

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, "ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT TO THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES BROADCAST FROM THE CAPITOL, WASHINGTON, D.C." (8 DECEMBER 1941)

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Abstract: Following Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and other military bases in the Pacific on December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress for a declaration of war against Japan. That speech is an exemplar of the genre of war rhetoric; it also stands as the last such request from any U.S. president. The speech also helped set the terms for the war and the role FDR hoped the nation would play in the world after peace was achieved.

Keywords: World War II, genre, anti-interventionism, internationalism

On December 8, 1941, at 12:30 pm, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress, requesting a declaration of war against the Empire of Japan. The resulting declaration moved to an immediate vote, passing the Senate by a vote of 82-0, and then the House with a vote of 388-1. Jeannette Rankin (R-MT) was the only dissenting vote. By 1:10 pm that day, the United States was legally at war. But the U.S. had been inching closer to war ever since a September day in 1939 when the forces of the Third Reich invaded Poland and began what would become the Second World War. Most notably, Congress passed HR 1776, more commonly known as "Lend-Lease," in March 1940, sending material aid first to Great Britain and then to the USSR. By July 1941, the U.S. had stationed troops in Iceland and Greenland. In September of that year, after the sinking of the *Greer*, the president authorized the navy to "shoot on sight" any ships that threatened harm. That October, after the *USS Kearney* was sunk, FDR armed the Merchant Marine. While no legal state of war existed prior to December 8, 1941, and certainly the U.S. was involved in no overt hostilities in the Pacific, tensions between the U.S. and the Axis powers had been steadily increasing for years.

Efforts were also underway to mitigate some of those tensions, especially with Japan. Throughout 1941, the two nations had been involved in a series of negotiations over trade and military rights in the Pacific; diplomatic relations still existed between them at the time of the attacks. There is evidence that the Japanese intended those attacks as a preemptive strike, hoping to keep the U.S. navy out of what became the Pacific Theater of Operations, and thus increasing their ability to act against the British and her allies there.¹ There is no question that the attacks were devastating to the Allied cause. Eight American battleships were damaged; one, the *USS Arizona* was left in place as a memorial to the fallen.² The Japanese also damaged three cruisers, three destroyers, a minelayer, and a training ship. Nearly 200 planes were lost, and the military base at Pearl Harbor itself sustained major damage. Much worse than the damage to ships, planes, and facilities, more than 2,400 people were killed; roughly another 1,700 were wounded. It was the first and most devastating attack by a foreign power on U.S. soil since the early days of the republic. The news sent shock waves throughout the nation. The next day, the president asked Congress for a declaration of war.

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That speech, widely considered one of the best given by this famously eloquent president,³ is not only an important piece of rhetoric in its own right. It is also the last such request made by a president. While the U.S. has been almost continuously under arms since the end of WWII, no president since Roosevelt has asked for a formal declaration of war. The speech thus stands as the end of an era of national war-making.

This is especially important, since the U.S., after the end of that war, assumed a primary place in the world order, first as the only atomic power, then as the “leader of the free world” during the Cold War. Then it became the world’s “lone superpower” following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Increasingly, it is a nation unsure of the position it wishes to play. As the U.S. shudders between contemporary versions of isolationism and engagement, it is worth remembering how it assumed the stature of a world power and the consequences of that assumption. The prelude to this speech, the events of December 7 and 8, 1941, and FDR’s conduct of the war that followed, had much to do with the nation’s assumption of global power.⁴ These are all encapsulated in this short speech.

In this essay, I begin by laying out the contemporary context of the speech, paying particular attention to the “Great Debate” over the appropriate nature and extent of American involvement in the Second World War. I then turn to the speech itself, examining it as it evolved over the course of the hours between the initial attack and the moment the speech was delivered before Congress, and locating it both as an exemplar of the genre and examining its unique features. I conclude with a discussion of the legacy of the speech and how it organizes the American role in the war and the peace that followed.

Historical Context

Franklin D. Roosevelt had been president for almost a decade in 1941. He was the first (and only) chief executive to serve more than the two terms—a precedent by George Washington. The scion of a wealthy family and cousin of Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, FDR took office during the greatest economic crisis in the nation’s history.⁵ His first two terms were dedicated to addressing the domestic economic situation; neither the American public nor its elected leaders were interested in looking outward.⁶ But as war clouds gathered over Europe and the Pacific, the debates over whether the U.S. should become involved, and if so, to what extent, became increasingly heated. The “Great Debate” over American foreign policy raged across the nation from the mid-1930s until the attack on Pearl Harbor, involving Congress, popular culture, and the president.⁷

The national commitment to non-intervention during the 1920s and 1930s had a lot to do with its experience in the Great War. Having been told by President Wilson that it was a war to make the “world safe for democracy,”⁸ Americans became ever more likely to believe their countrymen had actually fought and died in order to ensure the profits of those referred to in a best-selling book as “the Merchants of Death.”⁹ Americans were of the mind that the Old World always had been and would always be at war, and that intervening in these perennial conflicts was not in the interest of the New World.¹⁰ Those wanting to see the U.S. take a more active role in world affairs in general and in the developing war in particular, then, had first to argue that this war was somehow different from previous conflicts, and also that in this case, American intervention was in the national interest.

