

# 'Never surrender': Churchill's vow remembered

It's 75 years since Winston Churchill promised to 'fight on the beaches' as Britain prepared to defy Nazi Germany alone. Is stirring oratory merely a product of its time?



**Uncompromising leader:** Winston Churchill refuted the idea of giving in to the Nazis.



We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. 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.'

Winston Churchill's address to the House of Commons 75 years ago, on 4 June 1940, came at a moment of great uncertainty during World War Two. Despite the successful evacuation of 338,226 soldiers from Dunkirk, Britain and her allies had suffered a humiliation in France. A German attempt to invade Britain now seemed inevitable and several members of the Cabinet had spoken of reaching an accommodation with Adolf Hitler.

The promise not to compromise became one of the best-known pieces of rheto-

ric in history and is still commonly cited today. Churchill, it is said, summed up the will of the nation in a way that few others could, rallying the British people to the daunting task facing them and playing a crucial role in the ultimately successful resistance to Nazism. This was despite the remarkable fact that his delivery of the speech was only heard by those inside the Commons at the time.

Churchill's phrases in later speeches, such as 'their finest hour' and 'so much owed by so many to so few', also remain embedded in Britain's public memory. Though his leadership is remembered for many reasons, his ability to bring people together through oratory was a key reason why the phrase 'Churchillian' was coined.

Memorable people, events, attitudes or changes are often defined in the public consciousness through a speech or a particular turn of phrase. Elizabeth I's announcement to troops during the Span-

ish Armada that she had 'the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too', and Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech have endured long after specific details of the struggles they faced have faded from memory.

#### The power of words

What a contrast, some say, between the rhetoric which rallied the nation to defeat a hateful ideology and the bland platitudes we now hear from politicians. At a time when humanity faces great threats such as climate change and global terrorism, this anniversary should remind us what well-chosen words can achieve.

Others respond that rhetoric is just a reflection of circumstances. Churchill's words did not change much; they merely summarised the spirit of a country facing an existential threat. Extraordinary words are the product of extraordinary times. We do not need Churchillian rhetoric now, and we should be grateful.

## Q & A

### Q Why this speech in particular?

A Churchill had only taken up the post of Prime Minister on 10 May and was faced with a monumental task. Britain had suffered badly in France and was under-prepared for the possibility of a Nazi invasion. His main rival, Lord Halifax, had argued that

Britain should accept offers of mediation, possibly meaning that the country would have to accept many of Hitler's demands. In such a situation, the defiance in Churchill's words was memorable.

### Q Was Churchill's speaking ability transferable to peacetime?

A Churchill's greatest speeches were on foreign affairs, but not all of them were during the Second World War. His 'Iron Curtain'

speech of 1946, shortly after the war, was particularly lauded for identifying the new threat of communism.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity.' Yehuda Berg

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



## **READING HOMEWORK**

1. What impact do you think Churchill's speech had upon the British public? Explain your thinking.

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2. "Without Winston Churchill, the United Kingdom may never have won the Second World War." How far do you agree with this statement?

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