The Four Freedoms Turn 70

Speech
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Seventy years ago, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his famous Four Freedoms speech as he was steeling the United States for war. Three years later he elaborated further on his vision of human rights and security in a State of the Union address delivered at a moment when the democratic way of life was under assault around the world.

Roosevelt framed the war aims broadly in terms of core American values. And he warned that “enduring peace cannot be bought at the cost of other people’s freedom.”

Roosevelt’s premise was that our liberty rested on Four Freedoms: Freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. He identified freedom of speech and freedom to worship as core civil and political rights, just as we do now. He defined “freedom from fear” as a reduction in arms, so as to diminish our collective destructive capabilities – and that’s a component of the U.S. National Security Strategy to this day. And with the indelible phrase -- “freedom from want” -- Roosevelt linked the liberty of our people with their basic economic and social wellbeing. This concept is being echoed today on the streets of Cairo, Tunis and other Arab cities.

Roosevelt concluded with words that still guide us today: “Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere.”

There are many ways to think about what should or should not count as a human right. Perhaps the simplest and most compelling is that human rights reflect what a person needs in order to live a meaningful and dignified existence. It is the core belief in the supreme value of human dignity that leads us, as Americans, to embrace the idea that people should not be tortured, discriminated against, deprived of the right to choose their government, silenced, or barred from observing the religion of their choosing. As President Obama has made clear, it is this same belief in human dignity that underlies our concern for the health, education, and wellbeing of our people.
Human dignity has a political component and an economic component – and these are inexorably linked. Participation, transparency and accountability are valuable not just because they contribute to the dignity of the governed, but because they enhance the responsiveness of those who govern.

Amartya Sen, who spoke here last night, has spotlighted the connection between freedom of speech, democracy and good governance. He said elections, uncensored news reporting and unfettered public criticism prompt governments to address hunger. Freedom to criticize and make demands “promote the political incentive for governments to be responsive, caring and prompt.”

In the Middle East, the public understands the connection between corruption and impunity on one hand, and lack of freedom and economic opportunity on the other. That why the story of a Tunisian vegetable vendor, who was so humiliated by local authorities that set himself ablaze, resonated around the region.

It was recognition of the importance of human dignity that guided Eleanor Roosevelt as she led the effort to persuade the United Nations to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. She used FDR’s words as moral cornerstones for the international legal and institutional regimes that would later arise – regimes that address economic social and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights.

Today I want to re-examine those moral cornerstones, the Four Freedoms, as Roosevelt defined them, and talk about three things. First, since I have just returned from Egypt, where I accompanied Secretary Clinton last week, I want to discuss how the principles embodied in the Four Freedoms are resonating in Egypt today. Second, I want to discuss how President Obama and Secretary Clinton are applying those universal principles through U.S. foreign policy in the 21st Century. And third, I want to explain how we think about the economic and social rights that derive from Roosevelt’s freedom from want.

Today’s national security challenges are different than those that confronted Roosevelt as he contemplated war with Nazi Germany; but they are no less consequential. In one sense our primary enemies, extremists and terrorists, are much weaker. They have no armies. But they are able to employ a kind of Jujitsu strategy by turning our highly developed communications and transportation systems against us. Given the nihilistic extremism of those attempting to wield these tools against us, it is possible for a small group to cause catastrophic damage, as we have seen from New York to Bali to Mumbai.

In this unpredictable security environment, the Obama administration is doing everything possible to protect our nation, fulfill our security commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and deny Al Qaeda safe haven to plot and train for future attacks. As Harold Koh, the State Department’s Legal Adviser said here last year, we are committed to pursuing these security imperatives consistent with our values and while complying with all applicable domestic and international law, including the laws of war.
In his Nobel Prize lecture, President Obama promised that the United States would remain “a standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight. That is the source of our strength.”

The recent turmoil in the Middle East once again demonstrates the fallacy of trying to divide America’s “hard” strategic interests from our “soft” interests, including our commitment to human rights. Human security and national security are inextricably linked. As Roosevelt said, “Freedom from fear is eternally linked with freedom from want.” While the United States has important strategic interests in the Middle East, the recent protests demonstrate the centrality of human rights to those interests and the links among civil, political, economic and social rights. As President Obama said last week, the United States has “made clear our support for a set of universal values, and our support for the political and economic change that the people of the region deserve.”

