

**2<sup>nd</sup> Atlantic Conference, Madeira, Portugal**  
**“Fifty Years After the Portuguese Revolution**  
**(25 April 1974): The Path to Liberal Democracy”**  
**25-27 January 2024**

**Churchill: The Freedom of the Seas and the**  
**Atlantic Charter**

By Randolph L.S. Churchill

Thank you for the kind invitation to join you for this important conference. I particularly wish to say “*obrigado*” to that great Churchillian, Professor Joao Carlos Espada, for his tireless efforts on behalf of the International Churchill Society in Portugal.

My great-grandfather, Sir Winston Churchill, visited Madeira in 1950 and it is a great pleasure for me to be with you here today, in beautiful Madeira, to help celebrate the 650<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great Anglo-Portuguese alliance.

I know that if Churchill were here with us today, he would be wreathed in cigar smoke and enjoying a glass of port followed swiftly by a glass of Madeira! We all know how much he loved his cigars. In 1893 he wrote to his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, perhaps the most fanciful letter:

*“You do not like my smoking cigars. I will not do so any more, I am not fond enough of them in having any difficulty in leaving them off.”* Other than his only novel *Savrola*, it was the last piece of fiction he ever wrote!

On works of fiction in the propaganda of distorting history - which some believe is a modern phenomenon - Lord Roberts wrote brilliantly in *The Spectator* that the British were robbed by lies over the Boston Tea Party in 1773. It is now proved that it was not King George III’s taxes on the Americans, but that the real story was the taxed British Tea undercut the American bootleggers who wanted to preserve their profit by chucking the British tea in the harbour! I feel passionately that the telling of history fairly, as Sir Martin Gilbert did on Churchill, must sit at the core of all our democratic freedoms.

We are met at a testing time for alliances. The United States and United Kingdom are engaged in armed combat against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, in an allied endeavour to protect the freedom of the seas. A trillion dollars-worth of commerce passes through the Suez Canal every year; any serious interruption in its operations could cripple the world’s economy.

And the war in Ukraine rages on, as we approach the melancholy two-year anniversary of Putin's wicked imperial invasion.

Chinese economic imperialism continues apace in Africa and elsewhere, and the leadership in Beijing is casting a more and more acquisitive eye at Taiwan.

Churchill devoted his life and career to the alliance of the English-speaking peoples in the defence of the West. A good portion of that career was devoted to the principle of the freedom of the seas and, on two occasions, he found himself at the pinnacle of leadership in what was then the world's largest navy.

He took this responsibility seriously. As he later reflected in a 1949 speech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

*"During our prolonged period of naval supremacy undeterred by the rise of foreign tariffs, we opened our ports freely to the commerce of the world. Our Colonial and oriental empire, even our coastal trade, was free to the shipping of all the nations on equal terms. We in no way sought to obstruct the rise of other States or Navies.*

*For nearly the whole of the Nineteenth Century the monopoly of sea power in British hands was a trust discharged faithfully in the general interest. But now in the first decade of the Twentieth Century with new patterns of warships, naval rivalries became acute and fierce. Civilised Governments began to think in Dreadnoughts. It would in such a setting have been very difficult to prevent the First World War."*

Indeed, it was Churchill who would have to confront the naval aspects of that terrible war.

He was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty on 25 October 1911, before his 37<sup>th</sup> birthday, thus becoming the civilian leader of the largest navy on earth. Nothing could have given him greater joy.

He threw himself into the job, restructuring the Admiralty, clearing out deadwood, authorising the construction of powerful new battleships, and arming them with vastly powerful guns.

He also oversaw the creation of naval aviation and an early type of aircraft carrier, having gained insight into aviation from taking flying lessons, which he was lucky to survive.

