FIVE

Winston Churchill: May 1940—Should Churchill Negotiate?

Early in World War II, in May 1940, British prime minister Winston Churchill met with a large group of his cabinet-rank ministers and announced a fateful decision. He told them: "I have thought carefully in these last days whether it was part of my duty to consider entering negotiations with That Man."[1] That Man was, of course, Adolf Hitler. At the meeting, Churchill did more than announce that he would not negotiate with Hitler. With the rhetorical flair so characteristic of his wartime speeches, Churchill declared that Great Britain must fight to the finish: "If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground."[2]

This chapter tells the story of Churchill's decision and the secret deliberations that preceded it. For three days, Churchill and the members of his War Cabinet debated and wrestled with the question of whether to pursue peace negotiations with Nazi Germany. Later in the chapter, I will assess the wisdom of Churchill's refusal to negotiate. Should he instead have tried to negotiate a compromise peace with Hitler?

Today, many would find this question absurd. Of course Churchill's decision was wise. No regime in history was more evil than Hitler's. If there was ever a time to reject compromise, this was it. Of course, we know the rest of the story: the British endured the Nazi onslaught during the Battle of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union eventually joined the war effort, and the Allies crushed Hitler's regime. Most historians—and laymen—see Churchill's refusal to negotiate as not only right, but heroic.[3]

However, Churchill's decision seems obvious only in hindsight. What if we go back in time to May 1940?

In his own magisterial, six-volume history of World War II, Churchill did not even acknowledge that extended War Cabinet discussions had taken place, much less that the cabinet had seriously considered opening a channel for negotiations with the Germans.[4] Lord Halifax, his foreign secretary, also denied it. But the secret minutes of these cabinet meetings—long classified—reveal a much more complex reality and an intense debate.[5] As we shall see, it was a close call.[6]

The War Cabinet was made up of five men, including Churchill, who formulated Britain's war policy. As prime minister, Churchill had appointed the other four members: Edward, Lord Halifax, his foreign secretary; Neville Chamberlain, the former prime minister; and two leaders of the Labor Party, Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwood. Neither Attlee nor Greenwood plays a critical role in our story.[7] Halifax, Chamberlain, and Churchill do. Their deliberations and struggle in May 1940 occurred against a backdrop of earlier differences among the three men about Britain's prewar foreign policy of appeasement.

Today *appeasement* is a dirty word. But it can be defined in more neutral terms as "the policy of settling international quarrels by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise, thereby avoiding the resort to an armed conflict which would be expensive, bloody, and possibly dangerous."[8] While the notion of appeasement now carries a "shameful and even craven"[9] connotation, quite the opposite was true in Great Britain during most of the 1930s. At that time, "the policy of appeasement … occupied almost the whole moral high ground. The word was originally synonymous with idealism, magnanimity of the victor and a willingness to right wrongs."[10]

When Hitler began annexing territory in the mid-1930s, many in Great Britain thought he was simply trying to right the "wrongs" of Versailles. The Versailles Treaty of 1919 had transformed the map of Europe after World War I, carving up old nations, creating new ones, and literally cutting Germany down to size. Germany lost vast amounts of territory to France, Belgium, Poland, and the entirely new nation of Czechoslovakia. By the

1930s, many in Britain had come to believe that Versailles had treated Germany unfairly.

Other factors favored the British policy of appeasement. After the horrors of World War I, many Britons felt that another war in Europe should be avoided "at almost any cost."[11] As a practical matter, Britain was totally unprepared to fight another war. And some conservatives viewed the fascists in Germany and Italy as bulwarks against communism, which was seen as a far worse menace.

So in 1936, when Hitler violated Versailles by reoccupying the demilitarized Rhineland—Germany's own "backyard"—Britain did nothing to stop him.[12] Churchill, then a Conservative backbencher, was the only one in British politics who "wanted to call Hitler's bluff"[13] with a display of force. He was ignored. Throughout the 1930s, Churchill would remain one of the very few voices warning of the dangers of German rearmament.

Chamberlain became prime minister in 1937, and both he and Halifax are associated with appeasement because of their failure to resist German aggression in the late 1930s. Hitler's next target was the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia, which included a significant German-speaking population. Hitler launched a vitriolic propaganda campaign, threatening the Czech government and claiming that the Sudeten Germans were being horribly mistreated under Czech rule.

In late 1937, Chamberlain sent Halifax to Germany—on the pretext of attending a hunting exhibition—to meet personally with Hitler and convey a respectful, nineteenth-century message: that Britain understood Germany's concerns about the treatment of German minorities and was not necessarily opposed to changes in the European order, *as long as they were made peacefully*. In a high water mark of appeasement, Halifax complimented Hitler on "performing great services in Germany" and expressed Britain's hope that any modification of the Versailles Treaty would come through "peaceful evolution."[14]

Chamberlain later declared that Halifax's visit was a great success in "convinc[ing] Hitler of our sincerity."[15] Soon afterward, Halifax became foreign secretary.

In fact, Halifax and Chamberlain had completely misread Hitler, who was not playing by Marquess of Queensbury rules. The visit convinced

Hitler of something else entirely—that the British were so desperate to avoid war that he could maneuver freely in Europe without risk of their putting up a fight. He moved quickly. In 1938, he marched into Vienna and incorporated Austria into his Reich without firing a shot. Next he demanded that the Sudetenland be annexed to Germany and that all non-German Czechs leave the region.

