

CHURCHILL AND THE LIQUIDATION OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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The glorious Wren church and the memory of the 'Iron Curtain' speech now over a half a century ago instills in me a profound sense of humility in paying tribute to Winston Churchill, especially since my topic is not one that commands universal agreement. Churchill is unquestionably one of the great figures of the twentieth century. Without him the history of our own country as well as that of Britain would have been different and probably much darker. Yet all great figures have feet of clay, their blind spots and their prejudices as well as their moments of glory. It does not diminish Churchill's stature to take into account a side of his personality that was marked by prejudice, ignorance, and blind obstinacy. I am referring to his attitude towards the British colonies and their peoples. He had the capacity to make even Australians feel that they were second-class citizens of the Empire. He believed that the Indians and Egyptians were not merely incapable of governing themselves but were inferior peoples.

Having put it in bleakest terms, I should add at once that his disposition on this subject, as on others, was also characterized by wit and generosity, by occasional insight and, above all, ultimately by an ability to put aside his instinctive reactions and to rise above his fixed ideas and prejudices. We thus have a paradox. Churchill on the 'colonial issue' often came down on what has been called the wrong side of history. Had Churchill had his way, the British Empire would be a going concern to the present day. On the other hand he did, in the end, take a magnanimous view of the dissolution of the Empire, and in doing so he rose to the level of statesmanship and courage that one associates with him during the battle of Britain in 1940. He said then that the British would fight on the beaches, on the landing grounds, in the fields and in the streets, 'we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender.' Churchill could have been speaking of the British Empire as well as the British Isles. In 1942 he made an equally famous statement that he had not become the King's First Minister to liquidate the British Empire. Yet on the issue of Empire he did ultimately surrender, and he did in the end witness its liquidation. My lecture will attempt to explain his retreat from a diehard position and, at the same time, his transformation into a man of vision as well as reconciliation. At the end of the lecture I shall try to connect the problem of the liquidation of the Empire, specifically one of his last great acts as Prime Minister, his decision to dismantle from the great military base at Suez in 1954, with the larger issue of the Cold War that concerned him in 1946 here at Westminster College.

Churchill brought to bear on the colonial question a fundamental outlook on the British economy, indeed the world's economy. He was a free trader. He always said that free trade was what made England great in the nineteenth century and should continue to be the basic principle of the British economy in the twentieth. At the same time, he always tried to balance or reconcile what he called the three interesting circles of British interest: the British Empire-Commonwealth, the United States, and Europe. In each case the economic element was as important as the political. After the Second World War Churchill became a committed 'European,' but not in the sense that is commonly understood today as an

integrated European economic community. He would have favored NAFTA as part of the liberalization of world trade but not as a trading bloc competing against Europe. He had opposed the proposal at the turn of the century for 'Imperial Preference' – 'Empire Preference' is perhaps a more comprehensible term – whereby the British would create a self-sufficient common market embracing the Empire and the Dominions. From the 1930s he stated his views less dogmatically and acquiesced in the set of economic controls that became known as the Sterling Area. But in an intellectual and emotional sense he remained loyal to the idea of free trade, in part because free trade had helped to shape his consciousness of Britain's place in the world. According to his friend Leo Amery, who will act as a sort of witness during the course of this lecture, free trade provided a key to Churchill's personality as well as his attitude towards the colonies.

Churchill is a great English patriot – the greatest of our age. But his patriotism has always been for England; the England that fought Philip of Spain, Louis XIV and Napoleon in the past, the England that in his own lifetime overcame Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler ... England the home of political freedom, enhanced in prestige and power by an Empire of beneficent rule over subject peoples and incidentally also by a periphery of younger free nations sprung from her loins; but England still the starting point and the ultimate object of policy.¹

Churchill was not an ideologue, but the basic idea of free trade helps to explain his attitude on many things including that of the British Empire.

