

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, 1941 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS
("THE FOUR FREEDOMS") (6 January 1941)

James J. Kimble
Seton Hall University

Abstract: Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 "Four Freedoms" address is remembered as an oratorical masterpiece, an assessment which often overlooks the speech's war narrative. This essay examines the address as a war message, including its establishment of an enemy, a victim, and a heroic America. It concludes that the president's emphasis on the Four Freedoms as a rhetorical battle standard elevates the address above most war rhetoric, making it a memorable rhetorical effort in a conflicted situation.

Key Words: Franklin Roosevelt, War Rhetoric, World War II, Four Freedoms, Narrative, Prophetic Dualism

The popular conception of World War II in U.S. collective memory is that it was a righteous and morally justified struggle against the forces of evil. We remember it as "the good war," or as "the best war ever," a conflict that was fought by "the greatest generation" in such memorable, swashbuckling scenes as Midway, D-Day, and Iwo Jima.¹ These battles were so compelling that they continue to be fought by dauntless American GIs and marines on the History Channel, on movie screens, and in best-selling novels—each re-telling serving, in part, to reinforce for later generations the moral righteousness of the war effort.

Key to this conception of the war is that the nation's rugged heroism in the face of evil emerged rather unwillingly. After all, the United States had passed three neutrality acts since 1935, and before the war there were powerful voices arguing for an isolationist American stance. In retrospect, then, we like to think of the United States as a "sleeping giant," or a "reluctant belligerent."² The nation, we seem to recall, was slow to anger but fearsome when goaded into a fight. If not for the treacherous attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, this line of thinking concludes, America might have managed to stay out of the war altogether.

Yet there are those who suggest that U.S. participation in the war was inevitable. Some historians, for example, argue that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was determined to enter the war, one way or another.³ Some of Roosevelt's contemporaries would probably have agreed with this sentiment; many months before Pearl Harbor, a number of Americans were already accusing Roosevelt of trying to push the United States into the war. As Senator Burton K. Wheeler said, for instance, "I will not cease warning the American people that the foreign policy of this Administration is taking the United States into a war that is not ours."⁴

James J. Kimble: kimbleja@shu.edu

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Roosevelt, of course, never directly stated that he intended to bring the United States into the ongoing war in Europe and the Pacific (that is, until the Japanese attack, when the situation became quite different). However, in the president's many statements on the war in the months before Pearl Harbor, one can readily find some which strongly suggested that American participation in the conflict was at least being seriously considered. Consider, for example, his fireside chat on December 29, 1940. In this speech he derided the possibility of negotiating a peaceful settlement with the Axis powers, asking: "Is it a negotiated peace if a gang of outlaws surrounds your community and on threat of extermination makes you pay tribute to save your own skins?"⁵ Or consider his Navy Day radio address, on October 27, 1941. Here the president said that the United States "wished to avoid shooting. But the shooting has started In the long run, however, all that will matter is who fired the last shot." The Navy, he continued, now had orders to "shoot on sight." He concluded that Americans "have cleared our decks and taken our battle stations."⁶ Well before Pearl Harbor, then, there were indications that Roosevelt's rhetoric had taken a contentious turn.⁷

Nowhere is this contentious turn in Roosevelt's pre-war rhetoric more visible than in his State of the Union address, given on January 6, 1941. Delivered before Congress as well as to a nationwide radio audience, this speech offered millions of listeners a comprehensive glimpse into the upcoming war with the Axis powers. Looking back, we now know the shape and outcome of that war. For this reason, it would be easy to examine Roosevelt's address and anachronistically see what his listeners—not yet knowing what lay in their future—could not see. Yet because many of Roosevelt's contemporaries were worried that his aim was to drag the United States into the conflict, it is useful to consider how they (as well as FDR's supporters) might have viewed the speech and its underlying messages.

The aim of this essay is to explore Roosevelt's State of the Union address with such audiences in mind. The essay concludes that the president's speech to Congress and to the nation was an attempt to balance the conflicting desires of a number of interested factions. While the speech could not go so far as to declare war, it nonetheless needed to express a level of American determination to face any conflict on the horizon. FDR's address thereby constructed a narrative of a nation at war, a story encapsulated in Philip Wander's phrase, "the rhetoric of prophetic dualism."⁸ Roosevelt's narrative, I will argue, depicted three characters: an enemy with evil intent; a victim in need of rescue; and the United States as a moral actor about to engage in battle. Most important, however, the narrative crafted a memorable battle standard of rhetorical principles for which the fight would be fought: the famous Four Freedoms. This principled battle standard elevated the speech philosophically beyond the usual rhetoric of war. Ultimately, while many of Roosevelt's critics focused on his war narrative, it is the speech's lofty principles that have stood the test of time.

In developing this argument, the essay covers four important areas. First, it examines the speaker, Roosevelt himself. Then it sketches the context of the speech, offering a glimpse into the various worldviews of the president's time-bound audiences some eleven months before Pearl Harbor. Third, I analyze the speech itself, showing

how it developed a narrative of war framed by universal principles. The essay then concludes by looking at some of the legacies of Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address.

