

On May 13, 1940, Churchill gave his first speech as Prime Minister. Hitler invaded France, Belgium and Holland three days earlier. In his speech, he outlined the challenge ahead of the British people and what he had to offer: “I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this Government: ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.’ We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many months of struggle and suffering.”

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Winston Churchill, having lost his election to be Prime Minister, stood in Fulton to warn the world of the “iron curtain” which had descended across Europe. David McCullough in his great biography of Harry Truman, who accompanied Churchill to Fulton, notes that the immediate reaction to the “Iron Curtain” speech was negative. Newspaper editors accused Churchill of poisoning relations between America and the Russians. But in sixty years has anyone challenged, credibly, what the great man said here? Even in its last days you could feel the repression, the captivity, the inhuman crushing behind that Iron Curtain.

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From age 20 to 25, Churchill became passionate about three things that guided his life. The first was war – the strategy, the adventure, and the danger. The second passion was writing which not only provided him income but also an outlet to blend history and autobiography, analysis and eyewitness accounts. As he said, “It was great fun writing a book.” His third passion was politics and he aspired to be at the top level. He knew the dangers of both war and politics: “Politics is almost as exciting as war, and quite as dangerous. In war you can only be killed once, but in politics many times.”

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After taking office, Churchill sought to organize a staff that would give the nation strong and effective leadership. As its core was the close relationship between Churchill and the three Chiefs of Staff. Their frequent meetings, often daily, enabled him to discuss with them the many crises of the war, tackle the many emergencies, and to decide on an acceptable common strategy. This organization gave him the highest possible accumulation of professional knowledge.

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Churchill addressed the people of Britain on June 18, 1940 and outlined what had to happen if Britain were to survive: “Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’”

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Churchill was able to understand all aspects of leadership: strategic, political, diplomatic, moral and psychological. He understood the big picture, but at the same time, would enter combat himself to see what was happening on the ground. He followed course of action in World War I, fighting in the trenches and in World War II, as the troops left for the invasion of Normandy.

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In August 1939, Churchill, who was not in office, went to the defensive line in eastern France. At the time, the public was asking that he be put back into the Parliament. He wanted to learn for himself if what he feared with Germany was really happening. This trip shredded any illusion that it was not Germany's intention to go to war and go to war soon. On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. The events that Churchill had feared, and forecast, were about to unfold.

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In his June 4, 1940 speech before Parliament, Churchill focused on his message, repeating the same information: “We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

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During World War II, Churchill believed in not waiting to be attacked. In its early stages, bombing Germany was not effective, and yet, from Churchill's point of view, it was something that had to be done in order to show that Britain did not have to sit back and accept whatever Germany might throw against it. One of his generals said, "It is a regular disease that he [Churchill] suffers from, this frightful impatience to get an attack launched." But Churchill stood by his plan.

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Churchill loved the political life from the start. In 1899, he described to his girlfriend Pamela Plowdon what it was like being in his first political campaign. “It has been a strange experience and I shall never forget the succession of great halls packed with excited people until there was not room for a single person more - speech after speech, meeting after meeting - three even four in one night - intermittent flashes of heat & light & enthusiasm - with cold air and the rattle of a carriage in between: a great experience. And I improve every time - I have hardly repeated myself at all.”

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After France fell to Germany and Britain knew it was next to be invaded, Churchill later confided to one of his commanders, in December of 1940, “Normally I wake up buoyant to face the new day. Then I woke up with dread in my heart.” Those days lasted a long time and put a heavy strain on everyone. Churchill found the physical and mental resources to bear that strain, following the advice of one of his secretaries, “We must keep working till we drop.”

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Churchill was respected by the men and women of the front line of the war. In the summer of 1940, he visited the pilots at their airfields during the Battle of Britain. In 1942, after his visit to the sailors of the Home Fleet, the admiral reported, “Your presence with us has been an encouragement and an inspiration to us all.” After visiting during the Normandy invasion, one commander wrote, “I would like to tell you how tremendously pleased, heartened and honored every soldier was by your visit.”

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When Dwight Eisenhower wrote to a friend in 1954, he stated Churchill had ‘come nearer to fulfilling the requirements of greatness that any individual I have met in my lifetime.’

Eisenhower was referring to the many personal qualities demonstrated by Churchill, along with his many talents.

