the campaign; the designer of the campaign, Lee Atwater, on his deathbed dying of cancer, did so. He expressed regrets for the brutality in the program he designed for Bush.⁹³

⁹² Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, p. 331.

⁹³ For a discussion, see Skidmore, *Common Sense Manifesto*, p. 20, including footnote.

Bush came to the presidency with an extraordinary background, especially in foreign affairs. As could have been expected, his strongest interests and greatest accomplishments were foreign policy. The Soviet Union, for example, dissolved during his presidency, although the Reagan myth has it that it was Reagan's achievement.

In domestic policy, though, Bush did sign two extraordinary measures. One greatly strengthened the Clean Air Act. That must seem strange to modern Republicans, if indeed they are aware of it, because current Republicans under Trump rush madly to undue all possible environmental controls. The other domestic achievement was a major advance in civil liberties: the Americans with Disabilities Act.⁹⁴ His record on appointments to the Supreme court is mixed. He appointed David Souter, who went on to become a distinguished justice. He also appointed Clarence Thomas, whose general conduct reeks of corruption, and whose recent rulings reflect more a desire to protect Donald Trump than any constitutional theory.

Bush issued seventy-seven pardons, some quite controversial, but the most notorious was probably the pardon given to former secretary of defense Casper Weinberger, and "five others connected to the Iran-contra affair." He justified Weinberger's pardon by saying that he was an American hero, but it also meant that Bush, himself, would not be called to testify at a Weinberger trial. That is, it prevented Bush from having to admit to any adverse information pertaining to his own role. Overall, the pardons were much more generous than those Reagan granted. Jeffrey Toobin pointed out that for all Reagan's "surface good nature, he was fundamentally ungenerous to those around him. Bush was not that way. He believed in loyalty to his people."⁹⁵

Regarding freedom, Bush has more for which he should have answered than his benign appearance would have suggested. Nevertheless, his approval of the strength added to the Clean Air Act must be considered. Certainly also his approval of the Americans with Disabilities Act freed enormous numbers of Americans to live fully, as others live, in ways that previously had been completely denied them.

⁹⁴ See Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, p. 336.

⁹⁵ See *Ibid.* p. 339,

William J. Clinton (January 20, 1993-January 20, 2001), at 46, was the youngest person to be president, except for John Kennedy at 43, and Theodore Roosevelt at 42. After the ratification of the twenty-second Amendment limiting presidential terms, Clinton was the first Democrat to have completed two terms and thus to have been unable to run again because of the amendment's limitations. On his first day in office, Clinton removed the restriction that Republicans had placed on medical clinics. That restriction made it unlawful for doctors to refer patients for abortions, and prevented them from even discussing abortion as an option. Clinton attempted to deal with the restrictions on gays in the military, but was able only to make mild improvements of the harsh prohibitions. He implemented the "don't ask; don't tell" policy. That was not a good solution, but was an improvement.

The first bill Clinton signed was the Family and Medical Leave Act. It had come up twice under Bush, but both times lost to a veto. Clinton tried, unsuccessfully, to move toward universal health care. Republicans, including those who had supported the idea previously, were strong in opposition, aided by the health-insurance industry and the National Federation of Independent Business.

Clinton's record on the environment was excellent, but on civil liberties, especially his support for the "war on drugs," it was not. He signed a tax increase, for which not a single Republican had voted. Those Republicans predicted dire results and economic disaster. Instead, the economy boomed. Twice, the Republicans submitted appropriation measures to him that cut Medicare, taxes, and education. Clinton vetoed them, forcing shutdowns of the government. Republicans had thought he would have been forced to approve their austerity measures in order to avoid shutdowns, but it failed to work as they had hoped. The public recognized that Clinton was working to protect programs they favored, and blamed Republicans for their actions.

There was a salient factor that makes Clinton and his administration difficult to evaluate on many matters, including effects on freedom. For a quarter century, there had been a carefully organized, and very well funded, effort to destroy the Clintons, both Bill and Hillary. As reporter John Harris, then of the *Washington Post* put it, there was such a gang lying in wait as the Clinton administration began in 1993. "Conservative interest groups commentators and congressional investigations waged a remorseless campaign that they hoped would make life miserable for the Clintons and vault themselves to power. They succeeded in many ways. One of the most important was their ability to take all manner of presidential miscues, misjudgments or controversial decisions and exploit them for maximum

effect.” Moreover, he said, there were no “liberal equivalents” to the venomous conservative campaign. “The more paranoid elements of the far-right fringe went even further, accusing the Clintons of murders and of drug-running (some even accused former President Bush of being involved). Jerry Falwell hawked a videotape over television that portrayed Clinton as a multiple murderer.⁹⁶

As I have written elsewhere, “one should probably be lenient” in evaluating the Clinton presidency “because of the enormous and unprecedented opposition” that he faced. “In spite of the obstacles, he accomplished a great deal.” In viewing the record, one should remember that “no other public official has been so exposed—none has ever had more than \$70 million of public funds expended in an effort to bring him down and smear his record.”⁹⁷ As Cass Sunstein wrote, “what is perhaps not adequately remembered is the utter baselessness of many of the charges that reasonable people took seriously at the time.”⁹⁸ None of the culprits, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, has ever apologized for their inflammatory comments and editorials.

It is safe to say that Clinton’s record on freedom is mixed. It probably is safe also to say that on balance freedom benefited more than it suffered from his presidency.

George W. Bush (January 20, 2001-January 20, 2009) lost the popular vote to Al Gore, but the dysfunctional electoral college—after the Supreme Court intervened in the election on Bush’s behalf—overruled the people’s vote, and installed Bush as president. When he ran for re-election four years later, he had no need for the Supreme Court to intervene. He won both the popular vote and the vote of the electoral college. On September 11, just months after his inauguration, terrorists hijacked three airliners crashing one into the World Trade Center, another into the Pentagon, and the third into a field. The aftermath of 9-11 was the “Patriot Act” that Bush determined was needed to prevent such acts of terrorism. Congress hurriedly passed the Act, and Bush signed it. The Patriot Act, among other things, greatly increased the government’s powers of search and seizure, increased its ability to regulate financial matters, and vastly increased its surveillance authorities.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 346-347

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.352.