Roosevelt the Rhetor

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was no stranger to politics. When he was an undergraduate at Harvard University, his distant cousin, Theodore, became the first President Roosevelt. The elder Roosevelt's dynamic and enthusiastic demeanor greatly influenced the younger Roosevelt, encouraging him to enter politics as well. Before the age of thirty, FDR won a seat in the New York State Senate. Then, after a successful stint as Assistant Secretary of the Navy under President Woodrow Wilson, Roosevelt was nominated by the Democratic Party for the office of U.S. Vice President in 1920. Following a bout with polio that paralyzed his legs, Roosevelt was elected Governor of New York in 1928; four years later, in 1932, he had gained enough recognition that he was elected President of the United States, an office that he ultimately would win four times.⁹

This remarkable political career was based, at least in part, on Roosevelt's rhetorical talents. Roosevelt was a debater at Groton preparatory school in Massachusetts. His Groton education also included numerous recitations of classical literature. At Harvard, the future president continued to debate and to participate in oral readings even as he studied public speaking. In addition, he became editor of the student newspaper, the *Crimson*. Before Roosevelt began his political career, then, he had gained a number of leadership, oratorical, and writing skills. As presidential scholar Halford Ryan suggests, "by the time that FDR graduated from Harvard, he had a firm grounding in the skills that would serve him well in his political life."¹⁰

Those rhetorical skills undoubtedly played an important role in Roosevelt's political successes. Earnest Brandenburg points out that FDR's "eminence is commonly recognized as stemming in large part from his speaking ability."¹¹ Thus, it should be no surprise that scholars of rhetoric almost universally recognize Roosevelt as an excellent speaker. Ryan, for example, argues that "Franklin Roosevelt was the most successful presidential persuader in the twentieth century." Ryan also declares FDR "the most eloquent" president of that era.¹² Elvin T. Lim concludes that more recent American leaders have had to "live in the shadow" of FDR's "oratorical genius," with many considering his addresses to be "the gold standard for American political oratory."¹³

Roosevelt's rhetorical skills were on prominent display in a number of venues during his presidency. In his numerous press conferences, for example, he was at once eloquent and persuasive. Graham J. White describes the president's "ability to explain the broad outlines of administration policy in language which the reporters could understand." White also comments on FDR's pleasing tendency "to use homely metaphors and salient examples." "The president's performance" at press conferences, concludes White, "was superb, his technique incomparable, and his virtuosity of a kind that . . . the Washington correspondents could neither fail to benefit from nor cease to admire."¹⁴

Yet Roosevelt's eloquence was probably most evident in his prepared speeches. Consider, for instance, his first inaugural address in 1933. This speech, delivered in the depths of the Great Depression, was among FDR's greatest rhetorical achievements. A severe banking crisis had reached a crescendo as President Herbert Hoover left the presidency, leaving many citizens fearful for their economic and physical well-being. FDR faced the dire situation with strong yet inspiring words. He reassured the public, suggesting that they could face the crisis with courage instead of anxiety. As he said—in perhaps the most memorable phrase of his remarkable career—"the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."¹⁵ The address was, in retrospect, tremendously effective at calming the public and at establishing Roosevelt as a competent national leader. As Suzanne M. Daughton suggests, the speech "functioned rhetorically to achieve both the explicit purpose of allaying fear and the implicit purpose of creating public support for the new president and his policies."¹⁶

Another example of Roosevelt's eloquence was his famous War Address, delivered to Congress and the public on December 8th, 1941. In the wake of the devastating Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the president faced another kind of public fear, this one based in the uncertainty and anxiety of a world at war. In fact, the speech as it opened was quite somber. However, after recognizing the "day of infamy" and enumerating a number of Japanese offensives in the Pacific, Roosevelt quickly turned to an inspirational approach, telling listeners that "[n]o 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." He concluded the address with the stirring suggestion that "[w]ith confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God."¹⁷ Like his very first presidential speech nearly nine years earlier, then, FDR's War Address was both eloquent and reassuring.

Some eleven months before his famous war address, Roosevelt was already speaking about war in his State of the Union address. This time, however, he faced an even greater rhetorical challenge. Since the United States was not yet directly involved in the war—and because there were powerful voices calling for the nation to remain isolationist—his rhetorical task called for a more indirect approach, one that would not overly alarm isolationists even as it spoke to those who were calling for direct American involvement in the European war. As the next section suggests, this context made for a very challenging situation for the president, a situation that would severely test his considerable rhetorical skills.