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At 20, Churchill was an academic failure who had not even gained his Higher School Certificate. He tried three times to even get into the cavalry. He was an embarrassment to his family; and, in his father's opinion, a 'wash-out.' By 25, he was the talk of all of England and had become a national hero. Where was the transformation? Churchill, in writing of that time said, "I was now . . . the master of my fortunes."

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Churchill traveled with three secretaries who, typing on special silent typewriters, captured every word, while he was often carrying on three different conversations. He might be reading a newspaper and be prompted to say something to a Cabinet Minister or be reading top-secret information and have a thought, a point of criticism or a suggestion for action. All was captured and distributed to the proper people.

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During June and early July, the German Air Force regrouped to open the vital first stage of “Operation Sea Lion” (the invasion of Britain) by destroying the Royal Air Force. The Battle of Britain began on July 10. On July 14, 1940, in a BBC Broadcast, Churchill addressed the people of Britain, exhorting them to believe that all would go well and that Britain was still a powerful nation: “All goes to show that the war will be long and hard. No one can tell where it will spread. One thing is certain: the peoples of Europe will not be ruled for long by the Nazi Gestapo, nor will the world yield itself to Hitler’s gospel of hatred, appetite and domination. . . But Hitler has not yet been withstood by a great nation with a will power the equal of his own.”

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The years between 1929 to 1939 have been called Churchill's Wilderness Years. He was not in office but that did not stop his work. He strongly believed that the time would come when he would be called back to office, and that time would center on the ever-growing danger of Nazi Germany.

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Churchill sent a letter to Roosevelt in 1941 asking for the assistance of the United States and outlining the state of Britain's army and navy. His mastery of clearly explaining his position to a fellow leader provided Britain much needed supplies and proved to be a turning point in Britain's ability to remain at war. Roosevelt once told Churchill: "It is fun to be in the same decade with you." It was a decade in which the two men confronted evil and triumphed together when apart they might have failed.

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Two of the most powerful men in the 1940's, President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, were also good friends. Roosevelt once came upon Churchill in the White House as the Englishman, fresh from his bath, was pacing around naked—"completely starkers," recalled an aide. Roosevelt apologized and began to retreat. Stopping him, Churchill said, "You see, Mr. President, I have nothing to hide from you."

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When Churchill describes what it is like to be fighting on horseback: There is a thrill and a charm of its own in the glittering jingle of a cavalry [horse] squadron maneuvering at a trot; and this deepens into joyous excitement when the same evolutions are performed at a gallop. The stir of the horse, the clank of the equipment, the thrill of motion, the tossing of plumes, the sense of incorporation in a living machine, the suave dignity of the uniform – all combine to make a cavalry drill a fine thing itself.

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Churchill visited his old school, Harrow School, in October of 1941. Britain had been at war for over a year. He articulated his vision in his heart-felt speech to the students by saying: “This is the lesson: Never give in--never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”

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BBC radio broadcast, Feb 9, 1941, Churchill believed strongly in his country and said: “Here is the answer which I will give to President Roosevelt... We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of battle nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools and we will finish the job.”

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It was to avert a Communist takeover in Greece that Churchill flew to Greece in Christmas of 1944. There he negotiated between the local Greek forces and those directed from afar by the Soviet Union. Churchill's presence made a powerful impact, as did his advocacy, and an agreement was reached to maintain Greece's democracy.

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From 1946, when he spoke at Fulton, Missouri, about the “Iron Curtain,” Churchill used his experience of the pre-war years, and his knowledge of how hard it had been in wartime to secure victory as a result of pre-war neglect, to advocate direct talks with the new adversary, the Soviet Union. In both war and peace, his leadership had clarity of vision, strength of purpose, and faith in the ultimate victory of decency and goodwill.

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In 1899, after having lost his first attempt to be elected to Parliament, Churchill joined the fight in South Africa called the Boer War. He was taken prisoner, escaped his captors, and got away. But for Churchill, this was the basis of a wonderful story: a Boer attack on a British armored train, and Churchill took control of the situation, uncoupled the train, got all the wounded on board, and got them to safety. While attempting to free the rest of the train, he was taken prisoner. A few days later, it was reported he had been shot but this was not true. Instead he had scrambled over a wall of the prison camp, and without a map of where he was going and with only a few bars of chocolate to eat, walked across the veldt of Africa. He then jumped on a moving freight train and eventually made his way to neutral Mozambique. This story, which he told as a war correspondent, made him a hero in England and helped him win his second attempt at Parliament. He was 25.

