



Speech by

Theodore Roosevelt

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PUT THE FLAG ON THE FIRING LINE!

An Address by THEODORE ROOSEVELT

I come here tonight to appeal to the people of the great West, the people of the Mississippi Valley, the people who are the spiritual heirs of the men who stood behind Lincoln and Grant. You men and women, who live beside the Great Lakes and on the lands drained by the Ohio, the Mississippi and the Missouri, have always represented what is most intensely American in our national life. When once waked up to actual conditions, you have always stood with unfaltering courage and iron endurance for the national honor and the national interest. I appeal to the sons and daughters of the men and women of the Civil War, to the grandsons and granddaughters of the pioneers; I appeal to the women as much as to the men, for our nation has risen level to every great crisis only because in every such crisis the courage of its women flamed as high as the courage of the men.

I appeal to you to take the lead in making good the President's message of the second of this month, in which he set forth the reasons why it was our unescapable duty to make war upon Germany. It rests with us—with the American people—to make that message one of the great state documents of our history. Let us accept the lessons it teaches. Let us grasp what it says as to the frightful wrongs Germany has committed upon us and upon the weaker nations of mankind, and the damage she has wrought to the whole fabric of civilization and of international good faith and morality. Then let us steel our hearts and gird our loins to show that we are fit to stand among the free people whose freedom is buttressed by their self-reliant strength. Let us show by our deeds that we are fit to be the heirs of the men who founded the Re-

public and of the men who saved the Republic; of the Continentals who followed Washington, and of the men who wore the blue under Grant and the gray under Lee.

But, mind you, the message, the speech will amount to nothing unless we make it good and it can be made good only by the high valor of our fighting men, and by the resourceful and laborious energy of the men and women who with deeds, not merely words, back up the fighting men. We read the Declaration of Independence every Fourth of July because, and only because, the soldiers of Washington made that message good by their blood during the weary years of war that followed. If, after writing the Declaration of Independence, the men of Seventy-Six had failed with their bodies to make it good, it would be read now only with contempt and derision. Our children still learn how Patrick Henry spoke for the heart of the American people when he said "Give me liberty or give me death;" but this generation is thrilled by his words only because the Americans of those days showed in very fact that they were ready to accept death rather than lose their liberty. In Lincoln's deathless Gettysburg speech and second inaugural he solemnly pledged the honor of the American people to the hard and perilous task of preserving the Union and freeing the slaves. The pledge was kept. The American people fought to a finish the war which saved the Union and freed the slave. If Lincoln and the men and women behind him had wavered, if they had grown faint-hearted and had shrunk from the fight, or had merely paid others to fight for them, they would have earned for themselves and for us the scorn of the nations of mankind. The words of Lincoln will live forever only because they were made good by the deeds of the fighting men.

MAKING THE MESSAGE GOOD

So it is now. We can make the President's message of April 2d stand among the great state papers in our history; but we can do so only if we make the message good; and we can make it good only if we fight with all our strength now, at once; if at the earliest possible moment, we put

the flag on the firing line, and keep it there, over a constantly growing army, until the war closes by a peace which brings victory to the great cause of democracy and civilization, the great cause of justice and fair play among the peoples of the world.

We Americans are at war. Now let us fight. Let us make it a real war, not a dollar war. Let us show that we have the manhood to pay with our own bodies, and not merely to hire other men to pay with their bodies. Let us fight at once. Let us put the flag at the front now, at the earliest moment, and not merely announce that we are going to fight a year or two hence.

I most earnestly and heartily stand by the proposal of the President to raise an army on the principle of universal obligatory military training and military service, demanded as a right, not as a favor, from all the young men of the country capable of bearing arms. This is the principle I have long advocated with all fervor of conviction. It is the only really democratic principle on which permanently to shape the military policy of this country. To have it adopted as the permanent principle of our national military policy will be of incalculable service to our national peace and welfare. Moreover, if the war lasts, as well it may, for one or two or three years, the army, to see it through, must be raised in this fashion. It is vitally essential, both from the standpoint of fighting this war through to a successful conclusion, if it should last a long time, and from the standpoint of our permanent national safety and democratic welfare, that we should immediately inaugurate this principle and set about raising a great army in accordance therewith.