The Context of the State of the Union Address

The conflict that is now known as "World War II" was underway as early as 1937 in the Pacific and 1939 in Europe. The Roosevelt administration did not see the war as a worldwide crisis, however, until the summer of 1940.¹⁸ It was then that the German blitzkrieg overtook Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and France. The quick Nazi victories gave Hitler a much greater ability to wreak havoc in the Atlantic; they also gave him an excellent staging area from which to attack Britain. Germany thus

proceeded to bomb the British homeland, leaving London under constant siege in the so-called "blitz" and the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, repeatedly asking Roosevelt for U.S. assistance.¹⁹

The Roosevelt administration's initial response to the 1940 crisis in Europe was somewhat tepid. In a June 10th address at the University of Virginia, the president offered what seemed at first to be a decisive commitment against fascist aggression. Arguing that the aggressive actions of Germany and Italy constituted a danger to American security, FDR proposed offering significant military aid to both France and Britain.²⁰ He later backed away from this idea, though, finally agreeing some two months later (after France had fallen to the German and Italian invasions) to supply a number of destroyers to Britain in exchange for the right to build American military bases on several British-owned islands.²¹

Roosevelt's reelection later that fall allowed him to act a bit more boldly. Despite the destroyers-for-bases deal, Churchill had continued to plead for more supplies for use against the Axis powers. The president concluded that he would need to persuade Congress and the American public that lending or leasing military supplies to Britain was the best approach.²² In effect, he wanted to offer munitions to London with the understanding that repayment could take place after the ongoing hostilities. On December 17, 1940, the president told reporters in a press conference that what he had in mind was the equivalent of offering a hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire. Rather than quibbling over the cost of the hose, FDR suggested, the priority in such a situation would be to "help him to put out his fire." The hose, he continued, could be returned "after the fire is over."²³ Clearly, as 1940 drew to a close, the Roosevelt administration was finding itself more and more involved in the war, even if the involvement was second-hand.²⁴

This involvement in the ongoing war would become more formal in the State of the Union address, due to be delivered a few weeks later. One of the White House's primary goals in constructing the speech for this occasion, in fact, appears to have been to build support for an official lend-lease bill in Congress. Roosevelt had already broached the idea of lend-lease in his Fireside Chat on the "Arsenal of Democracy," on December 29.²⁵ But in the new year the legislative process that would approve the lend-lease program was already well underway. Even as the president and his advisors worked on drafts of the speech, Secretary of the Treasury Henry F. Morgenthau, Jr. was laboring on what Roosevelt dubbed the "aid to democracies" bill, soon to become House Bill 1776.²⁶ Scheduled to be introduced in Congress just four days after the address, the bill would propose making the president's lend-lease idea legal under American law. The 1941 State of the Union address, then, was Roosevelt's primary opportunity to promote the lend-lease idea before lawmakers.

The various, conflicting camps involved in the debate over U.S. war policy complicated the rhetorical situation tremendously. Consider, for example, those who were vehemently opposed to American involvement in the war. The America First Committee, which emerged in September, 1940, was just one of many groups that actively pressured the administration to continue its policy of strict neutrality in the war. Well-known isolationists included the popular aviator Charles A. Lindbergh,

Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, and many powerful members of Congress. Marshalling a committed group numbering, by some accounts, over 800,000 citizens, the isolationists were a formidable political force. Responding to such isolationists was, for FDR, "a frustrating task that sent the president on a wide-ranging search for effective means" of dealing with them.²⁷

At the same time, a number of people were openly advocating intervention in defense of Britain. In early 1940, William Allen White—a well-known Kansas newspaper publisher—had helped to organize the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. This organization's goal, as its name suggested, was to lobby on behalf of military aid for the beleaguered countries facing German and Italian forces. Before long, the group had established some six hundred chapters, involving between 6,000 and 20,000 vocal members. These interventionists, according to Lise Namikas, "believed the United States possessed sufficient power and influence to guarantee a free world order." Significantly, at least from Roosevelt's perspective, they "did not hesitate to advocate the use of force against Hitler."²⁸

Roosevelt was well aware that each of these groups would be scrutinizing his upcoming State of the Union address and his proposal to formalize the lend-lease approach. He was also aware that his audience for the important address would include "foreigners" from both sides of the ongoing war, even if their examination of the speech would take place from distant capitals. And, of course, FDR also had to be concerned with his immediate audience: the members of Congress who would vote on his proposal. As one might imagine, these lawmakers were as divided on American involvement in the war as were their constituents. Thus, as FDR and his advisors prepared for the speech, they knew that they would need to address a number of disparate audiences.

The State of the Union address was therefore one of most challenging speeches of Roosevelt's presidency. Numerous audiences would be listening, their divergent interests pulling the president in several directions. Given these divergent interests, could FDR successfully warn the Axis, bolster the Allies, and—for those audience members in the public and in the Congress—inspire interventionists even as he avoided alarming isolationists? There is no doubt that the address was successful in some of these respects. However, to the extent that the speech did raise significant concerns about the possibility of American involvement in the European war, it may well have been less successful than many in the administration had hoped.

