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Bill of Rights Day Human Rights Day and Week, 1981

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

On December 15, 1791, our Founding Fathers rejoiced in the ratification of the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States—a Bill of Rights which has helped guarantee all Americans the liberty which we so cherish.

One hundred and fifty-seven years later, on December 10, 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an effort aimed at securing basic human rights for the people of all nations.

Each of these great documents was born after the bloodshed of a bitter war. We remember the great sacrifices Americans have made for 200 years, from the Revolutionary War, in which our ancestors pledged "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor," to the wars of this century, in which hundreds of thousands of young Americans and millions of others gave their lives on the battlefields of Europe, Asia, and Africa in the struggle for freedom. And, yet, even today, as we celebrate Bill of Rights Day and Human Rights Day, we all are only too well aware that the individual rights declared in these documents are not yet respected in many nations.

We have learned that the lesson our Founding Fathers taught is as true today as it was two centuries ago—liberty depends not upon the state but upon the people. Liberty thrives in the free association of citizens in free institutions: families, churches, universities, trade unions, and a free press.

Mankind's best defense against tyranny and want is limited government—a government which empowers its people, not itself, and which respects the wit and bravery, the initiative, and the generosity of the people. For, above all, human rights are rights of individuals: rights of conscience, rights of choice, rights of association, rights of emigration, rights of self-directed action, and the right to own property. The concept of a nation of free men and women linked together voluntarily is the genius of the system our Founding Fathers established.

We will continue to strive to respect these rights fully in our own country and to promote their observance abroad. We could have no greater wish for mankind than that all people come to enjoy these rights.

This year, after nearly 20 years of effort, the United Nations Human Rights Commission and the UN General Assembly have approved a declaration on the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on religion. It begins with words Americans will find familiar, "Everyone will have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." It declares that parents must have the right to teach their children to worship God and that all religions must have the right to teach their faith, to train their clergy, and to observe their customs and holidays.

We in America are blessed with rights secured for us by the sacrifices of our forefathers, but we yearn for the day when all mankind can share in these blessings. Never is there any excuse for the violation of the fundamental rights of man—not at any time or in any place, not in rich countries or poor, not under any social, economic or political system.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim December 10, 1981 as Human Rights Day and December 15, 1981 as Bill of Rights Day, and call on all Americans to observe the week beginning December 10, 1981 as Human Rights Week. During this week, let each of us give special thought to the blessings we enjoy as a free people and let us dedicate our efforts to making the promise of our Bill of Rights a living reality for all Americans and, whenever possible, for all mankind.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this 4th day of December, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-one, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and sixth.

Ronald Reagan