⁹⁸ Cass R. Sunstein, “The Warrior’s Tale,” *The American Prospect*, (July/August 2003), p. 67.

The Bush family presents an appearance of decency and discretion. As the senior Bush's harsh and mean-spirited campaign against Dukakis illustrates, though, the Bush practice is to ignore any dictate of decency, to do anything it deems necessary to win. George W. was no exception. Karl Rove, identified as "Bush's brain," developed the practice of hitting opponents where they are strongest, and converting strengths to weaknesses.

Thus did Bush's re-election campaign present his opponent John Kerry, a legitimate war hero who commanded a Swift Boat in combat in the Vietnam War, as a fraud. Kerry in Vietnam had been involved in considerable action during which he disregarded the possibility of death in order to fulfill his mission and protect his fellows. Regardless, a group calling itself Swift Boat Veterans for Truth emerged from the Bush campaign. Over and over its members called Kerry anything but heroic. It was a lie, but it worked. The fact that the group's lies were completely discredited did not matter.

If a lie is repeated often enough, and loudly enough, many people will assume that it is true. For example, I was at a meeting in Portland, Oregon, during the campaign, and was chatting with a businessman. He said of Kerry that he couldn't vote for him because of Kerry's war record. I expressed astonishment that he was concerned about war experience when George W. had none. Bush had no military experience at all, except as a member of an Air National Guard unit that he rarely, if ever, attended. The businessman said, weakly, well, he did join the National Guard. In his mind, that was more important than Kerry's actual experiences in combat.

That George W. Bush campaign was responsible for a new political term: "Swiftboating." To Swiftboat, means to smear your opponent with lies.

Bush, as he seemingly recognized of himself, was a risk-taker to the point of recklessness. To retaliate for 9-11, he took the U.S. to war in Afghanistan. The rationale was that Afghanistan harbored the 9-11 terrorists as they trained for their deadly mission. He also sent troops to invade Iraq, on the pretense that Saddam Hussein was complicit with the 9-11 terrorists, which he was not, and that he had "weapons of mass destruction," which he did not.

It turns out that Bush, and his ally British prime minister Tony Blair, were well aware that those fearful weapons did not exist. This was amply documented "when a British intelligence worker, Katherine Gun, courageously leaked a top-secret memorandum, violating the UK's Official Secrets Act, at great personal risk." Note that this took place even before

Trump burst upon America's political scene. Republicans had already become "notorious for disregarding the truth to accomplish their ends."⁹⁹ As a party, Republican devotion to disinformation and willingness to discard concerns for truth under Trump have become even worse. The situation was so clear in the UK at that time, that the British government's prosecution of Gun, despite her clear violation of the ultra-harsh Official Secrets Act, failed; the charges against her were dropped.

Upon Bush's re-election, he was so confident of having "political capital," that he boldly sought to privatize Social Security. He was quickly slapped down politically, and Social Security remained secure. He also had enabled the United States, despite its history of rhetorical devotion to human rights, to go on record as supporting torture of prisoners to reach its goals.

On the other hand, although Bush was committed to fossil fuel use and certainly was not known for his environmental policies, he established a huge national monument protecting some 140,000 square miles of ocean northwest of Hawaii. He also had a superb program of combatting AIDS in Africa, PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief). Moreover, his unsuccessful immigration reforms were relatively enlightened.

So, although Bush II can hardly be thought of as being a major exponent of human freedom—and his overall presidential record is one of the worst—his record does contain some bright spots. Millions of Africans lived to exercise their freedom who might otherwise not have done so. Still, being on record as supporting human torture is a huge negative on his record—and that of the United States—as was the entire Iraq War.

Barack H. Obama ((January 20, 2009-January 20, 2017) was the first, and thus far the only, Black person to be president. As a result, he faced a constant barrage of Republican opposition, far beyond the normal opposition between the two parties. Mitch McConnell, the leader of Senate Republicans, even said his major goal was to make Obama a one-term president. In that, he failed. There was so much hysteria because we had a Black president, that even today (early 2026), after he has been out of office for years, elements on the far-right (religious zealots and others of the lunatic fringe) continue to believe the ridiculous

⁹⁹ Max J. Skidmore, *The Common Sense Manifesto*, Washington: Westphalia Press, 2008, p. 25.

nonsense that Obama is a mysterious evil force who controls the Democratic Party from behind the scenes.

For a charismatic politician, Obama's legislative accomplishments long passed without generating much enthusiasm—or for the most part even broad awareness. Taxes are a notable example. Roughly one third of his stimulus package—the measure that enthusiasts for tax reductions so reviled—was, in fact, tax reduction rather than direct spending. He had reduced the taxes of 95 percent of Americans, yet few recognized it. Indeed, many detractors complained loudly that Obama *raised* their taxes. Such misunderstanding undoubtedly was an influence in the massive Republican victories in the 2010 mid-term elections, along with other factors, including a prominent one that the voters understood very well, indeed: high unemployment.

In his first month in office, Obama signed into law three significant pieces of legislation: 1) On January 29 the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (in response to a 2007 decision by the Supreme Court, *Lilly Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co.* that women could not sue for pay discrimination unless they did so soon after the discrimination took place, even if they had been unaware of the discrimination); 2) On February 4, the Children's Health Insurance Reauthorization Act (expanding health insurance coverage for children, an act that George W. Bush had twice vetoed); and 3) On February 17, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the stimulus program). Obama also succeeded in persuading Congress to eliminate the ban on gays in the military.

There were many other achievements, but above all was Obama's crowning legislative achievement: healthcare reform. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Republicans named it "Obamacare"). The Affordable Care Act failed to include a public option, but did finally move the health care delivery system in the US in the direction of universal health care; something that many presidents going all the way back to Theodore Roosevelt—some Republicans and most Democrats—had attempted, or at least supported. Not until Obama, though, did anyone succeed. The closest had been Lyndon Johnson, who successfully implemented Medicare, health care for the elderly.

