

Winston Churchill : the Search for His Character

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Winston Churchill – The Search for His Character

In trying to reconstruct the evolution of Churchill's character, the historian has, as his principal source, Churchill's own private letters, spanning the whole of his career. These letters – to his mother, to his wife, and to his close friends – are preserved not only in Churchill's own archive, but in many other archives throughout England. Indeed, since I succeeded Randolph Churchill as Sir Winston's official biographer in October 1968, I have examined more than 200 private archives, many of which contain frank and personal letters written by Churchill in his own hand-writing; and of which he kept no copy.

Much can be learnt about Churchill's character from his public speeches, and from his interventions in Cabinet; and this material supplements his private letters in many important respects. For one dominating characteristic of Churchill's life was his openness about himself, his frankness about what was on his mind, and his almost daily laying bare of his inner thoughts – a constant parading of his feelings and conscience in both correspondence and conversations.

After 1894, when he was twenty, until 1900 when he entered Parliament, Churchill showed three dominant characteristics. The first was an overriding desire to enter politics, to emulate his father – who had died in January 1895 – and to seek to fulfil his father's promise and ambition, as well as to prove that his father's low estimate of his abilities was false. His second characteristic was an extraordinary ability to convey his experiences to others, to attract listeners, and to draw the attention of a wide number of people by his vivid manner of speech and expression. Often at Harrow he had found himself the centre of a group of boys who would listen to his brilliant mimicry and one of their number – someone who was always present listening, and whom Churchill would single out for amusing, and sometimes scathing, commentary. Often his father's contemporaries, talking to the young man at dinner, found themselves amazed by his precocious, but often shrewd, and at times prophetic remarks, as well as by his lively

turn of phrase. His third characteristic during the early years was his realisation of his own powers, and of the nature of his powers. Thus, on 22 December 1897, he wrote to his mother: "I have discovered a great power of application which I did not know I possessed." And he added (he was then in the army): "Were my chances not political, I should have no fear of rising to high commands." A month later, on 26 January 1898, he wrote to his mother from Bangalore in India:

In Politics a man, I take it, gets on not so much by what he *does*, as by what he *is*. It is not so much a question of brains as of character & originality. It is for these reasons that I would not allow others to suggest ideas and that I am somewhat impatient of advice as to my beginning in politics. Introduction – connections – powerful friends – a name – good advice well followed – all these things count – but they lead only to a certain point. As it were they may ensure admission to the scales. Ultimately – every man has to be weighed – and if found wanting nothing can procure him the public confidence.

Nor would I desire it under such circumstances. If I am not good enough – others are welcome to take my place. I should never care to bolster up a sham reputation and hold my position by disguising my personality. Of course – as you have known for some time – I believe in myself. If I did not I might perhaps take other views.

Churchill's belief in himself was communicated to the public through his writings from an early age. His early newspaper despatches, his first few books, and his newspaper articles written by the time he was 26, were all widely noticed. "I write very rarely" he wrote to his mother on 1 January 1901, "and when I do I like to get a very wide circulation and to produce some little effect on the opinion of the country." This was precisely what he did. The forcefulness of his opinions was clearly expressed in all that he wrote, and made an immediate impact. Twenty years later, during the General Election of 1922, a leading Liberal politician, Sir Alfred Mond, wrote to Churchill: "I envy you the gift of coining phrases which will live"; and it was these very phrases which, from the turn of the century, so impressed itself upon Churchill's contemporaries. In a letter to the *Natal Witness* published on 29 March 1900, Churchill had argued in favour of leniency towards the defeated Boers in South Africa. Criticising the spirit of revenge which was then prevalent in England, he wrote: "It is wrong first of all because it is morally wicked; and secondly because it is practically foolish. Revenge may be sweet, but it is also most expensive." And he continued:

Beware of driving men to desperation. Even a cornered rat is dangerous. We desire a speedy peace and the last thing in the world we want is that this war should enter upon a guerilla phase. Those who demand "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" should ask themselves whether such barren spoils are worth five years of bloody partisan warfare and the consequent impoverishment of South Africa.

