Winston Churchill
Warrior or Statesman?

Did Churchill’s ‘craving for action’ outweigh his capacity for statesmanship and vision?

Winston Churchill was saddled throughout his political career with the reputation of being a reckless, over-ambitious adventurer. His critics found plenty of ammunition to support this view in his behaviour as Home Secretary, when he allegedly took personal command of the siege of some anarchists at Sydney Street in 1911, sent troops (it was claimed) to put down striking miners, launched the misconceived Gallipoli operation in 1915 as First Lord of the Admiralty, and breathed fire against Irish Republicans and Bolsheviks alike. At the time of the General Strike in 1926, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, variously a political friend and foe of Churchill, was terrified that his Chancellor of the Exchequer wanted to shoot someone.

The man of war

Baldwin also later remarked, after reading Churchill’s colourful biography of his great ancestor the Duke of Marlborough, that ‘Winston really understands battles’. He certainly enjoyed them, and valued the martial virtues above all others. Here is Churchill writing about his experiences as a young officer in the Sudan in 1898 in the war against the Dervishes:

Suddenly in the midst of the troop up sprang a Dervish. How he got there I do not know. He must have leaped out of some scrub or hole...I shot him at least a yard. He fell on the sand, and lay there dead. How easy to kill a man! But I did not worry about it.

A whole chapter in the book from which this description is taken is melodramatically entitled ‘The Sensations of a Cavalry Charge’. Churchill claimed that he got on much better with admirals and generals than (for example) with the bankers and financial advisers who both puzzled and bored him during his term at the Treasury, between 1924 and 1929. But was this really true?

He had longed for the appointment of First Lord of the Admiralty in 1911, but his constant interventions and meddling caused resentment among professional sailors. Sometimes indeed it caused actual loathing, as in the case of Sir David Beatty, the renowned battle-cruiser commander in the First World War. As far back as 1902, Beatty had described Churchill in a letter to his wife as ‘a fraud, and to use a naval expression, all gas and gaiters’. In 1917 his view was unchanged. Churchill was ‘a man devoid of real patriotism’.

A reward was offered for Churchill, dead or alive, after he escaped from a Boer prisoner-of-war camp in 1899.
Relations with the Army were often little better, when Churchill was Prime Minister during the Second World War. Generals were promoted or sacked according to his personal whim and, on more than one occasion, General Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was enraged by bizarre Churchillian interventions. (One intervention, just before D-Day, demanded that a plan be conceived for an invasion of France from Spain and Portugal! This was duly prepared by Brooke's staff, before he castigated Churchill for its absurdity.) Churchill always demanded action (his memoranda often bore the legend 'action this day') and to his critics it sometimes seemed to be action for action's sake.

Subsequently, Churchill the propagandist also irritated professional soldiers, airmen and sailors by doctoring the historical record. It was not true, for example, that the naval staff were all agreed about the need to attack the fleet of Britain's former ally, France, at Mers al-Kebir in 1940. Neither was it the case that Churchill knew nothing about the controversial RAF bombing of Dresden in 1945. When questioned about it after the war, Churchill said, 'I cannot recall anything about it. I thought the Americans did it. Air Chief Marshal Harris would be the person to contact.' This was a manifest untruth. Yet Harris and Bomber Command were made to bear the odium of raids such as Dresden, deemed by some, with the convenience of hindsight, to be immoral.

The truth seems to be that Churchill, for all his claimed affinity with the military, could be both unreasonable in his demands on service chiefs, and disloyal to them when it suited him. There can, however, be no doubting Churchill's personal courage. He served in the trenches in the First World War, when already in his forties, after the Gallipoli fiasco; but he was, it seems, an unprofessional 'warrior' on occasion, ignoring the constraints under which his generals and admirals were bound to operate.

But in this area, as elsewhere, Churchill remains a paradox. The same man who gloried in cavalry charges at Omdurman in 1898 was haunted by the pointless slaughter of Gallipoli. It was this, rather than strategic myopia, which largely accounts for Churchill's strange opposition to the invasion of France in 1943. Gallipoli, and his own first-hand experience of trench warfare, made Churchill fear that an opposed landing on the French coast would produce another bloodbath. It is also known that Churchill did have scruples about the bombing of Germany. 'Are we beasts?' he asked of his staff on one occasion. 'Are we taking this too far?'

**A man of vision?**

The accusation is frequently made that Churchill's military obsessions and craving for action outweighed his capacity for statesmanship and vision. Certainly in the 1930s his constant criticism of the Baldwin and Chamberlain governments — for their failure to rearm — tended to ignore the very real defence and foreign policy dilemmas facing those malign leaders.

Here again, though, we face a paradox. The same Churchill who inveighed against appeasement in the 1930s, backed the notorious 'Ten Year Rule' in the 1920s — which was based on the assumption that there would be no war for ten years. Churchill flatly rejected the idea that Japan would at any stage be a menace to Britain, so that Professor Donald Cameron Watt remarked, with some justice, that for Churchill the Far East was 'a faraway country of which he knew nothing'.

