

The Significance of the Winston Churchill “Iron Curtain” speech

Introduction

Political leaders always deliver speeches to orient political thinking in their desired direction. However, in most cases, the speeches and their messages are quickly forgotten. Sometimes, the speeches are highly regrettable, with the audience or the speaker wishing they had never made them. Occasionally, a political leader rises above the rest and delivers a powerful speech of immense international significance that transcends ages and continues to resonate with a global audience long after it was delivered. This was the case with Churchill Winston's speech "Sinews of Peace," delivered in Fulton, Missouri, on the 5th of March 1946. Winston had just lost elections as the Prime Minister of Britain and was visiting the United States in his private capacity. This was occurring against tense relations between the United States of America, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies. He delivered a speech considered his best at Westminster College in the Midwestern town of Fulton. Even though the masses did not receive the speech well, it had significant international relations impact like reorienting the United States' foreign policy, and influencing the nature of cooperation among English-speaking countries.

Reception by Masses

Winston's speech was not well received by the masses and the elected leaders in the United States and back in his home country. Immediately after he delivered his speech, newspaper headlines across the country painted him negatively and criticized him for advancing antagonism against Moscow. One of the major American newspapers, the Chicago Sun, termed the content of that speech as poisonous.¹ Indeed, many Americans misunderstood Winston's idea of a

¹ Kevin Grieves, *Cold War Journalism: Between Cold Reception and Common Ground* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021), 81.

"special relationship" between London and Washington and considered it a call to undermine the newly formed United Nations Organization. This view resulted in protests against Winston outside his hotel in New York on his way back to Britain.² Adverse reactions to Churchill's speech in the US were not restricted only to the public and the media. The political establishment also distanced themselves from the views expressed in the speech. In the US Congress, three senators elected on the Democratic Party ticket expressed distaste and described it as shocking. The then US Secretary of Commerce, Henry Wallace, distanced the US from the contents of the speech reiterating that Winston did not speak for the US government and its people.³ Even back home, Winston received extensive criticism. One hundred members of parliament from Britain signed a formal motion to protest the former prime minister's assertions against the Soviet Union.⁴ Therefore, despite Winston's hope that his speech would wake people up to the dangers of communism, the immediate reaction from the masses and elected leaders in the US and Britain was mainly negative.

The Speech and the Cold War

Even though the Cold War was already ongoing when Winston made his speech in the US, it significantly influenced the intensification of action on the war's major fronts. Cold War refers to the restricted rivalry between the Soviet Union, the United States, and their respective allies.⁵ It developed after the Second World War and was wedged on the economic, political, and propaganda front: The use of weapons was limited.⁶ While the rivalry was already in place by

² Grievess, *Cold War Journalism*, p. 81.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Arnold, James R., and Roberta Wiener, eds. *Cold War: the essential reference guide* (Santa Barbra, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), p. 23.

⁶ *Cold War: the essential reference guide*, p. 23.

March 1946 when Winston made his famous speech in the US, his well-calculated assertions intensified action on the war's major fronts by both parties.

In the speech, Winston noted, “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.”⁷ While there was no physical barrier in the form of a curtain, Winston used the ‘iron curtain’ as a metaphor for the division between the communist states in the East and their democratic counterparts in the West. This claim served to demark the sides of the Cold War. On the side of the Soviet Union, Winston placed all the communist nations in the East, while on the side of the United States, he placed all the democratic nations in the West. With this assertion in his speech, he articulated more clearly how the war would be fought – the democratic western nations against the communist eastern ones. Additionally, Winston’s assertion was in itself propaganda. It aimed to convince the western allied that after spending six years fighting to rid Europe of fascism, half of the continent had fallen into the trap of Soviet dictatorship. This comparison elicited emotional reactions and justified the actions taken against the Soviet Union and its allies.

The Speech and the American Foreign Policy

In the immediate aftermath of Winston’s speech, President Truman responded to the American public’s unhappiness by claiming he had no prior knowledge of what the former Britain Prime Minister would say and was also surprised. In his attempt to balance things out and manage public disappointment, the President invited the Soviet Union leader Stalin to visit the United States, an invitation Stalin declined. Despite President Truman’s public show of disconnection

⁷Churchill, Winston "The Sinews of Peace ('Iron Curtain Speech')." *Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri/ABD* 5 (1946), pp. 1-6, p.2.

between his government and Winston's views expressed in the speech, his policies in the years that followed emulated the calls Winston made in this speech.