A life-long characteristic of Churchill's writings, which gave added power to their linguistic skill, was the strength of feeling behind them. He did not use fine phrases merely for effect. Everything that he wrote was seriously planned: a careful and brilliant use of language consciously employed in order to put across his carefully thought out opinions, many of which were controversial. In his book *The River War*, first published in 1900, he bitterly criticised the inhumane attitude of Lord Kitchener towards the wounded dervishes, and wrote in forceful language of the horrors of the field of battle. His description of his ride, on 5 September 1898 – three days after the fight – to the scene of the slaughter is one of the most harrowing pieces of writing in the English language, actually written before he was twenty-six. At the end of the description comes this passage: "I may have written in these pages something of vengeance and of the paying of a debt. It may be that vengeance is sweet and that the gods forbade vengeance to man because they reserve for themselves so delicious and intoxicating a drink. But no-one should drain the cup to the bottom. The dregs are often filthy tasting."

Many of Churchill's contemporaries resented his outspokenness. His youth was against him, and so were the opinions that he expressed. But one dominant characteristic, never lost, was fearlessness – which many saw as rashness, and regarded with contempt. Churchill fearlessly expressed unpopular opinions for more than fifty years. Leniency towards a defeated enemy is never a popular cry; yet Churchill demanded leniency after the Boer War, after the First World War, and again after the Second World War. In 1919 a French town asked him for an inscription on a war memorial. The inscription he designed read as follows:

IN WAR: RESOLUTION
IN DEFEAT: DEFIANCE
IN VICTORY: MAGNANIMITY
IN PEACE: GOODWILL

The French municipal authorities rejected this message. Magnanimity in victory was not a theme popular in France, or indeed in Britain, in 1919. Churchill, defiantly, used the identical inscription in 1948 as the moral for his Second World War memoirs.

If Churchill was persistent in his opinions, he was also consistent. Indeed, when one reads through his letters, speeches and books, spanning five decades, one is forcefully struck by how closely he adhered to his principal beliefs.

Churchill's character was basically humane. A strong surge of humanitarianism infused both his writings and his legislation. To the House of

Commons he repeatedly urged humane policies. When, on 5 May 1904, Parliament sought to avoid its responsibilities for black African mine-workers whose condition in the mines of South Africa was one of near slavery, Churchill declared:

A good many people said that the House of Commons took too much interest in subjects of this kind, and that they were inclined to be carried away by humanitarian considerations. They were told that the people who were interesting themselves in this matter were hysterical and maudlin. Those who reprobated humanitarian sentiment in others were very often people who had never seen a man flogged or killed. But the responsibility of the House in these matters was very great. They exerted influence and authority over the affairs of more than 400,000,000 people. Every official, from the highest to the lowest, from the Viceroy to the smallest Jack-in-office, in the whole hierarchy of the British Empire was influenced by the standard which was upheld or lowered in that House. Therefore they were bound in all cases of cruelty and the invasion of the rights of subject races to be vigilant and emphasize these facts even if it meant interrupting the course of Parliamentary business and causing inconvenience . . .

We must not only regard the financial interests of these prosperous companies, but we must remember the human interest of the miner at the bottom of the mine.

He hoped it would establish clearly that in all the wide dominions of the King there was no man so unfortunate and so humble as to have his ill-treatment beneath the notice of that House, and that there was no province in the British Empire so distant as to be beyond their reach.

The historian in search of Churchill's character is soon struck during his researches by another important characteristic – Churchill's determination to make his views known to the wide mass of the public. He was never a politician's politician. Not only was he always honest in his opinions; he was often most effective when addressing large audiences of ordinary people. He not only understood his oratorical gift, he also used it; and used it on many thousands of occasions in the great cities and halls of England. Even a hostile audience did not deter him. He soon mastered the art of winning the ears of the sceptical, and holding them enthralled. This power, like the power of his writing, derived from the combination of a superb speaking style with powerful content. Churchill never spoke in a vacuum. He shunned platitudes. The slogans of the established political parties found little place in his speeches. Throughout his life he infused his speeches with his own vigorous philosophy, with his humanitarianism, with his optimism, and with his determination: each of these excited his audience and drew them after him. "I have no fear of the future"; this phrase, first spoken by him at Oldham on 27 June 1899, is the theme of many hundreds of his speeches, in many difficult, and often seemingly impossible, situations.

