

What Do We Mean by Democracy and Freedom?

(Speech scheduled for a Boston America First rally
on December 12, 1941 that was never delivered)

In the slogans and propoganda that have been hurled back and forth during these months of war, there has been much discussion of those qualities of American life call Democracy and Freedom. Committees have been found to defend and to befriend democracy, and to fight for freedom. Our President says we must make this nation an "arsenal for Democracy," and that it is our mission to spread, by force if necessary, various forms of freedom throughout the world.

I believe it is time to define exactly what we mean by democracy and freedom. These are qualities too sacred to our country, to our traditions, and to our hopes, to be left to the irresponsible use of slogans and propoganda. It is meaningless to talk about fighting for freedom or defending Democracy unless we have first established, deep in our minds and hearts, what freedom and democracy really mean.

I believe in freedom and I believe in democracy, but I do not believe in the form of freedom and democracy toward which our President is leading us today. I say that democracy is gone from a nation when its people are no longer informed of the fundamental policies and intentions of its government. I say that the word freedom is a travesty among men who have been forced into war by a President they elected because he promised peace.

If democracy means anything at all, it means that the citizens of a democratic state have the right to be informed about, and to vote upon, the major policies of their government. If freedom means anything at all, it means that free citizens have the right to decide whether or not they send their men to die in foreign wars.

A democratic people must be an informed people, a trusted people. If we do not know what our government is doing or what it intends to do; if we have no right to vote upon the issue of foreign war; if our news is to be censored and mixed with propoganda, as in the totalitarian states; if our citizens are to be drafted, and our national economy upset, by a President who ran for his first term on

promises of economy, and for his third term on promises of peace; then ours is no longer a free and democratic nation.

Men and women of Massachusetts: Freedom and Democracy cannot long exist without a third quality, a quality called Integrity. It is a quality whose absence is alarming in our government today. Without integrity, freedom and democracy will become only politicians' nicknames for an American totalitarian state.

What we need today is not a "Committee to Defend Democracy" by "steps short of war", but a "Committee to Defend Integrity" by steps that are not short of anything at all. We do not need a "Committee to Fight for Freedom" abroad, as much as we need a committee to fight for the freedom of American citizens to decide their own destiny at home. I think we need a "New Deal", but we need one that holds its cards about the table.

There is one word that describes better than all others our danger in America. It is not invasion; it is not intervention; it is not Germany or Russia or Japan; that word is subterfuge - subterfuge in our Government; subterfuge in our political campaigns. Subterfuge marked every step we made "short of war", and it now marks every step we are making "short of" a dictatorial system in America.

Our nation has been led to war with promises of peace. It is now being led toward dictatorship with promises of democracy. The battle cry of freedom is being used to regiment our people.

It is time to strip the masque from the leadership we have been following. It is time to find out what ideas and what beliefs march behind the words waving on its banners. Many of us are tired of listening to promises that are made "again, and again, and again", and then turn out to be nothing more than the "oratory" of a political campaign.

Have you ever stopped to think how ridiculous it is that this democratic nation has twice, within a generation, been carried to war by Presidents who were elected because they promised peace? Have you ever realized how absurd it is for us in America to have committees who claim, in one breath, to stand for freedom and democracy, when in the next breath they demand that the Government of this country

declare war while the majority of our citizens are opposed to it?

Our President has spoken of four freedoms that should be spread all over the world. I believe it is time to ask him about other freedoms that he left unmentioned, freedoms that apply to us right here at home. For instance, let us address this question to our President:

Do you or do you not, Mr. Roosevelt, believe in the freedom of the American people to decide their own destiny by means of the vote? If you do believe in this freedom, how do you explain your thrice stated election promises of peace, in the light of your leadership to war? If you say that conditions have changed since the election, and if you still say you believe in democracy and freedom, why are you unwilling to submit the question of foreign war to a referendum of the people? And Mr. President, please give us credit for enough intelligence so that you do not reply that we are at war because American warships, attending to their own affairs in Icelandic waters, were, for no reason at all, attacked by the German navy.

