

Churchill: The Continuing Story

JØRGEN SEVALDSEN

The iconic position of Winston Churchill, the great statesman and orator (1874-1965), was confirmed in a very public and spectacular fashion when in 2002 a popular BBC poll made him a clear winner of the title of the Greatest Briton ever. With 28.1% of the final vote, he beat not only his nearest rival, the Victorian engineer Isambard Brunel (24.6%), but also celebrities better known outside Britain such as Shakespeare (6.8%) or Admiral Nelson (3%). This essay will look at other manifestations of the continued contemporary interest in Churchill and discuss why it is that his career, views and personality are still felt to be of contemporary relevance.

The literature on Churchill is overwhelming and new biographies and monographs on aspects of his life are coming out every month. A visit to some of the most important Churchill web sites will confirm that the Churchill industry is alive and well.

There are obvious reasons for this. Churchill's political career covered most of the 20th century, he held important ministerial posts in many governments, including the position as prime minister 1940-45 and 1951-55, and he was, of course, a key player in British politics in the early phases of the Second World War when the fate of Britain and the future of the democracies of Western Europe was being decided. As an individual he was colourful and unpredictable, and there are so many military adventures and political and personal ups and downs in his life that it would seem impossible to write a dull biography of him. At the same time he was a master of words, both written and spoken, and his towering political prestige after World War II combined with his ability to coin phrases that were born as aphorisms has made him one of the most quoted politicians of all times. 'As Churchill said' is a sentence you constantly run into when speakers or writers try to borrow his wit or to capitalize on his political prestige. A superficial indication of the frequency with which Churchill is quoted in the English-speaking world compared with other famous or infamous figures may be had via the internet search machine 'Google'. A search (August 2004) on the word combination "As Churchill

said” gave 1,830 hits. If you substitute ‘Shakespeare’ for ‘Churchill’, the Bard admittedly scored 3,050 hits, and ‘Lincoln’ beats the British lion narrowly with 1,940 mentions. Other comparable figures, however, trail far behind him: Napoleon (746), Stalin (578), Hitler (451), Roosevelt (305), Margaret Thatcher (150), Lloyd George (31) and Attlee (4). Sometimes you even see aphorisms attributed to Churchill which were in fact uttered by others. He has, in other words, become a popular source of political wisdom and one that many will automatically turn to for verbal support of their case.

Let me just give one example of the contemporary use of Churchill’s authority. The – perhaps unlikely – admirer is the American linguist and radical political activist Noam Chomsky, who twice refers to Churchill in a preface to a book on the erosion of civil rights in the USA after the events of September 11 2001. In his first passage, he uses him as an example of imperialistic Western attitudes towards third world countries:

... The resort to violence to intimidate – “terrorism,” in the technical sense of US official documents – has long been a standard tool of domination ...The commanding officer responsible for the Amritsar massacre in India [1919] defended his actions on the grounds that ...”it was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more specially throughout the Punjab.” Churchill’s impassioned advocacy of ‘using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes’ [in Iraq] shortly after was based on similar reasoning. [Churchill dismissed] with contempt the ‘squeamishness’ of those who worried about popular reaction to what was then regarded as the most criminal weapon of war...

In the second, he quotes him approvingly for his staunch defence of the principles of the rule of law, even in times of crisis:

...In this connection, it might also be wise to recall some words of Churchill’s : “The power of the executive to cast a man into prison without formulating any charge known to the law, and particularly to deny him the judgment of his peers, is in the highest degree odious, and the foundation of all totalitarian government whether Nazi or Communist.” Churchill’s warning against such abuse of executive power for alleged intelligence and preventive purposes was in 1943, when Britain was facing threats that were not exactly trivial.

In other words, within the space of a few pages, Churchill is called on to exemplify both the worst in Western arrogance and the best in enlightened thought on civil rights (Chomsky 2003: ix and xii).

Before expanding on the contemporary political use of Churchill's reputation, I would, however, like to return very briefly to the present academic interest in the great statesman.

