



CHURCHILL

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INTRODUCTION

Winston Churchill's first day as prime minister was a long one, ending at 3:00 a.m. on May 11, 1940. It was a dark hour. Great Britain teetered on the brink of defeat at the hands of [Adolf Hitler's](#) forces, which had already overrun most of Europe. A sagacious man might have sensed impending doom, but the sixty-five-year-old Churchill slept well - if not for long. "I felt as if I were walking with destiny," he wrote in his [memoir](#) of [World War II](#), "and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and this trial." So it had, and the way he withstood the trial became the stuff of legend.

Churchill possessed an iron will and a subtle conscience. His staunch patriotism, tenacity, appetite for a fight, and, above all, his towering rhetoric inspired the British people to mount a gallant defense of their island nation. Having set a new bar for national heroism, he earned a place in the pantheon of the world's greatest leaders.

Churchill, a fearless soldier, was a veteran of countless battles and a rider in the last real cavalry charge of the British armies. He was also a gifted writer, a winner of the [Nobel Prize in Literature](#), whose war reporting made his name and whose books outlived him. A *bon vivant* who loved his brandy and cigars, he was also a devoted husband whose marriage was a lifelong love affair. By any measure, Winston Churchill was a giant.

But the man was far from perfect. He was a hero, yes, but a human one. He could be petty, irascible, and self-centered; it was bred in his bone that white Englishmen were born to lead the world and all others to be led. His mistakes cost billions of dollars and thousands of lives, but he had courage and a born politician's sense of the public stage. He could outwait adversity and remain a player in the game. And when a bulldog was what England needed, he was there with a ferocious bark and bite. In his first [speech](#) as prime minister, in words so bleak and, at the same time, as splendid as any ever uttered under such terrible circumstances, he told his people, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat."

That stark message - and many later ones - carried the British people through the Nazi [Blitz](#), years of misery, and hundreds of thousands of deaths. As President [John F. Kennedy](#) echoed in making Churchill an honorary U.S. citizen in 1963, when Britain had few other weapons, Churchill "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." His words were inseparable from the man, and his eloquence moved millions to accomplish impossible tasks. In the end, Churchill became a regal figure whose life symbolized heroic defiance of tyranny in the face of impossible odds.

Here is his story.



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“UNDER FIRE”

Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was born two months prematurely at 1:30 a.m. on November 30, 1874, in the splendor of [Blenheim Palace](#), near Oxford in south central England. The grand estate originally belonged to [John Churchill](#), the first Duke of Marlborough, who purchased its 2,000 acres and built a 300-room manor house with money given him by [Queen Anne](#). It was a reward for his victory in the [Battle of Blenheim](#) in 1704.

Churchill's parents were distinguished in their own right. [Lord Randolph Churchill](#) was the talented son of the seventh Duke of Marlborough, but as a younger son, Randolph couldn't inherit the dukedom. However, he became the secretary of state for India and chancellor of the [Exchequer](#). Educated at [Eton](#) and [Oxford](#), he was a gifted orator and Parliament member for much of his adult life. [Jennie Jerome Churchill](#) was the determined second daughter of Leonard Jerome, a wealthy New York stock speculator and promoter whose ancestors fought on the American side in the [Revolutionary War](#).

The young Winston Churchill was small for his age, sensitive, and emotional. From age two to six, he lived in Dublin, his grandfather having been appointed viceroy to Ireland and employing Winston's father as his private secretary. It was in Dublin that Winston's brother John was born; the two were close and companionable playmates. As was the custom of the times, the boys were raised by a nanny, Elizabeth Anne Everest. She was hired by the Churchills when Winston was a month old. He fondly called her "Woomany." Later he wrote, "My nurse was my confidante. Mrs. Everest it was who looked after me and tended all my wants. It was to her that I poured out all my many troubles. . . ." His mother, Churchill wrote in *My Early Life*, "shone for me like the Evening Star. I loved her dearly - but at a distance." He was much closer to Mrs. Everest; in the prime minister's office, it was her photo that hung on the wall by his desk.

A month before Churchill's eighth birthday, his parents enrolled him at St. George's, Ascot, a boarding school outside London. He was miserable there. Caned often, he left after two years with bitter memories, having fared poorly both in the classroom and on the athletic field.

Churchill's father thought his son's poor grades meant the boy was intellectually slow. He was not. Winston did well at subjects he liked, poorly at those he did not. "Where my reason, imagination, or interest were not engaged," he later wrote, "I would or could not learn."

