Ceremony Marks FDR’s Continuance as Leader as War Goes On:

An Analysis of FDR’s Fourth Inauguration and How It Reflected the Effect of the War in American Society

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To say that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a president unlike any other is true; however, that does not cover the entirety of his importance to the nation. FDR was the first, and only, president to have the honor of holding four terms as the President of the United States, spanning from March 1933 to April 1945. During those years, he confronted the struggles created by national and international circumstances, fought to dig America out of the Great Depression, and led the nation through the majority of the Second World War. Many of these trials and tribulations, along with his answers to mitigate them, are what defined his legacy as president. This paper, using national and city news articles from late-1944 and early-1945, examines how the ongoing war affected Roosevelt’s fourth inauguration. In particular, this paper investigates the extent that the war affected both the event and the overall tone of the ceremony by analyzing the speech itself, the crowd in attendance, the celebrations, and how it differed from both his own past inaugurations, as well as those of other presidents. The abridged festivities of Roosevelt’s fourth inauguration reflected the degree to which the Second World War affected numerous aspects of American life, as well as how it forced many citizens, military and civilian, to adopt practical and simplistic lifestyles. The simplified ceremony and lack of pompous celebrations also represented a focus on American traditions, while symbolizing the continuation of American democracy in the face of a war against enemies who were antagonistic towards American ideals of freedom and justice, tying the population together under a common cause.

Before he became president, Roosevelt was very involved in politics, which gave him the experience that aided him during his numerous terms. An only child, FDR was born on January 30, 1882 to parents Sara Ann Delano and James Roosevelt I, and began a life of privilege; he often traveled to Europe with his family, participated in sports, and attended prestigious schools, like Harvard University.[[1]](#footnote-1) Roosevelt’s interest in politics emerged during his school years and was partially inspired by his distant cousin, Theodore Roosevelt. He later studied law before running and winning a seat as a Democrat in the New York State Senate in two consecutive races.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the years following, the Woodrow Wilson Administration appointed Roosevelt as the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He then unsuccessfully ran for Vice President in 1920 with Ohio Governor James M. Cox; though they lost to Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, the campaign marked the beginning of his political career in the national spotlight.[[3]](#footnote-3) His career was put in jeopardy when he contracted polio, which greatly limited his use of his legs and put him in a wheelchair; however, he did not let his illness cost him his political career.[[4]](#footnote-4) In his book, *FDR: A Biography*, Ted Morgan notes that “the nation was self-made, and after his polio, the man [FDR] was self-made.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This statement suggests the amount of effort FDR devoted in order to hide his disability from the eyes of the public, such as relying on something or someone to support him as he walked. After he went through rehabilitation, Roosevelt re-emerged into the political spotlight when the people of New York elected him as governor in 1928.[[6]](#footnote-6) While 1932 marked the first time FDR was elected, it was also a time when the nation was suffering under the now-familiar effects of the Great Depression. Morgan notes several of Roosevelt’s presidential strengths that contributed to his success: “Roosevelt’s greatest asset…was not his talent or his courage, but his capaciousness of spirit, which absorbed the inconsistencies of a nation the size of a continent.”[[7]](#footnote-7) During his four-term presidency, Roosevelt faced trials that very few presidents faced before him. Throughout his four terms, FDR expanded the powers and influences of the branches of government, in addition to passing unprecedented legislation, such as the New Deal. Legislation, however, was not the only notable feature of his legacy, but war was another major problem that dominated much of Roosevelt’s third and fourth terms.

When the war first broke out in September 1939, most of the American population was more concerned with remaining out of another European war than aiding the Allies. Anti-war sentiment was pertinent throughout the 1940 campaign, but within less-than-a-year of FDR’s third inauguration, American interests had dramatically changed. December 8th, 1941 marked the American declaration of war on the Japanese in retaliation for the simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbor and other U.S. bases in the Pacific that had occurred the previous day. Following soon after, Adolf Hitler’s government declared war on the U.S., per the stipulations in their alliance with Japan, which, along with Italy, was known as the Axis Alliance.

