



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill

Speech to a Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress

Location: **U.S. SENATE CHAMBER**

Era: **1850 - 1950**



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It was the day after Christmas 1941 and Winston Churchill was nervous. The British prime minister paced up and down in the small room off the Senate chamber mumbling to himself as he prepared to face one of the most daunting audiences of his long and storied career: a Joint Meeting of the United States Senate and House of Representatives.¹

Inside the Senate chamber, the atmosphere was almost as tense. Barely three weeks before, Congress had declared war against Japan in response to the December 7 surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor. Shortly thereafter Nazi Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. Now, after more than a year of persistent urging on Churchill's part, Great Britain and the United States, together with the Soviet Union, were finally and formally allied against the three Axis Powers. The British prime minister had come to Washington to discuss the conduct of the war with Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Under these conditions, Churchill's speech to Congress was a command performance, and he knew it. The prime minister had prepared carefully, working on his speech right up to the time he left the White



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt met for the Atlantic Charter Conference in August 1941 aboard their ships in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. Here they gather with staff on the deck of the HMS *Prince of Wales*. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection, [LC-DIG-ds-11162]

House for Capitol Hill. While his colorful oratory and rotund figure were familiar to most legislators from radio broadcasts and movie newsreels, Churchill's speech was the first time many in the audience, which besides the legislators included members of the Supreme Court, the president's cabinet, and the diplomatic corps, would see him in person and in action. He had to convince them and a large international radio audience that he and Great Britain would be reliable and relentless allies.²



However, Britain's situation in December 1941 did not inspire confidence. Shortly before he left for the United States, Churchill had learned that the Japanese had sunk two British battleships in the Pacific, resulting in great loss of life. Even more horrifying, the British colony of Hong Kong had surrendered to the Japanese on Christmas Day while the British prime minister was discussing military strategy with Roosevelt at the White House. Great Britain's position in Europe was almost as precarious since it was the only country still opposing the Nazis after two years of war.

Roosevelt had been supportive when the news of Hong Kong's surrender arrived, but Churchill knew he could not count on the same response from Congress. While the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had dissipated much of the isolationist sentiment that had previously gripped America, some legislators remained hostile to the prime minister, the alliance with his country, and the U.S.'s involvement in another global conflict so soon after World War I (1914-1918). To add to the pressure, Churchill also knew that Congress controlled the appropriation process for the Lend-Lease Act aid that Great Britain depended on to fight the war.

Despite these pressures Churchill radiated calm and confidence as he stood before a bank of microphones at the clerk's desk in the Senate chamber. He began with a humorous reference to his own Anglo-



Churchill returned to the United Kingdom aboard the HMS Prince of Wales after the Atlantic Conference in August 1941. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-DIG-ppmsca-05407]

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American heritage. "I cannot help reflecting that if my father had been American and my mother British instead of the other way around, I might have got here on my own," he said.³

From there, he moved swiftly to the conduct of the war. While he warned that "many disappointments and unpleasant surprises" awaited the Allies, he never-



theless asserted that they would eventually prevail. “Some people may be startled or momentarily depressed when...I speak of a long and hard war,” he said. “Our peoples would rather know the truth....” The struggle might be long and the enemy ruthless and determined, but “the task which has been set for us is not above our strength...its pangs and trials are not beyond our endurance.”⁴

He acknowledged that both Great Britain and America had been slow to appreciate the Axis threat. Their failure to rearm in the 1930s had left both countries “at a disadvantage which only time, courage and untiring exertion can correct.” However, he said, Great Britain’s rearmament program had “made very great progress” and America’s support in the form of Lend-Lease aid had bolstered its efforts in the early years of the war.⁵

Now America’s entry into the conflict had given the conquered people of Europe and Asia new hope and its industrial capacity, while not yet at maximum production, would, when allied to that of Great Britain, “produce results...beyond anything that has been seen or foreseen in the dictator states.”⁶

Knowing that the Pearl Harbor attack was still uppermost in his listeners’ minds, Churchill then turned his attention to the Pacific. After acknowledging that the dispersal of Lend-Lease aid to Great Britain might have left the U.S. more vulnerable



Churchill and Britain were dependent on American mass-production capabilities for the arms necessary to defeat Germany. Here B-24D aircraft roll off an assembly line—a form of production associated particularly with American capabilities. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USW33-055044-D]



