

Liberty and Justice for All

From 1775 to 1783, America fought for its freedom from the British. Between 1861 and 1865, the northern American states fought the southern American states for the freedom of slaves. The concept of freedom has been an important, longstanding American belief. It is so important that it is even the theme of our national anthem. 250 years later, it is still the crucial concept that our nation is built upon. All of these years later, we come to a critical question: is freedom a right we enjoy or a responsibility we uphold? In short, freedom is a responsibility. It is something that we must ensure every American citizen has equal access to. But what is this abstract concept of freedom and why is it our responsibility as American citizens to uphold it?

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” (American Constitution, Constitutional Convention, p. 1). This is the infamous preamble to our constitution. It laid the groundwork for our nation, but what does it mean? According to our Bill of Rights, “The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.” (Bill of Rights, James Madison, Amendment 11). These go hand in hand to mean that American citizens have certain, inalienable rights, such as freedom of speech, right to a fair trial by one’s peers, and freedom of religion. It is what the Founding Fathers decided 250 years ago to be moral and legal entitlements of the American people. These rights can never be taken away according to these founding documents. But what if someone tries to take these rights?

In 1941 to 1945, Hitler tried to do just that. He tried to take away the freedom of the Jews, the Roma, disabled peoples, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and more (Minority Victims of the Holocaust, Holocaust Museum Houston). The Nazis were not always people who supported the genocide; sometimes, they were people who simply did not fight back. Years later, we learn about the horrors of the holocaust and all the people who were killed. If German citizens had spoken against Hitler, it might have never happened. But there were few who did. These groups paid for others’ fear with their lives. Though the Holocaust occurred eighty or so years ago in Germany, there is a poem that perfectly exemplifies why we must intentionally uphold our freedom.

Pastor Martin Niemöller, the author of the famous poem, *First They Came*, was “Initially an antisemitic Nazi supporter, his views changed when he was imprisoned in a concentration camp for speaking out against Nazi control of churches. He later encouraged Germans to take responsibility for Nazi atrocities.” (Pastor Martin Niemöller, Holocaust Memorial Day, p. 1). Witnessing for himself the horrors committed against these people groups, he wrote “First they came for the Communists/ And I did not speak out/ Because I was not a Communist/ Then they came for the Socialists/ And I did not speak out/ Because I was not a Socialist/ Then they came

for the trade unionists/ And I did not speak out/ Because I was not a trade unionist/ Then they came for the Jews/ And I did not speak out/ Because I was not a Jew/ Then they came for me/ And there was no one left/ To speak out for me.” (First They Came, Pastor Martin Niemöller, p. 1). He spoke out for no one and for the same reasons, no one spoke out for him. This poem showcases why we as American citizens must protect our right to freedom with both our voices and our actions. We must protect these rights because it is not a world of us vs. them; we, as the United States, must actually stand united to defend the rights of everyone. Sitting idly by will ensure nothing except that our freedom is vulnerable.

Our responsibility to uphold the right of freedom is our due to our fellow citizens. We are a large and diverse group, but we are all Americans. When we fought the Revolutionary war against the British, we fought for the freedom of the American people. The same occurred when we fought for the abolition of slavery. The concept of freedom has made its way into even our Pledge of Allegiance. The Pledge itself calls for “liberty and justice for all.” (The Pledge of Allegiance, Baptist minister Francis Bellamy, p. 1). When our founding documents, from the Constitution to the Bill of Rights, and even a thirty-one word pledge of allegiance all call for freedom, liberty, and justice for all, we as American citizens have no choice but to uphold this long-established belief.

Source Links:

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>

<https://hnh.org/library/research/minority-victims-guide/>

<https://hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller/>

<https://hmd.org.uk/resource/pastor-martin-niemoller-hmd-2021/>

<https://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>