

NATIONAL REVIEW

Lion to the Last

Winston Churchill's unrelenting fight against socialism

By Larry P. Arnn — January 24, 2015

In June 1945, a month after the Germans' surrender, with the general-election campaign under way, Winston Churchill gave a 21-minute speech by radio. He was 70 years old. To the shock of much of Britain, it included this:

I declare to you, from the bottom of my heart, that no Socialist system can be established without a political police...No Socialist Government conducting the entire life and industry of the country could afford to allow free, sharp, or violently-worded expressions of public discontent. They would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo, no doubt very humanely directed in the first instance.

Asserting in 1945 that the socialists would become like the Nazis was met with outrage, and even Churchill's allies and members of his family heavily criticized the speech, which was dubbed his "crazy broadcast." A month later, Churchill's Conservatives were not just beaten in the election, they were overwhelmed — by a Labour party that gained the largest majority in the history of modern British politics to that time.

By the end of the war in Europe, Churchill had finally become a beloved man. The gates were open for him to take a victory lap as glorious as any that had been known in British politics. If he was after the honor of a united nation, he could have it now. About 80 percent of the British people approved of his performance throughout the war. He would remain known and revered nearly everywhere, if not quite by everyone, for the rest of his life.

But in 1945 he refused advice to rise above the fray and become a revered eminence. He could have had something like the moral position of Hindenburg after the Great War, war

hero and chancellor of Germany. But he seems to have thought that failing to state his views about socialism in the strongest terms would be to emulate Hindenburg in another way: It would be to welcome a doctrine as vile as Nazism into the government of Britain. Rather than take his victory lap, Churchill attempted, among his other purposes, to expel socialism from British politics.

Today marks the 50th anniversary of Churchill's death. Half a century later, Churchill is still relevant and still a statesman of our time deserving our attention and study. He's also deserving of our defense. In recent years, some academics on the left have sought to squeeze Churchill into political molds he never inhabited, to mischaracterize his beliefs and twist his history. Churchill's view of socialism is one of these controversies. Since he is now under siege, it is most important that we understand this man.

Churchill is unique in two ways. The first is in the richness of the records he leaves. He wrote more than 50 books, more than 8,000 speeches, newspaper and magazine articles by the hundreds, and thousands of pages of memos. In his time, the record of public actions became much more detailed, and his was the most detailed. He was involved in modern history's greatest events: He fought at or near the top of both world wars as a high-ranking official; he watched and resisted the decline of the British Empire; he applauded the rise of America. His actions were on the biggest scale, and his reflections on those events are many and enlightening.

Second, he understood, even a century ago, that we are living in a special time, one that is both opportune and dangerous, and that these two things are connected. The advance of science, he believed, makes possible a wider and more comfortable life for all, and makes easier the recognition of everyone's rights. Yet this same science threatens to overcome civilization. This is true in war, in which weapons have been deployed that can eliminate civilization and mankind itself. In his 1925 essay "Shall We All Commit Suicide?" Churchill wonders if mankind will simply destroy itself, or if the terrible cost of a major war would be the end of liberal society and limited government. This was a theme of Churchill's writing from 1898 until 1955, when he stopped writing. And it is one of the supreme ironies of his life that he spent it attempting to avoid the terrors of modern war, even as he made his fame amidst them.

Churchill was magnificently stubborn. He stayed in command through the dark hours, believed when others doubted, fought on when others were prepared to negotiate,

sounded warnings throughout the 1930s that proved prescient, and did so against fierce opposition. Those who spied for Churchill in Germany and England were threatened, and in one case his family was threatened as well. The Conservative government of those days had pressed Churchill's constituency to deselect him, almost driving him from the House of Commons. His enemies used government ministers to undermine his public character, a common tactic when politics is most serious. All this occurred at a time when Churchill's finances were shattered, saved only by the intervention of a German Jew who covered Churchill's debt after the crashes of 1929 and 1937 (more than £18,000 in the latter year), desperate for Churchill to keep resisting Hitler.

On the day of his "crazy broadcast," Churchill was thinking about despotism at home and abroad. Within hours of his speech, he telegraphed President Harry S. Truman, warning of Soviet tyranny. He wrote that he viewed with "profound misgivings" the "retreat of the American Army to our line of occupation in the central sector," which would bring "Soviet power into the heart of Western Europe and the descent of an iron curtain between us and everything to the Eastward." His phrase "iron curtain" would be made famous 11 months later in his speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Mo.

Churchill never withdrew his Gestapo comment, despite the criticism and election loss. When the *Times* of London scolded him, Churchill replied in an op-ed: "I fight for my corner" and "I leave when the pub closes." Far from being ashamed of his Gestapo assertion, he even repeated it. In 1947 he said that under socialism the "snoopers of 17 different Departments" would eventually be "assisted by a police Gestapo." And again, in the 1950 election, he said that socialism "leads inevitably to communism" and the "sacrifice of personal individual liberties." (Labour won that election, but with such a tiny majority that another election was required the following year, which the Conservatives won.)

Churchill was as relentless in resisting socialism as its supporters were in advancing it. He was as clear in opposition to socialism as he had been in his opposition to Hitler, and as he still was to Stalin. He refused to serve with socialists in any cabinet or coalition, except during World War II. He rejected the doctrine and its political party (Labour), root and branch, right from the start, beginning when he was hardly more than a boy.

In his prudence, Churchill willingly collaborated with the socialists during World War II in the struggle against Hitler. In May 1940, Churchill became prime minister and the

leader of a national government that represented the three major political parties: Conservative, Labour, and Liberal. The coalition lasted throughout the war. Labour-party leaders served in high war-cabinet positions under him and made major contributions to the victory. Churchill abated his statements about socialism during the war, although he didn't endorse them. He was grateful to the socialists — some of whom he liked personally too — in their service together during the war.

Churchill agreed with the socialists, partially, on one issue: He helped invent the social safety net. But he looked for ways to implement it without threatening the free-market system, the liberal nature of the society, the advantage of labor over idleness, and the security of property. Churchill's social safety net relied chiefly on contributions from the beneficiaries and their employers, who paid money into accounts that they could track. Benefits were limited so as not to undercut work or break the treasury. Understanding that human life would always be imperfect as long as it remained human, he did not preach or attempt utopia. The trials of living, raising a family, and following one's conscience were essential attributes of a fully human life. Churchill believed that if these activities were socialized, life would fall under dehumanizing tyranny, like Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia.

He balanced these decisions — often between being popular or speaking truth, for allying with socialists during the war and fighting against them in his campaign, for changing political parties twice in his career — all with the artfulness of action called statesmanship. It required gifts “much rarer than the largest and purest of diamonds,” he said. He believed statesmanship is natural, rare, and necessary; it involves the elevation of capacities inherent in human beings and required for high citizenship. All of us must choose. All of us have ultimate purpose and principles that drive what we do, and all of us face necessities that cut in different directions from each other and from our principles.

The classics teach us that this art of choosing involves an intellectual virtue, prudence, and is best learned by studying those who have the reputation for excellence at it. Those people tend to be statesmen, because the questions of politics involve so many people, so many ultimate questions, and so much risk and opportunity. This is why we study Churchill closely.

Today we fear the action of nations that would be insignificant except for their access to

technology that comes from the West. Today our governments are even larger than the massive size to which they grew in Churchill's time. One can find in Churchill's voice and writing a sustained effort to confront these evils, not always successful, but always persistent and often beautiful. When we fear that we will be overcome by new terrors, we might remember the last words Churchill spoke in the House of Commons: "Never flinch, never weary, never despair."

— *Larry P. Arnn is the president of Hillsdale College.*