8. The Special Relationship: 
Franklin D. Roosevelt and 
Winston Churchill

At the Quebec Conference in September 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt has a word with Winston Churchill. The two leaders are flanked by the conference’s Canadian hosts: at left is the governor general of Canada, the Earl of Athlone; at right is Canadian prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. The Anglo-American conference addressed such issues as how the Allies would occupy Germany after its defeat, which now seemed imminent. FDRL

As the world came unwound, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt built the most celebrated political relationship in modern history. Between September 1939, when Britain declared war on Germany, and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s untimely death in April 1945, the two men exchanged nearly two thousand letters and cables. They met eleven times.

During these years, both understood that their relationship—their ability to understand each other and work together—was of utmost consequence to their own nations and to the world. To reach the location of their first meeting, a shipboard rendezvous in the waters off Newfoundland in the summer of 1941, Churchill crossed an Atlantic infested with German submarines, and FDR constructed an elaborate ruse to make the press believe he was fishing off Cape Cod. Emissaries and transatlantic cables would no longer suffice. At this moment when Britain desperately required America’s help in the struggle against the Nazis, the two leaders knew they had to meet face-to-face.

What developed between FDR and Churchill was a give-and-take of extraordinary candor, leavened by great mutual admiration. Churchill had begun his career as a war hero
and writer, FDR as a New York lawyer and politician, and both men had a deep interest in history and a gift for language. Churchill was emotional and at times blunt, while FDR was more apt to exude a charming cordiality even in the face of ideas he was determined to oppose. Yet both men possessed an intense, magnetic personality that inspired and attracted others. In the early 1940s, history contrived to concentrate in these two leaders an uncommon share of responsibility for the future of civilization—and that was something else they had in common.

FDR and Churchill became friends, their exchanges largely unconstrained by the formalities of high office. They talked, dined, and drank together, and they stayed up late following Churchill’s habit. The British prime minister lodged for weeks at a time in the Queens’ Bedroom on the second floor of the White House. “I was solicitous for his comfort,” Eleanor Roosevelt would later write, “but I was always glad when he departed, for I knew that my husband would need a rest, since he had carried his usual hours of work in addition to the unusual ones Mr. Churchill preferred.”

After Churchill returned home from his first stay at the White House over Christmas of 1941, FDR wrote him a long missive on war matters, closing it with the warm remark, “It is fun to be in the same decade with you.” Not long after FDR’s death, Churchill would say that meeting him had been “like uncorking your first bottle of champagne.”

The president and prime minister enjoyed each other. But while their relationship was marked by a lack of ceremony, it was hardly casual. In fact, it was FDR’s style to draw his associates close, making little distinction between work and personal life. Advisors Louis Howe and later Harry Hopkins lived with the Roosevelt family for years. Secretary Marguerite LeHand was both a colleague and a constant companion. And ER, his wife and mother of his children, was every bit as much his political partner. It might be said that he mixed work with pleasure—or indeed that both were part of the mission to which he devoted himself completely.

So it was with Churchill. The two men cultivated each other’s friendship, not insincerely but as the ultimate act of diplomacy. Each leader remained ever alert to his own nation’s separate interests. FDR did not hesitate to oppose and disappoint Churchill, especially as the balance of world influence shifted in FDR’s favor. But FDR and Churchill also recognized that, to a great extent, the interests of their two peoples were not just overlapping but inextricably joined. So much was at stake.
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill first met at a dinner in London in September 1918. World War I was nearly over. FDR was in town following a tour of the Western Front as assistant secretary of the navy under President Woodrow Wilson. Churchill, having himself served as top civilian official of the British navy, was now in charge of the production of war munitions.

FDR found Churchill quite full of himself, marking him down as “a stinker,” according to a much later diary entry by Joseph Kennedy, who served as U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom in the late ’30s. Churchill, much to FDR’s chagrin, would not even recall meeting the young FDR.

