**President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1936 Address at Chautauqua:**

**The Peace Speech That Prepared for War**

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Following World War I, the trauma of American losses established isolationism in the United States, turning economic and political priorities away from internationalism. Failed disarmament attempts across the globe exacerbated the sentiment with concerns of another major war. President Franklin Roosevelt, however, believed shutting the country off from the world would not ensure the lasting peace and economic stability that Americans rightly longed for. In 1936, at Chautauqua, New York, Roosevelt hinted at the inevitability of U.S. intervention, stating that an isolationist America should not overlook the “vital influence” of foreign conflict (1).[[1]](#footnote-1) To reassure his crowd, he revisited his successful Good Neighbor policy, declaring that “the neighbor who resolutely respects himself respects the rights of others,” thereby proving that the U.S. could engage externally without risking foreign entanglement (1).[[2]](#footnote-2) In tandem, he professed peace — “I have seen war…I hate war” — to validate isolationist concerns (1).[[3]](#footnote-3) Roosevelt referenced his Good Neighbor policy to justify long-term diplomacy; yet rather than abruptly advocating intervention, his pacifist rhetoric eased Americans toward it by framing his policies as a moral duty.

Roosevelt’s ideological justification for foreign engagement began during his New Deal proposals. As noted by historian William Leuchtenburg,

Despite his early approach to foreign economic policy, FDR quickly demonstrated his internationalist leanings. In 1934, FDR won passage of the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, which allowed him to grant "most favored nation" trade status to countries with which the United States worked out trade agreements.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Roosevelt essentially borrowed credibility from the New Deal principle of mutual reliability and extended it to the Good Neighbor policy (“respect[ing] the rights of others”). Both policies include reciprocal obligation, presenting the U.S. as a diplomatic partner rather than a controlling force. This link is further seen when he stated, “Peace, like charity, begins at home; that is why we have begun at home” (2).[[5]](#footnote-5) The analogy appeals to the moral authority of the New Deal, portraying domestic reform (“charity”) as the foundation for intervention, effectively rebranding internationalism as a natural extension of American values. This strategy was a step forward in selling foreign engagement to a skeptical public.

Unfortunately for Roosevelt, policy alone could not overcome isolationism. He needed to reconstruct Americans’ view on isolationism, as it was emotionally rooted, not just political. He began by recounting the horrors of war: “blood running from the wounded,” “men coughing out their gassed lungs,” “children starving,” “the agony of mothers and wives” (3).[[6]](#footnote-6) These statements resonated with many and validated the trauma many Americans still carried. Voicing his grief gave him enough moral credibility before reshaping opinion about war as something to be confronted under moral leadership, not fled from. Subsequently, he introduces a contrast: “The conscience of America revolts against war,” but also warns of any “nation which provokes war,” creating moral criteria for intervention. In his 1937 “Quarantine the Aggressors” speech, he repeats this same contrast, stating, “Yes, we are determined to keep out of war, yet we cannot insure ourselves against the disastrous effects of war and the dangers of involvement.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The repetition of staying out of war aimed to pacify, but phrases like “cannot insure ourselves” imply necessity. This formula was clever in softening resistance to intervention. Importantly, a Gallup poll in 1936 revealed that 71% of Americans supported that a national referendum be required before entering war, underscoring how deep the isolationist sentiment was in America; it was crucial that Roosevelt did not appear interventionist.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Yet, like policy, rhetorical sympathy could only reach so far. Not all Americans had experienced war directly. The final pivot on isolationism came through his framing of foreign engagement as a moral duty. Roosevelt rejected the idea that U.S. neutrality by referencing “the legacy of old forgotten, far-off things, and battles long ago,” suggesting that contemporary conflicts were the result of old divisions (3).[[9]](#footnote-9) It challenged the sentiment that U.S. could wait out foreign conflicts, implying that such conflicts would eventually involve all nations. He tied interventionism to the American identity itself, contrasting U.S. diplomacy in the Americas with the “fanaticisms” and “race hatreds” in Europe, presenting engagement as a defense of democratic values (3).[[10]](#footnote-10) His most radical claim, depicting his liberal internationalist stance, was his economic warning: those chasing “fools’ gold” (war profiteers) were the very cause of the Great Depression, as they sought to profit from foreign conflicts through arms sales despite claiming to keep the U.S. out of war (4).[[11]](#footnote-11) This was profound; Roosevelt linked isolationism to domestic policy failures, making non-intervention morally indefensible and turning his “I hate war” from a plea to a call to moral arms.

Roosevelt knew that peace must be pursued, but never at the expense of principle. He knew that he had to reach his audience through their conscience by appealing to America’s values of mutual support and moral responsibility. He made foreign policy personal by forcing his audience to confront the human cost of isolationism (“the dead in the mud,” “cities destroyed”). He condemned war profiteers, exposing how the illusion of neutrality corrupted the nation. World War II tested his virtues — he led the U.S. in fighting fascism in Europe and economic instability at home. Though he did not live to see the final act of dropping the atomic bombs, the moral dilemma in those choices were the ones he spent his presidency preparing the American public to confront.

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