

Christmas Eve Broadcast--Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill (December 24, 1941)

Added to the National Registry: 2020

Essay by H.W. Brands (guest post)*



Roosevelt and Churchill at the White House

“So we had won after all,” Winston Churchill wrote after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The British Prime Minister had been trying since the German invasion of Poland in 1939 to involve the United States in World War II. Churchill believed that Britain’s fight against fascism was America’s fight as well. But the American people hadn’t agreed, and their President, Franklin Roosevelt, was reluctant to push them. Rather he led them gently, first offering America’s moral support to Britain and the other countries fighting Nazi Germany and imperial Japan, then diplomatic and economic support. Weapons followed, yet still no American troops. Finally, however, the Japanese, feeling the American pressure, struck at the United States in Hawaii. Congress declared war against Japan. Germany, Japan’s ally, declared war against the United States. And Winston Churchill got his wish. “The United States was in the war, up to the neck and in to the death,” he said.

Roosevelt and Churchill had been corresponding secretly for many months. They had met on warships off the coast of Canada. But Churchill had kept clear of America lest America’s isolationists, who distrusted both Roosevelt and Churchill and opposed American entry into the war, take a visit by the Prime Minister as occasion for new protest. But now that Britain and America were in the war together, Churchill invited himself to Washington. “Would it not be wise for us to have another conference?” he wrote to Roosevelt. “We could review the whole war plan in the light of reality and new facts.” Churchill also added a personal reason. “It would also be a very great pleasure to me to meet you again.” He closed: “The sooner the better.”

“Delighted to have you here at the White House,” Roosevelt replied by telegram. “Naval situation and other matters of strategy require discussion.”

Churchill crossed the Atlantic on Britain’s newest battleship, the *Duke of York*. The December voyage was swift but rough. One of Churchill’s companions remarked that so much water crashed over the deck of the ship that they might as well have crossed by submarine.

Churchill tired of the water travel and disembarked at Hampton Roads on the Virginia coast. He flew the rest of the way to Washington. Roosevelt met him at the new Washington National Airport and greeted him warmly. Churchill was delighted. “I clasped his strong hand with comfort and pleasure,” he recalled. The President’s motorcade whisked the two leaders to the White House, where Roosevelt mixed cocktails and Churchill consumed appreciatively. Dinner was announced, and Churchill personally pushed the President’s wheelchair--Roosevelt had been

paralyzed from the waist down since contracting polio in 1921--into the dining room. Churchill was a historian by avocation; the moment brought to his mind an image of Sir Walter Raleigh spreading his cloak before Queen Elizabeth.

Roosevelt insisted that Churchill stay at the White House. He wanted to become better acquainted with the Prime Minister. Churchill gave him more than he bargained for. Churchill liked a cigar after his bath, and he puffed in the buff. Roosevelt's chair rolled silently along the hallways of the White House, and he wheeled himself into Churchill's room unannounced. Encountering his unclothed guest, he apologized for the intrusion and turned his chair to roll out. Churchill stopped him. Neither apology nor departure was necessary, he said. "The Prime Minister of Great Britain has nothing to conceal from the President of the United States."

Talks on the conduct of the war filled the days of the two leaders. Churchill had brought his military advisers; Roosevelt gathered his own generals and admirals. They spoke of coordinating strategy between the two countries, and of working with the third member of what was being labeled the Grand Alliance: the Soviet Union. They agreed that the war against Germany must take precedence over the war against Japan, for Germany was the more powerful of the two enemies and the more centrally located in the heartland of the Eurasian continent.

Churchill had intended to stay a week. But his talks with Roosevelt were so congenial and productive that he remained another fortnight.

He was still Roosevelt's guest on Christmas Eve, when the President performed a ritual begun by Calvin Coolidge in 1923: the lighting of the national Christmas tree. Roosevelt delivered his holiday message to an audience gathered before the south portico of the White House and to a much larger audience listening by radio. Then he turned the microphone over to Churchill, who added his own sentiments.

Congress unanimously issued an invitation to Churchill to address a joint session. The Prime Minister reminded the senators and representatives that his mother had been an American. He joked that if his parentage had been reversed--if his father had been American and his mother British--he might have come to Congress by election rather than invitation. "But if I had it is hardly likely that it would have been unanimous." The members laughed. "So perhaps things are better as they are."

Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's most trusted assistant, accompanied the President and Churchill to the latter's train for Norfolk and his ship home. Roosevelt said goodbye to Churchill from the President's automobile. Hopkins walked the Prime Minister to the rail coach. To one of Churchill's aides, Hopkins handed a note for Churchill's wife, whom Hopkins knew. "You would have been quite proud of your husband on this trip," the note said. "He was ever so good natured. I didn't see him take anybody's head off.... If he had half as good a time here as the President did having him about the White House, he surely will carry pleasant memories of the past three weeks."

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*The views expressed are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.