In 1883, Churchill transferred to a boarding school run by two women in Brighton in southwest England. It was smaller than St. George's and friendlier, with teachers who recognized his strengths. He spent three years there, and despite a bout of double pneumonia, he grew healthier and stronger. Churchill's mother rarely visited, though he wrote letters begging her either to come to the school or allow him to come home. His relationship with his father was even chillier; he once remarked that they barely spoke to each other.

After graduating in 1888, Churchill enrolled at [Harrow](#), a public school that, in the British sense, meant private. His father chose Harrow over the more prestigious Eton because it was a feeder school for the Royal Military College at [Sandhurst](#). Lord Randolph had long imagined that the army might be his son's destiny. Surveying one of the boy's elaborate toy-soldier battlefields and envisioning it as a clue to his future, Randolph suggested that a military career might suit him. Young Winston was elated.

Even among English schools, Harrow was old, having received its Royal Charter in 1572, though its roots went back to the thirteenth century. It clung to tradition. Students were required to participate in school-wide choral performances, and many also played sports. The game of squash was invented at Harrow, and the school helped to codify the formal rules of soccer. The students wore uniforms - white shirts with black ties and light-gray trousers. In cold weather, the boys added a blue sweater or a coat called a bluer. They also wore the Harrow Hat, a straw boater encircled by a blue band. On Sundays and formal occasions, the students donned tailcoats and pinstriped pants, sometimes accompanied by top hats and canes.

Churchill won a fencing championship at Harrow and earned high marks in history and English. Under the tutelage of his English teacher, Robert Somervell, Churchill became, in the words of biographer [Paul Johnson](#), "not merely adept but masterly in his use of words. And he loved them."

Churchill was also beginning to think about his future. His friend Murland de Grasse Evans, who was knighted by Queen [Elizabeth II](#) and lived to see Churchill become prime minister, recalled a conversation with Winston about their ambitions. Evans asked if Churchill would join the army, and Churchill said it was likely. He also said that whatever he did, he was sure to have "great adventures."

Upon graduating from Harrow in 1892, Churchill enrolled at

Sandhurst. He was still having trouble with courses that didn't interest him, including math and science, thereby forcing him to take the entrance exam three times.

While at Sandhurst his father's health, which had been in general decline, worsened. On January 24, 1895, three weeks shy of his forty-sixth birthday, Lord Randolph died. Winston was twenty years old. A month later, he joined the cavalry with the rank of cornet, or second lieutenant, in the [4th Queen's Own Hussars](#). He chose the cavalry instead of the infantry because the required academic grades were lower and the cavalry curriculum didn't include math. Also, it cost less.

Churchill decided to sidestep the traditional army career moves, which meant promotion up through the ranks. Instead, he planned to rely on his family's connections to secure postings that promised a chance to win battlefield honors. He also expected to gain fame and fortune by serving as a war correspondent and publishing books about his travels, as his father had done before him.

As it turned out, his writing became his main source of income, and at times he came perilously close to going broke. Never good at handling money, at his first posting Churchill calculated that his salary of 300 pounds a year was nowhere near what he would need to support the same lifestyle of his fellow officers. He reckoned that he would need at least 500 additional pounds. His mother agreed to an allowance of 400 pounds, but he habitually overspent.

Characteristically, Churchill wasted no time in getting his career on track. His regiment was to ship out to India, but only after a lengthy leave, so he used the interval to travel to Cuba. The island was in rebellion against Spain, and Churchill, temporarily attached to a British unit sent as neutral observers, negotiated a contract to write about the insurgency for the *Daily Graphic*.

At first, Churchill was sympathetic to the rebels. "Spain in Cuba seemed to him a model of all that Imperial rule should not be: irresponsible, wasteful, harsh, above all vindictive and vengeful," wrote one biographer. Churchill had decided that the Spanish regime was so corrupt that the revolution was justified. But suddenly he found himself conflicted when he discovered that the Spanish had the same feelings about their empire as the Brits did about theirs. His own jingoism, planted by his father and nourished by childhood reading of the novels of [Rudyard Kipling](#) and [H. Rider Haggard](#), was further stoked by the headmaster of Harrow, an ardent devotee of the empire and all it stood for.

