Winston Churchill: Characteristics of His Leadership
Resolution and Magnanimity in War Speech, 3 September 1939, House of Commons
A History Lesson by Mark Ellwood

Objective 1: Presentation of lesson suggestions which offer flexibility in teaching on the subject of the outbreak of World War II in Europe, appropriate for an introductory level high school course.

Objective 2: Presentation of Winston Churchill in his last speech to the House of Commons before he is made a Cabinet member for the wartime government.

Objective 3: Presentation of a significant original source document which offers students an opportunity to analyze the purpose and influence of carefully chosen words.

Objective 4: Presentation of the leadership characteristics of resolution and magnanimity demonstrated by Winston Churchill.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS LESSON PLAN:

Part 1: The subject speech introduction.
Part 2: The speech narrative.
Part 3: A brief historical background to this speech.
Part 4: A consideration of key points in this speech.
Part 5: A series of questions to consider for discussion or document analysis.
Part 6: A suggested exercise for final analysis of this speech.

MATERIALS

“War Speech,” September 3, 1939
Click the Printer icon at the top to find a copy suitable for photocopying. There are many other speeches available at winstonchurchill.org.

Discussion questions, p. 4
Exercise for final analysis, p. 5

Note to Teachers: For further study of Churchill’s rhetorical skill and its role in strengthening the resolve of the British people, see “His Speeches: How Churchill Did It” by Dr. Stephen Bungay. Read “Their Finest Hour” speech of June 18, 1940.

PART I: THE SUBJECT SPEECH INTRODUCTION

On 1 September 1939, German troops invaded Poland. Great Britain and France had guaranteed the sovereignty of Poland and in accordance with this guarantee, issued ultimatums to Germany. The British ultimatum, issued on 2 September, demanded that Germany stop the invasion and withdraw all German armed forces from Polish territory within twenty-four hours. On 3 September, Prime Minister
Neville Chamberlain announced in the House of Commons that the ultimatum had expired and Great Britain was at war with Germany for the second time in only twenty-five years.

Ironically, immediately after the Prime Minister’s announcement, an air raid warning sounded and the Commons adjourned to bomb shelters. The warning turned out to be false and in the afternoon the Commons met again. Winston Churchill, who had not been a cabinet member for ten years, was given the floor and delivered his final speech as a backbencher. He was sixty-four years old.

After Churchill’s speech and the debate that followed, the Prime Minister asked Churchill to accept the position of First Lord of the Admiralty, a position he had held for part of World War I. At 6:00 p.m. Churchill took up his post and the signal was flashed to the Royal Navy, “Winston is back!” Winston Churchill held this wartime cabinet position until 10 May 1940, when he became Prime Minister of Great Britain.

PART 2: THE SPEECH NARRATIVE

“War Speech,” September 3, 1939
A teacher or student may also access this speech by going to www.winstonchurchill.org and entering the Speeches section. There simply click on the speech according to the date, September 3, 1939. Clicking the “Print” icon will yield a clean original copy for photocopying.

PART 3: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR THIS SPEECH

In 1929, Winston Churchill held a cabinet position when the government fell. From that time until 1939, he did not hold government office and this time period will later be known as his Wilderness Years. While he held a seat in Parliament, he remained a backbencher during these turbulent years. Thus, during these years he traveled, wrote, worked on his home at Chartwell and observed with growing concern, the political situation in Germany.

On 30 January 1933, German President Paul von Hindenburg chose Adolf Hitler to be his chancellor. Hitler’s Nazi Party had risen steadily in Germany in the post World War I era and would now seek to consolidate its power through Hitler’s office. This power was extended through an Emergency Powers Act, following the Reichstag fire and when the offices of the President and Chancellor were combined with the death of President Hindenburg. After that, much of Germany’s economic recovery was based on military growth through expenditures of the German government.

Hitler’s government was built in large part on a rejection of the claim that the Treaty of Versailles, which had been signed at the end of World War I, was a just treaty. Thus the construction of an army, navy and air force as well as significant weapons research and development constituted violations of that treaty. What Great Britain and France knew about this prior to 1936 did not seem to be of great concern and there was actually some sympathy for the claims of the Nazi Party. During this time, from his backbench position, Winston Churchill began to warn of German intentions, which seemed obvious to him for a variety of reasons, including Hitler’s own book, Mein Kampf.

