

Churchill lecture door Frans Timmermans

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1. Introductory remarks

It goes without saying that if one is asked to deliver a Churchill speech in Zurich, one first reads Churchill's Zurich speech. It amazes because it is short, to the point, historic and beautifully written. As one could expect from someone who was awarded the Nobel prize. For literature.

Two thoughts stand out in his speech. First, only one year after the end of the war, he declares that a partnership between France and Germany should be the bedrock upon which Europe's security and prosperity will reside. Self-evident today, but revolutionary at the time.

Second, Churchill gives a stark warning that the window of opportunity will not stay open very long, a warning that the founding fathers of the Council of Europe and later the EEC took seriously, for which we should be eternally grateful. It is a warning that remains valid, also today. One of the most important qualities of great leaders is to see a window of opportunity and act upon it, even if public opinion is not on your side.

And what a delight it is to rediscover his expression of "enlarged patriotism and common citizenship" as fundamental principles of our common European destiny. At a time when the radical right in Europe, including movements based on the heritage of the nazi regime, claim to be 'patriots' and sell nationalism as snake oil. Churchill sees 'oblivion' as part of the solution, Europeans should overcome their deep divisions by reconciliation and that requires shelving if not forgetting the horrors of the past. Perhaps this is the only part of the speech I disagree with. Perhaps 'oblivion' is today one of the reasons why the far right can fool people into believing that nationalism is the same as patriotism.

2. Failure of Imagination

The professionals and pundits who have reached positions of power and influence tend to see the world through the very same lenses that have served them so well over a career. As they progress, they have seen many scares and have learned to judge situations, and most often the great scares didn't come about. Therefore, it is very fashionable for these respectable people to play down words, threats, and events with a soothing 'Don't worry, don't dramatize, this too will pass, our adversaries are rational'.

While this gives succor to their audience 'they surely know what they're talking about' and tells people what they want to hear 'it's not going to be that bad', it is right, until it isn't. We live in a time of turmoil, where decades of history are being made in a matter of months. We cannot predict what the world will look like in half a year's time, but we can predict that many changes are coming. There is no longer need for leaders who lull us into a false sense of security. We need leadership that tries to peer through the fog, has a vision of hope of what can be if we put our brains, muscles, and heart into it. But also who has the ability to imagine of what could happen in the worst case and prepare for it to avert it. Thus, leadership in this age requires a rare combination of humility to know that we know very little, yet an open mind to think outside the box and avoid a 'failure of imagination'.

Churchill, as Andrew Roberts describes in his excellent biography, has many faults, but he did not suffer of a failure of imagination. Let me note an extraordinary example that is often forgotten or neglected. Even Mr. Roberts does not mention it in his otherwise instant classic book. It is the story that is recounted in the first chapter of Jean Monnet's autobiography. War had broken out. France was about to collapse, and Monnet had come with an idea to merge Britain with France: one army, one parliament, one coin, one nation. He went to Churchill to convince him of this necessity. Churchill, the man who harked back to his ancestor the Duke of Marlborough who valiantly fought the French, an antagonist and rival even before the times of Agincourt. Surely, every pundit in their right mind would scoff, roll their eyes and laugh such an idiotic idea off.

And yet, Churchill did not. He in fact agreed, convinced his cabinet, and telegraphed a letter back. That telegraph came hours too late and history took its course. But this example shows that in extraordinary times we need extraordinary leaders to have the imagination to come up with solutions that are fit to redress the challenge we're confronted with.

The same sense of prescience is found in his Zurich speech. His call for a blessed 'Act of Oblivion', which today sadly Europeans seem to take in a completely different and dangerous direction. He referred to Gladstone, but he could have referred to the English Parliament that limited reprisals only

against those who had taken part in the regicide of King Charles I. He said this at a time when the ashes of a Europe destroyed were still smoldering due to the aggressive and evil force of Nazism. He called for an Act of Oblivion, so we could move forward: "If Europe is to be saved from infinite misery, and indeed from final doom, there must be this act of faith in the European family, this act of oblivion". In this Churchill shows the extent of his statesmanship and humanity. Now, 78 years later, we can look back and only commend him for his wisdom and prescience. He was right, he is right.

