

## ■ President Roosevelt’s “Call for Sacrifice”

**Date:** April 28, 1942

**Author:** Franklin D. Roosevelt

**Genre:** speech

### Summary Overview

President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered this speech to the American people as one of his fireside chats, which were relatively informal radio addresses intended to encourage Americans to feel as though the president was talking to them as a friend. The official name of this speech is “On Our National Economic Policy,” but it later became known as “A Call for Sacrifice” because it addressed the need of the American people to consider the widespread sacrifices they must make in order to win the war. Although the purpose of this speech was to discuss the economic situation in the United States, Roosevelt also gave a summary of the war abroad and shared his concerns about new leadership in Vichy France. The speech ended with stories of American heroism on the battlefield, a reminder to the listening public of why they should sacrifice to support the war effort.

### Defining Moment

Roosevelt was one of the first American politicians to understand that mastery of the radio address was crucial to communicating with the nation. By the 1930s, almost 90 percent of American households owned a radio. Roosevelt’s first fireside chat was labeled as such by a journalist before a radio address given in May 1933. It evoked the comforting, conversational tone of these speeches. Roosevelt contributed to their writing and often spoke informally, changing the speech as he delivered it. Fireside chats were addressed directly to the American public who were generally addressed as “my friends,” or in this case, “my fellow Americans.” He used simple, direct language intended to appeal to a broad audience, and he referred to himself in the first person and to the listening audience as “we.” Roosevelt’s widespread popularity is attributed in part to his ability to reassure and inform the American people through these chats. From 1933 to 1944, Roosevelt delivered thirty such speeches to the American public.

“A Call for Sacrifice” was delivered in April 1942 at a time when the military situation on the ground seemed to be particularly dire. American troops had been forced out of the Philippines, and her last defenders were under siege on the island of Corregidor in Manila Bay. In addition, the Japanese had made extraordinary gains in the Pacific by occupying Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies. Significant raids had been made against the Australian mainland in February and March. Though the Soviet Union had managed to halt Hitler’s advances, fighting was still desperate and the outcome far from clear. England and the United States knew that there needed to be another front opened in Western Europe, but supplies and equipment continued to be needed by the Soviet Union and England, and the Allies were not yet ready to launch a large-scale offensive. Roosevelt alluded to another troubling development in Europe when he revealed that the nominally neutral but German-controlled French government at Vichy was taken over by Pierre Laval, who failed to offer even token resistance to German demands for French laborers and the deportation of French Jews. The Allies worried with good reason that French military resources would soon be completely at Germany’s disposal.

With war industries pumping billions of dollars into the economy just as goods were becoming scarce, resisting inflation and stabilizing the cost of living was also crucial. Roosevelt suggested a seven-point plan that stabilized prices, wages, and rent and that brought the money earned by individuals back to the war effort through taxes and war bonds. Rationing of goods needed for the war effort or in very short supply, such as rubber and sugar, had already begun, and many more items would soon be added to the list. Ration books contained universal coupons for items like sugar with identical amounts allotted to each American and point rations where points could be used for a variety of

needed items. Special permission was needed to buy gasoline, tires, typewriters, and farm equipment. The sacrifice of these goods by Americans at home was described in terms of sacrifices being made on the battlefield and were considered direct contributions to winning the war.

### Author Biography

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born in 1882 in Hyde Park, New York. He married Eleanor Roosevelt in 1905. He studied law and entered politics in 1910 as a state senator. In 1912, Roosevelt supported Woodrow Wilson's candidacy at the Democratic National Convention, and when Wilson won, he appointed Roosevelt as assistant secretary of the Navy, a position he held from 1913 to 1920. Roosevelt contracted polio in 1921

and was permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Despite this hardship, he was determined to return to public life, and through the use of locking braces, he was able to stand and even walk, though always with great difficulty. Roosevelt held the governorship of New York from 1928 to 1932 when he was elected president of the United States. He led the United States through the Great Depression and greatly expanded the power and reach of the federal government through a series of reforms known as the New Deal. In 1940, with war raging in Europe, Asia, and North Africa, Roosevelt ran for and won an unprecedented third term as president. He won a fourth term in 1944 when the United States was at war, and he held the position until his death in office in 1945.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

My Fellow Americans, it is nearly five months since we were attacked at Pearl Harbor. For the two years prior to that attack this country had been gearing itself up to a high level of production of munitions. And yet our war efforts had done little to dislocate the normal lives of most of us.

Since then we have dispatched strong forces of our Army and Navy, several hundred thousands of them, to bases and battlefronts thousands of miles from home. We have stepped up our war production on a scale that is testing our industrial power, our engineering genius, and our economic structure to the utmost. We have had no illusions about the fact that this is a tough job-and a long one.

American warships are now in combat in the North and South Atlantic, in the Arctic, in the Mediterranean, in the Indian Ocean, and in the North and South Pacific. American troops have taken stations in South America, Greenland, Iceland, the British Isles, the Near East, the Middle East and the Far East, the continent of Australia, and many islands of the Pacific. American war planes, manned by Americans, are flying in actual combat over all the continents and all the oceans.