1. Churchill and the historians

The mainstream accounts of Churchill tend to present him as the 'Man of Destiny'. A man 'larger than life', with a difficult early life, but with a strong belief in himself and in his mission to achieve great things for the nation that he loved. For a long period of his life, his political career saw great triumphs, but also met with setbacks which would have crushed ordinary mortals. He never despaired, however, and took it upon himself to warn the British against the evil nature of Nazism and against German aggression in the 1930s, even if his warnings were largely ignored till shortly before the outbreak of war in 1939. Finally, he met his historical moment as Prime Minister, when his defiance of Hitler in the crucial years of 1940-41 turned him into what we can now recognize as a saviour of Western civilisation.

The basis of this narrative was provided by Churchill's own autobiographical books, such as *My Early Life* (1930), and the extensive volumes on World War I (*The World Crisis* 1923-31) and World War II (*The Second World War*, 1948-54). Often quoted in this context is his remark that he was sure history would be kind to him, because he intended to write it himself! His family, too, took part in this work. His son, Randolph, wrote the first volumes of the official biography, his daughter Mary Soames has written about the family, in particular about her mother, Clementine Churchill; and other relatives have made their contributions to the canon. The basic story was repeated in the official eight-volume biography, largely written by the historian Martin Gilbert, who also edited the massive companion volumes of documents for the biography. It is not that Gilbert suppresses facts or documents that might put Churchill in an unfavourable light; but his basic approach is one of reverence, and you might say that in situations where a positive or a negative interpretation of Churchill's aims and motives might be constructed, Gilbert rarely chooses the negative one. All later one-volume biographies have relied on the narratives and documents left by the

Churchill family and by Gilbert's gigantic endeavours, and most of them see Churchill's life through the prism provided by them.

Until recently, alternative and critical voices were mostly heard either from historians on the left, where there is a tradition of seeing Churchill as an anti-labour, upper-class alcoholic, a racist and a trigger-happy militarist; and from professional soldiers and military historians, who have occasionally accused him of being an amateur meddling in affairs which should have been left to the true professionals (Ponting 1994; Barnett 1991). During the 1990s, however, a new critical trend emerged, this time from historians and politicians from the 'national right' – people who were both hostile to European integration and Britain's participation in the EU, and sceptical of Britain's perceived subservience to the USA. They accused Churchill of being a romantic whose determination to fight Hitler and whose deference for the Americans hastened Britain's decline unnecessarily. The main proponent of this view, the historian John Charmley, pointed out that Churchill had two major ambitions in his political life: to fight bolshevism and to preserve the British Empire. But see what happened? After World War II, the Soviets dominated Eastern Europe, and the British Empire broke up. The US became the dominant western superpower, and Britain a client of the Americans. All this, they say, might have been avoided if Churchill had been open to the conclusion of a separate peace with Germany in 1940. That might have given the British Empire a new lease of life and perhaps limited the damage inflicted by Stalin on Europe and the world (Charmley 1993: 649; 1995: 46).

Few historians are now (2005) running with this particular ball. Nevertheless, the furore created by Charmley's revisionism was no doubt one of the factors that created space for new biographies and new interpretations of Churchill's life and legacy in the early 2000s. The most successful recent biographies such as those by Geoffrey Best and Roy Jenkins are adamant that Churchill deserves the epithet 'great', and Best in particular insists that Charmley's belief in a continued life of Britain as an imperial world power following a British-German peace in 1940 is an unrealistic dream. Hitler would never have kept his word or limited his ambitions, and in the end Britain is in a better position now as an American client with its self-respect intact than it would have been as a German vassal.

So most of the new books about Churchill are still within a recognizable mould and are content with rehearsing well-known

