7. The Atlantic Charter: Would-be Allies Define Their Cause

Of all the critical meetings Franklin D. Roosevelt conducted during his twelve years as president, none was more dramatic or more consequential than his first face-to-face encounter with the man who would be his partner in global war and statecraft, Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

The meeting took place on the icy waters off Newfoundland during four days in August 1941. Both leaders assigned the rendezvous utmost importance and took extraordinary pains to get there, Churchill traveling incognito across an Atlantic infested by German submarines, FDR shaking the Secret Service and telling the world he was on a fishing trip around Cape Cod. He even had a crewman sit on the presidential yacht impersonating the commander in chief with the help of a floppy hat, pince-nez, and long cigarette holder.

The British prime minister and American president were quite different types—Churchill was a moody, hard-drinking night owl, while FDR tended to exude an even-tempered joviality. But they had this in common: each trusted in his own ability to communicate directly, to take the measure of another man, and to bring him around to a point of view.

To confer in person was, as much as anything else, their errand in the North Atlantic. As soon as the parties reached their meeting place on August 9, FDR pressed his advisor Harry Hopkins, who had been traveling on the battleship HMS Prince of Wales with the British contingent: What were the prime minister’s "moods and wishes"? As for Churchill, he had quizzed Hopkins so avidly about FDR on the ocean voyage that, as Hopkins would later remark, "You'd have thought Winston was being carried into the heavens to meet God."

A great deal was at stake. Though the United States had recently pledged itself to the Lend-Lease program funneling war supplies to Allies, it remained officially neutral in the great clash of power taking place in Europe and Asia. And the war was not going well. In the spring Adolf Hitler’s forces had overrun Yugoslavia and Greece. The Nazis were making inroads in North Africa and, in June, had invaded Russia. They now occupied fifteen nations, controlling all the territory between the Arctic Circle and the Mediterranean. Japan, meanwhile, occupied parts of Indochina, strengthening its blockade of China.

Churchill wanted FDR to bring the United States clearly, definitively to Britain’s side; he wanted a declaration of war. He also hoped FDR would agree to threaten retaliation against Japan if it continued its southward advance in Indochina.

FDR, on the other hand, wanted the leaders to issue a joint statement describing a vision for the future—one that would give comfort to a besieged Britain, while at the same time reassuring war-wary Americans that the Allies’ ultimate goal was a just, nonviolent world, not endless quest for empire.

FDR got his statement, dubbed the Atlantic Charter. And Churchill, though frustrated in the near term, would have his declaration of war soon enough.

The summit met a less tangible objective, too. Before the leaders of Britain and America steamed back to their respective seats of government, they had established the personal rapport both considered critical to the work before them. That was something no telephone call or transatlantic cable could have achieved.
In January 1941, FDR introduced to Congress his Lend-Lease proposal to supply arms to Britain on very generous terms. He needed information about this would-be ally. FDR wanted intelligence about Britain’s finances, morale, and military needs. He especially wanted a realistic assessment of Winston Churchill, who had not impressed FDR—had even offended him—during a brief encounter at a dinner in London in 1918.

So FDR asked his close advisor and friend Harry Hopkins to visit England and, as he put it, “say ‘How do you do?’ to a lot of my friends.” Hopkins, an administrator of New Deal relief and public-works projects, would have no official title or mission on the trip, but would greet Churchill and others as FDR’s “personal representative.” The tie between the president and his envoy was in fact so personal that Hopkins, very ill with a digestive disorder, had been living and convalescing at the White House since May 1940.

Though terrified of flying, Hopkins boarded an uninsulated military aircraft on January 5 for a harrowing, turbulent five-day journey. He arrived in England too weak to unbuckle his own seatbelt.

The next day Hopkins met with Churchill, who had little idea who he was. The two forged a quick and sturdy bond. “The people here are amazing from Churchill down and if courage alone can win—the result will be inevitable,” Hopkins wrote FDR. “But they do need our help desperately and I am sure you will permit nothing to stand in the way.” Churchill in turn found Hopkins “slim, frail, ill but absolutely glowing with the refined comprehension of the Cause.”

Hopkins lunched with King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in the basement of a bomb-ravaged Buckingham Palace. He met with officials, both American and British, and reviewed munitions factories, anti-air-raid facilities, and troops.

After a dinner in Glasgow, Scotland, Hopkins suddenly found himself called upon to say a few words. He closed his remarks quoting from the book of Ruth: “Whither thou goest, I will go; and whither thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people . . . even to the end.” Churchill wept.

On a second trip to England in July, Hopkins went directly to 10 Downing Street, the prime minister’s official residence, where Churchill greeted him as an old friend. They took up a subject broached on their first encounter: a personal meeting between “two prima donnas,” as Hopkins had privately referred to FDR and Churchill. Arrangements were complete, Hopkins said, for a rendezvous the second week in August, in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. Churchill instantly agreed. After a side trip to Russia that nearly killed the fragile Hopkins, he would return to London and set off with Churchill for the fateful Atlantic Conference.
An Envoy to Russia

While Franklin D. Roosevelt’s close advisor and friend Harry Hopkins was visiting England for a second time in July 1941, appalling events were unfolding to the east.

