Public Interactions with Norman Rockwell’s Four Freedoms, Then and Now

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Norman Rockwell’s Four Freedoms illustrations were initially published in four consecutive issues of the Saturday Evening Post between February 20 and March 13, 1943, in the magazine’s interior, on a full page facing an essay by a well-known author. Soon afterward, reproductions circulated in additional formats; these included large posters printed by the US Government Printing Office for war bond drives and reproductions presented to purchasers of war bonds during World War II. According to the Norman Rockwell Museum, “Bonds were sold in denominations of $25, $100, and $1,000, and each person who purchased one received a set of prints of the four paintings. In addition, the Office of War Information printed four million sets of posters of the paintings. Each was printed with the words ‘Buy War Bonds.’”¹

In a March 1945 profile of Rockwell, the New Yorker reported: “Portfolios of the pictures were presented to President Roosevelt, members of the Cabinet, Congress and the State Department, members of the parliaments and cabinets of all the United Nations, and forty thousand civic leaders around the country. The O.W.I. [Office of War Information] printed four million sets of posters and distributed them abroad and to the nation’s schools, post offices, Elks clubs, hotels, saloons, poolrooms, ration-board offices, Sunday schools, and railway stations.” Rockwell’s illustrations were credited with inspiring a Four Freedoms symphony, composed by Robert Russell Bennett, and gave meaning to the ongoing war efforts by visualizing ideals that motivated and sustained the United States’ engagements abroad. Decades later, in 1994, the US Postal Service produced stamps featuring Rockwell’s compositions. The four images have inspired countless parodies, satires, and provocative revisions, which suggest the ways in which American culture has evolved over the decades.²

While the impact of Rockwell’s Four Freedoms on viewers at the time and today is undeniable, public interactions with the illustrations have been diverse, and extant evidence is inevitably fragmentary. This essay explores these public interactions, focusing primarily on written remarks and visual appropriations—including irreverent parodies and revisions derived from the artist’s compositions later on—while touching on broader political and fund-raising campaigns. During World War II, commentary on Rockwell’s Four Freedoms was entangled with partisan views of

The four consecutive *Saturday Evening Post* issues featuring Norman Rockwell’s *Four Freedoms*: February 20, 1943; February 27, 1943; March 6, 1943; March 13, 1943. Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts; gift of William W. Hargreaves.
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and his January 6, 1941, speech that committed the United States to advancing the Four Freedoms “everywhere in the world,” even though Rockwell’s illustrations gave them idealized meaning with homely scenes in the United States.3

This selective survey underscores the rhetorical appeal of Rockwell’s Four Freedoms, addressing factors of social identity at the time of their creation, made even more explicit in provocative satirical works published decades later. Francis Frascina observed that Rockwell’s Four Freedoms “place emphases on idealized white small-town American lifestyles and American institutions that underpin them. His works are indebted to norms of heterosexual, Christian families with conventional adherence to the work ethic and local white community life.” Claire Sisco King concurs: “Many of Rockwell’s paintings have been deployed to reaffirm the hegemony of White, middle-class, Christian, and heterosexual values and subject positions. Images such as the iconic Freedom from Want (1943), which depicts a White, middle-class family eating Thanksgiving dinner, or Freedom from Fear (1943), which depicts White, heterosexual parents putting their children to bed, are those for which Rockwell is perhaps best known, and they have often functioned to reinforce dominant cultural narratives.”4

Because Rockwell’s illustrations became part of a political and a fund-raising campaign with numerous components in 1943 and 1944, isolating the specific impact of his Four Freedoms is a fallible undertaking. Thomas Buechner generalized about the illustrations’ circulation and influence: “Millions of copies were printed and distributed by the government and private agencies all over the world; the Treasury department toured the four originals to sixteen cities where they were seen by 1,222,000 people and used in selling $132,999,537 worth of war bonds. For many Americans, World War II made sense because of the goals depicted in the Four Freedoms.” While these images were central to a campaign that raised a substantial sum for the war effort, fund-raising events also featured appeals from celebrities, political figures, and diplomats, who charmed contributors into purchasing war bonds. According to the New Yorker magazine, “a total of four hundred and fifty entertainers, public officials, and miscellaneous celebrities took part” in the national tour of the Four Freedoms War Bond Show. The tour, which included the four original paintings, began on April 26, 1943, in Washington, DC, and then moved up the East Coast to Philadelphia (May 15), New York (June 4), and Boston (June 19), before continuing inland to Buffalo (July 12) and Rochester, New York (August 2), Pittsburgh (September 8), Detroit (September 27), Cleveland (October 25), Chicago (November 11), Saint Louis (December 16), New Orleans (January 16, 1944), Dallas (January 27), Los Angeles (February 12), Portland, Oregon (March 27), and Denver (May 1).5

