Revisiting Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered a speech on freedom and democracy less than a year before Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II, he probably had no idea that his message would resonate strongly more than six decades later.

**“I suppose that every realist knows that the democratic way of life is at this moment being directly assailed in every part of the world,” Roosevelt told Congress on January 6, 1941, as he outlined a new cornerstone in national policy that seems as powerful today as it did then.**

**“The issues of democracy and freedom that he was talking about remain the challenges of the modern world,” says Cynthia Koch, director the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York.**

**By the time of Roosevelt’s speech, Japan had invaded China and was pressing into French Indonesia, and Germany had swept through Western Europe and was waging an air assault on Great Britain. Italy had signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Japan, and the Soviet Union, at the time allied with Germany, was on the move toward the west.**

**“It was a very, very dark time in world history,” Koch says. “Many in the United States wanted us to remain neutral, but Roosevelt was doing what was possible to save American democracy from threats from both sides of the globe.”**

**“We look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms,” Roosevelt said, enumerating the freedom of speech and expression, freedom of every person to worship God in his own way, freedom from want and freedom from fear. “The first two freedoms – freedom of expression and freedom to worship – of course, we all recognize as having their roots in our founding documents,” Koch says.**

**Building on that familiar foundation, Roosevelt considered the realities of the modern world. He saw the devastation of World War I and very much wanted to try to complete the unfinished work of the aftermath of World War I where the Treaty of Versailles left the European continent devastated. It didn’t give them the kind of economic security which would have allowed democracy to flourish.**

**“He saw that freedom from want would take away the kind of poverty and the allure of a dictator who will come to power and promise plenty, promise people prosperity in exchange for giving up their rights,” Koch says.**

**The fourth freedom that Roosevelt spoke about, freedom from fear, seems directed at 21st-century Americans. “Terror is all about fear,” Koch explains. “Terror is the most fearsome way of attacking people, of taking away their sense of security and leading them to do things that they would not otherwise do. It undercuts the very foundations of liberty.”**

**“We’re seeing democracy beginning to flourish in places – and that is what is behind the Four Freedoms – the idea of self-determination for people,” Koch says. On January 30, million of Iraqis risked their lives to participate in free elections. And throughout this spring, Lebanon’s citizens have been taking steps to rid themselves of Syrian domination and are looking forward to the upcoming parliamentary elections.**

**Whether they serve in the military, buy war bonds, donate to scrap drives or work as civil defense wardens, as Americans did in World War II, or whether they go to the polls for the first time in nations where democracy is newly born, people around the world still look to Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms for inspiration. His words carried U.S. citizens from a devastating attack on America soil – at Pearl Harbor – through a costly global war to ultimate victory, and they ring just as true today with people struggling to overthrow the burdens of tyranny.**

**“Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere,” Roosevelt concluded. “Our support goes to those who struggle to gain those rights and keep them. Our strength is our unity of purpose. To that high concept there can be no end save victory.” *(American Profile magazine, May 8, 2005)***

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