I have mentioned Leopold Amery, whose career, like Churchill's, extended from the last decade of the nineteenth century into the post-Second World War era. Amery like Churchill maintained a large correspondence and in the Amery papers there are many references to Churchill at different times and on different problems, not least on the question of the dissolution of the Empire. Amery was Churchill's lifelong friend from the time of their boyhood companionship in school at Harrow. Their first meeting was significant. Churchill could be a bully and on their first encounter he pushed the smaller Amery into the swimming pool. Churchill then learned that Amery was one year his senior, and though small in stature, a fighter. Churchill retrieved the situation by saying that 'My father too, is small, though he also is a great man.' Though they developed a lasting friendship, they never became intimates, in part because of the tension over the nature and future of the British colonies.

Both Churchill and Amery were committed to the Empire, but in quite different ways. Both spent formative years in South Africa, both eventually reached the highest post in the Empire as Secretary of State for the Colonies, Churchill in 1921-22, Amery in 1924-29. Amery later became Churchill's Secretary of State for India during the Second World War. While Churchill upheld the principles of free trade, Amery believed in Empire Preference, the wall of protective tariffs that would be built up around the Empire to make it a single economic unit. Amery once described Churchill as 'a brilliant talker and military strategist who is frankly incapable of understanding finance or the meaning of Empire development.'² This was an exaggerated assessment but there was an element of truth in it. Churchill was not much interested in the day-by-day workings of colonial administration or in colonial finance. In colonial affairs Amery in many ways was Churchill's sharpest critic. He believed that Churchill had a romantic view of the Empire, indeed an eighteenth-century view, a view that in any event did not much change from Churchill's early experience in India to the end

of his life. Here too there was an element of truth. Churchill thought that the Empire was a glorious ornament to Britain's national life. He believed in the Empire passionately and wholeheartedly, but he seldom paused to examine it critically or to challenge his own underlying assumption – that it was one of the greatest forces for good that the world had ever known.

The young Winston served on the North-West Frontier in 1897. He was twenty-three years old. He never returned to India, but the impressions he gained of military barracks, pig-sticking, and polo grounds remained with him throughout his life, as did his perception of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent as a vast conglomeration of peoples whose salvation was British rule. In 1898 he took part in one of the last cavalry charges in the history of the British army during the battle of Omdurman. In 1899 he resigned his commission in the army, stood unsuccessfully for Parliament, and then went to South Africa as the Daily Telegraph's military correspondent. He was taken prisoner by the Boers and made a dramatic escape that captured headlines throughout the world. Such was Churchill's experience in the world of the British Empire in the early part of his career. In 1905 he became Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Colonial Office, a position he held until 1908. I am here touching on the parts of his career that relate directly to the Empire, and not on other important formative episodes such as his tenures at the Home Office, the Admiralty, and after the First World War, at the War Office. In February 1921 Churchill served as Secretary of State for the Colonies for a year and a half. He thus reached the highest political office in the administration of the Empire, apart from India, at the age of 42.

Churchill was an efficient and hard-working Secretary of State for the Colonies. He also demonstrated that he could take a balanced view of explosive issues despite his own inclinations. But he did approach problems with definite opinions or bias. For example, he was pro-white South African in Southern Rhodesia. Though others regarded him as aggressive and biased beyond redemption, he would be weaned away from extreme positions by argument and by evidence. Churchill worked by paper. He would read extensively through files, usually case by case, and would write probing, incisive, and goading minutes in coruscating red ink calculated to make civil servants reconsider and rethink basic issues. His method was pragmatic, and, though he could act precipitously, often as not he presented, in the end, a balanced view aimed at conciliation and practical solutions. He was in many respects a throwback to the Victorian age with a Victorian's sense of justice. He believed in British superiority and he held a paternalistic view that the Empire should benefit Britain just as Britain would convey benefits of order and peace to the peoples under British rule. He possessed representative Victorian views on race. He referred to the Chinese as 'the wretched little Yellow Men' and to Africans generally as 'Hottentots,' one of his favorite words of abuse. But this should not be mistaken as racial prejudice that found its way into policy. Ronald Hyam, the Cambridge historian who is the authority on Churchill and the Empire, has written that Churchill loathed racial exploitation and rejected the creed espoused by Joseph Chamberlain and others that the future lay with great empires rather than small states. Ronald Hyam's judgment helps in the first stage of the resolution of the paradox that Churchill could be prejudiced, ignorant, and obstinate and at the same time capable of pragmatism and reconciliation.³