Such an army will naturally need a long time to train, and at the earliest moment we should begin to devote our strength and energy to calling it into being and training it. This should be the task which we treat as of prime importance. But most emphatically, we should not rest content with this. We should not rest content with merely preparing an army to act a year or eighteen months or two years hence. Let us put the flag on the firing line at the

earliest possible moment, this Summer, wherever our services are most needed—in France or Flanders or the Balkan Peninsula. It need only be a small army at first. But even a division would be better than nothing. Then we can constantly keep that division filled, and other divisions from time to time added to it; until, a year hence, if the war continues, we have a really formidable fighting force at the front, a fighting force which will be steadily increased month by month, year by year, until the triumph comes.

To do this, it is necessary that we should appeal for volunteers, not in any way as a substitute for, but as a supplement to, the Administration's plan for raising an army in accordance with the principle of obligatory universal service. If the system of universal obligatory training and service had already been in existence here for a number of years, and if in other ways we had been prepared in advance, we could by this time have had an expeditionary force of a million men under way for the front, ready to strike the finishing blow. But the system does not yet exist, and, necessarily, all kinds of preliminaries will have to be gone through before it can now be called into being and an effective army of large size raised under it. Therefore, to wait for it before really entering into the war means an indefinite delay, a delay that might bring us to the end, not merely of the campaign this year, but of the campaign next year before we can strike hard and effectively. I wish to see the system of obligatory service used in order to make all men serve who ought to serve. It would be a capital mistake to use it in such fashion as merely to prevent men rendering service when they wish to render it and can render it, and ought to render it. Do not let anyone volunteer to stay at home. But do not hinder men, who, under conscription, would be entitled to stay at home, from volunteering to go to the front if they can render good service. Under the bill proposed to Congress by the War Department, many millions of excellent fighting men would be exempt from service, while a long time would elapse before the others are sent to the front. Under these conditions, we ought to use the volunteer system to fill the gap; it opens to us at once a great possibility;

let it be used, and used exclusively, to give to those who would otherwise be exempt an opportunity to go to the front without claiming exemption. Let me illustrate my meaning by a homely comparison. Every village ought to have a fire company. But if it commits the error of waiting until a fire starts before organizing the fire company, it will merely aggravate the situation by committing the further error of refusing to put out the fire until after the fire company is organized. The only wise thing to do is to put out the fire with the means that are handy, and then immediately organize the permanent fire company.

NO POLICY OF DELAY

I most earnestly hope that we shall avoid any policy of delay. If we are true to our own souls, we shall show that, like our forefathers, we are willing to pay for our principles with our bodies and not merely with our dollars. Congress has passed, without a dissenting vote, a bill to appropriate seven billions of dollars as representing part of our contribution to the great war. This is fine; but only on condition that we also put our men into the fighting line. Half of this great sum is to go to the Allies; that is, it is to be spent by them in getting their men up against the German and Austrian and Turkish shells and bullets. Now, we Americans have always prided ourselves on being able to do our own fighting. It is right to help others to fight in the common cause for which we are engaged. But it is even more necessary that we should fight ourselves.

We fight for our own rights. We fight for the rights of mankind. This great struggle is fundamentally a struggle for the fundamentals of civilization and democracy. The future of the free institutions of the world is at stake. The free people who govern themselves are lined up against the governments which deny freedom to their people. Our cause is the cause of humanity. But we also have bitter wrongs of our own which it is our duty to redress. Our women and children and unarmed men, going about their

peaceful business, have been murdered on the high seas, not once, but again and again and again. With brutal insolence, after having for well nigh two years persevered in this policy, Germany has announced that she will continue it, at our expense and at the expense of other neutrals, more ruthlessly than ever. The injury thus done to us as a nation is as great as the injury done to a man if a ruffian slaps his wife's face. In such case, if the man is a man, he does not wait and hire somebody else to fight for him; and it would be an evil thing, a lasting calamity to this country, if the war ended, and found us merely preparing an army in safety at home, without having sent a man to the firing line; merely having paid some billions of dollars to other people so that with the bodies of their sons and brothers they might keep us in safety.