Coveting the vast, resource-rich territories of the Soviet Union, on June 22 Adolf Hitler had launched a swift and ferocious surprise attack on that country, employing a new German tactic known as blitzkrieg or “lightning war.” Hitler and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin flung their armies at each other without mercy; within a week the Germans had advanced two hundred miles, killing, capturing, or wounding some six hundred thousand Soviets.

Having spoken with Russia’s ambassador to Britain in London, Hopkins wrote to FDR proposing he travel to Russia to gather intelligence and convey American commitment to supply arms. “I have a feeling,” he wrote, “that everything possible should be done to make certain that the Russians maintain a permanent front even though they may be defeated in the immediate battle.” A paramount goal was to discourage Stalin from yielding to a German-defined peace.

Hopkins found Stalin incensed at the Nazi violation of the two countries’ 1939 nonaggression pact, and willing to share information about military readiness with an openness unprecedented under his totalitarian regime. Ironically, perhaps, Stalin told Hopkins he believed Hitler’s biggest weakness was the great numbers of common people he oppressed—and that “the President and the United States had more influence with the common people of the world today than any other force.”

In October FDR would open the supply floodgates to Russia, approving aid to the Soviets under the new American Lend-Lease program.
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Aid Until Victory

In the months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought America into the war, Franklin D. Roosevelt increasingly spoke of the contest as one the United States, like it or not, had already joined.

In March 1941, days after signing a $7 billion appropriation for the new Lend-Lease program shuttling military aid to Allies abroad, FDR gave a major address proclaiming an "end of compromise with tyranny" and pledging that "all-out aid" to embattled nations would increase "until total victory has been won."

The next month, the president forcefully and publicly criticized the popular isolationist and famous aviator Charles Lindbergh for his proposal that America negotiate a neutrality pact with Nazi Germany—a prospect that by now was odious to most Americans. Lindbergh resigned his commission in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

Since the outbreak of war in Europe, the American navy had been patrolling the waters of a "Pan-American Security Zone," accompanying Allied ships in that zone and broadcasting sightings of German U-boats. In April 1941, FDR extended the security zone to within fifty nautical miles of Iceland. "How far may it possibly go?" he said in response to a reporter's question. "As far on the waters of the seven seas as may be necessary for the defense of the American hemisphere."

Before the year was out, the president would send marines to strategically important Iceland, and, after the targeting (perhaps mistaken) of a U.S. destroyer by a U-boat, would authorize navy vessels to shoot these "rattlesnakes of the Atlantic."

In May, in a fireside chat reaching an international audience of some 85 million, FDR declared "an unlimited national emergency." It was clear now, he said, that Hitler aimed at nothing short of "world domination." FDR reviewed the four steps the United States had taken to gird itself against the threat: negotiating agreements with other American republics, launching the largest armament production program in U.S. history, building up "our splendid navy," and aiding democracies under attack.

"Nobody," said the president, "can foretell tonight just when the acts of the dictators will ripen into attack on this hemisphere and us. But we know enough by now to realize that it would be suicide to wait until they are in our front yard."

"From now on, that aid will be increased—and yet again increased—until total victory has been won."

Franklin D. Roosevelt, days after signing the Lend-Lease bill to provide aid to Allies, March 15, 1941
They Meet at Last

After establishing the ruse of a presidential vacation with a highly visible day of fishing in Buzzard’s Bay off Massachusetts, Franklin D. Roosevelt boarded the heavy cruiser USS Augusta on August 5, 1941, and began the journey north, arriving two days later in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. On the ninth, the battleship HMS Prince of Wales came into view. Bracing against his son, Elliott, FDR rose to greet Winston Churchill as he boarded the Augusta dressed in a ceremonial navy-blue uniform with brass buttons. Finally the two men were face to face.

Over lunch, Churchill was quick to press for a U.S. declaration of war, saying he’d prefer a declaration and no Lend-Lease military supplies for six months over the United States staying out of the war but doubling military shipments to Britain. FDR made no response, instead pushing his idea for a joint statement of principles that would guide Allied policy during and after the war.

After dinner that night, Churchill made a detailed presentation on the war and Britain’s needs to FDR and his top military brass, including Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall and Air Corps Chief Henry “Hap” Arnold. Churchill’s emphasis was on the need for huge quantities of equipment, not American fighting men. FDR was noncommittal, listening intently but playing with his spectacles and doodling on the tablecloth with a burnt match. Marshall and Arnold were at that time intensely focused on building up America’s own military defenses in the event of an attack. Arnold would later report his relief at getting away “without promising or giving away everything we had.”

The next morning, August 10, came a stirring religious service aboard the Prince of Wales. British and American sailors mingling before an altar draped with their countries’ respective flags. They lifted their voices in hymns carefully chosen by a rather secular Churchill to strike a rousing note of joint purpose: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.”
"Onward Christian Soldiers," and "Eternal Father Strong to Save."