Trying to avert war, Chamberlain hastily arranged a four-power conference in Munich that excluded the Czech government. The result was a historic shift in the European balance of power. The Munich Agreement among the four great powers—Britain, France, Italy, and Germany—allowed the Nazis to absorb the Sudetenland in return for Hitler's promise to allow an international commission to settle any other German claims over Czech territory. The Czechs were presented with a fait accompli. At Chamberlain's request, Hitler also signed a piece of paper—soon to prove worthless—in which Germany and Britain promised to resolve their differences peacefully. Chamberlain returned to England, "peace treaty" in hand, proclaiming "peace with honor" and "peace for our time."

The British public rejoiced when they heard the news, but Churchill proclaimed it a "total and unmitigated defeat" and a "disaster of the first magnitude" for both Britain and France. Speaking before the House of Commons, he said, "Do not let us blind ourselves to that. It must now be accepted that all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe will make the best terms they can with the triumphant Nazi Power. The system of alliances in Central Europe upon which France has relied for her safety has been swept away, and I can see no means by which it can be reconstituted."[16]

He said he did not blame the British people for their "natural, spontaneous" outburst of relief that war had been averted for the moment.

> But they should know the truth. They should know that there has been gross neglect and deficiency in our defenses; they should know that we have sustained a defeat without a war, the consequences of which will travel far with us along our road; they should know that we have passed an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged, and that the terrible words

have for the time being been pronounced against the Western democracies:

> "Thou are weighed in the balance and found wanting."
>
> And do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first fore-taste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless, by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden time.[17]

Once again, Churchill was proven right. Six months later, in March 1939, Nazi troops marched into Prague and seized what was left of the country. As a consequence, Czechoslovakia disappeared entirely as a nation.[18]

That was the end of appeasement as British policy—a humiliating failure from which the reputations of Chamberlain and Halifax would never fully recover. Both men became completely disillusioned with Hitler, adopted a tougher policy of deterrence,[19] and began to mobilize Britain for war. As Hitler began to make ominous threats toward Poland, parts of which had substantial German-speaking minorities, Britain and France guaranteed Poland's security through a treaty,[20] in effect warning Hitler that if he invaded Poland, there would be war.

But it was too late for warnings. Hitler was not to be deterred. On September 1, 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

The outbreak of World War II brought about rapid changes in British leadership. Churchill, thoroughly vindicated, became first lord of the Admiralty. Poland was overrun in a month.[21] Chamberlain's credibility ebbed and Churchill's grew. In 1940, when Hitler overran Denmark and Norway, British public opinion turned decisively against Chamberlain. Germany had been neither appeased nor deterred, and British mobilization had failed to meet the Nazi challenge.

Chamberlain decided he should resign. Both he and King George VI wanted Halifax to replace him. But, for reasons that were never publicly explained, Halifax turned the job down. Winston Churchill became prime minister on May 10, 1940.

At the pensionable age of sixty-five, Churchill was thrilled at long last to become prime minister. From his youth, he had been persuaded that he was a man of destiny. He also held "a high romantic view of the monarchy and the empire"[22] that can be easily understood from his background.

He was the grandson of the Duke of Marlborough and the son of Lord Randolph Churchill, a Tory politician, who died young and had an unrequited dream of becoming prime minister himself. Winston's American-born mother, née Jennie Jerome, was a famous and pas-sionate beauty. Both were distant and indifferent parents, and Winston's nanny was the "central emotional prop of [his] childhood."[23] After boarding school at Harrow, Churchill attended the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. The year he graduated, he was commissioned as an officer in the Royal Hussars.

As a young officer, Churchill saw combat in India and the Sudan. He was seen as flamboyant and impatient, with a "dominating desire … to attract the greatest possible attention to himself, both on the local and the world scene."[24] An extraordinarily fluent writer, he "lived by phrase making"[25] and supported himself financially during most of his life as a war correspondent and author. By the age of twenty-five, he was already a celebrity because of his capture, imprisonment, and escape during the Second Boer War in South Africa, which he chronicled as a foreign correspondent.

As a politician, he was self-centered, self-confident, and nakedly ambitious. By twenty-six, he was a Conservative member of Parliament, but his independent views soon forced him to switch parties and become a Liberal. By thirty-three, he was a cabinet minister, and during World War I he held a variety of important posts. He became chancellor of the exchequer in 1924 under a Conservative prime minister and formally rejoined the Conservative Party the following year. "[A]nyone can rat," he quipped, "but it takes a certain amount of ingenuity to re-rat."[26]

The Tories hardly welcomed him back as a prodigal son. To many of them, Churchill's "wit and oratorical ability were not enough to overcome severe doubts about his judgment."[27] Many saw him as "unscrupulous, unreliable and unattractively ambitious"—a "political turncoat" who had twice changed his party affiliation. His personal eccentricities only alienated them further. He spoke with a lisp and a stutter. He wore loud

suits and bow ties. His bowler hat and cigar seemed like theatrical props. He gambled and consumed great quantities of alcohol. By 1929, his political career hit the skids and he entered his "wilderness years"[28] as a Tory backbencher with trivial influence.