I ask that we send a fighting force over to the fighting line at the earliest possible moment, and I ask it in the name of our children and our children's children, so that they may hold their heads high over the memory of what this nation did in the world's great crisis. I ask it for reasons of national morality no less than for our material self-interest. I ask it for the sake of our self-respect, our self-esteem. Our children will have to read the history of what we have done during this war. Let us make the chapter that yet remains to be written one that our children shall read with pride; and they will read it only with a feeling of self-abasement unless they read that in the times that tried men's souls we have shown valor and endurance and proud indifference to life when the honor of the flag and the welfare of mankind were at stake.

NOT DOLLARS ALONE

Put the flag on the firing line, and valiant men behind it; and keep it there, sending over a constantly growing stream of valiant men to aid those who have first gone.

In the Civil War, there were many men who went to the front to pay with their bodies for the high faith of their souls. There were some men who hired others to go as sub-

stitutes to the front. Which ones among these men are the ones to whom we look back with pride? Those who faced the bullets or those who paid with dollars to buy the willingness and ability of other men to face them? There is no need to answer.

In exactly the same way there should be no need to answer now the question as to whether we are merely to spend billions of dollars to help others fight, or to stand in the fighting line ourselves. By all means spend the money. A prime essential is to furnish the Allies all the cargo ships they need for food and all the craft they need to help hunt down the submarines. By all means aid them with food and ships and money, and speedily; but do not stop there. Show that we can fight, as well as furnish dollars and vegetables to fighting men. At the earliest possible moment send an expeditionary force abroad, show our German foes and our Allied friends that we are in this war in deadly earnest, that we have put the flag on the firing line, and that we shall steadily increase the force behind that flag to any limit necessary in order to bring the peace of victory in this great contest for democracy, for civilization and for the rights of free peoples.

Now that we are at war, let us make it a real war, not a make-believe war, not a war of limited liability. Germany has been in a state of war with us for two years; but so far we have only been at the receiving end of the game. Some centuries ago the Black Earl Douglas led a Scotch king and a Scotch army against the English, and when the battle-place was reached, the grim old fighter turned to the young king and said, "I have got you up to the ring; and now you must hop." Let us apply this to ourselves! We have walked into the ring; and now we must fight. Fighting does not mean merely parrying. It means hard aggressive hitting. No fight ever was won yet except by hitting. A good rule to remember is never to hit if it is possible to avoid it; but, above all things, never to hit soft. We have gone into the fight; we have determined to hit; and we must not hit soft.

Three months have passed since we broke off diplo-

matic relations with Germany. Read the history of the opening months of the war, and you will get a vivid idea of what the German army would have done to us during those three months if we had had only our own unprepared strength to defend us. We owe our safety at this moment to the British fleet and the French and British armies. I, for one, am not content to rest under that kind of obligation; and I do not believe that my fellow countrymen are content to rest under it. I wish to see us owe our safety to our own strength and our own courage and to the respect we inspire in our foe. We shall inspire no respect if we merely try to parry that foe's blows and not to return them. The only way in which we can return them is by immediately sending an expeditionary force to fight in Europe, a force small at first, but steadily increased until it becomes so formidable that it can end the war. It would be a scandal and a shame if the war ended now with our part in it limited to having furnished dollars behind the shield of other men's bodies. We are in the war. Let us fight it through ourselves, with our own strength and courage, to a triumphant conclusion.