Churchill was always concerned with the large issues. I give but one example, which is all-important. In 1920 Churchill was Secretary of State for War. He found himself in the

middle of the controversy surrounding General Reginald Dyer, who had opened fire on an unarmed crowd in India at Amritsar, where 379 Indians had been killed and some 1,200 injured. The massacre at Amritsar was one of the black incidents in the history of the British Empire. Dyer's motive was to strike terror in the hearts of Indians who resisted British rule. Churchill stated that Amritsar was a monstrous event without precedent or parallel in recent history, including of course the history of the First World War. 'Frightfulness' or 'Schrecklichkeit' – the doctrine of terror – Churchill believed, was a German technique utterly alien to British tradition. 'This is not the British way of doing business.' British rule in India did not stand on force.⁴ Churchill's position on this issue was not merely admirable as an ethical principle; it was also critical in the shaping of the belief that, in any military or police action in the colonies, restraint should be the watchword. This was the Churchillian principle of minimal force. It had wide ramifications during the next half-century.

In explaining Churchill's part in the liquidation of the British Empire, there are three cases that are of especial importance: India, Palestine, and Egypt. These will be my order of progression during the rest of the lecture. As a further note of background, it is useful to view the three cases in the context of Churchill's general thought and in his outlook on the rest of the world as revealed in his conversation. The word 'liquidation,' for example, was his own word used to describe the dissolution of the Empire as something perhaps necessary but disagreeable, not without a hint of bankruptcy of policy. He referred to different parts of the Empire in highly paternalistic language. South Africa was 'a country of conflicting dualities and vicious contradictions, where everything is twisted, disturbed and abnormal.' Nigeria consisted of 'just a wilderness of stone and scrub.' In Kenya the Kikuyu were 'light-hearted, tractable, if brutish children.'⁵ Churchill's attitudes did not remain cast in iron, immutable from the time he had been a subaltern in India in the 1890s, but there was usually a Victorian ring to his comments, as for example when he stated in 1926 in angry frustration, 'Punishing China is like flogging a jellyfish.'⁶ On the Empire as on other subjects, Churchill had an imitable style that always conveyed a definite point. On China, Britain should not intervene in the Civil War. On India, in a comment that summed up his view, he wrote in 1922: 'Our true duty to India lies to those 300 millions whose lives and means of existence would be squandered if entrusted to the chatterboxes who are supposed to speak for India today.'⁷

Churchill's opposition to Indian independence developed with increasing intensity in the 1930s. He was by no means alone in believing that Dominion Status (the term which means self-governing status or independence within the British Commonwealth of Nations) was a remote prospect, something to be achieved perhaps in a hundred years at the earliest, not as Indian nationalist believed, within decades at the latest. The controversy over India in British political circles was triggered by the Viceroy, Lord Irwin (Halifax), who stated in 1929 that Dominion Status should be explicitly stated as the goal of British policy. Churchill made his view immediately clear, and he was consistent through the 1930s:

Dominion Status can certainly not be attained while India is a prey to fierce racial and religious dissensions. ... It cannot be attained while the political classes of India represent only an insignificant fraction of the three hundred and fifty millions for whose welfare we are responsible.⁸

There were many others who held similar views on India. What is remarkable about Churchill is both the tenacity and the vehemence with which he attempted to block the passage of the India Act of 1935, which was an act designed to hold India in the Empire rather than to prepare the way towards independence. It is important to be clear about the purpose of the Act to understand Churchill's objections to it. The long-range aim was to ensure the unity of India by establishing provincial self-government within a federal union. The more short-term purpose was to retain British supremacy over the Congress, the Muslims, and the Princes. This was not far removed from Churchill's own solution of Britain presiding indefinitely at the top of a pyramid consisting of the Muslims, the Hindus, and the Princes. Why then did Churchill object so violently to the 1935 legislation? Why did he mount a diehard crusade that so damaged his reputation that many believed that he had committed political suicide by breaking with the Tories as well as the Liberals and the Labour Party in a quixotic campaign to keep India under direct, authoritarian British rule?

