

■ Franklin D. Roosevelt's Pearl Harbor Speech

Date: December 8, 1941

Author: Franklin D. Roosevelt

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered this famous speech to a joint session of Congress the day after the Japanese attacked US naval installations at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The speech was broadcast on the radio and drew the largest audience in radio history. Nearly 80 percent of American households tuned in to hear the speech. The speech was brief—just under seven minutes—but it served to unite the nation and galvanize the United States' response to the attack. The sense of violation and outrage it expressed was shared by the public, and its resolve to meet this “dastardly attack” served to channel the energy of the nation into preparing for war. Just over half an hour after this speech was given, Congress declared war on Japan.

Defining Moment

After the outbreak of World War II in Europe and the Pacific, the United States, despite deep concerns with Japan's growing aggression, worked for a diplomatic solution to avoid war with the Axis powers at almost any cost. Public opinion in the United States in 1941 still supported an official policy of neutrality, with matériel support for the Allies, including China. In 1940, Roosevelt moved the US Pacific Fleet from San Diego to Pearl Harbor and reinforced military bases in the Philippines, hoping to send a clear message to Japan. Fearing Japanese expansion, the United States limited and then eliminated shipments of military supplies and oil to Japan in the summer of 1941, which was seen by the Japanese as an aggressive act. The United States cut off all oil shipments in August 1941, after Japan invaded southern French Indochina, exploiting the collapse of France and its invasion by Germany. In August, Roosevelt entered into diplomatic negotiations with Japan to forestall further territorial expansion. Dependent on foreign oil and raw materials, Japan had the option of an unacceptable withdrawal from land that they felt they had the right to control or war with the United

States. Japanese military leaders determined that a pre-emptive strike on the US Pacific Fleet, with simultaneous attacks on the Philippines, Hong Kong, Guam, and Malaya, would cripple the United States and allow Japan to consolidate its control over the Pacific.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the naval base at Pearl Harbor was attacked by more than three hundred Japanese planes that had launched from six aircraft carriers and were supported by submarines. The attack damaged all of the US Navy battleships, including two that were sunk and permanently destroyed. Airfields were bombed and strafed simultaneously to prevent counterattack. Nearly two hundred US planes were destroyed and an additional 159 planes were damaged. The entire attack lasted just under two hours, but 2,403 Americans were killed, including 68 civilians.

Most Americans heard the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor over the radio, and they gathered around their sets again the following day to hear the president address Congress. The attack on Pearl Harbor, though it achieved its aim of crippling the Pacific Fleet, also served to galvanize the nation behind President Roosevelt and his determination to go to war with the Axis powers. War with Japan was declared with the support of all but one member of Congress, thirty-three minutes after this speech was delivered.

Author Biography

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born in 1882 in Hyde Park, New York. He married Eleanor Roosevelt in 1905. He studied law and entered politics in 1910 as a state senator. In 1912, Roosevelt supported Woodrow Wilson's candidacy at the Democratic National Convention, and when Wilson won, he appointed Roosevelt as assistant secretary of the Navy, a position he held from 1913 to 1920. Roosevelt contracted polio in 1921 and was permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Despite this hardship, Roosevelt was determined to return

to public life and, through the use of locking braces, was able to stand and even walk, though with difficulty. Roosevelt held the governorship of New York from 1928 until 1932, when he was elected president of the United States. Roosevelt led the United States through the Great Depression and greatly expanded the power and reach of the federal government through a series of

reforms known as the New Deal. In 1940—with war raging in Europe, Asia, and North Africa—Roosevelt ran for and won an unprecedented third term as president. He won a fourth term in 1944, when the United States was at war, and held the position until his death in office on April 12, 1945.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

To the Congress of the United States:

Yesterday, Dec. 7, 1941 - a date which will live in infamy - the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with the government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleagues delivered to the Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. While this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. Very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As commander in chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.

Always will we remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces - with the unbounding determination of our people - we will gain the inevitable triumph - so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, Dec. 7, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

GLOSSARY

dastardly: cowardly; meanly base; sneaking

infamy: extremely bad reputation, public reproach, or strong condemnation as the result of a shameful, criminal or outrageous act

solicitation: entreaty, urging, or importunity; a petition or request

Document Analysis

Roosevelt's Pearl Harbor speech begins with one of the most famous lines of any speech in US history: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy." In fact, this speech is widely known as the "infamy speech." Roosevelt intended to make it clear that this date would forever remind the nation and the world of the attack. Roosevelt also refers in his opening paragraph to the "Empire of Japan," highlighting the aggressive territorial expansion that Japan had pursued. Roosevelt emphasizes the United States' passivity in the opening statement, as a victim that "was suddenly and deliberately attacked."

Roosevelt emphasizes the treacherous nature of the attack by Japan throughout this speech, using heightened emotional language to express the outrage felt by a nation that thought they were working toward peace. He asserts that the Japanese engaged in "treachery" and "deliberately planned" a "surprise offensive." Roosevelt claims that the Japanese "deliberately sought to deceive" the United States into believing that they were still in discussions about a diplomatic solution. The attack was an "unprovoked" and "premeditated invasion" and an "onslaught against us."

Despite this emotional language, the speech is intended not simply to inflame but also to inform. This juxtaposition of the treacherous and duplicitous Japan and the outraged, but calm and resolved, United States served to unite the nation behind the idea of its impeccable moral standing—its "righteous might." Despite what the Japanese may have seen as provocative acts, Roosevelt emphasizes instead the innocence of the United States in the face of unprovoked aggression. The United States was not only "at peace" with Japan but also engaged in diplomatic negotiations at its behest. Indeed, even after the attack had begun, the Japanese ambassador gave no hint that an attack was planned or that war would be declared. Roosevelt em-

phasizes that the attack must have taken extraordinary logistical planning, meaning that for months the "expressions of hope for continued peace" by the Japanese were a lie.

Without giving details, Roosevelt acknowledges the severity of the attack, which had caused "severe damage" and "many American lives have been lost." He emphasizes the breadth of the Japanese aggression by expanding it to attacks on US vessels in the "high seas" and lists the simultaneous attacks by the Japanese one by one. "Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong. Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam. Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands. Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island. This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island." The Japanese had made their statement, and Roosevelt claims "the facts of yesterday speak for themselves."

Roosevelt did not ask the country to stand behind a declaration of war. He spoke from the assumption that there was no other possible conclusion and that the people of the United States were already united in their resolve to go to war. "The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation." Still, despite the outrage felt by the nation, Roosevelt emphasizes again that this is a defensive war. "I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense." The "American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory" and ensure that the Japanese "shall never endanger us again." His call to action is clear. Since the United States has been left with no alternative, Congress must acknowledge that the attack on Pearl Harbor was a de facto declaration of war by the Japanese. Defensive until the end, Roosevelt asks only that this "state of war" that has existed since the attack be formally declared by Congress.

Essential Themes

This speech was intended to accomplish two things: to convince Congress to declare war on Japan and to persuade the American people, who had continued to believe that the country could remain neutral, to support a massive war effort. The nation understood that war with Japan meant war with Germany as well. The essential theme of this speech was the need for the United States to defend itself against a “dastardly” and unprovoked attack. Roosevelt emphasized the “grave danger” that the nation faced. There was no other response but to go to war. The speech accomplished its task, and Congress declared war against Japan with widespread public support just over half an hour later.

—Bethany Groff, MA

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