"FOR OUR OWN SAKES"

So I ask that we at once send a force over to the fighting line primarily for our own sakes. Even if the Allies asked us merely to furnish them with money and foodstuffs, such a request would imply so galling a contempt for our manhood that I would with equal scorn refuse it; I would answer, that in war as in peace I put the man above the dollar, and would not rest content to see America make this on her own part merely a dollar war instead of a man's war. But I speak of my personal knowledge when I say that of course the Allies eagerly desire to see us send a fighting force to the front at the earliest moment, and steadily increase its size. It would be absurd for us to expect them as supplicants to ask us to send over men; they would not assume such an attitude and it would be unworthy of us to ask them such a question. I have already seen in the public press the statement from the French Minister of War that

he confidently expects us to send troops to the battle line. In a letter just received from James Bryce, he urges me to support as "specially useful" two steps, of which the first one is "the despatch of an American force to the theatre of war. The moral effect of the appearance in the war line of an American force would be immense." From France, England and Canada, from the highest sources, I have been told the same thing.

Our regular army is so small that such a force, if sent abroad at the earliest moment, ought to consist largely of volunteers. Of course no incompetent men should be given commissions; but to refuse competent men commissions for fear of lack of strength of mind to refuse the incompetent is at the outset to confess incompetency to handle armies. As for the persons who say that such a force of picked volunteers could not be speedily trained, they show utter ignorance of what Canada and Australia have done. I have before me a statement made on behalf of one of the highest military authorities of Canada, as follows, "I can personally say that with the use of the Canadian system of intensive military training your announced plan to have Americans at the front in four months would be entirely practical."

By all means let us set our house in order here at home. Let us obey the President's exhortation and put a stop to waste. Let us do as he outlines in furnishing money and ships and food to the Allies. Let us furnish the warcraft necessary to hunt down the submarines wherever the British Admiralty deems that this service can best be rendered and in whatever manner it desires. Let us, if necessary by Governmental action, see that the fullest use is made of the soil and the largest possible production obtained therefrom. Let us see that skilled workers are employed wherever they can do most good, and all our industrial establishments and transportation lines used to the utmost. Let us see that there is no improper or excessive profit-making by those whose business activities are stimulated by the war. Let us, even in war time, strive efficiently, by legislation and administration and through the activities of private associa-

tions and organizations, to secure a larger social and industrial justice for the men who actually toil, the workingmen on the soil and in industry; the wageworkers and the farmers; so that we may show by our deeds that this is their country, the country of all of us, where the welfare of every honest and hard-working man is the prime object of government, where the flag means justice, and fair play, and reasonable equality of opportunity to all, and where in consequence we have a right to expect, and if necessary to exact, from all the fullest measure of loyal service to the flag. Do all this; and yet remember that it is all of little avail unless we also show by the valor of our fighting men at the front that there is in us the great quality which makes us willing and eager to do and dare and die at need for the things we hold sacred.

APPEAL TO ALL AMERICANS

I make my appeal to all Americans, without distinction of creed or of national origin, of birthplace or of the section in which they live. In time of war like this all party distinctions vanish, and I know only those who are for America and those who are against America. I make my appeal equally to northerner and southerner, to easterner and westerner. I appeal equally to the Protestant and the Catholic, to the Gentile and the Jew, and to the men whose fealty to the great laws of righteousness is given outside the limits of any recognized creed. I care not a rap whether the man was born here or abroad. I care not a rap whether his forefathers came from England, Ireland, Scotland, from Germany, France or Scandinavia. But I demand that this single-hearted loyalty be given to the one flag that floats over all of us, the flag which we are bound to reverence and hold dear to the exclusion of every other.

We are a new nation, by blood and culture akin to, but different from, every nation of Europe. We are in honor bound in every crisis to judge every other nation by its conduct in that crisis. We are bound to pay heed only to our own national honor and need and to the just interests of mankind as a whole—the interests of the men and women

now existing and of the generations yet unborn. We are in honor bound to be swerved from our duty neither by improper friendship for or unworthy antipathy toward any other nation.

I speak as a man who himself has German blood in his veins. The American of the future will have in his veins the blood of many different nationalities, and he will not be American at all unless he is loyal to the principle of the American of the past, who opposed any nationality, if that nationality was a foe to his country and to humanity. The Americans who followed Washington in his first campaign fought against Frenchmen. The Americans who followed him at Trenton fought against Germans. The Americans who followed him at Princeton and Yorktown fought against Englishmen. His followers included men of English descent, like Lighthorse Harry Lee and Greene; of German descent, like Muhlenberg; of Irish descent, like Sullivan. But they were all Americans and nothing more! They treated one another each on his worth as a man without regard to that man's creed or blood. When they were pitted against an enemy they did not ask as to his national origin, but only as to whether he was an enemy of their common country and of that country's flag.

