



5-25-1941

## A Voice From the Cracker-Barrel, May 25, 1941

Alexander Woollcott

Fight for Freedom Committee

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/fmhw\\_secondworldwar\\_documents](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/fmhw_secondworldwar_documents)



Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

[Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Woollcott, Alexander and Committee, Fight for Freedom, "A Voice From the Cracker-Barrel, May 25, 1941" (1941). *World War II Era Documents, 1939-1945*. 102.

[https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/fmhw\\_secondworldwar\\_documents/102](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/fmhw_secondworldwar_documents/102)

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the World War II Era (1939-1945) at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in World War II Era Documents, 1939-1945 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact [aprock@ursinus.edu](mailto:aprock@ursinus.edu).

May, 1941

# A Voice from the Cracker-Barrel

Alexander Woollcott

*(A talk broadcast nationally over the Columbia network, CBS. Sunday evening, May 25th. Speaking under the auspices of Fight for Freedom, Inc., Mr. Woollcott took the cue for his title from a remark dropped by President Roosevelt at a recent press conference.)*

This is Woollcott speaking.

All over this country there is a great murmur of voices. Confabs from countless cracker-barrels. Talk under many an evening lamp. Men and women, old and young, rich and poor, wise and foolish, all talking freely about the war. How long will it last? How will it turn out? Are we in it now? Can we stay out of it? Listen and you will hear something as unmistakable as the footfalls of fate. The historic sound of the American people making up its mind.

To that discussion I feel I must add my two cents worth. This is why I am making this broadcast, speaking from Boston on a Sunday in May. I have a story to tell. A true story which seems to me to be timely. But it will not take me long and I shall leave it to the last. First let me do a bit of thinking out loud, here on my cracker-barrel.

It is my guess that most people in this country have it quite clear in their minds what this war is about. The people of Germany, always strong in their conviction that they are a master race and now in the grip of an armed gang, headed by an able tricky and murderous adventurer named Adolf Hitler, have set out to take command of the world. The war is being fought to decide whether or not they will get away with it. Leading in the fight to stop Hitler in his tracks are the people of the British Commonwealth of Nations. To them, when he took command, Winston Churchill offered blood and tears and toil and sweat. He brought them one thing more. Self respect! That is an imponderable by-product but it strikes me as important and enviable. Envidable? Well, if you want to know just where you do stand in this whole matter, ask yourself one question. Which would you rather be right now—an Englishman in England or a Frenchman in France?

From the outbreak of this war the sympathies of America were immediate and almost unanimous. There was never any question about that. The people of this country had got Hitler's number right at the start. From the first, by an overwhelming majority and as evidence of their natural inclination toward fundamental decency, they were against him. I suppose that the history of this nightmare year will someday be written by an American who at this moment is lying in a cradle pensively sucking his thumb. Unless in his prime all expression in this country is dictated, there is no

reason why his work should not be honest and, if so, I do hope he makes it quite clear that the immediate opposition to Hitler which developed in this country was not achieved by British propaganda. It was achieved by German propaganda. We knew all about Hitler but our sources were original. Our notion that a world dominated by him would be unfit to live in comes from his own words, his own declared intentions, his own acts as reported to us in accounts OK'ed by his own censors. From the first, we knew he was an enemy and if we are not at war with him right now it is not because of any obstruction put in the way by the isolationist senators nor because we Americans are—as we are so often inaccurately described—a peace-loving people. If we are not officially at war with Hitler today it is for one reason. It is because, as things stand right now—but may not stand for long—he cannot get at us.

Yes, we the people were immediately and properly partisan in this war. And when, in the slow processes of democracy that judgment found political expression, we guaranteed the beleaguered English our full material support. By the pledges of both candidates in the last election, by the testimony of every poll yet taken by Dr. Gallup, by the action of our representatives in Congress and of the President himself, we pledged full aid to England. Ex-Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh now urges that this assistance be withdrawn. He wants us to break our promise in the matter, to run out on the British and, so curious is his mentality, he thinks to encourage us in such base desertion by assuring us that England is going to be defeated. On this point he may be right. I would not know about that. Neither would he. If the words of our retired eagle ever reach as far as England, Mr. Churchill must derive some comfort from his knowledge that all fighters in a tight place have heard such talk since the world began. Among Washington's discomforts during the long winter at Valley Forge was the repeated prediction from the Lindberghs of his day that he didn't have a chance. Yes, Lindbergh keeps announcing the doom of England and always his statement is received with cheers and bursts of applause. This gives you a rough idea of what kind of people bulk large in his mass-meetings.

For here is a fact which Lindbergh and his colleagues of the America First Committee must face. Whether they admit it or not, whether they like it or not, whether, indeed, that is any part of their purpose, they are working for Hitler. Have you any doubt—any doubt at all—that Hitler would have been glad to pay Lindbergh an immense amount—millions—for the work he has done in the past year?

Indeed, if Lindbergh shares the opinion of Hitler held by the rest of us—on this point, to be sure, he has thus far been ominously silent—his heart must skip a beat when, in the still watches of the night, he realizes that if he had returned to this country as Hitler's paid and trusted agent, his public activity would have been in every particular just what it has been to date.

