

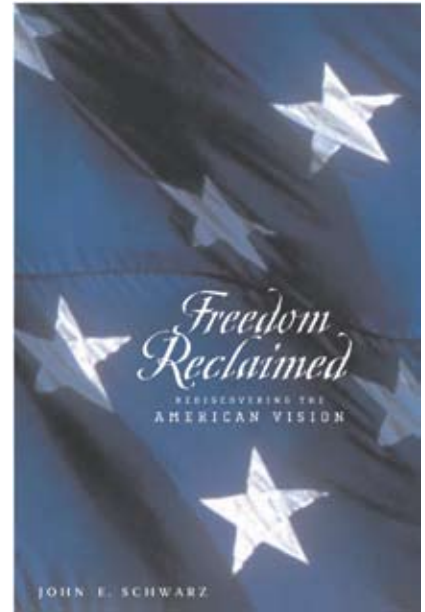
THE FREEDOM FRAMEWORK:

How a Renewed Vision of Freedom Can Serve as The Moral Compass for America

THE VISION CHALLENGE

The public policy disasters of recent years, and the vast changes facing us as a nation, present a major opportunity for big, fresh thinking about America's future. Only when advocates of social change are armed with an inspiring and commanding vision that is powerful, clear and has a strong moral bottom line can they make major policy advances and regain predominance in America.

This briefing paper suggests that those committed to a more caring, equitable, and democratic America must reclaim the value of *freedom* and reassert its inextricable link to fairness and the common good. It shows how a vision of freedom that emphasizes our obligations towards one another can inspire Americans to reconnect to a history in which freedom has represented the highest hopes for our nation, from the revolution to the women's and civil rights movements. Returning to such a vision of freedom will allow us to reach across political divides and transcend the individualism, selfishness, and enmity that so dominate our society and political arena.



The arguments set forth in this paper are expanded upon in John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

FREEDOM: THE DOMINANT AMERICAN VALUE

Freedom – the right of all individuals to be able to live, believe, and act as they wish as long as they fully respect the like rights of others – is the value standing at the heart of America’s identity. As the founders of this country envisioned it, freedom was the center of a moral system resting on the absolute principle of the dignity of every person where no individual is simply a means to someone else’s end. This idea of freedom couples the autonomy and personal responsibility of each individual with that individual’s mutual obligations toward others. If every person has the choice to determine his/her own fate, it then follows that every person must have freedom and must treat every other person as equally free. Each person’s own autonomy depends upon that person’s obligation to respect, care for, and protect the equal freedom of everyone else.

In this view, individuals deserve to control their own lives, not to be controlled by others, and to advance through their own efforts. The common good in a society that adheres to this kind of freedom emphasizes the responsibilities we have to one another to promote the equal freedom of all. It goes way beyond a simple “leave each other alone” approach. It is not only about political freedom, either. It is an overarching vision that includes every area of life – economic, legal, civil, personal, and political. And it requires the creation of the societal and institutional conditions that empower each individual. The aim is to make freedom not just an aspiration, but a reality for every person. Starting from our most basic founding principles, this vision of freedom

creates a moral anchor that defines how we can successfully address and resolve major challenges facing us—from stagnating economic opportunity and security for middle-class Americans, growing environmental dangers, and protecting the country against global threats of violence to safeguarding communities from street crime and corporate misconduct and retaining civil liberties as we defeat terrorism at home and abroad.

For the past few decades, freedom has been defined far more narrowly. To those on the left and right alike, freedom has come to be equated with the pursuit of “me-first,” self-interested aims in a free-market setting. But, as George Bush himself recognized, the free market “cannot touch the human heart.” It is time to reclaim the morally robust and inspiring freedom that was the founders’ ideal.

RECLAIMING FREEDOM’S MORAL MEANING:

This vision of freedom fits well in an age when large numbers of Americans are seeking the foundation for a renewed sense of common purpose even while valuing their own personal autonomy. Freedom does not stand in conflict with such heralded progressive and American ideals as equality, fairness, and community. The realization of these ideals is essential for every person to be genuinely free. Despite this, and at great political cost to their cause, those calling for social change have practically dropped the idea of freedom from their vocabulary.idea of freedom from their vocabulary.

Five principles flow from this vision. Together the five principles constitute a compelling morality. They set benchmarks for evaluating the extent to which we and our public policies are living

1 Americans cherish their ability to live their lives as they choose, but in making their choices they are not free to control or do wrongful harm to others.