Among the many personal delights of the position were the stately Admiralty House in Whitehall, which became his home and office, and *HMS Enchantress*, an armed, 320-foot-long yacht, which was for his personal use. It was one of the

peculiarities of British government that the perquisites enjoyed by Cabinet members are often greater than those of the Prime Minister. But perhaps it was an omen that his beloved yacht was built by the same Belfast company, Harland & Woolf, that would later build the *Titanic*.

As First Lord and the master of *Enchantress*, Churchill was in constant motion, sailing to the Royal Navy's many facilities and conducting an endless series of inspections. He was determined to get the navy shipshape, and trod heavily upon the toes of the admirals. By then the rumblings of possible conflict with Germany had begun, and Churchill was determined to ensure that the fleet would be ready should war come.

It came soon enough. On 28 June 1914 a diplomatic crisis began that led in five weeks to the First World War, a cataclysm that claimed millions of lives and ruined countless more.

Under blue skies in Sarajevo, terrorists with shadowy links to the Serbian government killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the rickety but splendid Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife. Vienna issued a strident ultimatum to Serbia, and Germany took the side of the aggrieved Empire; Russia, driven by Slavic solidarity and confident that her ally, France, would join the fray, mobilised against Germany; and Britain, outraged by the German violation of Belgian neutrality, reluctantly came to the aid of France.

Later, Churchill would refer to the opening act of the war as "*A drama never surpassed*". He was to play a major part in that drama, not only by presiding over the first naval clashes of the conflict, but by personally leading the defence of Antwerp, a critical port in Belgium. So eager was he to take the field that he offered to resign from the post he loved, as long as he could be given high military rank. The Cabinet declined his offer, and so it was as First Lord - dressed in an outlandish cap and cape - that he engaged briefly in the fight. Many thought him mad, and indeed he was nearly blown to smithereens, but he managed to keep Antwerp out of German hands for a few additional days and slow their progress west. The small contingent of raw troops he commanded was no match for the relentless enemy.

After a brief and bloody war of movement, during which hundreds of thousands died, the struggle settled into the pattern familiar to us today: static trench warfare, with almost incomprehensible levels of violence, and the green and pleasant countryside of France and Belgium transformed into a blasted and terrifying moonscape.

Churchill may have been a man of war, but he was horrified at the unfolding tragedy on the Western Front. As the civilian head of the navy, he cast around for an

alternative to what he called “*chewing barbed wire*”, and soon alighted on the strategic idea that was to be his undoing: a naval attack on Turkey, Germany’s ally, through the narrow straits of the Dardanelles. He envisioned forcing the straits - which had been closed by Turkey - and attacking Constantinople. This would have the added advantage of opening up a southern route to and from Russia, a British ally.

This was a dangerous prospect, and many in the Admiralty, including Churchill at one time, had considered it an impossible one. The straits were more than forty miles long, varying in width from one to four miles. An attacking armada would face mines below and artillery on both sides.

Despite his original concerns, Churchill became enamoured of the plan, and sought to put it into operation in early 1915. His admirals had many doubts, but kept them to themselves.

In the end, all was chaos. With a weak Prime Minister, a shaky command structure, and a lack of communication between the services, the operation was a disaster. Rather than working in harmony and at once, the navy and the army acted almost independently, the former in February and the latter in March. The naval operation led to the sinking of British ships without any significant effect on Turkish forts and gun emplacements. Churchill thought the navy should press on, but was overruled by the war council.

The Secretary of War, Lord Kitchener, was fatally indecisive. Would he commit troops to the operation, or not? Churchill admitted later that he should have called the whole thing off, once it became apparent that the army was not to be counted upon, but he did not. When Kitchener finally sent in troops, who could hardly be spared given the ferocious fighting in France and Belgium, he did so reluctantly and in insufficient numbers.

The landings took place in the face of overwhelming Turkish resistance, with fortifications and mobile gunnery that rained fire on the British (and Irish, and Australian, and New Zealander) attackers. The results were predictably disastrous.

