

Calling for sacrifice

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT

Excerpt from radio address by President Franklin Roosevelt, April 28, 1942.

As you read...

TOTAL WAR

In this speech, delivered in April 1942 when the Japanese were still advancing across the Pacific, President Roosevelt asked Americans to make sacrifices for the war effort. He told them that they faced a “total war” — a kind of war in which each side mobilizes everything at its disposal and considers everything the other side has to be fair target for attack. It had been Hitler’s decision, Roosevelt said, to wage total war, but now Americans must respond.

Roosevelt talked here about what Americans on the home front could and must do to win the war. They must accept rationing of scarce goods; they must invest in war bonds to lend the government the money it needed to fight the war; and they must accept price and wage controls to prevent inflation. But these “sacrifices,” he reminded Americans, were nothing compared to what Europeans under Hitler’s rule were forced to endure.

FIRESIDE CHATS

As governor of New York, Roosevelt had used radio broadcasts to speak directly to the people rather than relying on newspapers to report his words. Because he tried to keep his speeches informal and friendly in tone, he called them “fireside chats.” Roosevelt used the same strategy as president, broadcasting more than thirty fireside chats during his twelve years in office.

Typically the addresses were timed to coincide with a major policy initiative or a major event. The way Roosevelt ended this address — “Together we cannot fail” — was also typical of his fireside chats, which boosted morale during the Depression and later during World War II.

Every president since Roosevelt has made regular radio addresses to the American people. Today, President Obama gives weekly addresses both on radio and on YouTube, though his addresses are only four minutes long — far shorter than the half hour of Roosevelt’s fireside chats.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What kinds of sacrifices did Roosevelt warn Americans they would have to make?
2. Why do you think the President encouraged people not to buy on installment (buy things and pay for them later) and to pay off debts and mortgages?
3. How would you describe the President’s tone in this speech?
4. How did Roosevelt describe people who opposed making these sacrifices?

5. What images did he use to shame people into accepting sacrifices?
6. How would you feel if you heard a president call for this kind of sacrifice today? Under what circumstances might you be willing to accept it?

This media is available in the web edition only.

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 world-wide 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 (which) 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, (and) 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 (and) 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, (and) to buy the materials, (and) to pay the labor, (and) to provide the transportation, (and) to equip and feed and house the soldiers, 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 any time in the long history of the world.

We are now spending, solely for war purposes, the sum of about one hundred million dollars every day¹ 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 (then) 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.

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 business man, 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 forego 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 forego 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 non-essentials 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, of Czechoslovakia and France, looted of their livestock, starving while their own crops are stolen from their land, ask them whether “parity” prices² 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.

On the web

On Sacrifice (FDR fireside chat #21)

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/13373>

Radio address delivered by President Franklin Roosevelt, April 28, 1942. The transcript below is the official published version of the speech and may differ slightly from the audio.

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Notes

1. \$100 million in 1942 would be worth about \$1.3 billion today. In all, the United States spent about \$288 billion during World War II, which would be about \$4 trillion today. For comparison, the entire gross domestic product (GDP) of the U.S. today — the value of all goods and services produced — is about \$14 trillion a year. In 1945, the nation’s GDP was \$223 billion, so the war cost more than the entire economic output of the nation for a single year.
2. “Parity prices” were prices established by the government under a system of price controls. Parity prices had been established as minimum prices for agricultural products in the 1930s to guarantee farmers a decent standard of living. (*Parity* is a state of equality or fairness.)

When the U.S. entered World War II, the need to feed men in the armed services and the loss of farm labor to the military meant food shortages. To keep food affordable and to prevent profiteering or price-gauging (the unfair raising of prices in a time of need), Congress passed the Emergency Price Control Act in January 1942, establishing a ceiling (maximum) price for agricultural products at 110 percent of parity prices.

Although wartime demand and higher prices gave many farmers the first prosperity they had ever known, some complained that they could not raise prices even further to meet demand. Roosevelt is responding here to these farmers' complaints.

About the author

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David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.