

## **Why Churchill's Speech Was 'A Shot Which Rang Around The World'**

**Rt. Hon. Lord Jenkins**

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Mr Crosby Kemper, President of Westminster College, Churchill granddaughter Edwina Sandys, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is as I indicated at dinner last night a great pleasure and honour for me to be here, on this site hallowed in history by a memorable speech. What I propose to try to do in this talk is first to try to put that speech in its context, to describe its reception, rather mixed, at the time, and its subsequent consequences. And then in the latter part of my talk to try to outline Churchill's kaleidoscopic, exuberant, in some ways comical character and personality which made him such an extraordinary human being.

Churchill's Fulton Speech, delivered 56 years and 12 days ago, was, as I wrote in my biography, "one of the most controversial, remembered and formative speeches of the post-war years. In the late 1940s only General Marshall's Harvard Commencement address in June 1947 and, maybe, Churchill's own Zurich speech calling for European unity on the basis of Franco-German reconciliation in the autumn of 1946 could bear comparison with it".

The paradox of this - but there are always a lot of paradoxes in history, and Churchill's life was peculiarly rich in them - was that within a very few years, three at the most for the NATO treaty was signed in the spring of 1949 - the central Fulton message became the accepted wisdom of the whole Western world. But this was far from being so at the time. His words sent a frisson, of excitement certainly, but also of shock around the world, and also, if not exactly of disagreement, of disengagement in some surprising quarters.

But that is nearly always the way with formative speeches. They have to be a little, but not too much, in advance of the conventional wisdom. If they merely echo accepted truth, they

are essentially platitudinous. If they are well phrased they may be very well received by the immediate audience, but they will make little impact upon the pages of history. If they are too far in advance of their time they may resurface several years, or even decades, later, but they are unlikely to influence immediately pending events.

Churchill's Fulton speech was in my view very well chosen to avoid these alternative hazards. His reverberating phrase was of course "the iron curtain", which descended across the continent of Europe "from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic". But the phrase "iron curtain", although certainly dramatic and reverberating, was not original, for he had used it ten months before in a message to Truman, sent within three weeks of the latter's accession to the Presidency and within four days of the end of the war in Europe. Nor was it the hard core of Fulton. This was contained in two other passages, the former of which may have shown greater wisdom than the latter. The essence of the first, and this was the head-on challenge to the easy optimism at the end of the Roosevelt era, was that peace and democracy could not be sustained by the three great powers of the wartime alliance functioning as an equal trinity and offering the world a triangular leadership. It was this which led on to the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine (in relation to Greece and Turkey) in 1947, to the Berlin airlift in 1948 and to the signature of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949.

Perhaps less wisely, although understandably for a half American Englishman speaking in Missouri, particularly in a period when he was painfully aware that Britain's relative power had declined in the last years of the war and the first year of the peace, he added:

If the population of the English-speaking Commonwealth be added to that of the United States with all that such co-operation implies in the air, on the sea, all over the globe in science and in industry, and in moral force, there will be no quivering, precarious balance of power to offer its temptation to ambition or adventure. On the contrary, there will be an overwhelming assurance of security.

This was all closed in a penumbra designed to make it somewhat less offensive to the Soviet Union. He did not believe that the Russians wanted war, but he did think that their desire was for “the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines”. Churchill was also careful to say that Anglo-American co-operation should be done without the framework of the UN, and that a Soviet government which behaved in accordance with Western standards would always be welcome to enjoy the influence to which its wartime bravery and sacrifices entitled it. Nevertheless the core message was hard and clear.

The “English-speaking” aspect of the appeal may however have been ill-judged. It opened him to a thrust from Stalin, giving a very rare interview (needless to say in *Pravda*) which showed that he could use the rapier as well as the bludgeon:

Now Mr Churchill is starting his process of unleashing war also [like Hitler] with a racial theory, declaring that only those persons who speak English are full-blooded nations, whose vocation it is to control the fate of the whole world ... In point of fact Mr Churchill and his friends in England and America are presenting the nations of the world with a kind of ultimatum - recognise our superiority over you voluntarily, and all will be well - otherwise war is inevitable.

This cannot have been without some appeal to other countries -- not least France. It is important to realise what a tremendous fall the French language has taken over the past few generations. Up to 1939 it was and had been for centuries the primary language of civilisation, the *lingua franca* of world diplomacy, of international rail travel, not to mention gastronomy, to only the last of which it is now with difficulty clinging on. And this of course has been due to the weight of the US sitting on the English side of the seesaw. With Britain alone the French could have continued to hold the ring, and of course had the United States become Francophone rather than Anglophone which could conceivably have happened in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the sway of France spreading down the Mississippi from Mount Réal and Detroit and up from New Orléans, and aided perhaps by the well-known francophilia of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (with his liking for Lafitte wine) as well

as the hero status of General Lafayette, the world linguistic balance could have gone the other way. And very resentful we in Britain would have been had that been so. Today, when under international regulations, an Air France captain, flying a *Concorde* into Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, has to be talked down in English, we should be understanding of French linguistic susceptibilities and tolerant of the spurts of chauvinism to which this sometimes leads.

