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Last Updated: 05/2023



Bill of Rights Day Human Rights Day and Week, 1985

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

On December 15, 1791, the adoption of the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States—the Bill of Rights—gave legal form to the noble principles which our Founding Fathers had set forth in the Declaration of Independence as the very basis for the birth of our Nation.

Benjamin Franklin, then 81 years old, in a moving address, reminded the members of the Constitutional Convention that it was God who had seen them safely through the War of Independence and that it was only through His "kind Providence" that they were able to meet in peace to shape "the means of establishing . . . future national felicity. . . . And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice," Franklin asked, "is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"

Mindful of this, and deeply convinced that fundamental human rights are not a concession from the state but a gift of God, the Founding Fathers knew that government has a solemn obligation to safeguard those rights. That is why they were at pains to devise and ordain a constitutional system that would ensure respect for the dignity and uniqueness of every human being. Thus, they brought into existence a form of limited government—representative democracy—whose powers are circumscribed by law and whose legitimacy derives from the consent of the governed. For the first time in the history of nations, a written Constitution based on the inalienable God-given rights of the individual was promulgated.

It is with sincere thanksgiving that we reflect on the successful efforts of those wise patriots of two hundred years ago who laid the political foundations of our beloved Nation, and also to those millions of citizens ever since who have cherished and defended the Constitution and the principles it embodies. Many have given their lives on the field of battle so that freedom and human dignity might live both at home and abroad; let us never forget our debt to them or fail to honor their sacrifice and courage.

One hundred and fifty-seven years after the adoption of our Bill of Rights, the fundamental concepts enshrined in our Constitution were internationally acknowledged as applying to all peoples when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948.

Although we can take heart at the number of nations in which human rights are respected and real progress towards democratic self-government is being made, a disturbingly large number of governments continue to commit serious abuses of human rights. In the tradition of our forefathers, we protest against these abuses wherever they occur. We condemn the practice of torture, racial and religious persecution, and the denial of the right of free expression and freedom of movement.

The United States will never cease to be in the forefront of the noble battle for human rights. We have committed our resources and our influence to efforts aimed at extending throughout the world the rights we enjoy, rights which are rightly the prerogative of all people. This Nation must remain and will remain a beacon of hope for all who strive for human dignity. There is no better way of showing our gratitude for our inheritance of liberty.

We believe it is a right, not a privilege, to be allowed to speak freely; to assemble peacefully; to acquire and dispose of private property; to leave the country of one's residence; to form trade unions; to join or not to join groups and associations; and to worship according to one's conscience. Experience teaches us that the best check against tyranny is a government of the people in which leaders are elected in fair and open balloting and where the government's powers are subject to constitutional limitations. We pray that one day all nations of the earth may share with us the joys and rewards of living in free societies, and we resolve not to rest from our labors until the most noble longings of the human spirit, those for freedom of belief and expression, are fully realized.

During this commemorative week, let us rededicate ourselves to the advancement of human rights throughout the world, recalling the words of Alexander Hamilton that "natural liberty is a gift of the beneficent creator to the whole human race . . . and cannot be wrested from any people without the most manifest violation of justice."

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim December 10, 1985, as Human Rights Day, and December 15, 1985, as Bill of Rights Day, and I call upon all Americans to observe the week beginning December 10, 1985, as Human Rights Week.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this 10th day of December, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-five, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and tenth.

Ronald Reagan