FDR's “Four Freedoms” Speech

Do Now:
List what you feel are our 4 mist important freedoms as human beings.
1. _______________________
2. _______________________
3. _______________________
4. _______________________

While many of the most frequently-studied statements about freedom were published in the form of written documents such as the Bill of Rights or the Magna Charta, the library is certainly not the only place where Americans encounter references to freedom. On radio and television, on the campaign trail and at press conferences, our public officials appeal to the cause of freedom every day. The world of political oratory provides a living laboratory for studying the place of "freedom" within public discourse. Some of the most thought-provoking—and influential—muscings on freedom were first presented not in books or in pamphlets, but broadcast from podiums and grandstands.

One of the most famous political speeches on freedom in the twentieth century was delivered by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union message to Congress. The address is commonly known as the "Four Freedoms" speech. In a relevant part of the speech, President Roosevelt announced:

*In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.*

*The first* is freedom of speech and expression -- everywhere in the world.

*The second* is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way -- everywhere in the world.

*The third* is freedom from want -- which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants -- everywhere in the world.

*The fourth* is freedom from fear -- which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide 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.

The speech was delivered almost exactly 11 months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, at a time when the United States was officially neutral in World War II. The ostensible purpose of FDR's 1941 State of the Union was not to comment about freedom in the abstract, but to persuade a reluctant Congress to pass the Lend-Lease Act. Through speeches like the Four Freedoms speech, FDR successfully sold the public and the Congress on the idea of the Lend-Lease Act. The passage of the Act effectively ended American neutrality in World War II by essentially giving the British the badly needed weapons that they could not afford to buy. While this lesson does not focus on the debate over American participation in World War II, it is impossible to read Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" as anything other than an argument against American neutrality in the war.

In bold and plain language, Roosevelt's declaration raises many of the broad questions underlying any discussion of freedom. This lesson will introduce you to some of the rudiments of political theory embedded within FDR's vision.

The tone set by FDR in his "Four Freedoms" speech has been imitated by his successors and by his counterparts in other countries. We are so accustomed to hearing freedom invoked rhetorically as a matter of course that the word sometimes signifies little more than something to feel vaguely good about. This lesson will examine some of the nuances, vagaries, and ambiguities inherent in the rhetorical use of "freedom." The objective is to encourage you to glimpse the broad range of hopes and aspirations that are expressed in the call of—and for—freedom.

**Guiding Question**
What does FDR's "Four Freedoms" speech reveal about the variety of different attitudes, priorities, and political philosophies encompassed by the word "freedom"?

**Activity 1**: Two dimensions of freedom: "freedom to" versus "freedom from"
FDR's speech presents an opportunity to highlight a subtle distinction that has troubled political philosophers through the ages: the distinction between "freedom FROM" and "freedom TO." Notice that two of FDR's four freedoms are framed as freedom to do something: freedom to speak one's mind and freedom to worship as one sees fit. The other two freedoms are framed in terms of freedom from something: freedom from want and freedom from fear. Many scholars have taken care to distinguish sharply between these two types of freedom. The British political philosopher Isaiah Berlin called "freedom from..." negative liberty; he called "freedom to..." positive liberty. Here is how Berlin defines those terms in an essay published in 1958:

Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints... Positive liberty is the possibility of acting—or the fact of acting—in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes.

EXAMPLE: Teenagers tend to enjoy the freedom that comes with being able to drive. But when they ask their parents for the keys to the car, are they enjoying the freedom from parental interference or are they enjoying the freedom to go out and see their friends whenever they wish?

FURTHER CLARIFICATION: Positive liberty [FREEDOM TO] refers to having the power and resources to act to fulfill one's own potential.

The concept of negative liberty refers to FREEDOM FROM interference by other people [or the government].

In both theories of liberty, it is inherent that citizen participation in government is vital to achieve liberty.

Theorists have long argued about which dimension of freedom should be honored by governments. Proponents of "negative liberty" contend that governments should avoid interfering with the private decisions of its citizens. "Freedom from" can therefore be understood as the ideal of non-coercion. Proponents of "positive liberty" suggest that governments should intervene to make it possible for their citizens to achieve certain ends. "Freedom to" can thus be understood as the ideal of empowerment.

1. How do the 3rd and 4th Freedoms potentially change the role of the domestic government?
2. Why do you think the 3rd and 4th Freedoms were criticized by the right wing?
3. Which type of freedom would a right wing free market capitalist adhere to?
4. Which type of freedom would an FDR democrat adhere to?

Simulation
Imagine that Mr. Clymer has just announced, in agreement with the students, a new homework policy. Effective immediately, students will no longer be permitted to take their homework assignments home with them. Instead, students will be required to complete their assignments during a one-hour long study hall held each day immediately after school. Students will have access to all necessary texts, technology, and supplies, but they will not be permitted to leave the building until the hour is up or until their work has been completed and turned in.

The principal has explained the new policy as follows: "The common goal is for students to enjoy the time they spend out of school. We think that by getting all homework over and done with before they leave the building, students will find themselves more free to pursue their extra-curricular interests. We [i.e. the administration and students] have found that when students are left to manage their time as they see fit, they end up wasting a lot of time. Of course, students will no longer be free to decide for themselves when to complete their assignments. We've taken the option of procrastination away from students, and we think that as a result, they are going to feel like their evenings are a lot freer."

In groups you will analyze the new homework policy by completing the chart below. Essentially, think about the following questions: Do students agree with the principal's statement that the new policy will make them freer? Do students prefer the freedom of doing their homework whenever they please, or do they prefer the freedom of being done with their work by the time they leave the school building?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The new homework policy will give me greater freedom to...</th>
<th>The new homework policy will give me greater freedom from...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The new homework policy will give me less freedom to...</td>
<td>The new homework policy will give me less freedom from...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. In what way is positive liberty [FREEDOM TO] dangerous?
2. In what ways is negative liberty [FREEDOM FROM] limited?
3. In the long run, can more than one idea of freedom coexist within a single nation? Within the world?
4. What do you think an anarchist would feel about the two types of freedoms?
5. How could this scenario be changed to enable an anarchist to approve?