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American Spirit Essay

Equality and the Freedom of Expression

In the history of our country, the United States of America, one of the most significant values we have expressed as a nation is that of equality among people. This is a foundation of our understanding of civil rights. However, without the freedoms of speech, press, and assembly, it would be impossible to achieve the level of equality that we experience today. If it were not for these rights, the extent of our equality may still have been limited to select populations, even in our modern era. Thus, both equality and freedom of expression are concepts that are critical to our collective understanding of what it means to be an American today.

Our current understanding of civil equality traces its roots to the Declaration of Independence. It is no surprise that the following passage of the Declaration of Independence is familiar to nearly all Americans: "...[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness".¹ It is this passage that Americans and others turn back to, again and again, in order to seek an understanding of equality from both the perspective of our early founding fathers and the perspective of our people. However, the notion of "equality" has evolved since 1776, when rights were exclusive for white men only. The

metamorphosis of equality in America can be traced through the elimination of slavery to the expansion of voting, civil rights, and racial integration.

Through the American Revolution, the right to vote became possible for the first time in American history. The American Revolution had overthrown the previous monarchy and attempted to empower more citizens. It replaced the system of a sole, superior ruler to one in which more people, namely, white property-owning men, participated.² However, this was not enough. In our modern understanding, equality among only one group is not equality at all. In order for our equality to be complete, it must extend beyond white males to all citizens. Freedom of expression enabled this equality come to fruition over time. The Bill of Rights states 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.”³ Throughout our history, American citizens have tapped into this freedom in order to demand voting and other rights for women and minorities.

In 1848, at a private home in Seneca Falls, New York, two women pioneered the event that would later revolutionize women’s participation in national affairs through the women’s suffrage movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, two abolitionists who were denied access to the London Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, made the fateful decision to spark the candle of redress.⁴ Around three hundred people gathered to draft a Declaration of Sentiments, based upon the Declaration of Independence and including the concept of women’s suffrage: a controversial idea even among feminists at the time.⁵ Although women’s suffrage was not officially ratified as the Nineteenth Amendment until 1920, it was through the freedom

of peaceable assembly, as written in the Bill of Rights, that this contentious aspect of equality could be presented for posterity to fulfill. ⁶

An equally notable victory for the American value of equality occurred through the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. ^{7 8} On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. gave his 'I Have a Dream' speech before 250,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, a celebration of the right to assemble. ⁹ President Lyndon B. Johnson, using his political skills and the emotions caused by the death of King and President Kennedy, was able to enact a new level of equality strengthening the idea that every man and woman, regardless of race, religion, or nationality, should be treated equally under the law. ¹⁰ Freedom of expression was invaluable for ending segregation laws and improving voting rights for minorities.

More recently, this same celebration of assembly and expression to expand equality and fight lingering prejudices was evident in the Women's March on January 21, 2017, when over four million people in the United States, along with several hundred thousand more around the world, made public demonstrations of their views. ¹¹ The Women's movement has advocated for LGBTQ+ non-discrimination rights and universal healthcare, and it has trumpeted against discrimination towards Muslims, immigrants, the disabled, and more. ^{12 13} The protests that took place in 2017 and beyond would have looked completely different if it had been illegal to assemble peaceably or to express oneself. If it were not for the Bill of Rights and the founding notions of equality, the voices of the four million people who marched would have been suppressed, and perhaps their ideas even unrealized.

In all, it is clear throughout history that many Americans have been motivated by a desire for justice and equality. It was this drive for fairness that drove the nation to where it is today. From the Civil War, through the women's suffrage movement, to the modern Civil Rights movement, and to an array of ongoing battles, the roots of equality have spread vastly from its original application. This belief in equality has been passed on from generation to generation, evolving for new cultural contexts and understandings. It is the American people, armed with their rights and values, who have helped make this expansion possible. The concept of equality holds an intrinsic value in the American psyche and to those who look to our documents as models for social and political change. Freedom of expression and assembly have been prerequisites for successful modernization, and have supported Americans meeting the needs of evolving societies while still remaining true to the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

End Notes

¹ Declaration of Independence.

² “The Expansion of the Vote: A White Man's Democracy.” U.S. History, Independence Hall Association, www.ushistory.org/us/23b.asp. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

³ United States Constitution, Amendment I., 1791.

⁴ Sampaolo, Marco and Veenu Setia. “Seneca Falls Convention.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2 May 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Seneca-Falls-Convention. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

⁵ “Seneca Falls Convention.” HISTORY, A&E Television Networks, 10 Nov. 2017, www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/seneca-falls-convention. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

⁶ Levy, Michael and Brain P. Smentkowski. “Nineteenth Amendment.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Mar. 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nineteenth-Amendment>. Accessed 6 Jun. 2019.

⁷ “Civil Rights Act of 1964.” HISTORY, A&E Television Networks, 4 Jan. 2010, www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-act. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

⁸ “Voting Rights Act of 1965.” HISTORY, A&E Television Networks, 9 Nov. 2009.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/voting-rights-act>. Accessed 6 Jun. 2019.

⁹ “March on Washington.” HISTORY, A&E Television Networks, 19 Sep. 2018. www.history.com/topics/black-history/march-on-washington. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

¹⁰ Gittinger, Ted and Fisher, Allen. “LBJ Champions the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” National Archives, vol. 6, no. 2, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 13 Dec. 2017. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/summer/civil-rights-act-1.html>. Accessed 6 Jun. 2019.

¹¹ Rafferty, John P. “Women’s March.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Jan. 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Womens-March-2017>. Accessed 6 Jun. 2019.

¹² “Women's Agenda.” Women's March, Women's March, womensmarch.com/agenda. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

¹³ “Mission and Principles.” Women's March, Women's March, womensmarch.com/mission-and-principles. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

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"Women's March." History, A&E Television Networks, 21 Aug. 2018, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/womens-march. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.