Analyzing the Four Freedoms Speech as a War Address

President Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address was, at least formally, an attempt to build support for a new national policy. The speech's positive references to the lend-lease proposal that the administration would soon send to Congress strongly supports this perspective. Yet the president's various listeners might well have heard a number of additional messages in the address. The aim of this section is to suggest

that one of the most important of those messages was a *de facto* narrative of American involvement in the ongoing war.

What does it mean to suggest that Roosevelt's speech constructed a war narrative? To understand this idea, one must go back in time to the nation's first cohesive community, the Puritans. John Winthrop, a preacher whose New World-bound sermon to a group of seventeenth-century Puritans "echoes throughout the history of American life," is perhaps the primal figure for that community.²⁹ In his 1630 sermon, Winthrop argued that the new nation was to be a blessed agent of the Christian God. He suggested that

[W]e shall finde that the God of Israell is among vs, when tenn of vs shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make vs a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City vpon a Hill, the eies of all people are vpon vs.³⁰

As this excerpt so eloquently suggests, Winthrop's sermon constructed a rich narrative of the Puritan community. Indeed, his story cast the Puritans as protagonists with at least two important qualities: they were *moral*, and they would *inevitably succeed* over any enemies.

Over time, these qualities appear to have intertwined with the emerging nation's understanding of itself and its role in the world. In the American Revolution, for example, traces of Winthrop's narrative emerged to describe the conflict with Britain. Specifically, the story that was told about the ongoing revolutionary conflict was a dramatic narrative that featured three characters: a hero, an enemy, and a victim. The hero, of course, was the new nation, one that was acting in a morally just way and that, therefore, deserved to win its struggle. The enemy became a demonized form of the British, one frequently depicted as an immoral rapist with insatiable lusts. The victim—or victims—became the individual colonists themselves, a population constructed as having been unjustly attacked by the demonized enemy. Susan Jeffords points to the importance of the character roles in this revolutionary narrative, suggesting that in its "*generating moment*" the United States was creating for itself "the role of protector in configuring a national identity."³¹ In other words, just as the nation was beginning to create its self-image, it cast itself in the role of a savior of the individual colonists—a hero who was battling an enemy to revenge the symbolic rape of a victim.

Rhetorical scholar Philip Wander argues that over the years several important aspects of this grand narrative have become part of the nation's identity. Calling this rhetorical tradition "prophetic dualism," Wander believes that the United States often sees itself as "the manifestation of Truth, Justice, and Freedom placed on this earth by a God whose purpose it is to make of it an instrument for extending His . . . blessings to the rest of humanity."³² The narrative of prophetic dualism, as a consequence, typically orders and presents a thoroughly American perspective on the world. It has characters (e.g., America as a character of Good), actions (e.g., "walk softly and carry a big stick"), and settings (e.g., Pearl Harbor). Most importantly, it is a rhetorical resource available

for repeated use by American leaders. In times of crisis, U.S. presidents have frequently invoked elements of the narrative, invariably returning to the idea that the United States is a morally upright hero whose mission includes the defense of vulnerable victims against decivilized villains.³³

Although the United States was not (yet) at war in January, 1941, Roosevelt's State of the Union address implicitly invoked important aspects of the rhetoric of prophetic dualism. The following analysis demonstrates how this compelling narrative developed in the address. The analysis highlights four emphases in the president's words: the Axis powers as an immoral enemy; Democracy as a symbolic victim; the United States as a moral agent; and the principles underlying the four freedoms as the battle standard under which the envisioned struggle could be fought.

Constructing the Axis Powers as an Enemy

As its name implies, the presidential "state of the union" address is traditionally an annual platform from which the nation's chief executives can formally communicate their perspectives on the status and health of the nation to the other branches of government as well to the general public.³⁴ Yet since the United States is commonly perceived by Americans as an important player on the world stage, these addresses routinely include commentary on foreign policy and the status of affairs abroad. Thus, it was not unexpected for Roosevelt's 1941 speech to address not only the American status quo, but the ongoing war. Much less typical, however, were the speech's impassioned references to the Axis powers, which made for an unusually contentious message.

Roosevelt set the truculent tone for his address right away. The nation's international position, he claimed, was "unprecedented" because "at no previous time has American security been as seriously threatened from without as it is today" (2).³⁵ What was this unprecedented threat? The president shrewdly delayed a clear response to this question, effectively building suspense for his various audiences. Historical references in the speech's early passages offered only hints of the enemy's villainy. Past American antagonists, he said, never aimed "at domination of the whole world" (7). Previous wars, he claimed, never constituted "a real threat against our future or against the future of any other American nation" (8). Even the (first) World War, he contended, "seemed to contain only small threat of danger to our own American future" (10). The president's point was clear: at no other time in its history had the United States faced such a grave threat. Although FDR's audiences surely guessed where he was going with this indirect rhetoric, the imminent national danger he described remained faceless.

