

Prime Minister - President: meeting

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SECRET

Mr. S. L. Childs,
Counselor of H.B.M. Embassy,
2433 Massachusetts Avenue,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Childs:-

I am writing you with a view to getting on paper and perhaps thereby clarifying to some extent the various points to be made in connection with the idea of a meeting between the President and the Prime Minister. The more I think of this, the more I am driven to believe that it is the one "spark-plug" which could set in motion the machinery of complete Anglo-American cooperation, to the present benefit and security of our two countries and the future welfare of mankind.

1. Effect on American Opinion.

Mr. Churchill is personally very popular in this country. This is due as much to his steady opposition to the policy of appeasement, and all that went with it, and a realization of how right he was in his appraisal of Hitler's intentions and German rearmament, as it is to his great personal gifts, and his leadership of the British people in this war. His extremely realistic and forceful speeches, broadcast in this country, have made a deep impression, not least for their extraordinary frankness. I think, therefore, that Americans generally would be inclined to accept without reserve a statement of Britain's condition and needs made to the President by Mr. Churchill, even though that statement might not in its entirety be made public. Moreover, the dramatic quality involved in such a meeting between the two greatest leaders of democracy could not fail to fire the lively American imagination; we should expect great things to come of such a meeting, and should be prepared to perform our share in bringing them to pass. If the President, returning, then and there proclaimed a national emergency and called together leaders of industry and labor for a resolution of differences, we should have just the sort of "lift" which is desirable and necessary if our help is to arrive in sufficient quantity and in time.

Certainly there must be taken into account the possibility of criticism from isolationist circles, where it might be charged that the President was making "secret commitments" to Mr. Churchill, etc. But this could be discounted in advance by putting the announcement of the meeting on the basis that the President had thought proper, in the interests of the nation, to have a talk with the Prime Minister for the purpose of clarifying the situation, and of learning at first hand, and from the highest possible authority, precisely what the conditions were under which Britain was carrying on the struggle; indeed, it might well be said that no intelligent direction could be given to American policy without such information.

Furthermore, it is to be observed that the President has now been without an Ambassador in London for some months; and unhappily the British Ambassador in Washington, after a considerable absence, was taken from his post of duty just as he returned to it. A direct meeting between the President and the Prime Minister would certainly do much to alleviate the difficulties, delays and lacunae of various sorts necessarily resulting from this situation, and would enable the new Ambassadors on both sides to take up the duties of their offices under far more favorable conditions than might otherwise be expected.

It is also to be observed that just at present the isolationist case in this country is resting on two major premises:-

(1) That the British cause is hopeless, and we are therefore wasting our substance to no useful end in aiding Britain;

(2) That even if Britain is successful in defending the Island against Germany, Germany cannot be defeated without an expeditionary force and years of bloody warfare on the continent, in which American blood would be poured out to achieve a new Versailles.

Some means must be found to clarify what seems to me to be the much simpler and more hopeful means of bringing this war to a successful conclusion through naval and economic cooperation between the United States and the nations of the British Commonwealth on a world wide scale, and of continuing that cooperation for the assurance of peace and as the bulwark of a new order based on the principles of freedom and justice. If as a result of the proposed meeting, some concrete proposition of this sort could be set out as the combined War Aims of the two great democracies, a tremendous step forward would have been taken, the effect of which could hardly be measured.

2. Effect on British Opinion.

While you will be able to judge this better than I, I should think it likely that the British people would be equally stirred, and enormously encouraged: especially were concrete results to follow.

3. Effect on the Enemy.

This is not the least important of the considerations to be kept in mind. Perhaps the chief factor with which we must deal in appraising the current military situation is the time factor. Were we to be assured that the next six months would see no serious alteration of the military position, there would be every reason for the most complete confidence in ultimate victory. Under bombardment from the air and suffering from the effects of blockade, Germany cannot in the long run hope to outmatch opponents to whom the storehouses of all the non-European world are open and who possess arsenals beyond the reach of German bombs and of potential capacity far exceeding those of Germany. The one German hope is to overwhelm the island of Great Britain before her present superiority in war-making potential is wiped out, thus depriving her opponents at once of the base of the sea-blockade, that of the offensive by air against her munitionment, and the center of British industrial power.