The mere fact of Obama's election was itself significant. Whatever the difficulties, it demonstrated that it was possible for one of African descent to ascend to the presidency. That—along with the Affordable Care Act, gays in the military, and other Obama accomplishments—extended American freedom.

Donald J. Trump I (January 20, 2017-January 20, 2021) came to the presidency because of the electoral college, despite having lost the popular vote to the democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, by nearly three million. Trump was the only person to become president who had never held public office or served in the military. He did succeed in getting a vaccination development program started at the beginning of the pandemic with his Operation Warp Speed. Otherwise, though, he mismanaged the pandemic, leading to huge numbers of deaths that should have been prevented. He demeaned his office, using it for personal gain, damaged America's standing in the world by insulting allies and becoming close to dictators, made it clear that American democratic institutions were far less secure and stable than they appeared, intensified the corruption of the Republican Party that had placed him in office, rejected the notion of peaceful transfer of power, refused to accept his loss in the election of 2020, and sought to steal that election. In the course of that attempted theft, he encouraged a violent insurrection (now generally called simply, "January 6th") aimed at preventing Congress from counting the electoral votes that favored Joseph Biden and rejected Trump's candidacy.

The Trump effect on American freedom in that first term was highly detrimental. It foreshadowed even more damage that was to come.

Joseph R. Biden (January 20, 2021-January 20, 2025), despite Republican taunts and erroneous opinions on the parts of some Democrats with short memories, had a superb record of accomplishment as president. Biden probably would agree that he was not charismatic, but he was extraordinarily effective, and helped restore confidence in American among its allies. Biden came to office inheriting a crisis situation, the Covid 19 pandemic that had killed shocking numbers of Americans, and others around the world. On his first day as president, Biden released his National Strategy that called for mass inoculation against the harsh disease. It led to the speedy vaccination of millions of Americans. Delivering vaccines without charge, it was the largest such program in America's history, and was highly successful. This success came despite disinformation campaigns from fringe, anti-science, groups that ultimately came to include many Republicans. These groups spread lies about the nature of the disease and the efficacy and safety of the vaccines.

Biden's American Rescue Plan provided billions of dollars to citizens facing economic ruin from the pandemic, assisting families, providing nutrition, aiding small businesses, sending \$1400 checks to a majority of Americans, and much more. It greatly helped the country overcome the effects of the pandemic. Additionally, his Bipartisan Infrastructure law resulted

in modernizing projects throughout the country, upgrading roads and bridges, airports, clean water and sewage treatment facilities, eliminating lead pipes, expanding health care, expanding high speed Internet capabilities everywhere, creating charging facilities for electric vehicles making them accessible along major corridors, and financing many other projects that had long been needed. His Inflation Reduction Act was a major commitment to clean energy, environmental protection, anti-pollution, and public health.

This was a sterling record. His performance should be evaluated on his accomplishments, not solely on a disastrous debate performance, or of the obvious effects of his advanced age. Snide comments about his mental state overlook positive statements from those both here and abroad about his effectiveness. His poor image with much of the public is tragic now, but likely will be reversed by history. That is not helping the country currently as it slips progressively into a police state and tolerates Trump's reversal of much of Biden's superb accomplishments. Biden's effect on freedom expanded it greatly; reactionary response has brought to power those who would eliminate it.

Donald J. Trump II (January 20, 2025—) won the election of 2024, not only in the electoral college (where it counts) but also in the popular vote (which does not speak well for democracy). He made no secret of his authoritarian intentions, and the motivating factor that would propel his administration: vengeance; hardly an inducement for good government. Bertram Gross once wrote of "friendly fascism."¹⁰⁰ When it finally arrived it was definitely fascist, but hardly friendly. It is typified by Masked thugs and troops on city streets, takeover of D.C police force and threats to others. Mid-decade redistricting to give advantage to president, mass arrests, deportations to different countries, attempts to seize control of higher education and to eliminate the Department of Education, and direct attacks on the Constitution itself. Unless the effects of Trump's presidency are reversed, freedom, ultimately, if studied at all, will be relegated to historians.

¹⁰⁰ Bertram Gross, *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America*, New York: M. Evans and Co., 1980.

The Role of Language: Its Use, Abuse, and Effects on Freedom¹⁰¹

By

Max J. Skidmore

Abstract

This article examines the effect that language usage has upon politics and the political system. It examines propaganda, and the effects of various modes of thought, especially fundamentalism, literalism, and originalism. It considers the possibility of an education for democracy, and offers suggestions regarding what must be done.

An informed public is essential to maintain a free society, but information is insufficient. To operate rationally, populations must be informed, but must also possess the skills to evaluate effectively the information that they have. As both popular literature and scholarly studies demonstrate, rational appeals do not always produce rational results. For example, George Lakoff argues that the “framing” of issues—their shaping, description, and presentation—affects an audience more powerfully than does its logic.¹⁰² Drew Westen suggests similarly that rational presentations have far less success than emotional ones.¹⁰³

A perfect example comes from Robert Caro’s massive work on Lyndon B. Johnson. Caro is no LBJ partisan, and has been accused of “demonizing” Johnson.¹⁰⁴ From the third volume forward, though, his treatment is nuanced and thoughtful; it presents some of the most insightful work on LBJ ever written.

Volume Four deals with LBJ’s vice presidency and his early months as president. Here, Caro describes a brief speech that Vice President Johnson gave at Gettysburg Battlefield on

¹⁰¹ Some of the following is adapted from my article: Max J. Skidmore, “Populism and its Perils: Language and Politics,” *Annales Politologica*, 22:1 (Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, Lublin, Poland, 2015) pp. 7-22; that article is reprinted in Skidmore, *Notes From Flyover Country*, Washington: Westphalia Press, 2023, pp. 243-264.

¹⁰² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant*, White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004; and Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, New York: Penguin, 2009.

¹⁰³ Drew Westen, *The Political Brain*, New York: Public Affairs Press, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ See Randall Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, New York: The Free Press, 2008.

