"We looked for peace, and there is no good; and for the time of healing, and behold trouble!"

Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain Speech: Forty Years After

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OCEANS OF INK have been spilled in an attempt to clarify the origins of the Cold War. Scholarly reputations have been made and destroyed in this intellectual war. Some scholars have sought the origins of the Cold War in the closing months of the Second World War as suspicion mounted between the Western Allies and Stalin's Russia. Others have looked to the months following the end of the war when the Soviet system slowly but inexorably closed over Eastern Europe. But for many Americans the event which dramatized the seriousness of the situation was a single dramatic speech—Winston Churchill's famous "Iron Curtain" address at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946. Rarely has one speech created a whole new political condition. While Churchill did not create the Cold War, he gave the amorphous condition plaguing relations between the free and Communist worlds a new dramatic image in his phrase about an Iron Curtain descending upon Europe.

It is said that timing in politics as in life is everything. Churchill's speech came at a moment when public opinion in America was undergoing one of those seismic shifts that infrequently occur in the state system. The pervasive and often unrealistic pro-Soviet sentiment that had characterized the United States during the war continued to run very high in the weeks and months following the surrender of Germany. Public trust of Soviet intentions reached 54 percent positive in August 1945. A great deal of America's attention in these months centered on the newly organized United Nations. Expectations ran high that the UN would serve to soften differences between the Western nations and the Soviets. During these months there was a lot of brave talk about the UN as the world's last great hope for peace. Typical of this view was the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, one of the leading liberal newspapers in America. It described the UN as "our greatest stake in security for the future," an opinion shared by most enlightened progressives in America.

Beginning in the autumn of 1945 the first concrete signs that relations between East and West might prove difficult began to surface. The Soviets started to strip Germany of her industrial plants; Western newsmedia as well as diplomats were banned from certain East European states controlled by the Soviet Union; Russian troops continued to occupy Northern Iran; and conditions in Poland made it clear that despite promises to the contrary the Soviets were going to establish a Communist regime in power. When the new secretary of state, the normally optimistic Jimmy Byrnes, went to London in September 1945 for a foreign ministers' conference, Foreign Minister Molotov of
the Soviet Union took a harsh line on almost every issue: Greek independence, Russian control of Bulgaria and Romania, as well as the exclusion of France and China from all major discussions of the postwar world. Byrnes was shocked. A second meeting in Moscow in December 1945 did not improve matters. The year 1945 ended on a very pessimistic note as far as the relations of the former allies were concerned.

Thus as the new year opened, American opinion was confused about Soviet intentions. On one hand public and political leaders wanted to give the Soviet Union the benefit of every doubt because of its enormous contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany. But there were disturbing signs that the Soviet Union was going to prove troublesome. U.S. foreign policy seemed totally confused. In the words of the British ambassador in Washington, Lord Halifax, the United States foreign policy under President Truman was "without purpose or direction." In the British view something had to be done to stiffen America's ability to stand up to the Soviets and correctly evaluate their foreign aims. At this point Churchill arrived in the United States for a long Florida vacation.

Churchill at the time was still recovering from the aftermath of his election rout in the summer of 1945, when the Labour party had overthrown his wartime administration. According to his doctor, Lord Moran, Churchill was often depressed by the situation he found himself in after the war. From one of the Big Three, perhaps the world's best-known politician, he had become a famous but now powerless and repudiated old man. In the months after his electoral defeat Churchill traveled, returned to his old hobby of painting, began planning his memoirs, and grew increasingly worried about future relations with Stalin's Russia. In October 1945 Francis L. McCluer, president of Westminster College, in Fulton, Missouri, at the suggestion of General Harry Vaughan, Truman's aide and all around go-fer, met with the president and suggested Churchill for an honorary degree.

Truman impulsively endorsed the suggestion with a personal note to the former prime minister: "Dear Winnie. This is a fine old college in my state. If you'll come out and make the speech, I'll take you out and introduce you."

