

## First Place High School:

**Baird Johnson, 10th Grade, Stuyvesant High School, New York, NY**

### I'm Ready

I have always been fascinated with the Second World War, and the events directly preceding it. I was not familiar with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's '*Arsenal of Democracy*' quote, but had heard of his fireside chats. It turns out they are available online; not just the text, you can actually hear FDR address the nation. I was wholly engrossed for more than half an hour. As I listened, I could hear FDR turn the pages. I imagined my grandfather sitting next to a radio all those years ago. He was my age then. As he listened, did he suspect we would enter the war? Did he know he would soon enlist? Seventy-seven years later, holding a laptop not a radio, and listening intently, I wondered if it could happen again. And if so, would I be ready?

FDR set a precedent when he said, "[America] must be the great Arsenal of Democracy ... We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war." For more than half a century, the United States has been the '*Arsenal of Democracy*,' promoting democratic government worldwide. We have met with mixed results ranging from the momentous, history altering victory in WWII to the complete and utter disaster that was Vietnam. More recently, we have attempted to aid in establishing democratic governments in various Middle Eastern countries, meeting with little to no success. Since WWII, the US has been the unquestioned leader of the free world, and while are not perfect, the human condition has improved at an unprecedented pace under the guiding hand of the US. With America acting as the '*Arsenal of Democracy*,' more freedom has been extended to more people in more places. Yet, for the first time, our position as Democracy's Arsenal is threatened. A series of uninformed, isolationist policies put the US in a position to become only an observer on the world stage -- a tremendous mistake with drastic and dire consequences.

The concept of responding to non-military threats as if they were direct dangers to national security was not new in 1940. In the seventeenth century, European powers (France, Britain, Belgium, Italy etc.) believed the establishment of colonies by rival countries, through economic effects, was an imminent threat to their very existence. This mentality caused a wave of rampant imperialism known as the Scramble for Africa. The thought that countries with a similar style of government should band together and protect one another was, however, original and influential. Following WWII, the United Nations was formed as a respected, international organization trying to prevent future humanitarian crises or global conflicts like the one that had just concluded. The world, led by the US, recognized its obligation to protect the world's people from their respective governments.

Right doesn't always prevail, and the US has not always been right in its actions. Nonetheless, it is paramount to the success of our country (and the world) that we continue to uphold the mantle of liberty and justice for all, no matter the weight. The prompt asks me to relate FDR's quote to "emergencies 'as serious as war itself' faced by our country and our world." We are also asked our opinions as to how to solve these problems. I'm watching as Democracies and democratic governments are eroding around the world. "President" Erdogan of Turkey (a country with the desire to join the European Union) continues to infringe upon the basic freedom of his citizens. The Philippines has a group of assassins hired by the government to murder drug offenders. Most alarmingly, Poland, a member of the European Union and cornerstone of post Cold War politics is in the midst of a collapse of freedom. After coming into power through free elections in 2015, the Polish Law and Justice party passed sweeping reforms limiting the judicial system and the free press -- seemingly in an attempt to reenact Soviet policies. These countries

claim to be a democracy, but they are failing their people. The United States simply stands by. I'm sixteen. I'm not sure what we should do to remedy those situations, but I am certain we cannot do nothing. The US does not have to act as the world's police, but it is unacceptable to stand idle as foreign democracies crumble.

At home, we need to secure our elections from foreign interference. We must also abruptly halt all attempts to suppress the vote. "Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves and the only way they could do this is by not voting," spoken by none other than FDR. America always fares better when more Americans can make their voices heard on election day. The attacks on our institutions must also cease. Eroding trust in the government at home lessens our influence abroad. Interestingly, confidence in the social systems of the US is something FDR discusses just prior to his quote about the Arsenal of Democracy.

We mustn't take the word "Arsenal" (defined as a collection of weapons and military equipment stored by a country, person, or group) too literally. We are not democracy's violent enforcement agency, nor are we simply a threatening pile of nuclear weapons. An integral part of the United States' arsenal is diplomacy. The lack of diplomacy caused both World Wars. It was the Marshall Plan, not Little Boy, that forever changed geopolitics and allowed the world to heal. As John Adams said, "Without the pen of Paine, the sword of Washington would have been wielded in vain." Due to the proposed slashing of the State Department's budget, it will become increasingly difficult for the United States to lead peace talks and other diplomatic efforts around the world. Yet we must continue to try. The US has been Democracy's Arsenal for decades, and it is not a position that we, or the world can afford to lose. I'm ready.