controversies on for example the responsibility for the Gallipoli campaign, which ended Churchill's career as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1915, or the controversies between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin during World War II on allied strategy towards the Axis powers. A number of recent contributions have, however, tried to explore Churchill's legacy from fresh angles. David Stafford's *Churchill & Secret Service* (1997) illuminates Churchill's dealings with and use of the intelligence services on the basis of recently freed documents, and reminds us that if material likely to expand our knowledge on Churchill's career in important ways is ever likely to turn up, it will probably come from hitherto closed intelligence files. John Ramsden's path-breaking *Man of the Century. Winston Churchill* (2002) explores Churchill's legacy and the ways in which he has been celebrated – or the opposite – in various parts of the world, including Scandinavia. David Reynolds' *Churchill fighting and Writing the Second World War* (2004) is a detailed examination of how Churchill compiled his *The Second World War* (1948-1953) and compares Churchill's version of events and the version that emerges from a study of the contemporary war records. The outcome does not seriously change our picture of Churchill's role in the war, but the book provides a fascinating insight into Churchill's working methods as a writer. It makes it clear how much he relied on the drafts of his professional research assistants, and gives examples of themes that were underplayed in the memoirs in order to put Churchill himself in the best possible light or that were politically inconvenient to dwell on in the light of the international situation of the 1950s. Again, it is not unknown for authors of autobiographies to have selective memories, and Reynolds' strength is the methodical and exhaustive treatment of the topic rather than conclusions that require radical revisions of the history of World War II. In general, Reynolds' attitude to his subject is dispassionate. His research does not, for example, leave him as a great admirer of Churchill's skills as a military strategist: as a former soldier, he had 'real ... experience of war', but 'he did not command any formation larger than a battalion, he had never attended Staff College and learned to plan operations, and had no interest in logistics – that essential science of supply. In other words Churchill knew battle but did not really understand modern war – large-scale, resource-intensive operations involving the mobilizing and deployment of complex formations and different arms.' (Reynolds 2004: 244).

2. Churchill and Scandinavia: From Norway 1940 to the Nobel Prize in 1953.

Apart from the unsuccessful Allied attempt to force the Straits of the Dardanelles in 1915, which resulted in Churchill's resignation as a minister, the Norway campaign in 1940 has to be rated as the most spectacular military failure overseen by Churchill in his capacity as First Lord of the Admiralty. This was a post that he held in the first months of World War I as well as of World War II. On both occasions the British and the Germans and their respective allies devoted a great deal of diplomatic and economic attention to the peripheral areas of the Continent: To the Balkans and to Scandinavia. The aims of the warring powers were to try to persuade the small neutral powers in these regions to join them as allies or at least to prevent them from joining the enemy coalitions, and at the same time to secure continued access to important raw material such as, in the Second World War, Rumanian oil and Swedish iron ore. In both 1914-15 and 1939-40 Churchill's mind was thus frequently occupied by schemes that might bring British naval power to bear on Germany by actions through the Danish Straits directed against Germany's Baltic coast. In 1915 the plans were postponed in favour of the Dardanelles scheme and abandoned after the failure to force the Turkish Straits; in private, however, Churchill continued to wrestle with the idea of breaking the deadlock on the Western Front through daring actions in the Baltic. When in September 1939 he joined the Government and was put in charge of the Royal Navy, he returned to the plans for naval actions in the Baltic and also worked on a number of schemes designed to stop the transportation of iron ore from Narvik to Germany and even occupy the mines in Kiruna in Northern Sweden to control their output of ore.

There is no space here to retell in detail the complicated story of the Allied and German plans and ambitions in Scandinavia during the 'Phoney War' between the German attacks on Poland in September 1939 and on Denmark and Norway on 9 April 1940. Allied plans to start operations in the North of Norway and Sweden to support the Finns in their Winter War against the Russians and occupy the mines of Kiruna on the way never materialised, as the governments of neutral Norway and Sweden refused to cooperate. It is clear, however, from recent literature on Churchill and the events of 1939-40 that his advocacy of actions against the Norwegian coast was not only motivated by a wish to stop the iron ore trade, but also by a hope that Hitler would retaliate so that the British and

French might open a front against Germany in an area where the British navy could act from a position of supposedly superior strength. Where Neville Chamberlain and his foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, hesitated to embark on operations in breach of international law and carrying a risk of British troops being resisted by Norwegian and Swedish soldiers, the end justified the means to Churchill. According to the most recent historian of British policies during the phoney war, he 'cared not a fig for Norwegian or Swedish resistance, and positively welcomed an aggressive German reaction' (Smart 2003: 139).

The upshot of the deliberations in London and Paris was the British operation launched on 8 April to mine the approaches to Narvik within Norwegian territorial waters. At that time, German ships were on their way to the North Atlantic, and turned the tables on the allies with their invasion of Denmark and Norway on 9 April. Although Churchill was at first hopeful that the British navy would now be free to engage the Germans and strike a decisive blow against Hitler's maritime power, events soon turned into a disaster for the allies who were unable to prevent the Germans from occupying Norway.

