



Guest Column: Community Voices: Thoughts for Independence Day 2021 — Freedom of Speech

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At this time last year we were in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic with the nationwide shutdown that began in mid-March 2020. The pandemic subsequently precluded the celebration of the traditional start of summer with the Memorial Day weekend — a distinctly American holiday.

With May-June graduations cancelled, summer vacations preempted, and uncertainty about the course of the pandemic with increasing numbers of infections and deaths, Independence Day 2020 was a time of great ambiguity and uncertainty. Americans yearned for the lifting of restrictions and the return to normal, or at least the establishment of a new normal.

During that time, I took the opportunity to examine President Franklin Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech delivered in January 1941 (prior to the looming U.S. entry into the second World War). For that reflection I extracted themes from the Saturday Evening Post essay, "Freedom from Fear" to apply to our circumstances. I found the same approach useful for Thanksgiving by using the essay, "Freedom from Want."

In reflection of the past 12 months, Roosevelt's "Freedom of Speech and Expression" seems to be the most endangered American principle. Bear with me. The past year has been marked by several national discussions about social and political injustices, as well as by political division and turmoil — each discussion marked by a very uncivil discourse.

Technological innovations allow anyone to have a public voice through the ubiquitous social media platforms, news services, internet blogs, and omnipresent

cell phones. Paradoxically the more access we have to make public speech and to express our views, the less likely we are to listen to others. This is apparent in the polarization not only between political parties, but also within them. Our ability to make public proclamations has become paired with unswerving belief in being right and that others must be wrong. It has use of rhetoric to support one's interpretations of "fact." This applies to both sides of the political spectrum.

A proffered remedy to the rancor is to engage with others to gain alternate perspectives and develop empathy with those who hold different views. In several forums, we were invited to participate in uncomfortable and difficult conversations.

What I have observed of several such engagements is the need for practiced facilitation, lest the conversations devolve into unresolvable debates. I am reminded of a quote attributed to actor Leonard Nimoy (Mr. Spock of Star Trek): "Those who cannot hear an angry shout may strain to hear a whisper."

In conversations that move to debate, as the tone, volume, and passion increase, so too does the inability to hear and listen — the deaf ear surpasses the brain as the dominant organ. Eventually it comes to a point where the exchange stops completely and we lose the freedom of speech and the desire to express ourselves.

Even among well-formed groups, I have noticed the tendency of individuals to self-censor. Potential speakers do not want to take the risk of saying something that would jeopardize relationships with others they respect. In remaining silent, they do not allow others the opportunity to gain empathy with them. This happens among friends, in small family and social gatherings, as well as learning environments.

Those of us who saw the play or movie "1776" will remember the contentious debates that preceded the first Independence Day. It was also a time of ambiguity and uncertainty for the rebellious colonists. In the closing scene, there were several differences among the delegates from the 13 Colonies that seemed irreconcilable. It was through the frank and candid exchange of views that negotiation and compromise led to the Second Continental Congress' adoption of the Declaration of Independence on the 4th of July. Its formal signing did not occur until Aug. 2. This founding document became the underpinning for future engagements on difficult issues that would face the fledgling nation.

We still struggle with implementing our founding principles so clearly expressed in the Preamble to the United States Constitution: "... to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

https://cumberlink.com/opinion/columnists/community-voices-thoughts-for-independence-day-2021-freedom-of-speech/article_4ca5dc41-f1f3-5a37-bbbe-a529042770e8.html

Accordingly, the right to express and present differences was specifically addressed with the December 1791 adoption of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution such that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

This Independence Day and in the challenging times ahead, we should remember our American history and hold ourselves, as well as our government accountable to preserving freedoms for all.

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