Churchill during his 1941 speech in the Senate chamber. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection, [LC-DIG-ppmsca-51129]



to attack there than it otherwise might have been, he issued a challenge to the Japanese. “What kind of a people do they think we are? Is it possible that they do not realize that we shall never cease to persevere against them until they have been taught a lesson which they and the world will never forget?”⁷

Churchill’s defiance and his confidence in the Anglo-American alliance were so strong that he dared to end his speech with a vision of a peaceful postwar world where future international conflicts would be dealt with at their “earliest beginnings” and where the United States and Great Britain would together preserve the peace. “I avow my hope and faith ..., that in the days to come the British and American people will, for their own safety and for the good of all, walk together in majesty, in justice and in peace.”⁸

The audience in the Senate chamber responded with a standing ovation that only grew stronger after Churchill flashed his famous “V for Victory” sign with his fingers. According to the *Washington Post*, “the effect” of that one gesture “was instantaneous, electric. The cheers swelled into a roar.”⁹ Churchill’s doctor Lord Moran was present, and reported, “The senators and congressmen stood cheering and waving their papers until he went out.”¹⁰

Afterwards, individual senators and congressmen praised the speech. Acting House Speaker William Cole (MD) said



Churchill addressed Congress in the Senate chamber on December 26, 1941. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-DIG-ppmsca-05359]

Churchill’s address would inspire everyone to do their “utmost in the fight for victory.” Sen. John Gurney (SD) said the prime minister’s “appearance as well as...his determination” indicates “that our people can...bank on the complete cooperation of all the citizens and resources of the British Empire.”¹¹ Sen. Millard Tydings’s (MD) reaction was more direct: “You can follow that fellow anywhere.”¹² No less a foe than isolationist Sen. Burton Wheeler (MT) grudgingly concluded that the speech was “clever” and “one which will appeal to the average American.”¹³

Churchill, who at the outset of his remarks had called the occasion “one of the most moving and thrilling of my life,” felt he had connected with his audience.¹⁴ “I hit the target all the time,” he told Moran.¹⁵



Sen. Millard Tydings (MD) was a prominent New Deal opponent but said after Churchill's speech, "You can follow that fellow anywhere." Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Harris & Ewing, [LC-DIG-hec-29304]

Historians have rightly noted that the importance of Churchill's 1941 visit to Washington lay in the military decisions he and Roosevelt made, and the signing of a declaration of war aims by the U.S., Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and other allied nations. However, the prime minister's fighting words to Congress did more than reassure and galvanize an ally. Churchill's defiant opposition to the Axis Powers (particularly the Japanese), his confidence in an Allied victory, and his vision for a peaceful postwar world helped enhance the strong bond between the U.S. and Great Britain that still endures today.

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No less a foe than isolationist Sen. Burton Wheeler (MT)) grudgingly concluded that Churchill's speech was "clever" and "one which will appeal to the average American." Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-DIG-npcc-09583]

Winston Churchill's address to a Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress was only the third such address by a foreign leader in congressional history, up to that point. The first had occurred in December 1874 when Congress met jointly to receive King Kalakaua of Hawaii. The second was French Ambassador Andre de Laboulaye's 1934 speech to a Joint Session of Congress marking the 100th anniversary of the death of the Marquis de Lafayette.

The protocol for a Joint Meeting requires that both the House and the Senate declare themselves in recess either by resolution or by unanimous consent. Joint Sessions of Congress are usually reserved for the president's annual State of the Union address, other presidential speeches, and the counting of electoral votes for presi-



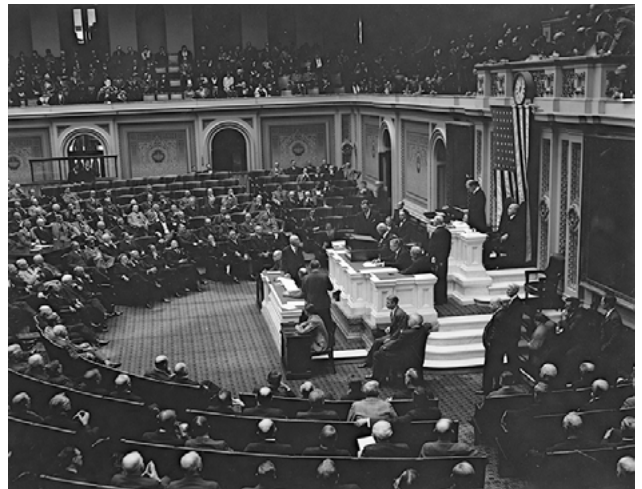
dent and vice president after an election. To initiate a Joint Session, both the Senate and the House adopt concurrent resolutions.¹⁶