That was something of a digression, but I hope one not without interest and certainly not inappropriate to Churchill who frequently indulged in digressions himself and whose love of his own peculiar version of the French language was a continuing feature of his life. But his tactlessness on this point apart, the Fulton speech was as formative as it was wise. It planted the seed of NATO, the most successful alliance in the history of diplomacy. It was successful because, over a 40-year span it achieved its objective, that of confronting and ultimately destroying the Soviet threat, without ever firing a shot. It was victory without casualties, the optimum. And in my view that result was secured because its objectives were always clear, limited, and commanding the committed loyalty of all the 15 members. Its founding fathers on this side of the Atlantic were Truman, Acheson and Marshall. In Europe they were Attlee and Bevin in Britain, and on the continent Robert Schuman of France, Alcide de Gaspari of Italy, Paul-Henri Spaak of Belgium, and a little later Konrad Adenauer of Germany. But it was Churchill who blazed the trail, here, from Fulton.

But it would be greatly to exaggerate human wisdom to believe that it was immediately well-received. The reports are that the audience here were content, even enthusiastic, including President Truman, who had of course been responsible for bringing Churchill to Missouri and who on a film of the occasion was shown clapping vigorously during Churchill's most controversial passages. But it was strong meat for a surprisingly wide cross-section of the American press. The *Wall Street Journal* said bluntly: "The United States wants no alliance, or

anything that resembles an alliance, with any other nation". The *New York Times* was at least as critical. And the *Chicago Sun*, in general then the internationalist answer to Colonel McCormick's *Tribune*, wrote so hostilely about what it called the 'poisonous doctrines' of Fulton that Churchill cancelled an arrangement, made only the previous week, for that paper to serialise his speeches of the wartime secret sessions of the House of Commons. And "deep offence" was necessary to make Churchill - always a believer in selling his words dearly - resign from a favourable publishing arrangement.

Nor was the British reaction enthusiastic. *The* (London) *Times*, which was going through one of its least pro-Churchill periods, was at best cool and wrote of the "perhaps less happy" passages of the speech. Attlee as Prime Minister and Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary stood back, but refused to condemn. Attlee, when urged by back-benchers of his own party to disassociate himself, declined to do so. "Mr Churchill," he said, "had spoken in an individual capacity, on his own responsibility and there was no obligation on the Government either to approve or to disapprove." This was as well for Churchill's speech set the tone for what was within a year to become the core of their foreign policy. But 93 Labour MPs, just under a quarter of the total, tabled a motion of censure on Churchill. These, including a few surprising names, most notably James Callaghan than whom no-one when it came to his own Prime Ministership, beginning almost exactly 30 years later, could have been more resolutely pro-NATO and the alliance with America.

More surprising was Harry Truman's temporary detachment. At the Washington press conference three days after the speech he insisted that his presence at the occasion had not been an endorsement. He also denied prior knowledge of the content, which was doubtfully true, for in the 18-hour train journey from Washington there had been plenty of time - in the intervals of poker and sleep - for Churchill to forewarn him, which indeed he did. Truman, even less

characteristically, was reported to have restrained Dean Acheson, then under-secretary at the Department of State under Byrnes, from representing the US Government at a New York reception for Churchill in the following week. Instructing Acheson, whom I knew well across the gap of a generation, devoted though he was to Truman, much more so than to Roosevelt, was never an easy thing to do. So there seems something a little unconvincing here, and there was certainly no impairment of personal relations between Truman and Churchill. I commented, a little cynically: "Churchill doubtless made full allowance for Truman being the heir to the long Roosevelt tradition of advancing to great objectives by somewhat crab-like movements".

This raises the greater question of the extent to which in the last year or so of the war, as the allies had moved to victory and in the first months of the peace, Churchill had been more realistic about relations with Stalin than had either late Roosevelt or early Truman. This is by no means a question to which there is an easy or obvious answer. Undoubtedly Churchill had been disappointed, both at the Teheran Conference in November 1943 and at the Yalta Conference in January 1945 by Roosevelt's desire to be equidistant between him and Stalin. And he found the same tendency in Truman, although Truman personally made a very good crisp impression upon Churchill at the Potsdam Conference of July 1945. And Churchill had been horrified when in July 1943 he was told, by Averell Harriman - who was sent to do it - that FDR was attracted by the idea of a bilateral summit with Stalin, with Churchill excluded.

