liberty was the conception of justice, and it is here that the United States has faced and continues to face its most perplexing and divisive struggle, particularly in dealing with racial and economic issues. The Revolution itself was both ambiguous and deeply flawed in its attempt to comprehend and create a full measure of justice in American life.

For example, a staple of Revolutionary pamphlets and sermons was the theme of slavery. The colonists complained that England had deprived the colonies of their liberties and reduced them to a state of vassalage. A few colonists sensed the incongruity of protesting against British policy as enslavement and continuing to hold Africans captive. Connecticut Congregationalist Levi Hart denounced "the horrible slave trade" as a sin and exclaimed, "What inconsistence and self-contradiction is this! . . . When, O when shall the happy day come, that Americans shall be consistently engaged in the cause of liberty?" 10 Hart's was a lonely voice, although the Revolution did mark the beginning of the antislavery movement and the abolition of slavery in the North. Southern slavery prevailed and flourished, only to convulse the nation in a Civil War and leave the persistent problem of racial injustice.

The constitutional settlement of the race question indicated a pattern in American racism. In the Constitution of 1787, apportionment in Congress was formulated in terms of the white population of each state and three-fifths of the slave population. In other words, justice could only be refused to black people by denying their humanity—by defining them as three-fifths of a human being. Even today injustice flourishes when racism encourages people to conceive of others as less than human.

Similarly, despite the now famous protests by Abigail Adams that women were determined "to foment a rebellion" unless their equality was recognized, the American Revolution was essentially for men only. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the feminist movement but also saw the gradual and increasing separation of women from full participation in American economic and social life. Like racism, sexism retained its hold only when a woman could be understood as less than a man.

Despite these profound inconsistencies and partial understandings of justice, every major reform movement in American history has returned to the spring of the American Revolution for much of its inspiration, rhetoric, and ideological justification. At perhaps the most basic level, the civil rights and women's rights movements today urge a realization of the basic principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. This is dramatic evidence of the continuing impact and revolutionary character of the American Revolution, which cannot be contained and which continues to speak to and for new groups at different times. Like the leaders of the