6. FDR’s Four Freedoms Speech: A Call for Human Rights “Everywhere in the World”

Not long past noon on Monday, January 6, 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt locked his leg braces into place and mounted the podium of the Capitol’s House of Representatives to deliver his eighth State of the Union address. Newly elected to a third term, FDR was by now a seasoned leader. Indeed, on that winter day in 1941, he was arguably the most experienced and most important statesman in the world.

And the world was falling apart. The Nazis had swallowed Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France, the Fascist Italians had invaded Ethiopia, Egypt, and Greece, and the Japanese had sacked China and Indochina. In September the three powers had signed the ominous Axis Pact, pledging mutual support in establishing “a new order of things.” Great Britain, a last line of defense against totalitarianism in Europe, had held fast during months of German bombing and U-boat attacks, but was now much depleted of armaments and out of money.

FDR had a great deal to accomplish in his speech. Most immediately, he asked Congress to authorize and fund “a swift and driving increase” in American arms production. He also asked listeners to support his plan (the “Lend-Lease” program) to give the British and other Allies ready access to American
airplanes, ships, tanks, and other munitions without having to pay for them in cash.

But FDR went beyond these short-term goals to explain to a country deeply troubled at the prospect of sending its sons into combat on foreign soil just what was at stake for Americans in this war.

He first made an eminently practical case, drawing a picture of Britain vanquished, the Axis tyrants holding dominion over all of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australasia. Nothing resembling an American way of life would be possible in such a world, he argued. Under a “dictator’s peace,” a “new one-way international law,” Americans could not long enjoy independence as a nation, nor should they expect to exercise their traditional liberties.

FDR went further still, arguing that Americans’ very identity—their most cherished values—hung in the balance. In so doing he defined American identity as a universal idea to which any and all might cleave, something very different from the tribal and even racist nationalism that fueled the Axis powers’ pitiless expansionism. It was no mistake that in FDR’s description of his nation’s values, the word “freedom” rang out again and again.

In the famous conclusion of his speech, he named four “essential human freedoms”—freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship as one chooses, freedom from fear (of armed aggression, for example), and freedom from want (for destabilizing “social and economic problems,” he pointed out, had birthed the appalling political movements that now threatened American security). In each case the president pointedly added that these freedoms must prevail everywhere in the world.

FDR’s message married the New Deal values that had helped sustain democratic life through turbulent times in America to an impassioned defense of “democratic existence” around the world. He proposed a broad “moral order” that would protect the individual but inspire the multitudes—and thus prove mightier than the militaristic “new order” the Axis powers sought to impose.

Isolationism in America

In the years following World War I, the American public was in an isolationist mood. Many believed the country should nurture its own people and distance itself from a troubled world beyond its borders.

The 1920s saw the passage of high tariffs on imported goods and immigration quotas that sharply curtailed the flow of newcomers to U.S. shores. Americans were particularly determined to avoid entanglement in foreign wars.

Many viewed the colossal loss of life in World War I with bitterness as well as sorrow. The flaring of renewed conflict overseas seemed to confirm the failure of a peace treaty that had redrawn the map of Europe in a way that left few satisfied and saddled Germany with debts that only exacerbated its desperation. Moreover, many Americans were convinced that it had been bankers and arms dealers—profiteers—who got the United States into the war in the first place.

FDR had always favored engagement in world affairs—he had accepted the Neutrality Acts with reluctance—but, as the 1930s drew to a close, he became increasingly persuaded that the fight against totalitarianism must be won. As Britain endured its pounding by German bombs, FDR received one urgent plea after another from Prime Minister Winston Churchill. When he cabled FDR in July 1940 asking for old destroyers, Churchill declared, "Mr. President, with great respect I must tell you that in the long history of the world this is a thing to do now."