Memorial Day weekend in 1963, a century after Lincoln's immortal Address there. LBJ had accepted the invitation to speak on his own initiative, sought no approval, and spoke only his own words. The Kennedy administration had shut him out entirely from policy formation. The *Washington Post* ran his Gettysburg speech as the lead story on page one. Caro said the speech had been so short, "barely two typed pages," that Johnson had read it in eight minutes. "Lincoln's speech had been short, too," Caro said, "and, the *Post* said in an editorial, this one, too, had 'eloquence . . . political courage . . . vision.'" LBJ had said, "One hundred years ago, the slave was freed . . . One hundred years later, the Negro remains in bondage to the color of his skin. The Negro today asks justice. We do not answer him—we do not answer those who lie beneath this soil—when we reply to the Negro by asking, 'Patience.' . . . To ask for patience from the Negro is to ask him to give more of what he has already given enough . . . The Negro says, 'Now.' Others say, 'Never.' The voice of responsible Americans—the voices of those who died here and the great man who spoke here—their voices say, 'Together.' There is no other way."¹⁰⁵ Both of these Gettysburg Addresses are beacons in the literature of freedom.

Caro described the persistence and patience with which Johnson had sought an audience alone with President Kennedy on civil rights. "May of 1963 had been the month of Birmingham." LBJ had said, "They've turned the fire hoses on a little black girl . . . They're rolling that little girl right down the middle of the street," the month of the fierce dogs "that Bull Connor's police kept on leashes, but not tightly. And all that month, the President and the attorney general and their aides were discussing what to do in Birmingham, and whether or not to propose new civil rights legislation, and what that legislation should be, but they hadn't been discussing it with him." He kept repeating his request for a meeting with Kennedy, and met rebuff after rebuff.

Finally, "at 10:00 a.m. on Monday, June 3, Johnson was allowed into the Oval Office." He was not to meet alone with JFK, but also with aides Ken O'Donnell, Ted Sorensen, and the president's brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy (RFK hated LBJ—the hatred was mutual—and undercut him constantly). "Since, at last, the President had asked Lyndon Johnson for advice about civil rights, he gave some." He did not know what was in the administration's bill, and knew of it only by reading about it in the *New York Times*, he said, nor had he sat in on any meetings, but then the master legislative strategist gave detailed advice on how to proceed—and how not to do so. His advice on strategy went unheeded.

Beyond that, this political genius LBJ who had been purely pragmatic, "who had despised politicians who talked about 'principled things,'" began talking about "a moral

¹⁰⁵ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power*, New York: Vintage/Random House, 2013, p.256.

commitment.” “Negroes are tired of this patient stuff and tired of this piecemeal stuff and what they want more than anything else is not an executive order or legislation, they want a moral commitment that he’s behind them.’ Kennedy hadn’t given them that commitment, he said. Legislation—no matter how well written it was—was only part of the answer to the civil rights problem, he said. ‘The Negroes feel and they’re suspicious that we’re just doing what we got to do [to keep their vote].’ . . . What Negroes are really seeking is moral force and to be sure that we’re on their side . . . and until they receive that assurance, unless it’s stated dramatically and convincingly, they’re not going to pay much attention to executive orders and legislation recommendations.’ . . . And only the President himself can give them that assurance.” President Kennedy then directed that LBJ and O’Donnell meet to discuss the issue in more detail. They did so, and O’Donnell reported back to the president.

“The next morning Johnson met with Kennedy again. And that afternoon was the first of a series of meetings that had been scheduled with leaders of various groups—this one was with a hundred executives of America’s largest retail chains—to mobilize opinion behind the civil rights effort. Kennedy had invited him at the last minute. And when he spoke, some members of the Kennedy Administration who had never seen Lyndon Johnson ‘revved up’ saw it now.” The Kennedy people had notoriously derided LBJ as “Uncle Cornpone” or “Rufus Cornpone,” to the delight of fellow sophisticates at their Georgetown cocktail parties and elsewhere—often within the vice president’s hearing. They now had to take notice.

Presidential adviser—and intellectual force—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was present. “Schlesinger felt almost as if he were watching ‘a Southern preacher.’ Kennedy was ‘wholly reasonable, appealing to the intellect. Johnson was evangelical. He was eloquent, all-out emotionally.’ Whatever doubts Schlesinger had entertained about his sincerity on the issue evaporated that afternoon. He realized now, he was to say, that Johnson was a ‘true believer.’ And anyone who observed the courtesy with which the President treated him at these meetings might have imagined for a moment that Lyndon Johnson was being given, at last, a significant role in the administration.” Kennedy “began to invoke him as an authority.” LBJ advised Kennedy to “make the point that while he could order Negroes into a foxhole in a foreign country to fight for the American flag, he couldn’t get them into southern restaurants while they were on their way to join their units to go to the war. They couldn’t get a cup of coffee while they were on their way to die for the flag, he said, and with his huge hand he grabbed the flagpole of the American flag that stood beside his desk, and shook it in his rage at the injustice.”¹⁰⁶ Like Lincoln, LBJ knew, and used, the power of language.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp, 257-262.

Rarely does language receive the attention it deserves, despite the quip that the pen is mightier than the sword. When it is “weaponized,” it takes on specific characteristics, and if it goes to the dark side becomes propaganda.

Propaganda

Studies of public opinion go back at least to the early 1920s, when a prominent journalist, Walter Lippmann, brought out his pioneering *Public Opinion*, a study of social psychology, media, and the ways in which attitudes develop.¹⁰⁷ Shortly thereafter, another journalist, Edward Bernays, an Austrian immigrant, wrote his controversial work, *Propaganda*.¹⁰⁸

Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, called for the “engineering of consent,” the deliberate manipulation of public opinion on behalf of both government and corporate interests using scientifically valid psychological techniques. Any perceptive reader should have recognized the potential threat to freedom. Bernays, however, saw propaganda as a social good (though he used it to benefit commercial interests, including the American Tobacco Company).

One should note that the term “propaganda” at the time had little of the negative connotation that emerged so forcefully in the 1930s, when Stalin’s Soviet Union, and various Fascist dictatorships—especially Germany under Hitler’s misnamed “National Socialism”—used scientific techniques to warp language and shape public opinion. Manipulation, distortion, and abuse of language led to violence, terror, and severe restrictions on freedom—even its elimination.

