

FDR Confronted Churchill On British Imperialism

The following eyewitness account of the clash between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Sir Winston Churchill, in Newfoundland in March 1941, is taken from As He Saw It, by Elliott Roosevelt (1946).

It must be remembered that at this time Churchill was the war leader, Father only the president of a state which had indicated its sympathies in a tangible fashion. Thus, Churchill still arrogated the conversational lead, still dominated the after-dinner hours. But the difference was beginning to be felt.

And it was evidenced first, sharply, over Empire.

Father started it.

“Of course,” he remarked, with a sly sort of assurance, “of course, after the war, one of the preconditions of any lasting peace will have to be the greatest possible freedom of trade.”

He paused. The P.M.’s head was lowered; he was watching Father steadily, from under one eyebrow.

“No artificial barriers,” Father pursued. “As few favored economic agreements as possible. Opportunities for expansion. Markets open for healthy competition.” His eye wandered innocently around the room.

Churchill shifted in his armchair. “The British Empire trade agreements” he began heavily, “are—”

Father broke in. “Yes. Those Empire trade agreements are a case in point. It’s because of them that the people of India and Africa, of all the colonial Near East and Far East, are still as backward as they are.”

Churchill’s neck reddened and he crouched forward. “Mr. President, England does not propose for a moment to lose its favored position among the British Dominions. The trade that has made England great shall continue, and under conditions prescribed by England’s ministers.”

“You see,” said Father slowly, “it is along in here somewhere that there is likely to be some disagreement between you, Winston, and me.

“I am firmly of the belief that if we are to arrive at a stable peace it must involve the development of backward countries. Backward peoples. How can this be done? It can’t be done, obviously, by eighteenth-century methods. Now—”

“Who’s talking eighteenth-century methods?”

“Whichever of your ministers recommends a policy which takes wealth in raw materials out of a colonial country, but which returns nothing to the people of that country in consideration. *Twentieth-century* methods involve bringing industry to these colonies. *Twentieth-century* methods include increasing the wealth of a people by increasing their standard of living, by educating them, by bringing them sanitation—by making sure that they get a return for the raw wealth of their community.”

Around the room, all of us were leaning forward attentively. Hopkins was grinning. Commander Thompson, Churchill’s aide, was looking glum and alarmed. The P.M. himself was beginning to look apoplectic.

“You mentioned India,” he growled.

“Yes. I can’t believe that we can fight a war against fascist slavery, and at the same time not work to free people all over the world from a backward colonial policy.” . . .

“There can be no tampering with the Empire’s economic agreements.”

“They’re artificial. . . .”

“They’re the foundation of our greatness.”

“The peace,” said Father firmly, “cannot include any continued despotism. The structure of the peace demands and will get equality of peoples. Equality of peoples involves the utmost freedom of competitive trade. Will anyone suggest that Germany’s attempt to dominate trade in central Europe was not a major contributing factor to war?”

It was an argument that could have no resolution between these two men. . . .

[The conversation resumed the next evening:]

Talking, gesticulating, at length he paused in front of Father, was silent for a moment, looking at him, and then brandished a stubby forefinger under Father’s nose.

“Mr. President,” he cried, “I believe you are trying to do away with the British Empire. Every idea you entertain about the structure of the postwar world demonstrates it. But in spite of that”—and his forefinger waved—“in spite of that, we know that you constitute our only hope. . . .”

[I]n saying what he did, he was acknowledging that British colonial policy would be a dead duck, and British attempts to dominate world trade would be a dead duck, and British ambitions to play off the U.S.S.R. against the U.S.A. would be a dead duck.

Or would have been, if Father had lived.