The Axis Alliance was forged in the three countries’ similar interests and ideologies that resulted in the outbreak of war in both theatres. Japan’s primary goal was to gather territory in the Pacific to expand their empire and available resources, but also to establish Japan as the dominating country in Asia. Additionally, Japanese actions worked in accordance with the Japanese ideological belief that they, the “Yamato race,” were of the top of a “racial hierarchy” and desired to “purify” Asia.[[8]](#footnote-8) The “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” a self-appointed position of leadership by the Japanese and attempt to portray that Asian countries were united under a common purpose, was the chosen method with which the Japanese would maintain their racial ideology by bullying other races economically, socially, and politically while enforcing strict “Japanization” of these other peoples.[[9]](#footnote-9) Meanwhile in the European Theatre, the threat towards democracy was burgeoning in a matter of a short period of time and, perhaps what some Americans may have found more concerning, was the fact that it was erupting from within the Western nations. By the time war was declared on the U.S., the Germans conquered most of Europe in support of their desire to become a world power and pursue their goal of strengthening the mythical “Aryan race,” both through “Lebensraum,” or “living-space” for the “superior race,” as well as gaining natural resources and slave labor.[[10]](#footnote-10) German occupation and influences went as far north as Norway, through western areas of Soviet Russia as German armies implemented Operation Barbarossa, spread into parts of Northern Africa, and the entirety of western Europe; however, the Germans were still reeling from their failed attempts to conquer Britain during the latter parts of 1940. At the same time, Italy, the third major country in the Axis Powers, had been running military operations in parts of Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, though not without heavily relying on the Germans for support.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was an unprecedented event in American experiences, quickly marking a major turning-point both in the war and American history. The need for retribution was felt strongly across the nation, and American society soon mobilized to support the war effort on all fronts.[[11]](#footnote-11) American military service branches found an influx of male and female servicemembers. Not only did the American economy focus on the war by shifting from the manufacturing of civilian goods towards making military supplies, but so did American society. Life became simplified as people mobilized into a well-running cog of the American war-machine through enforcement by the government and social obligation, such as rationing; rapid growth of women in traditionally male-dominated jobs; planting victory gardens; buying war bonds; and even Hollywood had a hand in supporting the effort, as war-focused films were produced, celebrities performed in the USO and promoted rationing, and many directors and film crews put their civilian careers on hold to capture scenes from the front lines.[[12]](#footnote-12)

While working with Allies on both sides of the world, the two theatres of war were pocked with decisive moments—positive and negative. By the fourth inauguration, the war in both theatres had been turned towards Allied favor. Though the Japanese secured early victories, the breaking of the Japanese naval code and the resulting Allied success at the Battle of Midway proved to be major turning point in the Pacific, leading to the Allied island-hopping campaign where the forces seized strategic points to inch closer to the Japanese mainland. Meanwhile, the majority of North Africa was controlled by Allied forces following a number of tumultuous events. Allied operations in Sicily and Italy, starting in July 1943, found the forces moving up the boot of the Italian Peninsula and Rome was liberated in early June of 1944, ending the Italian threat. As the Soviets forced the Germans back westward, a Western front within continental Europe had been opened in June 1944 with the landings in Normandy under Operation Overlord, and in the southern beaches of France in Operation Dragoon in early August 1944, leading to the liberation of Paris in late August 1944. In mid-September, the Allies initiated Operation Market-Garden in hopes of freeing Holland; however, the attempt was unsuccessful in pushing all German forces out. These operations by the Allies put the Germans in a staggered position, deeply affecting morale on all fronts. To counteract their losses, the Germans initiated Operation Watch-on-the-Rhine, also called the Battle of the Bulge. An unknown author of an article in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* informs their Virginia audience of the German intent:

A German prisoner captured in Belgium told Allied officers that…Hitler estimated the drive would cut off 38 Allied divisions, knock one of the Allies (presumably Britain) out of the war and gain a breathing spell to organize Germany’s defenses.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Allies were taken by surprise, acquiring large casualties in the defense of strategic locations, but persisted in holding off the German offensive. Though Allied media described that the Germans were “backpedaling” across the territory they previously gained, the fight between the Allies and the Germans continued, and had not been resolved by the time of the inauguration.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The ceremony and celebrations of the 1945 inauguration were just a few examples of the many aspects affected by the war. Multiple accounts reported the simplicity of the event, describing that “social features [were] ahorn [*sic*] of prewar elaborate trappings.”[[15]](#footnote-15) One of the typical “prewar elaborate trappings” included the parades and social functions. These celebrations were often a time of cheery attitudes and pomposity; unlike the inaugurations of the past, times of war had no place for these types of behaviors. Another article continues on the same note, explaining that, “there were a few social functions after the inauguration, but nothing to compare with the pretentious splendor of the inaugural balls of another era.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This quote further supports the simplistic take on the inauguration. By pointing out that the fewer number of “social functions” were lesser in “splendor” in comparison to past inaugurations, the author notes that the main focus was not on the celebrations, but the ceremony itself and what it represented as a continuation of FDR as the head of state. The war effort required of the U.S. during the time affected nearly all aspects of domestic life; war was the ultimate concern. The traditions associated with past inaugurations consisted of celebrations of the success of a candidate, along with the changing of heads of state. War held larger importance in comparison to these traditions, forcing the event to highlight simplified formalities rather than a celebration. One author states that the event was “stripped of its usual glitter and pomp by the grimness of war,” the ceremony still held symbolic importance as the continuance of a successful head of state.[[17]](#footnote-17) The articles notes that the war “stripped” the traditional pomposity, suggesting that there was little time nor need to have large celebrations with the continuation of war and loss of life. This statement also contributes to the notion that the main focus was solely on the war, and there was little time for anything else.

