To what extent did reform movements in the United States from 1825 to 1855 lead to an expansion of democratic ideals?

During the years of 1825 to 1855, the nation influenced the peak of an era of individual and moral discovery through the Second Great Awakening. Protestant denominations, like Baptists and Methodists, swelled their ranks as more Americans warmed to the emotional experience of their Christian faith especially during a time when some believed the Second Coming was at hand. Inspired by this religious revival, Americans pursued efforts to cleanse society of its ills. Some groups failed to achieve effective sociopolitical reform goals during the period. However, through behavioral, cultural, and social issues and platforms, more Americans helped build a foundation of increased political efficacy and progress. These reform movements expanded the understanding of democratic principles and ideals.

In order to understand the ideas of democracy and American republicanism, some reformers believed Americans should free themselves. Around this time Transcendentalism taught individuals to free their mind and become self-reliant. Although Transcendentalists, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, questioned the traditional institutions of religion and politics, the idea of opening the mind to new ideas furthered democratic ideals. Emerson gave a speech, The American Scholar, calling for a break from traditional institutions and thinking (DOC 2 – HISTORICAL CONTEXT). Before the reform era, American prisons housed criminals and the insane since the American penal system typically did not distinguish the two, recognizing them equally as evil sinners or possessed. Dorothea Dix launched an effort to open America’s eyes to penal reform to recognize the legal rights of the mentally ill. She criticized inhumane treatment of the insane and observed their progress in the proper medical environments. She persuaded the American public and state legislators to authorize legal support and funding for asylums through her personal testimony and observations (DOC 6 – INTENDED AUDIENCE). Other American attempted to solve social ills by freeing the mind of vices, such as alcohol, prostitution, and gambling. Reformers believed alcohol drove workers to be idle and unproductive. This behavior conflicted with the pervasive American tradition of the Protestant work ethic. The temperance movement preached how alcohol could affect even a successful man by leading him away from his paternal responsibility toward a state of moral corruption and ruin. The American Temperance Movement, founded in 1826, spearheaded temperance reforms through sermons and political cartoons (DOC 4 – HISTORICAL CONTEXT). Most Americans balked at temperance calls for prohibition as an attack on personal liberty. However, the overall intent of the movement attempted to free the mind of vices and this independence from alcohol could easily translate to increased dedication to political efficacy and understanding.
To further promote the idea of enlightening American society of its democratic principles, other American reformers targeted the educational institutions of the United States. The American printing press made innovations during the early industrial period leading to affordable newspapers, the penny press. As a result of the Market Revolution, the American working class expanded and demand for the news increased. The wide availability of newspapers kept most Americans updated with politics and helped solidify party support with the beginning of the spoils system after the Election of 1824. To fuel a society eager to read and participate, reformers launched efforts to improve public education. Horace Mann led one of the greatest educational reforms. He promoted a secular and public education to foster a free society. He believed it was the state government’s civic and moral responsibility to support the growth of responsible republican citizens. As a member of the Massachusetts state legislature he understood his state’s historical reputation of establishing and supporting free public education. Unfortunately, public education during the early to mid 19th century remained a low priority in the South. Education remained mostly private and limited to the sons of plantation owners. Southern planters also convinced legislators to extend slave codes to limit education opportunities for slaves. While Mann’s reforms became increasingly popular throughout the northern region leading to further democratization and spread of ideas, the South languished behind in educational opportunities to spread liberty.

Reform movements during 1825 and 1855 greatly influenced the call for a more democratic American society. This time period saw the rise of the common man exemplified with the election of Andrew Jackson to the White House in 1828. States began to eliminate property requirements for voting eligibility. Universal male suffrage spread throughout the United States. Despite the growing movement of voting rights, certain social groups failed to receive the right to vote. The Declaration of Independence states all men are created equal, but the author, Thomas Jefferson, was a slave owner. By 1833 the United States failed to apply liberty and equality to all men when two million black Americans toiled in bondage throughout the Southern slave states. William Lloyd Garrison founded the American Antislavery Society in 1833 to promote the ideals established in the Declaration of Independence and abolish slavery throughout the United States. Garrison spread the irony of a country based on freedom with legal recognition of slavery through his newspaper, The Liberator. Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, also published an abolitionist newspaper with his North Star. Garrison also believed in the rights of women who supported the abolitionist movement hoping to also bring light to their lack of legal rights. Most states denied women the right to vote and limited property rights. American society believed women represented the moral foundation of the family while men worked in their public sphere thus men should only be entitled to the right to vote. During the early to mid 19th century men assumed a more powerful and dominant role over their wives in the household and throughout the community. For some women, this cult of domesticity subjugated women and violated their natural rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton paralleled the colonists’ struggle for independence against Great Britain with the growing women’s suffrage movement in the 1840s and 1850s. Women proclaimed equal physical, mental, and emotional strength among men. Sojourner Truth challenged the superiority of men over women given her experiences as a woman and a slave. She displayed her body of muscles and scars to prove her immense capacity and strength, in some instances beyond the measure of any man. Unfortunately, the
women’s cause for suffrage moved to the background as the sectional conflict over slavery took precedence. By 1855 neither women nor slaves achieved nationwide suffrage, but their efforts established a foundation for ultimate recognition of equality and liberty.

The reform movements of the early and mid 19th century may not have secured full legal liberties and rights for all Americans, but it did fuel further understanding of democratic ideals. The reform movements resonated throughout time, including after World War II. During the early years of the Cold War, America struggled to compete with the Soviet Union. The federal government prioritized education to challenge the Russians in the Space Race. Americans embraced Christianity in contrast to the Soviet’s atheist state religion. Some Americans recognized the irony of the United States criticizing the Soviet Union’s oppressive society while still subjugating blacks in the South with segregation and disenfranchisement and regulating women to a modern version of the cult of domesticity. Through the promotion of democratic ideals, the Civil Rights Movement achieved legal protections. However, feminism failed to accomplish federal equal rights recognition. Yet, like the early 19th century reform movement, these contemporary movements laid a foundation to hopefully achieve full equality and liberty for all Americans in the 21st century.