

How Freedom from Want Remains Substantially Relevant to American Society



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Abstract

This essay examines the enduring relevance of Franklin D. Roosevelt's concept of "Freedom from Want" in contemporary American society. Originally articulated in Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address, this principle emphasizes the necessity of economic security and access to basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Despite historical efforts to uphold this ideal through various legislative reforms, significant challenges persist, particularly in the realms of economic inequality, poverty, and healthcare access. The essay highlights the widening wage gap between racial and gender groups, addresses the alarming rates of poverty exacerbated by events like the COVID-19 pandemic and discusses the inadequacies of the U.S. healthcare system. Ultimately, it argues that without addressing these critical issues, "Freedom from Want" remains unfulfilled, risking social unrest and undermining the overall well-being of American citizens.

During the 1941 State of the Union Address, United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed his wishes for the American nation and listed four values: Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Speech, Freedom from Fear, and Freedom from Want. His four freedoms outlined his hopes to protect various rights of American citizens as the United States prepared to enter war. One of these freedoms, Freedom from Want, exemplifies the desire to live with economic comfort and to be free from a lack of necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Since World War II, the American nation has attempted to uphold these ideals by enacting several laws, acts, and reforms; however, events against human rights have di-

minished the impact of sustaining Freedom from Want, ranging from Roosevelt's 1942 enactment of Japanese American internment camps to present economic inequalities. Along with historical and current events, research and testimonies have highlighted the violation of this freedom and illustrate the need to support Roosevelt's claims. Thus, out of the four freedoms, Freedom from Want warrants the most attention from America today through the notable wage gap between genders and racial populations, the prevalence of impoverishment in certain sectors of society, and the impact of unaffordable healthcare costs.

The glaring disparity between the average salary or wage of various populations in the workplace has resulted in families being unable to ef-

fectively support themselves, thus, violating FDR's conditions in Freedom from Want. In a 2022 publication examining wage inequalities between races, researchers found that "in 2019, the median black worker earned 24.4% less per hour than the typical white worker" and that it was "an even larger wage gap than in 1979, when it was 16.4%" (Wilson & Darity Jr., 2022). As the pay gap between black and white workers increases over time, it creates a power imbalance that further perpetuates lower pay for minorities, putting them at a risk for a decreased quality of life as they may not be able to adequately support themselves with the pay they receive. Hence, the prevalence of the racial wage gap warrants the reexamination of Freedom from Want as it can hold certain minorities from economic comforts otherwise enjoyed by the predominantly white population. As well as racial minorities, the pay gap burdens women in the workplace. 2021 data from the US Government Accountability Office reports that "for every dollar earned by White men, Hispanic or Latina women earned an estimated 58 cents... and Black or African American women earned an estimated 63 cents" ("Women in the Workforce," 2022). Thus, these unfairly

lost wages may cause women in the workplace to worry about supporting themselves financially, further violating the conditions of Freedom from Want. The disparity between men and women, despite having the same education and experience, hinders women from receiving the economic comforts they need to maintain their standard of life by meeting basic physiological needs. On the other hand, naysayers may argue that the gender pay gap has decreased substantially over the years with the enactment of gender reforms; however, these reforms have often backfired on their purpose and put women at a further disadvantage. Diana Furchtgott-Roth, former chief economist at the U.S. Department of Labor and published author on the gender pay gap, notes how the Paycheck Fairness Act, passed in 1963, rebounds its purpose as it allows companies to hire men than women more easily (Furchtgott-Roth., 2010, p. 9). Thus, the act enforces disproportionate treatment in the workplace and employs financial difficulties which make it increasingly difficult for women to support themselves and their families. Although initially passed to support Freedom from Want, the Paycheck Fairness Act breaches the freedom instead as those put at an inferior worth in the

workplace are forced to worry about their income and their standard of living. Thus, the prevalence of the inequality of financial income in the workplace places specific groups—such as racial minorities and women—at risks that violate Freedom from Want and calls for action to restore this liberty to the American people.

In addition to unequal pay, several American citizens live in destitute financial conditions despite the decrease in poverty over the past few decades, placing Freedom from Want under attack. Considering the recent COVID-19 pandemic, numerous American citizens fell into unexpected bouts of poverty, and those already living in impoverishment were subjected to worse living conditions. In January 2021, it was found that "24 million adults reported experiencing hunger and more than six million said they fear being evicted... due to their inability to make housing payments" ("United States: Pandemic Impact on People in Poverty," 2021). During the same period, however, "the collective wealth of the US' 651 billionaires... jumped by over \$1 trillion since the beginning of the pandemic, a 36 percent leap" ("United States: Pandemic Impact on People in Poverty," 2021). The significant dis

parity between the lower and upper class demonstrates how America is failing to uphold the ideals of Freedom from Want; several families are subjected to fear and worry over their next meal, clothing, and housing situation, while others are scarcely affected. This asymmetry leaves families unfairly disenfranchised and at a lower advantage for receiving the economic and social comforts needed to maintain their quality of life. Furthermore, it is important to note the toll taken on children due to poverty. Amy Jo Hutchison, community organizer for West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families and first-hand eyewitness to destitute conditions in her community, shared the story of a working mom who lost insurance and was forced to stop taking her blood pressure medications due to not being able to pay for them. As a result, her children were forced to quit their jobs to take care of their sick mother (Oversight Committee Democrats, 2020, 1:23). This poignant, yet true story illustrates the true effects of poverty on working parents and how it immediately affects their children. As America's future generation, children who are subjected to these living conditions may experience greater

difficulty handling responsibilities as adults. Once again, the implications of poverty on families in the United States violate the objective of Roosevelt's Freedom from Want. However, many disagree with the assertion that the US Official Poverty Measure demonstrates a decrease in poverty rates over the years. However, research clarifies that this measurement fails to include basic expenses included in the cost of living, thus demonstrating an inaccurate portrayal of the true costs faced by modern families (Madrack, 2020). This mismeasurement demonstrates that poverty is still extremely prevalent in American society despite trivial declines in rates. Notably, the prevalence of poverty in America has pushed numerous communities into detrimental conditions that affect both parents and children, further disregarding Freedom from Want and Roosevelt's vision for citizens' rights.