Eleven years later, when he finally shook off the dust of wilderness and moved into 10 Downing Street, he knew that his support in Parliament was still thin, especially in his own Conservative Party. "The strange dress, ridiculous hats, heavy drinking and pronounced speech impediment did little to encourage the Tory old guard to respect him for much more than having been proved right about the German threat."[29] Indeed, they considered him dangerously impulsive and apt to get carried away by his own rhetoric. Would he lead from the head or the heart? They feared the latter. Many in the Tory establishment saw Churchill as a "Rogue Elephant" whom the "wise old elephants"—Chamberlain and Halifax—might not be able to control.[30]

During Churchill's first two weeks as prime minister, the war went from bad to worse. Hitler conquered the Netherlands, invaded Belgium, and surged into northern France. Britain had sent troops to the continent to support the French, but they were unable to stop the German army. The United States was standing on the sidelines, rooting for Britain and France but doing little to help. Churchill wrote several personal letters to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pleading for assistance, but none came.

Worst of all, by May 23, 1940, the German army had surrounded the Allied troops near the French-Belgian border. Some 250,000 British soldiers appeared to be trapped, along with a roughly equal number of French troops. The British public had no understanding of just how bad things were.[31] Churchill knew he would have to "prepare public opinion for bad tidings. … [W]hat was now happening in Northern France would be the greatest British military defeat for many centuries."[32] It was against this desperate backdrop that Churchill and his War Cabinet were forced to consider negotiating with Hitler.

It was Edward, Lord Halifax who pressed for the possibility of negotiation. Like Churchill, Halifax was an English aristocrat but one with very different values and temperament. Born Edward Wood on April 16,

1881, he was the fourth son of a viscount and eventually inherited his father's title because his three older brothers had died of childhood diseases.[33] He was born without a left hand, but his life was not much affected by it.[34] His family was enormously wealthy, largely because a huge seam of coal lay under a portion of their lands. Educated at Eton and Oxford, he was personally rich by the time he graduated from university because of large inheritances from a number of uncles and aunts.

In 1909, Halifax went into politics and stood for a seat in Parliament. Thereafter, he pursued a "bright and successful" career as a Tory politician. An "intensely private man," he was genuinely modest and "found it hard to lose his temper."[35] Like his father, he was a devout High Church Anglican who exuded moral rectitude. Most of all, he was respectable.

Halifax's nickname became "The Holy Fox" because he was both religious and cunning. He believed deeply in original sin. "Far from a pious blindness to the evils of the world, Halifax was [all] too keenly aware of men's failings. He was if anything more guilty of cynicism than monkish innocence."[36] He saw himself as a pragmatist, not an ideologue. His diplomatic and political career demonstrated a willingness to "[c]ompromise, a degree of guile, and an awareness of the realities of life" that, to him, were fully consistent with his spiritual values.[37] As he would later write, "Many of our intellectual difficulties come from an attempt to think that the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of this world are concerned with the same problems. … [I]n a very vital sense they are not."[38]

Halifax's values and prejudices, however, were those of his class. He saw the world through the eyes of an English landed aristocrat, whose political goals were to safeguard Britain's independence, continuing imperial role, and honor.[39] Roy Jenkins, in his biography of Churchill, wrote that Halifax had a "resigned desire to preserve as much as he could of the England he knew and loved … the landscape, the ordered hierarchical society, the freedom from oppression or vulgar ostentation."[40] All of these factors attracted him to the possibility of a negotiated peace that would honorably get Great Britain out of a terrible war.

That possibility arose on May 25, 1940, when Halifax held a pivotal meeting in London with the Italian ambassador to Great Britain, Giuseppe

Bastianini. Halifax's purpose was to explore whether Italy might be induced —that is, bribed—to stay out of the war. Although Italy was officially a noncombatant, it had signed a "Pact of Steel" (an alliance) with Nazi Germany and amassed twenty thousand troops on the French-Italian border. There was reason to think Italy might soon join the Nazis, invade France, and claim some booty. Perhaps, Halifax thought, Italy could be bought off at a reasonable price.

Churchill knew about this meeting in advance and asked only that it be kept secret and that Halifax do nothing to suggest a lack of resolve on the part of Great Britain.

But I suspect that Halifax, the "Holy Fox," went to the meeting hoping delicately to explore a second and even more far-reaching possibility—one that he had not disclosed to Churchill or the War Cabinet. Might Mussolini play a role as mediator in facilitating negotiations aimed at *ending* the war? Halifax left no incriminating fingerprints, so it will never be known whether he went into the meeting wanting to plant this seed. But by the end of the meeting the idea had sprouted.

Halifax's written report of the meeting suggests that the Italian ambassador planted the idea. According to the report, Italy agreed to discuss its relationship with Great Britain only in the broader context of a "just and enduring European settlement." Was Britain interested, the ambassador asked, in discussions that might include this "greater framework"? Such a conversation would involve "other countries"—which, of course, would include Germany.[41] Halifax, using the double negative so favored by wily diplomats, gave the ambassador permission to inform Mussolini that "His Majesty's Government *did not exclude the possibility* of some discussion of the wider problems of Europe" (emphasis added).

Halifax presented this hot potato to the War Cabinet the next day. For three days, they would be forced to discuss his plan.

The Deliberations

Sunday, May 26, was anything but a day of rest for the War Cabinet. Churchill began by reporting the dire military circumstances on the ground. Belgium was about to capitulate.[42] The French were close to collapse, and

250,000 British soldiers were cornered in northern France.[43] Soon Britain might be facing both Germany and Italy alone.