Churchill's method of appealing to large popular audiences was not part of any surge of dictatorial powers. It was firmly based upon his con-

cept of democracy. He held the House of Commons, and the Parliamentary system, in the highest esteem. He also saw clearly that it derived its power and its authority from the consent of the electorate. In some notes for a speech which he delivered in the autumn of 1901 he declared: "Trust the people." And he continued:

I am not afraid of the British public getting panic stricken. The London clubs may hum with excitement, the political wire pullers may be perfectly frantic, the Stock Exchange may be in hysterics, but John Bull is a very stolid person. He has lived long enough to see the day break bright & fair after many a stormy night. He will not be frightened. I would say to the Govt – take him into your confidence. Let him know the whole truth; and you will derive a real encouragement in the tremendous task that lies before, wh restores the fortune of the British Empire, proves the consciousness of the comradeship and sympathy of millions of the most sensible people in the world.

There are enormous and incalculable resources of energy, strength, and self denial in this people – resources equal to overcoming far greater perils than now confront us, if only the Govt has the power to call them forth.

Churchill realised that appeals to the people could only be successful if based upon a deep knowledge and understanding of their problems. In each of the Government departments of which he became the Head it was his powers of concentration and application to detail that most impressed itself upon his subordinates. All Churchill's work was marked by great energy and drive, by total concentration often to the point of obsession to the matter in hand. In Cabinet he was among the most persuasive speakers, setting out his arguments not by rhetoric but by patient detail. His hours of work were long, although his life was one of personal comfort and even luxury. When work was to be done it dominated his waking hours, and during the First World War, when the pressure of work was at its most severe, he not only worked but also slept at his Ministry. He dictated his Minutes and memoranda whilst still in bed in the morning. A shorthand writer accompanied him on his many official journeys to France. Before explaining a case to the Cabinet he would usually circulate in advance a substantial memorandum setting out his arguments. This memorandum could be four or five printed pages long. His personal method of work was a demanding one. He wrote out the vast majority of his speeches in his own hand or dictated them to a shorthand writer; then he would re-write them, polish them, prune them, perfect them, often a long and painstaking process.

Churchill's sense of humour, his puckish wit, were much commented on by his contemporaries. Yet the bulk of his work concerned the most serious issues of his time. His interventions in Cabinet, his role in the many Cabinet committees of which he was chairman, his speeches and explanations during the committee stages of Parliamentary Bills, his long private

letters of advice and warning to senior politicians, all these were marked by an extreme seriousness of purpose and content.

Something of the impact of Churchill's appeals can be understood from reading. They are even more impressive if spoken aloud. I have always hoped that those who read the successive volumes of the Churchill biography – as indeed those who might read this lecture – will themselves read aloud the quotations in order to get something of the full flavour of them. During his lifetime, Churchill made more public speeches than any other figure in British public life. The vast majority of them were prepared specially for a specific occasion; many were written out entirely in his own handwriting; and most of them had been subjected to careful scrutiny and correction. Churchill seldom spoke without notes, which were always full notes, and from which he would read direct. Sometimes he himself was surprised by his oratorical powers. Thus, on 8 February 1922, in a surprise debate in the House of Commons, he had had to speak without prior preparation, and spoke, not from notes, but what he himself described as the “unpinnioned wing”. Two days later he wrote to his wife:

It was really a great success: no worry, nor work, but quite an agreeable experience. With the first two or three sentences I got the House laughing, and thereafter they simply would not leave off. Although when it was written down and read it looked fairly simple, yet almost every phrase produced a laugh of its own. I think I have really got my full freedom now in debate, and I propose to make far less use of notes than ever before.

A historian must be careful not to read Churchill's speeches in a vacuum. It is important not only to know the historical context in which they were made, but also to gauge as carefully as possible their impact. There is no doubt that his mastery of debate impressed even his critics. On 31 May 1922 Austen Chamberlain – with whom Churchill had quarrelled many times over policy, and who was temperamentally very much opposed, wrote to the King, drawing his attention to a speech “fearless in manner and wording, profoundly impressive in its delivery and of the first consequence as a statement of policy”. And Chamberlain added: “It gripped the attention of the House from the opening sentences and held it breathlessly intent to the end.”

