Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his State of the Union Address before Congress in January 1941 a few months after being elected to a third term as president. In this speech, President Roosevelt traced the isolationist tradition in U.S. foreign policy to the present day. He made the case that the United States was being threatened by forces of tyranny that were currently being fought by the Allies across several continents. It was up to Americans, in Roosevelt’s view, to increase the production of arms to support the Allies. This supply of munitions would also help fulfill the future needs of the United States. However, taxes had to be raised in order to pay for the nation’s increased defense program. Roosevelt knew that he was asking the American people to make significant sacrifices on behalf of the cause against fascism. He, therefore, closed his speech with a historic encapsulation of the rationale for taking up arms against the Axis powers: the Four Freedoms. These four consisted of the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Roosevelt brilliantly summarized the case for war in a way that would be accessible to all Americans. As an orator, he was quite skilled at deconstructing complex ideas and had been doing this with much success through his fireside chats since 1933. The man who had explicated and sought support for his legislative overhaul known as the New Deal was now presenting the foundation for war to Congress and the people.

In the address, Roosevelt emphasized that any peace secured following a fascist victory could not guarantee the liberties cherished by those living in the republic. He carefully elucidated the kind of future that could be expected following an Allied victory: “we look forward to a world founded on four essential human freedoms.” After listing each freedom, he stressed
that these freedoms were to be preserved “everywhere in the world.” The ideas of freedom of speech and freedom of worship were very familiar to Americans as they were contained in the hallowed First Amendment rights that were added to the U.S. Constitution to protect individual liberties against the potential domination of a strong central government. Freedom from want was a slightly more abstract conception but would have resonated deeply with a populace that was still enduring the worst economic crisis in U.S. history. Roosevelt defined the idea as securing to every nation “a healthy peace time life for its inhabitants.” This could be interpreted in a myriad of manners; however, it is significant that Roosevelt inserted this reference to economic freedom. Democracy, then, was not solely about political freedom but also had to include economic liberties like making a livelihood, supporting one’s family, and, ideally, having access to some degree of financial stability. Freedom from fear meant, in Roosevelt’s view, achieving a global reduction of armaments such that nations did not have to worry about acts of physical aggression from their neighbors. Pacifists and conscientious objectors were probably somewhat puzzled by his logic of arguing in favor of increased military production for the ultimate goal of attaining a worldwide arms reduction. In retrospect, the military buildup of the Cold War that immediately followed World War II ultimately overshadowed Roosevelt’s initial vision of freedom from fear. Yet, this idea acknowledged the sovereignty of individual nations that was expanded upon in the Atlantic Charter in the summer of 1941 and, ultimately, the charter for the United Nations in 1945.

The Four Freedoms became a rallying call for the war effort. These essential human liberties positioned the Allies as representing a set of values that was fundamentally different from the authoritarianism of Germany, Italy, and Japan. The formulation of the Four Freedoms was referenced by Roosevelt in other speeches. He, for example, compared them to the Constitution and the Magna Carta; he used them to emphasize the urgency of defeating Hitler; and he highlighted them when declaring a “day of mobilization for freedom and human rights” on December 15, 1941. The theme of the Four Freedoms was then depicted in a variety of media for public consumption. For instance, textiles with motifs based on the Four Freedoms designed by Jay Thorpe were available for purchase by patriotic households. The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) constructed a
sizeable photographic montage by artist Jean Carlu that rendered the Four Freedoms and measured fifteen by thirty feet. It was displayed near Fourteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., so that anyone strolling by could take a moment to contemplate the images (see figure 2). When, in 1943, artist Norman Rockwell illustrated the Four Freedoms with scenes from daily American life in the Saturday Evening Post, they became indelibly etched in the popular culture of the mobilization for war.

President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met at sea in August 1941 where they discussed, among other issues, the details of the Lend-Lease declaration that would enable the Allies to purchase munitions from the United States and pay for them later. The two leaders also agreed on a set of principles with regard to the defense of their nations in the face of fascist aggression. The ensuing Atlantic Charter enumerated the common principles for which the Allies stood. In addition to aiding the complete
destruction of Nazism, these included: supporting no territorial changes that did not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the people concerned, respect for the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live, and seeing sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who had been forcibly deprived of them.\(^3\) The spirit of the Four Freedoms was definitely apparent in the Atlantic Charter’s emphasis on cooperating for economic security and assuring that all men “may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want.” The philosophy of the war (that is, freedom versus tyranny) had now been articulated sufficiently such that Americans knew exactly what the Allies represented ideologically when the United States officially declared war after the attack on the base at Pearl Harbor in early December 1941. National unity was, thus, efficiently achieved for a mobilization effort based on defending the Four Freedoms.