On the European front the most important development of the past year has been without question the crushing counteroffensive on the part of the great armies

of Russia against the powerful German army. These Russian forces have destroyed and are destroying more armed power of our enemies-troops, planes, tanks, and guns-than all the other United Nations put together.

In the Mediterranean area, matters remain on the surface much as they were. But the situation there is receiving very careful attention. Recently, we've received news of a change in government in what we used to know as the Republic of France-a name dear to the hearts of all lovers of liberty, a name and an institution which we hope will soon be restored to full dignity.

Throughout the Nazi occupation of France, we have hoped for the maintenance of a French government which would strive to regain independence, to reestablish the principles of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," and to restore the historic culture of France. Our policy has been consistent from the very beginning. However, we are now greatly concerned lest those who have recently come to power may seek to force the brave French people into submission to Nazi despotism.

The United Nations will take measures, if necessary, to prevent the use of French territory in any part of the world for military purposes by the Axis powers. The good people of France will readily understand that such action is essential for the United Nations to prevent assistance to the armies or navies or air forces of Germany or Italy or

Japan. The overwhelming majority of the French people understand that the fight of the United Nations is fundamentally their fight, that our victory means the restoration of a free and independent France-and the saving of France from the slavery which would be imposed upon her by her external enemies and by her internal traitors.

We know how the French people really feel. We know that a deep-seated determination to obstruct every step in the Axis plan extends from occupied France through Vichy France all the way to the people of their colonies in every ocean and on every continent.

Our planes are helping in the defense of French colonies today, and soon American Flying Fortresses will be fighting for the liberation of the darkened continent of Europe itself.

In all the occupied countries there are men and women, and even little children, who have never stopped fighting, never stopped resisting, never stopped proving to the Nazis that their so-called new order will never be enforced upon free peoples.

In the German and Italian peoples themselves there's a growing conviction that the cause of Nazism and Fascism is hopeless-that their political and military leaders have led them along the bitter road which leads not to world conquest but to final defeat. They cannot fail to contrast the present frantic speeches of these leaders with their arrogant boastings of a year ago, and two years ago.

And on the other side of the world, in the Far East, we have passed through a phase of serious losses.

We have inevitably lost control of a large portion of the Philippine Islands. But this whole nation pays tribute to the Filipino and American officers and men who held out so long on Bataan Peninsula, to those grim and gallant fighters who still hold Corregidor, where the flag flies, and to the forces that are still striking effectively at the enemy on Mindanao and other islands.

The Malayan Peninsula and Singapore are in the hands of the enemy; the Netherlands East Indies are almost entirely occupied, though resistance there continues. Many other islands are in the possession of the Japanese. But there is good reason to believe that their southward advance has been checked. Australia, New Zealand, and much other territory will be bases for offensive action-and we are determined that the territory that

has been lost will be regained.

The Japanese are pressing their northward advance against Burma with considerable power, driving toward India and China. They have been opposed with great bravery by small British and Chinese forces aided by American fliers.

The news in Burma tonight is not good. The Japanese may cut the Burma Road; but I want to say to the gallant people of China that no matter what advances the Japanese may make, ways will be found to deliver airplanes and munitions of war to the armies of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

We remember that the Chinese people were the first to stand up and fight against the aggressors in this war; and in the future a still unconquerable China will play its proper role in maintaining peace and prosperity, not only in eastern Asia but in the whole world.

For every advance that the Japanese have made since they started their frenzied career of conquest, they have had to pay a very heavy toll in warships, in transports, in planes, and in men. They are feeling the effects of those losses.

It is even reported from Japan that somebody has dropped bombs on Tokyo, and on other principal centers of Japanese war industries.

If this be true, it is the first time in history that Japan has suffered such indignities.

Although the treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor was the immediate cause of our entry into the war, that event found the American people spiritually prepared for war on a worldwide scale. We went into this war fighting. We know what we are fighting for, We realize that the war has become what Hitler originally proclaimed it to be-a total war.

Not all of us can have the privilege of fighting our enemies in distant parts of the world.

Not all of us can have the privilege of working in a munitions factory or a shipyard, or on the farms or in oil fields or mines, producing the weapons or the raw materials that are needed by our armed forces.

But there is one front and one battle where everyone in the United States-every man, woman, and child-is in action, and will be privileged to remain in action throughout this war. That front is right here at home, in our daily lives, in our daily tasks. Here at home everyone

will have the privilege of making whatever self-denial is necessary, not only to supply our fighting men, but to keep the economic structure of our country fortified and secure during the war and after the war.

This will require, of course, the abandonment not only of luxuries but of many other creature comforts.

Every loyal American is aware of his individual responsibility. Whenever I hear anyone saying, "The American people are complacent—they need to be aroused," I feel like asking him to come to Washington to read the mail that floods into the White House and into all departments of this government. The one question that recurs through all these thousands of letters and messages is, "What more can I do to help my country in winning this war?" To build the factories, to buy the materials, to pay the labor, to provide the transportation, to equip and feed and house the soldiers and sailors and marines, and to do all the thousands of things necessary in a war—all cost a lot of money, more money than has ever been spent by any nation at anytime in the long history of the world.

