

Defeating the Forces of Darkness: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Atlantic Charter, and Responsibility

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can acting responsibly help contribute to something great than yourself?
- **Virtue:** Responsibility
- **Definition** – Responsibility is accountability to myself and others.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the actions of President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the development of the Atlantic Charter. They will learn from Roosevelt's example about how they can be responsible in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will examine how Franklin D. Roosevelt's acted responsibly in developing the Atlantic Charter.
 - Students will understand the importance of acting responsibly.
 - Students will apply their knowledge to being responsible in their own lives.
- **Background**
 - In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland to start World War II in Europe. Germany invaded and won a quick victory over France in the spring of 1940 before turning its sights on England. The British turned to Winston Churchill in May 1940 as prime minister for his pugnacious stance against the Nazis. The Germans then launched the Battle of Britain aerial campaign against England to prepare for crossing the English Channel to invade in Operation Sea Lion. The steely resolve and nerve of British fighter pilots, the British population, and Churchill defeated the German Air Force in the summer and fall. Meanwhile, the Germans turned their attention to preparing for the massive invasion of Russia which was launched on June 22, 1941. Before this attack, Britain stood virtually alone against Nazi tyranny and desperately wanted the United States to enter the war with the strength of her manpower and industrial might.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was sympathetic to the plight of the British and wanted to bring the United States into the war as an ally of Great Britain to defend civilization against the forces of conquest and darkness. As the New Deal reform movement waned with the onset of the World War II, Roosevelt began preparing America for war. However, many Americans thought President Woodrow Wilson and Wall Street bankers had dragged the U.S. into World War I and were determined to prevent the same mistake again and keep the U.S. out of this Second World War. They were called "isolationists" and included many important and famous people such as aviation hero Charles Lindbergh. However, the American people were broadly against entering the war and felt that the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans protected them against the Axis powers of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. Roosevelt thought that meeting with his counterpart, Churchill, would give them an opportunity to state the universal principles they would fight for and defend in the postwar world, as well as promise much greater U.S. aid to the British and Russians without alienating the isolationist sentiment in America. Roosevelt had a heavy responsibility to promote liberty and self-government for all peoples, especially in that dark time, and help the Allies while abiding by the Constitution and not fighting in a war that the Congress had not yet declared. It was a fine line to skirt, but Roosevelt wanted to do what was right.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Pugnacious
 - Aerial
 - Steely
 - Resolve
 - Virtually
 - Plight
 - Onset
 - Isolationists
 - Axis Powers
 - Sentiment
 - Misstep

- Provoke
- Totalitarianism
- Cruiser
- Impressive
- Pomp and circumstance
- Protocol
- Polio
- Pleasantries
- Orchestrated
- Altar
- Ebullient
- Omnipresent
- Aggrandizement
- Fudge
- Marshalling
- Coy
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Franklin D. Roosevelt? What was his role on this trip?
 - What was Roosevelt’s purpose on the *Augusta*?
 - How did Roosevelt show responsibility in his discussion with Churchill?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - Bercuson, David, and Holger Herwig. *One Christmas in Washington: The Secret Meeting Between Roosevelt and Churchill that Changed the World*. New York: Overlook, 2005.
 - Brands, H.W. *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.
 - Gilbert, Martin. *Churchill and America*. New York: Free Press, 2005.
 - Manchester, William, with Paul Reid. *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Defender of the Realm, 1940-1965*. New York: Little Brown, 2012.
 - Meacham, Jon. *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*. New York: Random House, 2003.

Handout A: Defeating the Forces of Darkness: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Atlantic Charter, and Responsibility

Background

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Narrative

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was steaming out into the Atlantic with some of his generals, admirals, and closest advisors. They discussed the upcoming conference with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the joint response to German expansion in Europe and now in Russia as Nazi armies marched in conquest. Roosevelt and his advisors expected that Churchill sought an American declaration of war. President Roosevelt wanted to help Great Britain and now Russia as much as possible, but he feared that any misstep with an aggressive policy would provoke the isolationists and American public opinion that he had been carefully cultivating to enter the war and defend civilization against the forces of totalitarianism. He also wanted to lay down certain principles in fighting the war and the shape of the postwar world. Roosevelt knew that Churchill desperately wanted American men and arms in the war, and that the United States would be the senior partner in an alliance. The president had a great responsibility weighing on his mind to support the free peoples of the world and enter the world war but also to follow the Constitution. All of this was on his mind as the rocky shores of Newfoundland entered into view.

