

# “Seeing the Empire Fall”

## FDR, Churchill and Indian Independence

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On June 3, 1947, India finally gained its independence from Great Britain after almost two hundred years of British colonization. Few people know that Franklin D. Roosevelt played a role in India's liberation. His discussions with Mahatma Gandhi and his attempts to sway the opinion of the British Prime minister, Winston Churchill, resulted in a conflict between Roosevelt and Churchill between 1942 and 1947 that was caused by Churchill's lack of compromise on the issue of Indian Independence. This paper examines this conflict and shows that despite Roosevelt's sympathy with the Indian cause and his numerous efforts to convince Churchill to grant India independence, his intervention proved ultimately fruitless.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the 32<sup>nd</sup> president of the United States from 1933-1945. He is best known for helping the United States through the Great Depression in the 1930s by enacting the New Deal, a set of projects that helped the economy recover. He also entered the nation into World War Two following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Although the internment of 120,000 Japanese people from 1942-1946 as a result of his executive order has tarnished his human rights record, other aspects of Roosevelt's presidency show that he was also committed to the values of freedom and liberty. For example, Roosevelt was vehemently opposed to the continued colonization of India because it undermined the principles that America stood for. In a United Nations Joint Declaration he wrote, Roosevelt regarded India as its own country instead of a British colony (Roosevelt Joint Declaration). FDR stated: "As a commonwealth, she (India) would be entitled to a modern form of government, an adequate health and educational standard. But how can she have these things, when Britain is taking all the wealth of her national resources away from her, every year?"

(Elliott Roosevelt 75). FDR felt that Britain was holding India back, plundering its resources, and preventing Indians from excelling by denying them access to proper education, health, and economic opportunity. Of course, Roosevelt also had other reasons for helping India. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 left the United States in shock, and the country needed allies in order to strike back. Its location near Japan and its powerful army motivated FDR to help India gain independence. (Merrill 110).

However important this alliance between Britain and the United States was for both nations, Churchill strongly disagreed with Roosevelt's point of view when it came to Indian independence. He was the Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955. The size of the British Empire was dwindling when he took over, and losing India would take away Britain's greatest colony. Churchill was opposed to giving India independence because India provided most of the manpower to the British military overseas due to its immense population. India was also a vast market for British goods, especially textiles. Furthermore, India was a rich resource for luxury goods that were avidly consumed in Britain such as exotic spices, jewels, and precious metals.

Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the Indian National Congress, was well aware of the nature and history of the British Empire and the value of India for Britain. Educated in Britain and having served as a lawyer in South Africa, he had witnessed British imperial exploitation of its colonies, goods, and people first hand. He wished to liberate his country from British control and played a central role in gaining India's independence. Gandhi became an Indian peace activist in 1921 and tried to solve conflict without violence. An example of his peaceful protest was the fact that he went on hunger strike when he was imprisoned by British officials for acts of civil disobedience. This

was a clever move as he knew that Great Britain would be in a dilemma if he died of hunger in jail. The Viceroy of India from 1943-1947, Archibald Wavell, conversed over the issue with one of FDR's American representatives named Phillips. Their encounter is described in a telegram from Wavell to the British Government in 1943. (Wavell telegram 1943). Gandhi's example sparked more acts of civil disobedience amid the Indian populace and also set a vital example for other figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X who sought similar actions during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

In 1942, Gandhi launched the Quit India movement, sparking a civil disobedience act that demanded that Britain leave India. On August 8, 1942, Gandhi gave a famous speech, known as the Quit India speech, in which he outlined India's demands. In order to emphasize the peaceful nature of his nation's goals and to show that he was not Anti-British, he stated: "Our quarrel is not with the British people, we fight their imperialism. The proposal for the withdrawal of British power did not come out of anger" (Kumar 49). Perhaps he was also aware that expressing the peaceful nature of India's desire for independence would also appeal to important nations, particularly America.

Gandhi also made a direct appeal to Roosevelt, hoping for the support of one of the most powerful countries in the world. On July 1, 1942, Gandhi sent Roosevelt a letter asking Roosevelt to peacefully convince Churchill to grant India freedom and self-government. In the letter, Gandhi says: "You will therefore accept my word that my present proposal, that the British should unreservedly and without reference to the wishes

of the people of India immediately withdraw their rule, is prompted by the friendliest intention” (Gandhi in his letter to Roosevelt). Like his speech, the language of this letter was intended to show that he harbored no bad feelings towards Britain. Roosevelt responded with a letter of his own on August 1, 1942, in which he said: “I am sure that you will agree that the United States has consistently striven for and supported policies of fair dealing, of fair play, and of all related principles looking towards the creation of harmonious relations between nations” (Roosevelt in his letter to Gandhi). In the same letter, he stated: “We, together with many other nations, are making a supreme effort to defeat those who would deny forever all hope of freedom throughout the world” (Roosevelt in his letter to Gandhi). Roosevelt’s language suggests that America had always pushed for world liberty and that they would always do what they could to help other countries gain their freedom, including India. Although Roosevelt doesn’t mention Britain by name, his comment suggests that Britain was amongst those countries “who would deny forever all hope of freedom throughout the world,” and it therefore stood in conflict with American aims to spread freedom throughout the world.