We are now spending, solely for war purposes, the sum of about \$100 million every day in the week. But, before this year is over, that almost unbelievable rate of expenditure will be doubled.

All of this money has to be spent—and spent quickly—if we are to produce within the time now available the enormous quantities of weapons of war which we need. But the spending of these tremendous sums presents grave danger of disaster to our national economy.

When your government continues to spend these unprecedented sums for munitions month by month and year by year, that money goes into the pocketbooks and bank accounts of the people of the United States. At the same time raw materials and many manufactured goods are necessarily taken away from civilian use; and machinery and factories are being converted to war production.

You do not have to be a professor of mathematics or economics to see that if people with plenty of cash start bidding against each other for scarce goods, the price of those goods goes up.

Yesterday I submitted to the Congress of the United States a seven-point program, a program of general principles which taken together could be called the national economic policy for attaining the great objective of keeping the cost of living down.

I repeat them now to you in substance:

First, we must, through heavier taxes, keep personal and corporate profits at a low reasonable rate.

Second, we must fix ceilings on prices and rents.

Third, we must stabilize wages.

Fourth, we must stabilize farm prices.

Fifth, we must put more billions into war bonds.

Sixth, we must ration all essential commodities which are scarce.

And seventh, we must discourage installment buying, and encourage paying off debts and mortgages.

I do not think it is necessary to repeat what I said yesterday to the Congress in discussing these general principles.

The important thing to remember is that each one of these points is dependent on the others if the whole program is to work.

Some people are already taking the position that every one of the seven points is correct except the one point which steps on their own individual toes. A few seem very willing to approve self-denial - on the part of their neighbors. The only effective course of action is a simultaneous attack on all of the factors which increase the cost of living, in one comprehensive, all-embracing program covering prices and profits and wages and taxes and debts.

The blunt fact is that every single person in the United States is going to be affected by this program. Some of you will be affected more directly by one or two of these restrictive measures, but all of you will be affected indirectly by all of them.

Are you a businessman, or do you own stock in a business corporation? Well, your profits are going to be cut down to a reasonably low level by taxation. Your income will be subject to higher taxes. Indeed in these days, when every available dollar should go to the war effort, I do not think that any American citizen should have a net income in excess of \$25,000 per year after payment of taxes.

Are you a retailer or a wholesaler or a manufacturer or a farmer or a landlord? Ceilings are being placed on the prices at which you can sell your goods or rent your property.

Do you work for wages? You will have to forgo higher wages for your particular job for the duration of the war.

All of us are used to spending money for things that we want, things, however, which are not absolutely essential. We will all have to forgo that kind of spending. Because we must put every dime and every dollar we can possibly spare out of our earnings into war bonds and stamps. Because the demands of the war effort require the rationing of goods of which there is not enough to go around. Because the stopping of purchases of nonessentials will release thousands of workers who are needed in the war effort.

As I told the Congress yesterday, "sacrifice" is not exactly the proper word with which to describe this program of self-denial. When, at the end of this great struggle, we shall have saved our free way of life, we shall have made no "sacrifice." The price for civilization must be paid in hard work and sorrow and blood. The price is not too high. If you doubt it, ask those millions who live today under the tyranny of Hitlerism.

Ask the workers of France and Norway and the Netherlands, whipped to labor by the lash, whether the stabilization of wages is too great a "sacrifice." Ask the farmers of Poland and Denmark and Czechoslovakia and France, looted of their livestock, starving while their own crops are stolen from their land, ask them whether parity prices are too great a sacrifice." Ask the businessmen of Europe, whose enterprises have been stolen from their owners, whether the limitation of profits and personal incomes is too great a "sacrifice." Ask the women and children whom Hitler is starving whether the rationing of tires and gasoline and sugar is too great a "sacrifice." We do not have to ask them. They have already given us their agonized answers.

This great war effort must be carried through to its victorious conclusion by the indomitable will and determination of the people as one great whole.

It must not be impeded by the faint of heart.

It must not be impeded by those who put their own selfish interests above the interests of the nation.

It must not be impeded by those who pervert honest criticism into falsification of fact.

It must not be impeded by self-styled experts either in economics or military problems who know neither true figures nor geography itself.

It must not be impeded by a few bogus patriots who use the sacred freedom of the press to echo the senti-

ments of the propagandists in Tokyo and Berlin.

And, above all, it shall not be imperiled by the handful of noisy traitors - betrayers of America, betrayers of Christianity itself - would-be dictators who in their hearts and souls have yielded to Hitlerism and would have this republic do likewise.

I shall use all of the executive power that I have to carry out the policy laid down. If it becomes necessary to ask for any additional legislation in order to attain our objective of preventing a spiral in the cost of living, I shall do so.

I know the American farmer, the American workman, and the American businessman. I know that they will gladly embrace this economy and equality of sacrifice-satisfied that it is necessary for the most vital and compelling motive in all their lives-winning through to victory.

Never in the memory of man has there been a war in which the courage, the endurance, and the loyalty of civilians played so vital a part.

Many thousands of civilians all over the world have been and are being killed or maimed by enemy action. Indeed, it is the fortitude of the common people of Britain under fire which enabled that island to stand and prevented Hitler from winning the war in 1940. The ruins of London and Coventry and other cities are today the proudest monuments to British heroism.