Churchill's anti-Indian campaign must be seen in the context of his other concerns, one of which was the writing of his autobiography, *My Early Life*, which included an account of his early career as a young army officer in India. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, saw the book in proof in 1930 and commented that Winston had 'become once more the subaltern of Hussars of '96.'⁹ What impressed Baldwin, as others, was the romantic view that Churchill held of India and of Britain as the protector of its peoples. Baldwin knew that Churchill was using India as a political weapon in British politics, in effect waging war against the Baldwin government, hoping to rally the hard right of the Tory party to oust the Prime Minister. In his denunciation of government policy, Churchill later used the word 'appeasement,' sometimes as applied to Hitler, sometimes, and just as emphatically, against Gandhi. It is not unfair to say that Churchill developed an obsession with Gandhi, who, Churchill believed, would establish a 'Hindu despotism.' 'It is no use trying to satisfy a tiger by feeding him with cat's meat,' Churchill once said. In his most famous statement on Gandhi, Churchill declared that it was 'alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well-known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the viceregal Palace.'¹⁰ In an equally famous statement, Churchill said of India generally:

India is not a country or a nation; it is rather a continent inhabited by many nations. The parallel to India is Europe. But Europe is not a political entity. It is a geographical abstraction. ... Such unity of sentiment as exists in India arises entirely through the centralized British Government of India as expressed in the only common language of India – English.¹¹

Churchill's stand on India brought him into direct conflict not only with Gandhi and Indian nationalists but also British politicians and friends, otherwise his natural allies, who believed that Indian nationalism had to be accommodated. Churchill's extreme stand led many to believe that his career had ended in frustration. Robert Rhodes James concluded in *Churchill: A Study in Failure* that if Churchill had died in the late 1930s he would have been remembered only vaguely as a diehard right-wing politician.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 changed everything. Churchill emerged as one of the heroic figures of the twentieth century. At the same time he resisted all efforts to move India forward towards independence. In 1942 he sabotaged the efforts of Sir Stafford

Cripps, the Labour statesman, to enlist the support of the Congress nationalist movement for the war effort in return for a promise of Dominion Status after the war. In 1944 he blocked the efforts of the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, to take steps towards Indian self-government. Throughout the war he denounced Gandhi and Congress leaders as part of a 'Hindu priesthood' who aimed to subject India to 'Hindu despotism.' The obsession with Gandhi now developed into a phobia against Indians generally. 'I hate Indians,' he once remarked. 'They are beastly people with a beastly religion' – 'the beastliest people in the world next to the Germans.'¹² Leo Amery observed that 'India, or any form of self-government for coloured peoples, raises in him a wholly uncontrollable complex.'¹³ India was a principal source of tension between Churchill and Roosevelt. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt questioned Churchill on the subject of Indian independence. 'I reacted so strongly and at such length,' Churchill later wrote, 'that he never raised it verbally again.'¹⁴ This was true. Roosevelt merely discussed the problem of British imperialism in India with Stalin instead. He warned Stalin never to mention the word 'India' to Churchill. For his part, Churchill suspected that the United States wanted to take Britain's place. He exclaimed to William Phillips, Roosevelt's representative in India: 'Take India if that is what you want! Take it by all means! But I warn you ... that there will be the greatest blood-bath in all history; yes, blood-bath in all history. Mark my words, I prophesied the present war, and prophesy the blood-bath.'¹⁵

When Churchill met defeat in the election of 1945, the Indian issue remained in deadlock. We do not know what might have happened if Churchill had been able to continue in office. What we do know is that Churchill in 1947 did not obstruct Indian independence, and that he played a vital part in securing India's membership in the Commonwealth. Until the very end, however, Churchill opposed the Labour government's plan to grant Indian independence. His most eloquent protest occurred in the House of Commons in December 1946. He attacked the government for 'scuttle' in Burma as well as in India. Churchill remained quite consistent in his interpretation. He spoke of the dangers of 'a Hindu Raj':

