DOI: 10.51845.39.2.9

The Four Freedoms Essays, Eight Decades Later

by Donald M. Bishop

The evidence is overwhelming. American students have, for many years, been losing ground in their knowledge of American history and government. Educators are actively debating how to remedy these deficits. There are many new programs that focus on civics, but adding and improving the study of history has taken a second-row seat.

Of course there are challenges. The history of the American nation sprawls across centuries and decades, regions, faiths, political visions, conflicts, wars, economic stresses, and the experiences of different races, ethnicities, and genders. Add to that list the power of individual motives—for land, property, money, recognition, and power. It's no small task for historians to write a narrative or teach a course that weaves these factors together.

Daniel Buck of the American Enterprise Institute, moreover, has written of a broader need for America's "cultural inheritance" to be preserved and cherished. "As students will inherit our society—its buildings, laws, norms, traditions, and government—so too they will inherit our most beautiful, compelling, and profound literary works."

For those who teach history and design courses, a fresh appreciation of the Four Freedoms is timely. Proclaimed in President Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address, they were given artistic expression in Norman Rockwell's four famous paintings. Four accompanying essays were literary themes, and another essay circulated at home and abroad by the Office of War Information provides lessons in argument and rhetoric. The Four Freedoms proved so influential that in 1948 they helped shape the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Paintings Needed Words

The inspiration for Norman Rockwell's iconic Four Freedoms paintings was President Franklin Roosevelt's description of "four essential human freedoms" in his 1941 State of the Union Address. The artist sensed, however, the need to "take the Four Freedoms out of the noble language and put them in terms everybody can understand." His paintings were immediately acclaimed

when they were published in four issues of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943.

Preparing to publish the paintings, the editors knew that the images needed words too. The magazine thus commissioned three then-famous men of letters, along with an immigrant from the Philippines, to write four short accompanying essays. The paintings have enduring appeal, but in the eight decades since they were published the essays have been neglected. In history courses that increasingly feature reading original documents, the Four Freedoms essays merit inclusion.

Freedom of Speech

Accompanying Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* was a "Parable" by Booth Tarkington (1869-1946), then the "dean of popular American letters." Now largely forgotten, the Indiana author wrote the best-selling *Penrod* series of novels of boyhood, a popular novel of adolescent infatuation, *Seventeen*, and his Pulitzer Prize novels, *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Alice Adams*. The last two became movies starring Orson Welles and Katherine Hepburn, respectively.

Tarkington's short story was set "in a small chalet on the mountain road" near the Brenner pass between Italy and Austria sometime before the First World War. A young painter named Adolph and a young journalist named Benito meet. Strangers who meet sometimes say things to one another that they keep to themselves even with friends, and in the story the two young men admit their will to power. They both know that freedom of speech is an obstacle to their designs. Tarkington's young Hitler says that to attain and keep power he must destroy freedom of speech "by means of purge ... a form of carbolic acid that would include the wife and child."

Tarkington had absorbed the essence of oppression from the Soviet purges of the 1930s and from Hitler and *Mein Kampf*. This is not Tarkington's best story, but his discussion of Freedom of Speech vs. "the purge" is on the mark. Had, for instance, young Saddam and young Fidel met, they might have had a like conversation.

Freedom from Fear

Rockwell's *Freedom from Fear* shows a husband and wife standing at the bedside of their two sleeping children. It was paired with a "Text" by Stephen Vincent Benét (1898-1943).

A few years ago, visiting Harper's Ferry in West Virginia, I found that Benét's epic poem of the Civil War, *John Brown's Body*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1929, is known by every ranger at the National Park. But few other Americans still recognize his name. One summary of Benét's life now dismisses him as "a talented writer of middlebrow literature, comparable to Longfellow, Carl Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsay."

In the 1930s Benét had become alarmed by the rise of totalitarianism, and his collected works contain many admirable poems ("Litany for Dictatorships," "Ode to Austrian Socialists," "Nightmare at Noon"), short stories

("Blood of Martyrs" and "Into Egypt"), and a radio script, "Listen to the People") that deserve a new appreciation, as we are now mindful of how the totalitarian urges and methods of, say, Iran and China compare to those of the European fascists of the 1930s. Many of his wartime radio plays echo the same themes.