“The major difference between the Rockwell and Roosevelt visions of the Four Freedoms was the distance between a domestic and an international focus for U.S. interests,” writes Elizabeth Borgwardt. “While the text of Roosevelt’s original Four Freedoms speech highlighted the world-wide relevance of each ‘freedom,’ percussively repeating the phrase ‘everywhere in the world’ after each item to emphasize its universal application, Rockwell’s Four Freedoms were an almost exclusively domestic affair, in both senses of that term—not international, and emphasizing images of home and hearth.” James J. Kimble has proposed, moreover, that Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms were a failure during the initial months after his 1941 speech, but that, in 1943, “Rockwell’s paintings
and their attendant publicity blitz dramatized and personalized the president’s Four Freedoms, fostering a surge of identification on the home front and ultimately launching the ideal on its ascendant course into rhetorical history.” Kimble credits the illustrations’ “mimetic approach” with giving them a power that Roosevelt’s remarks and his government’s “diegetic approach to propaganda” lacked.⁶

A Saturday Evening Post editorial, in the September 25, 1943, issue, acknowledged controversy over Rockwell’s Four Freedoms within the context of Roosevelt’s New Deal, noting fear among some readers of socialism and the potential creation of a welfare state. The editor distinguished freedom of speech and worship as relatively uncontroversial, while asserting, “the real controversy, of course, rages about the other two freedoms: Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear.” The Post explained: “The assumption by those who are alarmed at their inclusion in a body of doctrine is that they imply that men are to be guaranteed not merely against ‘want’ in the literal sense, but against lacking anything they happen to desire at any given moment. Freedom from Fear, these critics affect to believe, implies that the Government is fraudulently promising to remove all the hazards of life which men have feared in the past.” Seeking to reassure its readership, the Post averred,

If we believed that either Freedom from Want or Freedom from Fear meant that the New Deal was promising to pass a miracle which would end the necessity of individual work or foresight, reward the lazy and incompetent as richly as the able and conscientious, and set up a ‘welfare state,’ we should be as dubious about the Four Freedoms as are some of our correspondents. Some New Dealers may misconstrue these freedoms, but there is little ground for such an interpretation.

Partisan pushback from the public had apparently compelled the editor to clarify the Post’s stance in relation to Rockwell’s Four Freedoms.⁷
Such misgivings and fears about Rockwell’s illustrations were not isolated to the Saturday Evening Post’s readership. The pattern of public interactions with them in the contemporaneous political and economic climate had been indicated in a letter to the editor published in the New York Times on June 20, 1943. The writer, a B. Tomlinson, described having stood near a shop window that prominently displayed Rockwell’s Four Freedoms. When he asked a taxi driver, who had “left his cab and strolled over to take a look,” for his opinion of them, the driver replied, “Brother, the only freedoms I want are the ones guaranteed me by the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights. The New Deal can’t swap me anything for the Constitution.” Tomlinson editorialized, “Which just shows how stubborn and ungrateful the proletariat can be. Maybe the wretches don’t deserve anything better than the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.” In addition, on June 21, 1943, Time magazine criticized Rockwell’s portrayal of the Four Freedoms, commenting that the artist “would probably be incapable of portraying a really evil human being, or even a really complex one—perhaps even a really real one.” The critique continued, “Though he paints and composes exceedingly well, it is questionable whether any of his work could be seriously de-
scribed as art. Even the Four Freedoms posters fall short of artistic maturity through their very virtue as posters: they hit hardest at first sight.” In contrast to these undercurrents of concern and dissatisfaction, an enthusiastic characterization was expressed in March 1945 by the New Yorker, which stated that Rockwell’s Four Freedoms “were received by the public with more enthusiasm, perhaps, than any other paintings in the history of American art.”