Churchill accepted immediately. He was looking for an opportunity to speak out on the changed diplomatic situation. Arriving in Florida in January 1946, Churchill, between touring and some more painting, started working on his speech. He had a fairly clear notion of what he wanted to say. He had found the role of a Jeremiah over the unpreparedness of Britain in the face of Nazi Germany a rewarding one in the 1930s. Now he returned to that role once again. In his old age he would again render a singular service to the Western world, this time by alerting it to the new menace from Stalin's Russia. As he worked on his speech he consulted frequently with American leaders, especially sympathetic ones like Admiral Leahy and Secretary of State Byrnes. Leading figures in the U.S. government, from Truman on down, were given a clear idea of Churchill's themes. In fact, Truman and Byrnes actually read parts of the speech before Churchill gave it. Although acting entirely on his own, Churchill knew that his decision to speak was endorsed by the British government. While not aware of what he would say, the Labour government of Clement Attlee saw Churchill's role as stiffening America's resolve to accept her new international responsibilities.

The small town of Fulton, population 7,000, was jammed with 40,000 visitors to see the British leader. For the festive occasion Churchill had prepared something more than a mere commencement address. He had prepared a bombshell. The speech was entitled "The Sinews of Peace." Churchill claimed that he spoke for himself and not his government, and he believed that his long experience gave him the freedom to be frank. His speech contained three major themes. First was the division of the world into a Communist zone and a free zone. "A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the
Allied victory. Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and its Communist international organization intend to do in the immediate future, or what are limits, if any, to their expansive and proselytizing tendencies.” While expressing his gratitude to Russia and her role in defeating Nazi Germany, Churchill felt called upon to stress the unpleasant developments of recent months. It was at this point that he uttered the memorable phrase about an Iron Curtain descending on Europe. All of Eastern Europe with its historic capitals had come within the Soviet sphere of influence; by this he meant effective control of all affairs was exercised by the Soviet Union. “The Communist parties, which were very small in all these eastern states of Europe, have been raised to pre-eminence and power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control. Police governments are prevailing in nearly every case, and so far, except in Czechoslovakia, there is no true democracy.”

For Churchill, the consequences of this process were alarming. He did not believe that Russia wanted war but instead sought “the fruits of war and indefinite expansion of . . . power and doctrines.” Speaking from long experience he said that appeasement of Russia would not guarantee peace, because the Soviets respect nothing “so much as strength and there is nothing for which they have less respect than weakness.”

As significant as was Churchill’s dramatic image of an Iron Curtain dividing all Europe, the main thrust of his speech was a call for a revival of the Anglo-American cooperation that had prevailed during the war. If there was a single, paramount idea that had Churchill’s full allegiance throughout his long political career, it was the need for the English and American peoples to come together. In the 1930s he had contemplated and actually begun a long history, not of England, but of the English-speaking peoples as a way of promoting this unity. Close cooperation by the two major branches of the English-speaking world was a dream that the half-American Churchill had never forgotten. He saw in it a way of prolonging a major role for a declining Britain, and he hoped that close cooperation would sustain the British Empire. But Churchill’s view of Anglo-American unity was not just Machiavellian power politics—he genuinely believed that the English-speaking peoples were a positive force for good in the world.

For Churchill the heart of his speech was his call for a fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples, in particular the United States and Great Britain, to guide the free world toward a lasting peace. He said that what was needed was not an Anglo-American military alliance or treaty but maintenance of the special relationship between the United States and the British Commonwealth of Nations. Without this special relationship neither “the sure prevention of war nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained.” He then spelled out in ominous detail what he meant by fraternal association: “the continuance of the intimate relationships between our military advisers, leading to common study of potential dangers, similarity of weapons and manuals of instruction and interchange of officers and cadets at colleges.” Rejecting the notion that this special relationship was in any way inconsistent with loyalty to the United Nations, Churchill insisted that it was probably the only way the UN would achieve full stature and strength. “Special associations between members of the United Nations which have no aggressive point against any other country, which harbor no design incompatible with the charter of the United Nations, far from being harmful, are beneficial and, as I believe, indispensable.”

