

Winston Churchill: The Iron Curtain Speech

Fulton, Missouri

March 5, 1946

Background:

On March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill spoke at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. The former British Prime Minister was invited to Fulton as the Green Lecture Series featured speaker and to receive an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. President Harry Truman introduced Churchill who then delivered one of the most memorable speeches of the twentieth century. Reporters were given advance copies; however, deliberately omitted from those copies was the part of the address where Churchill used the term “iron curtain.” His choice of words conjured up a powerful mental image of the dire situation in central and eastern Europe.

The opportunity to speak at Westminster College was welcomed by Winston Churchill. He had important observations that he wanted the world to hear. Westminster College gave him the audience and stage he needed. Churchill felt he could speak freely and frankly as he was no longer British prime minister. He could voice his concerns regarding the aggressive postwar acts of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Joseph Stalin already controlled Romania and Bulgaria. Churchill warned that the Russian leader was intent on cutting off all of Eastern Europe from the West in order to establish communist domination throughout the entire region. Churchill’s warning not only angered Joseph Stalin but also upset many Americans. Many people believed that the former prime minister’s words further escalated the Cold War tensions that already existed between Russia and the United States.

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The President has told you that it is his wish, as I am sure it is yours, that I should have full liberty to give my true and faithful counsel in these anxious and baffling times. I shall certainly avail myself of this freedom, and feel the more right to do so because any private ambitions I may have cherished in my younger days have been satisfied beyond my wildest dreams.

...Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and the Empire and the United States. This is no time for generalities, and I will venture to be precise. Fraternal association requires not only the growing friendship and mutual understanding between our two vast but kindred systems of society, but the continuance of the intimate relationship between our military advisers, leading to common study of potential dangers, the similarity of weapons and manuals of instructions, and to the interchange of officers and cadets at technical colleges. It should carry with it the continuance of the present facilities for mutual security by the joint use of all Naval and Air Force bases in the possession of either country all over the world. This would perhaps double the mobility of the American Navy and Air Force. It would greatly expand that of the British Empire Forces and it might well lead, if and as the world calms down, to important financial savings.

A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory. Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and its Communist international organization intends to do in the immediate future, or what are the limits, if any, to their expansive and proselytizing tendencies. I have a strong admiration and regard for the valiant Russian people and for my wartime comrade, Marshal Stalin. There is deep sympathy and goodwill in Britain – and I doubt not here also – towards the peoples of all the Russias and a resolve to persevere through many differences and rebuffs in establishing lasting friendships. We understand the Russian need to be secure on her western frontiers by the removal of all possibility of German aggression....I am sure you would wish me to state the facts as I see them to you, to place before you certain facts...

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow. Athens alone – Greece with its immortal glories – is free to decide its future at an election under British, American and French observation. The Russian-dominated Polish Government has been encouraged to make enormous and wrongful inroads upon Germany, and mass expulsions of millions of Germans on a scale grievous and undreamed-of are now taking place. The Communist parties, which were very small in all these Eastern States of Europe, have been raised to pre-eminence and power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control. Police governments are prevailing in nearly every case, and so far, except in Czechoslovakia, there is no true democracy. Turkey and Persia are both profoundly alarmed and disturbed at the claims which are being made upon them and at the pressure being exerted by the Moscow Government...

I do not believe that Soviet Russia desires war. What they desire is the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines...Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by closing our eyes to them. They will not be removed by mere waiting to see what happens; not will they be removed by a policy of appeasement...

From what I have seen of our Russian friends and Allies during the war, I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness. For that reason the old doctrine of a balance of power is unsound...

Last time I saw it all coming and cried aloud to my own fellow-countrymen...but no one paid any attention. Up till the year 1933 or even 1935, Germany might have been saved from the awful fate which has overtaken her and we might all have been spared the miseries Hitler let loose upon mankind. ...It [WW II] could have been prevented...without the firing of a single shot...but no one would listen and one by one we were all sucked into the awful whirlpool. We...must not let that happen again...

Speech Analysis Document Analysis Questions

1. Why does Winston Churchill feel that he can speak freely to the Westminster College audience?

2. What is the “shadow” Churchill refers to in paragraph three? _____

3. Why is Russia’s fear of German aggression valid? _____

4. Define the term “iron curtain.” _____

5. List the countries that were behind Churchill’s iron curtain. _____

6. What does Churchill claim Soviet Russia desires if not war?

7. What example from World War II does Churchill use to explain why all nations must pay attention now? What action could they have prevented during WWII?
