

FDR urges NAACP support before WWII, 1940

Introduction

On June 14, 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to Arthur B. Spingarn, president of the NAACP, to praise the NAACP's fight for "increasing participation by Negroes in the benefits and responsibilities of the American democracy." Roosevelt urges Spingarn to focus on the threat to civil rights posed by Nazi Germany, recalling African American contributions to the defense of liberty and democracy in America's wars:

Your government has supreme confidence in the unflinching loyalty that the Negro race has shown from Boston Common to Flanders Field. Inspired by such traditions I know our Negro citizens will not hesitate to pledge their allegiance anew, in these ominous days, to the cause of human liberty.

Roosevelt wrote his letter to Spingarn just ten days after England had finished evacuating more than 338,000 troops from Dunkirk, France, as Germany advanced through Europe. While the United States did not declare war on Germany until December 1941, this letter demonstrates that Roosevelt was already planning for American participation in the international military conflict and was building support for the war among all citizens of the United States:

In the face of this challenge, the American democracy must marshal all the strength of all its people in a unity of conviction and of purpose. . . . Negroes and all other Americans have a special stake in this struggle. The adversaries we oppose deny every common right held by the man in the street in America.

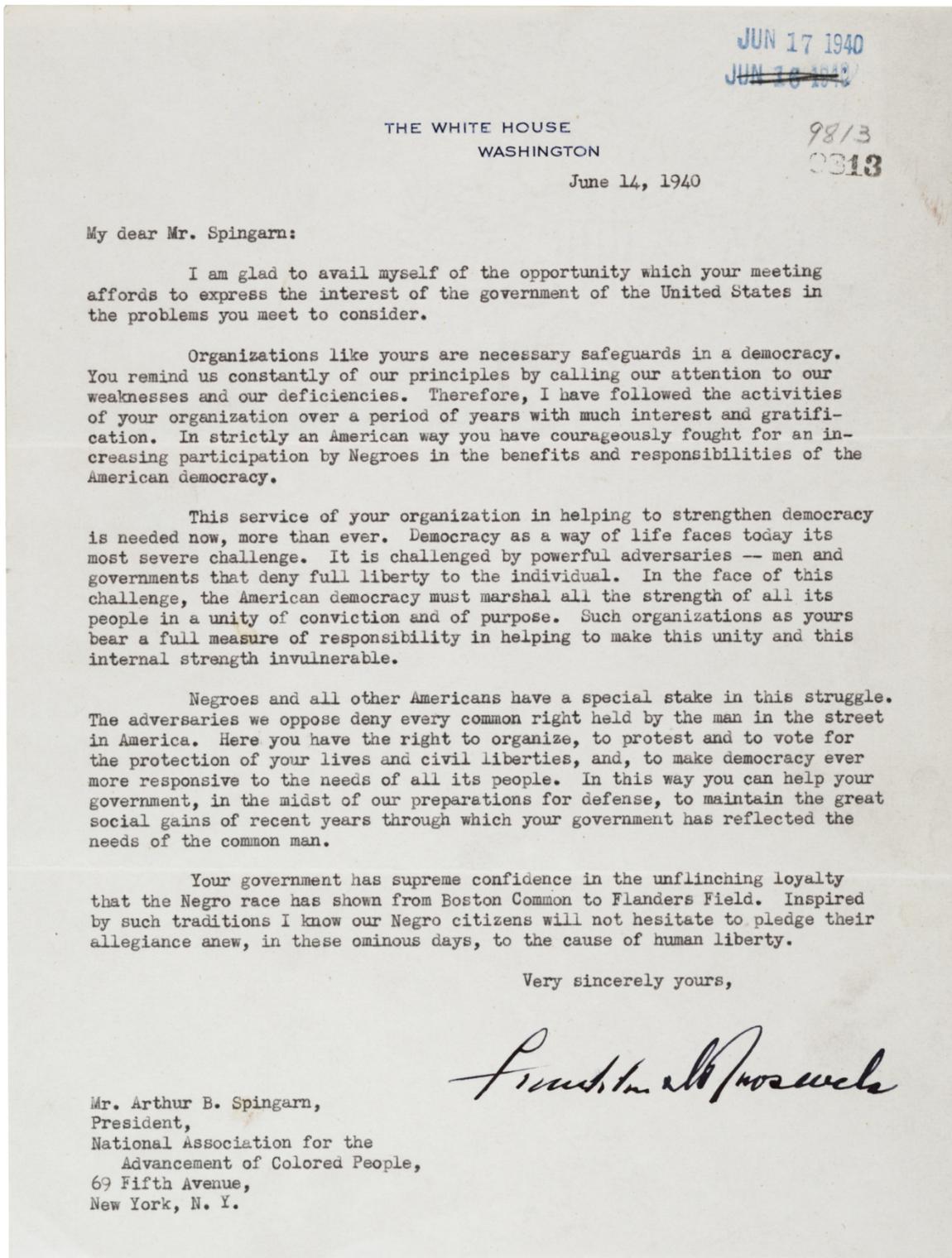
Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and study the letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. a) Which historical events did President Roosevelt invoke to illustrate the loyalty and patriotism of African Americans?
b) What did Roosevelt hope to achieve by including these events in his letter to Arthur B. Spingarn?
2. What did Roosevelt mean when he wrote that the NAACP "remind(s) us constantly of our principles by calling our attention to our weaknesses and our deficiencies"?
3. What did Roosevelt identify as the "common rights" of all Americans?
4. Based on your understanding of race relations in America in 1940, to what extent did African Americans share the belief they had common rights held by "the man in the street"?

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Image



Franklin D. Roosevelt to Arthur B. Spingarn, June 14, 1940 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04477)