

Freedom in the Written Word

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Freedom, as defined in the dictionary, is the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint. In other words, freedom is the right to be an individual, a right that Americans are fortunate enough to have defined and protected in the founding documents of this country. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are what many citizens consider to be the documents of freedom, as each contributed to the establishment of freedom in the United States. The Declaration provides the foundational definition of freedom in the American sense, the Constitution establishes mechanisms to protect this freedom, and the Bill of Rights applies this freedom to the context of the individual. Together, the documents are a well-oiled machine working actively to ensure freedom for all Americans.

The Declaration of Independence marks the beginning of the nation's freedom. Signed on July 1, 1776 and ratified on July 4, 1776, the Declaration declared the United States independent of the monarchical rule of Britain and stated that every citizen holds "...certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (US 1776 2). While the independence from Britain did not result in complete freedom for every citizen instantaneously, this document is still considered a document of freedom because it outlined the ideals of freedom within the newly independent nation. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are, ultimately, the fundamental concepts that shape how we as a country view freedom. For some groups, it took longer to achieve these rights. However, even today, all citizens recognize that at the most basic level of freedom lies those three ideas. Because the Declaration outlined this relatively simple idea, it is considered a document of freedom. The Declaration began the move to freedom, providing a launch point for the other documents of freedom to come.

One year and eleven years after the Declaration came the Constitution, a seven article document that outlines the structure of government to be put in place with the specific intent to protect and furnish the newly adopted freedom of the people. First and foremost, this document is a document of freedom because it promises protection for the citizens' freedom through the structure of government it outlines. Not only do the citizens have freedom, as stated in the Declaration, but they have a government above them that will continuously work to protect that freedom. The Constitution takes the ideals of the Declaration and makes them a reality. In addition, the preamble to the Constitution is where the famous three words "We the People..." are found (US 1787 1). These three words contribute to the Constitution's label of a document of freedom because they represent the first significant power the newly freed people exercised: creating their own government. That seemingly simple right is so well known and precious among people of all generations, a right they can point to in those three words of the Constitution. Because the Constitution provides the protection of freedom through a government, and represents the first major act the citizens committed in their independence, the Constitution is considered a document of freedom.

The Bill of Rights is the name for the first ten amendments that were quickly added to the Constitution, as the ratification of the Constitution depended on the promise this bill would be added on. Many of those people opposed to the ratification of the Constitution felt that the document wasn't sufficient to protect the individual rights that all citizens were entitled to as defined by the Declaration. The Constitution was effective at protecting the rights of citizens as one large group, but there was little indication of what freedoms were given to every individual. This group of opposers, dubbed the Anti-federalists, felt that the Constitution needed a Bill of

Rights to act as “a central safeguard of people's rights” (“Antifederalists” 7). The bill outlines individual freedoms that, because they are amendments to the Constitution, will be protected by the government (until the Constitution is amended again). Many people point to this as a document of freedom for those two reasons. The bill is the first document that deals solely with rights for the individual. The document deepens the simple statement in the Declaration, that all citizens are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, by extending the meaning of freedom to every individual in this country and making it relevant in day-to-day life. The Bill guarantees citizens the right to freedom of speech, press, religion, and so much more (U.S. Const. 1787 amend. 1). In addition, because the bill is a group of amendments to the Constitution, the outlined rights are protected by the government. By the same token, the Bill is the first use of the amendment process, which allows for the flexibility of the definition of freedom. It assured citizens that their freedom can be protected over time as that definition changes. For example, women were denied the right to vote for over one hundred years after the Constitution’s signing. The way women changed this reality for themselves was through an amendment to the Constitution, the 19th, which gave them the right to vote alongside men. The definition of freedom had changed, and the Constitution was amended as a result. The Bill of Rights set the precedent for all seventeen amendments after it, another reason for its designation of a document of freedom.

The documents work together to define and protect our rights because each document covers one aspect of our freedom. The Declaration gives a very basic definition of this freedom; the Constitution protects the freedom of the country through a government; and the Bill of Rights applies the meaning of freedom to the individual. None of the documents contradict each other or overlap. Together, they assure citizens that the rights they are entitled to under freedom are real, specific and protected by the law that rules in their free country. Should one of these documents be missing, the function of the other two would be severely hindered. If the Declaration did not state the most basic rights given to all citizens of the free country, the Constitution could not set up an effective government to protect those rights and the Bill of Rights could not have made these rights specific to daily life. If the Constitution did not create a government to protect these rights, the Declaration and Bill of Rights would mean nothing. The rights these two documents outline could be taken away from a citizen by anyone in an instant, for there would be nobody to stop them. If the Bill of Rights did not explicitly state the day to day rights of an individual, the Declaration’s statement of basic rights and the Constitution’s protection would both be very subjective and vague. There would be little to ensure that every individual experienced the freedom they deserved. Each document of freedom needs the other to guarantee every citizen the rights they are afforded with freedom.

We Americans owe much of our freedom to our ancestors for creating these three documents of freedom: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These documents have defined and established freedom as we know it for over 200 years. Although freedom for all is still not a realized statement, time has shown that our country is committed to moving towards that reality. For now, it is important for all Americans to recognize and appreciate the opportunities we are allowed because of this freedom.

Works Cited

"Antifederalists." [Article] Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/us/16b.asp>