Going forward, U.S. policy aims to help the Egyptian people achieve true stability as they build a political system that will honor the aspirations of all citizens – women and men, Muslims and Copts, bloggers and businessmen. Egyptians need the freedom from fear that the State Security police will knock on their door in the night or hack their Facebook pages. And they also need decent jobs for the nearly one-fifth of the population that is still living on less than $2 a day.

As Roosevelt put it, “People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.”

President Obama echoed this theme in his Nobel Prize speech in December 2009, when he said, “Just peace includes not only civil and political rights – it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want.”

Although the freedom from want is not explicitly contained in the U.S. Constitution, concern about the economic wellbeing of the American populace is deeply embedded in our nation’s history and culture.

After all, in the Preamble to the Constitution, the Framers aimed to “promote the general welfare.” From our earliest days, state laws and constitutions sought to promote our people’s economic security. And the American Dream is predicated on the belief that allowing individuals to flourish is the best way for our nation to flourish.

Nevertheless, the United States has had reservations about the international debate on economic, social and cultural rights, for reasons I will discuss in a moment.

Certainly the Egyptian activists and government leaders we spoke with last week view political and social rights, transparency and accountability, economic and social progress as inextricably linked. Egypt’s Prime Minister described his goals as promoting “freedom, democracy and social justice.” Young activists told us the Tahrir Square
Revolution was spurred by both the denial of basic political freedoms and the absence of jobs and economic opportunity.

When I met with Egypt’s new labor minister, he stressed his efforts to restore workers’ rights to free association, which he sees as a prerequisite to building a strong Egyptian economy. And when we met with Coptic Christian leaders, they spoke of a desperate need for educational reforms to combat religious bigotry and sectarian violence. Egyptians see the intersections between these issues as obvious and uncontroversial.

The United States has taken steps to provide for economic, social and cultural rights but we understand them in our own way and, at any given time, we meet them according to our domestic laws – laws that emerge from a political system based on representative democracy, free speech and free assembly.

But since the founding of the U.N., some Americans have worried that the international movement to recognize economic, social and cultural rights would obligate us to provide foreign assistance commitments that went beyond what was decided by the U.S. This has never been true. Human rights law doesn’t create an obligation to any particular level of foreign assistance.

The U.S. is a leading contributor to global efforts to alleviate poverty and promote development – not because we have an obligation to but because it is in our interest. We do this through our bilateral aid programs, through our multilateral contributions, and through the American people – who annually contribute financially and through voluntary service to development and humanitarian activities around the world. President Obama has asked Congress for nearly $33 billion for our 2012 core foreign assistance budget and we annually respond to multiple humanitarian crises around the world – from Haiti to Pakistan, from Sudan to Japan. And American citizens and U.S. corporations give much more than the government, year in and year out. We also give through our service. Over the last 50 years, more than 200,000 Americans have served in 177 countries as Peace Corps volunteers.

Some have also been concerned that using the language of human rights could create new domestic legal obligations that would be enforceable though the courts and tie the hands of Congress and the states. But we have been careful to ensure that any international agreements we endorse protect the prerogatives of the federal government, as well as those of our states and localities.

Under the U.S. federal system, states take the lead on many economic, social and cultural policies. For example, all 50 states are committed through their constitutions to providing education for all children. But our federal Constitution makes no mention of rights to education, health care, or social security.

Nevertheless, as my late friend and mentor Professor Louis Henkin wrote, once economic and social rights are granted by law, they cannot be taken away without due process. And
these rights also fall under the general requirement that government act rationally and afford equal protection under the law.

Our government’s commitment to provide for the basic social and economic needs of our people is clear, and it reflects the will of the American people.

The people ask us to care for the sick… and we do. In 2009, our nation spent nearly $900 billion on Medicare and Medicaid. And as you know, last year the administration passed and signed the Affordable Care Act to expand access to health care in America.

They ask us to provide shelter for the destitute… and we do. In the wake of the housing crisis, last year the federal government committed almost $4 billion to target homelessness.