Thus, by the time Roosevelt reached the twelfth paragraph of the address (some five minutes into the thirty-six minute speech), he had constructed an increasingly suspenseful danger, one that was vague but undeniably threatening as well as imminent.³⁶ This tension-filled suspense would naturally have produced a number of questions among the president's various audiences. For example, who exactly was this enemy? What was its nature and intent? Why was it so threatening?

After nearly six minutes of speaking, FDR finally drew back the curtain to describe the enemy in all of its villainy.

The enemy, he claimed, was "the new order of tyranny" in the world "that seeks to spread over every continent today" (11). This new order, he continued, aimed to dominate "all the population and all the resources of Europe, and Asia, and Africa and Australasia" (15). He suggested that this enemy was both clever and immoral, frequently operating "by treachery and surprise built up over a series of years" (24). Using "secret agents and their dupes," (25) he concluded, these "dictator nations" (22) aimed to create a frightening new world, an abomination which, he noted later, they sought to create "with the crash of a bomb" (87). Through such striking clarity, then, FDR revealed that the perfidious enemy was none other than the Axis dictators and their armies.

Even more threatening, perhaps, was the idea that the Axis powers ultimately sought to attack the United States. Roosevelt pointed out that "the tempo of modern warfare could bring into our very midst the physical attack which we must eventually expect if the dictator nations win this war" (22). The first stage of that attack—the deployment of unseen spies—had already occurred, he claimed, since "great numbers of them are already here" (25). The enemy's eventual military attack would not be in response to an "act of war on our part" (57). After all, the Axis nations "did not wait for Norway or Belgium or the Netherlands to commit an act of war" (57). No, argued the president, "[a]s long as the aggressor nations maintain the offensive, they—not we—will choose the time and the place and the method of their attack" (26). In this way, the president constructed the enemy so that it was not only inherently evil, but seemingly bent on striking at those listening to the president's speech, whatever their allegiance or political position.

Clearly, then, a central emphasis of Roosevelt's address involved the identification and vilification of the Axis powers as enemies of the United States. In the speech, the enemy first emerged as a vague threat, then became uncomfortably, even shockingly, evident. Consistent with the rhetoric of prophetic dualism, the enemy eventually emerged as immoral and hungry for conflict. Moreover, the enemy seemed ready to use any unfair means to conquer its victims. Not surprisingly, it was the nature of these victims—real and potential—that became a second important emphasis in Roosevelt's State of the Union address.

Constructing Democracy as a Victim

In the American tradition of prophetic dualism, the villain typically emerges as an aggressive attacker, one whose victims are in serious danger. But who or what was the victim in need of rescue here? The most visible victim of the Axis powers in Roosevelt's address appeared to be the democratic process. The dictator nations were not just endangering nations and cultures and people; they were willfully endangering the concept and practice of Democracy itself. The president's depiction of this victim took place on at least two levels.

On one level, FDR's address showed how democracy was already under attack by the enemy nations. "I suppose that every realist knows," he commented, "that the democratic way of life is at this moment being directly assailed in every part of the world" (12). "During sixteen long months," he continued, "this assault has blotted out the whole pattern of democratic life in an appalling number of independent nations, great and small" (13). With more and more democratic nations succumbing to the control of these aggressive dictators, then, there was little doubt that democracy across the world faced a "great emergency" (30).

On another level, the president's speech suggested that the danger to democracy would only get worse if the Axis powers were allowed to continue their rampage. Consider "what the downfall of democratic nations" would "mean to our own democracy," he intoned (10). Evidently, crushing democracy in Europe was not enough for this insatiable enemy, since it now sought "to destroy unity and promote discord in nations that are still at peace" (12). Thus, because "the assailants are still on the march," (13) he argued, "the Nation's life is in danger" (59). Truly, as FDR concluded, "the future and the safety of our country and of our democracy" (14) are in greater peril than ever before. In the speech's vision of the world, at least, the enemy nations had found in democracy a target of opportunity in the present as well as in the future.

Interestingly, Roosevelt's speech largely overlooked the suffering of the Axis powers' *human* victims. The president was, of course, well aware that the enemy's victims already included millions of people, many of them now dead at the hands of the dictators and their armies. Yet he evidently felt that the more urgent and compelling victim of the war emergency was the democratic way of life. Roosevelt's address therefore constructed democracy as a victim which was facing an ongoing attack from a vicious and immoral enemy. Even worse, the speech suggested that the attacks would continue, ultimately leading to an attack on the modern cradle of democratic thought: the American homeland. Yet Roosevelt's speech also created a narrative role for the United States, casting the nation as a sort of storybook hero who was ready to come to the rescue of democracy around the world.

Constructing the United States as a Moral Agent

With the villain and the victim in their narrative places, the war story in Roosevelt's State of the Union address logically led to an inspirational description of the tale's hero. The way in which Roosevelt discussed the status of the United States in the address was in fact quite consistent with the rhetoric of prophetic dualism. Indeed, the hero in this version of the narrative was one that John Winthrop, the Puritan preacher, would likely have recognized. Two of the hero's qualities, in particular, stood out: its inherently moral nature; and the seeming inevitability of its victory over the immoral enemy.