The Atlantic Charter provides evidence of Roosevelt’s attempts to compromise with Churchill over Indian Independence. The Charter was created in 1941 during a conference in Newfoundland organized by Roosevelt and Churchill. During the conference, they discussed aims for World War Two and post-war plans, which included giving British colonies their own government. The conference took place at a critical time during the war. The German invasion of Russia, Operation Barbarossa, had begun in June that year. The year before, Britain’s had endured prolonged military attacks by the German air force during the Battle of Britain, when British cities were attacked day and

night. The Atlantic Charter was important in establishing the goals of the Allied forces after the war was over. During the conference, FDR and Churchill argued about India, starting with Roosevelt's criticism of British imperial trade agreements. Roosevelt stated: "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" (Elliott Roosevelt 36). Roosevelt's language in this comment reveals the mounting conflict between the two world leaders.

Roosevelt was also displeased by the fact that Churchill included a self-government clause in the Atlantic Charter for countries that were occupied during the war but did not include India. FDR told Churchill: "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" (Elliott Roosevelt 37). Roosevelt expressed his passionate opposition to colonialism and clearly believed that freeing Indians from colonization was as important as freeing Jewish people from terror in Germany.

The conflict that arose between the two leaders due to Churchill's refusal to compromise with Roosevelt regarding Indian Independence is evident in letters they exchanged between 1942 and 1945. A *New York Times* article from 1984 by Edwin McDowell examines these letters, noting that the tone and language become tenser as they go on. As time passed, the two leaders started to refer to each other more formally instead of greeting each other as friends as they did before the conflict started. In one of the letters, Roosevelt wrote: "American public opinion cannot understand why, if the British Government is willing to permit the component parts of India to secede from the British Empire after the war, it is not willing to permit them to enjoy what is tantamount

to self-government during the war” (Roosevelt in letter to Churchill). Roosevelt meant that even the American people wanted Churchill to give India a government of their own sooner rather than later. The limited self-government that Churchill proposed did not stand up to Gandhi and Roosevelt’s desire for India to be an independent and self-governing nation. Churchill’s limited self-government still gave Britain partial control over India.

Churchill expressed his disagreement with Roosevelt on several occasions, including at the Atlantic Charter, but Roosevelt persisted. An example of his perseverance was a telegram Roosevelt sent on April 12, 1942, to Harry Hopkins, one of his advisors, to be directed to Churchill. The telegram was sent to warn Churchill not to send Sir Stafford Cripps to India again. Cripps was the British Lord Privy Seal and leader of the House of Commons. He was sent as an ambassador to Russia in 1942, where he successfully brought Great Britain and Russia together as allies. Directly after this success, on March 22 of 1942, Cripps went on a mission, known as the Cripps Mission, during which he attempted to finalize the “limited” self-government for India. He was offering India their own government after the war and was allowing them to have a small role in their government during the war (Weigold 40). The mission failed, however, and Cripps went back to England. After the failure, Britain planned to send Cripps to India again to attempt to gain India’s support in the war. By this time, the US had partnered with Britain and sent troops to Britain to help them defeat Germany. The alliance between the two countries was becoming much stronger and more important to Churchill and Roosevelt. In his telegram, Roosevelt told Churchill to delay Cripps’s second mission to India until they knew it was the right time to do so. Despite the telegram,

Churchill sent Cripps to India for the second time in 1946 to offer India their own government and dominion status in exchange for India's support during the war. Gandhi rejected the offer because he felt that India was still being treated unfairly, and that with the Dominion Status, they would still be seen as under British rule, so Cripps failed again (Add new source). After this failure, Cripps decided to give up on the issue and leave it to India to figure out their own path to independence. (*Making Britain: Sir Stafford Cripps*).

