

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, EXCERPTS FROM A FIRESIDE CHAT ON ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, BROADCAST FROM THE WHITE HOUSE ON APRIL 14, 1938.

Full text of the address is available online at <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/041438.html>

My friends:

. . . Five years ago we faced a very serious problem of economic and social recovery. For four and a half years that recovery proceeded apace. It is only in the past seven months that it has received a visible setback.

And it is only within the past two months, as we have waited patiently to see whether the forces of business itself would counteract it, that it has become apparent that government itself can no longer safely fail to take aggressive government steps to meet it.

This recession has not returned to us the disasters and suffering of the beginning of 1933. Your money in the bank is safe; farmers are no longer in deep distress and have greater purchasing power; dangers of security speculation have been minimized; national income is almost 50% higher than it was in 1932; and government has an established and accepted responsibility for relief.

But I know that many of you have lost your jobs or have seen your friends or members of your families lose their jobs, and I do not propose that the Government shall pretend not to see these things. I know that the effect of our present difficulties has been uneven; that they have affected some groups and some localities seriously but that they have been scarcely felt in others. But I conceive the first duty of government is to protect the economic welfare of all the people in all sections and in all groups. I said in my Message opening the last session of the Congress that if private enterprise did not provide jobs this spring, government would take up the slack—that I would not let the people down. We have all learned the lesson that government cannot afford to wait until it has lost the power to act. . . .

I am constantly thinking of all our people—unemployed and employed alike—of their human problems, their human problems of food and clothing and homes and education and health and old age. You and I agree that security is our greatest need—the chance to work, the opportunity of making a reasonable profit in our business—whether it be a very small business or a larger one—the possibility of selling our farm products for enough money for our families to live on decently. I know these are the things that decide the well-being of all our people.

Therefore, I am determined to do all in my power to help you attain that security and because I know that the people themselves have a deep conviction that secure prosperity of that kind cannot be a lasting one except on a basis of fair business dealing and a basis where all from the top to the bottom share in the prosperity. . . .

I went on in my Message [to Congress] today to propose three groups of measures and I will summarize my recommendations.

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A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

First, I asked for certain appropriations which are intended to keep the Government expenditures for work relief and similar purposes during the coming fiscal year that begins on the first of July, keep that going at the same rate of expenditure as at present. That includes additional money for the Works Progress Administration; additional funds for the Farm Security Administration; additional allotments for the National Youth Administration, and more money for the Civilian Conservation Corps, in order that it can maintain the existing number of camps now in operation.

These appropriations, made necessary by increased unemployment, will cost about a billion and a quarter dollars more than the estimates which I sent to the Congress on the third of January last.

Second, I told the Congress that the Administration proposes to make additional bank reserves available for the credit needs of the country. About one billion four hundred million dollars of gold now in the Treasury will be used to pay these additional expenses of the Government, and three-quarters of a billion dollars of additional credit will be made available to the banks by reducing the reserves now required by the Federal Reserve Board.

These two steps taking care of relief needs and adding to bank credits are in our best judgment insufficient by themselves to start the Nation on a sustained upward movement.

Therefore, I came to the third kind of Government action which I consider to be vital. I said to the Congress:

“You and I cannot afford to equip ourselves with two rounds of ammunition where three rounds are necessary. If we stop at relief and credit, we may find ourselves without ammunition before the enemy is routed. If we are fully equipped with the third round of ammunition, we stand to win the battle against adversity.”

This third proposal is to make definite additions to the purchasing power of the Nation by providing new work over and above the continuing of the old work.

First, to enable the United States Housing Authority to undertake the immediate construction of about three hundred million dollars worth of additional slum clearance projects.

Second, to renew a public works program by starting as quickly as possible about one billion dollars worth of needed permanent public improvements in our states, and their counties and cities.

Third, to add one hundred million dollars to the estimate for Federal aid highways in excess of the amount that I recommended in January.

Fourth, to add thirty-seven million dollars over and above the former estimate of sixty-three million for flood control and reclamation.

Fifth, to add twenty-five million dollars additional for Federal buildings in various parts of the country.

In recommending this program I am thinking not only of the immediate economic needs of the people of the Nation, but also of their personal liberties—the most precious possession of all Americans. I am thinking of our democracy. I am thinking of the recent trend in other parts of the world away from the democratic ideal.

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A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

Democracy has disappeared in several other great nations—disappeared not because the people of those nations disliked democracy, but because they had grown tired of unemployment and insecurity, of seeing their children hungry while they sat helpless in the face of government confusion, government weakness,—weakness through lack of leadership in government. Finally, in desperation, they chose to sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat. We in America know that our own democratic institutions can be preserved and made to work. But in order to preserve them we need to act together, to meet the problems of the Nation boldly, and to prove that the practical operation of democratic government is equal to the task of protecting the security of the people.

