

**Churchill: The Power of Words**  
**The Morgan Library & Museum**  
**Until September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012**

[\*Churchill: The Power of Words\*](#) at The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, offers a fascinating glimpse into the construction and delivery of speeches by one of the great statesmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also an interesting if coincidental review of the close relationship between Winston Churchill and the United States, and the impact this had on his personal and political lives.

For writers, there are exhibits that show the architecture of Churchill's approach and the implements used to draft the speeches that had such a dramatic effect on the outcome of World War II. A significant proportion of the words on show here served to strengthen the bond between the British Empire – at the moment of its most profound weakness – and the emerging industrial and political powerhouse of the U.S. Artifacts displayed include a dipping ink pen from the White House, and a Remington 'noiseless' typewriter used by Churchill's secretarial team so as not to interrupt his narrative flow when dictating drafts.

Most of the speeches shown here in their physical form are draft or amended final versions, with marks and amendments made in pencil, dark ink and occasionally, for impact or convenience, in red ink. The changes are rarely wholesale. More often than not they are careful, well-chosen excisions or additions that illuminate a turn of phrase, or correct a factual reference. The visitor can compare how Churchill's typescript looks on the page and then compare it with how the same words were paced and enunciated when spoken.

Blocks of text typed out in a rough system of scansion clearly guide the delivery of broadcasts or public speeches.

The centrepiece of the show is a darkened semi-circular booth positioned at the back of the modest room in which the majority of the exhibition is housed. Inside the booth, you sit and listen to a selection of the speeches featured in the exhibition, and watch as the words unfold on screen in a way that echoes how Churchill built his texts. It is at this point that you are reminded not just of the poetry and impact of his writing, but of his tremendous control of pace, pitch and pause in delivery.

It is within the booth that you hear what is perhaps the defining speech of the exhibition. Broadcast from London on February 9<sup>th</sup> 1941, [\*Give us the tools\*](#) marked a pivotal point in the wartime relationship between the British Empire and the U.S. The bargain offered here was that if President Roosevelt responded positively to Churchill's appeal for support in the resolution of World War II, Churchill would commit the British people, and British and Allied forces, to re-double their own efforts (in hardship and sacrifice) in seeking an end to the conflict. Having quoted from Henry Longfellow's *O Ship of State*, Churchill asks that President Roosevelt and the people of the U.S. give Britain their faith and blessing. "We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of battle, nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools, and we will finish the job."

This was a powerful plea that struck a balance between the humility of a nation almost on its knees, and likely to succumb without support, and the pride of a people that had already

sacrificed much in staving off a defeat that would have implications for generations.

It is important to understand the context of this speech beyond the immediate and obvious tumult of World War II. This was a moment in the history of the British Empire when everything was in peril. At the point Churchill made his plea to the U.S., the Allied forces were as good as defeated and appeasement to Hitler's Germany seemed inevitable. At the highest levels, many U.S. politicians were set against becoming involved in a war that already appeared lost. Public opinion in the U.S. was also heavily against joining such a seemingly distant conflict.

But this difficult political relationship was in contrast to the benefits Churchill had gained from his significant personal connections to the U.S. His mother, Jennie Jerome, was born in Brooklyn. His maternal grandfather, Leonard Jerome, was one-time proprietor and editor of *The New York Times*. His first visit to the U.S., at age 21, was to New York as a guest of Bourke Cockran, a prominent Irish American with interests in the law and whose future would see him operate at the highest levels of American politics. He was also a noted and impressive public speaker. In 1946, Churchill credited Cockran with giving him many of the words he used in his speeches, describing him as a great Irish American orator. Indeed, he said at one point that Cockran taught him "how to use every note of the human voice like an organ." Cockran was renowned for his epic phrasing and thundering voice.

That said, Churchill's approach was not founded entirely outside of his immediate family. His father, a noted parliamentarian, was celebrated for his speaking appearances in the House of Commons.

Indeed, it was said that when it looked like Randolph Churchill was about to stand, word would spread, and the chamber would fill with MPs keen to see how he would perform.

But it remains the case that Winston's personal connection to and connections within the U.S. were clearly fundamental to his style. This special relationship might also explain what lies at the heart of the reciprocal affection that has been shown for Churchillian rhetoric, not just by his contemporaries during and immediately after the war, but also by the U.S. political leaders that followed.

