



The "Four Freedoms" are displayed on the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons/Michael Kranewitter)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

March 11, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

One of the dangers of liberalism is its propensity to think of its achievements as inevitable, of history as linear, and of culture as always on the ascendant. The claim to be "on the right side of history" demonstrates the pridefulness of this propensity, as well as its vacuousness. In fact, cultures sometimes decline, political achievements can be discarded, and history is merely sequential.

In his State of the Union speech last week, President Joe Biden invoked Franklin Roosevelt's "[Four Freedoms](#)" address to Congress on Jan. 6, 1941. The moment was singular: Europe, which epitomized civilization at its heights, had been consumed by a new dark age; many of the great capitals of Europe — Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Copenhagen, Oslo, Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris — had fallen under the slavery of Nazi rule; and Britain stood alone in the fight against Hitler.

FDR, who had just won an unprecedented third term, knew he had to prepare America for war, but he also knew that public opinion was strongly opposed to anything that might drag us into another European conflagration. It was an enormously difficult balancing act.

[Lend-Lease](#) was the means by which to put the U.S. on a war footing in terms of military preparedness. There were legal barriers to allowing Britain to purchase armaments on credit. Lend-lease allowed the U.S. to "lend" the military armaments to Great Britain. It was a legal fiction, but it worked, getting much needed help to the United Kingdom and, just as importantly, building up the U.S. armaments industry.

When the Japanese empire attacked the U.S. on Dec. 7, 1941, many of our factories had already been converted to the production of war materiel.

The "Four Freedoms speech" did for the realm of values what Lend-Lease had done for the realm of munitions, creating a bridge between struggling Britain and an America that was still averse to entering the war.

Advertisement

Samuel Rosenman, one of Roosevelt's principal aides and speechwriters, [recalled](#) that while the president and his advisers were working on the fourth draft of the State of the Union, FDR said he wanted to add something to the peroration.

"We waited as he leaned far back in his swivel chair with his gaze on the ceiling. It was a long pause — so long that it began to become uncomfortable. Then he leaned forward again in his chair," Rosenman recalled. FDR dictated the Four Freedoms. "He dictated the words so slowly that on the yellow pad I had in my lap I was able to take them down myself in longhand as he spoke."

Roosevelt spoke 17 years before Isaiah Berlin delivered his famous lecture "[Two Concepts of Liberty](#)," the first conceptual articulation of the difference between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is freedom from restraint. The rights articulated in the Bill of Rights are all negative, prohibitions against the government preventing us from making particular choices.

Positive freedom is "freedom for" and speaks to what a person can actually accomplish, not merely what they are theoretically permitted to do. Economic freedom is generally, though not always, an exercise of positive freedom.

FDR employed different adverbs from those Berlin would use, but he captured a vision of American political values that remain at the heart of all that is best about our nation:

The first is freedom of speech and expression — everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way — everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want — which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants — everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear — which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of

physical aggression against any neighbor — anywhere in the world.

The words still stir the heart. And in Russia and in Nicaragua, in Bangladesh and in South Sudan, in Hungary and in Myanmar, these four freedoms are still threatened or worse.

Regrettably, and unprecedentedly, these freedoms are also threatened here in the United States.

America has not always lived up to its own ideals, but that does not invalidate the value of the ideals. Each political party has areas of moral blindness, but that does not invalidate the value of democracy.

[Tweet this](#)

It is an earlier section of the speech that seems especially appropriate to the fact that today, in the person of Donald Trump, our nation faces a unique threat to our democratic way of life.

"Just as our national policy in internal affairs has been based upon a decent respect for the rights and the dignity of all our fellow men within our gates, so our national policy in foreign affairs has been based on a decent respect for the rights and dignity of all nations, large and small," FDR said. "And the justice of morality must and will win in the end."

It should not surprise that Trump — who threw the FBI under the bus, accepting the absurd explanation proffered by Vladimir Putin that his government [had not interfered in the 2016 U.S. election](#) — was so willing to ask Georgia's secretary of state to manufacture votes [that did not exist](#). Why would anyone doubt that a man who [demonizes desperate migrants](#) at our southern border would likewise be indifferent [to the sufferings of the people of Ukraine](#)?

Megalomania mixed with a lack of political convictions has produced this moral enormity who has taken over the Republican Party. In ways that were not the case in 1941, the threat to democracy is a domestic one as well as a foreign one.

America has not always lived up to its own ideals, either at home or abroad, but that does not invalidate the value of the ideals. Each political party has areas of moral

blindness, but that does not invalidate the value of democracy.

The most important lesson from Joe Biden's State of the Union was the simple fact that we are lucky to have a president who looks back to FDR for inspiration. It remains to be seen if the American people today will rise to the challenges of the moment as our ancestors did in 1941.