Connected to Churchill’s call for Anglo-American cooperation was his third theme—his argument that the atomic monopoly of the West not be shared either with the UN or with the Soviet Union. It would “be wrong and imprudent,” he said, to entrust the secret knowledge of the atomic bomb to a world organization still in its infancy. Worse, it
would "be criminal madness to cast it adrift in this still agitated and ununited world." Then in a phrase designed to anger many progressive and liberal voices in America, Churchill argued that "God has willed" that at this dangerous moment in history it was the English-speaking world and not some Fascist or Communist state that possessed the atomic monopoly. This was a tremendously sensitive issue for many Americans. They were haunted by fear of atomic warfare and hoped somehow the matter could be resolved through an international agency like the UN. Churchill's assertion that it was fortunate that this awesome weapon rested in the hands of the English-speaking peoples was probably the single most offensive part of his speech for many forward-looking Americans. Although Churchill's phrase about an Iron Curtain caught the eye of most headline writers, his call for Anglo-American unity and his comments about the atomic bomb unleashed an uproar throughout the United States.

The reaction to the speech in the United States was overwhelmingly negative, especially to the part so dear to Churchill, his call for Anglo-American unity. Even many individuals who accepted Churchill's pessimistic diagnosis of the international scene were disconcerted by the implications of his charges. For days the American press was filled with hostile comments about Churchill's views. No other speech in recent memory had provoked such a torrent of controversy. Churchill seemed to enjoy the controversy he had created as he toured various parts of the United States on his way back to England. It is clear that this is precisely what he had in mind when he planned his speech. He thought that the American public, and the American political leadership and press in particular, were naive in their perception of Soviet intentions in the world. A shock was necessary to awaken them so that they could begin to face the international situation more realistically. Churchill succeeded brilliantly.

American liberals were harshest in their attacks on Churchill. The Chicago Sun-Times stated that it would be disastrous to follow "this great but blinded aristocrat" on a path sure to lead to war. PM, the leading journal of American fellow travelers, labeled the speech as nothing more than an "ideological declaration of war against Russia," which had to be repudiated. The political journals were equally harsh in their evaluation. The Nation, still optimistic about cooperation with Russia, was the most upset at Churchill. This journal was bothered by the timing of his talk, coming as it did after get-tough speeches from Secretary of State Byrnes and Senator Vandenberg. It seemed as if the British and Americans were ganging up on Russia. The Nation also claimed that Churchill had "added a sizable measure of poison to the already deteriorating relations between Russia and the Western powers." And finally it believed that he was undermining faith in the United Nations just as it was trying to establish itself. Truman they characterized as "remarkably inept" for allowing himself to be associated in any way with this speech.

Leading American liberal politicians also jumped on the anti-Churchill bandwagon. Henry Wallace, heir to FDR's political mantle as leader of Democratic liberals, angrily rejected the main thrust of Churchill's speech as nothing short of reviving imperialism under the guise of "enlightened Anglo-Saxon atomic bomb auspices." Like the Nation Wallace saw the speech as another example of the former Allies ganging up against Russia. Senators Claude Pepper, Glen Taylor, and Harley Kilgore, all liberal Democrats, issued a highly critical joint statement which attacked Churchill for what they described as his reactionary views. It was shocking, they stated, to see a man "who rose to power on the repudiation of Chamberlain align himself with the old Chamberlain Tories who strengthened the Nazis as part of their anti-Soviet crusade." They also feared that acceptance of Churchill's interpretation of international events would destroy what remained of Big-Three unity.
and undermine the UN. Their first charge was nothing more than a vain attempt to blacken Churchill’s name by linking him with the repudiated architect of appeasement, Chamberlain. Since no one else was more associated with anti-appeasement than Churchill, this argument was just plain silly. The other charges leveled by the senators were closer to the mark since Churchill believed that Big-Three unity virtually had disappeared in the months since the end of the war as the Soviets bolshevized Eastern Europe. The Soviet treatment of Poland had hardened his views of how to deal with Stalin. Insofar as the UN was concerned, in Churchill’s scheme of things it was unimportant when placed alongside the historical significance of the unity of the English-speaking peoples.

Eleanor Roosevelt, doyenne of American New Dealers, was deeply disconcerted by Churchill’s views. She feared among other things that it would push Truman in an increasingly harsh anti-Soviet direction. And as one of the leading American proponents of the UN, she disliked the way Churchill had denigrated this body as the centerpiece of the world’s quest for peace. When Churchill visited Hyde Park on his way home to England, Mrs. Roosevelt was friendly but refused to endorse his views on the world situation.