Against this backdrop, Halifax told the War Cabinet about his meeting with the Italian ambassador. In light of the desperate military situation, he said, British war aims had to be narrowed: it was no longer a matter of "imposing a complete defeat upon Germany but of safeguarding the independence of our own Empire and if possible that of France."[44] He thought that Mussolini wished to secure peace in Europe and that the Italians might be open to facilitating a discussion about a "general European settlement," but that the discussion would have to include Germany.

From the outset, Churchill was deeply skeptical. In his view, Hitler would never accept any negotiated deal unless it allowed Germany to dominate Europe, which Britain "could never accept" because it would threaten Britain's security. "We must ensure our complete liberty and independence," he said. But nothing was decided, and everyone left the meeting knowing the discussion would continue.

When the War Cabinet met again in the early afternoon, the differences between Churchill and Halifax came into sharper focus. Halifax argued strongly in favor of an approach to Italy, saying that "the last thing Signor Mussolini wanted was to see" a Europe dominated by Hitler. Churchill was still skeptical, but he conceded that "the matter was one that the War Cabinet would need to consider."[45] Halifax began the first of several attempts to pin Churchill down. Given that Britain's security and independence were in such danger, he said, "we should naturally be prepared to consider any proposals that might lead to [restoring that security], *provided our liberty and independence are assured*" (emphasis added). Then he asked the key question: If Churchill was "satisfied that matters vital to the independence of this country were unaffected," was he "prepared to discuss such terms?"[46]

Churchill did not say no. In fact, he appeared to say yes. He said he would be "thankful to get out of our present difficulties on such terms, provided we retain the essentials and the elements of our vital strength *even at the cost of some territory*" (emphasis added). But he went on to add that he did not believe that such a deal was possible.

The third meeting that day took place around dinnertime. In the interim, Churchill had met with the French prime minister, Paul Reynaud, who confirmed that the French military situation was all but hopeless. Churchill's response to him was typically pugnacious: "We would rather go down fighting," he said, "than be enslaved to Germany."[47]

He brought that defiant attitude back to the War Cabinet that evening, where his debate with Halifax became increasingly tense. If France collapsed, Churchill declared, Britain must not go down with her. The two nations had mutually pledged not to make a separate peace with Germany, but Churchill now wanted to release France from this treaty obligation. "If France could not defend herself, it was better that she get out of the war rather than drag us into a settlement which involved intolerable terms," Churchill said. Churchill predicted that Hitler would demand the most outrageous terms possible—including British disarmament. There was "no limit to the terms that Germany would impose on us if she had her way."[48]

Halifax was not so sure. He saw no evidence that Germany wanted to "enslave" Britain. In fact, he didn't think it was in Hitler's *interest* to insist on outrageous terms. Halifax believed that Hitler's primary goal—as stated—was to unite all German-speaking peoples under one roof and to create "Lebensraum" ("living room") in the east for expansion. In order to accomplish that goal, Hitler wanted territory in Eastern Europe, not Britain. Therefore, Halifax thought, Hitler might want to stop fighting on the western front so he could focus his military power on the Soviet Union. Halifax may even have thought, why not push him in that direction? The one thing Britain and Germany shared was their hatred of the communists.

Halifax was a balance-of-power strategist who no doubt believed that this war, like most wars, would eventually end with a negotiated agreement in which territorial concessions would be made to the stronger party. Some concessions would have to be made to Hitler, and Mussolini would expect a little pourboire for his own helpful behavior,[49] but this could be accomplished by some horse-trading among colonies. So Halifax pressed his point: How could you know that Hitler would insist on outrageous terms if there was no discussion? Moreover, Britain's interests could be declared in advance. "[W]e might say to Signor Mussolini that if there was any suggestion of terms which affected our independence, we should not look at

them for a moment." And Mussolini might well be alarmed by Hitler and "look at matters from the point of view of the balance of power."[50] Why not find out? Where was the harm in trying this approach?

Churchill's response suggested that he saw Hitler as a bully with boundless ambitions. "Herr Hitler thought that he had the whiphand. The only thing to do was to show him that he could not conquer this country."

Where was Chamberlain in all of this? He did not say a great deal at this meeting, and in historian John Lukacs's view he "now sat on the fence."[51] But his diary entry that evening suggested he was leaning in Churchill's direction. Chamberlain summarized the prime minister's outlook: "[I]f we could get out of this jam by giving up Malta and Gibraltar and some African colonies he would jump at it. But the only safe way was to convince Hitler that he couldn't beat us."[52]

Let's step back for a moment and ask how Spock might assess the Churchill-Halifax debate to this point. The issue was: What would Hitler insist upon in peace negotiations? Churchill was assuming the worst and presenting it as fact. Although the record doesn't show him saying this directly, he saw Hitler as a megalomaniac bent on nothing less than world domination. Churchill's instincts had been terrific in the past, and his predictions about Hitler had so far been accurate, but he had not even come close to explaining why he thought Hitler had a vital interest in enslaving Britain and destroying its empire. Halifax, by contrast, was sticking to the known facts: The situation on the ground was dire, and it was unknown what the Germans would agree to. Why wouldn't it be wise, and indeed honorable, to see if a settlement could be achieved on reasonable terms? Spock would consider that a logical question.

Moreover, Spock would ask rhetorically, what was the alternative to negotiation? Continued fighting—in which the Germans would direct their formidable airpower against Britain and perhaps invade. In May 1940, the outcome of such a fight was highly uncertain. In fact, the odds were pretty clearly against Britain.