Churchill's themes were, in the main, reformist and far sighted. Just as he had been a leading advocate of leniency towards defeated nations, so too he was one of the main exponents before the First World War of social reform on a massive, radical scale. In times of war he stood forward as a man who shunned defeatism and sought a means of victory, even during desperate days, as in March 1918 or May 1940. This approach, and the policies which it involved, found many critics and opponents. It was a dominant characteristic of Churchill that he faced these opponents squarely

and spoke to them direct. Thus, speaking at Bradford on 4 March 1905, he attacked the contemporary tendency to judge everything by its commercial value and success, telling his audience:

Why, Gentlemen, money, money, money, is the cry of the age in which we live. Equality, education, civic distinction, public virtue, all these things are valued less and less. Riches, riches unadorned, are valued more and more. Nothing seems to be of account except a bank account. The gospel of Mammon, the worship of what Mr. Ruskin called "Britannia Agorea", the goddess of getting on, the ten per cent commandments – and the prayer, "give cash in our time" – these are the sordid, evil tendencies of the day . . .

Another striking example of this tendency of answering his critics directly, is seen in his speech to the House of Commons on 20 July 1910, urging a lenient attitude towards the criminal. As Home Secretary in 1910 Churchill had instituted important prison reforms, which had had the immediate effect of releasing from prison over 125,000 people who were serving one week sentences, over 10,000 people who were in debt, and at least 7,000 young people under the age of fifteen. He also insisted upon bringing into the prison both education and entertainment (in the form of concerts and lectures) on a scale which horrified those who believed that prison must be a place of punishment alone. Answering these critics face to face in the House of Commons he declared:

The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country. A calm and dispassionate recognition of the rights of the accused against the State, and even of convicted criminals against the State, a constant heart-searching by all charged with the duty of punishment, a desire and eagerness to rehabilitate in the world of industry all those who have paid their dues in the hard coinage of punishment, tireless efforts towards the discovery of curative and regenerating processes, and an unfaltering faith that there is a treasure, if you can only find it, in the heart of every man – these are the symbols which in the treatment of crime and criminals mark and measure the stored-up strength of a nation, and are the sign and proof of the living virtue in it.

Churchill's radicalism, though much hated by many, was a persistent feature of his career. In the 1920's he was a leading advocate of extending the state-supported pensions system, himself introducing widows pensions in one of his budgets. During the Second World War he argued strongly in favour of a National Health Service, to the anger of many of his Conservative colleagues. For many years he voted in favour of the nationalisation of all railways. In both World Wars he advocated a severe system of taxation against war profiteering. Above all, he was consistent in opposing any policy which might lead to war, believing war to be an evil, which men would be wisest to exert all their energies to avoid. At the age of twenty-six, speaking in the House of Commons on 13 May 1901, he rebuked his older

and more senior Parliamentarians by telling them how he had been “astonished” during his time in Parliament to hear with what composure and how glibly members, and often Ministers, talked of a European war’; and he went on to warn that war in Europe could only end “in the ruin of the vanquished and the scarcely less fatal commercial dislocation of the conqueror”. Eight years later, while he was a guest of the Kaiser at German manouevres, he wrote to his wife, on 15 September 1909:

Much as war attracts & fascinates my mind with its tremendous situations – I feel more deeply every year – & can measure the feeling here in the midst of arms – what vile & wicked folly & barbarism it all is.

The First World War confirmed all Churchill’s fearful feelings. For three months in 1916 he himself was a battalion commander serving in the front line trenches on the western front. Even before he himself went to the trenches, he understood what men went through under fire. “Are there no other alternatives” he wrote in anguish to the Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, on 29 December 1914 “than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders?” He argued in favour both of the Dardanelles operation, and of the development of the tank, as a means of bringing the war to an end before it had killed millions of men. All his military plans during his nine months as First Lord of the Admiralty were designed to bring about a speedy victory. In his preface to A. P. Herbert’s blunt and moving novel about Gallipoli, *The Secret Battle*, Churchill wrote: “This book, like the poems of Siegfried Sassoon, should be read in every generation, so that people are under no illusion about what war means.” He himself was always free from any such illusions. Nor was this simply hindsight. Throughout 1917 he argued publicly against any renewed offensive on the western front and foresaw clearly that Passchendaele would be a slaughter devoid of real gain.

