

## De Valera and Churchill: A 30 Year Relationship

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

One of Winston Churchill's favorite stories he adored telling according to one of his former assistants, is "British bomber over Berlin, caught in the searchlights, flak coming up, one engine on fire, rear-gunner wounded, an Irish pilot mutters, "Thank God Dev kept us out of this bloody war."

Dev of course was Éamon de Valera who as Taoiseach maintained a policy of neutrality for Ireland throughout the Second World War despite the fact many thousands of Irish citizens served in the armed forces of the United Kingdom and other allied powers while thousands more moved to Britain to perform vital war work in the civilian sector. Clearly the irony was not lost on Churchill, but the British Prime Minister never understood the domestic reality in Ireland during the war, resented de Valera's stance, and failed to acknowledge the tacit assistance the Irish government did provide in the war against Germany. (During the Battle of Britain, British airmen who came down on Irish soil were sent home while their German counterpart were interned) Churchill also failed to understand that de Valera's policy of neutrality reflected the support of the Irish population.

When Adolf Hitler took control of Europe, the Taoiseach, de Valera and his counterpart Prime Minister Winston Churchill prepared for their own bitter personnel battle. Churchill hated neutrals – he regarded neutrals as feeble at best and despicably and cowardly at worst. He couldn't bear it. "DEVIL ERA" as Churchill would call him. They were an amazing pair sitting down to lunch in Downing Street in 1953: both in their times of dominant political personalities of their countries. The luncheon was the only occasion in which they spoke face to face and it came late in each man's career. What did each think of one another? A historian might venture a "not much" as an analysis of their relationship. Their relationship lives primarily on examining what each man had to say about the other from a distance.

Prior to their 1953 meeting there had been *three distinct periods* when the careers of Churchill and de Valera intersected.

a. The first came during the struggle for Irish independence when Churchill served as Colonial Secretary in 1921/22.

b. The second was when de Valera first became Taoiseach in 1932 'with every resolve' as Churchill saw it 'to violate the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty in every way possible. This period culminated with the return of the Treaty Ports to Ireland by the Chamberlain government in 1938.

c. The third and final phase started with the outbreak of WW2 in September 1939 when Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty felt it imperative to re-visit the matter of the treaty ports and de Valera felt it even more imperative to keep his nation neutral. This simmered after Churchill became Prime Minister in 1940 except for one final initiative which was made following the attack on Pearl Harbor. After that Churchill had little time for de Valera except for one odd notable occasion.

**Period 1.** Churchill felt that if de Valera accepted defeat gracefully in 1922 and taken up a position of political opposition within the structure of the new Irish Free State, Churchill most likely would have shown him some measure of respect. But de Valera could not accept the new structure as any way legitimate. He viewed the treaty as a document that had been signed under duress. Lloyd George, after all, had threatened the Irish delegation that without their signatures on the treaty there would be war -- and war within three days. Consequently, de Valera felt justified in resorting to extra-legal means to oppose the establishment of a 'Free State' which he viewed as an imposition of the enemy. It was this decision more than anything else that led de Valera to incur the wrath of Churchill.

As Churchill saw it “Mr. de Valera knowing himself to be in the minority, and, as it proved, in a small minority, set to work by every means in his power to obstruct, to delay, and if possible to prevent, such an election.”

In May, Collins was so fearful of any election being disrupted by anti-treaty forces that he made a compact with de Valera that would give the irregulars an agreed upon number of seats in the new parliament. This infuriated Churchill. He said, “the Irish masses were not allowed a voice in their fate; they were to be led by the nose by a tiny minority making an immoral deal among themselves and parceling out the nation as if they were cattle.”

In June, the compact broke down and the pro-treaty candidates, to Churchill’s delight, won a decisive victory. Churchill lost his own seat in the British elections in October, combined with the defeat of the Irregulars in the Irish Civil War meant that Ireland and de Valera ceased for a decade to occupy Churchill’s mind.

**Period 2.** The victory of Fianna Fail in the Irish elections of 1932 finally brought de Valera to power. Fianna Fail was a party that rejected the terms of the Anglo-Irish treaty and promised a united and fully independent Ireland. One of the first orders of business for de Valera was a repeal of the Oath of Allegiance to the Crown required by the 1921 Treaty. As Churchill saw it, the Oath legally bound the Free State to support Britain against the King’s enemies in a time of war. Hence, Dominion Status.

Churchill wrote “if the Oath of Allegiance is abolished by Mr. de Valera the Treaty is broken and the Irish Free State will cease to exist as a political entity. Churchill outlined the advantages of being in the commonwealth and disadvantages of severance. But these were Churchill wilderness years and he had no means to direct policy.

In 1935, De Valera’s decision to suspend payment of annuities that enabled Irish farmers under the Land Purchase Act to gain the freehold of the properties they worked. De Valera took the popular view that the Free State was still entitled to its share of the money. Churchill as the Chancellor of the Exchequer in March 1926 had secured a commitment from The Cosgrave government that payments continue to be made to the British treasury. Thus, Ireland entered into a trade war with Britain.

However, the tariff war paled in comparison with the decision of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to give up all British claims to the Treaty ports in an agreement concluded on April 1938. These ports were Lough Swilly, Castletownbere and Cobh and per the 1921 Treaty were for continued use by British naval forces. Churchill maintains that he took Collins to his office and laid out the case for the ports -- Collins agreed and said according to Churchill “of course you should have the ports they are fundamental to Britain.”

