

Churchill 1943 – 2013

Reactions by Robert Phillipson to [Winston Churchill's](#) speech when receiving an honorary doctorate at Harvard University in 1943

Churchill's first major point is support for USA global dominance. It is camouflaged as 'world responsibility'. In 1943 the British Empire was seriously weakened, British success in the Second World War was dependent on the American war machine, and the British economy was dependent on massive loans from the USA.

Secondly, Churchill sees the UK and USA as linked by 'blood and history', blood in Churchill's case being a reference to his American mother. It is factually correct that links between the two countries have been close throughout history.

Churchill sees the two nations as united by 'law, language, and literature', exemplified by morality, justice, fair play, and support for the weak. Kipling is cited with approval, but [Kipling](#) had no illusions about injustice in the USA: he 'never got over the wonder of a people who, having extirpated the aboriginals of their continent more completely than any other modern race had done, honestly believed they were a godly New England community, setting examples to brutal Mankind'. Churchill was a great believer in the British Empire, and the right of the British and Americans to colonise other peoples.

Thirdly, he stresses that in the war effort, American, British and Canadian forces have a joint command. He proposes that this should continue after the war, and only cease once a global system for peace maintenance has been established. The United Nations was soon established for this purpose, but in a form that maintained the principle of the permanent members of the Security Council, including the USA and UK, playing a decisive role. This they still do.

The Bismarck quote about the UK and US being connected by a joint language, and this factor being of global significance, has been cited by many, but is probably apocryphal. There is in fact no evidence of him making this observation. The reality is that the UK has since 1945 been a client state of the USA, like most European countries. There has always been a lack of symmetry in the USA/UK 'special relationship', even if there was close coordination between Roosevelt and Churchill, Reagan and Thatcher, Bush II and Blair. The USA decides unilaterally what it wants, and the UK follows. Blair was misguided enough to believe he could influence Bush – he could not.

Fourthly, a key issue in Churchill's speech is his articulation of a plan for English as a globally dominant language worldwide: "This gift of a common tongue is a priceless inheritance, and it may well some day become the foundation of a common citizenship... I do not see why we should not try to spread our common language even more widely throughout the globe and, without seeking selfish advantage over any, possess ourselves of this invaluable amenity and birthright."

There are many points tucked into these sentences:

- Churchill's advocacy of a potential 'common citizenship' has affinities with the vision of Cecil Rhodes, who bequeathed the vast fortune made in the gold mines of South Africa to fund activities to cement links between the USA and UK. His legacy funds the [Rhodes scholarships](#), which are still very active (Bill Clinton is a typical beneficiary). Rhodes' purpose was to promote Anglo-American dominance worldwide. He also envisaged the USA rejoining the United Kingdom that it broke away from in 1776. Churchill foresees the two societies merging, and pleads for more intensified contacts to facilitate this. In the same spirit the [Margaret Thatcher](#) think tank in Washington DC has as its goal the promotion of US/UK dominance worldwide.
- Churchill outlines a plan to spread the English language throughout the world, a task that is projected as being a 'birthright' of English speakers. This ridiculous claim is straightforward imperialism. He also claims that it would not represent gaining any advantage over others, which all evidence of British and American colonisation worldwide contradicts.
- He sees 'Basic English' as a key means of achieving the global spread of English, this simplified form of the language being a stepping-stone towards command of the full language and the interests it represents. To flatter Harvard University, Churchill praises it for promoting Basic English, although the key person doing this was in fact a British scholar, I. A. Richards, an influential literature professor, who taught at both Harvard and Cambridge. Richards also strongly argued that learning English was a key route to people thinking like the British (see my [Linguistic Imperialism Continued](#), 2009, pages 114-116 and 168 for a detailed analysis, as well as similar analysis in *Linguistic imperialism*, 1992, pages 166-169). Basic English never caught on seriously, but since the 1950s the promotion and expansion of English worldwide has been a key dimension of American and British policy.
- Churchill projects worldwide English as though the language would serve all equally well – which is manifestly not the case – and he specifically envisages the promotion of English being integrated with the peace-keeping institutions of the future.

The key themes of the entire speech – UK/US unity, military collaboration, plans for global peace-keeping, US/UK global dominance and global English – all lead to this conclusion: "Such plans offer far better prizes than taking away other people's provinces or lands or grinding them down in exploitation. The empires of the future are the empires of the mind." Churchill was able to accurately anticipate how different the world would be after World War Two. He argues that Britain and the USA should seize the initiative in influencing how the world would be shaped. Much of the evidence since 1945 indicates that Churchill's ideas have had a decisive influence on the modern world.

In 1950 Churchill was awarded an honorary doctorate by another university, the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. The declared reasons for granting the award were Churchill's accomplishments as a historian and his key role in battling against Hitler in the Second World War. This ultimately ensured the end of five years of German occupation of Denmark.

The speech that Churchill gave in Copenhagen was very different from what he said at Harvard in 1943. He makes profound observations about the role of the university:

“The first duty of a university is to teach wisdom, not to train, and to confirm character and not impart technicalities. We want a lot of engineers in the modern world, but we do not want a world of engineers. We want some scientists, but we must make sure that science is our servant and not our master... No amount of technical knowledge can replace the comprehension of the humanities or the study of history and philosophy.

The advantages of the nineteenth century, the literary age, have been largely put aside by this terrible twentieth century with all its confusion, exhaustion, and bewilderment of mankind. This is a time when a firm grip on all the essential verities and values of humanity and civilization should be the central care of the universities of Europe and the world”.

Alas, this humanist vision of the role of universities has been gravely undermined in recent decades. Governments are not concerned with “wisdom”. Following the example of the USA and UK, governments worldwide are increasingly forcing universities to graduate technocrats and technicians who are ignorant of “history and philosophy”, not to seek wisdom or think independently. Churchill’s engineers have been replaced by economists committed to neoliberalism, as have politicians. The USA and UK are not committed to peace-keeping but to wars of aggression in conflict with international law. The empires of the present – in which English continues to play a decisive role – are inhumane.