

Five things you should know about FDR's Pearl Harbor Speech

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's address to Congress on December 8, 1941—the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—rallied American support for World War II. Today it still conveys the emotion, immediacy, and impact of the attack and serves as a model of leadership communication in crisis. Here are five reasons why:

1. *No speechwriters, please.*

FDR dictated virtually every word of his address to his secretary, Grace Tully. The only exception was the next-to-last sentence, the phrasing of which was suggested by his close adviser Harry Hopkins.

2. *The facts speak for themselves.*

With the exception of his dramatic reference to "infamy" and one mention of "treachery," FDR never offered a personal opinion on the Japanese attacks in his address. Instead, he solemnly detailed the facts of the event, relying on listeners to draw their own conclusions.

3. *A foreshadow of things to come.*

FDR's call for "absolute victory" presaged the later decision to wage war until the Japanese surrendered unconditionally. This grand call for total victory also helps to explain why the United States later decided to drop the atomic bomb on Japan.

4. *Brief but powerful.*

The address to Congress contains just 25 sentences, fewer than 500 words, and was delivered in about 7 minutes. In that brief address, FDR was so persuasive that within 33 minutes, a declaration of war passed unanimously in the Senate, and in the House of Representatives only one dissenting vote was cast (Jeannette Rankin, a pacifist from Montana, the first woman elected to Congress).

5. *Defining a historic moment.*

"But always will our whole Nation remember the character of the onslaught against us," said FDR, positioning the attack as a defining event in the country's history. Roosevelt's use of the future tense—"always will"—reflected a sense of moral certainty that reinforced his role as commander in chief.

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