

FULL-FLEDGED FREEDOM

On the Fourth of July Americans light up the sky with fireworks to celebrate their freedom. Yet, as the United States commemorates its 235th birthday, two-thirds of the country believes America is heading in the wrong direction. What accounts for the widespread pessimism in “The Land of the Free?” Certainly, economic woes have dampened the national outlook, but the malaise runs deeper than the pocketbook. Perhaps Americans are unhappy because they have lost touch with the true meaning of the freedom they cherish and so heartily celebrate on Independence Day.

Over the years, Americans have subscribed to three myths, or half-truths, about freedom. This partial understanding of freedom undercuts relationships, enfeebles the rule of law, and leads to an aversion to responsibility. By looking briefly at each myth, this article endeavors to aid leaders in rediscovering the essence of authentic freedom.

Myth #1: Freedom is doing what I want to do.

The Founding Fathers designed the United States government to keep citizens free from oppression. Americans don't like being told what to do, and undoubtedly protection from tyranny has immense value. Yet insisting on the liberty to do as one pleases, when taken to the extreme, both isolates and debilitates people. Individuals bent on fulfilling their every desire overindulge their appetites and wreck their relationships.

For the Founding Fathers, freedom depended on more than just the removal of oppression. They understood that freedom most fully expresses itself in a relationship characterized by unity, sharing, and accountability. They named the new country that they created, “The *United* States of America” since its existence rested upon the mutual commitment of 13 separate colonies. In the system of government they devised, the states shared power with the federal government. None of the states could break off and do its own thing, but neither could the federal government dictate to the states how to conduct all of their affairs. Additionally, the Founders divided power between three distinct branches of government, creating a system of checks and balances in which each branch always remains answerable to another.

American pop culture often idealizes the singleness of college years as the phase of life when a person experiences the pinnacle of freedom. Yet the Founders actually may have regarded this unattached, self-focused, and largely unaccountable season of life as the time when freedom is most at risk. Instead, they likely would see a healthy marriage, with its give-and-take, joint commitment, and shared sacrifices, as a better metaphor for the apex of freedom. For the Founders, freedom was not just about independence, but also about linking up with others to make a valuable contribution to the world.

Myth #2: Freedom means doing away with restrictions.

The American Revolution was fueled by the colonial backlash to heavy taxes levied by the British Crown. The sense of injustice felt by Americans was not due to the tax itself, but to the fact that residents of the colonies had no representation in Parliament, where the tax laws were enacted. The colonists wanted to be free from a system of government in which they were subject to decisions of legislators on the other side of the ocean.

Over time, the original protest against arbitrary taxation has given way to a prevailing American attitude which instinctively opposes all limits on behavior. Increasingly, people in the United States equate freedom with the elimination of rules. However, the fact that freedom involves limits seems painfully obvious at a time when so many Americans suffer from indebtedness and obesity. Clearly, setting a budget aids the quest for financial freedom, and faithfully observing a diet helps to keep a person free from physical ailments. Budgeting and dieting, by imposing limits, bring much-needed structure that protects freedom rather than curtailing it.

Myth #3: Freedom is a function of a person's surroundings.

Most people think that others determine their freedom. They believe that liberty depends on external conditions. Consequently, when they encounter problems in society, they're more likely to blame the system than to volunteer a solution.

Genuine freedom, however, is an inside job, and each person must take responsibility to cultivate it. As Dwight D. Eisenhower observed, "Freedom has its life in the hearts, the actions, the spirit of men and so it must be daily earned and refreshed—else like a flower cut from its life-giving roots, it will wither and die." Freedom is not simply the political inheritance of present-day Americans, but also their daily challenge. In the words of Franklin Roosevelt, "In the truest sense, freedom cannot be bestowed; it must be achieved."

Summary

Over the centuries, the American understanding of freedom has atrophied to the point where many people only partly grasp its meaning. While it's true that freedom signifies the absence of oppressive rulers and rules, genuine freedom involves much more than the removal of external restraint. Freedom occurs when people join together and share their strengths on behalf of a common cause, when they live within the bounds of well-chosen limitations, and when they accept their share of responsibility for creating a better world. At its core, freedom is relational, regulative, and responsible.



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