The timeline of human history is written in blood. Despite the technological pinnacle that humanity has reached, the sinews of our soul are the same as our ancestors who first took up a club to beat off a threatening Neanderthal or neighbor. Reading Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War almost 2500 years ago, one cannot but be struck by the fact that despite Churchill's almost unsurpassed eloquence, nothing that we have said has not been said before and often better by the Hellenistic tribes of that age.

The difference is; Churchill gave his seminal speech here after WWII was over, and Europe lay ravaged. We have come here today when Europe is whole and free, but for all practical purposes find ourselves in the early stages of a war, but now with a new context. With artificial intelligence blurring our view of what is real, what is fake, what is right, what is wrong. With social media weaponized to divide us at home. Cyber capabilities to disrupt our societies. And with great powers who all have nuclear weapons and response times below 15 minutes. Our plight is more complex and more dangerous. To step up requires the capacity of imagination, it requires a whole of society approach (all hands on deck), and it requires the courage and heart to stand up and defend our rule of law, human rights and democracy against our adversaries who have already decided to fight us. As Benjamin Franklin said "Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety" I would add, not only do they not deserve it, they will not get it.

3. Inoculation against hate speech

We have to be clear about it; our democracies are not self-executing, they are also not irreversible. In fact, they are being attacked from within and without as we speak. But if we don't see the signs, hear the alarming words, feel the impending danger, we in fact prepare the path for the powers who want to overthrow democracy.

One should heed the words of hate, listen, and take seriously what some of these politicians say. And if their claims are outlandish, we should not discard them haughtily, but prick up our ears and listen carefully. I have followed very closely the Soviet Union and Russia since the mid to late 1980ies. I served in Moscow in the first three years of the nineties, years of extreme turmoil. And in the decades since, following developments there has remained a professional and personal passion. Out of the many things I could share, let me mention one. Autocrats are always very clear about their goals. You should not only take them seriously, but literally as well. Putin's plans to first consolidate and then restore the Russian empire, his obvious imperial ambitions, were clear from the outset because he didn't hide them, he spoke about them openly. The historic mistake of the West was to take him seriously but not literally, all too happy that he brought stability to a nation shaken by an identity crisis, economic and social turmoil and loss of a sense of purpose.

Today more than 1000 days have past since he invaded Ukraine in an effort to add an independent European nation to his empire. The level of destruction and human suffering surpasses anything we have seen since WWII. Make no mistake: he is waging war against all liberal democracies in Europe and stops at nothing to destabilize our nations and help his cronies and admirers to come to power and undermine the very fabric of our democracy. If anyone has the illusion he would not act in a covert and perhaps even open military way against us, they should think again. Calling him in the hope of convincing him to look for peace, is beyond naïve. He will see it for what it is: weakness and desperation. The only way to bring about peace is by making sure he cannot win, by giving far more support to Ukraine, even if the incoming American administration would not step in. This is a fight for our common European destiny. Ukrainians are doing all the fighting and the dying, we should at least be responsible enough to make sure they are not starved of arms and finances.

As those who have experienced national socialism in Europe are dying out, living memory is turning into written history. At the same time, less and less people are reading. I mean reading books. Articles of barely 100 words, let alone tweets or tiktok clips don't count. It is no wonder that the demons of the past are rearing their ugly heads again. I'm quite sure that Churchill would agree with me that this is the wrong kind of 'oblivion'.

Our youngest generations are farther and farther removed of the darkest past of this continent. I have often cited the following quote:

"We are fighting an enemy that is different from us. Not open, but hiding; not

straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international;

does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own

homeland but feels it owns the whole world,”

All my alarm bells went off when I heard of this quote, but no student could place it in time, nor tell me what this really was about. ‘Jew’ is not mentioned, but this text could come straight out of *Der Stürmer* in the 1930’s. Only it didn’t, it was said by Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, Putin’s Renfield, during a campaign rally in March 2018.