On the German side, the navy had long advocated occupation of the Norwegian seaboard in case of a war with Britain. Planning for such a contingency had begun in October 1939. During the early months of 1940, as the Allied interest in some form of intervention in Scandinavia became public knowledge, Hitler's interest in the project grew. The Germans were planning their big assault on their Western neighbours, and Hitler decided that he had better protect his Northern flank against British operations before he turned on the French. Hence the directive for the occupation of Denmark and Norway on 1 March, and the final order of 2 April to proceed with operation 'Weserübung' during the early hours of 9 April.

In retrospect, it is not difficult to find an explanation for the success of the German operations. Whereas the British, and not least Churchill, were quite open about their interest in the Swedish iron ore traffic and in the way in which the Scandinavians administered their neutrality, the German military plans were laid in total secrecy. When German naval movements were detected on 8 April, British intelligence misinterpreted the directions and purposes of the German operations so that the Germans managed to put their expeditionary forces ashore before the British discovered the true proportions of the German attack. Finally, Churchill and others had not foreseen the extent and significance of the

German air superiority during the operations and the ability of the Germans to land troops in Norway from the air.

In Britain, the setback in Norway was also a blow to Churchill's prestige, but not, as it turned out, to the extent that it prevented him from becoming Prime Minister. On May 10 Chamberlain had to stand down after the Norway debates in the House of Commons and the German attack on France, and Churchill was the only politician with stature and self-confidence enough to take on the daunting task of war leader in Britain. In Norway and Denmark, the experience of the German occupation, the position of Churchill as the central figure in the fight against Hitler in the crucial years of 1940-41, and the role of Britain as the liberator of the two countries from German rule ensured that the reputation of Churchill was transformed. Where before April 1940 he had been regarded by many as a slightly eccentric political maverick, his war leadership gave him an iconic position in the two countries. He made triumphal visits to Norway in 1948 and Denmark in 1950, and statues of him were put in place in Copenhagen in 1955 and in Oslo in 1976. By giving Churchill the Nobel Prize for literature in 1953, the Swedes provided him with an opportunity to visit their country. He was, however, unable to take it. At that point, he was in his second period as Prime Minister (1951-55), and had arranged a summit meeting with his American and French colleagues in Bermuda at the time of the ceremony in Stockholm in December 1953. So his wife, Clementine Churchill, went to receive it on his behalf and contributed to making it an occasion marked by warm appreciation on all sides.

Nevertheless, Sweden was hardly among Churchill's favourite countries mainly, of course, because he resented Swedish neutrality policies during World War II. During his visit to Copenhagen in October 1950, a year after Denmark and Norway had joined the Atlantic Pact, he discussed Scandinavia's position vis-à-vis Soviet Russia with Hans Hedtoft, the Danish Prime Minister. Hedtoft was a Social Democrat with very positive attitudes towards Nordic co-operation who regretted the failure to establish a Nordic defensive pact prior to the Norwegian and Danish decision to join NATO. When he assured Churchill that the Swedes were brave enough and would fight as well as the Norwegians and Danes if attacked by the Russians, Churchill replied that Swedish policy was 'governed by a professional neutrality' and that Sweden 'did not have the right sense of solidarity, although that might come' (Sevaldsen 2004: 359). This difference

between the positions of Denmark, Norway and Sweden in Churchill's universe is summed up thus by the historian John Ramsden:

... The Swedes were simply not part of the club of nations that had accepted Churchill's moral lead in the Second World War, an exclusion that was marked in 1965 by the British Government's decision to award two places for official mourners to each country that had been a British wartime ally, but only one to countries that had then been hostile – or neutral. The Danes and Norwegians were thus each given two seats in St Paul's Cathedral for Churchill's funeral, the Swedes only one. This was noted and somewhat resented in Stockholm, as American diplomats reported back to Washington, for, as some Swedes carefully pointed out, neither Denmark nor Norway had actually chosen to join the allied side in the war, they had merely found themselves there when Germany invaded them (Ramsden 2002: 296).

