“Democracy is not a static thing… It is an everlasting march.”—
Franklin Roosevelt, October 1st, 1935

Scholars and lay people alike agree that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was one of our three greatest Presidents, indeed the greatest President of the Twentieth Century. And yet, as much as we admire him, we too often fail to remember the most important thing, the most democratic and inspiring thing about his presidential leadership, the thing that made FDR truly great. Reading and listening to his speeches can help us to remember.

Yes, we recognize that Roosevelt successfully led the United States through two mortal crises, two crises that truly threatened to destroy American democratic life: the Great Depression of the 1930s, the worst economic and social catastrophe in American history, and the Second World War in the early 1940s, the global war against European Fascism and Japanese militarism.

However, we persistently fail to remember that FDR did so—against historical expectations and in the face of fierce antidemocratic opposition—by encouraging, enabling, and engaging his fellow citizens to join together to actually make America dramatically freer, more equal, and more democratic than ever before. That is, we forget how FDR’s words and actions led Americans to see that the only way to truly defend, secure, and sustain American democratic life against those who were determined to suppress it is to radically enhance it.

Roosevelt—who knew American history well, who believed in the nation’s revolutionary purpose and promise, and who had extraordinary confidence in his fellow citizens—had come to embrace that democratic historical truth even before Americans elected him to be their President. And crucially, he firmly believed that they knew it too. In fact, he had learned about it not just from his reading of US history, but also from his fellow Americans, especially with his wife Eleanor’s
assistance, from working people, both men and women, rural and urban, immigrant and native-born.

It was that knowledge, belief, and confidence that gave him the strength and courage to state in 1930 that, “There is no question in my mind that it is time for the country to become fairly radical for a generation”; to call in the 1932 presidential campaign for not only a New Deal, but also an “economic declaration of rights”; and to declare in 1935 that “Democracy is not a static thing… It is an everlasting march.”

Moreover, Roosevelt was right: Americans responded with energy, enthusiasm, and determination. Together, President and People severely tested each other, made terrible mistakes and regrettable compromises, and suffered tragic defeats and disappointments. However, challenging each other to live up to their finest ideals and aspirations, they advanced them further than either had expected or even imagined possible. They not only rejected authoritarianism, they also redeemed the nation’s promise by initiating revolutionary changes in American government and public life.

They subjected big business and banking to public account and regulation; they empowered government to address the needs of working people and established a social security system; they organized labor unions, consumer campaigns, and Civil Rights groups and they fought for their rights and broadened and leveled the “We” in “We the People”; they built schools, post offices, and parks; they expanded the public infrastructure with new roads, bridges, and dams; and they improved the American landscape and environment; and they cultivated the arts and refashioned popular culture--just think swing music. In so doing, they imbued themselves with fresh democratic convictions, hopes, and aspirations.

All of this propelled FDR to not only profess that “I do not look upon these United States as a finished product. We are still in the making”; to not only declare that “A true patriotism urges us to build an even more substantial America where the good things of life may be shared by more of us, where the social injustices will not be encouraged to flourish”; and to not only proclaim that “This generation has a rendezvous with destiny”; but also to articulate Americans’ grandest strivings past and present in a vision or promise of four fundamental freedoms.

In his 1941 State of the Union Message, Roosevelt said: “In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms: The first is freedom of speech and expression… The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way… The third is freedom from want… The fourth is freedom from fear…” The vision was international. But Roosevelt rooted it firmly in American experience and aspiration. And, as ever, Americans did not fail him or themselves.

In the name of the Four Freedoms, 16,000,000 Americans were to put on uniforms and pursue a global struggle we would come to call the “Good War”--not for the character of the combat, but for the righteousness of the cause and the unity of purpose in which the nation pursued it. With their allies, they would storm beaches, slog through jungles, tramp across icy fields, sail through submarine-infested waters, fly missions over heavily fortified territories, and punch, push, claw, and ultimately power their way to victory. At the same time, their fellow Americans would not
only pray for their safe return, but also—in their tens of millions—go “All Out!” both to provide the arms and materiel required for victory and to protect and improve what they were defending.

Once again, President and People were to test each other, make sorry mistakes and compromises, and suffer serious defeats and disappointments. Yes, racism sorely marked the war effort. Nevertheless, believing in the nation’s historic purpose and promise, inspired by FDR’s words, and refusing to be defined by that racism, American people of color would serve heroically in every phase of the war effort. And in all their diversity, Americans not only prevailed over their enemies, but also once again compelled each other to progressively enhance American democratic life in the process.

President and People expanded the labor, consumer, and civil-rights movements; subjected industry and the marketplace to greater public control; reduced inequality and poverty; and further transformed the meaning of the “We” in “We the People.”

Moreover, polls revealed that the overwhelming majority looked forward to pursuing new liberal and social-democratic initiatives at war’s end. And empowered by those hopes and aspirations, Roosevelt now proceeded to propose in his 1944 State of the Union Address that the nation enact not only a GI Bill of Rights for the homecoming veterans, but also a Second Bill of Rights—an Economic Bill of Rights for all Americans—to make the promise of the Four Freedoms all the more real. As he presented it, this Second Bill of Rights would include the right to a job with a living wage; the right of every family to a decent home; the right to healthcare; the right to security in old age; and the right to a good education.

But it was not to happen. As much as an overwhelming majority of Americans wanted it, big business and a conservative congressional coalition opposed it. And yet that coalition could not block the enactment of the famous GI Bill—a massive social-democratic program that was to enable 12,000,000 veterans, nearly 1 in 10 Americans, to progressively transform themselves and their country for the better.

President Roosevelt passed away in 1945. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan surrendered in the months that followed. But the power of Roosevelt’s words, especially the promise of the Four Freedoms, endured in the memory and imagination of those whom we have come to call the Greatest Generation, and they would continue to enhance American democratic life.

Indeed, while most of those who in the 1960s marched for Civil Rights, campaigned to end poverty, organized public employee unions, pushed to enact healthcare for the elderly and poor, demanded equal rights for women, reformed the nation’s immigration law, expanded public education and the arts, pressed for regulating business and industry to protect the environment, workers, and consumers, and protested the Vietnam War, did not regularly recite FDR’s words, there were quite a few who did.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

Suggested Readings:


