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"The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people." So wrote Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis more than 80 years ago. An important counter to the passive, uninvolved citizenry that Brandeis warned against is activism. Activism, which has had a rich and compelling role in the history of the United States, continues to play a powerful part in the dynamism of our country.

Activism is the promotion of a certain belief or principle through individual action. The difference between noble thoughts and activism is simple: activists work to put their beliefs into action. Some activists fight for broad causes, such as the environment or civil rights, but many other activists fight for smaller causes, such as feeding the homeless or revitalizing a neighborhood park. Both large and small instances of activism continually energize and refresh American civic life.

Activism has been prevalent throughout U.S. history, and guarantees for some of the most important means of activism were written into certain of our nation's earliest self-governing documents, including the constitutions of Virginia (1776) and Massachusetts (1780). Expanding on these earlier precedents, America's foremost founding document – the United States Constitution and its accompanying Bill of Rights – provides full protection for civic activism. Specifically, the Constitution's First Amendment, reads, in part, "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." With these words, our Founding Fathers cemented the role that activism was to play in America. The Founders wanted an open society where ideas could be thoughtfully and meaningfully discussed and laid out specific means for activism in America, including individual speech and collective action.

With the First Amendment's strong protections for individual speech and collective action, a new tradition of activism, personified by individuals such as Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony, began that would shape American history for centuries to come.

Although most people associate Frederick Douglass only with slavery and Susan B. Anthony only with suffrage, the two were more alike than one might imagine. In fact, these two American icons were close friends who believed in equality for all. Douglass, born a slave, later escaped slavery and became a fervent abolitionist. Douglass delivered powerful speeches, wrote best-selling books, and traveled extensively both nationally and internationally to mobilize support for abolition. Although he wasn't alone, Douglass was for some time the country's leading abolitionist, and the eventual end of slavery was in no small part due to his actions. Douglass epitomized activism: he had a specific purpose and worked tirelessly towards influencing public opinion in support of that purpose.

Susan B. Anthony, born to a activism-minded family, spent her entire life advocating for women's rights. Anthony, like Douglass, was a forceful writer and orator in support of a cause she believed in, served as president of a national women's rights organization and was even arrested for illegally voting in the 1872 presidential election. Susan Anthony's life work was vindicated 15 years after her death with the ratification of the 19th Amendment, giving all American women the right to vote.

Although activists such as Frederick Douglass and Susan Anthony are famous, ordinary citizens can, and do, serve as activists as well. For instance, I'm very concerned about the threat overfishing poses to our oceans. I'm only a high school student, but I believe strongly in the quote attributed to Helen Keller: "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." I contact my elected officials about marine conservation issues and write letters to local restaurants asking them to serve sustainable seafood. I had an article published in my local newspaper about overfishing, met with scientists in a government agency, and handed out sustainable seafood information at the zoo. My activism, while it might not change the world by itself, is illustrative of a larger culture of activism in America.

Activism has a long and storied history in the United States. Since its protection in our Constitution's First Amendment, countless activists have helped mold and change America. In fact, without ordinary Americans fighting for principles they believe in, our country would be very different than it is today. Activism is at the very core of what it means to be an American.