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How FDR Invented the Four Freedoms

Over July 4, 1940, Roosevelt came up with the idea for one of his most famous speeches.

By JOSH ZEITZ | July 04, 2015



Seventy-five years ago, on July 4, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt called dozens of reporters to his home at Hyde Park and officially deeded his new presidential library to the United States government. Now in the eighth year of his presidency, FDR struck many observers—those who were close to him, and those who weren't—as weary. Having steadied the ship of state through some of the nation's most trying hours, he seemed ready to go home.

Privately, FDR admitted to his wife, Eleanor, that he felt himself “slowing down.” He no longer had the “same zest for administrative detail that he had,” Eleanor told Harry Hopkins, his closest aide, “and is probably quite frankly bored.” Since the midterm elections of 1938, a congressional coalition of Southern Democrats and

Republicans who adamantly opposed any further expansion of the federal state had wiped out most hope for new domestic legislation. In effect, history seemed to have closed the books on the New Deal. “The president’s leadership in domestic affairs had accomplished everything he could accomplish,” Attorney General Robert Jackson observed in later years.

The prior November, when construction began on FDR’s presidential library, it seemed likely that the president would close out his public career and come back to Hyde Park. Speculation was still rife that he might run for a third term, but on July 5, when FDR called reporters to the new room that would serve as his post-presidential study, few understood the importance of the impromptu press conference in which they were about to participate.

Speaking from behind his mahogany desk, in free-associative style, Roosevelt presaged one of his most famous speeches and, whether he knew it, outlined the thesis for his next five years in office.

“You might say there are certain freedoms,” Roosevelt told reporters, in the course of a general discussion about the worrying events then unfolding in Europe. “The first I would call ‘freedom of information,’ which is terribly important. It is a much better phrase than ‘freedom of the press,’ because there are all kinds of information so that the inhabitants of a country can get news of what is going on in every part of the country and in every part of the world without censorship and through many forms of communication.”

FDR then identified three additional, universal liberties—the “freedom of religion,” the freedom to “express one’s self as long as you don’t advocate the overthrow of government,” and, in a novel evolution of the themes established in 1776, “freedom from fear, so that people won’t be afraid of being bombed from the air or attacked, one way or the other, by some other nation.”

Unbeknownst to those in the room, FDR had all but decided to pursue re-nomination at the Democratic National Convention scheduled for later that month. He foresaw a global conflagration that would require strong American leadership, and as he later wrote to a friend, he did not think that the Republican nominee, Wendell Willkie,

“had much knowledge of the world ... he would have had to learn ... in the school of hard experience.” The handful of Democrats in contention for the nomination—Postmaster James Farley, conservative Vice President John Nance Garner and Burton Wheeler, an isolationist senator from Montana—gave him even less cause for optimism.

Elaborating on his remarks, the president continued, “The question really comes down to whether we are going to continue to seek those freedoms or whether we are going to give up.”

Richard Harkness, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s White House reporter, then interjected. “Well, I had a fifth in mind,” he asked the president, “which you might describe as ‘freedom from want’—free trade, opening up trade?”

“Yes, that is true,” Roosevelt replied. “I had that in mind but forgot it. Freedom from want—in other words, the removal of certain barriers between nations, cultural in the first place and commercial in the second place. That is the fifth, very definitely.”

Wittingly or not, and “off the record” (as was his wont in all presidential press conferences), FDR was brainstorming the foundation of the landmark State of the Union speech that he would deliver the following January, in which he proclaimed America's mandate to extend “four freedoms” throughout the world.

If the president was still struggling to find the rights words and sentiment, his wife was not. In her “My Day” newspaper column, datelined July 4, Hyde Park, Eleanor conveyed *her* understanding of the American Revolution's enduring legacy.

“I personally want to continue to live in a country where I can think as I please, go to any church I please, or to none if that is my desire; say what I please, and within the limits of any free society, do what I please,” she wrote. “I want the right to work, and I want that opportunity to be extended to all my fellow citizens. I want them to have an equal opportunity for educational development, for health and for recreation, which is all part of the building of a human being capable of coping with the modern world.”

Better than her husband that day, Eleanor defined the essence of the “freedom from want,” a concept that many Roosevelt critics later derided as a cynical attempt to use the American war effort as a means to breath new life into the moribund New Deal.

Which, in many ways, it was.

When FDR spoke before Congress the following January, he framed the war—in which the United States was not yet formally a belligerent—as a contest between “human freedom and human slavery.” While his speechwriters penned the body of the address, Roosevelt personally authored its concluding lines, which traced their roots to those warm summer days the previous July.

“We look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms,” he concluded. “The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.”

The speech proved a major rallying cry for a nation that had been—and, until December 1941, remained—reluctant to entangle itself in a foreign war. FDR understood that Americans required a cause that resonated with their own personal experiences and aspirations. For good measure, his Four Freedoms also dovetailed with his fundamental belief that government should help ordinary citizens realize a more secure, prosperous life.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Four Freedoms quickly became a fundamental expression of America’s war effort. Their most popular iteration, a series of war bond posters designed by Norman Rockwell, evoked the tradition of New England town meetings, the plenty and family comfort of a Thanksgiving meal, the safety and security of a child’s bedroom and the imagery of people from around the world, of different colors and hues, worshipping God (or not) in their own way.

Not everyone approved. One conservative writer grouched that “Freedom from Want” and “Freedom from Fear” were “New Deal Freedoms,” not “American Freedoms.” Many of the advertising executives who joined the Office of War Information (OWI) worried that FDR was using the war effort to advance an unannounced but expansive post-war domestic agenda. (Indeed, in 1944 FDR would call for a “Second Bill of

Rights” that identified employment, health care, housing and education as fundamental birthrights of American citizenship.)

Not coincidentally, the conservative-led Congress eventually zeroed out funds for OWI’s domestic programming.

In the weeks leading up to July 1940, Francis Biddle, a Roosevelt insider who later served as attorney general, found the president “bored and tired and stale. ... He was not very much interested in his own nomination. It was as if he did not want to make the choice, and preferred to have someone make it for him.” Like so many other observers, Biddle got it wrong.

Less than two weeks after the July 5 press conference at Hyde Park, FDR announced his disinclination to seek a third term, throwing the Democratic National Convention in Chicago into a state of anguished confusion. The entire affair was staged. To be sure, Roosevelt’s essential idea of the presidency was himself occupying the office, but he didn’t want to maneuver for it. He wanted to be drafted, and his lieutenants saw to it that he was. From high aloft the convention hall, a lone, amplified voice suddenly cried out: “We Want Roosevelt! We Want Roosevelt!” (The voice belonged to a Chicago political appointee who was under strict orders from the mayor to turn the moment in FDR’s favor.)

What began as a staged affair soon turned into a spontaneous and popular demand. The delegates broke into rousing applause and joined in the cheers—the band struck up “Happy Days Are Here Again”—and the convention re-nominated FDR by an overwhelming margin.

Roosevelt, the master operator, would now enter the second chapter of his presidency. Like Americans before, then and since, he viewed the promise of American democracy as an ever-evolving concept.

“Freedom” as understood by the generation that came of age in 1776 was not necessarily adequate to the challenges faced by the “Greatest Generation” of the 1930s and 1940s. As Hillary Clinton seemed implicitly to acknowledge in choosing Roosevelt Island as the launching point for her own presidential candidacy, the true

test of one's fidelity to the Founding Fathers' vision is not a narrow, scriptural adherence to documents drafted in a different era, but rather a persistent effort to ensure that the ideas and aspirations expressed in those documents remain resonant in our own time.