In spite of all of these attempts at compromise, the conflict between Roosevelt and Churchill regarding Indian Independence was not resolved, and India did not gain its independence until 1947, when Clement Attlee was prime minister and passed the Indian Independence Act, freeing it from British rule and dividing it into two countries: India and Pakistan. Even when Roosevelt said that the American people wanted Churchill to free India, Churchill would not give up control of the country. Historian Robert Sherwood says: "Churchill would see the Empire in ruins and himself buried under them before he would concede the right of any American, however great and illustrious a friend, to make any suggestions as to what he should do about India." Churchill would rather see Great Britain fall than listen to what Americans told him to do about India. In fact, Churchill resented Roosevelt's and America's opinion so much that, according to Sherwood, no American suggestions during the war were "so wrathfully received as those relating to the solution of the Indian problem."

The issue of Indian Independence became a source of conflict between Roosevelt and Churchill, a conflict that was not always evident to the public. This conflict almost broke their alliance during World War Two. Roosevelt said: "I think I speak as America's President when I say that America won't help England in this war simply so



that she will be able to continue to ride roughshod over colonial peoples” (Pharshy). In making such a statement, Roosevelt suggested that if Great Britain failed to free its colonies, including India, he would not work with them in the war. Roosevelt’s threat was not very realistic, but if he had ended the alliance, Britain would probably have been overtaken by Germany. Churchill did not give into such threats and responded so harshly to Roosevelt’s suggestions that Roosevelt “never raised it (India) verbally again” (Maitra 55).

In conclusion, the issue of Indian Independence led to a conflict between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill due to Churchill’s lack of compromise and his insistence on limited self-government for India. Roosevelt used verbal exchanges, letters, telegrams, and public statements to sway Churchill’s opinion. At the Atlantic Charter, he attempted to persuade Churchill to include India in the self-government clause and even sent Churchill a telegraph peacefully warning him not to send Sir Stafford Cripps to India again after his first failure. Roosevelt believed strongly that every country should be free and have their own government, but Churchill was not willing to give up control of India. He received each of Roosevelt’s attempts harshly, and this eventually led to a conflict between the two leaders that almost ended their alliance. However, the alliance remained intact. The United States supplied Britain with troops starting at the beginning of the war and fought alongside Britain and the rest of the Allies until the end. The alliance between The United States and Great Britain remained intact, however, and the two countries still share a “special relationship”.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Cripps, Stafford. "Sir Stafford Cripps' Broadcast on India." 27 July 1942. *The National Archives*, [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/cab127-711.jpg](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/cab127-711.jpg). Accessed 2 Apr. 2018. Speech.

This is a broadcast by Sir Stafford Cripps on India. He talks about the offer he made to India that was rejected by Gandhi and Nehru. He also gives a small explanation for why Gandhi rejected the offer. I use it in the paper when talking about Cripps' offer and why it was rejected by India.

Gandhi, Mohandas, and Eknath Easwaran. *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas*. Ballantine Books, Vintage Books, 1962. *Google Books*, Ballantine Books, Vintage Books, [books.google.com](http://books.google.com). Accessed 16 Jan. 2018.

This book is a Collection of words, ideas, and papers of Indian Activist Mohandas Gandhi. It talks about how Churchill did not include India in the self-government clause of the Atlantic Charter and Roosevelt did not like it. He sent US ambassador John G. Winant to try to change Churchill's mind, and it proved unsuccessful.

Kumar, Vijaya. *The World's Greatest Speeches: Be a Winner*. Sterling Publishers, 2013. *Google Books*, Sterling Publishers. Accessed 1 Feb. 2018.

This source contains history's greatest speeches, and I use it to find quotes from Gandhi's Quit India speech, which I mention in the section of my paper dedicated towards Mahatma Gandhi.

Letter. *The National Archives Catalog*, [catalog.archives.gov/id/7065056](https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7065056).

This source contains FDR's reply to Gandhi's letter concerning Indian independence. Gandhi wanted FDR to peacefully tell Britain to free India. FDR replies with this letter saying that he does not like countries to be under another country's rule, and that he will do all he can to push for India's independence from Great Britain.

Letter. *Slate*,

[www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_vault/2014/07/23/gandhi\\_and\\_fdr\\_history\\_letter\\_from\\_indian\\_leader\\_to\\_roosevelt\\_in\\_1942.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2014/07/23/gandhi_and_fdr_history_letter_from_indian_leader_to_roosevelt_in_1942.html).

This is a very useful source on my topic. It is a letter from Indian civil-rights activist Mahatma Gandhi to Franklin Roosevelt, who was the president of the US at the time when India was pushing for independence. In this letter, Gandhi is asking Roosevelt to peacefully speak with Churchill about India being free. Gandhi *really* wanted Indian independence, but he definitely did not want war.

Roosevelt, Elliott. *As He Saw It*. Greenwood Press, 1946.