In November 1935, for example, only 11 percent of the respondents in a Gallup poll thought the most important issue facing the nation was foreign policy. The third most important priority, however, was “maintaining neutrality.”¹¹ That same year, Congress, backed by American public opinion, decided that sovereignty was more important than any voluntary internationalism, and the Senate rejected American membership in the World Court.¹² That decision was solidified within months as Congress enacted the first of several pieces of neutrality legislation. The president’s hands were tied both by widespread political preferences for non-intervention and by laws forbidding intervention.

Meanwhile, events in Europe increased the apparent necessity of intervention. In 1939, the Germans took Austria and then the Sudentland and advanced into Czechoslovakia. German forces then invaded Poland, triggering French and British treaty commitments. Both nations declared war on the Reich, beginning what Churchill called “the Twilight War,” as troops mobilized and nations readied themselves, but no guns were actually fired. When the shooting began, the world stood stunned as the Nazis stormed through Norway, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and then turned to France. Paris fell in a matter of days. The battered remnants of the British army escaped the continent under heavy fire and largely because of the heroism of ordinary British citizens who took every available boat across the channel to rescue the troops. The Western European mainland had collapsed in the face of overwhelming German might. Great Britain stood alone and imperiled.

There were two sets of arguments against American intervention on Britain’s behalf, one ideological and one pragmatic. Ideological arguments included the idea that wars were endemic to Europe and that this one was no different.¹³ They also included strong condemnations of the British Empire—there was no reason, some argued, for a democracy to intervene on behalf of empire.¹⁴ And if the British were really in that much trouble, they could either turn to the empire for help or sell off pieces of it.¹⁵ Practical arguments comprised variations on the theme that the Third Reich was unbeatable, Europe was doomed, and that at best sending aid was a waste of men and materiel. At worst, if the U.S. armed Britain and it later fell, those arms would fuel the German war effort.¹⁶

Between 1938 and 1941, and with increasing urgency, FDR argued against these claims, depicting the British as defenders of the democratic faith and Germany as an evil unique in world history and a threat to Western civilization. In the process, he also defined American aid as essential for the protection and defense of that civilization.¹⁷ Increasing German aggression, the valor of those in besieged Britain, and the ways in which both were portrayed through newsreels, on radio, and in film, helped make the case for ever-increasing American action.¹⁸

In all of this, the Japanese Empire held a very small place. Americans were worried by the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis in October 1936; outraged when the Germans and Soviets signed a non-aggression pact in August 1939;¹⁹ and suspicious when Germany violated it and invaded the USSR in June 1941.²⁰ The Tripartite Act, a treaty between Germany, the USSR, and Japan, (and eventually involving other countries, primarily in Eastern Europe), was signed in September 1940. It had little immediate effect, although it was the reason that, following the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and other American bases, Italy and Germany declared war on the United States, bringing it fully into both theaters of war.

But until Pearl Harbor, American attention was captured by the European side of the equation, and the tensions between the U.S. and Japan escalated quietly. Partly, these tensions

were a result of competing ambitions in the Pacific. The U.S. tended to regard it as their ocean, and occupied more and territory, adding territories and possessions throughout the early twentieth century.²¹ Japan, increasingly militaristic and harboring imperial ambitions, resented American incursions into Asiatic waters. Without confronting one another directly, the two nations jockeyed for position throughout the Pacific.

Japan evidenced an increasing commitment to isolated and militaristic action, engaging in wars with both China (1894-5) and Russia (1904-5). The U.S. objected, but did not act, when the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933, making clear their willingness, shared with the U.S., to protect their right to act unilaterally as national interest dictated. Roosevelt was cautious when the Japanese attacked the American ship, *Panay*, in 1936. As the Japanese increasingly searched for the natural resources required by industrializing their island nation, the U.S. began to respond, enacting trade restrictions beginning in 1938 and finally embargoing oil and freezing Japanese assets in 1940.²² It was clear—at least to the Japanese—that the U.S. intended to stymie both Japanese industrialization and its search for more territory. The presence of American bases on the Philippine Islands, their geographic proximity to Japan, their natural resources, and the increased centrality of the Japanese Imperial Navy to the nation's domestic politics, all made those islands an enticing target.²³ American military experts expected that if there was to be an attack, it would arrive there first. They were wrong.²⁴

On the morning of December 7, 1941, some 350 Japanese war planes (fighters, bombers, and torpedo planes) began their assault on the American military base at Pearl Harbor, located on the American territory of Oahu.²⁵ Over the next seven hours, the Japanese also attacked American bases in Guam, the Philippines, and Wake Island, as well as British and Dutch installations in Malaya, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The result was devastating in the short term, as the Allies lost control of important strategic ports, took large numbers of casualties, and sustained enormous damage to important parts of the American fleet. Thousands of British, Dutch, and American soldiers were captured and incarcerated under brutal conditions for the remainder of the war.²⁶

Such was the shock generated by the attacks that the president had to both explain them and call for an immediate military response. He met first, on December 7, 1941, with members of his cabinet and congressional leaders, offering details of the negotiations with Japan prior to the attacks and of the attacks themselves, so far as those details were available. He asked Congress for an invitation to speak the next day without specifying the nature of his message,²⁷ although he also told them, "The fact is that a shooting war is going on today in the Pacific. We are in it."²⁸ Cabinet members and legislative leaders were thus primed to expect his request for a declaration of war.