The underlying power of Rockwell’s illustrations depended largely on productive pictorial ambiguities, which suffused these works with a distinctive ideology oftentimes called “civil religion” or “civic piety.” This ideology infuses US political life with a generalized spirituality that transcends specific religious traditions. Rockwell’s Four Freedoms presented a generalized portrait of American political and religious values in a way that lent support to Roosevelt’s wartime policies.

Ekaterina Haskins has suggested that civil religion’s unifying power has waned in public memory, with the rise of postmodernism and a fragmentation of grand narratives that ostensibly unite a nation, and been replaced by what she calls the “consumer sublime.” Yet Peter Gardella writes that, “Among the first effects of 9/11 on the practice of American civil religion was a dramatic increase in the intensity and extent of the cult of the flag.” American culture has changed in basic ways that can be indexed by contemporary revisions and uses of Rockwell’s Four Freedoms, especially irreverent satires and revisions.

In this presentation of public interactions with Rockwell’s Four Freedoms, the illustrations are discussed in the sequence in which they were published. Freedom of Speech circulated initially, in the February 20, 1943, Saturday Evening Post, accompanied on the facing page by Booth Tarkington’s essay on the subject. Because the First Amendment to the US Constitution establishes free speech, this work was not as provocative as others at the time of its initial release. It is impossible to know how representative was a letter, dated February 21, 1943, from Carolyn McMullan to Rockwell. She affirmed that “the first of your Four Freedoms is beautiful. The man certainly isn’t beautiful, but you feel sure that whatever he is saying is beautiful. You can see in his face everything about him. You can see the sort of life he lives and the things he believes in. And the things he believes in are, I am sure what every real American believes in.” Viewers may have seen in these pictures what they were already predisposed to see, since the speaker’s convictions are not evident in the illustration. Rockwell biographer Deborah Solomon commented in 2013 that this illustration “is compromised by a near absence of women” at the town gathering, an observation that calls attention to women’s increasing participation in public life over the decades.

That same year, Lefty Nast posted online a parody image, titled Free Speech 2013, with “apologies” to Norman Rockwell. This unsettling satire contends that freedom of speech has eroded in the United States as a result of surveillance of citizens by government agencies such as the CIA, the FBI, and the NSA, whose representatives are positioned similarly to the men in Rockwell’s composition. They still listen with rapt attention to the speaker, but now wear headphones and dark glasses, presumably to conceal their identities while recording his remarks. At least seven microphones surround the speaker to capture his every word. A “wiretap list” appears centrally in the design in place of the annual meeting brochure in the original. The federal government subjects ostensibly free speech to so much covert surveillance, the image implies, that representatives
of all three agencies are attending to the same speaker’s comments. The iconic white, working-class man from Rockwell’s original print, still wearing his familiar blue plaid shirt and leather jacket, sweats visibly, apparently concerned that his remarks are being so closely recorded. The satire implicates the federal government in damaging the centuries-old constitutional guarantee of US citizens’ fundamental rights.11

Another revision of Freedom of Speech was posted online in 2010, by Dan Nance, who asked the questions: “What would Norman Rockwell’s famous ‘Four Freedoms’ series, painted in 1943, look like today? How have 70 years changed us as Americans and our collective sense of ‘freedom’?” This dramatic piece juxtaposes Nance’s revisions with Rockwell’s originals for both speech and fear. In his version of free speech, Nance portrays the speaker as an African American woman, who stands at the center wearing a long, beige hooded sweater with the meeting brochure in the pocket. While some in the racially diverse audience listen respectfully to her remarks, a white woman to the viewer’s left shouts down her ideas. A man behind the speaker likewise shouts over her remarks, with his hand cupped to amplify the disruption, as does a person in a baseball
cap next to the bellowing white woman. The work suggests that freedom of speech and community bonds are eroded whenever consideration and respect are lacking, particularly across racial lines. This parody portrays a noticeable decline in citizens’ civility in the United States, and yet it is likely that these social tensions were already there in the past, though perhaps not as visually noticeable at town hall meetings, in part because of systematic exclusions, along racial, ethnic, and gender lines, from certain public forums.12