Churchill was livid with chamberlain government. He also insisted the “treaty had been violated and repudiated in every detail by Mr. de Valera.

**Period 3.** The third major period of interaction between Churchill and de Valera started with the outbreak of WW2. De Valera made it clear that Ireland would remain out of the war. De Valera said “Irish neutrality was an inevitable consequence of Irish history of what he called is the forced partition of Irish territory. Small states suffer in big power wars; the Irish had suffered enough – not again.

Churchill felt that if the ports fell into German hands they would be used against Britain. So, he sent Malcolm MacDonald to Ireland with a promise of Irish Unity in return for Irish support and use of ports. De Valera rejected the proposal and responded with the immediate unification and neutrality for the entire Ireland. De Valera was lured with the bait of Irish unity, but he rightly rejected this as a promise highly unlikely to be fulfilled. British strategy, aimed at restricting food imports in the hope of causing popular resentment to force de Valera to provide naval facilities was based on a fallacy since neutrality was not a de Valera policy as some of Churchill advisors seemed to imagine. (The Dail and Senate passed a neutrality resolution in the summer of 1939).

Despite the prospect of a United Ireland the very thing he craved for 20 years, de Valera declared he was rejecting the Churchill offer with regrets. The prospect of German bombers attacking Irish cities, towns and villages exacting revenge on Ireland for entering the war was hard to accept.

In 1940, Churchill became Prime Minister and sent Sir John Maffy to Dublin to get de Valera to agree to let Britain use the 3 deep water ports. De Valera would take Maffy over to the map of Ireland and show him Ulster. Maffy realized that you could not threaten de Valera. Maffy reported "the question of the ports was the very nerve centre of public interest in that matter and the public mood would react with intense violence to any action invalidating their integrity." Churchill urged that the constitutional position of Irish neutrality should be challenged, the British cabinet as a whole agreed to take the matter no further at that stage.

In the spring of 1941, the British government began considering extending conscription to Northern Ireland. De Valera objected because it reinforced partition and it was illegal to take Irish Catholics and force them to fight for as James Joyce called it the "Brutus Empire." Churchill exploded and reportedly called the Taoiseach a "murderer and perjurer." De Valera's letter to Churchill warned "the imposition of conscription in any form would provoke the bitterest resentment amongst Irishmen and would have the most disastrous consequences for our two peoples." This received the full blast of Churchill disapproval (invective words). Churchill announced that conscription would be more trouble than it is worth.

The attack on Pearl Harbor elated Churchill. He knew the U. S. would enter the war. Probably after several brandies on December 8, 1941 Churchill sent a message to de Valera marked "Personal, Private and Secret." De Valera was given this 2 am and put his military staff on standby. He was alarmed because he didn't know what was in the letter. Could Ireland be invaded? The famous contents which read "Now is your chance. Now or never. "A Nation once again". Am ready to meet you any time." Some say this was Dev's last chance to accept Irish Unity in return for the abandonment of neutrality. All this was being an emotional appeal to Ireland recover its soul and take the side of the angels. De Valera treated it as rhetorical flourish.

After WW2, Churchill made victory speech following the collapse of the Third Reich. He made the following comments concerning the South of Ireland's conduct during WW2:

"This was indeed a deadly moment in our life, and if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland we should have been forced to come to close quarters with Mr. de Valera or perish forever from the earth. However, with a restraint and poise to which, I say, history will find few parallels, we never laid a violent hand upon them, which at times would have been quite easy and quite natural and left the de Valera Government to frolic with the German and later with the Japanese representatives to their heart's content. [...]"

The Irish people waited three days to hear de Valera's response: "Given the bloodstained record between England and this country, could he not find in his heart the generosity to acknowledge that there is a small nation that stood alone not for one year or two, but for several hundred years against aggression?"

This was an approximately 15-minute speech and is perhaps de Valera's finest hour.

Taoiseach Éamon de Valera visited the German Embassy to convey his condolences at the death of Adolf Hitler to German Ambassador Eduard Hempel. The move evoked a storm of controversy and outrage at home and abroad. He knew there would be bad reaction. But I don't think he anticipated how bad the reaction was going to be. However, when one of his aides informed de Valera that Churchill through a tantrum flinging books around his office when hearing about the visit to the German Embassy. De Valera's response was a big smile. (Perhaps that was his motivation?) Churchill was a man of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Imperialism attitudes.

In 1953 de Valera and Churchill were having lunch at Downing Street. This time a photograph was taken. At lunch they talked about higher mathematics and their soldiering years. De Valera made a request for the return of the remains of Sir Roger Casement, executed in 1916. Churchill stated that he favored the idea but would have to refer the matter to law officers. Then it came around to partition. By this time, however, the Attlee Government had guaranteed that Northern Ireland would never without consent of its majority be made to leave the United Kingdom. At this point in time, Churchill is not healthy, and people wondered if de Valera would attend his funeral.

Sir Ian MacLennan wrote: "Were de Valera Taoiseach and not president it is conceivable that he might have thought it fitting for him to attend Sir Winston's funeral. But he might have done so on the grounds of abstract principle - the same principle that led him in pursuance of his policy of neutrality to tender his condolences to the German minister in Dublin after Hitler's death in 1945."

De Valera's public reaction to Churchill's death was indeed qualified, although he did apparently send a personal note to Lady Churchill. In a statement released on Jan 24, 1965, he said: **"Sir Winston Churchill was a great Englishman, but we in Ireland had to regard him over a long period as a dangerous adversary."**

That was THE END of their 30-year relationship.