Churchill expressed his fears in long, cogently argued letters to senior politicians, and in several major speeches in the House of Commons. His arguments were rejected but he never lost his belief that the policy of attrition was meaningless folly. On 17 May 1916 he rebuked his fellow members of Parliament for not having understood the extent of the danger confronting Britain, or the terrible conditions under which men were fighting. During the course of his speech he declared:

I say to myself every day, What is going on while we sit here, while we go away to dinner, or home to bed? Nearly 1,000 men – Englishmen, Britishers, men of our own race – are knocked into bundles of bloody rags every twenty-four hours, and carried away to hasty graves or to field ambulances, and the money of which the Prime Minister has spoken so clearly is flowing away in its broad stream. Every measure must be considered, and none put aside while there is hope of obtaining something from it . . .

Churchill's understanding of the horrors of war did not in any way weaken his resolve that victory was essential. Nor did it deter him from his conviction that every source of energy in the state should be devoted to the war-making process until such time as victory was won. He was scathing towards those who did not understand the demands of total war. On 27 November 1914, after the Swiss Government had protested about British breaches of Swiss air space, he wrote to Sir Edward Grey: "It is no time for hedging neutrals to give themselves airs"; and when the Swiss persisted in their protest he added testily: "Tell them to go and milk their cows."

A year later, after Greece, Bulgaria and Roumania had each refused to join the allies, he wrote in a memorandum on 8 December 1915: "The Balkans must be left to stew in their own bitter juice." He was scathing also towards those British politicians who did not see the need for a vigorous and all impressive war policy. On 22 February 1916 he wrote to his wife about Asquith's War Cabinet: "War is action, energy and hazard. These sheep only want to browse among the daisies."

Churchill's anger at what he regarded as the feeble or unwise war policies, first under Asquith and then under Lloyd George, was heightened by his own exclusions from the centre of power between November 1915 and July 1917. During this period of nearly two years he felt acutely his personal isolation and feared that the powers which he knew himself to possess would never be made use of. Clementine Churchill always understood her husband's deep insight and realised the effect which his exclusion would have upon him. On 20 May 1915 she had written to Asquith: "Winston may in your eyes & in those with whom he has to work have faults but he has the supreme quality which I venture to say very few of your present or future Cabinet possess, the power, the imagination, the deadliness to fight Germany."

In a series of letters from the trenches, sent to his wife, to his brother and to friends, Churchill revealed the extent of his anger and isolation. "Whenever my mind is not occupied by work" he wrote to his wife on 10 January 1916, "I feel deeply the injustice with which my work at the Admiralty has been treated" and he continued "the damnable mismanagement which has ruined the Dardanelles enterprise and squandered vainly so much life and opportunity cries aloud for retribution and if I survive the day will come when I will claim it publicly." Nine days later he wrote again:

My mind is now filling up with ideas & opinions in many military & war matters. But I have no means of expression. I am impotent to give what is there to be given - of truth & value & urgency. I must wait in silence the sombre movements of events ... six o'clock is a bad hour for me. I feel the need of power as an outlet worst then; & the energy of mind & body is strong within me.

The political disaster of May 1915 when Churchill was forced to leave the Admiralty and the personal disaster of November 1915 when he resigned from the Cabinet and went to the western front, combined to create in Churchill a brooding, a moroseness, and a tendency to depression which were intense and fearful. On 26 March 1916 he wrote to his wife:

Sometimes also I think I wd not mind stopping living vy much – I am so devoured by egoism that I wd like to have another soul in another world & meet you in another setting, & pay you all the love & honour of the gt romances. Two days ago I was walking up to the trenches & we heard several shells on our left, each shot coming nearer as the gun travelled round searching for prey. One cd calculate more or less where the next wd come.

Our road led naturally past the ruined convent (where I have made the “conning tower”) and I said “the next will hit the convent”. Sure enough just as we got abreast of it, the shell arrived with a screech and a roar & tremendous bang & showers of bricks & clouds of smoke & all the soldiers jumped & scurried, & peeped up out of their holes & corners. It did not make me jump a bit – not a pulse quickened. I do not mind noise as some vy brave people do. But I felt – 20 yards more to the left & no more tangles to unravel, no more anxieties to face, no more hatreds & injustices to encounter: joy of all my foes, relief of that old rogue, a good ending to a chequered life, a final gift – unvalued – to an ungrateful country – an impoverishment of the war-making power of Britain wh no one wd ever know or measure or mourn.