Crafting the Speech

The archives at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library contain six drafts of the speech: a copy that indicates both the final prepared text and the deviations FDR made from that text; the final reading copy of the speech, which contains the final emendations made in FDR's own hand; the first draft of the speech as Roosevelt dictated it to secretary Grace Tully, with Hopkins's penciled notes indicating Hopkins's suggestions and contributions with an explanatory memo attached; a copy marked "third draft"; and two more copies of the final

draft, one with a memo from Press Secretary Steve Early attached, cautioning that “extreme care must be exercised to avoid premature publication” of the speech text.²⁹ In what follows, I discuss the drafting process, the ways in which the speech, largely dictated in one sitting by the president, conforms to the genre of war rhetoric, and other notable aspects of the speech.

The Drafting Process

It was obvious from the first that the Japanese attacks in the Pacific meant war; the question was how best to convey the news to the American public. Roosevelt chose to offer a condensed version of events, apparently favoring the greater impact of a short speech. He also refrained from making the kind of detailed, idealistic claims about the purpose of the war that had characterized Woodrow Wilson’s speech on the Great War. Such claims were inconsistent with the prevailing isolationist sentiments.³⁰ He did make the nature and the seriousness of the attacks clear, and he did so without attempting to minimize the extent of the disaster or its consequences. Given that the first draft was dictated in one sitting, it underwent remarkably few changes—three of them especially significant—before the final version was delivered.

The most important alteration was changing the phrase “a date which will live in world history” to “a date which will live in infamy,” a phrase that appears in the speech’s first sentence and set its frame—a dastardly attack by perfidious villains on an innocent nation.³¹ This phrase previewed the entire argument of the speech: that the U.S. was dragged unwillingly to war, but now that war was upon them, the people of the United States, “in their righteous might,” would win a “total victory.” The narrative of the speech was thus begun with one elegant and memorable phrase, one of the most famous lines of the twentieth century.³² Other minor alterations under this heading similarly underlined the characterizations of Japan and the U.S. upon which that narrative depended. For example, FDR changed “simultaneously” to “suddenly,” underscoring the surprise nature of the assault; he separated Oahu from the Philippines, which made the attack on an American possession and the American fleet most proximate; and he added the depiction of Americans as both righteous and mighty.

The second change I want to note is the addition of the phrase “at the solicitation of Japan” to the paragraph noting that negotiations between the countries were on-going at the time of the attacks. This phrase indicates both that Japan had asked for these negotiations, placing them in the position of supplicant, and that they had used this position duplicitously. Appearing to want peace, they planned war. Thus, the Japanese were doubly untrustworthy—both their appearances and their actions were deceitful, and further negotiations were impossible.³³ The only response was war.

The third critical change apparently followed a discussion of the speech between Hopkins and the president. One of Hopkins’s marginal notes follows the paragraph, “I speak the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will see to it that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.” Hopkins penciled in the word, “Deity,” which he underlined. By the final draft, a short paragraph had been added: “With confidence in our armed forces—with the unbounding determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.” That penultimate paragraph invoked the nation’s armed might, its commitment to unity, and its dedication to Christian principles, all of which were integral to FDR’s rhetoric during the coming war effort.

The final speech lasted barely seven minutes, was attended by sitting Members of Congress as well as members of the U.S. Supreme Court, and earned the largest radio audience of any speech in history to that date, with over 81 percent of American homes tuning in to the live broadcast.³⁴ During those few minutes, Americans were educated about the events and meaning of “the day that will live in infamy” through a very particular lens—that of war rhetoric.

War Rhetoric

In their volume on the genres of presidential rhetoric, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson lay out the five elements that constitute the genre of war rhetoric.³⁵ According to them, all presidential calls for armed intervention follow a similar pattern: presidents argue that the decision to go to war is momentous and therefore not undertaken lightly; that decision is justified through a narrative of the events leading up to war in which it made clear that all avenues short of war have been tried; the president insists on national unity and commitment from the audience; in doing so, he justifies and assumes the powers of Commander-in-Chief. Finally, they argue that these various narratives and justifications convey only one side of a complex situation, and that therefore they tend to rely heavily upon “strategic misrepresentation” of the available facts. Presidents do not, in other words, call for war by explaining the enemy’s reasons but only those motivating and exculpating their own nation.

As in all war addresses, this one had two main tasks: to justify the war and to rally the American people. Because of the nature of the attacks, the justification was simple; war was a foregone conclusion. FDR took the opportunity to characterize the events of December 7—he noted that the nation was “suddenly and deliberately attacked,” and that the distance between Japan and Pearl Harbor meant that the attack “was deliberately planned.” He called it “a surprise offensive,” and a “premeditated invasion,” and referred to the “character of the onslaught against us.” These characterizations justified the American response. Roosevelt argued it was not merely that the nation had been attacked, but also that this attack was of a particularly nefarious nature. By implication, the nation had no choice but to go to war.

