

President Franklin Roosevelt's "Hands Off the Western Hemisphere" Speech, 1939

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The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1939 vol., War and Neutrality, p. 195-199

Gentlemen of the Pan American Union:

I am glad to come here today on our Pan American forty-ninth birthday.

The American family of Nations pays honor today to the oldest and most successful association of sovereign Governments which exists in all the world.

Few of us realize that the Pan American organization as we known it, has now attained a longer history and a greater catalogue of achievements than any similar group known to modern history. Justly we can be proud of it. With even more right we can look to it as a symbol of great hope at a time when much of the world finds hope dim and difficult. Never was it more fitting to salute Pan American Day than in the stormy present.

For upwards of half a century the Republics of the Western World have been working together to promote their common civilization under a system of peace. That venture, launched so hopefully fifty years ago, has succeeded. The American family is today a great cooperative group facing a troubled world in serenity and calm.

This success of the Western Hemisphere is sometimes attributed to good fortune. I do not share that view. There are not wanting here all of the usual rivalries, all of the normal human desires for power and expansion, all of the commercial problems. The Americas are sufficiently rich to have been themselves the object of desire on the part of overseas Governments; our traditions in history are as deeply rooted in the Old World as are those of Europe.

It was not accident that prevented South America, and our own West, from sharing the fate of other great areas of the world in the nineteenth century. We have here diversities of race, of language, of custom, of natural resources; and of intellectual forces at least as great as those which prevailed in Europe.

What was it that has protected us from the tragic involvements which are today making the Old World a new cockpit of old struggles? The answer is easily found. A new, and powerful ideal—that of the community of nations—sprang up at the same time that the Americas became free and independent. It was nurtured by statesmen, thinkers and plain people for decades. Gradually it brought together the Pan American group of Governments; today it has fused the thinking of the peoples, and the desires of their responsible representatives toward a common objective.

The result of this thinking through all these years has been to shape a typically American institution. This is the Pan American group, which works in open conference, by open agreement. We hold our conferences not as a result of wars, but as the result of our will to peace.

Elsewhere in the world, to hold conferences such as ours, which meet every five years, it is necessary to fight a major war, until exhaustion or defeat at length brings Governments together to reconstruct their shattered fabrics.

Greeting a conference at Buenos Aires in 1936, I took occasion to say this:

"The madness of a great war in another part of the world would affect us and threaten our good in a hundred ways. And the economic collapse of any Nation or nations must of necessity harm our own prosperity. Can we, the Republics of the New World, help the Old World to avert the catastrophe which impends? Yes, I am confident that we can."

I still have that confidence. There is no fatality which forces the Old World towards new catastrophe. Men are not prisoners of fate, but only prisoners of their own minds. They have within themselves the power to become free at any moment.

Only a few days ago the head of a great Nation referred to his country as a "prisoner" in the Mediterranean. A little later, another chief of state, on learning that a neighbor country had agreed to defend the independence of another neighbor, characterized that agreement as a "threat" and an "encirclement." Yet there is no such thing as encircling or threatening, or imprisoning any peaceful Nation by other peaceful nations. We have reason to know that in our own experience.

For instance, on the occasion of a visit to the neighboring Dominion of Canada last summer, I stated that the United States would join the defending Canada were she ever attacked from overseas. Again at Lima, in December last, the twenty-one American Nations joined in a declaration that they would coordinate their common efforts to defend the integrity of their institutions from any attack, direct or indirect.

At Buenos Aires, in 1936, all of us agreed that in the event of any war or threat of war on this continent, we would consult together to remove or obviate that threat. Yet in no case did any American Nation regard any of these understandings as making any one of them a "prisoner," or as "encircling" any American country, or as a threat of any sort or kind.

Measures of this kind taken in this hemisphere are taken as guarantees, not of war but of peace, for the simple reason that no Nation on this hemisphere has any will to aggression, or any desire to establish dominance or mastery. Equally, because we are interdependent, and because we know it, no American Nation seeks to deny any neighbor access to the economic and other resources which it must have to live in prosperity.

In these circumstances, my friends, dreams of conquest appear to us as ridiculous as they

are criminal. Pledges designed to prevent aggression, accompanied by the open doors of trade and intercourse, and bound together by common will to cooperate peacefully, make warfare between us as to outworn and useless as the weapons of the Stone Age. We may proudly boast that we have begun to realize in Pan American relations what civilization in intercourse between countries really means.

If that process can be successful here, is it too much to hope that a similar intellectual and spiritual process may succeed elsewhere? Do we really have to assume that nations can find no better methods of realizing their destinies than those which were used by the Huns and the Vandals fifteen hundred years ago?

The American peace which we celebrate today has no quality of weakness in it! We are prepared to maintain it, and to defend it to the fullest extent of our strength, matching force to force if any attempt is made to subvert our institutions, or to impair the independence of any one of our group.

Should the method of attack be that of economic pressure, I pledge that my country will also give economic support, so that no American Nation need surrender any fraction of its sovereign freedom to maintain its economic welfare. This is the spirit and intent of the Declaration of Lima: the solidarity of the continent.

The American family of Nations may also rightfully claim, now, to speak to the rest of the world. We have an interest, wider than that of the mere defense of our sea-ringed continent. We know now that the development of the next generation will so narrow the oceans separating us from the Old World, that our customs and our actions are necessarily involved with hers, whether we like it or not.

Beyond question, within a scant few years air fleets will cross the ocean as easily as today they cross the closed European seas. Economic functioning of the world becomes therefore necessarily a unit; no interruption of it anywhere can fail, in the future, to disrupt economic life everywhere.

The past generation in Pan American matters was concerned with constructing the principles and the mechanisms through which this hemisphere would work together. But the next generation will be concerned with the methods by which the New World can live together in peace with the Old.

The issue is really whether our civilization is to be dragged into the tragic vortex of unending militarism punctuated by periodic wars, or whether we shall be able to maintain the ideal of peace, individuality and civilization as the fabric of our lives. We have the right to say that there shall not be an organization of world affairs which permits us no choice but to turn our countries into barracks, unless we are to be the vassals of some conquering empire.

The truest defense of the peace of our hemisphere must always lie in the hope that our sister nations beyond the seas will break the bonds of the ideas that constrain them

toward perpetual warfare. By example we can at least show them the possibility. We, too, have a stake in world affairs.

Our will to peace can be as powerful as our will to mutual defense; it can command greater loyalty, greater devotion, greater discipline than that enlisted elsewhere for temporary conquest or equally futile glory. It will have its voice in determining the order of world affairs in the days to come.

This, gentlemen, is the living message which the New World can and does send to the Old. It can be light opening on dark waters. It shows the path of peace.