Churchill’s call for Anglo-American cooperation at the expense of the UN hit a sensitive nerve in the United States. No other nation had so uncritically hailed and overestimated the significance of the founding of a new international organization as had the United States. Still haunted by Woodrow Wilson’s failure over the League of Nations, enlightened liberals had quickly made the UN a sacred cow—the phrase “the world’s last great hope for peace” was repeated over and over in liberal circles until it became a shibboleth and an article of faith. Thus Churchill’s talk of a British-American alliance was seen by many Americans as nothing more than a devious attempt to perpetuate the British Empire. Even so resolutely an anti-Communist source as the Wall Street Journal rejected out of hand Churchill’s call for Anglo-American cooperation. In words worthy of a prewar isolationist, the Journal argued that it must be clear to Churchill from the reception his speech received that “the United States wants no alliance, or anything that resembles an alliance with any other nation.” Pearl Buck, addressing a group of progressives, the fourth Peoples Congress of East and West Association, outlined the implications of Churchill’s talk in catastrophic terms. Churchill’s words would serve to widen the gap between the nations who represented the Left and the Right in the world. What was worse, she said, was that “we are nearer war tonight than we were last night.” Quite a distinction for a single speech of a few thousand words.

These views represented rather accurately the confused state of opinion that prevailed in the United States at the end of the winter of 1946. The United States was leaving the euphoria of victory over the Axis powers and gradually awakening to the newly dangerous, but immensely confusing, international situation. At the time of Churchill’s speech opinion in the United States was coming around to a growing mistrust of the Soviet Union and its intentions in the world. When the war ended in the summer of 1945, 60 percent of the American public polled expressed confidence about cooperation between Russia and the Western Allies. By February 1946, on the eve of Churchill’s speech, that figure had dropped to 35 percent. Thus Churchill’s speech came at an opportune moment as far as the formation of public opinion about Russia’s intentions was concerned.

The Gallup poll in the last week of January 1946 had asked the public to name the country they thought wanted to dominate the world. Russia with 26 percent came first, and Great Britain and Germany lagged far behind with 12 and 10 percent respectively. In the week following Churchill’s speech the Gallup poll asked if the public approved or disapproved of the policy Russia was following in the world. Although 7 percent ap-
proved, 71 percent were opposed. While it is true that Churchill’s views were unpalatable to many Americans, he had given them something to chew over. Of the Americans who were familiar with his speech, only 22 percent agreed with it, and 40 percent disapproved. It was still difficult for many Americans to face the possibility that less than a year after the end of the war they were confronted with a new, possibly more dangerous, international situation. They held fast to concepts like the UN precisely because the alternatives outlined by Churchill seemed so unpleasant.

After seeming to identify himself closely with Churchill, Truman pulled back once criticism of the Iron Curtain speech developed. At his press conference of March 8, Truman was asked if his presence on the stage indicated endorsement of Churchill’s ideas. Truman said no and moreover that he had had no foreknowledge of what Churchill was going to say. This was not true. Asked if he endorsed Churchill’s specific suggestion of an Anglo-American alliance, Truman had no comment. At the same time he publicly wrote to Stalin and offered him the opportunity to come to the United States to speak. Truman said he would introduce him as he had Churchill. In fact, Truman broadly agreed with Churchill but found it politically expedient to hold back full endorsement. To further distance his administration from Churchill, Truman ordered Byrnes to tell Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, who regarded the speech as an unmitigated disaster, to absent himself from a posh New York reception for Churchill shortly before he returned to England. The State Department in general shared Acheson’s view: they thought Churchill had overstated the case against the Soviet Union and believed cooperation through the UN was still possible with Russia. State Department optimism eventually was shaken by George Kennan’s famous cable about Russian intentions in the world, which had arrived in late February and whose implications were only starting to be absorbed in the days and weeks following Churchill’s speech.