So it was easy to *imagine* a negotiated deal that might serve both sides' interests better than continued war: the Germans would get de facto control of Europe, including France, while Britain would keep its independence, its military, and nearly all of its empire (after ceding a few territorial crumbs to

the Italians). There were three questions: Would Hitler agree to such a deal, would an agreement with Hitler be worth the paper it was printed on, and would the costs of that deal, including the loss of sovereignty for most of Europe, be acceptable to the British? Through bitter experience, Halifax and Chamberlain had come to share Churchill's view that Hitler was a completely unreliable negotiating partner. Even if the war ended now, Hitler might attack Britain later.

Spock would agree that this was a significant risk. But he would ask: Which nation, Germany or Britain, would *benefit more from a hiatus in the war*? Britain was not yet fully mobilized. If Hitler headed east and attacked Russia, as expected, it would absorb vast amounts of German manpower and materiel. That could only be good for Britain, which needed time to reach full strength.

Of course, in those desperate days in May 1940, the War Cabinet meetings were too chaotic to allow for a Spock-like discussion at this level. But Halifax's argument was strong enough to force Churchill to take another tack.

Churchill's second argument was that Britain must not be forced into the weak position of going to Mussolini and Hitler and asking them to "treat us nicely. We must not get entangled in a position of that kind before we had been involved in serious fighting."[53] In other words, this was *not the right time* to pursue negotiations because Britain had not yet proved it could put up a real fight. A willingness to engage in negotiation now would signal weakness. But perhaps after a few months of heroic fighting, Churchill suggested, the time would be ripe.

To Halifax, this was supremely illogical: In three months, Britain might be bombed to a smoking ruin. Where would its bargaining power be then? Was Churchill seriously willing to take that risk? This was just the kind of emotional argument that Churchill's critics dreaded. Halifax was aghast. If Britain could "obtain terms which did not postulate the destruction of our independence," Halifax insisted, "we should be foolish if we did not accept them." In other words, he was arguing that it would be stupid, given the situation on the ground, to turn down a negotiated deal that provided for continued British independence.

Here again, I think Spock would say that Halifax was making more sense than Churchill. In fact, I suspect the issue of timing was a makeshift argument on Churchill's part. True, one could always fight now and negotiate later, but Churchill had not explained why he felt justified in taking such a huge risk. Frankly, I think Halifax had Churchill on the ropes. If the analysis were to stop here, one might well conclude that wisdom would *obligate* Churchill to explore the possibility of negotiation by using the Italians as an intermediary.

Perhaps sensing this, Churchill backed off and the cabinet agreed that Halifax should prepare a draft of his proposal. By the end of the evening, Halifax had produced a document that was a masterpiece of obfuscation: "If Signor Mussolini will co-operate with us in securing a settlement of all European questions which safeguard[s] the independence and security of the Allies, and could be the basis of a just and durable peace for Europe, we will undertake at once to discuss, with the desire to find solutions, the matters in which Signor Mussolini is primarily interested."[54] This was to be coupled with a backchannel request that the United States make the first approach to Mussolini, not Britain or France. Roosevelt would inform Mussolini that the French and British would consider Italian territorial claims only if Italy stayed out of the war.

Note that this document conflates two goals: buying Italy off to keep it out of the war, and persuading Mussolini to mediate peace. As several scholarly commentators have noted, there is an obvious tension between them. "Buying off Italy facilitated the war against Germany, Italian mediation meant its end."[55]

What was Halifax up to? I believe he was pursuing both goals and knew he had to tread carefully. The entire cabinet supported the first goal: keeping Italy out of the war. The problem was the second goal, to which Churchill was adamantly opposed. Halifax may have hoped that by emphasizing the first goal, he might keep the door open to the second.

Monday, May 27

Before the morning session, Halifax was in despair. He told a colleague, "I can't work with Winston any longer."[56] A showdown was inevitable.

But it would have to wait. The morning meeting focused on the terrible military situation on the continent. British troops were still trapped in northern France, and the prospects for evacuating them from Calais or Dunkirk were not promising. Churchill doubted he could save more than fifty thousand men. But preparations were under way. "Around the coast of Southern England, hastily improvised flotillas of small ships, trollers, tug boats, tiny motor launches—anything that was serviceable—were being assembled and setting sail to try and do their bit in rescuing the stranded army."[57]

In many ways it was the "worst day of the entire Dunkirk saga," according to Lukacs. "The Germans ruled the air, with relatively little interference from the Royal Air Force … [The German dive-bombers were attacking] the columns of the British and French retreating along the dusty roads and lanes toward the town and port … [T]he British were systematically destroying their vehicles, stores, ordnance and other equipment"[58] to prevent their use by the German army.

With the collapse of France imminent, it was far from clear whether Britain could fight on alone. A top secret report, commissioned by Churchill, indicated that Great Britain could successfully resist the Germans, provided that it maintained air superiority and the United States gave it substantial economic support. But both conditions were open to serious question. The United States had provided virtually no help and could not be counted on.[59] Little wonder that Alexander Cadogan, an invited guest to the War Cabinet meeting that day, summarized the session as follows: "Cabinet at 11:30—as gloomy as ever. See very little light anywhere."[60]

The War Cabinet didn't take up Halifax's proposal until late afternoon, by which time the ground had shifted. A key piece of news had arrived. The British ambassador to Rome had cabled that Mussolini would soon declare war on France and that "nothing we could do would be of any value at this stage, so far as Signor Mussolini was concerned."[61]

Halifax was in a real bind. He could see that Italy probably could not be kept out of the war. But even so, Mussolini still might serve as a mediator, and Halifax was determined to keep this idea alive. French prime minister Reynaud, still desperately hoping to buy Italy off, had begged Halifax to

present to the War Cabinet a plan for an even bolder and more concrete offer to Mussolini, one that specified with "geographical precision" exactly what would be given to Italy to stay out of the war.