The second task was also relatively simple. Because the nation had been attacked, national unity was quickly forthcoming—even the most adamant anti-interventionists, for example, had argued that war was to be avoided only when the nation was not directly threatened. Nearly all of them immediately joined the war effort.³⁶ Still, Roosevelt made the attacks proximate—the assault had not occurred on remote islands in the far away Pacific, but “the United States of America” itself was the victim. This claim was potentially tricky and required a deft use of language—the places in question were not part of the contiguous United States, nor were they states, but were remote American bases, territories, and possessions. Given that FDR spent considerable time arguing for the moral superiority of democracy over other forms of government, including imperialism, the fact that the government honored this distinction more in theory than in practice was potentially embarrassing. But here, as Campbell and Jamieson suggest is normally the case, the narrative explaining events leading to war tended to be self-serving. Roosevelt referred to “the American island of Oahu,” and stressed the damage done to “American naval and military forces.” Further, he noted “American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu,” making

the potential for an attack on the mainland frighteningly possible. He made potentially distant events seem proximate.³⁷

That proximity also reinforced the call for national unity and commitment. FDR not only explicitly claimed the powers of Commander-in-Chief, but combined those powers with the interpretive ability of the chief executive—he called for military mobilization in one capacity, and spoke for “the will of the Congress and the American people” in the other. But he was not assuming unlimited or dictatorial power. He stated that “The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.” That is, he argued that he was not engaged in an act of persuasion, but only of enunciation—the facts spoke, the people had already decided. He had agency primarily as in interpreter of the people’s will. Even in wartime, the foundational principles of democracy, as he understood them, would be preserved. This element was particularly important, as FDR consistently defined the war as one of the forces of democracy against dictatorship.³⁸

Because the prosecution of the war depended on the will of the Congress and the American people, and because it was primarily dedicated to the preservation of democracy itself, Roosevelt asserted that the nation was both united and committed to the tasks ahead: “No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.” Note here that Roosevelt defined the sides of this war in very different terms. The Japanese, unsurprisingly, were characterized, as we have seen, as perfidious, duplicitous, and malignant, while the Americans, lawfully pursuing their interests and engaged in open and honest negotiations, were full of “righteous might.” Equally important, however, is that on the one side there stood the “Empire of Japan,” “the Japanese Government,” “Japanese forces,” and only secondarily, “the Japanese.” They were depicted as an empire, a nation, a military, and only then as a people. Americans, on the other hand, were a nation under attack; the object of Japanese duplicity (“the Japanese Government deliberately sought to deceive the United States”); and a united people. The attack on American bases was conflated with an attack on the entire nation. The American people were consubstantial with its government, its military, and its territory. An attack on any one of these things was defined as an attack on all of them. Such an attack must be answered by a call to unified arms.

This speech, then, brief as it is, contains all of the generic requirements of a war address: Roosevelt makes the momentous nature of the occasion clear; the decision to go to war is presented as unwilling; it is enacted through a dependence on democratic consensus; the audience is exhorted to maintain the unity that is presented as already operative; the president assumed both the power of Commander-in-Chief and put that power in the service of democratic ends; and there is a reliance on a one-sided narrative of the events and causes of the war. This speech didn’t stand alone, however, but was part of a long-standing series of arguments FDR had been making about the developing world war, and it’s also important to understand it in that context.

The Road to War

Speeches like this one rely on genre but also reveal a great deal about the public character and preferences of the speaker. There are many ways that generic expectations can be fulfilled (or not). A speech like this one, given with little time for revision, and, in this case,

presented largely as it was originally dictated by the president, can tell us a great deal about how that president understands the task before him and the institution he occupies.³⁹ In this section, then, I focus on some of the elements that bring these aspects of the speech to the fore. In at least three ways, Roosevelt's language in this speech echoed and depended upon arguments he had long been making and brought many of the pieces of what would be his overall arguments about the nature of the war into sharp relief.

Characterization

As we have seen, in the Pearl Harbor address, Roosevelt characterized the Japanese as duplicitous and deceitful. Subordinate to the will of their emperor and his military, the Japanese people were the opposite of the idealized democratic character. He could accomplish this characterization in an abbreviated and efficient way for two reasons: first, the Japanese military had perpetrated a surprise assault on the U.S. and other nations. Second, though, Roosevelt had long been engaging in exactly this kind of definition, as he prepared the nation for war with the Axis.

On July 7, 1937, Japan invaded China. The American government had limited options. Ideally, the U.S. wanted to have a way to respond to aggression without risking neutrality but had no coherent plan or how to manage this.⁴⁰ The closest FDR came to a clear policy was to refuse to recognize the acquisition of territory gained by "aggression." But non-recognition mattered little to the Japanese, and without direct military aid, the Chinese had few resources with which to fend off the invasion.

Searching for both an effective policy and a way of communicating it, on October 5, 1937, Roosevelt delivered what has become known as the "Quarantine Speech." Aimed primarily at Japan but with applications to the Fascist powers, Roosevelt offered a narrative of aggression in Europe and Asia, railing against "Nations claiming freedom for themselves [but who] deny it to others."⁴¹ He spoke in broad generalities, but did some important rhetorical work, for he identified the Japanese with Germany and Italy, connecting all three nations in one ideological whole. That identification was based on two things: their aggressive behavior and the threat they posed to peaceful nations. Roosevelt noted, for instance, that, "It began through unjustified interference in the internal affairs of other nations or the invasion of alien territory in violation of treaties . . . innocent people, innocent nations, are being cruelly sacrificed to a greed for power and supremacy which is devoid of all sense of justice and humane considerations."⁴² This description could as easily apply to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia or Franco's actions in Spain as to the Japanese incursion into China. Moreover, the threat was not confined to Asiatic nations but encompassed the world: "If these things come to pass in other parts of the world," Roosevelt warned his audience, "let no one imagine that America will escape, that America may expect mercy, that this Western Hemisphere will not be attacked and that it will continue tranquilly and peacefully to carry on the ethics and the arts of civilization."⁴³ For Roosevelt, aggressive actions in any part of the world threatened the peace of the entire world, an argument that seems inconsistent with the caution he was showing throughout 1937.

