



Freedom from Want

From *A Study Guide To The Four Freedoms*

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Freedom from Want
by Norman Rockwell

"The third is freedom from want...everywhere in the world."

When FDR first took office, the country was in the depths of the Great Depression. Thus, from the start of his first administration, President Roosevelt placed a high priority on securing "freedom from want," seeing it as essential to the nation's long-term strength and future. Social Security, unemployment insurance, aid to dependent children, the minimum wage, housing, stock market regulation, and federal deposit insurance for banks—these are but a few of the measures introduced through FDR's New Deal programs, many of which are still with us today.

With the onset of World War II, Roosevelt further saw the necessity of spreading "freedom from want" throughout the world. The Second World War, he believed, was caused in part by the currency disorders, mass unemployment, and economic desperation that had brought Hitler and Mussolini to power. As he stated when proposing an economic bill of rights ([see Appendix B](#)): "[T]rue individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. 'Necessitous men are not free men.' People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made."

During his first administration, FDR had informed his countrymen that American democracy could not survive if one-third of the nation were ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed. During his second term, he urged the further recognition that American welfare could not be assured in a disordered and impoverished world economy. America should seek "economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peace time life for its inhabitants," he declared in his Four Freedoms speech—a sentiment he reiterated a few months later when meeting with Winston Churchill to draw up the Atlantic Charter, which included a provision for international economic collaboration. Specifically, Roosevelt had in mind the creation of new international organizations—an international monetary fund, a world bank—with the mandate of fostering high levels of employment, growth, trade, and economic justice throughout the world.

Untold Prosperity—for Some

Sixty years after Roosevelt's death, a large number of Americans have achieved living standards far beyond the wildest dreams of their forbears who endured the Great Depression. Indeed, Rockwell's painting of a family about to enjoy a hearty Thanksgiving meal depicts the kind of scene of plenty that many Americans have come to take for granted. Likewise, citizens of other Western countries—including those living in the vanquished nations of Germany and Japan—have experienced an unprecedented rise in living standards.

Yet there are still significant numbers of Americans who are hungry and poor. According to a recent U.S. Department of Agriculture report, in 2003, 36.3 million Americans lived in households experiencing food insecurity, compared to 33.6 million in 2001 and 31 million in 1999. Meanwhile, the U.S. Census Bureau has found that in 2003, 35.9 million Americans were in poverty, up 1.3 million from 2002.

How did this situation evolve? William Felice of Eckerd College traces it back to the Cold War, when

"human rights" were equated with political rights and civil liberties—not to economic and social rights, which were associated with the values of communism. The right to an adequate standard of living was not seen as the government's special province and instead was left up to private enterprise and market forces.

The trend toward privatization is evident in President Bush's domestic agenda, which is focused on restructuring the government-sponsored social safety net created by FDR—including the capstone of the New Deal, Social Security. Meanwhile, the gap between the superrich and the common working person continues to widen—to the point where the top 1 percent of U.S. citizens now possess more wealth than the combined incomes of the bottom 90 percent. A recent New York Times investigation of class in America revealed that despite the nation's greater affluence, it has become even harder for Americans to move up from one economic class to another. "Americans are arguably more likely than they were thirty years ago to end up in the class into which they were born."

Strategies to End World Poverty

Prosperity at home is only half of the equation. What about in the rest of the world? As former World Bank economist Nancy Birdsall pointed out in her Eckerd College lecture, today's world is "incredibly unequal." In the foreign policy arena as well, the United States has yet to put its weight behind the goal of guaranteeing "a more secure, more prosperous world, a less unequal world, a world where fewer people live in poverty." On the contrary, the gap has been widening between rich and poor nations. Again in the words of Birdsall: "The wealth and income levels of rich countries like the United States and those Scandinavia, in Northern Europe, is one hundred times on average, in real terms, the average income level in countries like Ethiopia, Nepal, much of Africa, and some parts of Central America. That gap was about 10:1 a hundred years ago."

Why are we so far away from realizing FDR's vision of securing freedom from want "everywhere in the world"? Some economists, most notably Joseph Stiglitz, have blamed irresponsible, "one size fits all" trade policies for the growing disparity between Western countries and the rest of the world. Others, such as Jagdish Bhagwati, are more optimistic about the potential for trade liberalization to benefit the economies of developing countries by stimulating growth. As Financial Times writer Martin Wolf, another globalization advocate, wrote in his recent book: "Never before have so many people or such a large proportion of the world's population enjoyed such large rises in their standard of living."