Back in England, Churchill’s remarks at Fulton created consternation at least as great as that which arose in the United States. The Labour government was pressed by some of its own supporters to denounce Churchill, but both Prime Minister Attlee and Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin argued that Churchill was speaking for himself. One hundred and five Labour MPs, nearly one-third of the Labour membership of the House of Commons, signed a motion of censure against Churchill for his anti-Soviet remarks. In point of fact, Attlee thought Churchill’s conduct in the United States exemplary. This view was reinforced when Attlee heard from Sir Ben Smith, minister of food, who was in the United States at the time of Churchill’s speech, that the old man had vigorously defended the British government’s request for a loan from America in the face of hostile press cross-examination. Smith thought Churchill’s defense of the loan request would help to undermine political opposition to it in America. For this Attlee was grateful. Nor did Bevin have any intention of repudiating Churchill or weakening the impact of his speech on American opinion. It was true that Churchill had made life difficult for Attlee and Bevin among their followers, but they could balance that against the help he had given them on the loan request. One person who definitely liked the speech was the king, George VI. When Churchill returned from America, he met the king, who told him that by saying what had to be said the Iron Curtain speech had done much good in the world.

Churchill was aware that his remarks about Russia and his seeming denigration of the UN might cause difficulties for Attlee. Two days after the Fulton meeting he telegraphed Attlee that his purpose was not only to stiffen America’s resolve in dealing with Russia but also to demonstrate that “some show of strength and resistance is necessary to a good settlement with Russia.” Churchill also predicted that his words would have the eventual effect of bringing the United
States around to that view.

The British press generally split along party lines over the speech. Conservative papers like the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* praised Churchill’s frankness and called attention to the correctness of his warnings in the past. The nonpartisan *Observer* saw the speech as an attempt to counter the growing power of Russia in Europe by reviving the Anglo-American alliance. It correctly put its finger on one flaw in much of the criticism against Churchill—that the speech was dividing people into a pro- and an anti-Russian camp. The vast majority of the British public, the *Observer* noted, “would like nothing better than to be pro-Russian, but unfortunately Russia seems to have already decided to be anti-British.”

By far the sternest British attack on the Iron Curtain speech was found in the pages of the *Tribune*, the leading left-wing journal in England. In a lead editorial entitled “Nothing Doing, Mr. Churchill,” it vociferously rejected his call for an alliance with the United States as an unnecessary provocation of Russia. While describing the speech as a “magnificent piece of oratory,” they said it was the work of the Churchill of 1919-20, the man who ranted unfairly against “the foul buffoonery of Bolshevism.” Churchill’s call for fraternal association with the United States was seen to mean simply “selling out to the one remaining stronghold of world capitalism.”

Even members of his own Conservative party were disconcerted by Churchill’s views. Harold Macmillan, while generally agreeing with the thrust of Churchill’s argument, thought he might have oversimplified both the mood and motives of the Soviet leaders. For Anthony Eden it was another case of Churchill’s embarrassing him. Publicly, Eden was silent; privately he thought the speech only made British foreign policy more difficult. Eden also believed that the speech demonstrated the need to get Churchill to step down from an official leadership position. He had not consulted Eden, the official Conservative spokesman on foreign policy, before giving his speech. Nor as far as Eden knew had he discussed the details of the speech with any other leading English political figure. Eden feared Churchill wanted to use the anti-Communist issue as a way of reviving his popularity, a view shared by many American observers.

In retrospect this was a poor reading of Churchill, who on most foreign policy issues avoided purely ideological positions in favor of more realistic ones. Churchill believed it was time to stand up to Stalin not because of anti-Communist ideology but because it was practically speaking the best way to deal with the Russian dictator. In fact it was Churchill’s critics who were the real ideologues, placing their faith in not alienating the Russians and hoping desperately the UN would be able to iron out all the difficult issues in Western-Soviet relations. Churchill had set out to get the Americans in particular, the West in general, to face reality and see that the world situation had taken a serious turn since the end of the war. His Iron Curtain speech succeeded masterfully. Not at first perhaps but as time passed and as Soviet behavior in Iran, Czechoslovakia, Berlin, et cetera grew worse, people looked back and said that Churchill had been right. Once again, as in the locust years of the 1930s, Churchill had rendered a great service to the West.