If we cannot recognize hate speech, it means that we will be susceptible to it. There are politicians like Orbán, Putin, Farage, Trump, Fico, Wilders in my country and others who are becoming ever more bold in introducing hate speech, pinning the blame on the ‘other’, foreigners, Muslims, Jews, immigrants, but also on the establishment, journalists, academics, doctors, lawyers, teachers.

By the way, all these politicians have at some point expressed their deep admiration for Putin, even if today they sometimes try to hide that same fact. The taboo of outright and brazen lying has been broken over and over by Trump, and others are using his playbook, tapping into the veins of anger, fear, and hate. They will do their worst, no one can stop them from uttering their bile. But where is the rest? The success of the national populists is the failure of the rest of us, whether we are from the left or the right. We have left the pitch to those who play to our darker angels and have neglected to play to our better angels.

That means having a message of hope and salvation, policies that can genuinely better people’s lives, but ALL people’s lives. It means transcending the interests of the consumer who maximizes and thinks of his or her wallet only, and defining the interest of free citizens who yearn to be a part of something larger.

We have to rekindle critical thinking. We have to rekindle knowledge of our history. We have to avoid the trap of relativism that seems so modern, yet is a road to nowhere. The truth or morality never lies in the middle. There is right, there is wrong. And we have to spell it out, and never back down. Otherwise ‘never again’ will become a hollow phrase.

4. Europe's predicament – taking responsibility for our own defense

The European Union has been more successful than Churchill could have imagined in 1946. With 27 Member States, 450 million citizens, more preparing their membership in the ante-chamber, the biggest internal market in the world, rich, well-educated, free, no death penalty; if one would ask an oblivious, unborn child 'where would you want to be born and when?' the answer would probably be 'let it be in Europe in the 21st century'

Our duty is to rekindle the values our forebears fought, sacrificed and died for. Their legacy lives on in NATO and the EU. However, this is not a self-executing legacy but one that we have to constantly nurture and bolster. For to be part of an Alliance or a Union has a special meaning.

Membership is no small thing. It is not a buffet where one can pick and choose as one pleases. It signifies a commonality of values and interests, of rights and obligations, and the voluntary will and express intent to work together closely to further those values and defend those interests globally. All members will have to re-commit to these values, live according to these values, show solidarity in defense of these values, or ask themselves whether they still belong. Prime Minister Orbán says he is for peace. It is true Putin wants peace too in Ukraine, once he conquers it. Never before have we witnessed a Presidency of the Council of the European Union who for all practical purposes gives the impression that he is a bridgehead for Moscow.

The EU is coming to see that the price to outsourcing one's foreign and security policy may be too high. Free ridership starts out cheaply but can come back with a damaging surcharge. Traditional threats are still relevant, some – like nuclear weapons – even gaining in relevance. There are also new asymmetrical and hybrid threats such as terrorism, cyber, and even the abhorrent practice of using migrants as a tool of foreign policy such as Belarus is doing right now. All of these risks must of course figure in NATO's and the EU's strategic reviews.

And while we assess our risks and debate our response, we should avoid the false and nefarious dichotomy between NATO and the EU and oppose those who say there is a choice between the two. That is a false choice. If you don't watch out you may end up in a Catch-22 situation where both a strong and a weak EU are a risk to NATO. I'm absolutely convinced that a strong and credible EU makes for a strong and credible NATO, and vice-versa.

Moreover, we should also avoid understandable, though misguided knee-jerk reactions of 'going it alone'. 'America first' quickly descends into 'America alone', and that is a sure recipe for failure. And let's be clear, there is neither going to be a 'Europe first', let alone Europe going solo. Such unilateral propositions would weaken us both and sink our common causes and lower our common defenses.

That doesn't mean one cannot do more. Article 42(7) of the Treaty on the European Union has a very demanding obligation to aid and assist "by all means" any member state who is the victim of armed aggression. At the same time the article makes clear that NATO remains the foundation of 'their' collective defense and the forum for its implementation. Herein lays the 'Goldilocks' balance, and let us be frank; in the EU we're nowhere near there.

The EU will have to bear its part of the burden, and continue the trend of significantly increasing its defense funding, strengthen its cooperation, and even consider more effective integration of its foreign and defense policy and capabilities, from civil to military capabilities. One cannot commit to an Alliance or Union, enjoy its security and riches, but dodge its responsibilities and close the curtains when reality knocks on the door.