Halifax brought Reynaud's proposal to the War Cabinet and argued that something should be done to show support of France. Chamberlain agreed, saying that "the proposed French approach to Signor Mussolini would serve no useful purpose" but that he was willing to do so anyway in order to prevent the French from later claiming that Great Britain had stubbornly "been unwilling even to allow them the chance of negotiations with Italy."[62]

Churchill would have none of this. He scorned the Halifax-Chamberlain argument as suggesting that "nothing would come of the approach, but that it was worth doing to sweeten relations with a failing ally."[63]

At this point, an invited guest chimed in and explicitly gave Churchill the broader argument he had been searching for—one that rejected any approach to Italy for either of Halifax's purposes. Archibald Sinclair, the air minister, was a Churchill supporter and, more important, head of the Liberal Party. During the previous evening's debate, Churchill had shrewdly persuaded the cabinet to include Sinclair in the discussion of Halifax's proposal. Sinclair now contended that an approach to Italy would be worse than futile: it would be actively harmful to British interests. Even *appearing* to be willing to negotiate would be disastrous. "Being in a tight corner, any weakness on our part would encourage the Germans and the Italians, and *would tend to undermine morale both in this country and in the Dominions*. The suggestion that we were prepared to barter away pieces of British territory *would have a deplorable effect that would make it difficult for us to continue the struggle that faced us*." (Emphasis supplied.) Attlee and Greenwood warmed to this argument. Soon Greenwood was declaring that "[i]t would be heading for disaster to go any further with those approaches."

Halifax felt compelled to clarify and explain: He was not supporting the French plan of specific concessions to Italy. Instead, he was simply proposing to keep the lines of communication with Italy open.

Churchill, perhaps sensing that he had been given his strongest argument and that the tide within the cabinet was running in his direction, boldly vowed that any approach to the Italians "*would ruin the integrity of our fighting position in this country*. … Even if we did not include geographical

precision and mentioned no names, everybody would know what we had in mind." With great passion he then went further: "[L]et us not be dragged down with France. If the French were not prepared to go on with the struggle, let them give up. … The best help we could give to M. Reynaud was to let him feel that, whatever happened to France, we were going to fight it out to the end."

Perhaps fearing that the conflict between Churchill and his foreign secretary was about to spin out of control, Chamberlain tried to calm things down. He offered a compromise: "to keep the French in a good temper … our reply should not be a complete refusal." Why not defer any response to France until Roosevelt first contacted Mussolini? But Churchill ignored the suggestion and instead made an even more provocative claim: "If the worse came to the worst" and Britain had to face Hitler alone, "it would not be a bad thing for this country to go down fighting for the other countries which had been overcome by the Nazi tyranny."

Now this was crazy. Did it make any rational sense for Britain to sacrifice itself in a *losing* battle on behalf of occupied Europe? Did Churchill have any right, as a national leader, to sacrifice his countrymen on such a basis? In my opinion, absolutely not.

At this point Halifax was fed up with Churchill's florid rhetoric. He pointed out that Churchill was contradicting himself right and left. The day before, Churchill had said "he would be thankful to get out of our present difficulties" on terms that preserved British independence, "even at the cost of some cession of territory." Now Churchill was saying that "under no conditions would we contemplate any course except fighting to the finish." The day before, Churchill had indicated that he wasn't opposed to negotiation in general, as long as the timing was right. Now he was reneging on that, too.

Churchill softened somewhat, perhaps recognizing that he had gone too far. "If Herr Hitler was prepared to make peace on the terms of the restoration of German colonies and the overlordship of Central Europe, that was one thing," he soothed. "But it was quite unlikely that he would make any such offer."

In trying to placate Halifax, Churchill had created a new ambiguity, which Halifax went after. Was Churchill saying that he was simply waiting for *Germany* to make an offer? In Halifax's view, such a scenario was not

so hypothetical. “Suppose the French Army collapsed and Herr Hitler made an offer of peace terms,” Halifax challenged. “Suppose Herr Hitler, being anxious to end the war through knowledge of his own internal weaknesses, offered terms to France and England, would the Prime Minister be prepared to discuss them?” In effect, Halifax was pressing Churchill: Would he “consider any peace terms, at any time?”

