

“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 the United States attempted to play a part in India's liberation, particularly President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His discussions with Mahatma Gandhi and his attempts to sway the opinion of the British Prime minister, Winston Churchill, resulted in a conflict between the two leaders between 1942 and 1947 that was caused by Churchill's lack of compromise on the issue of Indian Independence. This paper examines the conflict and shows that despite Roosevelt's sympathy with the Indian cause and his numerous efforts to sway Churchill's opinion, his intervention proved ultimately fruitless.

Roosevelt vehemently opposed colonization because it undermined the values of freedom and liberty that America stood for. 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.

Winston Churchill strongly disagreed with Roosevelt's point of view. He was the Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1940-1945 and from 1951-1955. As such, he had the greatest power over India's fate during this period, and that is why Roosevelt tried to negotiate with him on numerous occasions. 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, strongly opposed British exploitation of Indian goods and people. He wished to liberate his country from British control and played a central role in gaining India's independence. Gandhi was an Indian peace activist who tried to solve conflict without violence. His party was the first to stand up to British oppression. Gandhi sparked civil disobedience, which eventually set the stage for figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X to take similar actions during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. In 1942, Gandhi launched the Quit India movement, which demanded that Britain leave India. Gandhi gave the Quit India speech on August 8, 1942, stating "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). In order to gain American awareness and support for his cause, he reached out to Roosevelt, because of his status as the president of one of the most powerful countries in the world. Gandhi hoped that Roosevelt would help to achieve a peaceful compromise between India and Great Britain by engaging in dialogue with Churchill.

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, he 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). Roosevelt responded with a letter of his own on August 1, 1942, which 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 said: “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 therefore stood in conflict with American aims to spread freedom throughout the world.

The Atlantic Charter provides further 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. FDR and Churchill argued about India during the conference, starting with Roosevelt’s criticism of British Empire trade agreements. He 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 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. Roosevelt’s language reveals a mounting conflict between the two world leaders.

Roosevelt prodded Churchill to include India in the self-government clause. He expressed his concern to the US ambassador to Great Britain, John G. Winant, who also tried to convince Churchill to reconsider India's position (Merrill 110). This attempt proved unsuccessful, however, and Churchill did not include India in the clause to the great displeasure of Roosevelt. 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 passionately opposed 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. They started to refer to each other more formally instead of greeting each other as friends like 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.

Churchill expressed his disagreement with Roosevelt multiple times, but Roosevelt persisted. An example of his perseverance was a telegram he 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. 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. 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, so Cripps failed again. 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 freedom until 1947, when Clement Attlee was prime minister and passed the Indian Independence Act. 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.”

India 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 didn’t free its colonies, including India, he would not work with them in the war. Churchill 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. 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 helped Britain during World War Two, and the two countries still share a “special relationship”.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

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. 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.

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.

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 Elliott 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. 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.

Secondary Sources

British Library.

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 that 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. 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. 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

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 tense. 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 that 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. 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.