It must be said, however, that Churchill did not in general concern himself much with the problems of smaller states. The world with which he was familiar was a world of empires and great powers with global spheres of influence. Small states were impractical and often in the way, and Churchill at times suggested that they should band together in regional federations. Nor was he willing to subscribe to their right to remain neutral in all circumstances of war. In a situation where Britain was fighting for her existence against an aggressive Continental power, she must reserve the right to herself to carry out operations that technically violated the rights of small countries for the sake of the greater good. Churchill was steeped in British history and could find examples in the past to justify a robust British attitude towards minor powers. A passage in his popular book, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956-58), on the British action against Denmark in 1807 may serve as an illustration. Churchill is writing about the Napoleonic Wars and is discussing the situation after the signing of the Franco-Russian alliance at Tilsit in July 1807. Napoleon now dominated the Continent and Britain had to rely on her naval superiority and ability to enforce her blockade of Continental trade:

... Grave and threatening news was conveyed to London from the raft where the two Emperors had met upon the River Niemen. An English secret agent reported that an arrangement had been reached whereby Napoleon was to seize the Danish Fleet and gain control of the entrance to the Baltic. This was to be a preliminary to a joint invasion of England with the help of the Russians. The

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Cabinet acted with praiseworthy decision. Admiral Gambier was immediately ordered to enter the Baltic with twenty ships of the line and procure, by force if necessary, the surrender of the Danish Fleet. After a heavy action in the harbour of Copenhagen the Danes yielded to this humiliation. This act of aggression against a neutral state aroused a storm against the Government in Whig political and literary circles. But events vindicated the promptitude and excused the violence of their action. Two days after the British Fleet left home waters Napoleon had informed the Danish Minister in Paris that if England were to refuse Russian mediation in the Great War Denmark would be forced to choose sides. Had the British Government not acted with speed the French would have been in possession of the Danish Navy within a few weeks.

(Churchill 1957: 253).

Churchill and his research assistants are not the only writers who mix up Nelson's naval battle at Copenhagen in 1801 with Wellington's and Gambier's action in 1807 which secured British aims through a bombardment of the city and its civilian population. Nevertheless, the argument is clear enough, and the reader is no doubt invited to see the parallels with both Churchill's plans for actions against Norway and the Baltic in 1939-40 and the Royal Navy's sinking of a section of the French navy off Oran in July 1940 to prevent the French ships from falling in the hands of the Germans.

3. Contemporary uses of Churchill

The steady interest in Churchill which has been apparent since his death in 1965 took a dramatic upturn after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 and the Anglo-American decision to invade Iraq in March 2003.

The tragedy in New York on 11 September 2001 immediately conjured up images of Churchill. The visits by Rudolph Giuliani, the Mayor of New York, and by President Bush to the ruins evoked memories of Churchill's walkabouts in the blitzed parts of London in 1940, and the rhetoric of Giuliani and Bush was equally reminiscent of Churchill's defiance of foreign tyrants. Such references continued in the period leading up to the decision to attack Iraq in 2003. The British war leader's name was frequently invoked to justify preventive action against the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime. Two themes in particular were presented:

Firstly, Churchill's wisdom in realising that appeasement does not work against unscrupulous dictators. Opponents of armed intervention against Saddam Hussein were compared with the followers of Neville Chamberlain and accused of making the same kind of misjudgement of their opponent's intentions that the appeasers made in the 1930s.

Secondly, that we should learn from Churchill's courage in standing up for views that were unpopular during the years before the war and in taking the difficult decision to fight on against Hitler in 1940 in spite of scepticism among his colleagues. President Bush and especially Prime Minister Blair knew that many of their voters were uncomfortable with their policies on Iraq, and Churchill provided a tempting model of a politician who dared lead from the front. As Bush expressed it in February 2004: 'In his determination to do the right thing, and not the easy thing, I see the spirit of Churchill in Prime Minister Tony Blair.' On the same occasion, Bush declared himself 'a great admirer of Sir Winston Churchill, admirer of his career, admirer of his strength, admirer of his character – so much so that I keep a stern-looking bust of Sir Winston in the Oval Office. He watches my every move.' (Bush 2004). Tony Blair on his part styled his speeches in a manner that often recalled famous phrases from Churchill's wartime speeches: 'We the British are a people that stand by our friends in times of need, trial and tragedy...' (14 September 2001); 'People should have confidence. This is a battle with only one outcome: our victory, not theirs' (30 March 2003); 'On its outcome hangs more than the fate of the Iraqi people' (*The Observer*, 11 April 2004).