Initially, FDR's speech valorized the United States and its moral status. At times, this heroic morality appeared as a simple and stark contrast to the enemy. Early in the speech, for example, Roosevelt said that "[t]he American people have unalterably set

their faces against . . . [the] tyranny" of the dictator nations (11). At the end of the speech, the president re-emphasized this direct contrast when he declared that "we oppose" the Axis nations' "so-called new order of tyranny" with a "greater conception"—what he called "the moral order" of America and its way of life (88, 87). In these two contrasts, America's superior morality was assumed because it was the direct opposite of the immoral pursuits of the dictator nations.

Yet Roosevelt was also careful to describe specifically the moral and heroic nature of the United States and its role in the world. In domestic affairs, for instance, he argued that "our national policy . . . has been based upon a decent respect for the rights and the dignity of all of our fellow men within our gates" (31). This admirable internal policy, he claimed, emerged in American foreign relations as well, since "our national policy in foreign affairs has similarly been based on a decent respect for the rights and the dignity of all nations, large and small" (31). Such lofty "principles of morality," he concluded, "will never permit us to acquiesce in a peace dictated by aggressors and sponsored by appeasers" (35). In such words, FDR constructed America as possessing an inherently just and moral nature; this nature was so positive that the nation could not stand idly by and watch international villainy succeed.

The second heroic quality of the United States emerged from the first: given the moral superiority of America's cause, victory over the immoral enemy was essentially guaranteed. As a nation, FDR said, "we express our determination that the democratic cause shall prevail" (34). The "stamina and courage" necessary for this victory, he suggested, would "come from unshakable belief in the manner of life" that "[t]hose who man our defenses, and those . . . who build our defenses" will be protecting (63). The American people, he continued, "have renewed their faith and strengthened their devotion to the institutions we make ready to protect," so much so that they are "conscious of their individual stake in the preservation of democratic life in America" (64). In the end, "[a] good society" like America was "able to face schemes of world domination and foreign revolutions alike without fear" (88). Without question, he concluded, "the justice of morality must and will win in the end" (31). Again, Roosevelt painted a rhetorical picture of a righteous nation, unafraid of conflict and certain of victory.

In this way, then, the State of the Union address worked to construct a heroic nation that could intervene in international affairs to save the victim (democracy) from the immoral villain (the Axis powers). As a heroic actor, the United States emerged from the speech as both inherently moral and as destined to win the struggle with the villain. Surely this narrative description of world affairs—especially given its traditional roots in American discourse—would have been compelling for many in Roosevelt's various audiences. However, as the next section shows, the president offered a final, transcendent touch to the tale, identifying philosophical principles to be defended in the coming battle.

Constructing a Rhetorical Battle Standard: The Four Freedoms

So far, Roosevelt's speech described the United States as an inherently moral actor in world affairs. It indicated that the nation should act to save a vitally important victim already under attack: the democratic way of life. And it argued that the rescue of that victim would take place through a deadly—though ultimately victorious—struggle against an evil villain. Given these admirable qualities and actions, the speech was clearly consistent in implying that America's purposes were worthy. The president enhanced this argument, however, by constructing a rhetorical battle standard for the impending struggle. That battle standard, as it turned out, was the most visible and famous part of the address: the Four Freedoms.

Roosevelt began the climactic segment of his address by stressing what he saw as the most important aspects of a democratic nation. In serial paragraphs, he listed what he called "the foundations of a healthy and strong democracy" (66), including "[e]quality of opportunity for youth and for others" (67), "[j]obs for those who can work" (68), "[t]he ending of special privilege for the few" (70), and "[t]he preservation of civil liberties for all" (71). There was no question that FDR treated these qualities as critical to a democratic state. Yet as lofty as these ideals were, the president did not clearly portray them as goals to be achieved in a war against the Axis powers. Rather, they simply described the inherent qualities of a democratic state—qualities worth defending, to be sure, but not war objectives or even qualities that the United States should attempt to duplicate across the world.

FDR did, however, offer a shorter list of freedoms that the U.S. had to defend if it hoped to "regain and maintain a free world" (55). In paragraphs eighty-three through eighty-six, he described these as "four essential human freedoms," ones that all just nations had to be "founded upon" (82): "freedom of speech and expression" (83), "freedom of . . . worship" (84), "freedom from want" (85), and "freedom from fear" (86). These freedoms, Roosevelt suggested, transcended the inherent qualities of a democracy. They also were worth fighting for, even if the nations being threatened were not democratic. Roosevelt was thus making a crucial distinction here. The defense of democracy did not necessarily mean an attempt to spread the democratic system of governance. It did, however, mean defending these four vital freedoms, even in non-democratic states. As the president reiterated four times, these freedoms were vital "everywhere in the world."³⁷

The fact that Roosevelt specifically delineated these four freedoms as "essential" (82) was important to understanding his implied message. The rescue of democracy from the Axis powers, he suggested, was not a trick to produce more American-style democracies—what John F. Kennedy would describe to the next generation as a "Pax Americana."³⁸ Such a goal would no doubt have been offensive to many of the world's leaders and citizens, and it certainly would have been repugnant to the domestic isolationists listening to the speech. Rather, FDR was holding up a more principled rationale for battle, one consistent with the "rescue" narrative. The United States, he implied, was not in this struggle to transform the world, but rather to *free* it from an attempt to stamp out basic human rights.