Churchill did, however, come to recognize FDR’s growing importance on the American political stage. On at least one occasion while visiting New York he tried to set up a meeting with FDR, who was the state’s governor at the time. In 1933 Churchill sent the newly elected President Roosevelt a copy of his biography of the Duke of Marlborough, with a personal inscription. But it wasn’t until the outbreak of World War II and Churchill’s return to his former top navy post that the two men began their famous correspondence.
In the autumn of 1939, Franklin D. Roosevelt was delighted to learn that Winston Churchill had entered the War Cabinet of British prime minister Neville Chamberlain as First Lord of the Admiralty—the same position he’d held in World War I. With this stalwart anti-Nazi at the helm of the Royal Navy, FDR felt more confident that Great Britain could persevere against the Germans. He sent Churchill a personal note of congratulations. Meanwhile, the British navy’s governing board sent a message around to the fleet: “Winston is back.”

It was not unusual for FDR to reach out to someone directly. The president often bypassed diplomatic channels to glean information from people in key posts abroad. It was, however, somewhat unusual—and a recognition of Churchill’s potential importance—for FDR to contact not a head of state or, on the other hand, a mere official, but a cabinet minister in a foreign government.

For his part, Churchill wasted no time in taking up this line of personal communication with FDR. He had long been convinced that Great Britain would need America’s help in the war. Knowing FDR’s affection for the navy, he signed his response to the president’s congratulatory note “Naval Person”—a sign-off he would modify to the tongue-in-cheek “Former Naval Person” after becoming prime minister.

Neville Chamberlain, who preceded Winston Churchill as prime minister of Britain, in an undated photo. Chamberlain agreed to let the Nazis annex parts of Czechoslovakia in the notorious Munich Agreement of 1938. Churchill, on the other hand, was a staunch, vocal anti-Nazi. He became prime minister on May 10, 1940, after Chamberlain resigned in the face of crumbling support for his government in the House of Commons. LOC
The Fall of France, Spring 1940

On May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill took up his place on the hot seat of world events. On that day he became prime minister of the United Kingdom, and Adolf Hitler launched attacks on Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. Within weeks British forces fighting to defend their neighbors in France would be forced to evacuate from Dunkirk; shortly thereafter, France fell. Fearing for the future of democracy, the New York Times characterized these events as “the most critical hour in the world’s history that Americans have ever known.”

Churchill’s elevation to his country’s highest office would profoundly impact the course of the fight against Hitler, as well as Anglo-American relations.

In Washington, DC, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s military advisors responded to the Nazi advance by issuing an urgent call to build up American military forces. In London, meanwhile, some members of the British cabinet advocated a negotiated settlement with Hitler. Churchill, of course, would have none of this, and in a series of historic orations “armed” the British—and the Americans—with the power of his words.

“You ask, what is our policy?” Churchill said before the House of Commons three days after becoming prime minister. “I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.”

FDR had a new and formidable partner across the ocean.

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Winston Churchill in the House of Commons, May 13, 1940
Satellite: The Battle of Britain and the “Destroyers for Bases” Deal, Summer and Fall 1940

Winston Churchill’s stunning oratory and gritty determination moved Franklin D. Roosevelt. His confidence in Britain’s ability to survive increased by the day.

But as Churchill had predicted, after conquering France in June the Nazis quickly moved on to Britain, the Luftwaffe striking British military and industrial targets, and finally central cities, from the air. While the Battle of Britain raged, Churchill—the “Former Naval Person”—renewed with increased urgency a request to FDR he had made as soon as becoming prime minister: Britain needed fifty old U.S. destroyers to help Britain stave off a possible German invasion.

The Nazi war machine seemed unstoppable. Most Americans were convinced England would fall as France had, and advisors urged FDR not to ship more arms to London. But FDR thought otherwise. In response to Churchill’s request, the president came up with the idea to exchange the destroyers for British naval bases in Newfoundland and the Caribbean. Under these terms, FDR got around the American requirement that warring nations pay cash for war equipment, and he could argue the swap was part of an effort to bolster security in the Western Hemisphere. He thus avoided a showdown with Congress on the question. Indeed, FDR decided to proceed with the deal on his own authority via an executive agreement issued on September 2, 1940—even though, as he said to one aide, “I might get impeached.”
By September 1940, the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration had adopted a wartime policy built around Britain's continuing defense of Europe. But under U.S. neutrality laws, all of the provisions the British obtained from the United States—with the exception of the recently dispatched destroyers—were acquired on a cash-and-carry basis. By the end of 1940, London no longer had the gold or dollar reserves to purchase the material it needed to carry on the war.

