

THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY
FDR, Detroit, and an Epic Quest to Arm an America at War
By A. J. Baime

Prologue

On the night of December 29, 1940, a few moments before 9:00 pm, Franklin Delano Roosevelt wheeled himself in his chair through the White House warrens and into the Diplomatic Reception Room on the first floor. He wore a gray wool suit and a face that, for an eternal optimist, appeared grim. An incongruous audience stood in the room. The President's mother was there, as were some White House guests, actors Clark Gable and Carole Lombard. Roosevelt was preparing to deliver an address that generations hence would deem one of the most important pieces of political rhetoric in modern history. It was called "The Arsenal of Democracy."

At that very moment, in London, bombs were raining from the night sky. Adolf Hitler's air force was subjecting London to the worst pounding since the start of the Battle of Britain—a night of terror planned specifically to steer attention away from Roosevelt's speech, which promised to solve a great mystery: what was the President prepared to do about the Nazis and their conquering armies? With most of Europe already subjugated, would Washington remain neutral? Or was Roosevelt prepared to support the effort to defeat Hitler with American-made tanks, guns, ships, and bomber aircraft?

All week long the White House had stirred with activity in anticipation of the President's "fireside chat." On the Sunday of the address, Roosevelt worked over every word in his office, complaining to his secretary, Grace Tully, who went heavy on the punctuation when she typed.

"Grace!" he yelled. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop wasting the taxpayers' commas?"

When he was satisfied, he sent the speech to the State Department for comment. He had his throat sprayed to ease his sinuses. White House workers removed the gold-trimmed presidential china from the Diplomatic Reception Room, and as Roosevelt sipped cocktails and ate dinner they tested the broadcasting equipment and the wires snaking across the floor onto a desk on which a cluster of microphones stood—the ears of the world.

At the stroke of nine, the largest radio audience ever gathered tuned in. Over five hundred stations were broadcasting the speech in the United States. This was the "Golden Age of Radio," with popular shows like Jack Benny and Amos 'n' Andy, and yet no broadcast had ever lured more attention than the President's speech. The only one that had come close was the Joe Louis–Max Schmeling fight at Yankee Stadium two years earlier.

Amid the rubble of Britain's cities, at 3:00 am London time, thousands, including Prime Minister Winston Churchill, crowded around their radios. Roosevelt's address would be broadcast in South America, China, the Soviet Union, and in six languages in Europe.

Roosevelt began. “My friends, this is not a fireside chat on war. It is a talk on national security; because the nub of the whole purpose of your President is to keep you now, and your children later, and your grandchildren much later, out of a last-ditch war for the preservation of American independence and all of the things that American independence means to you and to me and to ours,” the President said. And then, gravely: “Never before since Jamestown and Plymouth Rock has our American civilization been in such danger as now.”

The events leading up to that night had placed the President in an impossible situation.

For eleven years, the Great Depression had plagued the global economy, and the United States was a nation paralyzed by its economy. In 1940 about 17 percent of Americans were unemployed, over 7 million able-bodied people. Only 48,000 taxpayers out of 132 million earned more than \$2,500 a year (the rough equivalent of \$40,000 today). Nearly one-third of American homes had no running water. Americans had no unemployment insurance or antibiotics.

Since he came to power in 1933 (five weeks after Hitler became chancellor of Germany), Roosevelt had fought tirelessly to meet the basic needs of the masses. Recoiling from the horror of World War I, Congress had passed numerous neutrality acts, based in the idea that the oceans protected American soil from foreign attack, like some giant moat. With no funding, the US military had grown anemic. The army ranked sixteenth in the world in size, with fewer than 200,000 men, compared to 7 million Nazi soldiers. No legitimate munitions industry existed. The Army Air Corps had fewer than 1,300 combat planes, and most of them were technologically obsolete.

In Europe, Hitler’s rise had caused consternation at first. An artist and an ex-convict, he had brilliantly harnessed the power and will of the German people using modern communications such as film and radio. He had been secretly building his military for years using American-style principles of mass production. It was a futuristic kind of fighting force, with unprecedented amounts of horsepower built on assembly lines in factories and mounted on wheels and wings.

As Britain’s spymaster William Stephenson (code name: Intrepid) confided in Roosevelt: “The Fuehrer is not just a lunatic. He’s an evil genius. The weapons in his armory are like nothing in history. His propaganda is sophisticated. His control of the people is technologically clever. He has torn up the military textbooks, and written his own.”

It was the Luftwaffe that the Americans and British feared most, the first-ever fully crafted air force, headed by Hitler’s most trusted confidant, Hermann Goering, a World War I ace pilot turned morphine addict who had spent time in a sanitarium locked in a straitjacket. By the late 1930s, German factories were birthing more warplanes than all other nations combined. The German Air Force, it seemed, could turn the Nazis into Nietzschean supermen. As the British statesman Sir Nevile Henderson put it, “If one makes a toy, the wish to play with it becomes irresistible. And the German Army and Air Force were super toys.”

When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, he declared: “I am putting on the uniform, and I shall take it off only in death or victory.” On May 10, 1940, the Nazis invaded France, Holland, Luxembourg, and Belgium. The French—who had the finest army of the European Allies—surrendered within five weeks.

According to French premier Paul Reynaud, his forces were like “walls of sand that a child puts up against waves on the seashore.”

Great Britain was next. The Luftwaffe’s dive-bombers tore into England’s cities. Centuries-old buildings crumbled. “The London that we knew was burning,” one local wrote. “The London which had taken thirty generations a thousand years to build . . . and the Nazis had done that in thirty seconds.” Reporting over CBS radio from London, Edward R. Murrow brought the terror into America’s living rooms. “There are no words to describe the thing that is happening,” he reported on September 18, 1940.

Suddenly Americans couldn’t help but imagine the destruction of New York, Washington, Los Angeles.

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