In the end, Roosevelt's address was an unusually positive war message in the guise of a policy address. It functioned not only to describe the participants in a narrative battle, but to define the war aims of the eventual victor. Those war aims did not include the conceptually muddled—not to mention widely offensive—goal of establishing American democratic ideals elsewhere. Rather, the war had a simpler, more universal goal: the worldwide establishment of freedom of expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. These goals were not only easier to define, they were finite and acceptable to both internal and external audiences for the speech. In Roosevelt's message, the war was not only about defeating an evil villain and rescuing democracy; it was also about helping to build a better world in the name of definable, seemingly universal human freedoms. These freedoms presumably transcended national boundaries and functioned as naturalized ideals shared by all of humanity. As FDR concluded, "[f]reedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere" (90).

Conclusions: The Legacy of the Four Freedoms Address

Historians and rhetorical scholars frequently laud President Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address. Halford Ryan calls attention to its "eloquent and patriotic language."³⁹ Laura Crowell contends that the speech consists of "an extended series of carefully developed elements, each contributing to the tone and message of the whole but having its own individual excellence as well."⁴⁰ And Earnest Brandenburg and Waldo W. Braden suggest that "Franklin Roosevelt's proclamation of 'four essential human freedoms' . . . placed the Nazis in an unfavorable light, and strengthened favorable opinions of the Allies." "Public reaction" to both speech and speaker, they conclude, "was overwhelmingly complimentary."⁴¹ Several other scholars have celebrated the speech as an example of excellent public address, persuasion, and eloquence.⁴² Indeed, the address is so well respected that, by one estimate, it ranks in the top fifty political speeches of the twentieth century.⁴³

Many of those in the president's contemporary audiences liked the address as well. William Allen White, the influential newspaper publisher and interventionist, pointed to its "glowing, winging words that carried a new faith for a new world."⁴⁴ Republic Representative Edith N. Rogers of Massachusetts felt that although the president's notion of protecting "the entire world" seemed "a very large order," everyone "must agree with him on the question of preparedness."⁴⁵ And Democratic Senator Morris Sheppard of Texas said that "[i]t was one of the greatest deliverances of all time, not merely of American history."⁴⁶ Clearly, the address was received favorably by many.

Yet not everyone appreciated Roosevelt's words. A group of clergy calling themselves the American Peace Mobilization told the president that they were "both profoundly shocked and dismayed" by what they called his attempts at "inspiring fear into the hearts of our people in order to win them unwillingly to support a war policy."⁴⁷ Republican Senator Arthur Capper of Kansas said that FDR "is still making war speeches."⁴⁸ Eddie Hernan wrote to the *Washington Post* that "[e]nouncing [*sic*] war

aims is a strange development . . . considering the fact that President Roosevelt was elected precisely for enunciating peace principles."⁴⁹ And, from abroad, Mexican, Rumanian, and Swiss commentators saw the address as "another step toward leading the United States into war." Indeed, as one Mexican source added, "the United States already is in the war."⁵⁰

What can one make of these differing perspectives? Considering the address in its time-bound context, one possible conclusion is that Roosevelt's speech was not a complete success in the sense that not every partisan faction was persuaded. One of the president's primary challenges in preparing the address was to mollify the interventionist segment of his audience and, simultaneously, to take care not to increase the anxieties of the isolationists who were listening. Certainly, his message and its narrative undertone satisfied most of the hawks, those who viewed the Axis powers as a clearly-defined threat and who were agitating for war preparations. However, those who already feared that FDR was a warmonger seemed to find little to appreciate in the State of the Union address.

Of course, this delicate balancing task may have been impossible given the polarized nature of the president's listeners. It was probable that the message was bound to alienate one side or the other. Yet to consider the address unsuccessful on this basis is to ignore the speech's evident success at reaching the more moderate segments of the president's audience. The *New York Times*, for example, had written just a few weeks earlier that while it supported the idea of increased aid for Britain, it also felt that "the American people have . . . no wish and no present intention of entering the war, and the deepest possible hope of remaining at peace."⁵¹ The newspaper's later reaction to the address, in contrast, was telling: "[T]he words of President Roosevelt," it editorialized, "will bring fresh strength and added courage" to "wherever they are heard by men of good-will."⁵² Apparently, the *Times* recognized that the president's message was not so much a declaration of war as a declaration of noble, universal principles.