This danger was fended off, but Churchill's moral position in favour of trilateralism was not as strong as he liked to think, for he had had his own bilateral talks with Stalin in August 1942 and was to have another in October 1944. Moreover he had had five such meetings between himself and Roosevelt, with a sixth planned. Furthermore, at the two Moscow meetings Churchill was not above hinting to Stalin that they were two old political *roués* who could understand each other better than the somewhat naïve Roosevelt, although Roosevelt was

one of the least naïve politicians. And during his second Moscow visit (October 1944) Churchill wrote out his famous 'naughty document' proposing a *Realpolitik* allocation of spheres of influence in the Balkans, and pushed it across the table to Stalin. This gave the Russians 90% influence in Rumania and 75% in Bulgaria (what exactly was intended to be the practical difference between the two figures is difficult to say), with a 50/50 division in Yugoslavia and Hungary and 90% for Britain "in accord with the USA" in Greece. The official record of the meeting showed him as saying that "the Americans would be shocked if they saw how crudely he had put it."

The suggested arithmetical splittings of influence proved meaningless in every country except Greece. All the others fell fairly quickly within full Communist and Russian control. The only reservation that needs to be made is for Yugoslavia. But that was not because Marshall Tito allowed 50% Western influence, but because representing a more indigenous form of Communism than the other heads of the more or less puppet Balkan governments, he felt strong enough in 1948 to break with Stalin, although not with his own form of Communism.

Churchill's suggested deal with Stalin did however save Greece. When civil war broke out there at the end of 1944 Stalin firmly refrained from giving any Russian assistance to the E.L.A.S. (or Greek Communist) forces. This combined with Churchill's own extraordinary mission to Athens, flying off from London just after midnight on Christmas Eve (1944), preserved Greece for democracy, (at least until the Colonels took over in 1967) although it required to be sustained by the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine, a year after the Fulton Speech.

That Christmas Hellenic expedition illustrated Churchill's style in a clutch of ways. First, it showed what happened when his duty and pleasure clashed. He had a great love of pleasure,

of self-indulgence indeed. Arriving at Chequers from Downing Street, on the evening of November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940 at the height of the London blitz, he told his accompanying private secretary "I should now like to have dinner - at Monte Carlo - and then go and gamble". It was fantasy, of course, although not without a certain significance. But when he thought important duty called, pleasure went to the wall. He, and even more his assembled family were looking forward to what should have been the first enjoyable Christmas of the five they had spent at Chequers. In all the other four, particularly the first two, the outlook was menacing. Now victory was on the horizon. But off he went, to eat his Christmas dinner, not in the Buckinghamshire countryside but in an uncomfortable aeroplane between Naples and Athens.

But it was not all self-abnegation. It also illustrated Churchill's desire constantly to be at the centre of events, and his preference for danger over boredom, for risk over inertia. The exercise was something which no one but Churchill could have done. It required his unique combination of world prestige and boy scout enthusiasm. It is simply impossible to imagine Roosevelt or Stalin setting out, in that way and at that time, on such an expedition.

So Greece was a plus, but his morale was not on the whole good in that last winter of the war. He wrote at the beginning of 1945 of "this new, disgusting year" and he sent a considered telegram to Roosevelt on January 8<sup>th</sup> outlining his fear that "the end of this war may prove to be more disappointing than was the last". Poland, the country was not mentioned in his 'naughty document', was the main cause of his declining faith in tripartite allied unity. At Yalta he fought this issue much harder than did Roosevelt, who was in heavy physical decline. But he fought it without any significant success. And Poland was the subject of his last rather sad exchange with Roosevelt. Churchill received a message from Stalin on April 7<sup>th</sup> (1945), which made it clear that Western observers were not going to be allowed in Warsaw for the pending elections. Churchill urged on FDR a stern Western response, and received a distinctly deflating and complacent reply

sent on the morning of Roosevelt's death: "I would minimise the general Soviet problem as much as possible, because these problems, in one form or another, seem to arise every day and most of them straighten out..." And Churchill subsequently found Truman, in the first weeks of his abrupt immersion in the Presidency and before he had time to get his bearings or to make any international contacts of his own, resolved to follow the Roosevelt line.

Nevertheless I do not subscribe to the simple view that the British constantly showed realistic wisdom about Stalin, whereas the Americans showed complacent optimism. Churchill had more foreboding of the future, but that was at least partly because of Britain's shrinking power. Full victory, which would have been at the limit of his wildest dreams in 1940, was soured by a justified fear that Britain was becoming the half in a 2½ alliance. He was not however himself remotely immune from responding to Stalin's occasional friendliness. The diary entry of Jock Colville, Churchill's favourite secretary and the best Churchill diarist, in his entry for April 26<sup>th</sup> (1945) describes how Churchill returned from dining with the French Ambassador "to find a nice telegram from Stalin, indeed the most friendly that U[n]c[le] J[oe] has ever sent" and how this made Churchill sit up half the night in a glow of self-satisfaction.