Freedom in the moral sense does not exist if street criminals can invade our person or property with impunity, if corporations can cause financial or bodily harm without consequence, or if a woman's reproductive choices must fall in line with a particular set of religious beliefs. The

dramatic reductions in street crime over the past decade have significantly enhanced freedom in America – allowing people to feel safer and more secure in their communities. But other trends, such as increasing white-collar crime and corporate practices that undermine the health and safety of workers and consumers, have diminished freedom. The moral vision of freedom, and the mutual obligations we have to one another, call for strong, energetic government to counter and control such harmful actions. By contrast, according to this same principle, government may not be used to transform religious beliefs into enforceable regulations that all must obey

Assuring equality of opportunity – particularly through education – is an essential condition for this moral vision of freedom. Yet, the main path to greater personal choice and autonomy – namely higher education – is becoming ever less affordable for many Americans. Many others don't have access even to a decent basic public-school education. In addition, with economic inequalities at historically high levels and millions of Americans occupying jobs at which they do not advance substantially no matter how well they perform, this

2 Americans relish the freedom of self-reliance and entrepreneurship, but are not free without the opportunity to earn a dignified living through their efforts and to improve their lives by improving the quality and productivity of the work they do.

society is less and less free. What this suggests is that the core promise of the American dream, being able to advance one's living standards through improved work and greater responsibility, is in the process of vanishing for most Americans and their families. That historic dream— that great pledge of freedom— is disappearing in America not only for many of the poor but also across much of the broad middle class. The dark reality for more than three decades now is that most Americans experience stagnating real wages, eroding health-care coverage, and insecure pension prospects despite working harder and producing far more. Rather than participating in the prosperity of the economy, a solid majority of Americans (even most Americans with college degrees) are now standing mostly on the sidelines, their overall pay falling substantially behind their improved performance at work. That's why so many Americans harbor such serious doubts about the economy despite its surface good numbers.

Pay falling far behind productivity on the job has made families have to work much longer hours to get ahead, take on greater debt, become more insecure, and feel mounting stress and anxiety with ever less time for their family responsibilities. Many full-time jobs don't even pay a wage sufficient to sustain a decent standard of living. These are fundamental breaches of the moral vision of freedom and the quality of life it promises.

3 Americans have a long tradition of valuing individual autonomy in the face of intrusive government agencies. But we are only free if a sense of mutual obligation supports collectively intervening, through representative government, to confront wrongful harm and safeguard adequate opportunity.

Freedom does not sustain itself automatically. And certainly the free market does not naturally guarantee the conditions under which all Americans enjoy opportunity and personal independence. Instead, the moral vision of freedom holds that citizens have a mutual obligation to act together to ensure

such conditions for all. Such action is called for when criminals, rogue corporations, or intolerant religious actors cause wrongful harm or seek to improperly control others. Public intervention is also called for when economic conditions do not provide adequate opportunity for all citizens to make a decent living and get ahead through hard work and self improvement, or when they do not ensure basic protec-

tions – like education or healthcare – which are necessary for people to live in dignity and be responsible. Government-led action is also called for when there are market failures by which perverse incentives inherent in the private market itself, if left alone, would result in undesirable outcomes for all. Health care, controlling pollution of the environment and climate change, and the proper funding of basic research and development are key examples of this.

Strong government is an essential collective institution through which citizens work to advance freedom for all by confronting and resolving issues of wrongful harm, inadequate opportunity, and invidious market failures. As the founders well understood when they created the strong federal system to supplant the weaker government then in place, governmental action is often required to assure freedom. At the same time, government should use the least invasive, coercive, and costly actions possible that are able to attain this aim. *Appropriately restrained* government – not *smaller* government – is required. Governmental intervention can be usefully enhanced by non-profits, philanthropy, and market actors and mechanisms such as socially responsible businesses.

4 American democracy has been a model for those aspiring to freedom around the world; but we are free only if openness, honesty, full political equality, and the rule of law characterize our public life and public policies.

Government's decisions, and the elections selecting the representatives to make those decisions, must be legitimate. Our society is not free if public discussions, elections, and policy-making are characterized by biased procedures, secrecy, dishonesty, abusive surveillance, or the undue influence of private money. Government must scrupulously practice due process and the rule of law in all areas – whether in election and policy-making processes or with individuals suspected of crime. Corrupt political action, abuse of democracy, and governmental failure to maintain appropriate restraint are violations of the principles of freedom. We all have a responsibility to one another to ensure that the principles of freedom are upheld.

5 Americans sometimes take liberty for granted; but we are not free if our way of life is not secure.

This means that we must be strong. Every avenue should be used to guarantee our secu-

—military, diplomatic, political, and economic. The sole aim of military defense, in the moral vision of freedom, is to safeguard the nation against substantial threats to its security that cannot be met or contained in other ways and to stop ongoing mass genocide or torture. That same morality helps evaluate when military force should not be used – when an action is a war of choice rather than one of necessity, and risks weakening the nation’s security.