A meeting between the President and the Prime Minister would certainly give Herr Hitler "furieusement à penser". The result might be

any of the following:-

(a) He would speed up his plan to strike at Britain, strike before he was ready, without the perfecting of every detail which is so essential an ingredient of victory for Germans. Gain for our side.

(b) He would postpone his blow while he tried to puzzle out what the new situation created by the meeting might be. We gain time, and every day is golden now.

(c) No change. No harm done.

It is said of Herr Hitler that the unexpected upsets and infuriates him. An upset and infuriated enemy is far less dangerous than a coolly calculating one.

The effect on the German people is not to be disregarded. It would be impossible for the German government to keep from them the news of so earth-shaking an event. With whatever lies the news might be surrounded, the very fact of the meeting having taken place would be ominous and unnerving. Germans remember very well what happened the last time they thought America was too far away, and too unready.

Finally, one result of the meeting might be to give the final push which would thrust the Italian people over the brink of revolt against the Fascist regime. The last thing they want is a war with the United States.

4. Effect on Quasi-Neutrals.

To one so well versed in Russian affairs as yourself, I hardly dare venture an expression of opinion: but one may at least be certain that M. Stalin would think the matter over very carefully, and would be extremely cautious about bringing his fingers close to any moving machinery for some little time.

In Japan, likewise, where naval opinion well realizes the perils of Anglo-American blockade applied at an appropriate moment, the meeting might not only bring about a less truculent policy, but might be a blow to German influence in Tokyo from which the astute emissaries of the Third Reich would be long in recovering.

To the unfortunate government of France, and its satellites in Africa and Syria, there would come encouragement, even perhaps a real ray of hope for the future. This might have profound effects not only in the political but the strategical field.

Spain is probably so completely in Hitler's power that the effect on the Spanish government might not be of great value; but what result there was could not be other than beneficial.

5. Effect on Neutrals.

Neutral nations and peoples everywhere would see new hope in the world. Resistance to Axis demands would seem to offer more promise; the black curtain of despair would be lifted a little. Practical results might follow in the cases of Egypt, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Iran.

6. Further Consideration of the Time Factor.

The one thing we must now do is to gain time. Given every sort of determination and all the will in the world, we simply cannot make over our peace economy into a war economy over night. The proposed meeting would, or might, gain time in several ways:-

- (a) By dramatizing the situation for the American people, giving lift and inspiration to our efforts and bringing about a resolution of some of the difficulties which have delayed those efforts.
- (b) By a consequent stiffening of British determination to resist: not that it needs stiffening, but a man does fight better when he knows that a large and tough friend is hurrying to his assistance.
- (c) By confusing the enemy and delaying the execution of his plans.
- (d) By reducing the help he gets from other sources, and increasing his difficulties in his relations with other nations.

7. Immediate and Practical Results.

Nothing, at this juncture, could be more useful than for the President to have a first-hand, fully authoritative picture of the British position direct from Mr. Churchill. Far more, as you know, can be accomplished in this way by the give and take of personal interview than by a thousand ambassadors and ten thousand carefully drawn-up appreciations. Likewise I think the Prime Minister would find it most valuable to hear from Mr. Roosevelt direct what America is doing, plans to do and can do. For coordination of effort, elimination of waste motion, and "ironing out" of difficulties, nothing could be better: indeed the meeting would be justified on this ground alone.

Consider also with what increased assurance the President could thereafter speak to his executive subordinates, to Congress and to the people of the state of affairs in Great Britain; and likewise the Prime Minister of American progress and help to the War Cabinet, to Parliament and to his own people. The authority of each would be enhanced.

Indeed, considering the character and gifts of the two men who would meet to talk over the fate of the world under circumstances as dramatic and as exigent as those which now obtain, I do not think that you and I can attempt to set down in finite words the results which might flow from such a meeting. Those results might well, we may hope, go far beyond our anticipations.