Reaction to the speech was negative in the extreme and has been described as "an attitude without a program."⁴⁴ He was accused of war-mongering, threatened with impeachment, and both congressional and public opinion were strongly against action in Asia.⁴⁵ In fact, polling indicated that Americans wanted stronger neutrality laws.⁴⁶ At least one scholar

of public opinion argues that the mass public was persuadable on the issue, but that Roosevelt chose to focus on the negative opinions rather than the potential for creating a public mood more amenable to his preferred policies.⁴⁷ The speech stands as Roosevelt's first real attempt to set the terms of debate about the burgeoning war. The idea of "quarantining the aggressors," meant little in terms of actual concerted international action and the president's refusal to follow it up with any actual policy proposals did even less. But whether Roosevelt acted intentionally or not, the speech provided him with some important resources. It allowed him to continue to capitalize on the implied connection between Japan and the Fascist powers (the Tripartite Pact formally creating the alliance was not signed until three years later), thus enabling his arguments that it was a single war between the forces of freedom and those opposing human freedom and establishing the frame for the entire war. It also allowed him to plausibly make the case that the Axis nations posed a global threat that endangered American financial and ideological interests around the world. Much of FDR's war rhetoric hinged on the comprehensive nature and ideological unity of the threat to the United States; despite the problems with this speech, it was an important in the foundation for that rhetoric, which continued to develop until the U.S. officially entered the war.

High Stakes

In many ways, this speech echoes the arguments he had been making for years concerning the danger dictatorship and militarism posed to advocates of democracy. Those arguments became increasingly pointed as that danger became more evident. Roosevelt called the German incursion into what was then Czechoslovakia "wanton lawlessness" and referred to the German use of "arbitrary force."⁴⁸ He also made a point of connecting the military threat posed by the Reich to an economic threat. As the United States continued to suffer economically throughout the 1930s, FDR was careful to connect prosperity, values, and self-interest to the militarism he associated with the Axis: "This is what you might call the second phase of military aggression," he told the press in April 1939, the day after Italy's invasion of Albania. "One of the results of successful military aggression by any Nation or group of nations is the control of commerce, not only within their own territory by in other territories—other independent nations—which they can threaten because of their military power."⁴⁹ Thus, by 1939 FDR had established the argumentative pattern that would carry the burden of his rationale for American action. According to Roosevelt, the autocracies of Europe and Asia posed a triple threat to western civilization and world peace: militarily, they threatened invasion and occupation; ideologically, they threatened freedom, liberty, and human rights; economically, they threatened to control trade and limit national prosperity. Roosevelt added element after element—first the threat had been ideological, then military, and now was also understood as economic. International events as Roosevelt depicted them became ever more ominous, American stakes in the outcome ever higher. That threat eventually amounted to a danger to Western civilization broadly understood.

Roosevelt's 1941 Annual Message, for example, is one of his best,⁵⁰ and presents an eloquent defense of "the democratic way of life."⁵¹ He argued against appeasement and for preparedness, and declared that the nation was "now part of the great emergency." In that speech, he defined the critical elements of democracy, which he distilled into "four essential human freedoms."⁵² Those freedoms (freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear) were powerful expressions of American ideals as

seen through the lens of the New Deal. Through them Roosevelt justified his past policies, defined the purpose of the war, and provided a basis for his vision of the post war world.

Because the frame was set prior to the assault on Pearl Harbor, FDR depended on a widespread recognition of that frame in his war address. Japan was already understood as a member of a nefarious alliance; its actions were easily understood as iniquitous. But Roosevelt did not depend on that frame alone. In one of the most powerful sections of this powerful speech, and after noting the attacks on Oahu and in the waters between Hawaii and the West Coast, FDR lists the specific places targeted by the Japanese:

Yesterday, the Japanese Government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Note the amplification here. Roosevelt could have proffered something like, “In the last two days, the Japanese attacked several American and British bases throughout the Pacific.” That sentence is every bit as accurate as the list Roosevelt provided. But it lacks the drama and import of Roosevelt’s. Americans, unsure of the exact facts, and listening to the president over radio, heard the list, delivered slowly and dramatically, building and building to the conclusion that, “Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area.” The magnitude of the disaster was clear. The response had to be one of equal magnitude.

While Roosevelt separated the various attacks to amplify their import, he also conflated Dutch, British, and American territories and troops. The attacks were separated; the allies were joined. What began as a discussion of an attack on the “American Island of Oahu,” became an enactment of the allied war effort. The threat was real, the stakes could not be higher, for they encompassed both our national interests and our international allies.

Final Outcome

With the enemy defined as a threat to Western civilization and the stakes of the conflict tied to the fate of that civilization, there was no choice but “absolute victory.” If the enemy is defined as the incarnation of evil, halfway measures cannot be taken against that enemy.⁵³ The United States and its allies were defined as the Christian defenders of civilization writ large; the Axis became not another option available to civilized nations, but the antithesis of civilization itself. This, of course, obscured many of the more complicated elements of the Allied war effort, including its racism and imperialism.⁵⁴ But it did powerfully set the frame for how that war effort would be understood, at least by the dominant members of the Allied coalition.⁵⁵

According to Roosevelt, the day of the attacks, “a date which will live in infamy,” not only had to be avenged, but had to be avenged in such a way that a new world order could be established. The defeat of the Axis would mean that diplomacy could once again be trusted, that those involved in negotiations would not engage in duplicitous assaults; that “absolute victory” would be achieved over those opposed to democracy—that the U.S. would “not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.” The president declared that “hostilities exist,” and laid out the requirements for the eventual end of those hostilities. The nation’s homeland not only had to

be protected, but had to be protected in perpetuity—treachery would “never again” endanger the nation.