We must not allow British troops or British officers in the Indian Army to become the agencies and instruments of enforcing caste Hindu domination upon the 90 million Muslims and the 60 million untouchables; nor must the prestige or authority of the British power in India, even in its sunset, be used in partisanship on either side of these profound and awful cleavages.¹⁶

And in 1947:

In handing over the government of India to these so-called political classes, we are handing over to men of straw of whom in a few years no trace will remain. ... Many have defended Britain against her foes, none can defend her against herself. But, at least, let us not add – by shameful flight, by a premature hurried scuttle – at least let us not add to the pangs of sorrow so many of us feel, the taint and smear of shame.¹⁷

He referred to Jawaharlal Nehru, the future Prime Minister, as 'the leader of the caste Hindus.' But Churchill had an ambivalent attitude towards Nehru. Nehru had attended Harrow. A radical socialist, and thus at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from Churchill, Nehru had a strong record as an anti-Fascist. In 1939 Churchill had sent him a

telegram saying that he hoped Nehru would join in the struggle against Hitler. In 1942, after the Government of India had imprisoned Nehru as one of the leaders of the 'Quit India' movement, Churchill made sure that he was respected as a political prisoner and arranged for him to have books. In 1947 the connection may have helped to turn Churchill in favor of supporting the plan to accelerate the date for the transfer of power to India to August 15, 1947. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, told Churchill that he believed Nehru would keep India within the Commonwealth.

Churchill undoubtedly could have caused a breakdown in these delicate arrangements. He was the Leader of the opposition, the head of the Conservative Party, the savior of Britain. Why did he decide to lend his support to Indian independence, thus reversing himself on an issue on which he had been passionately committed for decades? Mountbatten's eloquence probably helped. But over and beyond the emotion of the subject, Churchill was a supreme realist. He disliked the prospect of a divided India, the emergence of the state of Pakistan as well as India, and above all an India ruled by Congress politicians. But he recognized that having India in the Commonwealth was better than having the Indians sever ties with the British. Churchill rose to the occasion of making a clear and decisive standing backing Mountbatten and the Labour Government. It was an act of statesmanship to put aside his turbulent feelings. According to an official in India, where those involved in the discussions with the Indian leaders awaited his response with considerable anxiety: 'This decisive expression of opinion, combining as it did the great man's breadth of view and immediate grasp of essentials with his ability to relate his exact ideas to perfect logic, set everybody's mind at rest.'¹⁸

The problem of India was intertwined with those of Palestine and Egypt, all of which developed simultaneously in the late 1940s. Churchill made a full statement before the House of Commons in mid-1946 that connects the three problems. I quote it in full because it gives an example of Churchill's style and flair as well as his analysis of the connection between Egypt and Palestine with that of India. Churchill had now been out of office for a year, and the Labour government in the spring of 1946 had offered to withdraw troops from Egypt. It was widely suspected that the British would withdraw from Egypt merely to create in Palestine a major base to replace the one at Suez. This was never a serious possibility but it was widely discussed in 1946. According to Churchill, the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was pursuing a policy of 'scuttle,' a word Churchill used repeatedly in the postwar years:

Take stock round the world at the present movement ... We declare ourselves ready to abandon the mighty Empire and Continent of India with all the work we have done in the last 200 years, territory over which we possess unimpeachable sovereignty. The (Labour) Government is, apparently ready to leave the 400 million Indians to fall into all the horrors of sanguinary civil war – civil war compared to which anything that could happen in Palestine would be microscopic; wars of elephants compared with wars of mice.