Strengthening the EU's common capabilities and common political will to deploy them not happen at once or overnight. Security cooperation, let alone integration, is the most sensible of sovereignties with national parliamentary oversight, and rightfully so. But let us begin exploring the possibilities with a sense of urgency.

A reinvigorated Alliance also requires a strong and principled political commitment by the US. An effective Alliance doesn't have an 'on-off' button. Moreover, it requires a rebalancing within NATO, and with a stronger European defense capability should come a stronger European voice and the possibility of closely prescribed autonomous action when needed.

Of course, there are numerous reasons why such a strengthened EU defense autonomy is difficult or nigh impossible; there is nothing easier than explaining why anything cannot be done. But leadership and statecraft are necessary ingredients to overcome the fear of bureaucratic controversy in times of need. Schuman was right in 1950 and he would be right today: "World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it."

However, aside from our traditional reflex to blow the dust off all the plans laying on the shelf in terms of command structures, strategic lift, civil and

military capabilities, talking about hardware, preparing for future conflicts, increasing resilience to new threats such as climate change, terrorism, cyber warfare and hybrid wars, we perhaps have to take an honest look in the mirror first. What are we fighting for, and what are we ultimately defending?

5. A true European defense pillar

This brings me back to Churchill; in everything we do, in everything we undertake, we must never lose sight of who we are, or who we want to be. It is in our constitutions, it is in our EU treaties (art. 2). These are precious values. They can be lost if we fail to defend them to the hilt. And the time is now; for as the saying goes: 'one defends one's freedoms while one still has them, not when they are already taken away'.

The re-election of Donald Trump marks a watershed moment in the transatlantic relationship. In the past few weeks the contours of his administration have become clearer. One gets the impression of a government of billionaires, by billionaires, for billionaires. It remains to be seen what the consequences for Europe are, but I tend not to be overly pessimistic. We must not forget that the transatlantic relationship has been declared dead at least a dozen times in the past 60 years. Kissinger even wrote a book about it, which he called "the Troubled Partnership".

For my generation of Europeans, the United States will always be seen as liberator. At Margraten War Cemetery, close to where I live, I adopted the grave of Leo Lichten, a young man from New York. He was just 19 years old when he was killed in action. Leo and his fellow countrymen freed our continent in its darkest of times and provided us a lifeline after the war when the continent lay in shatters. With the United States as security provider, Western European societies experienced a time of unprecedented prosperity and stability. Indeed, our hope was that this time would never come to an end.

For Americans on the other hand, it is different. It has been since the birth of their nation – when the founding fathers warned against "foreign entanglements". Dwight Eisenhower famously said in 1951: "If in ten years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defense purposes have not been returned to the United States, then this whole project will have failed." It soon became clear that America's commitment to this project – referred to as "Building Europe" – was going to be intensified and prolonged. Especially after the threat of the Soviet Union became more

apparent and – in Churchill’s words – the Iron Curtain descended on the continent.

Now let me be clear, I wish the United States to continue to play a key role in our collective security. And there is no other option than to try to convince Trump it is in his own interest to stand by the rules of the international order, formed by his predecessors after the Second World War.

The war fatigue we see in the eyes of brave Ukrainians is something none of us can afford all too long. Recently, an aide in Trump’s presidential campaign said that Ukrainians should refocus their efforts on peace. But the reality is that that’s all they have done since the start of Putin’s war of aggression. Take the city of Mariupol, where thousands of civilians have been left dead and there have been sustained efforts to erase the Ukrainian historical memory of the city.

In Kharkivska, Ukrainian language is suppressed and history books glorifying Russian history have become part of the school curriculum. Not even to mention the children that have been abducted and taken to Russia, who have now been put up for adoption for Russian couples. Is this the definition of peace? Exposing more Ukrainians to these brutal practices by making them give up large parts of their country. I don’t think so.

What was true 1000 days ago is true now: it is up to the Ukrainian people to decide when it’s time to go to the negotiation table. Until that time, we need to stand firmly by them. As a consequence of the war, a record number of NATO members have stepped up and are now meeting the 2 percent target, including my country the Netherlands.

