

Address given by Frédéric-Joseph Vandemeulebroek (Brussels, 1945)

Source: Churchill à Bruxelles / Frédéric-Joseph Vandemeulebroeck.- Bruxelles: RTL [Prod.], 1945. CTL-UFA, Luxembourg. - SON (13'36", Montage, Son original).
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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Reporter] Just a few days ago, we were here in this Gothic hall, a hall decked with gold, oak and draperies which has seen so many memorable events, more in fact over the last 12 months than in several years in pre-war times. All the great names have been here. De Gaulle was the last. Now it is Churchill, that fighter who for us symbolises honour and tenacity. He is, let me say it again, the man of steel who was determined to continue the war. It was he who refused to cave in to the enemy's attempts at blackmail. It was he who went to the House of Commons on 3 September 1940 [sic] and, as the bombs fell all around, said: '(...) if these great trials were to come upon our Island, there is a generation of Britons here now ready to prove itself not unworthy of the days of yore and not unworthy of those great men, the fathers of our land (...).' It was Churchill who, on 17 June, announced his decision to carry on the struggle: 'We have become the sole champions now in arms to defend the world cause,' he cried. 'We will do our best.'

The municipal authorities are now welcoming this man even as we speak, on the great staircase of honour, between two honour guards of young men and girls. Everyone in the hall is waiting with bated breath. Among them we recognise Cardinal Van Roey, the Presidents of the Chamber and the Senate, Mr Spaak, Mr Van Glabbeke, Sir Hugh Knatchbull-Hugessen, the British Ambassador, Mr [Churgeon], the Ambassador-Extraordinary from Canada, Colonel Sherman, Mr Sergejev, the Soviet Ambassador, Mr Sawyer, the United States Ambassador, Mr Brugère, the French Ambassador, the Chargés d'Affaires of China and Luxembourg, many other prominent figures from Britain and Canada, and many high-ranking Belgian personalities from the worlds of diplomacy, the law, politics and the Administration. And now here comes Mr Churchill.

[Reporter] Mr Churchill is now entering the hall, and everyone present is standing. Mr Churchill takes his seat on the podium of honour with Mr Vandemeulebroek. A group of girls is preparing to sing.

[Choir] God save our gracious King, long live our noble King, God save the King! Send him victorious, happy and glorious, long to reign over us; God save the King!

[Journalist] And now, the speech by Mr Vandemeulebroek.

[Frédéric-Joseph Vandemeulebroek] Mr Churchill, no visit by any illustrious personage could have been more pleasing to the hearts of my countrymen than yours. Since the liberation, the probability of your coming was the topic of every conversation, and as the days went by the calls from every quarter for us to see you at last in Brussels became more numerous and more pressing. By acceding to the wishes of the people of Brussels in this way, you have won their most respectful and heartfelt gratitude. What is more, by doing our city the great honour of accepting the title of Honorary Citizen of the City of Brussels which the mayor and corporation have seen it as their imperative duty to bestow upon you, you have granted everyone who lives here their dearest wish. Of all those propelled to the front ranks of fame by events, you are the one we love and admire the most, and have done not just since the liberation and victory but since the very beginning of the war. The fact is that from the very outset we have realised the enormous and decisive part you have played in the most tragic period in the history of the world. We remember how particularly agonising the start of this horrible war was. We saw how most people in every country caught up in the storm acted, or rather did not act. Whatever their function, their rank, their past history, their responsibilities, many of those who should have been leaders showed themselves to have been overtaken by events and paralysed by the panic which reigned around them, while their peoples, swept along by the whirlwind and crushed by the blows dealt to them by fate, were scattered along the roads wherever they were driven by military setbacks or civilian exoduses in the face of invasion. You were among those who, at those times of utmost distress, stood fast, calm and confident and knew how to awaken those same qualities in others.

The admiration and affection of whole peoples go, of course, to a number of men who have come to the world's attention because of the glorious ways in which they worked together in this gigantic battle for freedom which has just ended in triumph. We can, of course, say that more or less everywhere we saw the emergence of leaders whose efforts spurred their nations on and helped to bring about the victory of healthy, free democracies over brutal, tyrannical dictatorships. Some of them created a propitious climate for the

genesis and development of the idea that salvation was possible and a fight would have to be waged to bring it about; others, even as the disasters mounted up, kept their heads and carried on using the weapons which fate had not wrested from their hands. Of these, you were the first, the most confident, the calmest, the bravest, the most heroic, because of the very fact that you were the frankest and firmest of them. You dared to tell the truth, however appalling it was, to your own people, to the various peoples of the British Empire and, indeed, to all the peoples of the world. In accepting power, you called on men to fight and you promised them only work and sweat, tears and blood. A long time ago now, one of our great writers had already said: 'It is in tears and blood that the flower of liberty blooms.' You had the loyalty and the courage to say so. On 4 June 1940, in the House of Commons, you expressed your faith and your resolve, each as unshakeable as the other, when you said: 'We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.'

After the armies in the west of Europe were dislodged and Holland, Belgium and France were knocked out of the fight, you reacted with that tough frankness which was to earn you the eternal trust of your people and said: 'We are alone now. We have our backs to the wall and we are fighting.' With this, you galvanised everyone's energy, awakened their courage and aroused their heroism. Your men fought by land, sea and air to preserve your country from that invasion which would almost inevitably have meant slavery for the rest of the world. To the amazement of the enemy and the admiring astonishment of other nations, your heroism and that of your soldiers brought about the unlikely miracle and prevented the occupation of Britain. And at that point you went on the offensive. There was no point in just putting up a defence, the country had to prepare to launch an attack, the only way of securing victory. At the same time, you issued a call to arms, you called on the people to work in the factories, in the arsenals, in the shipyards, in the docks and on the land. Men and women throughout the British Empire rose at the sound of your voice. They all closed ranks, gritted their teeth and clenched their fists. In a wave of enthusiasm and faith, you unleashed more than just an overwhelming hope: you inspired them with the certainty of winning. That wave, as it broke over the world, would at last bring about the union of all free peoples against barbarity and oppression. By successive, immense leaps you raised yourself above the mass of mankind. At each stage of the war, your hold on people's souls tightened and your influence on military developments hardened to become more powerful and more decisive. The view before the eyes of mankind — towering over the bedlam and commotion of battle, looming out of the thick smoke that billowed from the downpour of bombs which laid towns and cities to waste, soaring above the tragic fray born, as you said, of blood and tears, standing out against a sky which every day was growing clearer — that view was of your transcendent, magnificent figure, that of a man defying cruel fate and eventually becoming the master of it through no more than the virtues of his courage, his energy and his faith. People here listened to your voice from the very outset. They trusted you. You supported them in the most terrible and difficult trials they had to undergo in the tragic wartime years. It was thanks to you that they became free again and that their children will be free. They will never forget it! And from the bottom of their hearts rises the tribute of their eternal gratitude and their unswerving love.