

Printed July 23, 2008 11:47am AEST

## A long dance with freedom

Stephen Matchett | May 28, 2008

**ERIC Foner sits at the highest table of the American historical establishment; he has held the DeWitt Clinton chair in history at Columbia University for 20 years and served as president of the Organisation of American Historians and the American Historical Association.**

Yet despite, or perhaps because of, his standing, his fascination with the meaning of freedom in the US in the past and present upsets conservatives.

In 2002 Daniel Pipes named Foner as one of "six professors who hate America" because of the historian's expressed opposition to any US attack on Iraq.

Writing with a colleague, Foner replied: "In equating opposition to government policies with hatred of our country, Pipes displays a deep hostility to the essence of a democratic polity: the right to dissent."

It was an exchange that goes to the heart of Foner's academic endeavour.

In 19 books, a great many more essays and articles, he has explored the changing meaning of freedom in US politics and in identifying who has won and lost in the way the concept is understood and applied.

And since President George W. Bush declared that the country was at war with terror after the destruction of the twin towers he has not liked much of what he sees.

"The language of the war on terror opens the door for infringements of freedom," he tells the HES.

Examining whether a nation lives up to oft-expressed ideals in past or present is not a familiar subject in the pragmatic world of mainstream Australian politics.

But the idea of freedom is central to US political history and Foner, in lectures at the University of Melbourne and on Tuesday at the University of Sydney's new US Studies Centre, is exploring the way politicians have adapted and abused it through American history. Since the War of Independence there have been struggles to determine "who is entitled to freedom", he says.

And, throughout US history, freedom has often been understood as less a positive ideal than the difference between the US and its enemies. In the century before the Civil War, freedom was defined by what it wasn't, as the opposite of slavery.

"In the 20th century the US has found examples of 'unfreedom' overseas in communism and the Nazis. We define ourselves in opposition to the absences of freedom abroad, using this to define our domestic idea of what freedom is or isn't," he says.

And now freedom is being defined as what terrorists hate about the US. "The Government uses freedom as a rallying cry to mobilise support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. 'The enemy hates us because we are free' is an all-purpose explanation for the terror attacks."

According to Foner, there is nothing new about politicians invoking freedom. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln spoke of a "new birth of freedom", and in January 1941 Franklin Roosevelt set out the four freedoms to which the US aspired at home and abroad: freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear.

"But the idea is insistently promoted since September 11 by politicians so that if you disagree with government you are opposed to freedom," Foner says. He suggests that conservatives in government used the war on terror as an opportunity to take the intelligence agencies off the leash they have strained against since the 1970s.

"They saw 9/11 as giving them the opportunity. I don't want to exaggerate, we are not living in a fascist state, but since then time-honoured liberties have been chipped away," he says.

But is the terror risk real? Foner does not deny the danger; he lives less than 10km from the World Trade Centre site. "Obviously there are groups that hate America, but this is not a war in a conventional sense. Better to see it as a struggle against bands of mad criminals or like dealing with the Mafia."

He also suggests the idea that American freedom is easily exported is not only as old as the US but is often self-serving.

Endorsing arguments advanced by historian and Cold War critic of US foreign policy William Appleman Williams, Foner says the "language of freedom goes with economic interests" throughout US history.

"Williams exaggerated, but his idea of 'open door imperialism' is a brilliant insight. With the exception of North America and Mexico, the US has never been a territorial empire but an economic one," Foner says. "The language of freedom goes with economic interests."

And, pointing to the invasion of Iraq ("even the neo-cons admit it was a terrible mistake"), he argues American conceptions of what it is to be free are unique and universal. "You just can't impose democracy by invading a country. Iraqi democracy will be an outgrowing of Iraqi history and culture. Americans have an idea that the US's job is to teach the rest of the world what freedom is, but we can learn by listening to others."

Foner is obviously passionate about the way an understanding of the past can inform the present. But he acknowledges a disconnect between academic history and what general readers want.

"The problem is the gap between professional scholars and what general readers of history are interested in. While academics are interested in race, women's history, labour history - areas where you aren't going to see bestsellers - the bestsellers are the same as they were 50 years ago, books about the founding fathers and the Civil War.

"The funny thing is that people complain about the lack of knowledge of history but Doris Goodwin (author of a 2005 book on Lincoln's cabinet) and David McCullough (biographer of founding father John Adams) both sold a million copies."

The answer, he says, is "for we historians to get out into the public arena".

Foner certainly has. In addition to an immensely productive publishing career he has curated museum exhibitions and worked with the National Park Service on the presentation of history in its visitor centres. He was historical adviser for a short-running 1999 Broadway musical on the less than likely subject of the war between the states, called, unsurprisingly, *The Civil War*.

And he has reached an audience that even Goodwin and McCullough can't claim by rewriting the Hall of Presidents presentation at Disney World in 1993.

"I write scholarly books but I also worked for Disney," Foner says. "I don't emphasise it but I did it."

Eric Foner will deliver a public lecture at the University of Sydney's US Studies Centre on Tuesday.

---

Copyright 2008 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).