## **Second Place High School:**

**Jack Acomb, 12th Grade, Hopkins High School, Minnetonka, MN**

### **Democratic Cooperation**

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared the United States to be the "Arsenal of Democracy" in 1940, the world was in violent crisis. Major fascist and authoritarian powers in Europe and Asia threatened to subjugate large portions of the globe, and the United States itself had only just recently climbed from the depths of the Great Depression. With dictators clawing at the doors of our allies, it was only natural that we would lend our arsenal to the cause. However, over time, the Arsenal has been bent to justify more than just support. Rather than acting in the collaborative and diplomatic spirit befitting of a democracy, there has been a worrying trend of the "Arsenal of Democracy" becoming the unilateral judge, jury, and executioner. Our claim to singular democratic authority has led to the blending of moral and ideological lines, when we ought to be embracing cooperation now more than ever.

During WWII, there were fairly clear-cut ideological lines to guide our foreign policy. The democratic governments of the Allies squared off against the authoritarian governments of the Axis. To many Americans, there was a "good side" grappling against a "bad side". In large part, this perception was valid. The German Reich's persecution of Jews, homosexuals, communists, and other minority groups was horrific. Similarly, the ideologies of racial and ethnic superiority upheld by the fascist dictators openly ignore the values that ought to be upheld by a fair and equal society. Given that, there was ample justification for the United States to stand diplomatically and militarily against these forces; the ideals on which the Constitution was written demanded it.

However, ending the story there would miss the nuance that defines the period and the decades to follow. The United States and the rest of the Allies, try as they might, were no perfect beacons of democracy or equality. There are various examples of these shortcomings, but there are none more ironic than Franklin Roosevelt's own order for the relocation of Japanese American citizens to internment camps. For a country that upholds "Liberty and Justice for all", such an action seems irreconcilable; this is the very thing the Arsenal of Democracy is intended to prevent. In the minds of many American people, however, these black spots are ignored or forgotten; history, as they say, is written by the victors.

Therein lies the problem: the United States claims the title of "Arsenal of Democracy" without recognizing its own shortcomings or capacity for injustice. Simply, we ought not be acting alone on behalf of democracy. It is far too easy to see ourselves as the infallible "good side", a mentality that encourages us to ignore the lessons of the past, and act unilaterally when we ought to cooperate. Take, for example, the Iranian coup d'état in 1953. The democratically elected government of Iran was removed by the CIA, and replaced by a strongman monarch known as the Shah. The reasoning, like many others, was well intended; a coup could ensure the survival of "American interests" and limit Soviet influence. However, despite ostensibly being done in the name of democracy, American actions resulted in the very opposite for the people of Iran. Not only is our establishment of the Iranian Shah a moment of bitter irony—the American colonists themselves rebelled from a monarch to gain our own independence—but it's an example of when the "Arsenal of Democracy" gives us the authority to harm global democracy in the name of our own. The overthrow of Iranian democracy paradoxically became a victory for Americans, rather than a massive step backward for both peoples in the long run.

Ultimately, the United States has the power to be an amazing proponent of democracy and liberty worldwide. The vision that "all men are created equal" can change the world, and that is what the United States ought to be striving for in the 21st century. However, in the words of an American icon, "with great power comes great responsibility". To allow for our values of liberty, equality, and self-determination to spread further, the Arsenal of Democracy that Roosevelt envisioned has to become more—a "Toolbox of Democracy" perhaps. That means that the United States can't be the international puppet master, but instead a diplomatic member of the larger global community. We must learn to respect views that differ from our own on the global stage.

The United Nations remains a great tool to embrace this collaborative spirit. For a contemporary example, rather than ignoring and vetoing the world's objections to moving the Israeli capital to Jerusalem, we ought to attempt diplomatic dialogue until there is no further option. Respecting the wills of all members of the global community, instead of only a chosen few, is critical to maintaining our democratic ethics. Similarly, events like the Paris Climate Conference ought not be easily dismissed; they are representations of the global democratic consensus, and the United States not participating would be undermining to that valuable cooperation.

It is the responsibility of a democratic society to address the ills of all citizens, and it's time that the American people look beyond our own walls and help fulfill that responsibility to the global democratic community. It is the United States' role to set the standard, both within its own borders and externally, of what a successful democracy can truly accomplish when we work together. Roosevelt got one thing right about the Arsenal of Democracy: the power of mobilization. Imagine if the American people mobilized against poverty the way that we mobilized for war; the result would be inspiring. There are issues that affect every community and country on the planet, whether it's poverty, climate change, or healthcare access. We have the diplomatic toolbox to improve the lives of citizens from every country; we just must keep the patience to use it. When we combine with neighbors collaboratively rather than competitively, we can achieve things greater than the sum of our parts. That's how a free world ought to be led.