The appeal to Churchill was not, as Danish newspaper readers will know, confined to the countries of the 'Anglosphere'. In Denmark, too, politicians and commentators supporting the Danish participation in the military action against Iraq frequently reminded their critics of Churchill's uncompromising stand against tyrants and of the debt of gratitude that Danes owe him and the British people (Sevaldsen 2004: 392).

In the context of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, however, the close relationship between them during the Iraq crisis was in itself seen as a vindication of the 'special relationship' between Britain and the USA, and thus of an ideal that Churchill himself had cultivated more than any other British statesman in the 20th century. Born of an American mother, he saw the relationship as based not just on a community of interests, but on a shared history and common democratic and constitutional ideals. This is what he elaborated over four volumes in *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956-1958), and which he translated into a special duty

of the two leading English-speaking countries to secure and uphold an orderly and democratic world. Thus, in his famous 'iron curtain' speech in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946 on the threat from Soviet totalitarianism, he dwelled on the position of the USA as the champion, with Britain, of human rights, freedom and the rule of law. 'Here are the title deeds of freedom which should lie in every cottage home. Here is the message of the British and American peoples to mankind. Let us preach what we practise – let us practise what we preach.' (Cannadine 1990: 300). In the context of an emerging Cold War, he stressed the special role of the USA and Britain, within the new organisation of the UN, to ensure order and stability in the world. Churchill tried as long as possible to insist on an equal status between the US and Britain and its Commonwealth in this task, even though he recognized that the North American cousins were the superpower of the future. Nowadays, the idea of the US as the heir to Britain's world role has been taken up by historians such as Niall Ferguson, who famously called the USA 'an empire in denial' (Ferguson 2004a). The argument of Ferguson and other Anglo-American neo-imperialists is that the world needs a benevolent superpower to ensure order and stability. Britain fulfilled this role in the 19th century through its Empire, which was, by and large, a good, progressive and stabilizing thing. What is needed now, in this view, is that the USA takes it upon itself to play this role in full recognition of what it is doing.

And what, then, should Britain's role be in a world dominated by the USA? Here, too, Churchill's legacy plays an interesting part in the discussions. The fact that his and Britain's finest hour in 1940 was a case of 'standing alone' against dark forces emanating from the Continent is seen by many as having had a lasting effect on British perceptions of Europe. It is true that in the late 1940s Churchill acquired a reputation as one of the fathers of a united Europe through his sponsorship of the Council of Europe in 1949, but it quickly became clear that he was against British participation in any form of supra-national European co-operation. A United Europe for him was an instrument of French-German reconciliation, not a construction that should lure Britain away from her imperial or Atlantic destinies. So he did not use his authority to prepare the British for a life as one among many European players. The pro-European conservative historian John Ramsden comments on the 'extremely high regard with which both Churchill and Britain itself were held across Europe after 1945' and deplores 'the recklessness with which such a national asset was wasted by British Governments over the next two

decades. Whatever role Britain might have sought to play after 1945, Churchill had ensured that the ball was at our feet, though somehow neither he nor his successors were ever able to run with it. This was a failure of foreign policy that could well come to weigh heavily in the historical scales of judgement.' (Ramsden 2002: 321).