And Mr. President, there is one more question we would like you to answer so that we may better know what you have in mind when you use such words as democracy and freedom. Mr. President: Iceland was a European island, belonging to Denmark. It was occupied by belligerent forces of Europe. It was in a war zone which was declared soon after the start of hostilities. It was in an area that you yourself recognized as a war zone by banning it to American shipping. There could be no more momentous decision for this free and democratic nation than the decision whether or not to send American forces to occupy a foreign island, lying in the German war zone, off the European coast. Yet you made this decision upon your own initiative, as a dictator would have made it, without any warning to our people, and without even laying the matter before our Congress. Mr. President: Is this your idea of democracy and freedom? Is this your standard of integrity, after promising us again, and again, and again, that our boys would not be sent to fight in foreign wars?

The American people have a right to answers to those questions, Mr. President, and if they are not forthcoming, do not be surprised when you find among us a new movement,

a movement for democracy and freedom of a different sort; a movement which has integrity as the ideal at its peak.

The record of the Roosevelt Administration has been a record of subterfuge masquerading as a crusade for freedom. "Cash and Carry", "Steps Short of War", "Aid to the Democracies", "Neutrality Patrols", "Lend and Lease"; every one of these slogans was used to deceive the American people; every one of them was a disgrace to the names of democracy and freedom.

First, we were subjected to a fear campaign, and told that America would be invaded if we didn't defend England. Then we were subjected to a greed campaign, and told that Germany would get some of our foreign trade if we didn't protect the British Empire. Now we are subjected to a hate campaign, and told that Germany may not be crushed if we don't enter the war ourselves. And in between, our ideals are appealed to. We are told that we must go to war to help the British Empire and the Soviet Union defend democracy and liberty and non-aggression. We democratic people are apparently considered such imbeciles that we can be told one year that France and Finland represent everything we would be willing to die for; and told the next year that France and Finland have changed and represent everything we should be willing to die against. One year Russia is a totalitarian monster, and the next year she is a democratic friend.

The United States is on the verge of war today. Our navy has already become involved in fighting. We are on the verge of war in Asia, in Europe, and in Africa; war on the Atlantic, war on the Pacific, on the Mediterranean Sea, on the Indian Ocean; war with Germany, with Italy, with Japan; war, possibly, against France and Spain and some of the smaller countries of Europe as well. And what is our objective? Are we to die by the millions to make the world safe for ideals of freedom and democracy that are denied to us in our own country? Are we to spend unlimited American lives, throw American business into bankruptcy, and harness our children and our grandchildren with debt, in a crusade to make democracy safe among foreign nations who don't desire it?

Before we crusade for freedom and democracy in foreign nations and on foreign continents, let us decide how we intend to apply these terms at home, how they are to be

applied to use, here, in what we have called the foremost democracy on earth. How are we to apply freedom and democracy to our right to vote on vital issues, to our right to determine our own destiny either in peace or in war, to our right to be accurately informed about the policies and the actions of our own government. Before we send our youth to die defending the freedom and democracy abroad, let us decide how these terms are to be applied to the Negro problem in our southern states. Before we send our youth to die defending the freedom and democracy of the British Empire, let us decide how freedom and democracy are to be applied to British Imperialism in India. Before we send American soldiers to fight for Soviet Russia, let us inquire why a nation as brave and as respected as Finland, a nation that has fought for freedom and democracy with the utmost courage, let us inquire why such a nation has been fighting on the other side.

Before we spend unlimited billions for foreign war, before we crusade so blithely for four freedoms across the seas, before we send the spirit of America "to stand on foreign ground", let us make sure that the roots of freedom and democracy are firmly planted in our own country, and that these words, dear to the heart of every American, stand for more than the campaign slogans of politicians and the propaganda of foreign agents.

Men and women of Massachusetts: It is time for a new movement in this country, a movement with its roots in American traditions, and with its branches in American ideals, a movement which is not tied to political parties, and which says what it means, and which means what it says, a movement which carries on its banners the words - Freedom, Democracy, Integrity.