In fact, it is the speech's focus on essential human principles that is most striking, and an important reason why the address ultimately transcended its polarized context. The Carnegie Council's Joel H. Rosenthal recently spoke about this quality of the speech, suggesting that it "gave the United States and the world a signature idea: that there were four freedoms, four simple universal principles, that when presented in plain words, could become a rallying point for fighting against insecurity, intolerance, poverty, and religious persecution."⁵³ Wim van Gelder, speaking at a recent award ceremony for the Four Freedoms Medal, made a similar point. In his words, "[t]he most remarkable feature" of the address was that Roosevelt

did not call on the American people to fight against something. On the contrary, he called on America and its allies to fight for something. For the restoration of democratic values, for the recovery of fundamental human freedoms. Hate wasn't pitted against hate. There were no exclamations like "We want them dead or alive." No stigmas like "The axis of evil." No. Central to his speech was a return to human dignity.⁵⁴

Roosevelt's State of the Union address, in other words, was not a typical war message at all. Its narrative of war was subordinated to a timeless call for fundamental human principles. It suggested that if the United States ultimately fought against the Axis powers, it would do so not for the purpose of power, or land, or prestige, or influence, but for the improvement of human freedoms across the world.

In a sense, then, the speech represented an international extension of FDR's aims for the New Deal. Nearly a decade earlier Roosevelt had envisioned a way of showing "millions of our citizens" that they "cannot and shall not hope in vain." The answer to the current crisis, he said, was a "new deal for the American people," a high-minded program that would be "more than a political campaign." This program for hope, he concluded, would be "a call to arms."⁵⁵ To be sure, by 1941 FDR's New Deal programs had run their course. But the president's desire to empower human dignity by calling Americans to arms in the face of crisis had not diminished. The Four Freedoms speech was his opportunity to once again try to inspire his listeners to make the world a better place.

Appropriately, the State of the Union address did end up inspiring many of the president's listeners. A number of American artists, for example, tried their hand at depicting the Four Freedoms in their works. The most notable of these artists was Norman Rockwell, whose series of paintings—also called the Four Freedoms—appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in successive issues in February and March of 1943.⁵⁶ The images proved to be so popular that they toured the country as part of a gigantic war bond promotion.⁵⁷ Later, the images were sold as reproductions to those on the home front, giving further life to the president's earlier message. As Rob Kroes points out, "[t]hrough the mass distribution of reproductions, Rockwell's paintings . . . facilitated the translation and transfer of Roosevelt's high-minded call to a mass audience."⁵⁸

Roosevelt's Four Freedoms also had diplomatic legacies. The Atlantic Charter, signed by both FDR and Churchill some four months before Pearl Harbor, explicitly included freedom from want and freedom from fear in its principles.⁵⁹ Toward the end of the war, moreover, the Four Freedoms became involved in the negotiations that would ultimately establish the United Nations. Eleanor Roosevelt, whose public goal of "four equalities" at home "prefigured and then subsequently echoed her husband's four freedoms," played a central role in these negotiations.⁶⁰ Ratified by Congress on July 28, 1945, the U.N. charter did eventually include each of the four freedoms in its statement on the *Purposes of the United Nations*.⁶¹ Clearly, Roosevelt's speech had a number of historical legacies, impacts which continue to influence the world.

Ultimately, FDR's peacetime speech had several identities: it was a policy message, an instance of war rhetoric, and an identification of lofty human principles in the face of crisis. The importance of the first two identities has faded over time. What remains in collective memory is the speech's emphasis on the Four Freedoms, a set of ideals that underlies popular understanding of the moral righteousness of the United States and its role in the war. Perhaps it is true that World War II was "the good war" fought by "the greatest generation."⁶² Perhaps it is true, as well, that America was a

"reluctant belligerent" that was ultimately dragged into the war against its will.⁶³ Yet what may have been President Roosevelt's most challenging address emphasizes another apparent truth: fighting for human dignity and freedom is a cause well worth remembering.

James J. Kimble (Ph.D., University of Maryland) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Seton Hall University. He thanks the archivists at the FDR Library in Hyde Park, New York, for their enthusiastic assistance on this project. Correspondence concerning the article should be addressed to the author at Department of Communication, Fahy Hall, SHU, 400 South Orange Avenue, South Orange NJ 07079 (Email: kimbleja@shu.edu).

Notes

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33 Herbert W. Simons, "From Post-9/11 Melodrama to Quagmire in Iraq: A Rhetorical History," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007): 185.

34 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52.

35 All quotations from Roosevelt's State of the Union Address are taken verbatim from "Annual Message to Congress, January 6, 1941," audio recording, available at <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/od4freed.html>. The parenthetical number(s) after each quotation in the text indicate(s) the paragraph number(s) of the speech from which the material derives. The administration's public version of the text is Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Annual Message to the Congress, January 6, 1941," in Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1940 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), 663-672.

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