Indeed we place the independence of India in hostile and feeble hands, heedless of the dark carnage and confusion which will follow. We scuttle from Egypt which we twice successfully defended from foreign massacre and

pillage. We scuttle from it, we abandon the Canal zone about which our treaty rights were and still are indefeasible; but now, apparently, the one place where we are at all costs and at all conveniences to hold on and fight it out to the death is Palestine, and we are to be at war with the Jews of Palestine, and, if necessary, with the Arabs of Palestine. For what reason? Not, all the world will say, for the faithful discharge of our long mission but because we have need, having been driven out of Egypt, to secure a satisfactory strategic base from which to pursue our Imperial aims.¹⁹

Churchill never became converted to the idea that strategically Palestine might be substituted for Egypt.

On Palestine, Churchill held strong views that stretched back to his early years, to his boyhood, when his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, took the young Winston to have dinner at the Rothschilds. Churchill was raised in a family tradition in which Jewish friends were to be respected and treated as equals. Churchill also inherited another of his father's principles that played an important part in the Palestine controversy and indeed in all problems of the colonial empire that came under his scrutiny. Colonies and other dependencies could not be permitted to become a burden on the British state. In the case of Palestine, for example, Churchill was entirely prepared to see it administered by another power, preferably the United States, if it became financially or politically onerous for the British. Otherwise Churchill wished the Jews well. Throughout his career, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and skepticism, he was thus a moderate Zionist. Even before the First World War, he declared himself in favor of a Jewish state in Palestine. Though he was not especially consistent in his views, and though it was not until mid-way through the Second World War that he came down on the side of partition – in other words the partition of Palestine to create an independent Jewish state – there can be no doubt that Churchill upheld the principle of Zionism just as he also held that the Palestinian Arabs were a backward people who had done nothing to improve the country and were incapable of governing themselves.

It fell to Churchill, as Secretary of State for the Colonies after the First World War, to implement the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that had declared British support for a Jewish national home in Palestine, provided it did not prejudice the rights of the Arab inhabitants. In 1922 Churchill established the basis of British policy for nearly two decades. He wrote that Jewish immigrants to Palestine would be allowed entry up to the limit of 'economic absorptive capacity.' The idea of economic absorptive capacity became Churchill's basic principle that he invoked then and forever after. In May 1939, for example, the British government's White Paper attempted to curtail and stabilize the Jewish population of Palestine at one-third of the Arab majority. Churchill denounced the White Paper as a breach of faith with the Jews and a violation of the Balfour Declaration itself as he had explicated it in 1922. As Prime Minister during the war, Churchill in 1943 became convinced that the partition of Palestine and the creation of an independent Jewish state was the only solution. He established an interdepartmental committee that deliberated at length and came to the same conclusion. But in late 1944 there occurred an event that turned Churchill away from Zionism and he never again embraced the Zionist cause with the same degree of enthusiasm.

In November 1944 Lord Moyne, the senior British representative in the Middle East, was assassinated by Jewish terrorists. Moyne (Walter Guinness) was a close friend. Churchill denounced the Jewish terrorists as 'vilest gangsters,' and, in even more passionate rhetoric, 'a set of new gangsters worthy of Nazi Germany.' Nevertheless Churchill did not take punitive action against the Jewish community in Palestine.²⁰ He adhered to the same principle of minimal force as he had during the Amritsar massacre in India when he had stated that 'frightfulness' was a German doctrine, not a British one, and that Britain must behave as a civilized power. In 1947 Churchill, now in opposition, denounced the Palestine policy of the Labour government. One-tenth of the armed forces of the entire British Empire now occupied a territory the size of Wales. The drain on the economy for military upkeep alone amounted close to £40 million a year, a significant figure in the economic circumstances of postwar Britain. 'There is the manpower of at least 100,000 men in Palestine,' Churchill stated in Parliament, 'who might well be at home strengthening our depleted industry. What are they doing there? What good are we getting out of it?'²¹ On the question of Palestine, Churchill helped to form a broad consensus of public, Parliamentary, and Cabinet opinion that recognized military withdrawal as an economic as well as a political and ethical imperative. When the British withdrew from Palestine in May 1948, he saw it as the end of a long, unhappy, and on the whole, disastrous episode in British history.