This declaration was consistent with the universals upon which Roosevelt grounded the war effort—it was, for him, a battle of the forces of good against the forces of evil—and half measures were therefore not sufficient. Evil had to be completely vanquished so that good could triumph. This formulation is also consistent with the requirements of war rhetoric—in declaring war, presidents eschew complexities for a straightforward and uncomplicated view of the situation. Complexities are the stuff of diplomacy; war does not admit nuanced views of reality. In this case, the “absolute victory,” Roosevelt required here became a call for “total surrender,” later in the war.⁵⁶ Consequently, the Allied victory structured expectations for the world that emerged from the bloodiest war in human history.

The Nation’s Last Declaration of War: The U.S. and the World

This speech encapsulates the frames and themes Roosevelt set for the national understanding of what became the Second World War: he depicted the U.S. and its allies as innocent victims of militaristic and imperial aggression; he identified the U.S. and its allies with Christianity and with the noblest aspects of Western civilization; he defined the war as one of ideological disputation as much as one of territorial acquisition; and he outlined the ends of the war as the protection of democracy from the forces that opposed human freedom.

Throughout our national history, American presidents have argued for the connection between American actions and the will of God. The U.S. has tended to see in its actions the manifestation of that will. Roosevelt articulated this connection from as early as 1937, and continued to do so until his death in April 1945. In his formulation of the war, there was little complexity, little room for the idea that the U.S. itself had a troubled history. In Roosevelt’s rhetoric, the U.S. became the beacon of democracy, tasked with illuminating the world.

The world following the armistice in 1945 was in dire need of illumination. Europe lay in ruins; Japan, having suffered the firebombing of Tokyo and the atomic conflagrations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was devastated. The old order had been decisively overthrown: colonial powers were on the wane, the international dominance of the British Empire was ended, and a new order was emerging. That order, Manichean in outlook, revolved around the ideological contest between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. No longer would nations fight over territory and justify it through mere national interest. Now the contest was defined in explicitly ideological terms and there would be little room for compromise.⁵⁷

Among the combatants, the United States alone emerged from the war with its homeland and its economy intact. The world’s only atomic power, it also emerged from the war with an unparalleled ability to dominate the emerging order. Dominate it did, forging democratic forms onto the government of Japan, rebuilding European economies through the Marshall Plan, and constructing a democratic consensus through Western alliances. Those alliances increasingly faced the ideological and military resistance in Eastern Europe under Soviet control, and the Cold War was born. During that decades-long series of confrontations, the United States and its presidents comfortably assumed the mantle of “leader of the free world,” a mantle that had enormous impact both globally and at home.⁵⁸ Head of an international coalition, the U.S. did not hesitate to act alone.

The end of the Cold War did not decrease American responsibilities, but it has brought with it an end to the comfort with which those responsibilities have been assumed and has made unilateral action difficult and troubling.⁵⁹ Roosevelt's rhetoric leading up to and during World War II gave us an unequivocally barbaric set of enemies and arrayed the allied forces of good against the militarized forces of evil. This was and is a profoundly satisfying view of the war, but it is one that ill-prepares us for the complexities of the world in the aftermath of that war.

It is no surprise then, that Pearl Harbor became associated with the attacks that shocked the nation on September 11, 2001.⁶⁰ Those attacks demonstrated that the American homeland was vulnerable to surprise attacks, but this time, the enemy was more elusive, less attached to a specific nation-state, and this time, the president declared a state of hostilities not on a nation, but on a set of practices, it was a "War on Terror." The complexities of the contemporary world had shaken free of the post-World War II order, and it was unclear then, as it unclear now, how the United States and its allies should best respond. "Absolute victory" is not a reasonable goal under these circumstances, and the nature of America's global alliances and its role in those alliances, is uncertain at best.

Roosevelt had a certainty in the face of the assault on Pearl Harbor, expressed in his speech on December 8, 1941, and throughout the war that followed. He was never sanguine—he did not hesitate to tell Americans bad news, and the war news, especially in its first years, was often bad. But he also never hesitated to assure Americans that absolute victory was achievable. He called for dedication and demanded sacrifice. Those elements too are missing from contemporary discussions of war. The shadow of Pearl Harbor lingers over our national understanding of 9/11 and the years of armed conflict that followed, but it is a poor parallel as a guide to understanding national action.

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Notes

¹ For a discussion of Japanese intentions, see, among many others, Herbert Feis, *Road to Pearl Harbor: The Coming of the War between the United States and Japan* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

² Details on the *USS Arizona* and the sites associated with Pearl Harbor are available at: <http://www.pearlharborhistoricsites.org/>

³ See for example, the comparison to Wilson in Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order: 1919-1933, The Age of Roosevelt* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 8.

⁴ For further discussion of this argument, see Mary E. Stuckey, *The Good Neighbor: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of American Power* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2013).