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Churchill believed in face-to face negotiations to build, nurture and mobilize a vast network. This included many visits with French leaders and with Roosevelt in Newfoundland, Malta and Casablanca. He also met with Stalin in Moscow to persuade Stalin to allow Poland to have elections after the war.

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Churchill, surrounding himself with people who had talent, said that during war, it was time to “Try men of force and vision and not be exclusively confined to those who are judged thoroughly safe by conventional standards.” It has been said the quality of Churchill’s wartime leadership was displayed in those people he selected to work with him.

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Here's how Churchill put it: "Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world. Abandoned by his party, betrayed by his friends, stripped of his offices, whoever can command this power is still formidable."

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In England's hour of peril, Churchill was brutally candid, ready to lay out the worst. People trusted him because he believed the British people could stand the truth; indeed, they demanded it. "There is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away. The British people can face peril or misfortune with fortitude and buoyancy, but they bitterly resent being deceived or finding that those responsible for their affairs are themselves dwelling in a fool's paradise."

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Churchill knew that national morale and spirit was everything. That's why he told the British people in his most famous address to "brace" themselves.

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The great broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow once introduced a volume of Winston Churchill's recorded speeches by saying: "The voice you are about to hear is that of the only man who ever prophesized history, made history and recorded history." Churchill himself said: "The farther back you can look, the farther forward you can see."

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Churchill used the money he made writing about the World War I to buy his beloved Chartwell. He lived the life of an aristocrat, never, ever, venturing into a kitchen or traveling, even to war, without a valet. But he paid for his extravagances himself, supporting his taste for luxury with his verbal eloquence. He made his living, as he put it, by his pen and by his tongue. “I have had to earn every penny I possessed but there has never been a day in my life,” he said, “when I could not order a bottle of champagne for myself and offer another to a friend.”

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Anthony Eden, who served as Britain's foreign minister for so many years, and then succeeded him as prime minister said of Churchill and his many losses in elections: "Courage for some sudden act, maybe in the heat of battle, we all respect, but there is that still rarer courage which can sustain repeated disappointment, unexpected failure, and shattering defeat. Churchill had that too and had need of it, not for a day, but for weeks and months and years."

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Churchill accepted the responsibilities for his actions, and in response to Roosevelt's wish to set up "consultative machinery" between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, Churchill responded, "Action is paralyzed if everybody is to consult with everybody else about everything before it is done. Somebody must have the power to plan and act."

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As First Lord of the Admiralty on the eve of the First World War, Churchill learned all he could about flying (coming just a few hours short of earning his pilot's wings). He made numerous suggestions for the improvement of flight. When the war came in 1914, he directed resources to be used to develop the tank and made many technical suggestions for its development. As Prime Minister during World War II, he continued generating many ideas for weapons and devices including amphibious tanks.

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Churchill talks about what it requires to be a politician: “A politician needs the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn’t happen.”

In his personal life, Churchill failed often, in his school work and in his battles. The response to one loss in particular, at Dardanelles in World War I, resulted in Churchill going to the front lines of battle, in the trenches for one hundred days. The front line dangers taught him a great deal about war, and the ‘tests that men have been called to bear.’

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In his first address as Prime Minister in 1940, Churchill said: “You ask, ‘What is our policy?’ I will say; ‘It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us: to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy.’ You ask, ‘What is our aim?’ I can answer with one word: ‘Victory - victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.’”

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Churchill was a punctilious wordsmith. When choosing a word, he considered every subtlety, every shade of meaning, every nuance of sound until he found just the right one. Plain words, particularly single-syllable words of Anglo-Saxon derivation, were his favorites because they can communicate so effectively. “Short words are best,” he wrote, “and the old words when short are best of all.”

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In the summer of 1942, in the midst of World War II, Churchill seemed to have the energy of twenty men. He defended himself in Parliament, planned battles with his chiefs of staff, worked with Americans, flew to Egypt to fire generals, flew to Washington and worked with Roosevelt, flew to Russia and did battle with Stalin. His energy was contagious and by the end of the year, he had everything just where he wanted it.

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