Freedom of Worship appeared in the February 27, 1943, issue of the Post along with Will Durant’s essay on the facing page. In a recollection published posthumously in the Post, Rockwell recounted that he “wanted Freedom of Worship to make the statement that no man should be discriminated against for his race or religion.” Not characterized as controversial in the Post’s September 1943 editorial, because of the nation’s longstanding commitment to religious freedom as a constitutional guarantee, this illustration may have tacitly reassured the magazine’s readership, given its diverse though ambiguous portrayals. Rockwell portrayed religious diversity by including a Catholic holding a rosary; an agnostic or atheist above her, who strokes his chin, deep in thought, instead of folding his hands in prayer; an elderly Protestant woman whose gray hair is held back with a hair clip; and a Jewish or Greek Orthodox worshipper in the right foreground. The imagery for the last figure might have been a productive pictorial ambiguity for viewers who were not familiar with these religions. He was interpreted at the time and over the decades as a Jewish man, because he could be construed as holding a Jewish prayer book in a codex form and wearing a hat that, according to religious historian Rachel L. Kranston, “looks quite a bit like the caps typically worn by the Chazon (cantor) in formal synagogues. These hats are still worn by cantors today—particularly on the high holidays—and were even more popular in the 1940s.” Yet he has also been interpreted as holding a Bible and wearing a hat similar to a conventional Greek Orthodox Kalimavkion.13

In 1943, the Post had an interest in portraying religious diversity and specifically including Jews in its assessments of freedom of worship. In December 1941 and March 1942, the Post had published a series of three articles that explored the importance of Jewish history and culture, all written by prominent Jewish authors: Jerome Frank, Waldo Frank, and Milton Mayer. The last of these articles, Mayer’s “The Case Against the Jew,” was interpreted as anti-Semitic by readers, whose objections were substantial and widespread enough to elicit an editorial explanation and an apology from the new editor, Ben Hibbs, in the May 5, 1942, issue. Subsequently, the Will Durant essay paired with Rockwell's Freedom of Worship alluded to “chapels” as well as “temples and mosques and great cathedrals—everywhere on earth,” which expanded the Post’s rhetorical appeal by coupling the artwork with an essay nodding to Jews, Muslims, Christians, and people of other religions around the globe.14

At least one viewer of the time was profoundly dissatisfied with Freedom of Worship, to judge by the lengthy criticism that T. C. Upham, a theater director, sent to Rockwell on February 25, 1943. Although there were seven faces featured in the illustration, the first of Upham’s eight enumerated criticisms began, “In your picture there are six principal faces in view—now five are old and one at least thirtyish.” “Where,” Upham asked, “are the youths and the children, who are certainly of greater importance than the old?” He was discontent that “ALL are foreign-looking”
and “all are northeast Nordic or Slavic or Jew.” “Where,” he wanted to know, “is the old American type and the Negro and the Italian type?” These comments are perplexing in that the image contains no specifically Jewish symbolism, and there is an African American woman praying in the upper left, possibly the seventh figure that he did not notice, to judge from his lament. “All are laborers and poor and worn,” the dissatisfied viewer continued, asking, “where is the middle class and the intellectual, etc.?”. Moreover, this viewer was troubled that all were praying “with eyes open,” when “many people pray with eyes shut.” Upham was upset that “All are facing in the same direction like cattle or sheep, but the distinction of human beings in a free country is that they face in opposite directions even toward different gods.” He extended his critique even to the “dull grey-brown color, where religion should be bright and gay and uplifting.” He was dissatisfied too with the caption, “Each according to the dictates of his own conscience.” The writer observed, “Catholics do not worship according to their own conscience but according to the dictates of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.” He concluded, “I can’t see how you COULD have gone so completely wrong; so a letter of explanation would help a little.” Rockwell replied, “I am extremely sorry that you found my picture so bad, and can truly say that in it I tried to express what I felt about Freedom of Worship—which I believe is all anybody can do.”