Not only our future economic soundness but the very soundness of our democratic institutions depends on the determination of our Government to give employment to idle men. The people of America are in agreement in defending their liberties at any cost, and the first line of that defense lies in the protection of economic security. Your Government, seeking to protect democracy, must prove that Government is stronger than the forces of business depression.

History proves that dictatorships do not grow out of strong and successful governments but out of weak and helpless governments. If by democratic methods people get a government strong enough to protect them from fear and starvation, their democracy succeeds, but if they do not, they grow impatient. Therefore, the only sure bulwark of continuing liberty is a government strong enough to protect the interests of the people, and a people strong enough and well enough informed to maintain its sovereign control over its government. . . .

And finally I should like to say a personal word to you.

I never forget that I live in a house owned by all the American people and that I have been given their trust. I try always to remember that their deepest problems are human. I constantly talk with those who come to tell me their own points of view—with those who manage the great industries and financial institutions of the country—with those who represent the farmer and the worker—and often, very often with average citizens without high position who come to this house. And constantly I seek to look beyond the doors of the White House, beyond the officialdom of the National Capital, into the hopes and fears of men and women in their homes. I have traveled the country over many times. My friends, my enemies, my daily mail bring to me reports of what you are thinking and hoping. I want to be sure that neither battles nor burdens of office shall ever blind me to an intimate knowledge of the way the American people want to live and the simple purposes for which they put me here.

In these great problems of government I try not to forget that what really counts at the bottom of it all is that the men and women willing to work can have a decent job—a decent job to take care of themselves and their homes and their children adequately; that the farmer, the factory worker, the storekeeper, the gas station man, the manufacturer, the merchant—big and small—the banker who takes pride in the help that he can give to the building of his community—that all of these can be sure of a reasonable profit and safety for the earnings that they make, not for today nor tomorrow alone, but as far ahead as they can see.

I can hear your unspoken wonder as to where we are headed in this troubled world. I cannot expect all of the people to understand all of the people's problems; but it is my job to try to understand all of the problems.

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A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

I always try to remember that reconciling differences cannot satisfy everyone completely. Because I do not expect too much, I am not disappointed. But I know that I must never give up—that I must never let the greater interest of all the people down, merely because that might be for the moment the easiest personal way out.

I believe that we have been right in the course we have charted. To abandon our purpose of building a greater, a more stable and a more tolerant America would be to miss the tide and perhaps to miss the port. I propose to sail ahead. I feel sure that your hopes and I feel sure that your help are with me. For to reach a port, we must sail—sail, not lie at anchor, sail, not drift.

QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Who is Roosevelt's intended audience?
2. What is a "fireside chat"? Why did Roosevelt deliver this type of address?
3. Identify three parts of this speech in which Roosevelt seeks to empathize with his listeners. Explain why Roosevelt emphasized these sections of the speech.
4. Reading between the lines, what does Roosevelt think frightens the American people?
5. Why does Roosevelt request additional funding for New Deal initiatives such as the CCC, the NYA, and the WPA?
6. Roosevelt proposes five new initiatives to provide "new work over and above the continuing of the old work." List these five initiatives.
7. This address is a response to the economic downturn of 1937–38. Where does Roosevelt refer to the recession, sometimes called the "Roosevelt Recession"?
8. What was happening in Europe when Roosevelt delivered this fireside chat? Explain why these developments influenced Roosevelt's message.
9. According to Roosevelt, why has democracy disappeared in "several other great nations"?
10. In what ways, according to Roosevelt, do his proposals protect Americans' "personal liberties"?
11. According to Roosevelt, how and why do dictatorships grow out of "weak and helpless governments"?
12. List three things this fireside chat reveals about life in the United States at the time Roosevelt delivered it.

ACTIVITIES

Use your textbook and other print and online resources to complete the following activities.

1. Make a list of the three most important words Roosevelt uses in this speech, then go to www.wordle.net and paste the full text of the speech into the text box. (The full text of the speech is available at <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/041438.html>.) Within less than a minute, the site will generate a word cloud that features the most frequently used words. Are the words you picked the same as the words Roosevelt most frequently used? Is a frequently used word the same as an important word? Based on the word cloud, would you revise your list of three important words? Once you finalize your list, explain why you feel the three words you chose are the most important words to Roosevelt in the speech.
2. Imagine you are an unemployed worker who has heard this fireside chat. Write a letter to President Roosevelt. Be sure to describe yourself and your major concerns in the letter, writing as realistically as you can.
3. Reread this excerpt as if you were Franklin D. Roosevelt's political advisor. Considering the state of the country—and American people's resulting anxiety—how would you recommend revising the speech so that Roosevelt might reassure Americans more effectively?

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