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All & nothing at all

by Timothy Jacobson

Of all our country's allies, there is little doubt that the United Kingdom remains among the closest, based on likenesses of language, law, constitution, custom, and historical sentiment. Back in 1941, when Nazi and Italian totalitarianism was the scourge of the age, and when Britain alone held fast against the dictators, the two "cousin" democracies set forth principles for reordering the world following victory in the then-still-European war, which had begun in September 1939. The United States was still neutral and the Soviet Union, Britain's new ally of convenience, was reeling from Hitler's June onslaught and, it seemed to many, likely soon to collapse. The "Joint Declaration," issued by Britain and the United States on August 14, 1941, and soon to be known as the "Atlantic Charter," rested on the presumption that Britain would actually win the war. It was a presumption hardly warranted by facts on the ground.

This declaration, the result of a meeting between Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (their second since 1919 and the first of eleven during the war), reflected needs of both sides. With the war news virtually all bad, Churchill aimed to push the Americans further down the road to belligerency. Though Roosevelt had already committed to aiding Britain by all means "short of war," including the provision of military supplies through the Lend-Lease program enacted in March 1941, his hands were tied by the Neutrality Acts passed between 1935 and 1939. The president needed to convince a divided Congress and populace that Britain's war and post-war aims were compatible with American ideals. (He only succeeded later that year after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.) The two leaders' eight-point joint declaration, hammered out aboard hms *Prince of Wales* and uss *Augusta* in a foggy Newfoundland anchorage, Placentia Bay, which had only recently become an American base in the "destroyers for bases" agreement, traded in big generalities about what a post-war world order should look like and who exactly would do the ordering.

Churchill liked to claim that the charter was "in its first draft a British production cast in my own words," and he was not far off the mark. In its final form, it embraced a widescreen picture of the post-war world for which the British and the Americans were to bear equal responsibility. No matter that Britain was already on the downslide and America on the rise: equal partnership still sounded plausible and would have been had the Empire remained intact, as Churchill was

determined it should. They committed their governments to the following goals: one, no aggrandizement, "territorial or other"; two, territorial changes only in accord with the "wishes of the people concerned"; three, the principle of self-determination and the right of people to choose their form of government; four, free trade and equal access to raw materials; five, improved material standards of living and social welfare; six, within secure boundaries, the "assurance that all men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want"; seven, freedom of the seas; and eight, disarmament of aggressor nations, "pending the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security."

Points three and four required some careful diplomatic footwork. On point four, Churchill was cautious not to forsake the protectionist system of Imperial Preference instituted in the 1930s and so inserted the phrase "with due respect for their existing obligations," which Roosevelt let pass. Point three, however, represented a more serious, long-standing tension regarding the right of national self-determination. Roosevelt, speaking from the perspective of America's own anti-colonial history and echoing Woodrow Wilson's ill-fated Fourteen Points from 1919, insisted on the phrase "the right of *all* people to choose the form of government under which they will live," which to his mind included the subject peoples of Britain's overseas empire. For his part, the imperialist Churchill emphasized restoration of sovereignty and self-government specifically to those countries overrun by the Germans and, a month later and safely back home, backtracked to say that point three did not apply to the Empire at all. Yet both sides wanted a joint declaration that, at a critical moment, was useful to them. And both sides got it. Though he spoke with the authority of the one still carrying the heaviest burden, Churchill was content with a degree of vagueness: "We must regard this as an interim and partial statement of war aims designed to assure all countries of our righteous purpose, and not the complete structure which we should build after victory." It was enough, he thought, and indeed astonishing, that the still-neutral United States should align itself formally and without ambiguity with a belligerent power and would commit to "join with us in policing the world until the establishment of a better order."

The proclamation of high-flown peacetime aims to buttress a grinding war effort was nothing new, and it was no surprise that the post-war world did not conform perfectly to the Charter's implied predictions. The declaration was, as Churchill understood, both aspirational and driven by the practical and political needs of the moment. With its ambitious outline for a post-war order, the Atlantic Charter delivered all—and nothing much at all, beyond a pledge of steadfastness between friends starting down a very tough road ahead. That pledge sufficed, however, because Britain and America then were anchored in a different reality from ours, which tempered its idealistic visions of the future with a sober understanding of the past.

The Newfoundland meeting was well photographed. Pictures survive of the two great leaders together; of Churchill alone, pacing the deck of the *Prince of Wales*; and of the August 10 church service aboard that doomed British battleship (which still bore the marks of her encounter with the Bismarck and was soon to be lost to Japanese bombers off the coast of Malaya), which brought together both ships' companies. As Churchill, ever the master of authentic sentiment, remembered

it in *The Grand Alliance*, the third volume of his history of World War II: "This service was felt by us all to be a deeply moving expression of the unity of faith of our two peoples, and none who took part in it will forget the spectacle presented that sunlit morning on the crowded quarterdeck—the symbolism of the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes draped side by side on the pulpit . . . the close-packed ranks of British and American sailors, completely intermingled, sharing the same books and joining fervently together in the hymns and prayers familiar to both." The great man himself picked the hymns: "For Those in Peril on the Sea," "Onward Christian Soldiers," "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."

Here was a great moment to be alive, but a fleeting one: "Nearly half of those who sang were soon to die." It was wartime.

Timothy Jacobson (1948–2024) wrote from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.