Thus did the mighty Turkish guns, hundreds of mines, tough Turkish troops, and lack of inter-service coordination by the British, doom the campaign.

Someone had to take the blame, and the First Lord of the Admiralty was the obvious target. In May 1915, as the price of the Conservatives entering a coalition government, Churchill (who was a Liberal at this point) was sacked and forced to give up his beloved *Enchantress* and palatial Admiralty House. Rather than being cast out of the Cabinet immediately, Asquith appointed him to the sinecure of Chancellor of

the Duchy of Lancaster. For a man of action like Churchill, this was like a professional death; indeed, his wife Clementine would later say of him during this period: *"I thought he would die of grief"*.

Of, course, his indomitable spirit allowed him to survive even this crushing setback. He did penance of a sort, resigning from his meaningless post and taking command of a battalion on the Front. In the mud and blood of Belgium he sought expiation for his mistakes and dreamed again of a political comeback.

And a quarter of a century later, he found himself First Lord of the Admiralty yet again, when a reluctant Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain - his policy of appeasement in tatters as Hitler's forces were rampaging through Poland - brought Churchill back into the Cabinet.

When he returned to his office in the Admiralty, he flung open a cabinet and was stunned to find a map marked with the positions of German ships that had been untouched since his departure in 1915.

His return brought a hurricane of activity through the staid corridors of the Admiralty, and through the months of the so-called *"phoney war"* he yearned to bring the fight to the Germans. His restless eye alighted on Norway as a likely place of attack, and in April 1940 ships loaded with landing forces were duly dispatched northward.

But the same problems that hampered his efforts in the Dardanelles did so again in Norway, as the rickety command structure then in place, and the diffuse authorities responsible for the expedition, led to failure. Ironically, it was this failure that precipitated a revolt against the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and led to his fall.

A reluctant King George VI, who would have preferred Lord Halifax, summoned Churchill to Buckingham Palace on the 10 May 1940 to appoint him Prime Minister.

The hurricane that had blown through the halls of the Admiralty now tore through Whitehall. Civil servants half Churchill's age found themselves running breathlessly to keep up. Applying the lessons of a lifetime of statesmanship, especially his two tours of duty as First Lord, he created a small War Cabinet and a coordinated Chiefs of Staff Committee. Casting about for a Minister of Defence, he alighted upon the best possible candidate: himself. The days of confused command structures were over.

The crises that followed - the shocking collapse of the French army, the aerial jousting of the Battle of Britain, and the advent of strategic bombing - made it clear to Churchill what was necessary for ultimate victory: the entry into the war of the

United States of America. This would be a tall order indeed, for the American people - chastened by their experiences of the First World War - were determined to keep out of any more European conflicts. Even the Blitz failed to move them. But President Franklin D. Roosevelt gently nudged American foreign policy in a pro-Allied direction, and eventually agreed to meet his British counterpart to discuss the ongoing conflict.

In August 1941, the two leaders met in Placentia Bay, off the coast of Newfoundland. Churchill had undertaken the perilous journey aboard *HMS Prince of Wales*, a sparkling new battleship that only three months later would be sunk by the Japanese.

Churchill and Roosevelt called for a peace that would “*enable all men to traverse the high seas and oceans without hindrance*”, and the joint declaration of the two leaders would soon be known as the Atlantic Charter. This Charter laid the groundwork for the wartime alliance that would come into being three months later, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war on the United States by Germany which finally brought America into the conflict.

Just as it did on that warm August day in Placentia Bay, history is unfolding before our eyes. Borders are yet again being rewritten by force. The instruments of war and conquest are being wielded like a cudgel against our friends in Kyiv, and the horrors of murderous antisemitism have resurfaced even within the borders of the Jewish homeland.

As we all know, Ukraine has long borne the brunt of Russian aggression. The unspeakable barbarity of the Holodomor - the great, man-mad famine inflicted upon Ukraine by the Soviet Union in 1932-33 - still sears the conscience. Perhaps five million people died in one of history’s most unspeakable crimes.

