

This Day in History... January 6, 1941

Roosevelt's Four Freedoms

On January 6, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt gave his "Four Freedoms" speech while delivering the State of the Union Address. The Four Freedoms represented America's goals for a peaceful post-war world.

By January 1941, World War II had wreaked havoc across the globe. Germany invaded Poland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Additionally, France had been defeated by a German blitz, the Soviet Union invaded Finland, and Japan was ruthlessly battling China.

In the US, President Franklin Roosevelt was just elected to an unprecedented third term. Across the nation, Americans did not want to get involved in the war. The president earnestly tried to convince them that completely ignoring the war was dangerous not just to other countries, but also America. He knew America would eventually be forced into the war and, more than anything, worried the country would not be ready.

When President Roosevelt delivered his State of the Union address on January 6, 1941, he stressed the serious nature of the situation and that "at no previous time has American security been as seriously threatened from without as it is today." He continued to explain that the US must assist the Allied nations in defeating the Axis powers from taking over all of Europe.

President Roosevelt continued with perhaps one of his most famous speeches, saying, "In these future days which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms." Those freedoms are the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom to worship in one's own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. He concluded his speech stating that "Our strength is our unity of purpose. To that high concept, there can be no end save victory." Roosevelt's speech resonated around the world, offering hope to civilians suffering under Nazi oppression.

The following year, Norman Rockwell began a series of four paintings that pictured ordinary Americans in scenes portraying the ideals for which the United States had gone to war. Called The Four Freedoms, the series consisted of *Freedom of Speech*, *Freedom of Worship*, *Freedom from Want*, and *Freedom from Fear*.

Unlike much of his other work, these paintings were not designed as illustrations, but as original works of art. More than one million people saw the original paintings in the 16-city tour to promote the sale of war bonds. The tour was so successful that it raised over \$130 million for the cause. Publishing the paintings as inside illustrations, *The Saturday Evening Post* generated an equally impressive response from its readers. The government agencies that had turned the series down when Rockwell offered it to them soon realized their error – these powerful images struck a chord that reverberated around the country.

The ideals expressed in the Four Freedoms became a guiding influence on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, shaping its emphasis on both political liberties and basic human needs. The Declaration reflects these principles through protections for free expression and religious belief, as well as rights to security, work, education, and an adequate standard of living—echoing freedom from fear and freedom from want. Eleanor Roosevelt played a central role in translating these broad ideals into a practical, international document. As chair of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, she led lengthy negotiations, balanced competing viewpoints, and insisted the declaration speak

Since 1982, the Roosevelt Institute has issued Four Freedoms Medals to people who further these ideals.

in clear, accessible language. Her steady leadership helped ensure that the Four Freedoms were embedded in a global human rights framework, giving them lasting international significance beyond their American origins.



FDR personally selected this stamp design to show the world why the US entered the war.



There is a Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island dedicated to the speech.



This stamp was part of a series of four memorial stamps issued just a few months after President Franklin Roosevelt's unexpected death in April 1945. It lists the Four Freedoms.



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United Nations stamp issued for the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights pictures Eleanor Roosevelt with the Declaration.

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