Writing as well about Freedom of Worship, on the stationery of the Young Women’s Christian Association, on April 5, 1943, General Secretary Gladys W. Taber reported to Rockwell that young businesswomen had “wondered why there were no young people in the picture, why everyone looked so troubled, old and worn.” One recent revision of the illustration replaces Rockwell’s praying elderly white woman wearing a hair clip in the foreground with a young praying black woman, her eyes closed, likewise wearing a hair clip, almost as if to respond to these bothered, contemporaneous critics’ concerns about Rockwell’s inattention to youths, African Americans, and varied praying practices. This revision, posted online in August 2014 by Jacqueline DeBerry, who identifies herself as the woman portrayed, could be interpreted as an affirmation of the Black Lives Matter slogan, because of its timing and the broader political climate that followed the movement’s founding in July 2013. Yet DeBerry offered the image explicitly as a sample of her work and homage to Rockwell in her portfolio as an art student. A recent revision by artist-photographer Maggie Meiners is racially and spiritually diverse and features younger worshippers as well, an apt response to Mr. Upham’s concerns more than seventy years later. Acknowledging ongoing tensions regarding Islam, it features a Muslim man holding a clearly labeled Quran. Of Rockwell’s four illustrations, Freedom of Worship is the least used in contemporary satire and parody, possibly because of the gravity with which many people continue to view faith and religious convictions.

In contrast, Freedom from Want is the most appropriated of Rockwell’s Four Freedoms. On March 6, 1943, the Post featured Freedom from Want with an essay by Carlos Bulosan, a Filipino novelist and poet who had grown up in poverty, worked as a laborer on farms in the Pacific Northwest, and participated in the labor movement. A June 22, 1943, Time article reported that Rockwell “wants especially to rework Freedom of Worship and Freedom from Want.” The Time writer seems to agree, asserting, “The latter is perhaps weakest: Rockwell’s acquaintance with want is decidedly impersonal.” Later, Rockwell acknowledged that, “Freedom from Want was not
popular overseas. Europeans sort of resented it because it wasn’t freedom from want, it was over-abundance.” It is possible that in the context of rationing food in the United States, which had begun in 1942, the abundance raised concerns for domestic viewers as well. In March 1943, soon after the publication of Rockwell’s illustration, the ongoing rationing was expanded to include meat, cheese, fats, canned fish, canned milk, and other types of foods.17

There have been so many satirical appropriations of Rockwell’s composition for Freedom from Want that entire websites are devoted to them. Most of these collections are apparently curated in the United States, though one is evidently French. On his blog, Josh McCormack has posted the most extensive coverage of these parodies, showcasing at this writing fifty-five different appropriations of Rockwell’s Freedom from Want. Most parodies are playful and amusing, featuring zombies or Muppets at the table, or portraying superheroes such as DC Comics’ Justice League or Marvel’s Fantastic Four. Sofia Vergara and Ed O’Neill, who play characters from the popular television series Modern Family, star in one adaptation of the scene. Comic book artist Joe Phillips features a gathering of buff young gay men of diverse racial backgrounds. Another such revision appeared in Reinventing Rockwell, an exhibition featuring re-creations by Pops Peterson, on view in 2015 at the Sohn Fine Art Gallery in Lenox, Massachusetts. This composition, Thanksgiving
Gay Dinner, portrays Pops and his partner, an interracial male couple, at the head of the long table. As a group, these revisions offer an inclusive and capacious representation of family compared with Rockwell’s original composition for Freedom from Want.¹⁸

In a different vein is a powerful satire designed by 2012 Pulitzer Prize–winning editorial cartoonist Matt Wuerker, entitled Thxgiving, in which almost everyone at the table is distracted by communication technology, including the elderly woman serving the food. When the Daily Kos website displayed Wuerker’s parody on November 24, 2011, it prompted a conversation, in fifty-one comments, about the prevalence of electronics in social settings. If Rockwell’s original composition portrayed family togetherness, Wuerker’s satire suggested that recent technologies and social media have so distracted family members that they have eroded such togetherness. Overwhelmed by the rush and distractions of Thanksgiving, parents serve fast food from containers to two kids in a 2015 parody, this one featuring a family much smaller in overall size than the one in Rockwell’s version. None of the family members, noticeably, make eye contact with each other, or even, for that matter, with the family dog.¹⁹

Finally, Freedom from Fear was distributed in the Post’s March 13, 1943, issue, accompanied by an essay by Stephen Vincent Benét. Francis Frascina commented:
In retrospect, Rockwell thought *Freedom from Fear* was, in his own words, “based on a rather smug idea.” While European cities were in flames, American families could rest assured that their children slept free from the fear of injury and death. Rockwell wrote: “Painted during the bombing of London, it was supposed to say, ‘Thank God we can put our children to bed with a feeling of security, knowing they will not be killed in the night.’”

