

Fireside Chat 18: On The Greer Incident (September 11, 1941)

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Roosevelt takes advantage of the Greer incident, in which a German submarine fired on an American destroyer near Iceland, to argue for more American involvement in the war. Citing the incident as an act of aggression, Roosevelt orders escorts to protect Lend Lease convoys and shoot German submarines on sight.

This transcript is abridged and it contains the published text of the speech, not the actual words spoken. There may be some differences between the transcript and the audio/video content.

My fellow Americans:

The Navy Department of the United States has reported to me that on the morning of September fourth the United States destroyer GREER, proceeding in full daylight towards Iceland, had reached a point southeast of Greenland. She was carrying American mail to Iceland. She was flying the American flag. Her identity as an American ship was unmistakable. She was then and there attacked by a submarine. Germany admits that it was a German submarine. The submarine deliberately fired a torpedo at the GREER, followed later by another torpedo attack. In spite of what Hitler's propaganda bureau has invented, and in spite of what any American obstructionist organization may prefer to believe, I tell you the blunt fact that the German submarine fired first upon this American destroyer without warning, and with deliberate design to sink her.

[....]

The United States destroyer, when attacked, was proceeding on a legitimate mission. If the destroyer was visible to the submarine when the torpedo was fired, then the attack was a deliberate attempt by the Nazis to sink a clearly identified American warship. On the other hand, if the submarine was beneath the surface of the sea and, with the aid of its listening devices, fired in the direction of the sound of the American destroyer without even taking the trouble to learn its identity -- as the official German communique would indicate -- then the attack was even more outrageous. For it indicates a policy of indiscriminate violence against any vessel sailing the seas -- belligerent or non-belligerent.

[....]

The important truth is that these acts of international lawlessness are a manifestation of a design (which) -- a design that has been made clear to the American people for a long time. It is the Nazi design to abolish the freedom of the seas, and to acquire absolute control and domination of (the) seas for themselves.



[...]

It is time for all Americans, Americans of all the Americas to stop being deluded by the romantic notion that the Americas can go on living happily and peacefully in a Nazi-dominated world. Generation after generation, America has battled for the general policy of the freedom of the seas. And that policy is a very simple one, but a basic, a fundamental one. It means that no nation has the right to make the broad oceans of the world at great distances from the actual theatre of land war, unsafe for the commerce of others.

That has been our policy, proved time and (time) again, in all of our history. Our policy has applied from (time immemorial) the earliest days of the Republic -- and still applies -- not merely to the Atlantic but to the Pacific and to all other oceans as well. Unrestricted submarine warfare in 1941 constitutes defiance -- an act of aggression -- against that historic American policy. It is now clear that Hitler has begun his campaign to control the seas by ruthless force and by wiping out every vestige of international law, (and) every vestige of humanity.

His intention has been made clear. The American people can have no further illusions about it.

No tender whisperings of appeasers that Hitler is not interested in the Western Hemisphere, no soporific lullabies that a wide ocean protects us from him -- can long have any effect on the hard-headed, far-sighted and realistic American people. Because of these episodes, because of the movements and operations of German warships, and because of the clear, repeated proof that the present government of Germany has no respect for treaties or for international law, that it has no decent attitude toward neutral nations or human life -- we Americans are now face to face not with abstract theories but with cruel, relentless facts.

This attack on the GREER was no localized military operation in the North Atlantic. This was no mere episode in a struggle between two nations. This was one determined step towards creating a permanent world system based on force, on terror and on murder.

And I am sure that even now the Nazis are waiting, waiting to see whether the United States will by silence give them the green light to go ahead on this path of destruction.

The Nazi danger to our Western world has long ceased to be a mere possibility. The danger is here now -- not only from a military enemy but from an enemy of all law, all liberty, all morality, all religion.

There has now come a time when you and I must see the cold inexorable necessity of saying to these inhuman, unrestrained seekers of world conquest and permanent world domination by the sword: "You seek to throw our children and our children's children into your form of terrorism and slavery. You have now attacked our own safety. You shall go no further." Normal practices of diplomacy -- note writing -- are of no possible use in dealing with international outlaws who sink our ships and kill our citizens. One peaceful nation after another has met disaster because each refused to look the Nazi danger squarely in the eye until it had actually had them by the throat.

The United States will not make that fatal mistake.

No act of violence, (or) no act of intimidation will keep us from maintaining intact two bulwarks of American defense: First, our line of supply of material to the enemies of Hitler; and second, the freedom of our shipping on the high seas.

No matter what it takes, no matter what it costs, we will keep open the line of legitimate commerce in these defensive water of ours.

We have sought no shooting war with Hitler. We do not seek it now. But neither do we want peace so much, that we are willing to pay for it by permitting him to attack our naval and merchant ships while they are on legitimate business.

[...] I assume that the German leaders are not deeply concerned, tonight or any other time, by what we Americans or the American Government say or publish about them. We cannot bring about the downfall of Nazi-ism by the use of long-range invective.

But when you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him.

These Nazi submarines and raiders are the rattlesnakes of the Atlantic. They are a menace to the free pathways of the high seas. They are a challenge to our own sovereignty. They hammer at our most precious rights when they attack ships of the American flag -- symbols of our independence, our freedom, our very life.

It is clear to all Americans that the time has come when the Americas themselves must now be defended. A continuation of attacks in our own waters or in waters (which) that could be used for further and greater attacks on us, will inevitably weaken our American ability to repel Hitlerism.

Do not let us (split hairs) be hair-splitters. Let us not ask ourselves whether the Americas should begin to defend themselves after the (fifth) first attack, or the (tenth) fifth attack, or the tenth attack, or the twentieth attack. The time for active defense is now.

[....]

It is no act of war on our part when we decide to protect the seas (which) that are vital to American defense. The aggression is not ours. Ours is solely defense.

But let this warning be clear. From now on, if German or Italian vessels of war enter the waters, the protection of which is necessary for American defense, they do so at their own peril.

The orders which I have given as Commander-in-Chief (to) of the United States Army and Navy are to carry out that policy -- at once. The sole responsibility rests upon Germany. There will be no shooting unless Germany continues to seek it.

That is my obvious duty in this crisis. That is the clear right of this sovereign nation.



FDR on 09/11/1941 preparing for Fireside Chat #18. He is wearing the black armband to mourn the recent death of his mother.

Fireside chats is the term used to describe a series of 30 evening radio conversations (chats) given by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933 and 1944. The shortest of these chats was 13 minutes long and the longest was 44 minutes.