Despite Dwight D. Eisenhower's occasional frustrations with Churchill, the former U.S. President turned to Churchill's mastery of plain language in his own political maneuverings. In his memoirs, Eisenhower talks about quoting Churchill in defence of measures he had implemented to combat inflation: "This attitude caused me to recall a laconic comment of Winston Churchill when someone asked him during World War II what the allies were fighting for: 'If we stop,' he replied, 'you will find out.'"

John F. Kennedy also called upon Churchill's example. At the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles in 1961, he combined some of Churchill's most effective rhetorical techniques and made a direct reference to one of Churchill's reflections on the responsibilities of power. Employing a tricolon of sobering intensity, he said: "The times are too grave, the challenge too urgent, the stakes too high..." And then followed: "As Winston Churchill said on taking office... if we are open to a quarrel between the present and the past, we shall be in danger of losing the future."

As President, JFK made Churchill an Honorary Citizen of the United States in 1963, and this act created an opportunity for the President to outdo Churchill's rhetorical skills. In making the award, which Churchill was not able to receive in person, Kennedy spoke about how the man he so admired "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." With an even greater flourish, he developed the thought, describing how "the incandescent quality of his words illuminated the courage of his countrymen." With his tongue firmly in his cheek, and in a barely disguised allusion to Churchill's fondness for Pol Roger champagne, JFK went on to say that though the great man was accustomed to the hardships which war had brought, Churchill had "no distaste for pleasure."

George W. Bush also chose Churchillian rhetoric to help inform his public address on the advent of conflict. Just before U.S. troops entered Afghanistan he spoke to the American people, saying: "We will not waiver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail." This was a direct reference back to Churchill's 1941 radio address. It is perhaps of passing interest that Bush spoke these words within sight of a bust of Churchill that used to reside in the Oval Office.

Most recently, President Barack Obama closed a speech he made to the British Parliament in 2011 with an affirmation of the continued benefits of the transatlantic relationship. To do this, he quoted the words Churchill spoke to the crowds on V-E Day, May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945. As the speech neared its end, the president said: "In the long years to come not only will the people of this island but [Obama omitted 'of'] the world, wherever the bird of freedom chirps in [Obama added 'the'] human heart [the President turned 'hearts' into a

singular], look back to what we've done, and they will say 'do not despair, do not yield [Obama omitted 'to violence and tyranny']... march straightforward." This closing phrase clearly achieved the president's ends, for he left out six words from the end of that sentence. Churchill's original prepared people for conflicts and sacrifices as yet unknown when it continued: "March straightforward and die if need be unconquered."

For the benefit and future reference of students of rhetoric, and those who take inspiration from reading the thoughts of writers on writing, Churchill had the foresight (some might even say the arrogance of youth) to commit his own thoughts on the subject to paper in an unpublished article entitled *The Scaffolding of Rhetoric*. Written in 1897, the piece gave clear guidance on how to move an audience from unresponsive silence to grudging approval, and eventually to complete agreement. His scaffolding was built from a number of elements.

First, he believed it was important to have good diction. Second, short words – the older the better – are best. This particular piece of advice is best illustrated by an example from [The Wicked Wit of Winston Churchill](#), compiled by Dominique Enright: "There is a story that an American general once asked Churchill to look over the draft of an address he had written. It was returned with the comment 'Too many passives and too many zeds.' The general asked him what he meant and was told: 'Too many Latinate polysyllabics like "systematize", "prioritize", and "finalize". And then the passives. What if I had said, instead of "we shall fight on the beaches", "Hostilities will be engaged with our adversary on the coastal perimeter?"'"

Churchill also wrote that it is crucial to understand the rhythm, cadence and sound of a speech – and the way this propels an argument or strengthens and affirms a key point. And there is what he describes as the accumulation of argument, where facts point in a common direction and the last words fall “amid a thunder of assent.”

Throughout this modest, methodically set out show at The Morgan, you are reminded of the importance of the physicality of writing, and the way in which the scaffolding of language is built, piece by piece, with effort and craft, to arrive at something which inspires, moves and motivates. In the case of Winston Churchill, and in the context of the ending of World War II, words and orator can have rarely enjoyed such a symbiotic relationship, or achieved a more important goal.

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