Now don't get me wrong about this. I doubt that Lindbergh has taken or would take German money. It so happens that we do not know, thanks to the reticence of General Wood, have been unable to find out just who has put up all the money for the costly goings-on of the America First Committee. But I should be greatly surprised to learn that any considerable part of that money came directly or indirectly from Hitler. That does not alter the fact that they are all working for him. For they, like all the rest of us, are trapped in a tragic irony. In this world today there is no such thing as neutrality. You are either for Hitler or against him. You either fight him or you help him.

All of which is important but not fundamental. Even though the America First Committee is being cheered on and helped by some of the most vicious people in this country, even though much of what has been said by its principal speakers strikes *me* as fraudulent and poisonous nonsense, its fundamental argument can be and has been advanced by some honorable men and women—the argument that in the long run the prospect of the good life in America will best be served if we try to make this continent a fortress and retire inside it. To make sense, they must assume that even with Hitler in command of the Atlantic and in cahoots with Japan, we'll be left unmolested to build that fortress. If they really think that, they do not live in America at all. They are already in Paradise—a fool's paradise.

But even if the America First Committee can fairly be described as a Fifth Column, the really dangerous one is the Fifth Column that is in your heart and mine—the Fifth Column that is in all part-time citizens, in each of us who would so like to go our pleasant ways and pretend all this is no affair of ours. Why should we be bothered? Business as usual. Pleasure as usual. Look into your heart and see.

I am resisting the Fifth Column in mine when I now stand up to be counted—*ich kann nicht anders*—as one who thinks the Fight for Freedom Committee is more nearly right in this matter—the Committee of which the faith was magnificently expressed by President Conant of Harvard in a broadcast made over this network just three weeks ago. He wound up with these words:

“In my opinion strategy demands we fight tomorrow, honor and self interest that we fight before the British Isles are lost. But whether we fight tomorrow or on a later day, we shall before long close our ranks and fight to win.”

And now for that story I promised to tell. I have been hoarding it for years as part of a book I still hope to publish in January. Recently it has occurred to me that perhaps this, if ever, is the time to tell it. If you like titles for your stories this one might be called “The Judge's Last Opinion.”

The scene is the city of Washington. The year, '33. The date, March 8th—Thursday, March 8th, 1933. If you are old enough, think back and try to recall your own state of mind on that day. The dizzy spiral of the depression had been in progress for more than three years. Paralysis had set in. From coast to coast all you could hear was the sound of closing banks. Franklin Roosevelt had been in office only four days and was yet to make that first fireside chat which so put heart into a bewildered people. On that eighth of March, a day on which the new President must have been fairly busy, he managed somehow to take time off in the afternoon to pay his respects to an old man living in a small brick house in I Street. Hat in hand, he went to call on the late Justice Holmes—Oliver Wendell Holmes, the younger, great son of a great father, himself as noble an embodiment of the human spirit, I think, as this continent has yet produced. March 8th was his birthday. He was 92.

Until the year before he had remained in harness, retiring at last with no great fanfare. Indeed, the only announcement was the one he made to the man at the Supreme Court whose job it is to keep charge of the Judges' robes. To him the old Judge said gruffly, “Won't be down tomorrow.” And that was that. Thereafter he needed only to write out his will and wait for the end. That will, by the way, is a unique document. Except for certain personal bequests, he left the bulk of his fortune to a single legatee—a legatee already deeply indebted to him but to whom he felt he owed everything he had and was. His heir was the United States of America.

Now, with that off his mind, he was living in retirement and on his 92nd birthday here was the new President coming to call. The visitors—Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt and their eldest son—took him by surprise and found him in some sheepish confusion. You see, he was busy rearranging his library, puttering over the shelves so that his sinful supply of detective stories would be hidden behind his law-books. The visit was a great success. Soon the old Judge had stopped calling Roosevelt “Mr. President” and was addressing him as “young feller.” They had a high old time talking about fishing and prize-fighting. At last the visitors felt they must go.

At the door, in the moment of parting, the tone grew suddenly solemn. Turning to his host the President said, “Mr. Justice Holmes, you are the great American. You have lived the great life. You’ve seen everything, known everything. What is your advice to me?” At that the old Judge straightened up, taking on again for a moment the stature that had been his when, as a youngster in the 20th Massachusetts, he had fought at Antietam and Fredericksburg. “Mr. President,” he said—not “young feller” any more, mind you—“Mr. President, you’re in a war. I’ve been in a war. There’s only one thing to do in a war. Form your battalions and carry the fight to the enemy.”

Well, there you are. The Judge’s last opinion. Of course he was talking about another kind of war than the one unleashed overseas now more than a year and a half ago. He was talking about a war against greed and injustice and ignorance and panic and despair. But I find myself wondering how often the words of that opinion come back to the man to whom they were addressed. How often, when he is alone at night in the White House, carrying, as he must, every hour of the day and night, a burden which no one in his senses could envy him, does the President among all the voices that pour counsel into his ears, especially now on the eve of the report to the nation which he must make on Tuesday, how often does he hear once again the voice of Justice Holmes:

“Mr. President, you’re in a war. I’ve been in a war. There’s only one thing to do in a war. Form your battalions and carry the fight to the enemy.”

*Additional copies may be secured from:*

## FIGHT FOR FREEDOM, Inc.

1270 SIXTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY • Telephone CIRCLE 6-4250

SENATOR CARTER GLASS

*Honorary Chairman*  
Washington, D. C.

RT. REV. HENRY W. HOBSON

*Chairman*  
Cincinnati, Ohio