

Remembering Ruth Bader Ginsburg: a freedom fighter in an unrecognizable America

In the bleakest of nights, as a pandemic raged across the United States, as a political firestorm threatened to topple one of the world's longest-surviving democracies, Americans took to the streets bearing candles and flowers, mourning the death of a feminist heroine dubbed 'Notorious RBG'. They emerged from a nationwide lockdown to pay their respects to a woman whose liberal values and iron will had transformed her country.

On 18th September 2020, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a Supreme Court justice and a lover of opera, gave her final aria.

Perhaps years later, Ginsburg will be remembered for her tiny, petite frame, one that cast an unforgettable silhouette over the steps of the Supreme Court building and withstood the weathering of sex discrimination. She will be known for her quiet yet fiery dissidence; the cool, calm and collected manner with which she would speak even when enraged; the decades-long war she waged against inequality, a battle guaranteed to inspire generations of American daughters. But most importantly, Ginsburg encapsulated everything her broken and divided country claimed to be but failed to truly live up to. The United States has lost not only a feminist advocate, but one of its greatest legal minds and freedom fighters.

That same night, Americans found themselves living in an irreconcilable state of division and decline. 200,000 of their fellow countrymen had been sentenced to their graves by a disease they had not even heard of at the start of the fateful year of 2020. That sense of possibility – the animating belief of personal and generational advancement dubbed the American Dream – was diminished.

But Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Supreme Court justice born into a lower middle-class family in 1933 Brooklyn? She was the living persona of the American Dream.

Ginsburg came from modest roots. Her traditional female identity in high school was cemented by the prevalence of sexism in 1930s America. This Ruth was not the justice we know today – the justice who joked that she would not be satisfied until all nine Supreme Court justices were women. Before that, she was a bright Jewish schoolgirl who had just lost her mother to cancer, living under the shadow of the Holocaust.

Her mother's death was the trigger in Ginsburg's transformation from high school 'twirler' to aspiring young lawyer waging battle against sex-based discrimination. Ruth's mother was a star pupil whose family, when faced with financial uncertainty, sacrificed her education to provide for the schooling of her brother. Where her mother failed, Ginsburg was determined to succeed – she strove to be what her mother should have been.

It was this personal tragedy that defined Ginsburg's mission – to create an era in which men and women could see each other as equals and aspire to the same stars, and dream of the same possibilities.

That same motivation drove Ruth to work hard despite rampant gender discrimination. Her meticulousness propelled her to the elite straits of Harvard Law School, in which she was one of the only nine women in a class of over 550. She graduated in first place in her class at Columbia Law School. Staggeringly, she did this while caring for her cancer-stricken husband and a two-year-old daughter.

Her astounding strength of character would carry her through the ordeal of the following years, during which she struggled to find employment due to her being a woman and a mother. In those years, she continued to defy social barriers, most notably in her marriage. Ruth refused to marry a man who cared nothing for her brilliant mind, and Marty Ginsburg, she said, was the 'first boy who cared that I had a brain.'

It was Ruth's modest origins that made her relatable to her fellow Americans; it was her hard work that reminded them of what they were promised; it was her struggle against inequality that gave them hope. Americans were promised possibility – that hard work can catapult them to success. In a growing economic recession and in the midst of a pandemic, that possibility is fading; and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whose success

proved that the principle of equal opportunity was alive and well, died of cancer at age 87. Her last breath seemed to herald the death of the fabled American Dream.

Every morning, Americans awake dreading the moment they turn on the news, which will almost inevitably open a Pandora's Box of sickening information, throwing more upheaval into the crisis, flame on fire. In the midst of that inferno, people look for hope, that crucial entity that will reconcile an irreconcilable state of a broken and polarized America.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg had always maintained that dissent was an act of hope. She knew that the act of dissent could 'speak to a future age'. She knew that change had to be done on different levels and over many years. It could not be accomplished by saying, 'They are wrong and I would do it this way', but by gradually changing the general opinion until over time it became the dominant view. 'That's the dissenter's hope,' Ginsburg said, 'that they are writing not for today, but for tomorrow.'

Her feminist opinions and liberal values gave her the nickname 'the Dissenter', following an incident during which she said, 'I dissent' instead of the typical 'I respectfully dissent.' And Ruth Bader Ginsburg dissented on a great many things; most notably on the Virginia Military Institute, which was run only by men. In 1996, Ginsburg argued that the exclusion of women from an institute created to build strong character within young people was a constitutional violation; and she convinced all but one justice that it went against the American value of equal protection.

It was dissenting opinions on landmark cases that solidified the entire concept of gender discrimination and other constitutional protections that Ginsburg had almost single-handedly established decades earlier. It allowed Ginsburg to rise from a judge to justice, and it was also what paved the way to her emergence as a cultural icon to the American people. As the Supreme Court tilted towards the right over the following years, Ginsburg flexed her power to dissent on the bench; she could not control the outcome of events, but she could at least make her voice heard.

Her scathing dissents were heard in the Supreme Court's demolition of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, which she denounced as an act of hubris. They rang truer in the 2016 presidential race, which resulted in Donald Trump becoming President of the United States.

One morning, when Americans wake up to a country that has become a stranger to themselves, they will remember Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who in her lifetime strove to serve not herself but her country; who fought not just against sex-based discrimination but against discrimination of any form; who, in a country tilting increasingly away from democracy, encompassed everything it should be: a fighter for equal opportunity and freedom.

On 23 September, a procession stood on the steps of the Supreme Court. A clear blue sky and autumn sunshine graced the morning as her casket was lifted down the same steps she walked up every day for the past 30 years. But several streets away, in the US Capitol, a dark political brawl was brewing.

Ginsburg had voiced her wish to not be replaced until the next president was elected; President Trump refused to respect the dying wish of a woman who devoted her life to serving her country. A week after her death, he nominated a candidate that would cement the Supreme Court's tilt to the right-wing and the conservative, a stark contrast to Ginsburg's own radical and liberal values. It is, frankly, an insult to the memory of a woman who fought through cancer and various health scares to continue her work on the bench out of love for her country.

America has lost more than a feminist icon – it has lost Justice Ginsburg's vital opinion and dissent. But Americans have also inherited her legacy – the opportunities she created, the rights she fought for, the norms she changed.

Americans find it harder to recognize the country that they once loved. In the midst of political turmoil, a raging pandemic, racial discrimination and sexism, it is glaringly evident that this is not the America the founding fathers envisioned. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, they found themselves confronted with a scenario that looked all too much like a scene out of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A shattered mirror is being held up to a fractured country. America has been called the bastion of democracy; it has strayed farther and farther from its title. Ginsburg embodied a fundamental part of American democracy in her monumental struggle against discrimination, sex-based or of any sort. Years later, parents will speak to their sons and daughters of a woman who allowed them to be equally cherished, even if, beyond the walls of their homes, their country is no longer recognizable, a broken, post-American America.