

Emergency Measures(1941)



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From the East Room of the White House.

MY FELLOW AMERICANS OF ALL the americas; my friends:

[. . .] Our future—our future independence is bound up with the future independence of all of our sister Republics.

The pressing problems that confront us are military and naval problems. We cannot afford to approach them from the point of view of wishful thinkers or sentimentalists. What we face is cold, hard fact.

The first and fundamental fact is that what started as a European war has developed, as the Nazis always intended it should develop, into a world war for world domination. Adolf Hitler never considered the domination of Europe as an end in itself. European conquest was but a step toward ultimate goals in all the other continents. It is unmistakably apparent to all of us that, unless the advance of Hitlerism is forcibly checked now, the Western Hemisphere will be within range of the Nazi weapons of destruction. [. . .]

Our whole program of aid for the democracies has been based on hard-headed concern for our own security and for the kind Of safe and civilized world in which we wish to live. Every dollar of material that we send helps to keep the dictators away from our own hemisphere, and every day that they are held off gives Us time to build more guns and tanks and planes and ships.

We have made no pretense about our own self-interest in this aid. Great Britain understands it—and so does Nazi Germany.

And now—after a year—Britain still fights gallantly, on a “far-flung battle line.” We have doubled and redoubled our vast production, increasing, month by month, our material supply of the tools of war for ourselves and for Britain and for China—and eventually for all the democracies.

The supply of these tools will not fail—it will increase. [. . .]

To the people of the Americas, a triumphant Hitler would say, as he said after the seizure of Austria, and as he said after Munich, and as he said after the seizure of Czechoslovakia: “I am now completely satisfied. This is the last territorial readjustment I will seek.” And he would of course add: “All we want is peace and friendship, and profitable trade relations with you in the New World.”

[And] Were any of us in the Americas so incredibly simple and forgetful as to accept those honeyed words, what would then happen?

Those in the New World who were seeking profits would be urging that all that the dictatorships desired was “peace.” They would oppose toil and taxes for more American armament. And meanwhile, the dictatorships would be forcing the enslaved peoples of their Old World conquests into a system they are even now organizing—to build—to build a naval and air force intended to gain and hold and be master of the Atlantic and the Pacific as well. [. . .]

The American laborer would have to compete with slave labor in the rest of the world. Minimum wages, maximum hours? Nonsense: Wages and hours [would be] fixed by Hitler. The dignity and power and standard of living of the American worker and farmer would be gone. Trade unions would become historic[al] relics, and collective bargaining a joke. Farm income? What happens to all farm surpluses without any foreign trade? The American farmer would get for his products exactly what Hitler wanted to give. [He would] The farmer would face obvious disaster and complete regimentation. Tariff walls—Chinese walls of isolation—would be futile. Freedom to trade is essential to our economic life. We do not eat all the food we [can] produce; and we do not

burn all the oil we can pump; we do not use all the goods we can manufacture. It would not be an American wall to keep Nazi goods out; it would be a Nazi wall to keep us in.

The whole fabric of working life as we know it—business and manufacturing, mining and agriculture—all would be mangled and crippled under such a system. Yet to maintain even that crippled independence would require permanent conscription of our manpower; it would curtail the funds we could spend on education, on housing, on public works, on flood control, on health and, instead, we should be permanently pouring our resources into armaments; and, year in and year out, standing day and night watch against the destruction of our cities.

Yes, even our right of worship would be threatened. The Nazi world does not recognize any God except Hitler; for the Nazis are as ruthless as the Communists in the denial of God. What place has religion which preaches the dignity of the human being, of the majesty of the human soul, in a world where moral standards are measured by treachery and bribery and Fifth Columnists? Will our children, too, wander off, goose-stepping in search of new gods?

We do not accept, [and] we will not permit, this Nazi “shape of things to come.” It will never be forced upon us, if we act in this present crisis with the wisdom and the courage which have distinguished our country in all the crises of the past.