Yet even in the depths of depression Churchill never lost his faith in himself, nor his belief that one day his fellow countrymen would call upon him in their hour of need. Even in his letter of 26 March 1916 his spirits rallied: “I am not going to give in or tire at all”, he went on to write. And he added: “I am going on fighting to the very end in any station open to me from which I can most effectively drive on this war to victory.”

Churchill’s sense of destiny was a constant characteristic. Shortly after his twenty-third birthday after he had been under fire on the Indian frontier he had written to his mother on 22 December 1897:

Bullets – to a philosopher my dear Mamma – are not worth considering. Besides I am so conceited I do not believe the Gods would create so potent a being as myself for so prosaic an ending.

To his wife he wrote from the trenches on 15 December 1915, two weeks after his forty-first birthday: “Believe me I am superior to anything that can happen out here. My conviction that the greatest of my work is still to be done is strong within me. I feel a great assurance of my power and now – naked – nothing can assail me.” That same day he wrote to his former Private Secretary and confidant, Edward Marsh: “I have fallen back reposefully into the arms of fate, but with an underlying instinct that all will be well and that my greatest work is to hand.”

In July 1917 Churchill returned to the Cabinet as Minister of Munitions in Lloyd George’s Government. In January 1919 he was made Secretary

of State for War. In January 1920 he moved to the Colonial Office in charge of Britain's new Middle East territories. For nearly six years of Lloyd George's premiership he was once more at the centre of political affairs, and soon regained his earlier position as one of the most influential members of the Cabinet. The characteristics which had marked his first forty years remained as forceful as before. His hatred of war did not diminish, yet his determination not to bow before the threat of force was equally strong. He was prepared if necessary to declare all-out war on the Southern Irish in 1920 if they decided to declare Republic. He was prepared to go to war with Mustafa Kemal and the Turkish Nationalists in 1922, if they dared to attack the small British force holding the Straits between Asia and Europe. Under Lloyd George, his Parliamentary abilities reached a height of excellence, and his Cabinet advocacies were even more powerful than they had been during the first decade of his Ministerial career. His subordinates continued to find him a stern but remarkable taskmaster. On 17 July 1917 Christopher Addison, Churchill's predecessor as Minister of Munitions, noted in his diary: "There is no more capable chief of a department than he is." And on 22 October 1922 General Tudor wrote to Sir Hugh Trenchard of Churchill's two years at the Colonial Office: "Everyone felt while he was there that if things had got bad they would be thoroughly backed up."

A characteristic of Churchill's which the six years of Lloyd George's premiership brought to the fore was his political courage. He was not afraid of putting before Parliament a case essentially unpopular. To a predominantly Conservative House of Commons he argued in 1920 that the basis of British rule in India must be mercy, not force. Imperial rule would not survive, he insisted, if it rested on bayonets alone. "Frightfulness" he declared "is not a remedy known to the British Pharmacopoeia." Throughout the Irish Treaty debate Churchill bore the brunt of Conservative anger at the establishment of the Free State in Southern Ireland, making four major speeches on behalf of the Government. On several occasions Lloyd George would specifically ask Churchill to present a difficult or unpopular case to the public. In 1916, immediately after the Battle of Jutland, A. J. Balfour had specially summoned Churchill, then in the wilderness, to issue a communiqué about the battle which might help to restore public confidence. Six years later Lloyd George likewise turned to Churchill when he needed, during the Chanak crisis, to issue a communiqué explaining why Britain might shortly be at war with Turkey. Churchill's closest friends had always recognised not only his willingness to take the unpopular stand, but also his determination to do so where others shirked the task, or did not feel capable of it. "The worse things go" Edward Marsh wrote to Archibald Sinclair on 13 October 1915, "the braver

and serener he gets – it was the feeling of being condemned to inactivity that was so terribly depressing to him.” Seven years later, on 11 November 1922, T. E. Lawrence – who had served under Churchill at the Colonial Office as an Adviser on Arabian affairs, wrote about him to a friend: “The man’s as brave as six, has good humour, shrewd, self-confident and steady as a statesman can be, and several times I have seen him chuck the statesmanlike course and do the honest thing instead.”

In times of crisis, Churchill’s courage enabled him to give a firm lead and good guidance. Recognizing this quality, Lloyd George often sought his advice during the six years of his Premiership. When danger threatened, as it did during the German breakthrough of March 1918, he turned to Churchill for moral support. Churchill at once responded to Lloyd George’s appeal: “Violent counsels & measures must rule”, he wrote on 24 March 1918. “Seek the truth in the hour of need with disdain of other things. Courage & a clear plan will enable you to keep command of the Nation. But if you fall below the level of the crisis, your role is exhausted.”