The roots of propaganda studies, though, reach further back than formal studies. Both Lippmann and Bernays had been key officials during World War One of President Woodrow Wilson’s “Committee on Public Information,” headed by George Creel; the notorious “Creel Committee.” The blurb on the 2005 edition credits Bernays with “eerily prescient vision for regimenting the collective mind,” and suggests that his *Propaganda* is “an essential read for all who wish to understand how power is used by the ruling elite of our society.”

Propaganda has advanced by orders of magnitude since Bernays, but he set the tone for much advertising in the 1930s and subsequently. Wendy Wall has analyzed brilliantly the use

¹⁰⁷ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922.

¹⁰⁸ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, New York: H. Liveright, 1928.

of propaganda techniques directed toward “Inventing the ‘American Way.’”¹⁰⁹ The Advertising Council, the National Association of Manufacturers, and corporate interests in general were concerned with friction between management and labor, and sought national unity during World War II and thereafter. They portrayed a “tripod of freedom,” that did incorporate such praiseworthy goals as civil liberties, representative democracy, religious freedom, and opposition to racism while concentrating on political goals such as anticommunism and, above all, “economic freedom.” Note that these goals were to have mixed results regarding freedom in general, but the overall effect was to warp understanding of freedom’s deeper meaning.

To foster unity, these business leaders drank deeply from the well of American popular culture and in the 1940s and 1950s conscripted even Superman, who became their spokesman for “Truth, Justice, and the American Way,” as they attempted to roll back the reforms of the New Deal. This campaign by the business community did not achieve all its goals, but on some levels it was so successful that that many Americans and some of their more noisy political leaders now seem to think of the term “free enterprise” as having been a prime factor in the American Revolution, perhaps a key principle of the Constitution, and possibly even having been conferred upon the nation by Christianity itself (or, among the more ecumenical, by the “Judeo-Christian tradition”). Wall, though, demonstrates that the term hardly existed before 1935 when “America’s corporate leaders” adopted a specific political strategy.¹¹⁰

After World War Two and Nazi Germany’s downfall, the noted literary and cultural critic George Steiner, wrote of the corruption of the German language. The Nazis, gleefully manufactured unparalleled linguistic ugliness and imposed it for their own sadistic purposes. They created mass barbarism and delusion among intelligent, and even educated, people—actually controlling a population.

Steiner argued that languages can demonstrate that they have within themselves the germs of their own dissolution. “Actions of the mind that were once spontaneous become mechanical, frozen habits (dead metaphors, stock similes, slogans). Words grow longer and more ambiguous. Instead of style, there is rhetoric. Instead of precise common usage, there is jargon.”¹¹¹ To be sure, Steiner admits, a Hitler would have found “venom and moral illiteracy”

¹⁰⁹ Wendy Wall, *Inventing the “American Way:” The Politics of Consensus From the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

¹¹¹ George Steiner, “The Hollow Miracle,” in Max J. Skidmore, ed., *Word Politics: Essays on Language and Politics*, Palo Alto: James E. Freel and Associates, 1972, pp. 27-28; the essay first appeared in *The Reporter Magazine* (February 18, 1960), and subsequently appeared in Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, New York: Atheneum, 1960.

in any language, but German was “ready to give hell a native tongue.” He asked how could a word such as *spritzen* “recover a sane meaning after having signified to millions the spurting of Jewish blood from knife points?”¹¹² Words, he said, gradually lost their meanings “and acquired nightmarish definitions. *Jude, Pole, Russe* came to mean two-legged lice, putrid vermin which good Aryans must squash, as a party manual said, ‘like roaches on a dirty wall.’ ‘Final solution,’ *endgültige Lösung*, came to signify the death of six million human beings in gas ovens.” Beyond the bestialities, the language was called upon “to enforce numerous falsehoods,” to say “light” when there was darkness, “victory,” when there was defeat.”¹¹³ This happened to a language, even though it is language “that has been the vessel of human grace and the prime carrier of civilization.”¹¹⁴ Fortunately, the German language demonstrated resilience, and did recover.

German was not unique, except possibly in the extremes to which it went. George Orwell has pointed to similar, if less dramatic, tendencies in English,¹¹⁵ and modern political discourse in America and elsewhere is hardly reassuring.

There were efforts to counter the assaults upon language. The most prominent of these was the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. The New York Public library has the Institute’s records, two linear feet (two boxes), in the Manuscripts and Archives Division [Institute]. The Library indicates that a group of social science scholars founded the Institute in New York City in 1937 in order to enable the public to “detect and analyze propaganda.” The IPA conducted research into the methods developed to influence public opinion, it published analyses of current problems, and it promoted the establishment of study groups in public schools for detecting propaganda. It published a monthly bulletin, *Propaganda Analysis* from 1937 to 1941. Additionally, the institute produced a number of books, the most prominent of which was *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, by Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, that analyzed radio speeches of the populist and anti-Semitic demagogue, Father Charles Coughlin.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 38.

¹¹⁵ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *Horizon* 13:76 (April 1946); reprinted countless times and widely available.

¹¹⁶ Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1939.

The New York Public Library's IPA website identifies these and provides the IPA's "seven common propaganda devices, 'The ABCs of Propaganda Analysis.'" These formed the basis for flyers and other materials supplied to schools, colleges, and "adult civic groups." Americans of a certain age are likely to remember classroom materials from their school days that built around these seven techniques from IPA's publication, *Propaganda Analysis*:

Name Calling—

Glittering Generalities—The propagandist uses them to create a favorable reaction to whatever is desired. A notable recent example is "family values." It also operates to create opposition to anything the propagandist dislikes. Consider the recent term "narco-terrorist." Terrorism in the first half of the twentieth century meant harsh and arbitrary measures employed against a country's own people by its government, often randomly in order to cow them into submission. Think of the unexpected Midnight knock on the door. More recently, the term means violent actions by foreign enemies to bring down a government, or disrupt a society.