However, since Churchill's 1941 speech, events of this kind have become more common. Many political leaders and heads of state have addressed the Congress, including the presidents of France, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Mexico, and South Africa, the prime ministers of Israel, Ireland, India, and Pakistan, and the monarchs of Great Britain, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Jordan, and Thailand. Most of these leaders have done so only once. Winston Churchill holds the distinction of having addressed a Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress three times, twice during World War II and once in 1952 when he was again serving as British prime minister.¹⁷ Of those three occasions, the December 26, 1941 speech is arguably the most significant as much for its timing as for what he said and how he said it.

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Churchill and Roosevelt were key participants during a 1942 meeting of the Pacific War Council at the White House. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection, [LC-USZ62-128770]



A Joint Session of Congress meets to count the votes of the Electoral College. On Feb. 12, 1929 Congress counted the votes from the 1928 election, which Herbert Hoover won. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-DIG-nppc-17058]



★ Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think Churchill wanted to come to America so soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?
2. Why do you think Churchill opens his speech by talking about his parents? What point is he trying to make?
3. If you had been listening to Winston Churchill in person or via radio, which parts of his speech would have been the most meaningful to you? Why?

★ Glossary

Isolationism: national policy of avoiding political or economic entanglement with other countries. The term is most often applied to the U.S. in the 1930s.

Joint Meeting: an occasion when the House of Representatives and the Senate meet in the same location, usually to hear a speech. It is less formal than a Joint Session and requires only unanimous consent.

Joint Resolution: a resolution passed by both houses of a legislative body that has the force of law when signed by or passed over the veto of the executive.

Joint Session: a formal meeting of both the House of Representatives and the Senate to conduct official business, such as hearing the State of the Union Address by the president or for the official count of the votes of the Electoral College. It must be initiated by a Concurrent Resolution passed by both Houses.

Lend-Lease Act (1941): legislation that allowed the U.S. government to lend or lease military supplies to any nation deemed “vital to the defense of the United States.” The law enabled the U.S. to aid its foreign allies, notably Great Britain, while maintaining its own neutrality.

Oratory: the art of speaking in public eloquently or effectively.

Rotund: round.

Pearl Harbor (1941): The U.S. naval base in Hawaii the Japanese attacked on December 7, 1941. The surprise attack brought the U.S. into World War II.

Unanimous Consent: the silent consent of an assembly to a routine or minor matter proposed by the chairman.

★ Notes

1 Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt The Homefront During World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1994, 309.

2 James B. Reston, “Reception of Talk Warms Churchill,” *New York Times*, 27 December 1941, 3.

3 National Churchill Museum, Address to Joint Session of the US Congress, 1941. <https://www.nationalchurchill-museum.org/churchill-address-to-congress.html>, accessed 12/10/2019.



4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Robert De Vore, "Churchill Promises We Will Be Able to Take Initiative 'Amplly' in 1943," *Washington Post*, 27 December 1941, 1, 3.

10 Charles McMoran Wilson, Baron, *Churchill From the Diaries of Lord Moran*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 16.

11 "Churchill Speech Hailed in Congress," *New York Times*, 27 December 1941, 3.

12 Jon Meacham, *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*, (New York: Random House, 2003), 154.

13 "Churchill Speech Hailed in Congress," *New York Times*, 27 December 1941, 3.

14 Address to Joint Session of the US Congress, 1941.

15 Wilson, *Diaries*, 17.

16 Office of the Historian, US House of Representatives, "Joint Meetings, Joint Sessions, & Inaugurations," <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Joint-Sessions/Joint-Sessions/>, accessed 12/1/20219; "Foreign Leaders & Dignitaries Who Have Addressed the U.S. Congress."

17 For a list of speakers invited to address the Congress, see <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Foreign-Leaders/Joint-Sessions/>

Additional Reading

Kerr, Mary Lee (ed.), *Foreign Visitors to Congress* (2 vols., Millwood, NY, 1989) 1:169-77.

Kluckhorn, Frank L. "Congress Thrilled," *New York Times*, 27 Dec. 1941, p. 1

Reston, James B. "Reception of Talk Warms Churchill," *New York Times*, 27 Dec. 1941, p. 3.

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