One of FDR’s most challenging tasks was to inspire a similar sense of urgency about the war in the American people. His Four Freedoms speech in January 1941 framed the conflict in a way that emphasized its relevance to America’s own future—and helped Americans prepare themselves for the sacrifices that lay ahead. Before the year was out, Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor would erase any doubt on the matter, uniting the nation against the Axis powers.

The president’s next State of the Union address came only weeks after that bloody attack, on January 6, 1942. In this speech, stirring his countrymen to their cause, FDR built on the Four Freedoms theme he had introduced in ‘41. "Hitler and his Italian and Japanese chessmen . . . know that victory for us means victory for freedom," he said. "They know that victory for us means victory for the institution of democracy—the ideal of the family, the simple principles of common decency and humanity."
Prepared by the Four Freedoms Speech

At a perilous juncture in world history, Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that his eighth State of the Union address on January 6, 1941, must bring to bear all his gifts as a communicator. He carefully honed the speech, first dictating five pages of notes, rejecting a draft offered by the State Department, and calling on a team of close advisors—Harry Hopkins, Sam Rosenman, and Robert Sherwood—to make suggestions and help him hammer the words into shape.

The team met through the Christmas holidays of 1940 and into the New Year, ultimately producing seven drafts.

A fateful moment came just days before FDR was to give his speech. Working with his team in a White House study, the president announced that he had an idea for the peroration, the end of an address that traditionally delivers an ardent “takeaway” message. “We waited as he leaned far back in his swivel chair with his gaze on the ceiling,” Rosenman later recalled. “It was a long pause—so long that it began to be uncomfortable.”

Finally FDR leaned forward and began to speak, slowly and deliberately, the lines making up the Four Freedoms section of his historic address, in very nearly complete and final form. The words “seemed to roll off his tongue,” Rosenman testified, “as though he had rehearsed them many times to himself.”

A page from the fifth draft of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s January 1941 Four Freedoms speech. FDR and his speechwriters had worked on the critical address over the December holidays, composing numerous drafts. FDRL
III. Four Freedoms: Preparing for War, Envisioning Peace

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The Legacy of Four Freedoms

It cannot be said that Franklin D. Roosevelt’s eighth State of the Union address, instantly dubbed the Four Freedoms speech, escaped criticism. To the contrary, isolationists on the left and right denounced it as a justification for war, and anti-New Dealers saw the inclusion of freedom from want and fear as signaling an odiously outsized role for government.

Overall, though, the speech was an enormous success. FDR soon got his massive acceleration in arms production and his Lend-Lease program, which made these arms available to Allied democracies facing the direst threats.

The speech found its way into the popular imagination, too, perhaps most significantly through the work of illustrator Norman Rockwell. Rockwell was much moved by FDR’s address. But it wasn’t until the summer of 1942 that he found a way to translate its high, abstract language into familiar images that would engage the emotions.

For his first painting, illustrating freedom of speech, Rockwell would use a scene he had witnessed at a council meeting in his hometown of Arlington, Vermont—a man rising before a courteous audience to voice his minority opinion.

Once the artist had sketches for all four paintings, he offered them to the U.S. Office of War Information, which was producing posters to raise support for the effort. The government demurred, but Rockwell soon sold the works to the Saturday Evening Post, where they appeared in four separate issues in 1943, along with commissioned essays on each of the Four Freedoms. Requests for reprints poured in by the thousands. Ultimately the government did take on Rockwell’s works, printing millions of posters that appeared in schools, post offices, and other public places to raise citizen morale and sell war bonds.

In 1943 the U.S. Postal Service issued a Four Freedoms one-cent stamp, featuring a figure holding a torch and the caption “Freedom of Speech and Religion, From Want and Fear.” The same words appeared on a 1946 five-cent commemorative stamp beside a portrait of the recently deceased FDR.

In his influential Four Freedoms speech, FDR called the American way a “perpetual peaceful revolution.” And indeed, long after his death, his Four Freedoms have continued to inspire hope and change, laying the basis for the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights and giving support to movements for independence, civil rights, women’s rights, workers’ rights, and arms control at home and around the globe.