"We know fear," wrote Benét, "armed Fear," and "innocence, good will, distance, peaceable intent, will not keep those children safe from the fear in the sky."

Roosevelt, Rockwell, and Benét knew the threat as enemy bombers. Since 1943 Americans have known ever more fearsome weapons delivered by air—A-bombs, H-bombs, ICBM's, Scuds, hijacked airliners, missiles, and now drones. Every American parent trembled with that old fear on September 11, 2001. Ukrainians know missiles and drones. Rockwell and Benét were more prophetic than they could have imagined.

In his story, Benét traced history as a form of progress away from fear, but his tone is democratic. "No one man did this by himself. It took many men and women, over many years. It took saints and martyrs and prophets—and the common people." He asked, "what do we mean by 'freedom from fear'?"

> We do not mean freedom from responsibility—freedom from struggle and toil, from hardship and danger.... But we have the chance ... to destroy the worst fears that harry man today — the fear of starving to death, the fear of being a slave, the fear of being stamped into the dust because he is one kind of man and not another, the fear of unprovoked attack and ghastly death for himself and for his children because of the greed and power of willful and evil men and deluded nations.

Benét died at age 44 on March 13, 1943, the day his essay was published alongside Rockwell's painting. When war came, he had plunged into what he called "propaganda work," and he took on a punishing schedule of writing and editing at the Council for Democracy. His heart attack was attributed to overwork and exhaustion.

Freedom from Want

The most remembered and cherished of the four Rockwell paintings is certainly *Freedom from Want*, showing an American family gathered at Thanksgiving. The essay, however, conveys a different mood. To write the "Text" that accompanied the painting, the magazine chose the Philippine immigrant Carlos Bulosan (1914-1956), tracking down the itinerant worker on the West Coast.

Bulosan used "we" to mean farm laborers and mill hands facing hard times during the Depression. Like his 1943 novel, *America Is in the Heart*, now a staple of courses in Asian American studies, the essay is suffused with pain from the great distance between American ideals and American reality. He elided the fight for labor justice and the fight against the Axis when he wrote: "If you want to know what we are—We are Marching!"

Bulosan's essay and Henry Fonda's final peroration in the Hollywood classic *The Grapes of Wrath* (directed by John Ford, 1940) seem cut from the same cloth. Bulosan called for collective bargaining and an end to lynching, police brutality, and violence against the labor movement, but he pointed as ardently to freedom of worship and expression. When he said, "The America we hope to see is not merely a physical but also a spiritual and intellectual world," and when he said the reason to ease hunger is to allow mankind to contemplate freedom, he was pointing out the synergy of all the Four Freedoms.

Freedom of Worship

Rockwell's *Freedom of Worship* portrayed many faces at prayer, "each according to the dictates of his own conscience." In his accompanying essay, Will Durant (1885-1981), using "church" as a synonym for "religion" in a way Americans no longer do, asked the reader to imagine a country congregation coming together on the Sabbath. "This little church is the first and final symbol of America," he said, in a warm portrayal of faith.

> The poetry of their ritual redeems the prose of their daily toil; the prayers they pray are secret summonses to their better selves; the songs they sing are shouts of joy in their refreshened strength. The commandments they receive, through which they can live with one another in order and peace, come to them as the imperatives of an inescapable deity, not as the edicts of questionable men. Through these commands they are made part of a divine drama, and their harassed lives take on a scope and dignity than cannot be canceled out by death.

In 1943 the horrors of Hitler's final solution were known by few and acknowledged by fewer. When we look at the Second World War in retrospect, however, we know that whatever geopolitical reasons led America into the battle, human rights and religious freedom lay at the core of the struggle. Durant knew this, even though the full horror of the Holocaust was not yet revealed, writing, "Therefore, when we denounce the imprisonment of the heroic [Protestant pastor Martin] Niemoller, the silencing of the brave [Catholic Archbishop of Munich, Michael Cardinal] Faulhaber, we are defending the freedom of the German people as well as of the human spirit everywhere."