FDR had not realized the extent of Britain’s financial straits until he received a long and frank letter from Winston Churchill informing the president that soon the British government would be unable to continue its cash purchases. It would be “wrong in principle and mutually disadvantageous in effect,” Churchill argued, if Britain, after winning the war by its own sacrifice and toil, should find itself “stripped to the bone.”

FDR pondered this letter carefully and finally conceived a disarmingly simple response: America would become the “great arsenal of democracy.” It would supply the British with what they needed to fight, and, in effect, worry about getting the goods back in kind at a later date.

Churchill had been persuasive; now it was FDR’s turn to persuade the American people. He promoted this “Lend-Lease” program to the press and public with an analogy. Imagine, he said, that a neighbor’s house were on fire and upwind. Would you expect him to buy your garden hose? No, you’d lend it to him and either get the same one back or another of similar quality.

In January 1941, a few days before introducing the Lend-Lease bill to Congress, FDR gave his celebrated “Four Freedoms” State of the Union address, insisting the war’s ultimate goal was to establish a world that would be “the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny” the dictators were imposing in Europe. This “moral order” would be founded in four fundamental human freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—“everywhere in the world.”

In March Congress passed the Lend-Lease bill granting the president authority to transfer war aid to any country he deemed vital to the defense of the United States.
The year 1941 brought increasing U.S. involvement in the British war effort in various ways: the passage of the Lend-Lease bill in March; the extension of naval patrols to the mid-Atlantic in June; and the occupation of strategically important Iceland by American troops in July. In August Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met aboard the HMS Prince of Wales as it lay at anchor off the coast of Newfoundland in their first summit. At this dramatic rendezvous, FDR and Churchill drafted the Atlantic Charter, a set of principles to guide the conduct of the two powers in the war and lay the basis for the peace that would follow. The two men also got to know each other.

In the meantime, the German attack on Russia on June 22, 1941, meant that Great Britain—and her Commonwealth—no longer faced the Nazi menace alone. On the other hand, Japan, Russia’s longtime foe, had taken advantage of Russian preoccupation with Germany to move into Indochina. FDR tried to stanch Japanese aggression with embargoes. But on December 7, 1941—a “date which will live in infamy,” as FDR would famously say—Japan launched a massive attack on Pearl Harbor.

Churchill and FDR spoke on the phone that day, the president confirming the news and remarking, “Well, we are all in the same boat now.” This was an enormous relief to Churchill, who knew the Americans with their vast industrial and military potential could turn the tide against the Axis. The prime minister went to bed that evening to enjoy, as he would later write, “the sleep of the saved and thankful.”

"Well, we are all in the same boat now."

Franklin D. Roosevelt to Winston Churchill, by telephone on the day of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941

Winston Churchill greets Franklin D. Roosevelt as the latter arrives aboard the HMS during the shipboard Atlantic Conference off Newfoundland, Canada, August 1941. Given the dire emergency unfurling in Europe, the two men were extremely anxious to develop a rapport during this first face-to-face meeting. © IWM (H 12739)
With America’s entry into the war in December 1941, the United States became Britain’s official wartime ally, bound to it by the urgent demands of global conflict. The relationship between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, forged largely in private, now moved onto the world stage; over the next eighteen months this important relationship would reach its zenith.

It began with Churchill’s holiday visit to the White House, kept secret until his arrival on December 22; the White House butler was informed an hour before the British party was expected on the scene.

During the three-week visit the two leaders, often with FDR advisor Harry Hopkins as a third, spent hours each day talking about the war and other matters of state. Dinner, Churchill would later write, was a more social occasion. "The President punctiliously made the preliminary cocktails himself," he wrote, "and I wheeled him in his chair from the drawing-room to the lift as a mark of respect, and thinking also of Sir Walter Raleigh spreading his cloak before Queen Elizabeth."

Churchill charmed a large gathering of journalists in a joint press conference with FDR on December 23. On Christmas Eve, he joined the president on the White House balcony for the lighting of the National Christmas Tree. A crowd covered the White House lawn and many more gathered around their radios to listen at home. Addressing the American people as "fellow workers for freedom," FDR spoke of the war ahead and good people around the globe joined in a ferocious struggle to "preserve all we hold dear," he said. "Whether it be the ties of blood on my mother’s side, or the friendships I have developed over here over many years of active life, or the commanding sentiment of comradeship in the common cause of great peoples who speak the same language, who kneel at the same altars, and to a very large extent, pursue the same ideals, I cannot feel myself a stranger here."