In March 1936, German military forces crossed the Rhine River and established an occupation in the Rhineland, which was expressly forbidden in the Treaty of Versailles. Neither France nor Great Britain
took strong action to defend the treaty and Hitler’s confidence soared. Two years later the German nation of Austria was absorbed and Nazi plans for the annexation of the northern part of Czechoslovakia were made apparent. In September 1938, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made three trips to Germany to confer with Hitler about his intentions and to try to secure guarantees for peace. The final meeting in Munich, which included the President of France, Edouard Daladier, resulted in the Anglo-Franco agreement to permit the Germans to annex the Sudetenland. Chamberlain hoped that this agreement would establish peace for a time so other concerns could be addressed, but he was soon criticized by Churchill, who predicted that Germany would not be satisfied. Early in 1939, German troops seized the rest of Czechoslovakia.

Winston Churchill continued to collect data, present it to the House of Commons and warn them of the growing danger. He became specific in what had to be done and the danger that would be faced if it were not. While he had some hearers, he had many more opponents for a number of reasons and the British government continued to pursue a sedate foreign policy regarding Germany. But, after the fall of Czechoslovakia, Great Britain did guarantee the sovereignty of Poland.

PART 4: A CONSIDERATION OF KEY POINTS IN THIS SPEECH

Remember that Winston Churchill held a seat in the House of Commons, but not a position in the Government. As he had stepped up his warnings about Germany, he found greater and greater criticism of his views and his intentions. But then, war came and he stood to make his speech. What a wonderfully delicious opportunity for him to point out his remarkable prophecies and the obvious blindness of his critics. You will note that the written presentation of the speech on the Churchill website has three paragraphs.

The first paragraph emphasizes that the British Government has made “repeated efforts for peace.” Churchill indicates that these efforts “all have been faithful and sincere. This is of the highest moral value…” because being morally right will be necessary to sustain the great trials that Great Britain now faces. He indicates that there are going to be some very tough times, “but our consciences are at rest.”

The second paragraph again stresses “. . . the gravity of the task which lies before us. . .” But then he offers the encouragement that, “. . . 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, who laid the foundations of our laws and shaped the greatness of our country.”

The final paragraph points out that Great Britain is not going to war to gain empire, rather “We are fighting to save the whole world from the pestilence of Nazi tyranny and in defence of all that is most sacred to man.” Then he points out the strange paradox that in order “. . . to establish, on impregnable rocks, the rights of the individual. . . “ the Government will actually have to suspend or limit many of those same rights. He then offers that “. . . these liberties will be in the hands which will not abuse them, . . . which will cherish and guard them. . . .” And he concludes that ultimately these English liberties will be extended to everyone who has lost them under the boot of the Nazis.
PART 5: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR ANALYSIS OF “WAR SPEECH”

1. There are three paragraphs in the written speech. How would you summarize the content of the speech in one sentence?

2. What makes this speech informational and what makes it inspirational?

3. What absolutes does Churchill identify in his message? How did he use words to convey these absolutes?

4. What do you think may be Winston Churchill’s reason or purpose for giving this speech on the day that he did?

5. Winston Churchill was sixty-four years old when he gave this speech and he had not been part of the Government for nine years. Still, this day he would be named First Lord of the Admiralty and in eight months he would become Prime Minister of a coalition Government for the war effort. What, in this speech, might give you confidence in his leadership?

   Consider an operational definition of leadership. What actually is leadership? What is the difference between a leadership position and actual leadership? Consider how one might learn leadership in sixty-four years. Consider how one might be regarded as a competent leader at the age of sixty-four, but not competent for leadership the previous nine years.

6. Winston Churchill presented this speech as a backbencher. This means that he was not even considered a leader of his own political party. If you had been in his position; warning about the German threat for several years while all around you refused to listen, or even criticized and ridiculed, what might you consider saying in a speech after it turns out you have been right?
PART SIX: A FINAL ANALYSIS OF “WAR SPEECH.”

ESSAY: Write an essay answering the following question. As you consider the speech and your answer, be sure to make specific citations to validate your view.

THE QUESTION:
After the war was over, Winston Churchill wrote a six-volume memoir, The Second World War. Each volume was inscribed with the theme of the history as follows:

   In war: Resolution
   In defeat: Defiance
   In victory: Magnanimity
   In peace: Good Will

Churchill’s September 3 speech is a clear example of his personal resolution and his personal magnanimity. Either defend or refute this statement.