Egypt along with India and Palestine became one of Churchill's principal concerns from the close of the Second World War through his last period as Prime Minister in 1951-55. In concluding on an Egyptian theme, I shall try to make it clear how Churchill's even more significant preoccupations on larger issues of war and peace can be seen in relation to his 'Iron Curtain' speech here at Westminster College a half century ago.

Churchill was just as contemptuous of the Egyptians as he was of the Indians. He believed the Egyptians to be an 'inferior' and essentially a 'cowardly' people, and he once referred to them as 'degraded savages.' The problem was that the British base at Suez, at that time the largest military complex of its kind, was on Egyptian soil. Suez was, and in Churchill's view remained, the supreme geopolitical position in the world. Churchill never forgave the Labour government for proposing to withdraw British troops from Egypt in the spring of 1946. He also used the word 'scuttle' to describe the British evacuation from the Iranian oil fields and the refinery at Abadan in 1951. In other words he usually denounced any suggestion of withdrawal from any British position in any part of the world as tantamount to treason. Why then did he change his mind in 1954 about Suez, which, to use his own phrase, he regarded as the 'lifeline of the Empire'?

In office and out of office, Churchill used the same obstructionist tactics in Egypt that he had previously employed in India. But he was eventually wooed away from a diehard position by the military experts, notably General Sir Brian Robertson, the Commander-in-Chief British Middle East Land Forces. Robertson argued that the Suez base had become strategically obsolete and that British forces should be deployed elsewhere in the Middle East, notably in Libya and Jordan. One of Churchill's confidants wrote in 1953: 'He hates the policy of "scuttle" ... but tries to console himself with the fact that the eighty thousand troops [at Suez] can be used elsewhere, and that it will mean a substantial economy.'²² Churchill thus began to change his diehard view that Suez had to be held at any cost, but it was not so much the military reality in Egypt that ultimately persuaded him as a development of momentous magnitude in the spring of 1954. In March of that year the

Americans tested the hydrogen bomb, a weapon of much vaster destructive power than the Atomic bomb used against Japan. No one who has studied Churchill's letters and speeches at this time can doubt Churchill's genuine concern. He believed that thermo-nuclear warfare would be a turning-point in the history of mankind. Churchill made it clear that he regretted, in his words, 'abandoning the position which we had held in Egypt since 1882,' but he now believed that the development in nuclear weapons had not only rendered the base at Suez obsolete but also that the situation in the Cold War had become so dangerous that a new initiative had to be taken 'to establish human relationships' with the rulers of the Soviet Union.²³ Churchill thus came down on the side of conciliating the Egyptians and evacuating the base. It went against his basic instinct, and he was influenced by the belief that the Suez base had become obsolete rather than because of the merit of the Egyptian case. He was willing to concede a rationality to the Russians that he denied to most former subjects of the British Empire. Nevertheless, in Egypt as in India, he rose to the occasion and proved that he could be a man of vision as well as of magnanimity.

Churchill is often remembered as an inveterate Cold warrior because of his famous 'Iron Curtain' speech here at Westminster College in 1946. Yet at the same time he also worked to reduce tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, and this aim was part of his broader vision in 1954 when he made the decision to evacuate the base at Suez. He saw it as a way of reducing tensions of the Cold War and demonstrating to the United States as well as the Soviet Union that he was willing to reflect on basic issues and to chart a new course.

In this lecture I have said harsh things about Churchill, but they do not detract from his stature as one of the truly great men of the century. Despite his fixed ideas and his Victorian attitudes towards the Indians and Arabs, Churchill was able to see beyond specific problems and to reflect on greater issues of war and peace. He believed that Britain and the United States should stand together in building up western strength; but he also despised the rigid tensions of the Cold War, he feared nuclear build-up, and he thought that the Americans and the Russians might provoke each other into World War III. Churchill may have given the impression of a man living in the past, lamenting the decline and fall of the British Empire, but he also proved capable of adjusting his views realistically and towards conciliation in the Cold War as in colonial affairs.

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