But the negotiations of that day and the next would make clear that the two nations’ interests were hardly identical.

Perhaps the most strenuous debate was over the joint statement of principles. The insistence by FDR and his advisors on including a provision supporting an expansion of free trade almost derailed the talks. Churchill knew this would affect the British Empire’s preferential treatment of its territories. Indeed, Britain’s imperial dominion in India and Africa was not something Americans wanted to fight for. The empire was also very much at issue in clause three of the statement, promoted by FDR and proclaiming the right of all people to self-government. Churchill, recognizing that the empire was at risk from more immediate threats, succeeded only in inserting a phrase saying that free trade should respect "existing obligations."

For his part, Churchill wanted the charter to call for an “international organization” to help maintain peace. But FDR was convinced that talk of any structure resembling the League of Nations—which the United States had refused to join—would stir up isolationists and possibly alienate the American public. Instead the charter would encourage disarmament of aggressor nations “pending the establishment of a wider and permanent system of national security.”

By the afternoon of August 11, the two leaders had cobbled together a charter that simply—but, given the circumstances, audaciously—stated what kind of world the Allies sought to achieve by vanquishing the Axis.

They forewore territorial expansion for themselves, as well as any change of national borders without popular consent. They called for worldwide economic advancement, labor rights, and peace. They insisted on global freedom of the seas. And, critically, they promised that the mistakes of the punitive post–World War I era would not be repeated: victor and vanquished alike would have access, "on equal terms," to the resources needed for prosperity.

It was a lot to get done in three days. On the fourth day, the two men laughed and told stories. Around 3:30 p.m. Churchill disembarked the Augusta, receiving the U.S. Navy’s full honors.
The Atlantic Charter

The President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, representing His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom, being met together, deem it right to make known certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world.

1. Their countries seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other.
2. They desire to see an equitable adjustment of their international debts, on principles which will be fair and square to all concerned.
3. They respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they will hold inviolate the rights of all nations to choose their own form of government.
4. They will endeavor, with due respect for their existing obligations, to further the development of the economies of their respective countries in such a manner as will not interfere with the just requirements of other nations.
5. They will support the establishment of a world economic order which will afford security and opportunity to all nations, large and small.
6. They believe that, in order to achieve their ends, it will be necessary to establish a new international organization.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT
WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

August 14, 1941

The President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, representing His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom, being met together, deem it right to make known certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world.

First, their countries seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other;

Second, they desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned;

Third, they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them;

Fourth, they will endeavor, with due respect for their existing obligations, to further the development of the economies of their respective countries in such a manner as will not interfere with the just requirements of other nations;

Fifth, they desire to bring about the fullest collaboration between all nations in the economic field with the object of securing, for all, improved labor standards, economic advancement and social security;

Sixth, after the final destruction of the Nazi tyranny, they hope to see established a peace which will afford to all nations the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and which will afford assurance that all the men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want;

Seventh, such a peace should enable all men to traverse the high seas and oceans without hindrance;

Eighth, they believe that all of the nations of the world, for realistic as well as spiritual reasons must come to the abandonment of the use of force. Since no future peace can be maintained if land, sea or air armaments continue to be employed by nations which threaten, or may threaten, aggression outside of their frontiers, they believe, pending the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security, that the disarmament of such nations is essential. They will likewise aid and encourage all other practicable measures which will lighten for peace-loving peoples the crushing burden of armaments.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT
WINSTON S. CHURCHILL
Impact of the Atlantic Charter

The Atlantic Conference and resulting charter signaled to the world that the United States and Britain cherished common aims and would cooperate to achieve them.

To Adolf Hitler’s obsessed mind, this was more evidence of an international Jewish conspiracy. In 1941, the slaughter of Jewish families already begun by German execution squads that swept into Russia behind invading armies, the Nazis were edging toward a policy to eliminate Jewish populations—the so-called Final Solution. Meanwhile, Imperial Japan assumed an increasingly hawkish stance toward the United States and Britain.

Friendly nations, of course, also took note. In a statement issued the month after the Atlantic Conference, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and representatives of the exiled French leader Charles de Gaulle all endorsed the charter, which they referred to as the “Roosevelt-Churchill Declarations.”

The Netherlands nonetheless objected to the clause respecting “existing obligations” (i.e., imperial economic policy) as a limit to free trade. Indeed, Winston Churchill and the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration would disagree over whether the charter’s proclamation in favor of self-government applied to Great Britain’s colonies—Churchill thought not. But the charter would be invoked by advocates of decolonization, a movement already well developed by the time FDR and Churchill met in Placentia Bay. India’s Mahatma Gandhi, for example, had adopted his strategy of peaceful resistance to British rule in the 1920s, and by the ’40s he was intensifying calls for Indian independence.

Controversies aside, the Atlantic Charter helped cement the alliances that would beat back the Axis powers. In its approach to geopolitics, it prefigured the Marshall Plan, which was designed to rebuild Europe after the war by providing aid and removing trade barriers. And it set the stage for the founding, in 1945, of the United Nations.