The day after Christmas, Churchill became the first British prime minister to address the U.S. Congress, where he received a warm welcome. "Many disappointments and unpleasant surprises await us," he warned the lawmakers, though he expressed confidence that the Allies would prevail.

In the years after World War I, a number of issues had created a sense of distance between Britain and America: war debt, the gold standard, tariffs, British imperialism, and American isolationism, for example. Churchill and FDR thought it imperative to close that gap and strengthen their war coalition. Both masters of spectacle, oratory, and public relations, the two leaders, having developed a warm personal relationship, now sought to promote to the American and British public the importance of what Churchill would call the “special relationship” between the two countries.

“I spend this anniversary and festival far from my country, far from my family, yet I cannot truthfully say that I feel far from home,” he said. "Whether it be the ties of blood on my mother’s side, or the friendships I have developed over here over many years of active life, or the commanding sentiment of comradeship in the common cause of great peoples who speak the same language, who kneel at the same altars, and to a very large extent, pursue the same ideals, I cannot feel myself a stranger here."

Winston Churchill at the White House, Christmas 1941
Crafting the Grand Alliance

British and American interests in the war—and Winston Churchill’s and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s judgments about strategy—had much in common. But they were not identical. This was apparent to both men from the beginning.

Indeed, Churchill traveled to Washington in December 1941 not just to take part in the ceremonial lighting of a Christmas tree but also to secure FDR’s commitment to pursue the “Germany First” strategy agreed upon a year earlier in secret staff talks. It was Japan, after all, that had attacked the United States, but the Nazis were a far more direct threat to England.

Churchill found FDR and his military chiefs in agreement on the need to strike a stunning blow against Germany before committing major resources against Imperial Japan. But on the question of how best to deal that blow, there were sharp differences of opinion. Roosevelt’s chief of staff, General George C. Marshall, argued for landing a large army in France as soon as possible. But since such an ambitious operation appeared unfeasible in the near term, Churchill and Roosevelt favored an invasion of North Africa in 1942. Churchill saw this as a way to clear the Mediterranean and “close the ring” around Germany; Roosevelt saw the North Africa campaign as a means to engage the American public in the European theater—and to satisfy his promise to the Russians to relieve them by engaging the Germans on a second front.

As the war progressed, in fact, FDR’s attention increasingly focused on the Russians, whose enormous sacrifice of men and material resources on the brutal Eastern Front was proving indispensable in beating the Nazis—and seemed clearly to presage the Soviet Union’s rise as a postwar superpower. Always a believer in the power of his own personal diplomacy, FDR assiduously worked to establish a direct relationship with Joseph Stalin, as he had with Churchill. These overtures to the Soviet Union had the effect of loosening FDR’s bilateral alliance with Churchill.

When the “Big Three”—FDR, Churchill, and Stalin—met in Tehran, Iran, near the end of 1943, for example, FDR made it a point to show his independence from Churchill. Having ignored Churchill’s repeated requests for a preconference talk, at Tehran FDR refused to back the British prime minister’s fervent wish to maintain Anglo-American forces in Italy and the eastern Mediterranean rather than send them into a costly operation to retake France. Instead the president agreed with Stalin that the time had come for the British and the Americans to open this most challenging of fronts, plunging into Nazi-occupied France. Stalin insisted the operation occur no later than May 1944, a deadline the Allies would miss by less than a week.
D-day

On June 6, 1944, the Allies began their assault on the northern coast of France, landing troops by air shortly after midnight, with amphibious landings of armored and infantry divisions following around daybreak. It was a huge risk Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt were taking together, the memory of the Britons’ desperate evacuation from northern France four years earlier certainly fresh in their minds, and success, in the present endeavor, by no means guaranteed.

Churchill had hoped FDR might travel to London to be there for the attack, but no such visit materialized. FDR did send Churchill a brief note on June 6, noting the day’s “stupendous events” and how he wished he “could be with you to see our war machine in operation!”