On the other hand, it has been easy and obvious to use Churchill's authority in support of maintaining close links with the USA. The Churchill-Roosevelt relationship has been compared with the Thatcher-Reagan partnership and with Blair's relations with both Clinton and Bush. As mentioned before, Blair's policy of sticking to the partnership with Bush partly out of basic sympathy for the American view of the world and partly because of an ambition to maximize British influence on American decisions is easy to present as one modelled on the example of Winston Churchill. There has been an ongoing discussion about the validity of such a parallel between the experts. Thus in July 2004, Jon Meacham, the author of *Franklin and Winston* (2003), warned against historical comparisons of this kind and against seeing too many likenesses between George W. Bush and Tony Blair on one side and Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt on the other: 'Bush eschews complexity; FDR and Churchill embraced it. Bush prefers to decide, not go into details or revisit issues; FDR and Churchill were constantly examining their own assumptions and immersing themselves in postwar planning. Bush is largely incurious about the world; FDR and Churchill wanted to know everything.' (Meacham 2004). In contrast, Martin Gilbert reminded us in December 2004 that in their time, Churchill and Roosevelt were the target of much criticism, too, and argues that if a democratic Iraq and an Israeli-Palestinian agreement emerge at the end of the difficult war in Iraq, Bush and Blair 'may well, with the passage of time and the opening of the archives, join the ranks of Roosevelt and Churchill.' He also saw the intervention in Iraq in the context of Anglo-American idealism as expressed in the Atlantic Charter: 'Churchill and Roosevelt worked together to shape the postwar world. The Atlantic Charter, which they both signed in August 1941, set out the parameters of self-government, free elections and democracy for all those nations that had been subjected to Nazi tyranny. In Iraq, Bush and Blair have adhered to the Atlantic Charter concept. Hussein was overthrown in order that a democratic Iraqi leader could be put in his place, and both leaders are persevering in this task.' (Gilbert 2004).

There are, of course, other roads for Britain than the Atlantic or the European ones. The historian Timothy Garton Ash has recently tried so

summarise the various options discussed in Britain as the following four strategies:

- I. Regain independence. This is a narrative that 'draws on an immensely powerful self-image: that of Britain fighting heroically on, led by Winston Churchill, after France had fallen to Hitler's armies in the summer of 1940', and which concentrates on pulling out of Europe.
- II. Choose America. The voices recommending this say that Britain must choose between the US and Europe, and that she should choose the US and join the North Atlantic Free Trade Area.
- III. Choose Europe. Only through pooling its sovereignty with the partners in the EU, say the proponents of this option, can Britain free herself from her servitude to the US and regain her natural place as a leading force in Europe. Britain needs to realise that culturally and in terms of social values, she is a European country.
- IV. Try to make the best of Britain's intimate relations with both America and Europe. This is, in fact, what the Blair government tries to do, and which most British people would no doubt opt for, whereas the media tend to be more polarised between 'Eurosceptics', 'Europhiles' and 'Atlanticists'.

In this scheme of things, Winston Churchill, in Ash's view, is 'the prime witness, role model and adopted patron saint' of the first two options (Ash 2004: 30). Options which are still alive in the British debate, where participants are still trying to capitalise on Churchill's immense reputation.

4. Historical role model?

For historians, this leaning on a historical authority like Churchill in contemporary political controversies raises the old and familiar question of learning lessons from history. In the case of Churchill: Are there sufficient similarities between the situations in the 1930s and the present day for a comparison between Churchill's stand against Hitler and Blair's against Saddam Hussein to be meaningful?

In the late 1930s, Churchill certainly was more alert to dangers coming from Hitler's Germany than many of his contemporaries were. As to the

question of how to contain Hitler's ambitions, Churchill's main advice was (1) To build alliances against him in Europe while strengthening the League of Nations, and (2) To build up Britain's defences so that the country could negotiate from a position of strength. He never proposed a preventive war on Germany to force the country to disarm or to rid it of the Nazi regime. During the crisis in 1936 caused by Germany's remilitarisation of the Rhineland, he did not oppose the official policy of trying to find a negotiated settlement of the crisis. In 1939, the final decision of Neville Chamberlain's government to go to war with Germany was taken as a response to a direct German attack on Poland.

In other words, it seems difficult to compare the situation in the 1930s with the 2003 scenario of a perceived threat from a minor power ruled by a vicious dictator possibly possessing weapons of mass destruction. If you want to find historical situations in which Churchill advocated intervention for preventive or humanitarian reasons you would have to look at other episodes in his long career. Thus, his advocacy of allied intervention against the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1920 may be said to have sprung from a sort of liberal interventionism. In that situation, however, as in the case of his intervention in the Greek civil war in 1944-45 on the side of the anti-communists, there already were internal conflicts taking place in which Churchill chose to support one of the parties. He also cheered, as Prime Minister, the American-led operations against the Iranian politician Mohammad Mossadegh in 1952-53 which led to Mossadegh's fall. Churchill had resigned as Prime Minister when the British, French and Israelis invaded Egypt in 1956 in response to President Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal. He appears not to have had qualms about the intervention in itself, but reservations about the wisdom of going in without assurance of American support. In any case, the military interventions against local autocrats in Iran in 1953 and in Egypt in 1956 took place to protect British economic and strategic interests; they were not defended as actions to rid the world of dangers to the peace or to liberate the Iranian or Egyptian peoples from oppression. If Churchill had been alive in 2003 and in a position to confer with Tony Blair on the merits of intervention in Iraq, my guess would be that he would have been attracted by the idea of a joint Anglo-American action to punish a local tyrant, but also doubtful about whether key British interests were at stake, or whether the liberation of the Iraqi people from a despotic ruler was a strong enough argument to warrant military action.