"Narco terrorism," has no legal meaning, and in fact is nonsense. It would imply that drug dealers seek to overthrow America's government. Actually, they are seeking profit, not the destruction of a government. "Narco capitalist" would fit them far better, but would not achieve the propagandist's (read "the Trump administration's") goal of generating support for a murderous campaign against small boats near Venezuela

Transfer—this device uses the authority and prestige of something hearers respect or revere to associate it with something he or she is trying to get hearers to accept.

Testimonial—originally, this meant the obvious: associating something the propagandist wants accepted with a figure whom the hearer respects. Now it often includes entertainers, sports figures, or other celebrities often without regard to expertise.

Plain Folks—the use of an obviously populist technique to assert humble background, implying that it is superior to one of privilege.

Card Stacking—In this technique, half-truth masquerades as truth. A mediocre candidate becomes an "intellectual titan." Extremist elements become "freedom fighters."

Bandwagon—this technique "employs symbols, colors, music, movement, and all the dramatic arts" to convince the populace that "everyone agrees" that thus and so should be done, and that anyone who disagrees is out of step.

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis had a few quite active years, but “was dormant during World War II and in 1950 all operations ceased.¹¹⁷” Upon reflection, it would seem inevitable that the IPA would be controversial. Critics argued that it was too negative, that its efforts were simplistic, or that analyzing advertising would damage capitalism or the economy. An obvious objection would be that the habit of examining news for enemy propaganda would include building a resistance to America’s own wartime propaganda and thus undermine national solidarity. According to the New York Public Library’s materials, though, the IPA “maintains the reason it suspended its operations in 1942 was due to lack of sufficient funds and not the war.”

Undoubtedly, the techniques the IPA identified remain with us today, all over the world, throughout all political parties, and from candidates on all points along the political spectrum. They have been revised and expanded.

The Threat to Freedom from Fundamentalism and Literalism

There is yet another force that may be potentially even more important than propaganda techniques. It certainly is related to language, but is a force that works overtly against language itself, and even the foundation of much of rational thought, logic.

Especially in the United States, there is a powerful movement that emerged from fundamentalist-evangelical religion, but which has strongly influenced politics, economics, and other realms of human endeavor. It appears to be creating vast numbers of voters—and officeholders as well—who are mentally armed against science, against logical argument, and against the very elements of rational thought.

It is called “harmonization,” and springs from the need to protect the idea of biblical inerrancy; the belief that every word in the Bible is literally true. There are numerous inconsistencies in scripture, and instances of clear contradiction as well. The technique at work is easy to overlook or to dismiss, but a cultural anthropologist, Susan Friend Harding, examined

¹¹⁷ Institute for Propaganda Analysis records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Call Number: MssCol 1513 <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/1513> (access 10.06.2015); note: Library access requires advance notification

it in a remarkable study, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*.¹¹⁸ She describes the process at length.

As I put it in a review, “To the outsider, the most startling and ominous of Harding’s findings is the manner in which—in a defiance of reason—contradiction actually strengthens faith. The Bible is literally true in every respect. Identifying inconsistencies simply tests faith and (postmodernists take note) forces an acceptance of the inconsistent whole.” Believers are forced to harmonize “contradictions and infelicities according to interpretive conventions that presume, and thus reveal, God’s design.” In this sense adherents of biblical literalism are “largely—if not completely—shielded against any challenge to their belief; shielded against inroads from the very bases of modern thought: logic and reason.”¹¹⁹

Many Bible colleges that train fundamentalist-evangelical ministers have specific courses in “harmonization;” courses that deal with biblical inconsistencies and contradictions. The courses indoctrinate until students can accept impossible propositions as true, eliminating awareness that if one thing is true, the other cannot be. This does not mean that fundamentalist-evangelicals are unaware of biblical inconsistencies—they tend to be too well versed in scripture to argue that.

Vincent Crapanzano, also an anthropologist, immersed himself in the world of fundamentalist-evangelicalism, as did Harding. He says that most of those he interviewed are not bothered by biblical inconsistencies, and often ignore them. “There simply was one meaning, God’s meaning—the plain, ordinary meaning, and one intention, God’s intention, that was manifested through the divinely inspired authors of Scripture.” Fundamentalist-evangelicals, he argues, “adhere to what is popularly called a ‘domino approach’ to the Bible. For them to admit even one error in Scripture would be to destroy their faith in the whole.” This, he says, illustrates the “all-or-nothing” quality of fundamentalism.¹²⁰ When asked about biblical contradictions, many he interviewed dismissed them by saying such things “only appear as contradictions because we cannot understand God’s words fully.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

¹¹⁹ Max J. Skidmore, “Review of Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*,” *The European Legacy*, 7:3 (July 2002), p. 415; reprinted in Joey Skidmore, *The Review as Art and Communication*, London, Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2013, p. 87.

¹²⁰ Vincent Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America From the Pulpit to the Bench*, New York: The New Press, 2000, pp. 60-63.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p. 79.

The argument here is not to attack the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, or any theological principle, nor to judge what is appropriate for a religion; it is absolutely to say that such thought is dangerous outside the theological realm. If large numbers of people are trained to dismiss logical contradiction within their religion as though it is unimportant, they may think similarly when dealing with economics, politics, or other phenomena in the secular—the real—world. This is especially true in the United States, in which the power of fundamentalist-evangelicals has become a major force in one of its two major political parties.