The war was apparent in all aspects during the inauguration, and while the ceremony itself reflected the tone of the war, the audience also demonstrated how practicality and simplicity replaced tradition—something the war required of the nation. Among those in attendance were both civilians and military personnel alike, gathered for a common reason. One article depicted that “top military commanders were present…uniformed men and women were scattered through the crowd.”[[18]](#footnote-18) At this time, the majority of people were somehow affected by the war, whether it was through the rationing of goods and products, public morale, or a connection to the military. The presence of the military was not the only indicator of how the war affected the American population. In the same article as above, the author acknowledged that “for the most part the crowd that turned out spurned the formal attire of other inauguration—another concession to the war.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The author illustrated that the crowd rebuffed the traditions of the past in favor of simplistic ideals and requirements. As a total war, products on the market became restricted, both from international trade or goods abandoned by American industries which were more focused on making equipment and supplies for the troops. This simplistic attire could also be assumed to be because of the preference to recognize the event as a reminder and symbol of American traditions and democracy in comparison to continuing the pomposity of the past. Furthermore, the event served as a common reason for the population to come together in light of grievous and strenuous times. The war clearly affected the nation’s citizens, such as the increased number of servicemen and women present, and the nation’s attitudes about keeping things simple.

Multiple sources agreed upon similar conclusions regarding Roosevelt’s speech: it was brief. Marquis Childs’s article, “Entering the Fourth Term,” depicts that the speech was held “with wartime brevity and simplicity.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The brevity of the speech tied to the simplicity of the event: both were short and to the point. The event’s and address’s purpose was to allow Roosevelt time to make a public appearance, and to assure of the continuation of American democracy. When Roosevelt addressed the public, at one point he mentioned that he, along with the rest of the nation “shall work for a just and durable peace as today we work and fight for total victory in war.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In his short speech, FDR further unifies the American public with his words and promises of “total victory,” requiring the entire focus and dedication of American citizens to work towards a common goal, along with his promise to do the same.

One can argue that the simplicity of FDR’s fourth inauguration, and the event itself, took upon a special symbolism in the face of the war. Another article published following the inauguration exhibited Mrs. Roosevelt’s opinions regarding the event, describing that she “thought the ceremony was very impressive and very solemn,” but more importantly was “a time of rededication to a very great responsibility.”[[22]](#footnote-22) One can interpret that the inaugurations of the past treated the event more as a victory celebration, rather than a passing of responsibility from one hand to another.[[23]](#footnote-23) In Roosevelt’s case, the continuation of his responsibility in defeating fascism and leading the U.S. to victory took precedence. The simplicity and “solemn” tone noted by Mrs. Roosevelt was attributed to these concerns. One author explained that “Mr. Roosevelt must turn immediately to the pressing problems of the office which war has forced to a level of worldwide importance.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The event, against the backdrop of the chaos and unpredictability of war, acted as a symbol of American tradition and democracy that would not vanish in those dark times, as well as a method to bring the nation together for a more positive reason. Most importantly, Roosevelt’s fourth inaugural address represented the continuation and assurances of his leadership in light of the war, which gave hope to the American public.

Overall, the interpretations and analysis of the various components of the event demonstrate just how much of the Second World War had affected FDR’s fourth inauguration. The general solemn tone of the ceremony greatly differed from those of the past inaugurations, easily reflecting how the war afflicted the home front in terms of both politics and the culture of America during this time. One could effectively turn this investigation into numerous other discussions; such topics could include: the effects of the Second World War on both foreign and domestic politics; how the war and/or his presidency affected FDR; if the war contributed to FDR’s success, leading to his eventual third and fourth terms; whether FDR’s “legacy” dictated the following democratic presidents’ policies; and how the public perceived FDR. More importantly, this analysis construes FDR’s significance to the U.S. during this era, and how he, as an unprecedented president, led the country through dark times that no president had faced before. It also demonstrates the role of the American government, specifically, its symbol during the war as leaders towards peace and the better future stated in FDR’s final address. This symbol translates directly from the ideals of American democracy that the country had been founded upon, as well as the roles enshrined to the government through the Constitution, especially when faced with the tumultuous threat of fascism arising from both theatres of the war.

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