This book is a narration by Elliot Roosevelt from all of his father's (FDR) conferences and talks and includes conferences between FDR and Churchill about India. Roosevelt is telling Churchill to give Indian people education and provide welfare to make them successful, but Churchill disagrees. From this account, it seems as though FDR tried to do what Gandhi asked him to. It also contains an account of the Atlantic Charter, and this source has most of my quotes in the paper.

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano. "Joint Declaration-UN Hand Written List." Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park. Manuscript.

This is a declaration written by Roosevelt from the Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum archives. It is important because instead of listing India under Great Britain, he listed them as their own country.

---. Telegram to Harry Hopkins. 12 Apr. 1942, Library of Congress.

This is a telegram from Roosevelt to Harry Hopkins to be "immediately directed to Churchill". Roosevelt was trying to warn Churchill not to send Cripps to India for a *third* time until India was given another chance. However, Churchill ignored the warning and sent Cripps again, and the mission failed.

Wavell, Archibald. Telegram. 1943. *The National Archives*,

[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/empire/g3/cs3/g3cs3s4.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/empire/g3/cs3/g3cs3s4.htm). Accessed 3 Apr. 2018.

This is a telegram from the national archives from the Viceroy of India, Archibald Wavell, to the British government. The telegram was about Mahatma Gandhi's fasts in jail as a peaceful means of protest. The fasts could have potentially hurt the British, because if Gandhi died in prison, the British would undoubtedly be blamed. Roosevelt sent someone named Phillips to see the viceroy, and this telegram describes the encounter between Wavell and Phillips.

## **Secondary Sources**

*British Library.*

[www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpregion/asia/india/indianindependence/ww2/index.html](http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpregion/asia/india/indianindependence/ww2/index.html).

This source gave me context on India's independence. It contains a helpful timeline which briefly summarizes the time period from The British East India Company to India gaining their independence in 1947.

History.com Staff. "Atlantic Charter." *History.com*, 2009, [www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/atlantic-charter](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/atlantic-charter). Accessed 12 Jan. 2018.

This source provided me with a background on the Atlantic Charter. It was a meeting with Roosevelt and Churchill discussing the problems during the war and what they would do Post- World War 2. Roosevelt and Churchill had a conflict at the Atlantic Charter when Roosevelt brought up India.

Kux, Dennis. *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941-1991*. DIANE Publishing, 1993. *Google Books*, DIANE Publishing, [books.google.com](http://books.google.com). Accessed 16 Jan. 2018.

This is a great book about Churchill's lack of compromise. It shows that Roosevelt tried to prod Churchill into including India in the Atlantic Charter. Churchill wanted India's manpower and resources as help in the war, however, and just wouldn't budge or even consider to give them freedom.

Maitra, Ramtanu. "U.S Policy toward India, 1940-50: An Indian Viewpoint." *Executive Intelligence Review*, 12 May 1995.

This is an Article containing a part about FDR and Churchill. In the source I found important people like Churchill's **Assistant Secretary Berle** and British ally **Sumner Welles**. The rest of the article had information that I already know from the book *As He Saw It*.

McDowell, Edwin. "Roosevelt-Churchill Letters Depict Tensions." *New York Times*, 11 July 1984. *The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/1984/07/11/books/roosevelt-churchill-letters-depict-tensions.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/11/books/roosevelt-churchill-letters-depict-tensions.html?pagewanted=all).

This source contains letters between President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. As FDR started to talk more about India, Churchill began to stop liking him and their conversations became tenser. A conflict was starting, so what kind of compromise did they reach, if they reached one?

Merrill, Dennis. "The Ironies of History." *The United States and Decolonization: Power and Freedom*, edited by David Ryan and Victor Pungong, St. Martin's Press, 2000.

This is a book of different sections/essays. I use the Essay by Dennis Merrill which contains quotes from Roosevelt to ambassador John G. Winant. It also states the reason for why Roosevelt cared about India.

"Stafford Cripps." *Making Britain*,

[www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/stafford-cripps](http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/stafford-cripps). Accessed 15 Jan. 2018.

This source was to find out about Sir Stafford Cripps, the former leader of the British House of Commons. He went on missions to India to discover the idea of self-

government there, and he failed all of them. He was a firm believer of the prospect of Indian Independence.

Weigold, Auriol. *Churchill, Roosevelt, and India: Propaganda during World War II*. New York, Routledge, 2008.

This book has a little bit on the conflict, but I use it as a source about Sir Stafford Cripps. It has information on his India missions, and his role in the tug-of-war between India and Britain to gain America's opinion.

Wolfe, L. "The Other War: FDR's Battle against Churchill and the British Empire." *The American Almanac*.

This source from *The American Almanac* has a lot of quotes from Churchill and Roosevelt, and some of them are about India. I don't really need the rest of the source other than the quotes, because I already have the rest of the information about India.