Europe is outspending the United States in their support for Ukraine. But with the recent election, it is inevitable that Europeans need to be ready to do more.

Donald Tusk’s initiative to build an alliance in support of Ukraine that includes the UK is a welcome and necessary step. And I believe even more spending on defense should be on the table.

70 years after the proposal for a European Defense Community, we see 27 different national militaries. If we finally want to work towards a true European defense pillar, we must further integrate our defense systems and address the capability gaps that we still have on this continent. The reality is that European militaries are not set up to conduct operations without the help of the United States.

Putin's war has also brought to light Europe's economic and industrial weaknesses. Europe's competitiveness increasingly lags behind the other global players, in particular the US and China. Bold action is required as was ruthlessly analysed by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta in their excellent reports.

Without large, New Deal kind of investments in the future, the EU will die a "slow and agonizing death", in Draghi's words. Together, we need to close the innovation gap with the US and China, speed up the energy transition and secure the supply chains of key technologies. Nothing in Europe works better to incite a heating argument than a call for extra money, working like a red rag to a bull.

And it was no surprise that almost immediately countries started to retract along the all too familiar lines we have seen in the financial crisis.

The divide between north and south, and frugals versus so-called "cohesion countries" is a false dichotomy that we overcame when faced with the horrible consequences of the pandemic. Sadly it seems to rear its ugly head again today and we should be much more outspoken and clear about what is at stake and which levels of investment will be necessary.

Here again, the false patriots of the far right are weakening us with their divisive rhetoric. There is no protection in nationalism, no future in confrontation with neighbors with whom you share a common destiny, no solution in false promises, no comfort in scapegoating the 'other'. Creating enemies within only helps the autocrats without and, sadly, also within.

In a healthy body politic citizens should be able to choose between different parties and their different programs, but with the knowledge that whoever wins, they will respect the rule of law and the fundamental freedoms that have shaped our societies since the end of WW2. The consensus has been that to govern, one must be decent and protect the minority. Those who lost the election know that in the next four or five years there is another chance to win.

Nowadays, our democracies are afflicted with a new syndrome, namely that every election is a flip of the dime whether the center holds or whether the would-be autocrats come into office. And every time the center holds, it becomes smaller as it governs and spends political capital, while the fringe grows. Once the extremes win, we suddenly are debating about democracy, human rights and the rule of law whereas we should be debating about interest rates, housing, health care, education, and infrastructure. The debate in my country, since Wilders came to power, is about racism, identity, disrespect for the rule of law. The government

stokes divisions, increases societal tensions, burns bridges between communities instead of building them.

Political differences between the left and the right are part and parcel of national and European politics. These differences can lead to political confrontations and societal tensions. But there has always been a common baseline. Certain boundaries that were not crossed, such as the respect for the rule of law, for facts and our fundamental freedoms.

This has completely changed. We have seen it in Sweden, in Spain and the Netherlands, where parties that used to belong to the center are now working with the far-right. And so far this leads to the center-right slowly becoming indistinguishable from the far right. Not because the far right moves in their direction, on the contrary.

And now it's happening in the European Parliament, where the European People's Party has sought cooperation with the Alternative für Deutschland and Orban's Patriots.

Last week, the EPP's new bromance with the far-right has torpedoed an important deforestation regulation. It's time to send a clear message: take it or leave it. We will be a constructive partner in Europe, in support for our democratic values, the fight against climate change and worker's rights. What we won't be is a bystander when the rights and interests of Europeans are being compromised. The choice is for them to make.

It is self-evident that the center cannot hold if it is abandoned by the center-right or, for that matter, the center-left. Politicians often underestimate the effect of their words and their actions. We can stoke divisions and foster radicalization, which in the last decades has been done successfully, but we can also decide to build bridges, address injustices and inequalities and advocate respect and tolerance. The fear of the center-right to come too close to the center-left has, certainly in the EU and also in my country led to the situation that they have come too close to the far right, becoming almost indistinguishable from them. In the Netherlands the center-right excluded the possibility of forming a coalition with us, whilst tearing down the cordon sanitaire they themselves had established to keep the far right isolated and out of power. Now in power, the far right get absolutely nothing done but create ever deeper divisions in society and dragging the center-right with them in a blur of hate and incompetence.

