

“Sinews of Peace” (Iron Curtain speech)--Winston Churchill (March 5, 1946)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Christopher Sterling (guest post)*



The peaceful rural town of Fulton in central Missouri seems far from any center of world news. But on March 5, 1946, Fulton’s leafy Westminster College provided the backdrop for a speech that helped define the developing Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West. The title words of that speech don’t really explain why it is still remembered.

The Allied victory in the European portion of the Second World War was but ten months past. Britain’s wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, had been voted out of office in mid-1945. Disturbed over Soviet intentions, the 71 year-old leader of the Conservative opposition in Parliament had been seeking a way back onto the world stage. President Harry Truman provided the means.

Truman endorsed an early October 1945 invitation to Churchill from Westminster College president F.L. McLuer to speak on his campus, saying “This is a wonderful school in my home state. Hope you can do it. I’ll introduce you.” Surely that last offer—a presidential presence and introduction--provided the final impetus for Churchill’s acceptance of the offer. Accompanied by his wife, Clementine, and daughter Sarah, Churchill began his long trip with a January 1946 vacation in Florida, briefly interrupted with a visit to Washington to see Truman and the Secretary of State and share with them an outline of the key points he planned to make in the impending speech.

On Monday evening March 4th, Churchill, the President, aides and some 60 reporters and photographers boarded a train in Washington and headed west on the overnight trip to Missouri. Churchill made finishing touches to his speech and the party drove the final 20 miles to Fulton the morning of Tuesday the 5th. After lunch on the Westminster campus, Churchill and Truman joined the academic procession to the college gymnasium for the conferring of Churchill’s honorary degree, followed by the President’s introduction and Churchill’s speech. Radio networks carried his words to the nation.

Churchill began by noting the utter ruin of much of Europe and parts of Asia—and the danger that situation posed going forward. Millions of refugees needed help. He spoke of the role of the victorious allies—at the peak of their power—to provide that help. But he expressed caution about Soviet Russia as he reached what would quickly become the most quoted part of his speech: “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe.” The term “iron curtain” was far from original—it had been used by others as far back as 1920, by chief Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels during the war, and by Churchill himself in several telegrams to Truman after the war. But hearing it in this widely heard and discussed speech placed the term forever into general usage.

Churchill went on to underline his two key themes---that further Soviet expansion in Europe and elsewhere had to be firmly resisted, and that Britain and the U.S., working in alliance together, were the only means of assuring that resistance.

In the days that followed, press coverage was extensive--and largely quite critical. Editorials were generally negative (odd as that seems six decades later). Papers in London and elsewhere offered cautionary responses. A strong Soviet attack on Churchill's words came two days later—followed by further expressions of disagreement with Churchill's hawkish tone from most European and American political figures and newspapers. Churchill followed up his speech with a number of further American talks that underlined key points made in the now famous Fulton talk. He was back in London by the end of the month.

President Truman, sensing the political winds, struck a distinctly neutral stance on Churchill's speech, professing not to have seen the Fulton remarks before they were delivered. (Documents made public in the years since suggest, however, that that was not the case.) Despite his active role at the time, Truman gave the whole event but three lines in his memoirs published a decade later.

By that point in the midst of the Cold War, however, Churchill's Fulton speech was seen as a distinct, defining point in the post-war world. As Soviet actions in the late 1940s and early 1950s proved him right, Churchill (who again served as prime minister from 1951 to 1955), was perceived again as a prescient observer of the world scene.

Christopher H. Sterling served on the faculty of George Washington University for over three decades. Prior to that, he spent 10 years at Temple University and two years at the FCC. He has authored or edited over 25 books on telecommunications and the electronic media.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.