Thanks to Halifax’s probing, Churchill finally clarified where he stood on peace negotiations: “He would not join France in asking for terms; but if he were told what the terms offered were, he would be prepared to consider them.” Nor was he prepared at this time to enter into any process in which Great Britain would appear to be signaling a willingness to negotiate peace terms with Hitler.[64]

At this point Halifax may well have been considering resignation. As he would confide to his diary later that night, “I thought Winston talked the most frightful rot, also Greenwood, and after bearing it for some time I told them exactly what I thought of them.” He then added, “If that was really their view, and if it came to the point, *our ways must separate*.”[65]

Churchill must have realized how close Halifax was to the edge, because he asked Halifax to join him for a private walk in the garden. There was not any record of what exactly was said, but Halifax’s biographer suggests Halifax again threatened to resign and that Churchill “was full of apologies and affection.”[66] The biographer concludes, “However much annoyance he had shown, though, Halifax had no intention of resigning. Indeed, the more Churchill hectored, the more convinced he was of the necessity for him to stay. Eventually, he contented himself to confining his exasperation to his diary: ‘It does drive me to despair when [Churchill] works himself up into a passion of emotion when he ought to make his brain think and reason.’ ”[67]

Tuesday, May 28

On Tuesday morning, the news from the continent remained so bleak that the minister of information asked Churchill to make a public statement. For the first time in a week, Churchill appeared before the House of Commons and addressed the nation.

"The troops are in good heart," he reported. "And are fighting with the utmost discipline and tenacity." He provided no specifics but promised to offer a "detailed report" in about a week, "when the result of the intense struggle now going on can be known and measured." In the meantime, "the House should prepare itself for hard and heavy tidings." But he ended his speech with a rousing flourish that was typical of his wartime speeches: "nothing which may happen in this battle can in any way relieve us of our duty to defend the world cause to which we have vowed ourselves; nor should it destroy our confidence in our power to make our way, as on former occasions in our history, through disaster and through grief to the ultimate defeat of our enemies."[68]

When the War Cabinet met shortly afterward, Halifax and Churchill crossed swords again. Their brief exchange returned to the core question. Halifax thought peace talks might still be possible if Britain sent a "clear indication that we should like to see mediation by Italy."[69] Churchill retorted that the whole idea of peace talks was a ruse by the French, who "were trying to get us on to the slippery slope" of negotiating with Germany. Churchill did not respond further. He had made up his mind. He knew he had the support of everyone in the War Cabinet except Halifax, who was isolated.

At this point, Churchill staged what several commentators have characterized as a "coup." He adjourned the War Cabinet meeting until 7 p.m. and didn't say where he was going. In the interval, he met with the approximately twenty-five members of the Outer Cabinet—all of his ministers *except* those in the War Cabinet. It was to this group, not the War Cabinet, that Churchill announced his decision: that he had considered negotiation with "That Man" and firmly rejected it.

"It was idle to think that if we try to make peace now we should get better terms from Germany than if we went on and fought it out," Churchill told the ministers. "The Germans would demand our fleet—that would be called 'disarmament'—our naval bases, and much else. We should become a slave state," with a "puppet" British government under Oswald Mosley, the founder of the British Union of Fascists, or some similar Nazi sympathizer. Instead, Churchill proclaimed: "We shall go on and we shall fight it out … and if at last the long story is to end, it were better it should

end, not through surrender, but only when we are rolling senseless on the ground."[70]

His speech had an electrifying effect on his listeners. He received enthusiastic support, and not a single minister objected. Churchill would later describe how pleased and surprised he was that "twenty-five experienced politicians and Parliament men, who represented all the different points of view" about Britain's policy toward Germany, would now be so supportive. "Quite a few seemed to jump up from the table and came running to my chair, shouting and patting me on the back."[71]

When Churchill returned to the War Cabinet, he announced what he had done. He described—no doubt with great drama—the scene that had just unfolded before the Outer Cabinet: his ringing announcement that he would not negotiate with Hitler, his vow that "there was no chance of our giving up the struggle," and the fervent support of the ministers. He expressed the "greatest satisfaction" at their response, saying he "did not remember having ever before heard a gathering of persons occupying high places in political life express themselves so emphatically" in support of Churchill's decision to fight on, and not negotiate.[72]

Halifax offered no further dissent. Nor did he resign. Had he done so, especially if Chamberlain had joined him, there would have been a political crisis within the Conservative Party that might have threatened Churchill's ability to remain prime minister.[73] But Churchill had skillfully avoided that risk.

Later that year, Churchill sent Halifax to the United States as ambassador, essentially sidelining him for the rest of the war.

The evacuation from Dunkirk was far more successful than Churchill had any reason to expect.[74] Nearly two hundred thousand troops were safely brought back to England.[75] France fell as predicted, and Britain had to fight on alone. But through the Lend-Lease program, the United States began providing important materiel aid. During the summer and fall of 1940, the Royal Air Force maintained air superiority and Churchill maintained public morale during the Battle of Britain. As a result, Hitler gave up any thought of invading Great Britain and instead turned east and invaded the Soviet Union. This gave Britain an ally—the Soviets. By the end of 1941, the

United States joined Great Britain and the Soviet Union in their fight against Germany. Eventually the Allies prevailed.

Assessment

Churchill's speech to the Outer Cabinet was eloquent and stirring, and it epitomizes the rhetorical use of negative traps: he demonized Hitler's regime and called his ministers to battle by invoking tribal loyalty. His later war speeches to the British people were equally stirring.

Earlier in the book, I said that if you're a leader, you have an obligation to engage in rational analysis. You don't have the right to act solely on your gut feelings or personal moral beliefs. You have to think things through, to consider the costs and benefits of your alternatives. Does Churchill's decision pass this test?

