

What is freedom? That is the overall compelling question from History 106 (Post Civil War US History). Ever since the end of the Civil War, and the emancipation of slaves in America, that question has taken on many forms throughout American history. Freedom has meant different things to different demographics at different times. Throughout the course, the definition of freedom changed as we explored the changing times and cultures in America after the Civil War.

After the war, slavery in America had officially come to an end. But what did this newfound freedom mean to former slaves? Overall, it meant solely freedom to labor. With the institution of slavery dismantled, former plantation owners and southern whites had to contend with their own changing definitions of freedom. What did freedom mean to the former slave owners? What did freedom become for whites in the south who supported slavery? The answer largely revolved around freedom from federal government interference. This would allow southern whites to oppress the newly freed blacks of the south as they pleased. Fast forward to the 1890s and new questions about freedom arise. Are people truly free if all they can do is work? Do laborers have rights and protections guaranteed to them by law? Should business and government be separate? Questions surrounding economic freedom for business owners clashed with debates over workers rights and the very idea of peoples' purposes in life.

Eventually, the definition of freedom morphed once again to include issues of human and civil rights, protection from oppressive governments, freedom of self-expression, and freedom from societal pressures and norms. Could minorities call themselves free in America if they were denied the same privileges and protections that whites had? Does granting minorities these protections take away from the rights of white Americans? As American culture and society developed, what was once considered freedom for some became commonplace, and a new form of oppression added to the fluid definition of what freedom really is. This definition will no doubt be changed again in the future, as generations yet to come engage in their own fights from oppression.

Throughout this course, it was imperative that we put ourselves in the mind of those who were alive and debating at those times. The use of primary sources and documents in group discussion allowed us as students to truly "get with the times" and rationalize with the opinions and lifestyles of those living in the past. It was never expected for us to be converted to any specific ideology, but to understand why these debates were important, we must understand what was changing and who it was affecting and how.

Group discussions were used weekly to foster a sense of understanding about the subjects and debates of the time periods. Different people were able to offer different insights into the issues, and could relate them in different ways to what was happening in our contemporary society.

The discussions began with an examination and analysis of the primary source documents. We needed to understand the intent of the primary source, who its intended audience was (if any), and recognize any kind of bias present in the source material. All of these factors

help us understand both the mindset of the people at the time and how we should approach the use of such a source.

The attached work sample of my History Blog gives a clearer picture of what the discussion sections were about. After each discussion section, we needed to write up a quick review of what was discussed regarding the primary source material we had been given for that week. When writing these reviews, we were encouraged to speak candidly on the matters, giving our personal opinions and relating the issues to relevant topics we felt were still ongoing problems.

In my Blog, I wrote briefly about historical biases present in primary sources, and how these biases can shape historical documentation if one isn't careful. I also spoke about certain images and political cartoons that had the most profound affect on me, particularly Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech which upon reading, gave me a very different perspective on former President Nixon than I had previously. Nixon explicitly mentions the word "freedom" several times in his speech, referring to freedom from oppressive and tyrannical social orders. The images of child laborers in coal mines also spoke to me, as in my modern mindset, the concept of children laboring in such unsafe work conditions is inconceivable and highly unethical. This is a testament to how our perceptions of morality and freedom have changed in just a little over a century.