Yet Churchill could be statesmanlike, for all that. Half a lifetime of fervent opposition to Soviet communism was thrust aside in 1941, in the interests of the anti-Nazi cause, although Churchill withdrew none of the criticisms he had made of the communist system. He came to admire Stalin — if not to like him — but was quicker than Roosevelt to sense the dangers behind the Soviet dictator's long-term ambitions.

This was in 1943; but in 1944, when Churchill visited Stalin in Moscow, he signed the notorious 'naughty document', which recognised the dominant Soviet interest in Eastern Europe and allegedly led to the Yalta 'sell-out' months later. But was Yalta the sell-out so often portrayed?

British power was circumscribed and, as the then British ambassador in Moscow, Sir Frank Roberts, has pointed out, there was no real alternative. Would the A-bomb have been used against the USSR to protect Polish national integrity in 1945? Could such a policy have been put forward in an atmosphere of fervent admiration for 'Uncle Joe' and the heroic Red Army in both Britain and the USA? Roberts says not, and it is hard to see how any reasonably dispassionate analyst could disagree.

It needs to be remembered that Churchill's famous 'iron curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri, in 1946 was not welcomed in the United States at the time, as opinion polls showed all too clearly. More obvious evidence of aggressive Soviet intent was required before the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine were forthcoming; and in the former case, US economic interest, more than altruism, was predominant. A healthy West European economy was much to the United States' advantage in trade terms, just as it would help to provide a more effective bulwark against the USSR.

**The sunset years**

Was the post-war Churchill ultimately an appeaser? He certainly tried hard enough to stage a summit with the Soviet leadership, particularly after the death of Stalin in March 1953 (he had returned to office in 1951). But, according to Norman Rose, 'he was like a one-man band, unable to find anyone to accompany him'. Eisenhower was vehemently opposed to any such meeting, and Cabinet colleagues were enraged by Churchill's unilateral efforts to 'find a reasonable way of living side by side' with the USSR without consulting them. The Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was particularly incensed by Churchill's abortive summitry, which he used as an excuse to put off his own retirement — and which kept an exasperated heir out of 10 Downing Street.

Only in April 1955, when he was more than eighty, did Churchill finally agree to go. He claimed to have reservations about Eden's capacity for the premiership, and was certainly critical of his handling of the 1956 Suez crisis, which he said he would not have rushed into, without US support. Churchill was as 'pungent' about Suez as he was conciliatory about Anglo-Soviet relations. But interestingly, when confronted in 1951 with the nationalist Mossadeq in Iran, who nationalised British oil installations, Churchill opposed gunboat diplomacy.

Ultimately Churchill's postwar diplomacy, conducted under the threat of nuclear holocaust, must be regarded as sensible and realistic. 'Peace, the sturdy child of terror', he observed, when commenting on how fear of nuclear destruction prevented direct confrontation between the superpowers. But he was prescient, surely, in his recognition of the need for detente — which only the severe shock of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis really forced successive US administrations to accept. At the same time Churchill was always aware of the fact that he might be the dupe of Josef Stalin, just as Neville Chamberlain had (he alleged) been the dupe of Adolf Hitler.
Conclusion
In surveying the immense, dramatic panorama of Winston Churchill's life, one is struck by the paradoxes — but also by the consistency. Before the First World War, as First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill offered a naval 'holiday' to Wilhelmst Germany, just as he sought accommodation with an ideologically hostile USSR as Prime Minister between 1951 and 1955. As Alastair Parker has pointed out in a recent analysis of appeasement, he was also a late convert to the virtues of collective security in the 1930s and effectively an appeaser of Japan and Italy, if not of Germany.

On a personal level, he could be as ruthless as any military commander in getting his own way and ignoring the cost for others. It was Bob Boothby, after all, a long-time political ally and friend, who memorably remarked, after he had suffered at Churchill's hands: 'Winston is a shit. But we need a shit to beat Hitler.' A certain hardness, then, was at the core of the man, a quality needed by warriors — even if Churchill often failed to hit it off with professional servicemen.

Above and beyond this, however, and beyond his capacity for statesmanship and compromise, was ambition and a belief in his individual star. As a young man, Churchill told his mother (after a particularly boring phase in his army career): 'I am so conceited that I do not believe that the Gods would create so potent a being as myself for so prosaic an ending.' The need to achieve — the need for action and colour — was predominant.

Was it caused by a need to prove a dismissive, distant father wrong about him, as some historians have suggested? We can only speculate about this and the speculation may not be especially fruitful. For within Churchill's complex personality, the statesman, the warrior, the propagandist, the painter, the father, the husband — all co-existed in a tumultuous disharmony.

One thing cannot be taken away from him and that is his overwhelming contribution to the British victory in the Second World War. As Richard Lamb (by no means an uncritical source) justly observes: 'Despite many blunders and hasty, impetuous decisions, only one verdict is possible. He was a great wartime leader.'

Further reading

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