Our own American civilian population is now relatively safe from such disasters. And, to an ever increasing extent, our soldiers, sailors, and marines are fighting with great bravery and great skills on far distant fronts to make sure that we shall remain safe.

I should like to tell you one or two stories about the men we have in our armed forces:

There is, for example, Dr. Corydon M. Wassell. He was a missionary, well known for his good works in China. He is a simple, modest, retiring man, nearly sixty years old, but he entered the service of his country and was commissioned a lieutenant commander in the navy.

Dr. Wassell was assigned to duty in Java caring for wounded officers and men of the cruisers *Houston* and *Marblehead* which had been in heavy action in the Java seas.

When the Japanese advanced across the island, it was decided to evacuate as many as possible of the wounded

to Australia. But about twelve of the men were so badly wounded that they couldn't be moved. Dr. Wassell remained with them, knowing that he would be captured by the enemy. But he decided to make a last desperate attempt to get the men out of Java. He asked each of them if he wished to take the chance, and every one agreed.

He first had to get the twelve men to the seacoast-fifty miles away. To do this, he had to improvise stretchers for the hazardous journey. The men were suffering severely, but Dr. Wassell kept them alive by his skill, inspired them by his own courage.

And as the official report said, Dr. Wassell was "almost like a Christ-like shepherd devoted to his flock." On the seacoast, he embarked the men on a little Dutch ship. They were bombed, they were machine-gunned by waves of Japanese planes. Dr. Wassell took virtual command of the ship, and by great skill avoided destruction, hiding in little bays and little inlets.

A few days later, Dr. Wassell and his small flock of wounded men reached Australia safely.

And today Dr. Wassell wears the Navy Cross.

Another story concerns a ship, a ship rather than an individual man. You may remember the tragic sinking of the submarine, the United States Ship *Squalus*, off the New England coast in the summer of 1939. Some of the crew were lost, but others were saved by the speed and the efficiency of the surface rescue crews. The *Squalus* itself was tediously raised from the bottom of the sea.

She was repaired, put back into commission, and eventually she sailed again under a new name, the United States Ship *Sailfish*. Today, she is a potent and effective unit of our submarine fleet in the Southwest Pacific.

The *Sailfish* has covered many thousands of miles in operations in those far waters.

She has sunk a Japanese destroyer.

She has torpedoed a Japanese cruiser.

She has made torpedo hits-two of them-on a Japanese aircraft carrier.

Three of the enlisted men of our Navy who went down with the *Squalus* in 1939 and were rescued are today serving on the same ship, the United States Ship *Sailfish*, in this war.

It seems to me that it is heartening to know that the *Squalus*, once given up as lost, rose from the depths to fight for our country in time of peril. One more story that I heard only this morning.

This is a story of one of our Army Flying Fortresses operating in the western Pacific. The pilot of this plane is a modest young man, proud of his crew for one of the toughest fights a bomber has yet experienced.

The bomber departed from its base, as part of a flight of five bombers, to attack Japanese transports that were landing troops against us in the Philippines. When they had gone about halfway to their destination, one of the motors of this bomber went out of commission. The young pilot lost contact with the other bombers. The crew, however, got the motor working, got it going again and the plane proceeded on its mission alone.

By the time it arrived at its target the other four Flying Fortresses had already passed over, had dropped their bombs, and had stirred up the hornets' nest of Japanese "Zero" planes. Eighteen of these Zero fighters attacked our one Flying Fortress. Despite this mass attack, our plane proceeded on its mission, and dropped all of its bombs on six Japanese transports which were lined up along the docks.

As it turned back on its homeward journey a running fight between the bomber and the eighteen Japanese pursuit planes continued for seventy-five miles. Four pursuit planes of the Japs attacked simultaneously at each side. Four were shot down with the side guns. During this fight, the bomber's radio operator was killed, the engineer's right hand was shot off, and one gunner was crippled, leaving only one man available to operate both side guns. Although wounded in one hand, this gunner alternately manned both side guns, bringing down three more Japanese Zero planes. While this was going on, one engine on the American bomber was shot out, one gas tank was hit, the radio was shot off, and the oxygen system was entirely destroyed. Out of eleven control cables all but four were shot away. The rear landing wheel was blown off entirely, and the two front wheels were both shot flat.

The fight continued until the remaining Japanese pursuit ships exhausted their ammunition and turned back. With two engines gone and the plane practically out of control, the American bomber returned to its base

after dark and made an emergency landing. The mission had been accomplished.

The name of that pilot is Captain Hewitt T. Wheless, of the United States Army. He comes from a place called Menard, Texas—with a population of 2,375. He has been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. And I hope that he is listening.

These stories I have told you are not exceptional. They are typical examples of individual heroism and skill.

As we here at home contemplate our own duties, our own responsibilities, let us think and think hard of the

example which is being set for us by our fighting men.

Our soldiers and sailors are members of well-disciplined units. But they're still and forever individuals—free individuals. They are farmers and workers, businessmen, professional men, artists, clerks. They are the United States of America.

That is why they fight.

We too are the United States of America. That is why we must work and sacrifice. It is for them. It is for us. It is for victory.

