



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

## Handout A: Narrative

### 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 defiant 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 needed the United States and its manpower and industrial might to enter the war.

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.

These “isolationists” included many important and famous people such as aviation hero Charles Lindbergh. Many American people were 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 felt a heavy responsibility to promote liberty and self-government for all peoples, especially in that dark time. However, he needed to help the Allies while abiding by the Constitution and not fighting in a war that Congress had yet to declare. It was a fine line to skirt, but Roosevelt wanted to do what was right.

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt was steaming out into the Atlantic with a heavy weight on his shoulders. He was on his way to meet with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to discuss a joint response to German expansion in Europe as well as Russia. Roosevelt and his advisors expected

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that Churchill sought an American declaration of war. President Roosevelt wanted to help Great Britain and Russia as much as possible, but he feared that any misstep with an aggressive policy would provoke the isolationists and American public opinion. Instead, Roosevelt hoped to slowly convince citizens that the country ought to enter the war to defend liberty. He also wanted to lay down certain principles in fighting the war that would shape the postwar world. Roosevelt knew that Churchill desperately wanted American men and arms in the war, a fact that placed the United States as 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. 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, to which 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, helped support his Polio-stricken father, whose legs were held in place by steel supports. As the two shook hands, Roosevelt smiled broadly with his characteristic grin. 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 then had 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, stating, "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. An American and British clergy delivered the service, 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 commented, "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 the Atlantic Charter. 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

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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 remove mentions of free trade and self-determination because they spelled the end 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, as well as bombers and tanks. The United States also promised that American destroyers would escort British convoys in the North Atlantic. 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 reaching an agreement on the Atlantic Charter, Roosevelt and Churchill spent the final evening of the conference having dinner again. 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 asked. “You can quote indirectly,” was the coy presidential response.

Roosevelt believed that the United States had a responsibility to help defeat the Nazi’s militaristic expansion and defend the principles asserted in the Atlantic Charter, all while following the constitutional rule of law if the United States were to support the principles it would fight for in World War II.