Three years later, at a time when Britain was supporting the Greek offensive against Turkey, Churchill wrote to Lloyd George, on 25 June 1921: “I am sure the path of courage is the path of safety . . . I think everybody here would approve our stopping the war.” On 27 February 1922, when the Coalition was in difficulties, he again sent Lloyd George advice – at Lloyd George’s request: “What is best for the nation & empire . . .” Churchill wrote, “must alone decide”. And he added: “Decisions must be taken, & those who take them must not shirk from facing the consequences. We must not squander the gt forces wh are still in our hands by vacillation, ambiguity, or fear of not pleasing everybody.”

Churchill constantly demanded clear policies and definite decisions. Many of his most forceful letters, memoranda and speeches were those in which he urged decisive policies in place of drift and delay. On 19 January 1918, after outlining to Lloyd George the policies he believed essential if defeat were to be avoided he wrote: “Ponder & then *act*.”

There was perhaps one aspect of Churchill’s character which changed noticeably by the time he was fifty in 1924. Before the First World War, optimism had been a marked feature of all his speeches and advice. He not only believed that the world could be changed for the better, that the ordinary life of the working man could be markedly improved, that the relations between states could be regulated and pacified, and that the ugly tendencies in national and international life could be smoothed away; he also believed that these were things he himself could help bring about. Four years of war turned him, in many ways, into a pessimist. His faith in the self-regulating and self-improving nature of human society began to wane.

In his subsequent writings he marvelled that men and states could be so cruel towards each other. "Never for a moment" he wrote to his wife on 29 May 1917, "does the thought of this carnage and ruin escape my mind"; and when the war was over it seemed to him that evil forces were still at work. On 4 November 1920 he warned an audience of businessmen in the City of London that there was a "worldwide conspiracy against our country designed to deprive us of our place in the world and rob us of victory". His hatred of Bolshevism and his fierce efforts throughout 1919 to bring about the fall of Lenin's Government in Russia sprang largely from this fear of conspiracy and anarchy. The Russian revolution, he believed, was a deliberately engineered attempt to bring to an end all settled democratic values not only in Russia, but throughout Europe.

During this speech in the City of London he spoke bitterly of the "rascals and rascalions of mankind who are now on the move against us". This fear of the disintegration of society was in strong contrast to his pre-war beliefs. Yet throughout the inter-war years he was to remain deeply disturbed by the collapse of settled values and ancient institutions. A graphic indication of the way his thoughts had developed can be seen in the notes which he wrote out in his own hand-writing during the Election campaign in the winter 1922, and which he read out at Dundee in a speech on 11 November 1922. His notes were set out as follows:

What a disappointment the Twentieth Century has been
How terrible & how melancholy
its long series of disastrous events
wh have darkened its first 20 years.
We have seen in ev country a dissolution,
a weakening of those bonds,
a challenge to those principles
a decay of faith
an abridgement of hope
on wh structure & ultimate existence
of civilised society depends.
We have seen in ev part of globe
one gt country after another
wh had erected an orderly, a peaceful
a prosperous structure of civilised society,
relapsing in hideous succession
into bankruptcy, barbarism or anarchy.

Churchill then looked at each of the areas which were in turmoil: China and Mexico "sunk into confusion"; Russia, where "that little set of Communist criminals . . . have exhausted millions of the Russian people"; Ireland, scene of an "enormous retrogression of civilisation & Christianity"; Egypt and India, where "we see among millions of people hitherto shielded

by superior science & superior law a desire to shatter the structure by which they live & to return blindly & heedlessly to primordial chaos". And he went on to warn of the future:

Can you doubt, my faithful friends
as you survey this sombre panorama,
that mankind is passing through a period marked
not only by an enormous destruction
& abridgement of human species,
not only by a vast impoverishment
& reduction in means of existence
but also that destructive tendencies
have not yet run their course?
And only intense, concerted & prolonged efforts
among all nations
can avert further & perhaps even greater calamities.

Seventh Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture, given in the St Gall Graduate School of Economics, Business and Public Administration, 25 January 1973.