## GLOSSARY

**indomitable:** that which cannot be subdued or overcome; unconquerable

**munitions:** materials used in war, especially weapons and ammunition

**Vichy:** a city in France which became the provisional capital from 1940-1942

## Document Analysis

Roosevelt begins this radio speech, as he did many of his fireside chats, with a familiar address, "My fellow Americans," and goes on to speak to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that "we" the nation have suffered. Having thus established the common experience shared with his listeners and the informal tone of his address, Roosevelt notes that though they have been engaged in their common struggle for five months and war production has been gearing up, the war effort has thus far "done little to dislocate the normal lives of most of us." Now that war has begun in earnest, however, the American public must understand that what they have taken on would be "a tough job—and a long one." Roosevelt points out that American lives are committed all over the world and that the war effort is vast and all-consuming. He continues this point with a lengthy list of the places around the world where American warships were facing combat at the time. Roosevelt then plunges into an update of the military situation abroad.

Though the United States forces were deployed across the world, the situation was complicated. Roosevelt starts his recap of the military situation with the good news that the Soviets have halted Germany's advance and launched a great counteroffensive, which was destroying German troops and military equipment. The

situation in France, however, was cause for concern. Without addressing Laval by name, Roosevelt shares "news of a change in government" in Vichy France and then expresses his fear that the remaining military resources of France would be used by the Axis powers. Of particular concern were the French colonies in North Africa, and Roosevelt argues they must not be allowed to become bases for German offensives. Roosevelt ends this military status report with the bad news. The Allies have "passed through a phase of serious losses" and the Japanese have made significant territorial gains in Asia. Roosevelt concludes that "the war has become what Hitler originally proclaimed it to be—a total war."

The American people have no illusions that war would be easy and are ready to make the sacrifices needed for victory, Roosevelt argues. Those who could not serve in the military or in the factory would have a chance to prove their determination on the home front. He states, "Everyone will have the privilege of making whatever self-denial is necessary, not only to supply our fighting men, but to keep the economic structure of our country fortified and secure during the war and after the war." Roosevelt outlines the basic imbalance in the United States economy in simple terms: "You do not have to be a professor of mathematics or economics to see that if people with plenty of cash start bidding

against each other for scarce goods, the price of those goods goes up.” His plan to counteract inflation is laid out in seven steps: controlled profits, wages, rent and prices, sale of war bonds, rationing, higher taxes, and discouragement of debt. This is a small price to pay for the great fight they are engaged in, he argues, and he ends his speech with examples of brave deeds performed by Americans across the world.

### Essential Themes

The primary theme of this speech is that the war would require sacrifice from all Americans. For some, this sacrifice would be direct service in the military. For others, it would mean doing without consumer goods that were rationed. For all it would mean they would need to accept much greater control of the economy than Americans were accustomed to. Business owners would see their profits curtailed, landlords, their rent, and workers, their wages, but all for the good of the nation. For those Americans not privileged enough to serve in the military, they would have the chance to support the war effort and work for victory at home. Roosevelt’s frank assessment of the military situation

reinforced the message that as a nation, there would be significant struggle ahead and that all Americans must dedicate their resources to the fight. Economic controls were necessary to combat the imbalance created by the war, and the sacrifice of profits and consumer goods was a small price to pay for victory.

—Bethany Groff, MA

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## ■ We Love Honor More than We Fear Death

**Date:** December 8, 1942

**Author:** Nick Aaron Ford

**Genre:** speech

### Summary Overview

Delivered one year after the United States declared war on Japan and entered World War II, professor Nick Aaron Ford's speech served as a ringing answer to a question he posed, "What are Negroes fighting for?" Ford acknowledged the racial discrimination inherent in US politics and society, but argued that the patriotism of African Americans was so great that they were willing to fight to the death to protect the democratic freedoms and ideals that their nation asserted as its purpose. The United States, Ford contended, was flawed but its laws sought equality, while its German and Japanese enemies stood against the personal liberties in which African Americans deeply believed. According to Ford's arguments, African Americans were willing to fight against racism because it was wrong, even if the nation they were fighting on behalf of was itself struggling to find its way toward ending racism within its own borders.

### Defining Moment

By the early 1940s, the African American experience in the United States had been a long and complex one that had known much struggle but few victories. The end of the Civil War in 1865 had paved the way for a series of constitutional amendments that abolished slavery, extended full citizenship rights to members of all races, and affirmed that US law must be applied fairly without regard to race or ethnicity. In practice, however, those rights had often gone unrecognized. The rise of Democratic state governments in former slave states ended direct African American representation in government and allowed for the passage of discriminatory Jim Crow laws that enacted widespread racial segregation. Racist organizations and lynch mobs murdered African Americans without repercussion. Informal segregation and racial discrimination existed nationwide, worsening as African American populations outside the rural south increased during and after World War I. Although historians generally consider the late nineteenth century to

be the nadir of race relations in the United States, the period directly preceding the civil rights movement was certainly one of ongoing challenges.

