

Address given by Winston Churchill to the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 11 August 1950)

Caption: On 11 August 1950, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe adopts a motion tabled by Winston Churchill which calls for the immediate establishment of a European army so as to form a bulwark against Communism.

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I am sure we can all agree with the Committee of Ministers that definite progress has been made in the last year in building up the European conception represented by this Assembly. There are, however, several important points which lie open between us.

We regret that these should have been somewhat inconsiderately set aside by the Committee of Ministers until October. I think the Assembly should press its points and its opinion on the questions at issue. There really is, for instance, no reason why a Resolution passed here by a two-thirds majority should not be formally made known to and laid before our respective Parliaments, it being, of course, obvious that nothing can prevent either the Government or the Parliament concerned from taking its own decision upon the questions raised after whatever debate they may think desirable.

It is important to the future of this Assembly that it should be brought continually into closer contact not only with the executive Governments but with all the representative institutions upon which, in all true democracies, executive Governments can alone be founded. For Great Britain I can, however, guarantee that all Resolutions of the Assembly will be brought before the House of Commons for discussion on their merits, whether we agree with them or not. For this purpose we shall use the facilities at the disposal of the British official Opposition, and I do not doubt that the House of Lords will take corresponding action. I suggest to my colleagues of other countries here that they use the liberties of procedure which their own Parliaments possess in abundance for the same purpose, and that this become our general practice unless or until the obstructive influences on the Committee of Ministers have been overcome or have disappeared.

There are other points of difference which may well be re-adjusted as a result of our discussions. I have always thought that the process of building up a European Parliament must be gradual, and that it should roll forward on a tide of facts, events and impulses rather than by elaborate constitution-making. Either we shall prove our worth and weight and value to Europe or we shall fail.

We are not making a machine. We are growing a living plant. It certainly is a forward step that Mr. MacBride, the representative of the Committee of Ministers, should be here among us to express their collective mind — if they have one, — directly to the Assembly, and to deal by word of mouth with matters which we may raise. Indeed, when we look back over the past twelve months — and not only over the past twelve months but to The Hague two years ago — it is marvellous to see how great is the progress which has been made in this time. From an unofficial gathering of enthusiasts, pleading the cause of reconciliation and revival of this shattered Continent, we have reached the scene to-day when we sit as a body, with ever-growing influence and respect, in our own House of Europe, under the flags of fifteen historic States and nations.

In all that we do and say here, we must not belie the hopes and faith of millions and scores of millions of men and women not only in the free countries of Europe but in those which still lie in bondage.

The Message which we have received from the “composite throne”, if such I may term it, has directed our attention to the Schuman Plan of associating in an effective manner the basic industries of the Western nations, and invited us to express our opinion upon it. Sir, we as an Assembly are very ready to do so and it may well be that it is in our power to smooth away some of the misunderstandings which have arisen or the prejudices which have been stirred. We may handle this large and hopeful scheme in a manner which will be favourable to the general principles which it embodies. Some of my British colleagues have offered a constructive contribution on this subject to the Debates of the Assembly, and I trust their views will receive careful and friendly consideration not only from other Governments and Parliaments but from their own. It will be a memorable achievement if this Assembly is able to offer practical guidance to uncertain Governments and competing parties in regard to a scheme which seeks to build around the tomb of Franco-German wars and quarrels the structure of a more productive, a more stable industrial life for the vast numbers of our peoples who are concerned. We express our thanks to M. Schuman for his bold initiative and also for his courtesy in coming here to tell us all about it.

But, Sir, the Message we have received from the Committee of Ministers directs our attention in its final paragraphs to the gravest matters which now impend upon world affairs. We are invited to approve the action of the United Nations in Korea and to proclaim our “complete solidarity” with the resistance to aggression the burden of which is now being borne by the United States, but which involves us all. No one can doubt what our answer will be or that the European Assembly will do its utmost to sustain the cause of freedom and the rule of law in the face of a most grievous and violent challenge. But what is our position here in these smiling lands and war-scarred cities, their peoples so rich in tradition, virtue and glory, striving to rise again from the consequences of the tragedies of the past?

Sir, the Committee of Ministers has, by its Message, virtually invited us to consider in their broader aspects the military aspects of our position. Certainly it would be futile and absurd to attempt to discuss the future of Europe and its relation to world affairs and to the United Nations Organization if this dominating military aspect were arbitrarily excluded. Nearly all the speakers who have addressed us, including our two British Socialist colleagues, have trespassed upon this hitherto forbidden territory, and its effective occupation by the Assembly has now become a “*fait accompli*”.

I am very glad that the Germans, amid their own problems, have come here to share our perils and augment our strength. They ought to have been here a year ago. A year has been wasted, but still it is not too late. There is no revival of Europe, no safety of freedom for any of us, except in standing together, united and unflinching. I ask this Assembly to assure our German friends that, if they throw in their lot with us, we shall hold their safety and freedom as sacred as our own.

I have heard it said that if any Germans — I think the argument was raised yesterday — except Communists were to be armed, this might be the pretext for a preventive war by Russia. Believe me, Mr. President, the long calculated designs of the Soviet Government will not be timed or deflected by events of this order. There is no doubt that we are all of us in great danger. The freedom and civilization of Western Europe lie under the shadow of Russian Communist aggression, supported by enormous armaments. The Soviet forces in Europe, measured in active divisions, in Air Force and in armoured vehicles, outnumber the forces of Western Union by at least six or seven to one. These are terrible facts, and it is a wonder that we are sitting here in our new House of Europe, calmly discussing our plans for the future happiness and concord of our peoples and their moral and cultural ideals. It is a wonder, but at least it is better than getting into a panic. The danger is, of course, not new. It was inherent in the fact that the free democracies of the West disarmed and dissolved their forces after the war, while the dictatorship in the Kremlin maintained gigantic armies and laboured tirelessly by every means to re-equip them.