As I have latterly made a few critical remarks I propose to conclude with a summary of the reasons which made me come to the concluding sentence of my book. "Of more importance is a judgement between Gladstone [the subject of my previous 1996 biography] undoubtedly the greatest Prime Minister of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Churchill undoubtedly the greatest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When I started writing this book I thought that Gladstone was by a narrow margin, the greater man, certainly the more remarkable specimen of humanity. In the course of writing it I have changed my mind. I now put Churchill, with all his idiosyncrasies, his indulgences, his occasional childishness, but also his genius, his tenacity and his persistent ability,

right or wrong successful or unsuccessful, to be larger than life, as the greatest human being every to occupy 10, Downing Street.

This relates not merely to his achievement but to character and personality. I have tried to bring those out in my book. It relates also to the width of his activities. He had a huge literary output, far exceeding that of any other British Prime Minister with the possible exception of Disraeli, or that of any American President, except for Theodore Roosevelt. He was a considerable amateur painter - starting only at the age of 40 and at the nadir of his early political fortunes and never, according to his wife, having previously been in an art gallery.

I now come to a short passage of Churchill's oratory because that was the art which he exercised here 56 years ago, and six years before that it was also an important part of his armoury and that of the British nation. It always depended upon very careful preparation. He was a much less spontaneous speaker than either Gladstone or Lloyd George. Gladstone was high flown and inspiring, but not epigrammatic or witty. He could talk for hours on end upon the basis of a half sheet of paper. He was generally above the heads of his audience but he got his effect by making them look up, which they rather enjoyed doing because it made them feel that they were more important than they had previously thought.

Lloyd George was also more spontaneous and in many circumstances more persuasive. He could get himself much more into the working of the minds of his audiences than could Churchill. Churchill spoke at his listeners. Lloyd George wrapped himself around them. But Churchill nonetheless, and above all in the summer of 1940, spoke at them with crucial effect. Even under the intense pressure of that terrible time he devoted many hours of concentrated and wholly personal composition to his parliamentary speeches. Yet it was time well spent, for that fateful summer, the climax of his whole long life, was measured out and given shape, like

the intervention of choruses in a Greek play, by these Churchillian orations. With their high-flown eloquence, which in less dramatic times would have sounded overblown, they could be regarded as a form of self-indulgence. They not only matched the mood of the moment but have survived six decades etched in the memory of those who were young at the time but are old now. He produced a euphoria of irrational belief - irrational in the circumstances of the time, when US participation was still far off - in ultimate victory. But they were also a catharsis for Churchill himself. They raised his spirits and thus generated even more energy than was consumed in their composition.

On June 18<sup>th</sup> which was the day of his "Let us so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth and Empire lasts for a 1000 years men will still say: 'This was their finest hour'" speech. Alexander Cadogan, the acerbic but effective Permanent Under Secretary of the Foreign Office wrote with the faint air of disapproval which he always used about the political activities of politicians, that Churchill had missed a routine 12.30 meeting of the War Cabinet - "writing his speech, I suppose". He might as well have complained that Abraham Lincoln did not apply himself to some minor piece of White House business on the morning of the Gettysburg address.

I conclude with Churchill's two most important wartime decisions. The first was to fight on in May 1940. Halifax, half supported by Neville Chamberlain, which made two members of a War Cabinet of only five, undoubtedly wanted to explore the possibility of a negotiated peace. This was not because Halifax was an ignoble man, but because he was a pessimistic, rather downbeat Christian gentleman. That was the last thing that Britain needed at the time. What it needed was an indomitable buccaneer, and that is exactly what Churchill provided. Over five desperate Cabinet meetings, brilliantly described by George Lukacs in *Five Days in London*,

Churchill fended off the threat to negotiate. Had he not succeeded the whole future of the world would have been different and worse.

His second key influence on the conduct of the war was more surprising because more cautious. This was his delaying tactic against launching the Western assault on Hitler's Fortress Europe until the prospect of success was almost certain. The Russians would have liked it in 1941. Many Americans would have liked it in 1942 or 1943 at the latest. It did not come until 1944. Why? Because Churchill thought the others greatly underestimated the difficulty of an assault upon a heavily fortified coast. He feared that the Allies would be hurled back into the sea with such appalling casualties that the war might have dragged on into the late 1940s or even 1950. He was not nearly as rash as he was sometimes made out to be. He always hated heavy, particularly if unnecessary, casualties. The Western world owes him an immense debt for these two decisions, the one of superb defiance the other of far-sighted and cautious wisdom. He was always more complex than met the eye.

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