Is it unreasonable to think that dismissal of evolution in religion, for example, may be related to rejection of scientific arguments outside of churches? Brendan Nyhan, who teaches government at Dartmouth College, more than a decade ago published an op ed piece in the *New York Times* that may be relevant here. He pointed to a study by Yale Law School professor, Dan Kahan, demonstrating that those who dismiss evolution and human-influenced climate change may be well informed, “they knew the science; they just weren’t willing to say that they believed in it.” In other words, if scientific consensus “contradicts their political or religious views,” they refuse to let that consensus affect their opinion. Nyhan says that his own research and that of his colleagues supports Kahan’s findings, and that “Factual and scientific evidence is often ineffective at reducing misperceptions and can even backfire on issues like weapons of mass destruction, health care reform and vaccines. With science, as with politics, identity often trumps the facts.”¹²²

The next day, economist Paul Krugman in his own column cited Nyhan’s essay and demonstrated that the same phenomenon affects many of even the most distinguished professional economists—especially with regard to monetary matters. Issues that should be strictly factual and based entirely on evidence, instead were overridden by “faith.” The problem was not ignorance, it was wishful thinking, he concluded. The late economic disaster was caused by a housing bubble, but mainstream economists (while initially shocked at the developments) “quickly rallied.” Somehow, they concluded that the financial crisis had been the “fault of liberals.” The great danger then facing the economy came, not from the crisis itself, “but from the efforts of policy makers to limit the damage.” Both economists and politicians such as Paul Ryan began to issue “dire warnings,” about “printing money,” warning “currency debasement and inflation” would ensue. That this did not happen, nor did it appear at all likely, in no way affected their arguments. Krugman noted that it is hardly the first time that “a politically appealing economic doctrine has been proved wrong by events,” but that most of the

¹²² Brendan Nyhan, “When Belief and Facts Collide,” *New York Times Sunday Review*, (July 6, 2014), p. 3.

analysts have followed the same flawed approach of climate-change deniers. They “have gone down the conspiracy-theory rabbit hole,” and claim that, despite the evidence, “we really do have soaring inflation, but the government is lying about the numbers.”

He asked why monetary theory is being treated like evolution or climate-change, rather than simply responding to the numbers, and concludes that “money is indeed a kind of theological issue.” Precisely in line with the argument here, Krugman says that “when faith—including faith-based economics—meets evidence, evidence doesn’t have a chance.”¹²³

Crapanzano does not allege that literalism in the law is rooted in American evangelicalism. He does not look to their religion to discern the roots of the interpretations of the legal literalists. “My aim is to delineate a mode of interpretation, whatever its source,” he says.¹²⁴

This, I agree, is what is important. Nevertheless, I argue that it would be unwise not to recognize the potential effect of fundamentalist thought—and literalist thought in general—on policy. Consider the effects of “originalism,” for example. Because of America’s overwhelming world influence, for instance, fundamentalist thought on American policy is almost always pernicious. In years past the US has banned “needle-exchange programs (thus contributing to the spread of AIDS), and family-planning programs, (thus contributing to poverty, starvation, and the subjugation of women).”¹²⁵ Moreover, religious extremism has effects even beyond US policy. Uganda’s 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Law provides life sentences for homosexuals. Uganda had laws against homosexuality as legacies of British colonialism, but the impetus for the recent cruelty came from American evangelists, active in Uganda conducting seminars, speaking publicly, and working closely with government officials there.

The advent of two Trump administrations has certainly intensified these irrational and cruel policies. Note how religious dogma and poor historical reasoning have permeated Justice Alito’s *Dobbs* decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, and attacking women’s reproductive freedom.

Education for Freedom and Self-Government

A great danger lies in insufficient preparation of the populace to meet the demands of self-government, and of freedom. However utopian it may now seem in these days of Trump’s MAGA, an effective education is a possibility. It will never be perfect, and nothing can ensure

¹²³ Paul Krugman, “Belief, Facts, and Money,” *The New York Times*, (July 7, 2014), p. A17.

¹²⁴ Crapanzano, p. xviii.

¹²⁵ Skidmore, “Review,” p. 8

that public choices will always be wise ones, but it would seem that societies can achieve a workable balance between critical awareness, on the one hand, and an acceptance of sufficient civic cohesion to encourage a functioning society, on the other; not easy, but possible. It will, of course, require at first the overturning of Republican dominance in the 2026 midterm elections.

One of the more prescient social critics and advocates of an education for freedom and democracy was the prominent literary figure from the middle twentieth century, Aldous Huxley. He observed totalitarian states, and examined tendencies elsewhere, going beyond literary satire to offer alternatives. He recognized that the mid-century evils were not confined to the obvious examples such as Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR.

In 1958, he published an extended essay, *Brave New World Revisited*, evaluating changes since his 1932 *Brave New World*. Many of the evils he warned in his novel that he thought would come in 500 years were already in place.

Unfortunately, his fiction received more attention than did his prescriptions. Perhaps his influence was brought to a halt by the timing of his death which ensured that it would receive no attention whatever: he died on 22 November 1963, the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Despite the lack of attention it has received, time has not lessened the force of Huxley's thought.¹²⁶

“An ethical system that is based upon a fairly realistic appraisal of the data of experience,” Huxley wrote, “is likely to do more good than harm.” Sadly, though, many systems have been based on a view of the nature of things “that is hopelessly unrealistic,” and certainly an ethic of this sort “is likely to do more harm than good.” Until rather recently, he said, bad weather and numerous misfortunes were assumed to be the result of malevolent magicians—it was a duty to search them out. That duty was “divinely ordained in the second Book of Moses: ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’ The systems of ethics and law that were based upon this erroneous view of the nature of things were the cause (during the centuries when they were taken most seriously by men in authority) of the most appalling evil.” Such an “orgy of spying lynching and judicial murder,” based on the erroneous view of magic, he said, had not since been duplicated until the time of the Nazis and Stalinists, “when the Communist ethic, based on erroneous views about economics, and the Nazi ethic, based upon erroneous views about race commanded and justified atrocities on an even greater scale.”

¹²⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, combined edition, 2004 [1932 and 1958].

Even in western democracies, he argued, governments and business had, or soon would have, the abilities of what he called “mind-manipulation” that he had portrayed in *Brave New World*. Unless prevented, societies will make use of all the techniques available. “If this kind of tyranny is to be avoided,” he said, “we must begin without delay to educate ourselves and our children for freedom and self-government.”¹²⁷ Within three years, President Eisenhower in his Farewell Address on January 17, 1961 gave a similar warning against the power and actions of the “military, industrial, complex”:

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.¹²⁸

As Huxley envisioned it, an education for freedom, for self-government, should be an education “first of all in facts and values—the fact of individual diversity and genetic uniqueness and the value of freedom, tolerance and mutual charity which are the ethical corollaries of these facts.” Most important: “correct knowledge and sound principles are not

¹²⁷ Huxley, pp. 325-327.