## **Third Place High School:**

**Daniel Coppinger, 12th Grade, Simsbury High School, Simsbury, CT**

### **THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY: MY BROTHER'S KEEPER**

*God's hand, like a sign-board, is pointing toward democracy, and saying to the nations of the earth, "This is the way: walk ye in it."*

*HENRY WARD BEECHER, Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit*

Throughout history, the United States of America has often had to make the difficult decision whether or not to cross the blurred line of entanglement in another country's affairs. Sometimes this engagement comes in the form of military force and at other times in the form of material support such as medical aid, food, shelter, and military supplies. How America "picks a side" is often political in nature, but it is not always an easy one. It requires serious consideration of fiscal constraints, casualties to both civilians and military personnel, and what if any, repercussions lay further down the road after rendering such support. Choosing one side over another always has ethical, moral, and material consequences. People around the world have argued over whether America should be the world's peacekeeper, but while the rest of the world tends to take a backseat to their neighbor's plights, America has often been what Franklin Roosevelt referred to in his December 29, 1940 Fireside Chat, the "Arsenal of Democracy."

In this chat Roosevelt told the American people that "If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and the high seas...It is no exaggeration to say that all of us, in the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun." Roosevelt was trying to convey to his listening audience that in order to preserve universal freedom for America, it was necessary for America to provide universal freedom to all people. This required America to do everything it could to assist and sustain those nations who could not defend themselves against the aggressors of the liberty that Americans holds sacred. Roosevelt's words urged citizens to provide America's allies with "more ships, more guns, more plans- more of everything. We must be the great arsenal of democracy."

Since the Revolutionary War, America has fought against tyrannical forms of government. It continued with WWI, WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and our present-day military involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have devoted countless military and civilian lives, and trillions of dollars for the preservation of not only our own but other nation's liberty.

The "Arsenal of Democracy" is not an abstract concept to me. I am Korean and I was born in Seoul, South Korea in 2001 and adopted by American parents when I was six months old. My American grandfather fought in the Korean War after the North Korean Communist army crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel and invaded South Korea in 1950. In just three years millions of people were killed, including almost 40,000 Americans. As a member of George Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, my grandfather fought in bloody battles in a war that is now mostly forgotten by my generation. He watched American soldiers die on foreign soil, the soil of my country. But he told me that these men fought for a just cause because democracy was not just the right of Americans, but the right of every human being. He, along with many other military personnel, gave past generations of my family a chance for a better life. Had it not been for American military support in the defense of South Korea's democracy millions of other South Koreans would have been living under a brutal, communist dictatorship, as Kim Jung-un, his father Kim Jung-Il, and his grandfather Kim Il-sung, have clearly displayed to the rest of the civilized world.

Roosevelt's Fireside Chat was given only one year before America entered the battlefields of WWII. Up until then, the U.S. was preparing to defend itself if needed, but it soon realized that it was also the only

country with the ability to produce the quantity and quality of armaments to other democracies threatened by oppression from the Axis governments. President John F. Kennedy said, “The 1930’s taught us a clear lesson; aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately lead to war.” It is for this reason that America has a long history of arming, training, and providing assistance and aid to foreign nations.

My father served twenty-two years in the Air National Guard, which included active duty supporting the war in Afghanistan. He, along with other members of my extended family that have served in the military, helped me realize that American military personnel has given the world the greatest gift one human being can give to another... to lay down their life for their fellow man.

We live in a world where many countries are still governed by dictators and terrorists who threaten people with imprisonment or death unless they convert to their way of ideological thinking, who deny women the right to vote, equality, or to an education, and who tell their citizens how they must worship God. The “Arsenal of Democracy” that Roosevelt talked about so long ago is still very much a tactical necessity. It is essential for our own national security, and it is ethically the “right thing to do.” In today’s globalized world, no nation stands alone. As Edmund Burke once said; “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men should do nothing.”

#### **High School Honorable Mentions:**

Joseph Chichelo, Hanover Park High School, East Hanover, NJ

Kimani Coye, Lusher Charter School, New Orleans, LA

Timothy Kolb, Jr., Lakeshore High School, Mandeville, LA

Anna Krsnak, AJ Dimond High School, Anchorage, AK

Amanda Kujiraoka, Aragon High School, San Mateo, CA

Molly Martinez, Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Dallas TX

Heymy Patino, Benito Juarez Community Academy, Chicago, IL