As a student of history and a far-seeing statesman, Churchill instinctively knew that Lenin’s revolution would bring about only horror and misery, and that is why, while Secretary of State for War in 1919, he deployed British troops as part of a multinational force in opposition to the Bolsheviks. This intervention is - incredibly to me - often added to the charge sheet against Churchill, as if wishing to strangle Communism in its cradle were a mistake. We know better. And when Churchill referred to Bolshevism as “*foul baboonery*” and said that it “*was not a policy, but a disease*” and “*not a creed*” but a “*pestilence*”, he was peering into a future stained by the blood of millions of victims of Communism.

Churchill was famous for speaking clearly.

On 4 June 1940, as France was besieged and just after the retreat from Dunkirk, Churchill delivered one of his greatest speeches to the House of Commons, in which he pledged:

*“We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...”*

The writer, Vita Sackville-West, who heard excerpts from the speech on the BBC, wrote to her husband Harold Nicolson - who had been in the chamber to hear it - saying:

*“Even repeated by the announcer, it sent shivers (not of fear) down my spine. I think that one of the reasons why one is stirred by his Elizabethan phrases is that one feels the whole massive backing of power and resolve behind them, like a great fortress: they are never words for words’ sake.”*

In the same spirit, Britain has been at the forefront of giving both rhetorical and material support to Ukraine. The United Kingdom has provided nearly 5 billion pounds in military assistance, second only to the United States and, at the start of the war, British anti-tank missiles, along with Ukrainian bravery, were instrumental in stopping the Russian advance.

Thanks to Western aid and Ukrainian determination, the Russians have been forced into a bloody stalemate. Democracy and Freedom must prevail in Ukraine: we are inspired by their national spirit.

As a former Royal Navy officer, I also take pride in the fact that our Trident nuclear submarines and two powerful aircraft carriers are providing an important component of Europe’s deterrent against aggression. But our Navy is under terrible strain. As the great historian, Peter Frankopan, observed in a brilliant naval *tour d’horizon* in a recent issue of *The Spectator*:

*“The demands on the Senior Service are extensive and rising. There are operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea and off the coast of West Africa as well as in East Asia – not to mention Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US-led security force announced at the end of last year, whose aim is to keep shipping lanes open. That the navy advertised recently on LinkedIn for a Rear Admiral – Director of Submarines is a sign of the times: being a global power means investing in the future, rather than sticking plasters on problems that spring up.”*

Just as urgently, it is long past time for the continent to take its defence responsibilities more seriously.

Put simply, Europe must do more. I am greatly concerned that, in large measure, the security of the Continent is dependent on the United Kingdom and the continuing goodwill and strategic sense of the United States. And who knows how much longer we can depend on the latter? Besides, if American presidents as different as Obama and Trump can both complain about Europe not spending enough on defence, mustn't we admit that they might have a point? We would be foolish indeed to feed the grievances in the population of the world's only remaining superpower that tempt its leaders with isolationism.

Central to all of this is the freedom of the seas. The bombing of the Houthis in Yemen sends a clear signal that terrorists and their Iranian enablers will be met with force. Our Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has described this as *"limited, necessary and proportionate action in self-defence"* and declared, *"the Houthis have continued to carry out attacks in the Red Sea, including against U.K. and U.S. warships just this week. This cannot stand."*

This echo of previous alliances should remind us yet again that the cost of freedom is constant vigilance, and that leaders - not just in the United States and United Kingdom, but throughout the free world - must not shirk their duty. For, in Churchill's words, if we join *"in fraternal association, the high-roads of the future will be clear, not only for us but for all, not only for our time, but for a century to come."*

Our European family of nations must put truth, democratic rights, freedom and liberties at the core of our beliefs. As the Portuguese and British nations resolved so many years ago, the freedom of the seas is at the heart of building a better world.

Thank you