

Four Freedoms (January 6, 1941)

*John Q. Barrett**

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On Monday afternoon, January 6, 1941, two young pages carried two locked boxes into the chamber of the United States House of Representatives. A joint session of Congress was meeting in the House chamber. The boxes contained the votes of the Electors who had, after being appointed by each State, met in their respective States and voted for one person to be President of the United States and another to be Vice President.¹ The votes were recorded on distinct lists, signed and certified, identifying and giving the vote total for each person who received an electoral vote for either office.²

The boxes were presented to the President of the Senate, Vice President John Nance Garner. In the presence of all assembled, he opened the certificates. The votes were counted. Tellers then announced that a majority of the Electors had chosen Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York to be president and Henry A. Wallace of Iowa to be vice president.³

Franklin Roosevelt already was, of course, then completing his eighth year as President of the United States. The 1940 Electors had, by the process which had just been completed in the House chamber, chosen him for a third term. Roosevelt would be, along with Vice President Wallace, inaugurated to start that term on January 20, 1941.

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¹ See WASH. POST, Jan. 7, 1941, at 10 (including a photograph of pages Barry Sullivan of Boston and Robert March of Washington carrying the locked boxes).

² See U.S. CONST., Amend. XII.

³ See *Tellers Confirm Election Result*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 7, 1941, at 5; *Roosevelt Reelected! This Time It's Official*, WASH. POST, Jan. 7, 1941, at 4. The detailed vote totals are available at www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/votes/1941_1953.html#1940.

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In the meantime, President Roosevelt had chosen January 6, 1941, as a date on which to comply with his constitutional duty to “from time to time give to the Congress Information on the State of the Union....”⁴ The joint Senate-House session was assembled on that date not only to receive the Electors’ votes, but also to hear the President.

FDR spoke that afternoon, a time of national challenge and global peril, for more than thirty minutes. He explained his commitments to national policies of defense buildup, to aiding besieged democracies, and to the rejection of appeasement. He described the need for the U.S. to support Great Britain in its defensive war against Nazi Germany and its allies. He explained that these policies emanated from U.S. commitments to universal freedoms:

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.

As the President delivered his speech, including the powerful and challenging call for the “Four Freedoms” that has come to be history’s purchase on the address, he looked out on a chamber packed with family, friends, colleagues, political supporters and, yes, some political opponents.

⁴ U.S. Const., Art. II, Sec. 3.

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The Senate leaders in the front row included Harry S. Truman of Missouri. The Cabinet officers in the front row were Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Attorney General Robert H. Jackson, Postmaster General Frank Walker, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard, and Secretary of Commerce Jesse Jones.⁵

In the executive gallery above the House floor, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt sat in the front row with Crown Princess Martha of Norway. Others in that gallery included Irene Jackson and other Cabinet wives—they had arrived early, before the First Lady, to be sure to get seats.⁶

The adjoining gallery was filled with members of the international diplomatic corps. All eleven seats and every inch of standing room was filled. Every major power, with the exception of Germany, Italy and Japan, was represented.⁷

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For more information on the “Four Freedoms” speech, visit this Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library webpage: www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/fourfreedoms.html. It includes the following links:

- the text of the full speech: www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/pdfs/fftext.pdf;
- FDR’s reading copy of the speech: www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/pdfs/ffreadingcopy.pdf;
- audio of part one of FDR delivering the speech: www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/ffaudiofull.mp3; and
- audio of part two of FDR delivering the speech, including the “four essential human freedoms” passage: www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/ffaudioclip.mp3.

⁵ For a photograph identifying these men seated in the front row of the House chamber, see WASH. POST, Jan. 7, 1941, at 10.

⁶ See Hope Ridings Miller, *Norse Princess, First Lady and Envoys’ Wives Make Dazzling Assembly As Congress Opens*, WASH. POST, Jan. 7, 1941, at 14.

⁷ See *id.*

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For newsreel film excerpts of the President's speech, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnrZUHcpoNA.

I also encourage you to support and, in time, to visit the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park that now is under construction on the southern tip of New York City's Roosevelt Island. For more information, see www.fdrfourfreedomspark.org.