And this stirring final paragraph:

> When we yield our sons to war, it is in the trust that their sacrifice will bring to us and our allies no inch of alien soil, no selfish monopoly of the world's resources or trade, but only the privilege of winning for all peoples the most precious gifts in the orbit of life— freedom of body and soul, of movement and enterprise, of thought and utterance, of faith and worship, of hope and charity, of a human fellowship with all men. If our sons and brothers accomplish this ... it will be an achievement beside which all the triumphs of Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon will be a little thing. To that purpose they are offering their youth and their blood. To that purpose and to them we others, regretting that we cannot stand beside them, dedicate the remainder of our lives.

One More Essay, Four More Authors

Reading one more essay—"The United Nations Fight for the Four Freedoms," published in 1942 by the Office of War Information—can yield a fuller grasp of the Rockwell paintings and the four pieces in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The magazine's essays were aimed at the American public, to know the war's aims and the reason for its enormous sacrifices. The OWI pamphlet, on the other hand, was also addressed to other nations—allies, neutrals, and enemies. Reading all five of the essays helps us understand how the same Four Freedoms were pitched to different audiences.

The OWI pamphlet was written by four then-famous authors—E. B. White, Malcolm Cowley, Max Lerner, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Beginning with "Beyond the war lies the peace," it contrasted the visions of the Axis powers and the allies (The United Nations) for the postwar order. It powerfully traced the vision of a peaceful world animated by the Four Freedoms. The pamphlet also helps us understand President Roosevelt's vision. The fear addressed by President Roosevelt came from external aggression—from without rather than within. Today we contemplate domestic sources of fear.

As for "want," the President's State of the Union address assumed that his New Deal programs would go far to eliminate "want" at home, and progress in agriculture, shared with the world, would reduce hunger and want in other nations. In 1941, the President called for "economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants." After the war, his commitment was expressed in tariff reductions, "free but fair" trade, and an economic order framed by rules and by organizations like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and other international bodies like the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program (WFP). This vision animated the international trade and development policies of the United States well into this century, and reading the essay invites class discussion of, say, tariffs and foreign aid.

Reflections from the Present

Yes, Norman Rockwell mostly presented a white bread America. Yet it's also worth noting that *Freedom of Worship* showed men and women of minority faiths and that the individual portrayed in the painting's upper left corner was the first black American ever shown on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. That more recent artists have offered more diverse portrayals, parodies, and criticisms show that Americans are still in dialog with Rockwell and FDR.

Students who view Rockwell's *Freedom from Fear* and read Benet's essay today are likely to ask about American and Israeli bombing of targets in Iran—and perhaps the long American debate

over "collateral damage." Class discussion might be framed with a review of "Just War" principles and responses to "willful and evil men."

Then and Now

Some years ago in Beijing, I asked a renowned Chinese scholar what he thought was the core of America's ideology. He confessed that he had been looking for just such a comprehensive statement for years, but American thinking was messy, a bundle of sprawling contradictions. The only consistent principle he had been able to discover, he told me, was "freedom."

"Freedom!" For hundreds of years Americans have had diverse thoughts about its meaning. Washington, Hamilton, Garrison, Webster, Lincoln, Douglass, Anthony, TR, Booker T. Washington, DuBois, Debs, Hoover, Hughes, Dr. King, Bush, Hannah-Jones, Jonah Goldberg, and many others—all have contemplated, and all have argued, its contours. They, and many others, have all shaped how Americans think about freedom. The Rockwell paintings and the four essays merit a place in the continuing debates.

Listening to current American debates over social change, many voices urge the rejection, discrediting, overturning, reframing, or transformation of the way Americans understand the past. I have long been persuaded, however, that enduring social change is more effectively achieved when it begins with, draws upon, and builds from the inspirations of the past. That was among Dr. King's most powerful insights: he called Americans not to abandon the promises of the Declaration of Independence, but to fulfill them, and to embrace the brotherhood professed by the nation's religious traditions. In his view, meaningful change had to grow out of continuity as well as reform.

If Americans contend over the true meanings and shapes of "freedom," the Four Freedoms essays can enlarge our conversations.

Donald M. Bishop *is a retired Foreign Service Officer, now a Krulak Center Distinguished Fellow at Marine Corps University. He last appeared in* AQ *in the fall of 2024 with a review essay on the film and the book* The Mortal Storm.