Among these challenges was the reluctance of the federal government to intervene and enact new civil rights policies, or to enforce those that already existed. During the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal coalition relied in part on the support of Southern Democrats who fervently supported racial segregation and discriminatory policies. In order to retain this support, the Roosevelt administration did little to push civil rights. Many New Deal programs failed to address the needs of African Americans or even authorize segregated systems or lower pay scales based on race.

As the nation began to ramp up wartime industrial production in the early 1940s, the federal government declined to intervene in defense industry policies that rejected African American employees or otherwise discriminated against them. Civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph successfully challenged this stance by warning Roosevelt that he would lead a march of thousands of African American protesters on Washington, DC, over the issue if Roosevelt failed to act. Knowing that such a public display would fuel negative propaganda over the apparent US hypocrisy in claiming to support democracy around the world while declining to share the fruits of democracy with some of its own citizens, Roosevelt issued an executive order integrating defense industries and establishing a commission to enforce fair employment practices for federal contractors in 1941.

The military continued to use segregated units, however, and draft boards were widely known to reject African American recruits even after the nation entered the war later that year. US opponents used the nation's racial woes in propaganda, and domestic voices questioned the nation's ideals. Many African Americans, however, sought to fight in the military or otherwise

work to support their homeland.

### Author Biography

As a professor, a literary critic, and an author, Nick Aaron Ford was a leading African American intellectual of the mid-twentieth century. Born in South Carolina in 1904, he studied at that state's Benedict College before pursuing graduate work at the University of Iowa. Much of Ford's career was dedicated to the study and analysis of contemporary works by African American authors and to educating students as the head of the

English department at the historically black Morgan State College in Baltimore, Maryland. From the time of his first graduate research in the 1930s, Ford hoped that drawing academic attention to the racial issues and stereotypes raised in works by black authors could inform a better national understanding of racial tensions, and his work in African American literary criticism had little precedent. Ford was also a respected writing educator and administrator. By the 1970s, he had become interested in the development of what were then new university-level black studies programs.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

THE bombs that fell on Pearl Harbor in the early hours of December 7, 1941, did more than kill three thousand Americans and demolish American property in that region. They shattered the very foundations of the world as we had known it—the world that had been in the making since the birth of Christ. And as that world lay teetering in the balance, ready to burst into a thousand pieces, three-fourths of the peoples of the earth joined hands with Uncle Sam to catch the broken pieces of that dying order in the hope of re-constructing them into a finer and nobler world of the future.

Since that memorable date twelve months ago, many revolutionizing events have occurred. A little colored nation, that Americans had always regarded as insignificant, inefficient, and incapable of engineering a successful war against a powerful white nation, astounded the world by winning every encounter with American forces for eight long months. Thus, for the first time in its history, the great American nation was faced with the folly of the white man's philosophy of racial superiority. Only through a tragic sacrifice of some of the best blood of its citizens did the nation finally learn that the color of a man's skin and the shape of his nose do not determine his capacity either for treachery, or courage, or calculating efficiency.

Since that memorable date American Negro troops for the first time have landed in the little Negro republic of Liberia, Africa, founded by American freedmen nearly a century and a quarter ago. When Private Napoleon Taylor led his black comrades down the gangplank of the great American transport that had brought them safely

across 6,000 miles of submarine-infested waters, he greeted the Liberian officials in words similar to these:

We have come to join hands with you in the fight to keep your freedom and to win additional freedom for yourselves and for all oppressed peoples of the world.

These are only two of the revolutionary events that have thrust themselves upon a bleeding world since last December 7. But in the midst of these recollections, there comes a challenging question that is hurled at us from a hundred different quarters: What are Negroes fighting for? It is a question we cannot ignore, for it has been sarcastically asked by Hitler himself.

One can well visualize Mr. Hitler resting his satanic carcass upon a pile of his vile and slimy publication, *Mein Kampf*, which contains the statement by the Fuehrer himself that no person of African descent can ever become a citizen of Germany because he is too inferior to claim a heritage with a superior race. Yes, we can visualize this crafty hypocrite issuing orders from one corner of his mouth for the subjugation or total destruction of all non-Nordic races, and from the other corner asking, "What are you Negroes fighting for?"

"Aren't you segregated and discriminated against in America? Aren't you denied the right to work in defense industries and the right to fight on equal terms with your white countrymen? Aren't you insulted, and cheated, and oppressed by the very country for whom you are fighting? Aren't you lynched and burned at the stake and your bleeding or charred bodies left swinging in the breeze, as your tormentors march away singing, "My country 'tis of Thee? "What are you Negroes fighting for?" Yes, Mr.

Hitler, we admit the question is a challenging one. But before we answer, let us assure you that you are not the first in world history to ask us that question. The British Redcoats asked it in 1775, when Crispus Attucks lay dying on State Street, Boston, killed by bullets from the guns of those who sought to destroy freedom. "What are you dying for, Black Man?" they asked. "Don't you know that 95 per cent of your black fellowmen are slaves? What do you have to fight for?"

It Attucks could have stopped the march of death long enough to reply, I imagine he would have said in bitter scorn, "I'm fighting for freedom. I'm fighting for a principle which those who have tasted the shame of slavery know the real value of. Although my fellowmen are slaves, I'm fighting that the world may know slavery cannot destroy courage nor the love for freedom."

