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WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE AND FREE SPEECH?

Civil discourse and free speech are vital for democratic self-governing. The latter cannot exist without the other. While countries across the world suppress freedom of speech, it is a liberty on which America was built. People from all over the world travel perilous journeys and risk their lives to set foot on American soil. They come from countries where they are persecuted for religious beliefs or they live in constant fear of speaking their own truths.

Free speech and civil discourse provide hope and possibility. History shows that the lack of free speech can prevent societies from evolving and moving forward. Dictatorships typically target speech freedom and the exchange of ideas, often resulting in the crumbling of their economies and the suffering of their people. Freedom of speech is the foundation of every other liberty written in the constitution.

Although freedom of speech is the foundation of every other liberty written in the U.S. constitution, it has been challenged at various points in history. Men and women have used their voices to debate on societal issues. Allowing, and even encouraging civil discourse, can lead to progress and growth in both individuals and the country. Free speech has allowed the country to be what it is today, a melting pot of ideas in which the best rise to the top. Though it is far from perfect, hope remains, in part due to the promise at the heart of a free speech regime. Even as politicians continue to argue and banter on different sides of every issue, hope remains. Through free speech and the discourse it facilitates, the

opportunity exists for the country to lift itself up and try again and again. Growth, not perfection, is that hope.

In 1927 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis reimagined the meaning of free speech, both its roots and what it could mean for the nation's future.

"But they [The founding fathers] knew that order cannot be secured merely through fear of punishment for its infraction; that it is hazardous to discourage thought, hope and imagination; that fear breeds repression; that repression breeds hate; that hate menaces stable government; that the path of safety lies in the opportunity to discuss freely supposed grievances and proposed remedies... they amended the Constitution so that free speech and assembly should be guaranteed."

It would take decades for Brandeis' words to gather momentum. As free speech cases were heard in courts, Brandeis' opinion would trickle back into consciousness. In 1969 it was ruled that free speech would be protected unless it caused "imminent lawless action."

At the core of Brandeis' words was civil discourse – the value inherent in thought, hope and imagination. These values provide citizens the opportunity to share their opinions and their frustrations. Through civil discourse, problems are debated, truths are sought, and solutions can be reached.