In addition to those subjected to income inequalities and living in poverty, the American public's inability to afford healthcare further contributes to the need to reexamine FDR's Freedom from Want. According to a 2022 survey conducted by the West Health-Gallup Healthcare Affordability Index, "An es-

timated 112 million (44%) American adults are struggling to pay for healthcare" and over one-third has been forced to reduce utility use and food consumption in the past year ("112 Million Americans Struggle to Afford Healthcare," 2022). The lack of access to basic healthcare violates Freedom from Want as it forces many individuals without access to medical care to choose between receiving treatment and meeting other basic needs, such as housing, clothing, and food. Thus, these individuals are denied access to the ideals expressed in Freedom from Want as they are forced to make challenging decisions regarding where to allocate their limited financial resources. Furthermore, without proper medical care, individuals are unable to maintain their health or treat illnesses, which may potentially lead to premature death. In the multitude of personal stories shared with The Susan G. Komen Advocacy Alliance about experiences with the American healthcare system, one citizen notes how her mother died early from breast cancer due to pushing back appointments since she was unable to pay for them, and another had friends pass away due their insurance being unable to cover their lung cancer treatments ("Per-

sonal Stories about the U.S. Health Care System,” 2009). Heartbreaking stories such as these not only warrant a need to reexamine the healthcare system but also call attention to the struggles faced by Americans who are unable to pay for treatments or medical bills; their health rapidly declines as they scramble for ways to pay for medical bills, or they are simply forced to decline receiving treatment due to its unaffordability. However, naysayers may pull attention away from this topic with the assertion that access to affordable healthcare has greatly increased with the expansion of Medicaid. While it is true that federal programs have accelerated the health insurance rate of the population, it is important to note the imbalanced distribution across the country. Research from the Peter G. Peterson Foundation notes that not all states enacted the expansion of Medicaid eligibility, which creates a disparity between those able to receive healthcare and those who are not (“Nearly 30 Million Americans Have No Health Insurance,” 2022). Thus, while access to healthcare has exemplified an increase over the years, families in certain communities are still put at an unfair disadvantage when they are not able to receive relief

from federal programs due to their geographic location. As a result, they may be forced to give up basic comforts in order to preserve their health, which may further escalate their medical conditions. Ultimately, those who are not able to receive access to affordable healthcare due to income or eligibility are forced to deprive themselves of basic comforts, further supporting the need to place importance on Freedom from Want today.

In contrast, opponents contend that Freedom of Religion is more important than Freedom from Want because of the personal liberties granted to the citizen when it comes to free expression and a sense of individuality. They state that as a deeply cherished aspect of several citizens’ lives, religion plays a major role in forming values and beliefs which provide the individual with a sense of purpose; therefore, it contributes to their overall happiness. Freedom of Religion also allows those of similar backgrounds to unite, creating a harmonious, diverse population that contributes to the nation’s well-being. However, while it is understandable why the opposition believes Freedom of Religion is the most significant today, Freedom from Want proves more important because it serves

as the foundation for experiencing other freedoms. This is exemplified in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which argues that basic needs such as shelter, food, and clothing must be met prior to achieving other ambitions and one’s full potential (McLeod, 2018). Freedom from Want demonstrates importance here as it defines that Americans have the right to basic physiological needs, which are required on the first level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Thus, to enjoy freedoms such as the ability to worship or express freely, one must first meet their basic needs; without this, an individual may face difficulties in maintaining their well-being and survival. Furthermore, when Freedom from Want is not upheld in American society, poverty rates increase and become more prevalent, which can lead to social unrest and civil disorder. According to Zoe Marks, dynamics of violence and civil war researcher, “Poverty can lower resilience to conflict by weakening government institutions, stripping capacity for public goods provision, and limiting the projection of power and authority” (Marks, 2016). Thus, when economic inequalities are present, the stability of society may be threatened; as a result, citizens may have

a limited or nonexistent ability to enjoy freedoms such as Freedom of Religion when authoritative institutions are put in a state of turmoil. Fundamentally, while Freedom of Religion is certainly an important right that serves as a contributing factor to one's well-being, Freedom from Want proves to be the most important freedom today as it serves as the first requirement for all other freedoms.

As the fundamental freedom each individual must possess in order to enjoy oth-

er liberties granted to them, Freedom from Want proves the most significant out of FDR's Four Freedoms. Today, several American citizens are denied the physiological needs required for survival and well-being. Several populations are unfairly alienated from receiving the proper pay suited for their experience and education, access to proper housing, clothing, and food is not adequately met, and affordable healthcare is not evenly distributed among the population. In turn, these individu-

als are subjected to power imbalances and may be forced to risk their lives to support their families or receive the medical relief they need. If action is not taken to restore Freedom from Want to the American public, each of these factors places the nation at a risk for social unrest if individuals' basic comforts are not prioritized. Thus, Freedom from Want must be placed at high importance immediately to address prevalent inequalities, uphold human dignity, and preserve the nation's state of civil order. 🕯

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