Two years ago, the Western Union Pact was signed and a number of Committees were set up which, as M. Reynaud and others say, have been talking ever since. Imposing conferences have been held between military chiefs and experts, assisted by statesmen, and the pretentious façade of a Western front has been displayed by the Governments responsible for our safety.

In fact, however, apart from the establishment of the American bomber base in England, nothing has been done to give any effective protection to our peoples from being subjugated or destroyed by the Russian Communist armies with their masses of armour and aircraft. I and others have given what warnings we could, but, as in the past, they fell on unheeding ears or were used to sustain the false accusation of “warmongering.”

Now, however, suddenly the lightning-flash in Korea, and the spreading conflagration which has followed it, has roused the whole of the free world to a keen and vehement realization of its dangers, and many measures are now proposed which, if they had been taken two years ago, would at least have yielded fruit by now. Indeed, what is now proposed and on the move, if inaugurated two years ago, might well have gone half-way to meet our needs.

I do not doubt that, as the realization of our mortal danger deepens, it will awaken that sense of self-preservation which is the foundation of human existence, and this process is now going forward. Our British

Socialist colleague, Mr. Edelman, reminded us of the immense superiority in steel, in oil, in aluminium and other materials on which the defence potential of the free nations rests. But much of this might be the prize of the aggressors if we were struck down.

M. André Philip said on Tuesday that France did not wish to be liberated again. After a period of Russian Communist occupation there would not, as M. Reynaud pointed out, be much to liberate. The systematic liquidation of all elements hostile to Communism would leave little which could be recognised by the rescuers of the survivors.

We in this Assembly have no responsibility or executive power, but we are bound to give our warning and our counsel. There must be created, and in the shortest possible time, a real defensive front in Europe. Great Britain and the United States must send large forces to the Continent. France must again revive her famous Army. We welcome our Italian comrades. All — Greece, Turkey, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Scandinavian States — must bear their share and do their best.

Courage and unity must inspire us and direct the mighty energies at the disposal of our Governments to solid and adequate measures of defence. Those who serve supreme causes must not consider what they can get but what they can give. Let that be our rivalry in these years that lie before us.

The question which challenges us is: shall we have the time? No one can answer that question for certain, but to assume that we were too late would be the very madness of despair. We are still under the shield of the atomic bomb, possessed in formidable quantities by the United States alone.

The use of this weapon would shake the foundations of the Soviet regime throughout the vast areas of Russia, and the breakdown of all communications and centralized control might well enable the brave Russian peoples to free themselves from a tyranny far worse than that of the Czars. It seems very likely that such possibilities will constitute an effective deterrent upon Soviet aggression, at least until they have by a lengthy process built up an adequate supply of atomic bombs of their own.

There is another reason why the general armed assault by Communism against the Western democracies may be delayed. The Soviet dictators have no reason to be discontented with the way things have gone so far, and are going. Since the world war stopped in 1945, they have obtained control of half Europe and of all China without losing a single Russian soldier, thus adding upwards of 500 million people to their own immense population.

They have a wealth of opportunities for creating trouble and tempting us to disperse our forces unduly through the action of their satellites. It seems that Tibet is to be the next victim. Engaged in these diversions they are able to preach peace while planning aggressive war and improving their atomic stockpile.

But in my judgment, which I present with all diffidence, we have a breathing space, and if we use this wisely and well, and do not waste it as we have already wasted so much, we may still greatly increase the deterrents against a major Russian Communist aggression. It is by closing the yawning gap in the defences of the Western Powers in Europe that we shall find the surest means, not only of saving our lives and liberties, but of preventing a third world war.

If in the next two years or so we can create a trustworthy system of defence against Communist invasion, we shall at least have removed the most obvious temptation to those who seek to impose their will by force upon the free democracies. This system of defence in the West will alone give the best chance of a final settlement by negotiation with the Soviets on the basis of our strength and not of our weakness. But there is not a day to be lost nor a scrap of available strength to be denied.

As I have already said, this Assembly has no power to act, nor do we seek to relieve the responsible executive Governments of their duties. We ought, however, to make our united convictions known. We should now send a message of confidence and courage from the House of Europe to the whole world. Not only should we reaffirm, as we have been asked to do, our allegiance to the United Nations, but we should

make a gesture of practical and constructive guidance by declaring ourselves in favour of the immediate creation of a European Army under a unified command, and in which we should all bear a worthy and honourable part.

Therefore, Mr. President, I propose to you a Motion which, after some previous consultation in various quarters, I have ventured to place upon the Order Paper.

I trust that this Motion will, by an open and formal vote, receive the overwhelming, if not indeed the unanimous, support of this Assembly. This would be the greatest contribution that it is in our power to make to the safety and peace of the world. We can thus go forward together sure at least that we have done our duty. I beg to move that:

“The Assembly, in order to express its devotion to the maintenance of peace and its resolve to sustain the action of the Security Council of the United Nations in defence of peaceful peoples against aggression, calls for the immediate creation of a unified European Army subject to proper European democratic control and acting in full co-operation with the United States and Canada.”