Teaching human rights is not easy. It is a loaded and complex term replete with patriotic underpinnings, grand notions of justice and peace, and intense debates over sovereignty, compassion, culture, and economics.

Although Americans tend to interpret human rights as predominantly political and civil rights and assume that it is inextricably linked to democracy and democratic values, human rights is a global concept, spurred by a variety of voices, faiths, economies, cultures and political systems.

Indeed, several noted historians, lawyers, and philosophers contend that although the Magna Carta, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and the U.S. Bill of Rights are key documents, they are no more important than Eastern texts detailing the social responsibilities communities have to feed, clothe, house, educate and otherwise tend to their citizens’ needs.

Spurred on by films such as Blood Diamond (2006), Hotel Rwanda (2004), and A Mighty Heart (2007), television and magazine campaigns to stop the genocide in Darfur, the battle over American prisons at Guantanamo Bay, and iconic images of Eleanor Roosevelt holding a poster-sized scroll of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, many of our students embrace the idea of human rights without understanding what the concept means. Moreover, they have little understanding of America’s often conflicting relationship with the human rights movement.

Yet a firm grasp of these ideals and the forces that shaped them are essential to understanding both American and world history. The essays and curricula in this magazine are but a tiny first step toward addressing these concerns.

This issue focuses on the American role in defining the postwar human rights movement and illustrates how America strove to embrace the highest ideals and the struggle it took to attain them. It begins with Franklin Roosevelt’s articulation of the Four Freedoms and continues with Eleanor Roosevelt’s shepherding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through the United Nations. It then raises questions as to how Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders embraced the human rights agenda to combat more fully the stain that racial discrimination imposed on American commitment to human rights. In the process, it asks readers to consider FDR’s 1941 address to Congress in which he articulates the “Four Freedoms”—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want—against the legacy of the Great Depression, the backdrop of World War II, and the rise of the Cold War at home and abroad.

Readers will immediately notice the selective nature of the rights chosen for this discussion. Women’s rights, religious rights, civil liberties, to name just a few, are not examined here. In the meantime, readers are encouraged to examine the web sites listed below for engaging curricula on these specific rights. The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers will gladly post human rights related curricula tied to these and other issues on its website. <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers>, if readers will share their work with us.

This year—the 75th anniversary of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal—offers a unique opportunity to bring this material into your classroom. It is the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Eleanor Roosevelt guided through three United Nations Committees before its adoption by the General Assembly in December 1948. It, tragically, is also the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in the midst of his campaign for the economic and social rights of African American sani-
tation workers in Memphis and his organization of the Poor People's March on Washington.

These three events are watersheds in American History. The voices they bring into the classroom reflect the struggle to articulate and implement human rights at home and around the world.

Franklin Roosevelt, ever mindful of the damaging effect Woodrow Wilson's soaring rhetoric had on American morale during World War I, refused to embrace dramatic slogans “to make the world safe for democracy” and to fight “a war to end all wars.” Instead, he laid out a series of ill-defined but readily understandable goals that united the nation in the face of Axis threats. He hoped, but did not anticipate, the impact his four freedoms would have on those nations engaged in the battle against fascism.

Eleanor Roosevelt, who initially refused Harry Truman's request that she join the American delegation to the first session of the United Nations, had no idea when she was appointed to the Committee on Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Concerns, that she, the only non-lawyer on the delegation, would be charged by the entire fifty-one nations of the United Nations with steering the drafting of the declaration that would become the foundation of modern human rights law. In the process, she listened to the voices of those on her committee—the Canadian, the Chinese, the French, the Indian, the Lebanese, the Russian and the Yugoslav voices—to craft a declaration of values they could adopt. To do so, she had to persuade the United States State Department to adopt a much more encompassing concept of human rights (i.e., economic, social and cultural rights, as well as political and civil rights) than it envisioned when it joined the deliberations.

By the time he got to Memphis, Martin Luther King, Jr., who came to national attention during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, now viewed the civil rights struggle as a more encompassing campaign for the human rights of African Americans. He saw the deaths of Memphis sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker as violations of economic and social rights of all workers. King's supporters shared his vision. As they stood silently, carrying placards declaring “I Am A Man,” they embraced both his call for nonviolent protest and his conviction that economic and social rights are as critical as political and civil rights. They stood, demanding their full participation in American culture. King, in the last decade of his life, transformed the civil rights movement in ways that brought the human rights movement home in a distinctly American way.

My hope in editing this issue of the OAH Magazine of History is that teachers will use this material to flesh out their discussions of the Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and the civil rights movement to expand notions of responsibility, rights, and reciprocity. These crises not only tested American resolve, they challenged American values at a time when the world rushed toward globalization. Postwar America, as the fear of communism illustrates, did not know about her speech but they immediately made their own connections. Their teachers—Judy Davenport, Marge Metzger, Mary Peck and Holly Snyder—are gifts and I dedicate this issue to them.

Websites
The Advocates for Human Rights Human Rights Education Curriculum <http://www.mnadvocates.org/Human_Rights_Education_Curriculum.html>. The curricula created by the Minnesota based Advocates for Human Rights highlight the Advocates’ focus on refugee and immigrant issues in Minnesota, as well as its investigation into domestic and international challenges to children’s rights and women’s rights, and the challenges September 11, 2001 posed to human rights.


Center for Women’s Global Leadership program on Women’s Leadership Development and Human Rights Education <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/leadership/leadership.html>. The Rutgers based center “develops and facilitates women's leadership for women's human rights and social justice worldwide.” This site offers guidance for conducting “strategic conversations,” descriptions of CWGL human rights education workshops, and the tools and resources CWGL provides to further these actions.


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