[. . .] The Axis Powers can never achieve their objective of world domination unless they first obtain control of the seas. [This] That is their supreme purpose today, and to achieve it, they must capture Great Britain. They could then have the power to dictate to the Western Hemisphere. No spurious argument, no appeal to sentiment, [and] no false pledges like those given by Hitler at Munich, can deceive the American people into believing that he and his Axis partners would not, with Britain defeated, close in relentlessly on this hemisphere of ours.

But if the Axis Powers fail to gain control of the seas, then they are certainly defeated. Their dreams of world domination will then go by the board; and the criminal leaders who started this war will suffer inevitable disaster. [. . .]

The blunt truth [is] of this seems to be this—and I reveal this with the full knowledge of the British Government: the present rate of Nazi sinkings of merchant ships is more than three times as high as the capacity of British shipyards to replace them; it is more than twice the combined British and American output of merchant ships today.

We can answer this peril by two simultaneous measures: first, by speeding up and increasing our own great shipbuilding program; and second, by helping to cut down the losses on the high seas. Attacks on shipping off the very shores of land which we are determined to protect present an actual military danger to the Americas. And that danger has recently been heavily underlined by the presence in Western Hemisphere waters of a Nazi battleship of great striking power.

There are some timid ones among us who say that we must preserve peace at any price—lest we lose our liberties forever. To them I say this: never in the history of the world has a nation lost its democracy by a successful struggle to defend its democracy. We must not be defeated by the fear of the very danger which we are preparing to resist. Our freedom has shown its ability to survive war, but [it] our freedom would never survive surrender. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

There is, of course, a small group of sincere, patriotic men and women whose real passion for peace has shut their eyes to the ugly realities of international banditry and to the need to resist it at all costs. I am sure they are embarrassed by the sinister support they are receiving from the enemies of democracy in our midst—the Bundists, [and] the Fascists, and Communists, and every group devoted to bigotry and racial and religious intolerance. It is no mere coincidence that all the arguments put forward by these enemies of democracy—all their attempts to confuse and divide our people and to destroy public confidence in [our] Government—all their defeatist forebodings that Britain and democracy are already beaten—all their selfish promises that we can “do business” with Hitler—all of these are but echoes or the words that have been poured out from the Axis bureaus of propaganda. Those same words have been used before in other countries—to scare them, to divide them, to soften them up. Invariably, those same words have formed the advance guard of physical attack.

Your Government has the right to expect of all citizens that they take [loyal] part in the common work of our common defense—take loyal part from this moment forward. I have recently set up the machinery for civilian defense. It will rapidly organize, locality by locality. It will depend on the organized effort of men and women everywhere. All will have opportunities and responsibilities to fulfill. Defense today means more than merely

fighting. It means morale, civilian as well as military; it means using every available resource; it means enlarging every useful plant. It means the use of a greater American common sense in discarding rumor and distorted statement. It means recognizing, for what they are, racketeers and fifth columnists, [who are] the incendiary bombs in this country of the moment.

All of us know that we have made very great social progress in recent years. We propose to maintain that progress and strengthen it. When the nation is threatened from without, however, as it is today, the actual production and transportation of the machinery of defense must not be interrupted by disputes between capital and capital, labor and labor or capital and labor. The future of all free enterprise—of capital and labor alike—is at stake. This is no time for capital to make, or be allowed to retain, excess profits. Articles of defense must have undisputed right of way in every industrial plant in the country. [. . .]

I repeat the words of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence—that little band of patriots, fighting long ago against overwhelming odds, but certain, as [are we] we are now, of ultimate victory: “With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

Questions

1. Why did FDR think American industry was the crucial factor in defeating Nazism?
2. In FDR’s view, why did some Americans not want to fight the Nazis?
3. What did it mean that FDR juxtaposed the American “minimum wage” and Nazism?
4. How would Nazi victory in Europe hurt American workers in the United States?