My hunch is that without the benefit of the War Cabinet discussions, Churchill would never have thought through carefully whether to pursue the negotiation path. Even *considering* making a deal with Hitler was difficult for Churchill. It would have been completely inconsistent with his sense of self and his consciously crafted political identity. Churchill had warned of the dangers of German rearmament and Hitler's megalomania long before others realized it. He was asked to become prime minister because he wanted to fight, not negotiate. To back down now and negotiate with a cruel enemy like Hitler, especially when Hitler was winning the war, would be publicly humiliating—even if some sort of reasonable deal could be struck. If, at some point, Churchill had come to believe that negotiation with Hitler would better serve Great Britain, he would have resigned and let others—such as Lloyd George—handle the negotiations.[76]

Churchill was strongly motivated by his personal moral beliefs and gut feelings. He saw Hitler and his Reich as evil. On a visceral level, he found the very idea of negotiating with Hitler to be repugnant. He believed that this kind of evil should be resisted, almost no matter what the consequences. In this respect, he was much like Sharansky. I think he started with an emotionally based gut feeling of what was right and then used his reason to justify the decision. And again like Sharansky, he used

the negative "traps" to keep himself (and his constituents) committed to a strategy of resistance.

Earlier, I concluded that Sharansky's refusal to negotiate with his Soviet captors, notwithstanding the pragmatic benefits of negotiation, was wise because he alone would suffer the consequences if he made the wrong choice. I also said that leaders have an obligation to act on the basis of a pragmatic assessment of the expected benefits and costs of the alternatives, not simply on moral intuitions or gut feelings alone. Sometimes the better part of wisdom is to negotiate, even when you don't want to. Even with an enemy who is evil.

As I read the minutes of the War Cabinet discussions, I was powerfully struck by how hard it was for Churchill to translate his intuitive convictions into a persuasive argument. I also gained a respect for Halifax that I had not felt before. Halifax played an important role in the process by pushing Churchill to explain why his intuitions were sound enough to act on. He really put Churchill through his paces, almost as Spock might have done if he had been present. This underscores an important lesson: In deciding whether to enter into nego-tiations with a despised adversary, you can guard against a hasty rejection based simply on your gut instincts by discussing the matter with a colleague who disagrees. Being pushed to give reasons for your inclinations may sometimes lead you to change your mind. And even when it doesn't, it will force you to think through more rationally which course of action makes the most sense.

In the end, the War Cabinet's discussion persuades me that Chur-chill's refusal to enter into negotiations was wise. Churchill and Halifax had different perceptions of Hitler's wartime aims and interests—in effect, different predictions amid great uncertainty. We will never know what Hitler might have demanded from Great Britain if negotiations had begun in the middle of 1940. Halifax may have been right, but Churchill's prediction was equally plausible: that Hitler would make unacceptable demands because he was winning the war. That is just the problem: you can't rely on hindsight to know whether you're making a wise decision. A wise decision can turn out badly; it happens all the time. And a stupid decision can have a good outcome; you can be lucky. So the test of wisdom cannot be whether you're proven right in the end. The test is, *Did you think it through*?

With Halifax's help, I think Churchill passed that test. He was surely right in his implicit premise that it would be impossible to keep secret any sort of international conference about ending the war. If peace negotiations failed, they would fail publicly. He was also right that in May 1940, few in Great Britain knew how profound the risks were and how difficult it would be to resist Hitler alone. He was surely justified in being concerned, along with Sinclair and Greenwood, that if the negotiation route failed—and failed, moreover, *in the middle of a war which the British were losing*—British morale would have been seriously damaged. Britain had gone to war very reluctantly. Now she was the underdog and was taking a terrible beating. That was disheartening enough for the British people. Peace talks would raise hopes that further bloodshed could be avoided, and Churchill believed they were false hopes, which, once dashed, might leave the British too demoralized to fight to the finish. This was not an unreasonable prediction, particularly from a charismatic leader who understood when his rhetorical magic worked and when it did not.

Halifax never rebutted Churchill's argument that if the negotiations failed, British morale would have been undermined. By refusing to negotiate, Churchill signaled his determination that Britain would fight on. This signal was sent not just to Germany and other countries but, most importantly, to the British people themselves. He understood that entering into the negotiation process itself is not costless and can create risks. Wise decisions must take these into account.

Let me conclude by coming back to the subject of heroism. I must confess that there is something deeply appealing for me about the way Churchill resisted Hitler. And something disturbing about Chamberlain and Halifax's prior policy of appeasement. Churchill is one of my heroes. Chamberlain and Halifax are not. Even I, a strong proponent of negotiation, am not immune to the notion that fighting evil is heroic—and sometimes even thrilling.

What, after all, is a hero? A hero is someone who acts on behalf of a principle greater than himself, without regard to his own well-being. Consider the legends in every culture: A hero doesn't negotiate. He fights. To the death if necessary! A hero is willing to risk it all.

Negotiating with an evil enemy, by contrast, doesn't seem very heroic. It may be *prudent* to negotiate and make concessions, but it is rarely romantic

or thrilling. It doesn't get the blood going. Nor, I must admit, is the process of negotiating typically exciting. It is often slow and tedious. It drags on and on.

But such simple dichotomies can be misleading. The very word *appeasement* now automatically evokes the story of Chamberlain and Halifax, and the moral of that story is plain: Never try to placate an enemy. The example of Churchill evokes a different narrative: It is heroic to resist evil, especially when standing alone. These are two very powerful narratives, but they can be dangerous because they invite knee-jerk reactions, not careful thought.

Can it be heroic to negotiate with evil? I think it can, and the next chapter explains why.