

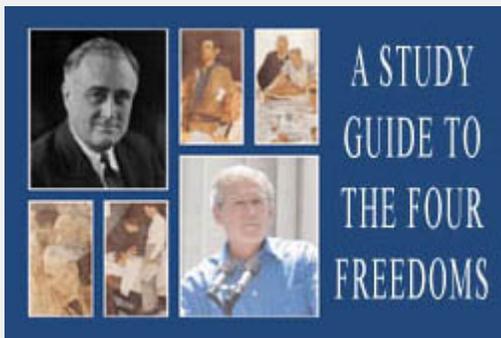
Freedoms

Ethical Dimensions to American Foreign Policy

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A Study Guide to the Four Freedoms

FDR's Four Freedoms are as familiar to me as my hometown of Seattle, Washington. They are something that I, as an American citizen, have taken for granted all my life. Where would I – where would we all – be today without the freedoms of expression, or worship, from want, and from fear?

But sometimes an innovative experience can shed new light on a familiar place or set of ideas. So it was during the four-part lecture series, "America and the World: Ethical Dimensions to Power," held at Eckerd College during the past year and

cosponsored by the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs. The five speakers in the series – Nancy Birdsall, John B. Judis, William F. Schulz, Michael J. Smith, and Joel Rosenthal – focused on the ethical choices America has faced in crafting its post-9/11 foreign policy. Specifically, they examined the areas of human rights, empire building, economic justice, and development.

At some point during the series, it struck me and a number of others that these speakers were providing a kind of report card on the progress the United States has made with realizing FDR's vision of the post-WWII world order. Steeped as I was in FDR's New Deal literature from working on my book, *The Global New Deal*, I was curious to see how far we had come in constructing a world order based on ethical principles.¹ Had we made substantial progress, or were we regressing, particularly since the attacks of 9/11? Certain common normative themes emerged from these notable scholars and practitioners, which we summarize in this booklet on the Four Freedoms.

The Four Freedoms

On January 1, 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) slowly dictated in his small study on the second floor of the White House his famous declaration of hope for "a world founded upon four essential human freedoms": freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion; freedom from want; and

freedom from fear. FDR believed these were not a vision for “a distant millennium” but “a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation.” Newspaper editors declared that the president had given the world “a new Magna Carta of democracy,” and the Four Freedoms became the moral cornerstone of the United Nations.² Accordingly, the Four Freedoms formed the basis of the internationalist ethical principles found in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that arose out of the great depression and the world wars of the twentieth century.

We should underline the point that in their original context, the Four Freedoms were designed as a global moral framework, on which to base the restructuring of international relations after World War II. While FDR’s “New Deal” was primarily a domestic program of reform intended to protect the weak and vulnerable in the United States, the Four Freedoms addressed a larger stage. FDR realized that national security and economic prosperity for our country depended upon the creation of a cooperative world system based on ethical principles.

FDR called for freedom of speech and religion “everywhere in the world.” He sought freedom from want in “world terms” meaning “economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants everywhere in the world.” And, finally, freedom from fear translated into world terms meant “a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.” FDR called for a “new moral order” based on the “supremacy of human rights everywhere.”

FDR thus provides us with a planetary foundation to ethical world leadership. In essence, he made the claim that it is morally and politically unacceptable to ignore global human rights concerns, including the plight of the world’s poor. This ethical conclusion is based not only on abstract moral principles but also on a new understanding of national security. FDR realized that security for U.S. citizens (freedom from fear) could not be attained through a sole focus on the assertion of military power. He recognized that a state of constant fear, fueled by the arms race, does not create secure rule, but rather a condition of instability and insecurity. Global security, on the other hand, can be built on principles including freedom and democracy, instead of militarism. FDR’s first freedom, “freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world,” is thus central to the creation at home of a secure and just America.

To a significant extent, the current Bush administration has prioritized FDR’s Four Freedoms in its foreign policy—democracy promotion (freedom of speech and expression), faith-based initiatives (freedom to worship), free trade and economic liberalization (freedom from want), and security and the war on terrorism (freedom from fear). In this pamphlet we explore the difficult ethical choices the Bush administration confronts as it tries to implement this vision.

The Four Freedoms as Guiding Principles

Few dispute the position of hegemonic dominance held by the world’s sole superpower, the United States, in world politics today. On almost all indicators of power resources, the United States has emerged, since at least the fall of the Berlin Wall, as the world’s most potent and forceful state. Such power gives America the potential to do both enormous harm and immense good. America’s moral legitimacy rests, to a large degree, on how the country navigates these moral hazards.

International relations and foreign policy require moral choice. Policy-makers may justify their goals and actions as being “in the national interest.” Yet there are moral consequences to their decisions, even if policy-makers remain unaware of the moral nature of their choices. Ethical action in the global community involves moral restraints on state and non-state actors, as well as moral duties. Globalization enhances the importance of such ethical action. All states, including the United States, are faced with the challenges and vulnerabilities of economic, environmental, and security interdependence.

Scholars at the Carnegie Council have long argued that the precondition to ethical action is moral awareness. Most citizens recognize the many ways in which our private lives are filled with ethical choices regarding our personal behavior and our treatment of fellow human beings. The decisions of policy makers regarding state behavior toward other states, religions, and the poor are also filled with ethical choices. Such decisions have moral consequences, especially those made on narrowly defined grounds of short-term “national interest.”

FDR's Four Freedoms provide an ethical vision for policy-makers and citizens for foreign policy in today's complicated world. These four ideas—freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—provide a moral compass and an ethical scale upon which to evaluate plans of action and their consequences. The trade-offs between valid rights-based claims are difficult. But a true “moral politician” will struggle, as Kant wrote so long ago, to use ethics to “cut through the knot that politics cannot untie.”

1. William F. Felice, *The Global New Deal: Economic and Social Human Rights in World Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

2 . Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *FDR and the Creation of the UN* (Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 26-27.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (1795).

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