At dawn on August 9, 1941, at the port of Argentia in Placentia Bay, the American battle cruiser *Augusta* came up alongside the British battleship *Prince of Wales* with an impressive array of pomp and circumstance as well as potential firepower. Because Roosevelt was a head of state and Churchill the king's first minister, protocol called for Churchill to go aboard the American warship where Roosevelt awaited. As Churchill left the *Prince of Wales*, an aide remarked to Churchill on the historic nature of the meeting, and Churchill barked, “Yes, and more so if I get what I want from him.”

Churchill was dressed in a nautical outfit and a sailor's cap as he was welcomed onto the *Augusta*. The president's son, Elliot, in his Army dress uniform helped support his Polio-stricken father whose legs were held in place by his steel supports. As the two shook hands, Roosevelt smiled broadly with his characteristic grin but was without his cigarette holder. Churchill presented a letter of introduction from the king that read, “I have no doubt that your meeting will prove of great benefit to our two countries in the pursuit of our common good.” They exchanged

pleasantries and Roosevelt toured Churchill around the ship and invited Churchill to lunch where the two raised their particular mission: Roosevelt to secure a statement of principles, and Churchill to secure American help in the war. Roosevelt reportedly “liked [Churchill] immediately.”

That night the two dined together on broiled chicken, spinach omelets, and sweet potatoes with their senior officers and staff present. Roosevelt was uncharacteristically silent and fiddled with his pince-nez glasses as he listened intently to Churchill. As they finished their dessert of cupcakes and chocolate ice cream, Churchill launched into an address. “The Americans must come in on our side. You must come in, if you are to survive.”

On Sunday, August 10, Roosevelt and hundreds of American sailors went aboard *Prince of Wales* to celebrate Divine Service, which Churchill had orchestrated to the last detail. The service was delivered by an American and British clergy, and the altar had the respective countries’ flags draped over it. The intermingled sailors and marines of both countries sang several hymns including “Onward Christian Soldiers,” “Eternal Father Strong to Save,” and “O God Our Help in Ages Past,” the last of which caused tears to fall down Churchill’s cheeks. One British participant said, “You would have had to be pretty hard-boiled not to be moved by it all...one rough British sailor sharing his hymn sheet with one American sailor...already in spirit allies.”

After the service, Churchill conferred with Roosevelt and handed him a draft of an Atlantic Charter. Elliot Roosevelt leaned in and confided in Churchill that, “[My father] said quite plainly and without reservation that you are the greatest statesman the world has ever known.” The ebullient prime minister then sailed onto the shore with American diplomat, Averell Harriman, and they walked the rain-swept beach for hours talking while Churchill smoked his omnipresent cigars.

The following day saw formal negotiations between the two leaders to hammer out the exact agreements and wording of the Atlantic Charter. Points one and two asserted that there would be “no territorial aggrandizement” and that no territorial changes would occur without “the freely expressed wishes of the people concerned.” Point three expressed principles of liberty and self-government: “[They pledged to] respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.” Other points included free trade and freedom of the seas. The sixth point emphasized that, “After the destruction of the Nazi tyranny...[a peace] which will afford assurance that all the men in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want.” The last and eighth point expressed support for “the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security,” that would take shape after the war as the United Nations. Churchill would consistently want to fudge on free trade and self-determination because of the British colonial empire, but Roosevelt was committed to taking responsibility for both principles throughout the war and his vision for the postwar world.

Besides the statement of principles, the two countries agreed to some practical, concrete actions for the war. The United States promised Britain 150,000 rifles, and bombers and tanks. The United States also promised that American destroyers would escort British North Atlantic convoys. They agreed to a joint mission to Moscow to discuss the relative arms and supplies needs from the United States for the Soviet Union and Great Britain. They also agreed to restrain Japanese aggression in the Pacific.

After coming to agreement on the Atlantic Charter, Roosevelt and Churchill spent the final evening of the conference having dinner again. Roosevelt thought it was “delightful...We talked about everything except the war! And, Churchill said it was the nicest evening he had had! ...How easy it is to do big things if you can get an hour off.” Churchill and his officers were given full honors as they disembarked from the *Augusta* and then prepared to sail home.

Churchill triumphantly told the crew of *Prince of Wales* as they sailed home: “We have brought back a means of waging war more effective and surer hope of final and speedy victory.” He also broadcast to the British people that, “[The Atlantic Charter] symbolizes something even more majestic—namely: the marshalling of the good forces of the world against the evil forces which are now so formidable and triumphant and which have cast their cruel spell over the whole of Europe and a large part of Asia.” Roosevelt for his part met with reporters and was asked, “Are you any closer to entering the war?” “I should say no,” Roosevelt answered. “May we quote directly,” the reporters followed. “You can quote indirectly,” was the coy presidential response. Roosevelt knew that the United States had

a responsibility to join in defeating the militaristic expansion and defend the principles asserted in the Atlantic Charter and had to follow the constitutional rule of law if the United States were to support the principles it would fight for in World War II.