Still others have focused on practical plans to address the limitations of market forces in helping the world's poor. They argue that with 1.1 billion people suffering from extreme poverty (defined by the World Bank as an income of less than \$1 a day), it is high time to do something to reduce these numbers.

Economist Jeffrey Sachs, for instance, has been spearheading an ambitious UN scheme to end global poverty by 2025. In his view, geography has played a crucial role in determining Africa's fate—it is landlocked and disease prone—yet such problems, once acknowledged, can be overcome. By increasing foreign aid, disease (such as malaria) can be controlled, and infrastructure can be created. The upshot will be greater returns on private investment, triggering market-led growth. Otherwise, political elites will continue to focus on removing resource-based wealth from poor countries as quickly as possible; investment and development will never be anything but empty promises.

At the April Eckerd meeting, Birdsall outlined the anti-poverty plan developed by her organization, the Center for Global Development, which has much in common with Sachs' prescriptions. The United States, she said, has an ethical duty to make "freedom from want" a high priority in its foreign policy. Birdsall finds it paradoxical that America readily utilizes its "hard power" resources in both the market and military affairs while failing to make use of its "soft power" resources to shore up its reputation and moral standing in the world.

She went on to list a number of key ways in which the United States could enhance its soft power, beginning with foreign aid. U.S. Overseas Development Aid (ODA) is "scandalously cheap," she said. As a share of overall GDP, the U.S. aid level has dropped to 0.15%, the lowest of any major industrialized

country. To the poor and vulnerable of the world, America seems to be sending the message that it just doesn't care. Birdsall called for dramatic action to improve the U.S. record on this score. Such action would include not just more aid but also "development-friendly" steps such as lower agricultural subsidies and a cabinet-level development agency tasked with working with other affluent countries to come up with feasible strategies for alleviating world poverty.

All Talk and No Action?

In fact, there is no shortage of proposals on the table for freeing the world from want. President Bush has proposed the Millennium Challenge Account, which directs aid to countries that have taken responsibility for government reforms. In the view of journalist Nicholas Kristof, this plan, while off to an "agonizingly slow start," is at least "shrewdly focused on encouraging good governance and economic growth." Another hopeful sign was Bush's recent announcement of \$1.2 billion for a five-year campaign against malaria—acknowledged by New York Times editors as an "admirable start" to the July 2005 G8 summit meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland.

But while there are plenty of ways, is there a will? The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, known as the Bretton Woods institutions, celebrated their sixtieth anniversaries in 2004 with very little to show for their goals of reducing world poverty and fostering development. Likewise, six decades after FDR attempted to persuade world leaders to work cooperatively toward promoting prosperity around the globe, we are once again faced with a situation where the heads of nation-states are primarily interested in pleasing their own constituents—a position that one speaker described as "democratic narcissism." Such a narrow and short-sighted approach makes it difficult to implement even the simplest of proposals, such as the Tobin tax initiative.¹ Western leaders lack the political traction to move such ideas forward.

In Michael Smith's view, the time has come for the United States to revisit Roosevelt's rationale for international economic collaboration: namely, that a world marred by rising poverty is unstable and hence insecure for all of its inhabitants. Particularly during these times of heightened insecurity, taking action to lessen global inequalities should be seen as being in America's best interests. People who think that America's interests come first "need to be persuaded that they are living on borrowed time," he suggested.

Birdsall reinforced Smith's conclusions in the final meeting of the Eckerd series, stating that America should use its power not only to capture for Americans the benefits of globalization but also to "reduce the two kinds of risk, conventional security risks and human security risks, that globalization has brought." Improving the plight of the world's poor would not only bring ethical returns, it would also serve U.S. national interests, she argued.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1)** In the 1950s and 1960s many economists predicted that the newly independent African countries would become wealthier once they developed modern industrial sectors. Yet Africa has failed to prosper in an era of globalization. What can, and should, be done to address the situation?
- 2)** Do market-friendly (i.e., free trade) policies stimulate economic growth and in turn reduce poverty? How can we measure this?
- 3)** The economist Jeffrey Sachs claims that ending world poverty should be possible in our lifetimes. What are the main proposals of the UN anti-poverty plan he espouses? Are such proposals feasible?

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[Symposium: "World Poverty and Human Rights." With Thomas Pogge, Mathias Risse, Alan Patten, Rowan Cruft, Norbert Anwander, and Debra Satz.](#) *Ethics & International Affairs* 19.1 (Spring 2005)

Notes

1. The so-called Tobin tax calls for a tiny tax being levied on capital transfers and then being transferred into a global development fund.

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