Twice we have fought Great Britain; and in each case the immense majority of our citizens of British origin were undividedly loyal to the United States. And now, when we fight Germany, I know I utter the sentiments of the immense majority of my fellow citizens of German origin, when I say that their undivided allegiance is given to the stars and stripes and to the nation for which the banner stands. I appeal especially to the descendants of those heroes of liberty, the Germans of '48. We battle now for freedom and justice in exactly the spirit of the men of '48 who so valiantly stood against tyranny.

APPEAL FOR DIVISION

If I am allowed to raise the division for which I have asked, I most earnestly hope that it will have as large a proportion as possible of Americans who are in whole or,

like myself, in part, of German blood. The other day I was with the head of the War College at Washington, General Kuhn. He is of pure German blood, his father and his mother being born in Germany. But he is an American, and nothing else! I would welcome the chance, if I am allowed to raise a division, to serve with that division under him at the front; and I would ask no favor of any kind save thus to serve with him and to be judged on my merits by him for my service. In similar fashion, I would gladly serve under General Barry, who is with you here in Chicago, and who is of Irish parentage; or under General Pershing, or of course with deep enthusiasm under my old friend and commander, General Leonard Wood, who like Pershing is of Revolutionary stock; or under any other men of the same type. Each of the men I have named has held my commission when I was President; and I would wish nothing more at the close of my active career, than the chance to serve under one of them or under any other officer of their type. They differ in blood and in creed among themselves and from me. But they and I are Americans and nothing else. Our lives are actuated by the same principles of honor, and our undivided loyalty is given to the same flag.

This is the appeal I make especially to the men and women of the West. I do not merely ask you to go to the front, you men of the West; or to cheer your men when they go, you women. I also ask you to see that I am given the high privilege of making my words good by my deeds and going to the front with you. I have asked leave to be allowed to raise a division to take to the front in the first expeditionary force, under the commander of that force; a division which, after two or three months' preliminary training here, can be taken for intensive training to France, and then put into the trenches at the earliest possible moment that the allied generals deem it fit to render service. I ask that I be allowed to join with others who feel as I do in making good the President's message.

I ask that I and those dearest to me and closest to me by blood shall be given the chance to prove the truth of our endeavor and be sent at the earliest possible moment

under the flag to the firing line. I have led a regiment in battle and commanded a brigade on active service, and since then I have been the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States. Let me raise a division to serve in an army corps under its chief, or to serve in command of a brigade under the division chief. Let me be given the authority to help raise the division or the army corps and to serve under whoever is appointed over me; but let me be put in the position where I can say to the men I address that I do not merely ask them to go to the front, but to come with me to the front; that I am to be allowed the great privilege of sharing with them the hardship and the hazard.

Remember, friends, that what I am asking is not in any way as a substitute for, but as a supplement to, the plan for a great army to be raised on the principle of universal obligatory military service, a plan which I favor with all my heart. I do not ask for men in the classes which would be taken under the Administration's plan for an army raised under the obligatory system. I ask for men who would not otherwise be allowed to go. The force I propose to raise would represent an absolute addition to the nation's military strength, an addition which could be used at once, which would serve to put the flag and keep the flag on the firing line during the time that the great army was itself being raised, and while our flag would otherwise not be on the firing line. The favor I ask is the great favor of being allowed to render a service which I believe that my record entitles me to say that I am able to render.

I ask to be allowed effectively to do my part in showing that the Americans of today are worthy of the great heritage bequeathed to them by their fathers who lived in the days of Lincoln, and their forefathers who lived in the days of Washington; that we are loyal to the spirit of the mighty men of the past; and that we, too, as freemen who prize beyond measure our freedom and who feel that the enjoyment of rights and the observance of duties go hand in hand, are eager, in our turn, to prove that those who are fit to live are not afraid to die.