Yes, Mr. Hitler, others have asked us that same question before. The Southern slaveholders asked it in 1861, when thousands of slaves were deserting the plantations to join the Union army, even though Lincoln had not yet announced the Emancipation Proclamation. "What are you slaves fighting for?" they asked. "This is not a war to set you free. This is a war for economic domination. The Northern army will only make you worse slaves than you are now."

But those slaves did not stop to answer. They went on fighting with the Union and dying on such historic battlefields as Vicksburg, and Bull Run, and Gettysburg. And from the blood of those erstwhile slaves came freedom for their children and their children's children.

Again, in 1918, the German Kaiser asked, "What are you Negroes fighting for?" We answered, "For democracy!" And with that cry upon our lips 200,000 of us helped to turn the tide of battle that drove the Kaiser from his throne.

But Hitler laughs and scornfully tells us we did not get the democracy we fought for in 1918. We answer with voices hard as steel, "Yes, we know it." But we challenge him or any man to prove that we did not get more democracy than we had ever possessed before we shed our blood on Flanders field. We challenge him to point to any time in all history when the German masses, or the Italians, or the Japanese have had more democracy than the American Negro now enjoys. I say this, not to uphold the injustices and discriminations that are still practiced

against Negroes in America, for I condemn such proscription with all the strength and power of my being, but I do want to emphasize how empty and meaningless such considerations are when they fall from the lips of fascist sympathizers.

We are the first to admit that conditions are not ideal for Negroes in this country, not even during this all-out effort for national defense, but we cannot deny that powerful voices high in governmental circles are being raised in every section of the nation in behalf of equality and a full degree of democracy for our people. Where can you find in any Axis country a single voice of protest raised by a governmental official in behalf of maltreated minorities?

America is the only country in the world whose written Constitution guarantees equal freedom and equal opportunity for all races, creeds, and religions. Certainly, there are injustices, but our government is committed to equal justice for all. Certainly, there are inequalities here, but our government is committed to the recognition of the essential equality of all men. As long as the ideal is before us, we can always have reason to hope that each new day will bring us nearer to that ideal. But if, like the Axis countries, the government acknowledges no responsibility for equality or justice, there can be no hope that they may ever be achieved.

Yes, Negroes are lynched in America, but never yet in the whole history of these shameful and barbarous episodes has any official of our national government publicly condoned such a crime. Every such incident has been vigorously condemned by our national government, by newspaper editorials, by state governors, and by many prominent white citizens in the very communities where the lynchings live. But what German, or Italian, or Japanese newspaper has dared to print a single line in condemnation of the brutal slaughter of thousands of innocent Jews on the streets of every German city? What Fascist governmental official has ever parted his lips in defense of scores of innocent hostages of minority groups that die before Fascist firing squads every day in every conquered nation of Europe?

It is true that injustices and mistreatment at home can never be excused by pointing to larger and graver injustices abroad. But the odious comparison can serve notice upon us that the Negro's only hope lies in victory

for the United Nations and the complete destruction of totalitarian ideals.

Yes, Mr. Hitler, that same question has been asked us before. Your dear friend, Mr. Tojo, premier of Japan, asked us after Pearl Harbor, "What are you Negroes fighting for?"

"Don't you know," he confided, "I'm colored just as you are? Why, you ought to be glad to see me whip your white countrymen and put them in the same category they have kept you in all these years. Then you and I would be the best of friends, and I would make you free indeed."

"We know you are colored, Mr. Tojo," we answered, "but so are the Chinese. If you are truly interested in the advancement of the colored peoples, why didn't you start your program of uplift with your next-door neighbors, the Chinese, who are really more your color than we are. But instead of seeking the advancement of the Chinese people, what did you do, Mr. Tojo?"

"I'll tell you. Five years ago you attacked those unarmed, peaceful people with all the deadly military might at your disposal. You have killed five millions of them. You have bombed their fragile cities off the map. You have raped their wives, daughters, and mothers and left them to die from exposure. You have slaughtered in cold blood their old men and their children. And yet you say you are the friend of the American Negro. If that is the reward of your diabolical friendship, we do not want it. We prefer to see you and all your treacherous, barbarous brood consigned to the 'tongueless silence of the dreamless dust.'"

Now, Mr. Hitler and Mr. Tojo, with this background of undeniable facts before us, we proceed to answer your question: What are Negroes fighting for?

We are fighting for the four freedoms that President Roosevelt has announced. Yes, we are fighting for the freedom of speech. And we can truthfully say that there is no other country in the world, with the possible exception of England, where the members of a minority race can speak out so boldly and candidly in condemnation of the conduct of the majority race toward them. There is no other country in the world, with the possible exception of England, where Negro newspapers could print such damaging diatribes against inequalities and discrimination practiced by the majority race without having their presses confiscated and their editors thrown

into prison.

We are fighting for the freedom of religion—the freedom to worship God as we please, or not to worship him if we do not wish to—the freedom to join Father Divine's angels, or the Washfoot Baptists, or the Holly Rollers.

We are fighting for freedom from want—for freedom from the curse of tenant farming and from the poverty and disease of city slums—for freedom from malnutrition and economic servitude—for freedom from premature death.

