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Five Things You Should Know About FDR's Pearl Harbor Speech

The address that rallied American support for WWII still resonates today

DALLAS—December 3—How would December 7—Pearl Harbor Day—be remembered without President Franklin D. Roosevelt's powerful address to Congress on December 8, 1941? Historians see that speech as a turning point in American history, uniting the country in a patriotic surge of support for the “good war.” In fact, FDR's address was chosen to be among the 134 works included in *Milestone Documents in American History* (Schlager Group, 2008), placing it among the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Bill of Rights in historic importance.

“FDR's address is a masterwork of leadership communication in crisis,” says Neil Schlager, founder and president of Schlager Group. “Sixty-six years later, it still conveys the emotion, immediacy, and impact of the Japanese attack. No wonder the ‘Greatest Generation’ rose in such resolute response.”

While many can easily recall FDR's catchphrase “a day which will live in infamy,” the historians and editors behind *Milestone Documents in American History* want Americans to know more. For example . . .

1. ***No speechwriters, please.*** FDR dictated virtually every word of his address to his secretary, Grace Tully. The only exception was the next-to-last sentence, the phrasing of which was suggested by his close adviser Harry Hopkins.

2. ***The facts speak for themselves.*** With the exception of his dramatic reference to “infamy” and one mention of “treachery,” FDR never offered a personal opinion on the Japanese attacks in his address. Instead, he solemnly detailed the facts of the event, relying on listeners to draw their own conclusions.

3. ***A foreshadow of things to come.*** FDR's call for “absolute victory” presaged the later decision to wage war until the Japanese surrendered unconditionally. This grand call for total victory also helps to explain why the United States later decided to drop the atomic bomb on Japan.

4. ***Short but powerful.*** The address to Congress contains just 25 sentences, fewer than 500 words, and was delivered in about 7 minutes. In that brief address, FDR was so persuasive that within 33 minutes, a declaration of war passed unanimously in the Senate, and in the House of Representatives only one dissenting vote was cast (Jeannette Rankin, a pacifist from Montana, the first woman elected to Congress).

5. ***Defining a historic moment.*** “But always will our whole Nation remember the character of the onslaught against us,” said FDR, positioning the attack as a defining event in the country’s history. Roosevelt’s use of the future tense—“always will”—reflected a sense of moral certainty that reinforced his role as commander in chief.

To read FDR’s address, visit schlagergroup.com.

Milestone Documents in American History from Schlager Group explores more than 130 works that shaped the United States, from its founding through its march into the 21st century. Its unique approach marries riveting, readable expert analysis with primary sources, focusing new attention on important classics and giving contemporary documents their place among the icons. Visit www.schlagergroup.com for more information.