6. Ever closer union

In 2018, German professor in literary studies Aleida Assmann wrote a book called *Der europäische Traum*. We all heard of the American dream – but what is the European dream? Assmann's point in the book is that in order to move on after the WWII, we participated in an act of communal forgetting, Churchill's 'act of oblivion'. Forget and forgive, in order to move on towards a more peaceful future.

In the decades that followed, we created a collective image as a beacon of human rights and democracy. Virtues we have come to call fundamental values in our European Union and that form the gateway for countries to join the club. The Treaties of Rome, signed in 1957, lay the foundations "of an 'ever closer union' among the peoples of Europe". With this, leaders of the founding member states expressed that European integration transcends mere technocratic, economic cooperation. Working towards European unity, a continent of prosperity and peace, is and has always been a political project.

In the Brexit referendum, the phrase "the ever closer union" got a life of its own. It became one of the main arguments for the Brexiteers. Today it is blatantly obvious that Brexit was the single worst act of self-harm any European nation has inflicted upon itself since the end of WWII. The most powerful political slogan of the last decade; 'take back control' had a huge impact on the campaign but did not materialize in practice. Even if today in British (or should I say English) politics it is still taboo to talk about this. Brexit failed because it did not 'bring back control', on the contrary it did great harm to the British economy and to Europe's position in the world. It hurt Britain and Europe both. It also brought to light how interdependent we are and that we are in dire need to embrace Churchill's concept of 'enlarged patriotism'.

With the profound global challenges we face today – to which we can only find solutions if operating together – we need to unapologetically advocate for an "ever closer union" to address Putin's aggression in the East, tackle the climate catastrophe and to increase our competitiveness in the world.

Professor Tim Snyder describes European integration as European nations' post-imperialistic project. To ween ourselves of our imperialistic and colonial past, a vision of European nations as sharing sovereignty and create the 'enlarged patriotism and common citizenship' Churchill foresaw. Today more citizens than ever before in my lifetime have become skeptical of liberal democracy and tempted by what I would call 'demokratatur', winner takes all democracy and far more vertical power structures. This version of democracy is popular in most of the BRIC countries and gains popularity in the Western world.

On top of that, post-pandemic politics is characterized by incumbents in liberal democracies losing elections. This enhances insecurity and further undermines belief in liberal democracy itself. In practice the new populist or autocratic incumbents have in common that they make huge and unrealistic promises, fail to deliver – never even having had the intention to deliver, and blame a scapegoat for this failure. They can get away with it as long as the narrative of ‘the enemy within’ is successful. A narrative that thrives in societies where groups of citizens are tempted to retreat in their own bubbles of like-minded people. Recently an American study showed that on both the left and the right people thought the ‘other’ had far more negative views of them. In other words: people are much closer to each other than they think. And, like almost a century ago, people who objectively have strong common (socio-economic) interests, are pitted against each other like mortal enemies on the basis of mostly fabricated enmities of identitarian or cultural nature.

This is not new. This is the very reason for the creation of the Council of Europe and the EU. This is the very reason why democracy based on the rule of law and respect for human rights is the choice made by European nations who had the good fortune to be on the right side of the iron curtain after the war. This is what the nations who found freedom after the end of the European divide embraced. This is what now is under threat.

Our responsibility is to see the threat in all its aspects and to tackle every aspect indefatigably until we overcome. We owe this to our ancestors, like Winston Churchill and his glorious generation. But above all we owe it to the generations that will come after us and that deserve not to revisit the horrors of the past. Let’s be good ancestors ourselves. It is a fight, sure, but it is a fight that can be won. But to win a fight you have to show up for the fight and understand what is at stake. It is our civic and democratic duty to be relentless in mobilizing all people of good will to defend and strengthen the liberties and socio-economic values we hold dear. Let’s put out fires, tear down walls and build bridges. It can be done.

Thank you.