By this point in the war, the relationship between the two men, though still close, had undergone a sea change. Churchill now rarely referred to himself as the “Former Naval Person.” This shift to more formal language may well have reflected the tension creeping into the Anglo-American alliance as the end of the war drew near. The matters at issue—Britain’s deployment of troops to fight a communist uprising in Greece, the postwar fate of Poland, the continuation of Lend-Lease—did not touch so closely on the very survival of Britain and America. That made it possible for differences to emerge.

In December 1944, as the United States refused to support Britain’s actions in Greece, Churchill wrote to close FDR advisor Harry Hopkins. “It grieves me very much,” Churchill wrote, “to see signs of our drifting apart at a time when unity becomes ever more important, as danger recedes and faction arises.”
The Yalta Conference

By the time the Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin met for the last time in the Black Sea resort of Yalta in February 1945, the Allies were poised to make their final assault on the German homeland. Yet Japan was still very much in the game.

Franklin D. Roosevelt came to the conference intent on easing the cagey Joseph Stalin toward two objectives he considered paramount. One, he wanted the Soviet leader’s promise to join the other Allies against the Japanese as soon as Adolf Hitler was subdued. Two, he wanted Stalin’s assurance that the Soviet Union would participate in the United Nations, which he hoped would be a vehicle for protecting peace and individual freedoms long after the war. Indeed, this had been a preoccupation of FDR’s since the beginning of American involvement in the conflict. So strenuously had FDR urged Soviet representative Maxim Litvinov to agree to support “religious freedom” in the January 1942 United Nations Declaration that Winston Churchill had teased FDR he planned to recommend him as Archbishop of Canterbury.

Churchill, meanwhile, arrived at Yalta with an outlook that was perhaps more pragmatic, and with a focused concern for the fate of European neighbors of strategic importance to Britain. In October Churchill had sat down with Stalin to work out the respective powers’ postwar “spheres of influence” in southeastern Europe (an informal agreement that, for example, gave the British more power in Greece, the Soviets greater sway in Romania).

At Yalta both FDR and Churchill also worked to secure Stalin’s signature on the Declaration of Liberated Europe and the Declaration of Poland, which established the right of all people to choose their form of government and, in the case of Poland, called for “free and unfettered elections as soon as possible.” Stalin signed but later reneged on this promise, imposing Soviet-style communism across much of the area between Russia and West Germany. Stalin saw this as a buffer zone protecting Russia against German aggression.

FDR came home from Yalta pleased at having won the Soviets’ assent to join both the war against Japan and the United Nations. But FDR and Churchill’s joint errand of mitigating Soviet dominance in large swaths of postwar Europe would not, in the end, prove successful. By the time of Yalta, the Red Army occupied much of Eastern Europe. Possession, as the saying goes, was nine-tenths of the law.

On March 5, 1946—the war over, FDR dead, Churchill returned to private life—the former prime minister would travel to Missouri to give a speech describing what he viewed as an ominous new reality in Europe. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent,” said Churchill. “Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.”
Winston Churchill and the Death of Franklin D. Roosevelt

Franklin D. Roosevelt did not live to see either the end of the war in the summer of 1945 or the official founding of the United Nations that fall. He died at his Warm Springs, Georgia, cottage on April 12, 1945, while resting from the exhaustion apparent to many at the Yalta Conference and exacerbated by the long journey home. The news of the president's death sent shock waves around the world. The people's grief was keen, especially among the more than fifteen million Americans who had served in America's armed forces during the war.

As for Winston Churchill, he described the news as a "physical blow." In a letter to King George VI, the prime minister observed that with Roosevelt gone, "ties have been torn asunder which years have woven." Churchill delivered a eulogy to FDR in the House of Commons, recalling their friendship and Roosevelt's determination to help Great Britain at its critical hour, inspired by "the beatings of that generous heart which was always stirred to anger and to action by spectacles of aggression and oppression by the strong against the weak."

In closing, Churchill observed that, for the British people, "It remains only to say that in Franklin Roosevelt there died the greatest American friend we have ever known and the greatest champion of freedom who has ever brought help and comfort from the new world to the old."

Despite their disagreement and occasional irritation over some issues, FDR and Churchill had accomplished a great work together, developed a deep respect and affection for each other, and drawn their two peoples into a "special relationship," as Churchill put it, that endures today.