⁵ For various views on the Depression, see Jonathan Alter, *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); Ronald Edsforth, *The New Deal: America's Response to the Great Depression* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*

(New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009 [1989]); Jim Powell, *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and his New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003); Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York: Harper, 2007).

⁶ On Roosevelt and the anti-interventionists, see Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 113; William E. Kinsella, Jr., *Leadership in Isolation: FDR and the Origins of the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1978), 1-2.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the "Great Debate," see Mary Stuckey, "The "Great Debate": The Battle over American Neutrality, 1936-1941," ed. Martin J. Medhurst, *A Rhetorical History of the United States, Volume 8: World War II and the Cold War* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, forthcoming). This discussion is based on that essay.

⁸ Woodrow Wilson, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War Against Germany," April 2, 1917. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65366>.

⁹ H.C. Engelbrecht and F.C. Hanighen, *The Merchants of Death: A Study of the International Armament Industry* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1934). A complete version is available on line: <http://greatwar.nl/frames/default-merchants.html>.

¹⁰ Justus D. Doenecke, "American Isolationism, 1939-1941," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 1982(Summer/Fall): 201-216; Donald Drummond, *The Passing of American Neutrality, 1937-1941* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), 42.

¹¹ Ralph B. Levering, *The Public and American Foreign Policy, 1938-1978* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1978), 55.

¹² For a discussion of the decision against participation in the World Court, see R. D. Accinelli, "Peace Through Law: The United States and the World Court, 1923-1935," *The Canadian Historical Association Papers 1972* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1972), 247-262.

¹³ For an example of the argument that this was just another European war, grounded in economic conflict, see Martin Maas, *Hearings on American Neutrality Policy, Seventy-Sixth Congress, First Session* (Washington DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 19.

¹⁴ For examples of condemnations of the British Empire, see Mrs. Rogers, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Seventy-Seventh Congress, First Session, on HR 1776* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 126; Senator Reynolds, *Committee of Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Seventy-Sixth Congress, First Session, Hearings on Neutrality, Peace Legislation, and Our Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 26.

¹⁵ For an example of the argument that the U.S. should not spend its resources helping Britain, see William E. Borah, "Retain the Arms Embargo," September 14, 1939, *Vital Speeches of the Day* 5(24): 741-743, 741.

¹⁶ Charles Lindbergh was probably the most famous proponent of this view. See Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention, 1940-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953), 78-85.

¹⁷ See, for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address at Chicago," October 5, 1937, 406-411, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Random House, 1939), 408. See also Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Annual Message to Congress," January 4, 1939, 1-12, *Public Papers*, 2. Rosenman edited 13 volumes of papers and addresses; the first 6 were published in 1939 by Random House, the others by MacMillan in 1950. All volumes are abbreviated below as *Public Papers*. Most of the speeches are also available at the American Presidency Project's web site (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>).

¹⁸ Newsmen like Edward R. Murrow were notably important. See Lynne Olson, *Citizens of London: The Americans who Stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour* (New York: Random House, 2010), 31, 49. Movies like Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* were influential as well. See Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 215.

¹⁹ For a discussion of American public opinion and the war, see Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "Red fascism: The merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American image of totalitarianism, 1930's-1950's." *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (1970): 1046-1064.

²⁰ For more on Operation Barbarossa, see David Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²¹ On American ambitions in the Pacific, see Michael Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History." *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1692-1720.

²² The oil embargo is often considered a proximate cause of the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Without access to oil, the Japanese estimated they had a maximum of two year's supply, a fact that had enormous consequences for the Japanese economy.

²³ Scott D. Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 893-922; Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

²⁴ On the intelligence failure, see David Kahn, "The Intelligence Failure of Pearl Harbor." *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 5 (1991): 138-152. There is a long-standing and contentious debate concerning the responsibility for that failure. For details, see Emily S. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 34-52.

²⁵ Hawaii did not become a state until 1959.

²⁶ For more on the experiences of Allied captives in Japan, see Brian MacArthur, *Surviving the Sword: Prisoners of the Japanese in the Far East, 1942-45* (New York: Random House, 2005); Simon P. MacKenzie, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II." *The Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 3 (1994): 487-520; Philip R. Piccigallo, *The Japanese on Trial: Allied War Crimes Operations in the East, 1945-1951* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

²⁷ The President does not appear on the floor of Congress without an express invitation.

²⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Remarks to Cabinet Members and Legislative Leaders," December 7, 1941, 1399a, FDR Speech File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, p.13.

²⁹ These drafts are available at the Library itself and are digitized on line where they can be found through the finding aid for the Master Speech File:

<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=582>

³⁰ Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live*. See also Rebecca Onion, "FDR's First Draft of His 'Day of Infamy' Speech, With His Notes," December 8, 2014, *The Vault*,

http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2014/12/08/history_of_pearl_harbor_day_of_infamy_speech_first_draft.html

³¹ Emily Rosenberger argues that this frame resonated with the nation's frontier tradition. See Rosenberger, *A Date Which Will Live*, 12-14.

³² It is frequently invoked in histories of the war. See, for example, Walter Lord, *Day of Infamy, 60th Anniversary: The Classic Account of the Bombing of Pearl Harbor* (New York: MacMillan, 1957).