Both abroad and at home, we must concentrate our resources on the real terrorist enemy facing us and must also bring a national security lens to other areas, such as energy policy. In addition, each of the terrorist attacks, including 9-11, reveals how strengthened enforcement practices at home and abroad in collaboration with other nations is central to success. But success in protecting security alone is insufficient. The moral vision of freedom also requires that the means used also be appropriate. Lest we become akin to terrorists ourselves, enforcement procedures must incorporate protections of independent judicial review adapted to national security. FISA courts with Congressional oversight, and treating captives according to international standards, are examples. Finally, in a highly interconnected world, when we act abroad, we must collaborate with others and meet the mutual obligations we have in the context of our commitment to the United Nations and other international institutions.

FREEDOM, A WINNING VALUE

Because the value of freedom is so quintessentially American, the party or movement that owns and defines it has tended to be in the majority. The political meaning of freedom has changed with the times depending upon which party puts it at the center of its vision.

When progressive forces controlled the idea of freedom, they were victorious. The trustbusters of a century ago successfully invoked the cause of freedom, promising to liberate ordinary Americans from the tyranny of an industrial over-class. Freedom was equally pivotal in the appeals of FDR, whose path-breaking New Deal programs were all grounded in the belief that a person without basic economic opportunity and security could not be free. Freedom was the galvanizing concept behind the civil rights movement and the organizing principle of the push for women's rights and reproductive rights. Historically, Democrats have been defenders of freedom, and their skill at using this concept – and linking it clearly to the common good – spearheaded nearly all of their landmark victories. More recently, except in the area of civil liberties, Democrats have virtually stopped publicly referring to the idea of freedom. Their political fortunes have declined as they have done so.

Republican successes over the past quarter century make more sense when viewed through the prism of freedom. From Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, freedom has increasingly been seen as a Republican and conservative concept as it has become equated with the free market and the pursuit of individual self-interest. Republicans have promised more freedom by cutting taxes, reducing regulation, and otherwise “getting government off your back.” The Bush Administration has promoted economic freedom through an “ownership society” said to allow people to “take charge” of their lives. In contrast, conservatives have successfully depicted progressives as elitist and paternalistic, fundamentally opposed to the desire of ordinary Americans to control their own lives and have freedom. At the same time, liberals are cast as relativists – advocating only a social freedom that is tolerant to the point of having neither a moral bottom line nor clear limits.

Progressives can recapture national leadership by reclaiming the historic American ideal of freedom. That vision of freedom emphasizes the values of individual autonomy and personal responsibility, on the one hand, and couples them with mutual obligation, fairness, and caring on the other. This essential linkage between freedom and the common good has been turned upside down by conservatives. Freedom, far more powerfully than can any other theme, will enable advocates of a more equitable and democratic America to take the offensive and inspire Americans across racial, gender, class, and regional lines.

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ABOUT DĚMOS

Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action is a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization committed to building an America that achieves its highest democratic ideals. We believe this requires a democracy that is robust and inclusive, with high levels of electoral participation and civic engagement; an economy where prosperity and opportunity are broadly shared and disparity is reduced; and a strong and effective public sector with the capacity to plan for the future and provide for the common good. Founded in 2000, Dēmos' work combines research with advocacy—melding the commitment to ideas of a think tank with the organizing strategies of an advocacy group. As with all Dēmos publications, the views expressed in this briefing paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Dēmos Board of Trustees.

JOHN E. SCHWARZ, SENIOR FELLOW

John Schwarz's work at Demos focuses on developing a new vision for a more democratic and fairer America based on the value of freedom, the argument in his book, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision* (2005). He is currently professor emeritus in the Department of Political Science at University of Arizona, where he has been since 1970. He has published five books and articles of his have appeared in every major professional journal in political science as well as many outlets for the general public, including the Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic, The Nation, The Wall Street Journal, and The New York Times. His prior book, *Illusions of Opportunity: The American Dream in Question*, was entered in nomination for the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. Two of his other books, *America's Hidden Success* and *The Forgotten Americans*, have been placed on lists of the best fifty books on American economic and social policy written during the past half century. In 1984, *America's Hidden Success* was named through the American Political Science Association as the best book of the year on public policy. It was named by The Washington Monthly in 1984 as one of the best five books of the year. He has a BA from Oberlin College and a PhD from Indiana University. He also was educated at The London School of Economics and Political Science and L'Institut d'Études Politiques at the University of Paris.

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