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In fact, Churchill did not always act in heroic and uncompromising modes. His policies could be very pragmatic. As Prime Minister 1951-55 he was very much aware that the West was confronting a country that had nuclear bombs, and was more careful to avoid provoking the Soviets than was his US partners. Like them, he sincerely wanted the demise of the Soviet Union. He was certain that the communist regimes would fall, but thought that the breakdown of the Soviet bloc would be a result of a long process of attrition and of the effects of increasing cultural and economic pressure from the West. You might say that here was another issue on which history was to prove him right.

So the conviction that Churchill would be a certain supporter of the Coalition attack on Iraq, had he been with us today, seems difficult to sustain if you look at the specifics of each of the historical situations that might be compared. It may also be that the fans of Churchill choose to appeal to him more generally as a politician with a heroic and activist approach to the conduct of foreign policy. By the end of 2004, however, the increasingly messy and un-heroic circumstances of the intervention in Iraq lessened the inclination of Anglo-American leaders to draw in Churchill in the debate. Who knows, perhaps the Churchill that will be quoted over the next few years will not be the opponent of appeasement in the 1930s, but the minister who in 1920-21 fought relentlessly against IRA terrorists in Ireland, but in the end decided that enough was enough and that a settlement could only be reached through negotiations with the terrorists? As the quote from Noam Chomsky referred to at the beginning of this essay illustrated, Churchill's speeches and policies span so many positions that his authority can be called upon to support a wide range of views.

There are, finally, a number of other reasons why Churchill will no doubt continue to be quoted and used as an authority. They have to do with aspects of his personality which mark him out as a modern or even post-modern politician:

Firstly, his ability to set the scene and create reality through rhetoric, especially in 1940. All spin doctors must admire his ability during the period after the fall of France to persuade the British population that their country was in a position to win a war with the axis powers, when all rational analysis pointed in the opposite direction. This has always been recognised as a superior feat of political persuasion, which was even more remarkable as he was, of course, his own spin doctor.

Secondly, his very modern way of 'branding' himself as a politician. There were certainly other leaders with strong public profiles during the

1930s, but among democratic politicians he was remarkable in his early ability to brand himself through the weird variety of hats he used, his cigar, bow tie, and the V-sign that he cultivated during World War II. He was extremely careful about this and very conscious of cultivating and maintaining his public image.

Thirdly, his leadership style. Certainly, his reputation among his contemporaries and his staff on this score is mixed. He was known as a person who drove his secretaries to despair by demanding their services at improbable hours, as an addict of one-way communication and therefore a hopeless chairperson of meetings. Nevertheless, other aspects of his style of leadership are attracting interest at business schools and other centres of management studies: His ability to inspire his staff through his energy and ceaseless interest in even minute details, which made him an 'inspirational' and 'hands-on' leader; his curiosity, which made him want to see for himself what went on in the offices, ships, airfields, munition factories or whatever other establishments that were part of his ministerial responsibilities. Experts have declared him a prime example of the 'MBWA' style of leadership: Management By Walking About (Roberts 2003: 101).

These 'modern' features are to be found, it should be remembered, in a person who was born into the upper echelons of the British aristocracy. This is one of the many apparent contradictions which make him so fascinating: at the same time progressive and aristocratic, social reformer and anti-socialist, cautious pragmatic and heroic firebrand, realistic power politician and romantic nationalist, prophetic seer and detail-obsessed administrator. You should, in my view, always be sceptical of anybody claiming authority for contemporary courses of action from the great statesman, but it will always be fascinating and often inspiring to see how he coped with the challenges that he and his country met with in his lifetime.

University of Copenhagen

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Note:

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