In the years that followed Winston's speech, President Truman rolled out his foreign policy that deviated significantly from his predecessor (President Roosevelt) and emulated the reactionary tactics outlined in Winston's speech. Americans had been accustomed to President Roosevelt's foreign policy in which he approached foreign disputes from a diplomatic point of view, only applying force if diplomacy failed: Truman adopted a completely different approach to foreign disputes. Unlike his predecessor, he made quick decisions and did not hesitate to use force.⁸ His foreign policy is summarized in the Truman Doctrine, which arose from his address to Congress on the 12th of March 1947, following the British Government's short notice on its withdrawal of economic and military assistance to the Greek government in its war against the communists.⁹ The doctrine established that the United States would henceforth offer economic, military, and political support to all democratic nations facing threats from internal and external authoritarian forces. This doctrine reoriented the US foreign policy from its traditional position of avoiding regional conflicts that did not directly involve the nation to a new position in which it would readily intervene in conflicts in other countries in order prevent them from becoming communist dictatorships.

This new position followed Winston's call for joint military action against the Soviet Union and its eastern communist allies. In his speech, Winston underscored the need to aggressively respond to the peace and stability threats that the Soviet Union's expansion posed to the world and placed the responsibility on the shoulders of the US, saying, "if you look around

⁸Spalding, Elizabeth Edwards. "The enduring significance of the Truman doctrine." *Orbis* 61.4 (2017): 563.

⁹Spalding, Elizabeth Edwards. *The Truman Doctrine: A Companion to Harry S. Truman* (2012): 332.

you, you must feel not only the sense of duty done but also you must feel anxiety lest you fall below the level of achievement.”¹⁰ A year later, Truman responded to Winston's call by adopting a foreign policy position that allowed the US to participate in faraway conflicts.¹¹ The timing and content of the Truman Doctrine indicate the significance of Winston's "Iron Curtain" speech on US foreign policy.

The Speech and Anglosphere Cooperation

Winston's speech served as a basis for increased cooperation among the English-speaking nations sharing cultural and historical ties with England. In his speech, Winston openly rooted for the Anglo nations to form a united front against the threats to global peace and stability posed by the expansion of the Soviet Union and its associated dictatorship. He outlined this need saying, "It is necessary that constancy of mind, persistency of purpose, and the grand simplicity of decision shall guide and rule the conduct of the English-speaking peoples in peace as they did in the war.”¹² In this excerpt, Winston roots for three things. First, he asks for the English-speaking nations to be faithful and dependable to each other. Secondly, he asks the English-speaking nations to persist in their quest to protect their people against the tyranny of the dictatorial powers, particularly in the communist East. Lastly, he calls for simplicity in the decision-making process in order to make the English-speaking nations more efficient when responding to a communist threat. Even though cooperation among Anglo nations existed before Winston's speech, had the unexpected effect of expanding this cooperation beyond those

¹⁰*The Sinews of Peace*, p.4

¹¹*The enduring significance of the Truman doctrine*, p.563

¹² *The enduring significance of the Truman doctrine*, P.563

countries and his call formed the basis for the modern-day NATO alliance and later the European Economic Community.¹³

Conclusion

The Sinews of Peace is regarded as Churchill Winston's best political speech. The former Britain prime minister delivered this speech in Fulton, Missouri, on the 5th of March 1946. He was visiting the US as a private citizen of Britain after losing elections the previous year and received an invitation to deliver a speech at Westminster College, signed by President Truman. The speech was criticized by the masses and elected leaders in both the US and Britain. Despite this criticism, it played a critical international relations role. First, the speech contributed to intensifying Cold War actions by clearly demarking the opposing sides and painting the picture of an extremely dictatorial Soviet Union. Secondly, it reoriented the United States foreign policy from the traditional diplomacy-centric position to a direct involvement in regional politics. Lastly, it influenced the nature of cooperation among the democratic countries by highlighting the critical items they needed to pursue.

¹³Dermot Hodson, , et al. *The institutions of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022),

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