¹²⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Text of the Address by President Dwight Eisenhower, Broadcast and televised From His Office in the White House,” Press Release Office of James C. Hagerty, Press Secretary to the President (January 17, 1961)
http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/farewell_address/1961_01_17_Press_Release.pdf (access 10. 6.2015).

enough. An unexciting truth may be eclipsed by a thrilling falsehood. A skillful appeal to passion is often too strong for the best of good resolutions.” He anticipated Drew Westen’s findings mentioned above, and also was correct that counteracting “false and pernicious propaganda” is a huge task. The only way to neutralize it, he said, is “by a thorough training in the art of analyzing its techniques and seeing through its sophistries. Language,” he said, has made it possible for humanity to achieve civilization, but “language has also inspired that sustained folly and that systematic, that genuinely diabolic wickedness which are no less characteristic of human behavior than are the language-inspired virtues,” including sustained forethought and benevolence.¹²⁹

There may be time still to heed his powerful admonition. “In their anti-rational propaganda” he said, “the enemies of freedom systematically pervert the resources of language in order to wheedle or stampede their victims into thinking, feeling and acting as they, the mind-manipulators, want them to think, feel and act. An education for freedom (and for the love and intelligence which are at once the conditions and the results of freedom) must be, among other things an education in the proper uses of language.” All the information for such an education is now available, he says, noting that philosophers have long studied meaning, have analyzed symbols, and have developed the intellectual materials required for “an education in the art of distinguishing between the proper and improper use of symbols” at every level from kindergarten to the doctorate. “Yet,” he complains, “children are nowhere taught, in any systematic way, to distinguish true from false, or meaningful from meaningless statements.” Answering his own question, “why is this so”? he says that even in democratic countries their elders “do not want them to be given this kind of education.”

This led him to the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. “With all the Allied governments engaging in ‘psychological warfare,’ an insistence upon the desirability of analyzing propaganda,” he said wryly, “seemed a bit tactless.” Even before IPA closed, he said, there were many who found its activities to be “profoundly objectionable.” Certain educators feared that propaganda analysis would make adolescents “unduly cynical.” Military authorities condemned it, and were fearful that it could lead recruits to “analyze the utterances of drill sergeants.” Then came advertisers and the clergy. Advertisers objected because they feared that propaganda analysis might “undermine brand loyalty and reduce sales,” while from the clergy came the charge that propaganda analysis might “undermine belief and diminish churchgoing.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Huxley, pp. 327-328.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 329-330.

All these concerns, he said, were well-founded. “Too searching a scrutiny by too many of the common folk of what is said by their pastors and masters might prove to be profoundly subversive.” He saw the problem as one of balance between tradition and civic cohesion, on the one hand, and rational analysis, on the other. He believed a middle ground between gullibility on the one extreme and being “helplessly under the spell of professional mind-manipulators,” on the other, would be possible. Education should arm the public against “an uncritical belief in sheer nonsense,” without making the people reject every well-meant utterance that is not explicitly rational. There may be times when symbolism and tradition have their own values apart from the strictly rational.

He concedes that analysis alone is not the answer, implicitly recognizing that a completely intellectual approach, analysis without regard for feeling, emotion, and for relevant but non-rational factors is not enough. There must also be a positive approach, “the enunciation of a set of generally acceptable values based upon a solid foundation of facts. The value, first of all, of individual freedom, based upon the facts of human diversity and genetic uniqueness; the value of charity and compassion, based upon the old familiar fact that, whatever their mental and physical diversity, love is as necessary to human beings as food and shelter; and finally, the value of intelligence, without which love is impotent and freedom unattainable.” This, he asserted, is the “set of values” that will provide the “criterion by which propaganda may be judged.”¹³¹ The emergence of Trump’s MAGA movement makes clear Huxley’s prescience. It is remarkable that he died long before the Trump phenomenon existed.

Conclusion

Freedom is more severely threatened today than at any time in the history of the United States. Even Confederate secession would have confined its reactionary political philosophy to a small segment of the country that separated from the rest. Today’s Trump fuelled MAGA attempts to bully, warp, twist, and ultimately to destroy the best of American political thought. That would mean the failure of the American experiment; humanity’s greatest attempt at human freedom. Time is running out to reverse the sinister trend, but it may yet be possible to do so. Of the many things that must be marshalled in defense of freedom, a few stand out: Certainly, one is the proper use of language, and the ability to recognize when it is being misused or

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 330-331.

abused. The key will be whether the 2026 midterm elections will halt the degradation of the American system.

Populist appeals may lead both to beneficial, or to detrimental, action. The peril is less from populism, as such, than from those who would use public appeals for something other than for the public good. We need not fear “populism;” we need only to recognize and guard against irrationality, misuse of language, and appeals that would do harm whether or not they are well-intentioned. Our task is to educate. The need is to stress, over and over, the public good and to frame our arguments in the most effective manner.

Nyhan suggests that we seek to disconnect “the association between identity and factual beliefs on high-profile issues.” He notes that one can believe in human-induced climate change and still be a conservative Republican, for instance, such as former US Representative Bob Inglis. Similarly, one can be a climate scientist and still be an evangelical Christian such as Katherine Hayhoe. This will be necessary in the long run, but we must first create a blue wave—or better yet, a blue tsunami—to crash MAGA in 2026.

Looking ahead, Language will always be a key. It is vital that appeals be crafted carefully, with attention to clarity, and that they be crafted to appeal to the imagination as well as to the intellect. Our audience must be able to exercise skill in analyzing the language it hears. The public must accept that there is a “public good,” and be able to recognize the extent to which that public good must be the true effect of whatever policies are being advocated. Additionally, we must recognize that we are all in this together.

The public good, then, must be judged on the basis of what is best for all, not merely for the greatest number. As a society, we must be able to recognize policies that enhance human freedom. Moreover, freedom must be properly defined and understood so as to be truly meaningful.