Still, the idea of the Four Freedoms, eloquent though it might have been, was not only vague but fundamentally problematic. From the perspective of African Americans, basic liberties that were supposed to be protected by the Constitution were not being defended. The right to vote was being systematically blocked in the South, and the right to have access to education was obstructed by segregation law. Freedom from want and freedom from fear, especially, had been neglected. Unemployment and job discrimination were consistently acute for African Americans during the Great Depression. New Deal programs, like Social Security, excluded many black workers. Racial violence, such as lynching, was a reality in African American communities. Likewise, the provisions of the Atlantic Charter, while laudable, were imbued with an inherent paradox coming from two nations that had occupied foreign territories and built empires without respecting the sovereign rights of the people therein. Historian Howard Zinn has posed the provocative question: did the Allies “represent something significantly different, so that their victory would be a blow to imperialism, racism, totalitarianism, militarism, in the world?”\(^4\) This query can be pondered from multiple perspectives: Britain was a strong imperialist force and tried to maintain its empire for as long as possible; the Soviet Union, an ally by the summer of 1941, was largely totalitarian under Stalin’s rule; the United States’ record on race relations was abysmal and would be for many years to come.
Nevertheless, while the United States was terribly compromised with regard to race, it was the African American community that employed the Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter as a basis from which to organize during the war. Civil rights activists, in groups like the Southern Negro Youth Congress, pressured the government to live up to the ideas embedded in the Four Freedoms for all American citizens, and anticolonial activists, like those in the Council on African Affairs, lobbied for the Allies to implement the principles of the Atlantic Charter for people in Africa. These were the people who worked to ensure that an Allied victory would be a blow to racism and imperialism.

In a very interesting way, the framework outlined in both the Four Freedoms speech and the Atlantic Charter provided a foundation from which black activists could argue persuasively for full civil rights and colonial self-determination. Doxey Wilkerson, a journalist, activist, and member of the Council on African Affairs, observes of the war years, “the events of this period are forging new relationships between the Negro people and the rest of the nation.” These new relationships included African Americans serving in the armed forces in large numbers. African American activists also utilized many strategies during the transformative moment of World War II to protest for freedom. The Pittsburgh Courier newspaper advocated for a Double Victory, or Double V, which would defeat both fascism overseas and discrimination in the United States.

And through campaigns like A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement, African Americans were agitating for jobs in the defense industries. Randolph’s program was largely responsible for pressuring Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802 in June 1941, which outlawed racial discrimination in defense hiring and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to monitor hiring practices. Randolph was not satisfied, however, and called for economic security through union organizing, freedom for Africa, and the dismantling of segregation through nonviolent direct action.

Writer Langston Hughes draws upon Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms in a poignant essay from 1944. Hughes laments the ironies of life under segregation as he explains that trains traveling South began the practice of segregated seating at the stop in Washington, D.C. Even if a black passenger had been sitting comfortably in a rail car all the way from New York, he had to
move to the Jim Crow car once the train reached the nation's capital. “To a southbound Negro citizen told at Washington to change to a segregated coach the Four Freedoms have a hollow sound, like distant lies not meant to be the truth,” Hughes discerns. The rhetoric out of Washington was voided by the injustices that violated the freedoms of African Americans in that very city every day.

Educator Mary McLeod Bethune, who was a supporter of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, also referenced the symbolism of the Four Freedoms to African Americans. She points out in an essay that since “the radios and press of the world” have “drummed” the Four Freedoms into the minds of black Americans, it would lead one to believe “that the world accepts as legitimate” their claims to these rights. “What, then, does the Negro want?” she asks. The “answer is very simple,” she notes. “He wants . . . what the Four Freedoms establish.”

The Southern Negro Youth Congress and the Council on African Affairs utilized the promises inherent in the Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter during the war years. SNYC worked to secure employment and protested against acts of violence in the spirit of the Four Freedoms. The council employed the language of the Atlantic Charter and challenged the Allies to apply those assurances to people in the colonized world. In the eyes of activists in SNYC and the council, the Four Freedoms had to apply equally to the South as well as other parts of the United States just as the Atlantic Charter pertained to Africa as much as it did to the rest of the world.

SNYC 1942–1945: “Freedom’s Children, to Arms!”

In the spring of 1942, while the wound of the Pearl Harbor attack was still fresh and gaping in the American consciousness, the United States lurched forward in its mobilization effort now that the country was fully absorbed by the war. Since the conflict had directly penetrated a U.S. base, antifascism became a rallying cry for U.S. citizens who were from a range of political, social, economic, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds. The call against Hitlerism that was sounded by the Southern Negro Youth Congress and other groups sympathetic to the invasion of the Soviet Union in