The most famous digital revision of *Freedom of Fear* appeared in the *New York Times*, soon after the attacks of September 11, 2001. In this piece, the father’s newspaper was changed digitally for a very different political moment. Frascina comments:

On 2 November 2001, *The New York Times* published a full-page advertisement for itself (p. B12). A large white border surrounded a digitally altered full colour reproduction of Norman Rockwell’s painting *Freedom from Fear, 1943*, with the byline “Make sense of our times.” … In the advertisement of 2 November the depicted 1940s newspaper has been replaced so that the father is seen to hold *The New York Times for 12 September 2001*. On view is the front page with a central photograph of the burning World Trade Center and the headline: “U.S. ATTACKED HIJACKED JETS DESTROY TWIN TOWERS AND HIT PENTAGON IN DAY OF TERROR”. The altered Rockwell was placed at the end of the section titled *A Nation Challenged* and after the sub-section *Portraits of Grief*.  

The same advertisement was published again on November 4, 2012. Frascina observes, “On 3 November, the day after the altered Rockwell advertisement for *The New York Times* first appeared, the traveling exhibition *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* opened to the public at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.” He concludes, “In the aftermath of ‘September 11’, the Rockwell exhibition and individual works were received in transformed emphases that combined the complexities of trauma and new patriotism. One phenomenon of trauma is regression; another is a return to a vision of the past fashioned by a pleasurable order.”

Karen J. Engle has also commented at length on the digitally revised use of Rockwell’s *Freedom from Fear* in the November 2001 *Times*. “Drawn in part from his *Four Freedoms*, a Second World War series first published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, the doctored Rockwells enable identification with images of pre 9/11—pre-collapsarian—American innocence.” Engle further explained, “Capitalizing on the nostalgic power of Rockwell while promising readers the salve of elucidation, the ad paints a picture of America as a family under threat, selling *The New York Times* as the path to understanding.” This nostalgic power consists primarily in a general commitment to civil religion. “In order better to understand how a compelling sense of national unity and renewal can be generated by a massacre like the Sept. 11 attacks,” writes Agnieszka Soltyşik Monnet, “we need to look into sociology and specifically the concept of civil religion, which is concerned with the religious or emotional aspects of nationalism.”

Today, other satires of *Freedom from Fear* raise grave domestic issues of the day, such as racism and poverty within the United States, in contrast with Rockwell’s emphasis on a threat from abroad. For instance, in 2008, the Wolfsonian museum at Florida International University in-
vited sixty artists and designers “to create contemporary responses to Norman Rockwell’s 1943 *Four Freedoms* paintings.” R. O. Blechman’s entry for the exhibition, according to the Norman Rockwell Museum’s Illustration History website,

acknowledges some of the challenges that assail the contemporary every man: foreclosure, stolen identity, recession, bad cholesterol, terrorist attack, and taxes, as opposed to those detailed in Rockwell’s World War II era painting: bombings, kill, horror, hit. To communicate the immensity of these issues, Blechman’s father figure looks out of the picture frame at those of us viewing it, while Rockwell’s father gazes down at his children. Rockwell couched his Four Freedoms illustrations in personal and private terms. Blechman’s decision to pose the father figure looking back at the audience broadens the realm of personal fear into every man’s fear.24

Other revisions of Rockwell’s famous composition explore race and abiding racism in the United States. For instance, Dan Nance’s 2010 appropriation of *Freedom from Fear* features a woman of color, apparently pregnant, tucking her children into the bed, above which hangs a portrait of her partner in military attire. A headline on her newspaper, a copy of the *New York Times*, suggests that her partner is serving in the Iraq War. Maggie Meiners, in contrast, featured a black, single mother at her children’s bedside, in her reworking of *Freedom of Fear*, which has the alternative title *Cock, Bang, Repeat*, alluding to gun violence. The mother’s newspaper, a copy of the *Chicago Tribune*, has the headline, “If you see some[thing],” referencing the fear of terrorism in
the United States. Another powerful revision by Pops Peterson, focusing on racism and the Black Lives Matter movement, reveals a newspaper headline with the words “I Can’t Breathe.” In this work, the mother gazes directly at the viewers, as if seeking a response from them.25

