

Winston Churchill and the Fourth of July

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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On July 4, 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill released a memorandum to his country's public officials: "On what may be the eve of an attempted invasion or battle for our native land, the Prime Minister desires to impress upon all persons holding responsible positions in the Government, in the Fighting Services, or in the Civil Departments, their duty to maintain a spirit of alert and confident energy."

Churchill had taken office as prime minister of the United Kingdom in early May just as Germany invaded Belgium and France. In the following weeks, he strove mightily to mobilize the British Empire to confront the Nazi onslaught and to avert the collapse and surrender of France. In mid-June, France sought an armistice with Germany. Britain successfully evacuated 120,000 troops from Dunkirk. England was now alone to face the massive German war machine.

At the time, Churchill declared: "We have become the sole champions now in arms to defend the world's cause. We shall do our best to be worthy of this high honour. We shall defend our island home and with the British Empire we shall fight on unconquerable until the curse of Hitler is lifted from the brows of mankind."

Britain then had to prepare for German attacks by air – and a possible invasion by sea. Churchill told the House of Commons: "We have to think of the future and not of the past." Churchill then made some controversial decisions regarding England's former ally, France, now a German supplicant. On July 3, after the main French fleet refused to surrender, Churchill ordered the British navy to attack and scuttle French ships at Oran and Mers-el-Kebir in North Africa. Churchill told Parliament: "I leave the judgment of our action, with confidence, to Parliament. I leave it to the nation, and I leave it to the United States. I leave it to the world and to history."

Churchill knew he was speaking that day to many audiences worldwide – especially to the House of Commons – but also to President Roosevelt, to the American people, and to its government. Churchill's American mother had been born Jennie Jerome in New York City. He made her provenance a political asset. In December 1941, Churchill would jokingly tell a special session of Congress: "If my father had been American and my mother British, instead of the other way 'round, I might have got here on my own!" Churchill immediately understood better than his peers that Britain must have America as a wartime ally to subdue expansive Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

On July 4, 1940 Churchill had concluded his speech to Parliament by reading in full his memorandum "to all who are serving in positions of importance under the Crown." In his message, Churchill hit notes of optimism amid the crisis: "While every precaution

must be taken that time and means afford, there are no grounds for supposing that more German troops can be landed in this country, either from the air or across the sea, than can be destroyed or captured by the strong forces at present under arms. The Royal Air Force is in excellent order and at the highest strength it has yet attained. The German Navy was never so weak, nor the British Army at home so strong as now.” But Churchill knew equally well the vulnerability of England to the Nazi U-Boat and the enormous and well-trained German armed forces.

Having spent much of the late 1930s urging greater British preparations for war, Churchill now declared: “The Prime Minister expects all His Majesty’s servants in high places to set an example of steadiness and resolution. They should check and rebuke expressions of loose and ill-digested opinion in their circles, or by their subordinates. They should not hesitate to report, or if necessary remove, any officers or officials who are found to be consciously exercising a disturbing or depressing influence, and whose talk is calculated to spread alarm and despondency. Thus alone will they be worthy of the fighting men, who in the air, on the sea, and on land, have already met the enemy without any sense of being out-matched in martial qualities.”

Churchill’s words remind us of British native Thomas Paine who during the American Revolution had written in *The Crisis*: “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it.”

The British prime minister concluded his parliamentary speech of July 4, 1940: “I feel that we are entitled to the confidence of the House and that we shall not fail in our duty, however painful.” Said Churchill: “We shall...prosecute the war with the utmost vigour by all the means that are open to us until the righteous purposes for which we entered upon it have been fulfilled.”

Five embattled years followed until victory in Europe (VE day), victory over the Nazis, victory for righteous purposes be celebrated by the Prime Minister in people.