³³ This characterization aligned with the racist stereotypes prevalent at the time and reflected throughout the war in the depictions of the Japanese as insects, apes, and vermin. See Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination: The Psychology of Enmity* (Minneapolis, MN: Olympic Marketing, 1986); David M. Kennedy, "Culture Wars: The Sources and Uses of Enmity in American History," in eds. Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase and Irsula Lehmkuhl *Enemy Images in American History* (Oxford, NY: Berghahn Books, 1997), 353-355.

³⁴ Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (New York: McFarland & Company, 1998), 117-120.

³⁵ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 105.

³⁶ Thomas A. Guinsberg, *The Pursuit of Isolationism in the United States Senate from Versailles to Pearl Harbor* (New York: Garland, 1982); T.R. Fehrenbach, *F.D.R.'s Undeclared War: 1939-1941* (New York: David McKay, 1967).

³⁷ On Roosevelt's tactics, see John M. Murphy, "No End Save Victory: FDR and the End of Isolationism 1936-1941," in *Making the Case: Advocacy and Judgment in Public Argument*, ed. Kathryn M. Olson, Michael William Pfau, Benjamin Ponder, and Kirt H. Wilson (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012). On the idea of presence, see Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 115-120.

³⁸ See, for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Radio Address to the New York *Herald Tribune* Forum," October 26, 1939, 554-558, *Public Papers*, 556-557. This argument was made both by FDR and his surrogates. See also, Henry L. Stimson, (by this time Secretary of War), "Our Duty is Clear," *Vital Speeches* August 15, 1939, 647-648.

³⁹ Ronald Reagan's address after the *Challenger* explosion would be another case in point.

⁴⁰ Robert A. Divine, *The Illusion of Neutrality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 30.

⁴¹ Roosevelt, "Address at Chicago," 407.

⁴² Roosevelt, "Address at Chicago," 407.

⁴³ Roosevelt, "Address at Chicago," 408.

⁴⁴ Dalleck, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 149.

⁴⁵ James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox, 1882-1940* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1956), 318.

⁴⁶ Robert Edwin Herzstein, *Roosevelt and Hitler: Prelude to War* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 95.

⁴⁷ Michael Lee, *Mobilizing Consent: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy, 1937-1947* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976), 31-37. See also, Thomas N. Guinsburg, "Ebb Tide of Isolationism: The Senate Debate on the Arms Embargo, 1937-1939," *The Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers 1972* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1972), 313-334.

⁴⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Statement by Acting Secretary of State Welles, Edited and Approved by the President, on the Partition of Czech-Slovakia by Germany," March 17, 1939, 165-166, *Public Papers*, 166.

⁴⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Five Hundred and Thirty-Seventh Press Conference) Excerpts," April 8, 1939, 188-191, *Public Papers*, 189.

⁵⁰ It made the list of top 100 speeches of the twentieth century and is the only State of the Union address to do so. See Stephen E. Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., *Words of a Century: The top 100 speeches, 1900-1999*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Annual Message to Congress," January 6, 1941, 663-678, *Public Papers*, 664.

⁵² Roosevelt, "Annual Message to Congress," 672.

⁵³ Robert Ivie has been the most consistent analyst on this point. See Robert L. Ivie, "Images of Savagery in American Justifications for War," *Communication Monographs* 47 (1980): 279-294; Robert L. Ivie, "Evil Enemy Versus Agonistic Other: Rhetorical Constructions of Terrorism," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 25 (2003): 1-10. Robert L. Ivie, "Literalizing the Metaphor of Soviet Savagery: President Truman's Plain Style," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51 (1986): 91-105.

⁵⁴ Stuckey, *Good Neighbor*.

⁵⁵ Victor Sebestien, *1946: The Making of the Modern World*. (New York: Vintage, 2014).

⁵⁶ For a discussion of this, see Casey, Steven. *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 110-111.

⁵⁷ Sebestien, *1946*, 372-3.

⁵⁸ On the one hand, this was a powerful argument in favor of civil rights. See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). On the other, it tended the nation toward anti-communist hysteria. See Joel Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism and the Making of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁵⁹ Mary E. Stuckey, "Competing Foreign Policy Visions: Rhetorical Hybrids After the Cold War." *Western Journal of Communication* 59, no. 3 (1995): 214-227.

⁶⁰ See Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live*, 174-189.

The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our Nation. As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire. - Address to Congress asking that a state of war be declared between the US and Japan. Call Number/Physical Location. AFC 1986/022: AFS 24,312, folder 22. MLA citation style: Roosevelt, Franklin D. Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt, New York Transcript . 1941. Pdf. Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945; Rosenman, Samuel Irving, 1896-1973; United States. President (1933-1945 : Roosevelt). Publication date. 1941. "The material in these volumes has been compiled and collated by Samuel I. Rosenman Counsel to the Governor during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt as Governor of the State of New York 1929-1932"--Prelim. p. [v]. Includes bibliographical references and index. Electronic text and image data. News of the "sneak attack" was broadcast to the American public via radio bulletins, with many popular Sunday afternoon entertainment programs being interrupted. The news sent a shockwave across the nation, resulting in a tremendous influx of young volunteers into the U.S. Armed Forces. The attack also united the nation behind President Franklin D. Roosevelt and effectively ended the American isolationist movement. On Monday, December 8th, President Roosevelt appeared before Congress and made this speech asking for a declaration of war against Japan, calling the previous day "...a date which will live in infamy..." See also: Pearl Harbor Slide Show - 40 photos. Listen to the entire speech.