In closing, the potential to tap Norman Rockwell’s original Four Freedoms compositions for parodies, satires, and revisions is a testament to their enduring iconographic and ideological power. The creative possibilities seem endless. Partisans have endeavored to challenge, limit, redefine, and even propose additional freedoms. Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers from Massachusetts, for instance, wrote to Rockwell, enclosing a copy of her proposal to recognize a fifth freedom, “Freedom of Private Enterprise.” Apparently written in 1943, her letter asked Rockwell to lend his artistic talents to preparing a cover for the Saturday Evening Post that would incorporate this additional freedom, because such an illustration “undoubtedly would be a major contribution towards speedy passage of the Resolution.”26

Each public interaction offers a glimpse into American culture in a specific historical moment and, oftentimes, indexes changes across social differences as well as convictions regarding civil religion. Many satires, as illustrated above, focus on the issue of racism in the United States. There was evidence even in Rockwell’s day that some viewers wanted him to attend to these deep and abiding concerns. Writing to the artist on the stationery of the Bronx Inter-Racial Conference, on July 12, 1943, chairman Roderick Stephens began with observations regarding Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear: “‘Want’ is something with which the Negro has been very familiar, except during the height of the war industry boom during World War I and, to a considerable extent, at present. ‘Fear’ has been ingrained in the Southern Negro and, in recent months, must have extended beyond the deep South, as a result of race riots of recent occurrence in Northern and Western Cities.” Stephens further observed, “The ‘Four Freedoms’ were generally recognized from the outset as intended for global application, but on second thought, the question of equal application at home, so far as our Negro population is concerned, has been arising in our minds, whether Negro or white.” Toward the conclusion of this lengthy letter, Stephens acknowledged, “I am attempting to suggest an idea which, in your powers of visualization and your presently integrated association in the minds of the American public with the Four Freedoms, can be visualized by you in terms to which the American public will quickly respond. If so, you can thus advance racial good-will by years.” It is possible that correspondence such as this, as well as changing times, contributed to Rockwell’s raised consciousness, as evidenced in such civil rights–era works as The Problem We All Live With, New Kids in the Neighborhood, and especially Murder in Mississippi.27

Today the Four Freedoms illustrations are rarely satirized in a single work, even though in 1943 they were at times reproduced together as a single poster. One disconcerting example, by Robert Grossman, relating to gun violence in the United States, uses weaponry as the central focus of all four images. Grossman’s reworking of Freedom of Speech suggests that people shoot guns in public to express themselves and as a way to communicate with others. He revises Freedom of Worship to imply that there is a worship of weaponry in the country today. In Freedom from Fear, the parents’ gun holsters are visible even while they are tucking the children into bed. In his Freedom from Want, a platter full of weaponry is served at the table to eager consumers.
Grossman’s images represent a sea change from Rockwell’s originals, in which violence was intimated but not vividly depicted as a representation of the people of the United States.28

While much has changed over the decades, the Four Freedoms portray deeply and widely held values that are at risk today in a changed political climate. Writing in the Guardian on February 7, 2017, Jonathan Jones affirmed, “Norman Rockwell’s Four Freedoms remind us what the US has to lose. News that the painter’s quartet of works celebrating an apple-pie America is to go on tour emphasizes what is under threat in the Trump era.” Jones explains, “Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ presidency is abandoning any claim of a US mission to defend or spread ‘freedom,’ around the world. He also seems not to care much about it at home.” Alternatively, in a very different context, Francis Frascina questions whether “there was once a sentiment, a set of values, a vision of America to be preserved and memorialized” as portrayed in Rockwell’s Four Freedoms. He asks incisively, “Was there ever such a vision in a society with histories of racial discrimination, slavery, poverty, and the genocide of Native Americans?” Conflicting commentaries such as these underscore the transnational importance of citizens around the globe continuing to discuss, debate, argue, converse, contest, and teach diverse perspectives on the Four Freedoms. Disagreement can be a good thing. It can make us think, reconsider, and change for the better.29


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Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: MacMillan, 1941), 672.


Notes


1. This essay has been adapted from: William J. vanden Heuvel, “Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Twentieth Century,” (address, August 2006); and vanden Heuvel, address, Dedication of the Four Freedoms Park, a Memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (October 17, 2012, Roosevelt Island, New York).