8. The Risk.

This is chiefly a matter of risk to the personal safety of the Prime Minister. Were the risk to be considered prohibitive, the plan would of course have to be abandoned; but war conditions permit a secrecy and allow of precautions which could not be had in time of peace. It is difficult to believe that reasonable forethought and preparation could not render the risk negligible. That there is a risk at all arises from the rather obvious fact that the President cannot go to Great Britain without diminishing the effect of the meeting and arousing considerable criticism in this country; nor could the Prime Minister come here without equally undesirable results. A meeting on neutral

territory seems psychologically preferable. I have considered places of meeting very carefully, and have come to the conclusion that the ideal place is Reykjavik, Iceland.

This is neutral territory de jure, though it is occupied by British troops. It is out of the enemy's reach. Enemy ships and aircraft do operate to some extent in and over the waters between Iceland and Scotland, but the long nights give good cover. Reykjavik is only 700 miles by air from Scapa Flow: a matter of four hours in a large flying boat, perhaps taking off after an "inspection" of the Fleet Base by the Prime Minister. Reykjavik is likewise only 1500 miles from Cape Race, Newfoundland; the President has recently inspected base sites in the Caribbean, might reasonably do so in Newfoundland also. While the President's physical condition would probably not allow him to fly 1500 miles, one of our heavy cruisers could log that distance in $2\frac{1}{2}$ days; and time absent from the country is not of as vital importance in the President's case as it is in Mr. Churchill's. If the Newfoundland part of the plan were deemed impracticable, Reykjavik is still only 2300 miles from Boston, adding one more day only to the journey by cruiser.

I see no reason why this meeting should not take place without one hint of what was going on seeping through to the enemy, or to any unauthorized individual. Once it had taken place, of course, the widest possible publicity would be of the essence of the plan.

9. Details.

The President would doubtless wish to be accompanied by a few trusted advisers, and the Prime Minister likewise. I offer no suggestions as to such personnel, except to remark that I think at least one representative of labor on each side should be along (Mr. Bevin, Mr. Morrison - Mr. Hillman). Four or five carefully selected and thoroughly trusted representatives of the press of each country should be on the scene; a complete photographic and motion-picture record of the whole affair would be essential for the subsequent publicity campaign. Iceland is an ideal place for preventing premature disclosures: the only cable runs to the Shetland Islands, and the British military could easily see to it that every radio sending station was under guard.

I need offer no suggestions to you as to how the affair should be exploited afterward. You will be able to think of a hundred expedients which would never occur to me.

In conclusion, I will only remark that I firmly believe this idea to be the key to the solution of the difficult problem which now ~~confronts~~ confronts our two peoples; and not only that, but a means for laying a foundation for a secure and lasting peace after victory has been attained. One of the great difficulties in this country is for Americans to see what is to be gained by defeating Hitler; another Versailles, they say, after a long and bloody struggle? From such a meeting as I here suggest might come a clarification of this great issue also, and the outlines of a peace based on the cooperation of the English speaking peoples of the world which would indeed be a guerdon worth fighting to attain.

Another and final consideration lies in the matter of seizing and holding the initiative. The value of the initiative is recognized

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by all students of the art of war; it is not so generally recognized as applicable to the political as well as the military phases of war, though certainly the Germans have grasped this fact and are conducting themselves accordingly. The famous remark of Demosthenes to the Athenians applies with great force to the present situation. By the very fact of such a meeting taking place, even were no concrete and practical results to flow from it, we (the democracies) should have seized for the time being the political initiative; we should compel the enemy to conform, in some sense, to our will; he would have to think things over, try to puzzle out what we were up to. The effect on the minds of our opponents could not but be beneficial to our cause, whatever the effect on their immediate actions. Hitler and Mussolini have their Brenner Pass; why should not the leaders of democracy have their Iceland?

Yours very sincerely,

George Fielding Eliot
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