We are fighting for freedom from fear—for freedom from the fear of bombs that fall in the nighttime upon the sleeping beads of women and children—for freedom from the fear of armies marching through our cities with plunder, rape, and murder in their wake—for freedom from the fear of dictators' threats and tyrants' power.

We are fighting to destroy the false concept, both at home and abroad, that the color of a man's skin or the shape of his nose can determine his capacity for civilization and achievement. We are fighting for the privilege of earning a place at the peace table when this war is over, so we can add our voices to those who will create the charter of a new world.

We are fighting to let the world know we love liberty and that we are willing to pay the price for it, even though that price may be our life's blood.

We are fighting because everything decent we have been taught to respect, honor, and love has been challenged and marked for destruction by the enemy. We are fighting because we love honor more than we fear death.

Yes, Mr. Hitler and Mr. Tojo, we are fighting for that democratic freedom which you scorn. And we shall fight for it on every battlefield of the world where men are willing to welcome our aid in the spirit of brotherhood. We shall fight for it in the muddy bottoms of Guadalcanal. We shall fight for it in the rice swamps of China. We shall fight for it on the burning sands of Africa. We shall fight for it in the black jungles of India. We shall fight for it on land, in the air, and on the sea.

But as we fight for this freedom abroad, we shall not forget to fight harder for it at home. We shall fight for it from the lecture platform, from the pulpit, from the newspaper office, from the factory, from the schoolroom; from buses, trains, and street cars. We shall fight for it everywhere. And we shall not cease fighting for it until complete victory is won.

### Document Analysis

In his speech, Ford speaks both to his immediate audience and to all those who question African Americans' dedication to support US democratic ideals when they are themselves often denied the fruits of those tenets. He repeatedly asserts that the African American cause is inextricably linked with the overall American cause of protecting democracy; Ford also emphasizes African Americans' special interest in opposing the openly racist policies of German dictator Adolf Hitler, a clear enemy of the kind of equality that black Americans long for, and he rejects the notion that African Americans might join with another "colored" race, the Japanese, who themselves sought to oppress others.

Ford opens by emphasizing the dangers of white Americans' dismissal of the abilities of other races by pointing to the consistent military prowess of the Japanese, the residents of "a little colored nation, that Americans had always regarded as . . . incapable of engineering a successful war against a powerful white nation." He cites the unity of American troops with Liberian troops in asserting that people of varying races can find common cause in "fighting for freedom."

Much of the speech is dedicated to rejecting common objections to engaging African American support for the war. Ford makes rhetorical use of Hitler and Japanese prime minister Hideki Tojo to pose and answer the simple question, "What are Negroes fighting for?" He is not shy to admit to the discrimination African Americans have endured in the United States from the era of slavery through segregation and lynching. Yet, he argues, these actions have never been condoned by the national government in the same way that the Nazis have made it German policy to discriminate. He reminds the audience that African Americans have long wrestled with the question of whether to support their nation and have always resoundingly answered yes. Ultimately, Ford contends that African Americans seek to support the four freedoms previously stated by Roosevelt as core to democracy—and "to destroy the false concept, both at home and abroad, that the color of a man's skin or the shape of his nose can determine his capacity for civilization and achievement."

Ford ends with a ringing call to action that African Americans "shall not forget to fight harder for [freedom] at home . . . until complete victory is won." In this, he presages the civil rights movement that emerged during the 1950s to resist racist policies in place around the United States. By linking the struggle against racism

abroad with that domestically, Ford's ideas suggest that a victory over Germany would prove that equality in the United States must be attainable.

### Essential Themes

Ford's speech echoed the ideals linking democracy and racial equality that informed contemporary African American discussion of the black role in the war effort. Beginning in early 1942, for example, the *Pittsburgh Courier*—one of the nation's top African American newspapers—inaugurated the "Double V" campaign that called on African Americans to fight for a "double victory": for democracy to triumph over both racial discrimination at home and racism abroad (as exemplified through Hitler's persecution of European Jews and other groups). Campaigns of this nature encouraged African American support for the war through military service and through personal sacrifice because of wartime rationing and restrictions. At the same time, such efforts drew attention to the patriotism that African Americans displayed for their home country while emphasizing their desire for the full civil rights that their contributions warranted.

This link, too, is an enduring one in US history. Despite restrictions on their service, African Americans had volunteered to serve in the armed forces since the time of the American Revolution, often in the hopes of proving their dedication to the nation and its political leaders and generating high-level support for increased citizenship rights. During the Civil War, noted abolitionist Frederick Douglass had urged African Americans to volunteer for the Union Army to win a victory for black civil rights. African American troops had again served bravely during the World War I.

African American soldiers became some of the most revered of World War II. The Tuskegee air division flew some fifteen thousand missions. African American servicemen were present at the D-Day invasion and helped retake France from the Nazi over the following months. The irony of overcoming the avowedly racist Nazi regime with a segregated army was not lost on civil rights leaders. After the war's conclusion, A. Philip Randolph lobbied the Harry S. Truman administration to desegregate the armed forces. In 1947, Truman issued an executive order barring racial discrimination in the military and effectively integrated the Army at last.

—Vanessa E. Vaughn, MA

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