They ask us to educate every child, including those with physical and learning disabilities… and we do. This year alone, federal, state and local governments will spend close to $600 billion on education.

Some of our suspicion of the international focus on economic, social and cultural rights springs from the misuse of these demands in earlier times. For decades, the Soviet states and the Non-Aligned Movement critiqued the United States for a perceived failure to embrace economic and social rights. They used the rhetoric of economic, social and cultural rights to distract from their human rights abuses. They claimed economic rights trumped political rights, while in fact failing to provide either. We have prioritized political and civil rights because governments that are transparent and respect free speech are stable, secure and sustainable – and do the most for their people.

It is time to move forward. The Obama administration takes a holistic approach to human rights, democracy and development. Human rights do not begin after breakfast. But without breakfast, few people have the energy to make full use of their rights. As Martin Luther King once noted, an integrated lunch counter doesn’t help the person who can’t afford to eat there.

Therefore, we will work constructively with like-minded delegations to adopt fair and well-reasoned resolutions at the UN that speak to the issues of economic, social and cultural rights and are consistent with our own laws and policies.

We will do this understanding that these goals must be achieved progressively, given the resources available to each government. But we will also stress that nothing justifies a government’s indifference to its own people. And nothing justifies human oppression – not even spectacular economic growth.

When negotiating language on these resolutions and in our explanations of position, we will be guided by the following five considerations:
First, economic, social and cultural rights addressed in U.N. resolutions should be expressly set forth, or reasonably derived from, the Universal Declaration and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. While the United States is not a party to the Covenant, as a signatory, we are committed to not defeating the object and purpose of the treaty.

Second, we will only endorse language that reaffirms the “progressive realization” of these rights and prohibits discrimination.

Third, language about enforcement must be compatible with our domestic and constitutional framework.

Fourth, we will highlight the U.S. policy of providing food, housing, medicine and other basic requirements to people in need.

And fifth, we will emphasize the interdependence of all rights and recognize the need for accountability and transparency in their implementation, through the democratic participation of the people.

At the same time, the U.S. will not hesitate to reject resolutions that are disingenuous, at odds with our laws, or contravene our policy interests. Just because a resolution is titled “a right to food” doesn’t mean it is really about the right to food. Resolutions are not labeling exercises. Rather, they are about substance.

Finally, we will push back against the fallacy that countries may substitute human rights they like for human rights they dislike, by granting either economic or political rights. To assert that a population is not “ready” for universal human rights is to misunderstand the inherent nature of these rights and the basic obligations of governments.

All Four Freedoms are key to the Obama administration approach to human rights, national security and sustainable global prosperity.

For U.S. foreign policy today, freedom from fear means we will continue our efforts to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It also means voting for UN Security Council resolution 1973 on Libya last week and joining other countries to enforce the resolution in order to protect Libyan civilians against a brutal regime.

Freedom to worship in foreign policy today means that Secretary Clinton makes a point of defending freedom of religion throughout the world. In Egypt she stressed that democratic transitions will only succeed when Muslims, Copts and Jews all have the opportunity to worship freely and in peace.

Freedom from want in foreign policy today means a U.S. leadership role in a global food security initiative that aims to help subsistence farmers expand their production and developing countries to develop their markets. It also means being the world’s leader in global health –providing treatment for those infected by HIV, and strengthening health systems in developing countries. It also includes our recent pledge of $150 million in economic aid and democracy assistance to Egypt to help during this time of transition.
For our domestic policy today, freedom from want means this Administration will keep fighting to bring health care to more Americans, improve education to make our country more competitive, and continue to provide unemployment benefits for those who need them. Despite our budget constraints, we will continue to invest in the future of the American people.

We will also continue to urge other countries to invest in a better future for their citizens. And we stand willing to assist by pursuing an approach to development that respects human rights, involves local stakeholders, promotes transparency and accountability, and builds the institutions that underpin sustainable democracy.

This is in our moral interest, our political interest and our strategic interest. President Obama, in his National Security Strategy, put it in terms Franklin Roosevelt would have approved:

“Democracy does not merely represent our better angels,” the President said, “It stands in opposition to aggression and injustice, and our support for universal rights is both fundamental to American leadership and a source of strength in the world.”

Thank you.