In Cuba, on December 2, 1895, Churchill got his first taste of combat, greeting it with Kiplingesque fervor. He described the scene, packing it with color and excitement, in a dispatch for the *Daily Graphic*: "Behold [the] next morning a distinct sensation in the life of a young officer! It is still dark, but the sky is paling. We are in what a brilliant though little-known writer has called, 'The dim mysterious temple of the Dawn.' We are on our horses, in uniform; our revolvers are loaded. In the dusk and half-light, long files of armed and laden men are shuffling off towards the enemy. He may be very near; perhaps he is waiting for us a mile away. We cannot tell; we know nothing of the qualities either of our friends or foes. We have nothing to do with their quarrels. Except in personal self-defense, we can take no part in their combats. But we feel it is a great moment in our lives - in fact, one of the best we have ever experienced. We think that something is going to happen; we hope devoutly that something will happen; yet at the same time we do not want to be hurt or killed."

Churchill pondered what it was about war that lured young men. Certainly it was an adventure, but in many ways a preposterous one. He was astonished at how easily one could commit to the time and expense of traveling to a far-off land in hopes of "getting into a scrape" in the company of strangers. The correspondent admitted that it was completely irrational, while adding that many in the British army would be happy to be in his saddle. One could never know what might happen next.

"On this day," he wrote, "we halted for breakfast. Every man sat by his horse and ate what he had in his pocket. I had been provided with half a skinny chicken. I was engaged in gnawing the drumstick when suddenly, close at hand, almost in our faces, it seemed, a ragged volley of fire rang out from the edge of the forest. The horse immediately behind me - not my horse - gave a bound. There was excitement and commotion. A party of soldiers rushed to the place whence the volley had been fired, and, of course, found nothing except a few empty cartridge cases."

Churchill contemplated the stricken horse, a chestnut hit between the ribs. Blood coated the horse's flank and pooled on the ground below. Soldiers removed its saddle and bridle. For the first time, it was clear to Churchill that the animal was dying. He wrote that the horse's demise caused him to consider their enterprise more thoughtfully than he had done before, realizing that he could have been killed as easily as the animal: "I could not help reflecting that the bullet which had struck the chestnut had certainly passed within a foot of my head. So, at any rate, I had been 'under fire.' That was

something.”

The next day, in a second dispatch to the newspaper, Churchill wrote about a hot, humid day on which he and several officers went for a swim to cool off in a river near their camp. As the men dressed, someone took a shot at them, then two more, then a full volley: “The bullets whistled over our heads. It was evident that an attack of some sort was in progress. A sentry, sitting on a tree about fifty yards higher up stream, popped over it and, kneeling down behind, began to fire at the advancing enemy, who were now not 200 yards away. We pulled on our clothes right away . . . one of the officers . . . half-dressed . . . ran and collected about fifty men who were building shelters for the night close by. Of course, they had their rifles, in this war no soldier ever goes a yard without his weapon, and these men doubled up in high delight and gave the rebels a volley from their [Mausers](#), which checked the enemy’s advance.”

Churchill and the other men scrambled back to camp only to discover that it, too, was under attack as the Spaniards and the rebels skirmished nearby. Churchill could tell which side was firing by the sounds of their weapons: single cracking shots from the insurgents and rapid, rattling emptying of magazines by the Spanish. This went on for about thirty minutes before the rebels retreated. But late that night, the rebels returned and fired on the camp for an hour. Several soldiers were killed. One bullet ripped through the thatch of a hut in which Churchill had been trying to sleep.

He departed Cuba with a lasting taste for combat and Havana cigars, which he smoked for the rest of his life. From there he traveled to New York, where he stayed with a friend of his mother’s. Soon he received word from England that Elizabeth Everest, his nanny whom he dearly loved, was dying. He returned home to be with her. Churchill thought Everest had been unfairly treated by his parents, who let her go after Churchill left home. He had sent money to her when he could and also paid for her headstone.

On September 11, 1896, Churchill, now a second lieutenant, sailed with his regiment to India. A little more than two weeks later, they entered the harbor of Bombay (now known as Mumbai). On the day of its arrival, Churchill’s ship was attended by a fleet of small boats. When it was time to go ashore, one of the boats was summoned. The water was rough, and what happened at the dock stayed with Churchill for the rest of his life: “We came alongside of a great stone wall with dripping steps and iron rings for handholds. The boat rose and fell four or five feet with the surges. I put out my hand and

grasped at a ring, but before I could get my feet on the steps the boat swung away, giving my right shoulder a sharp and peculiar wrench."

Muttering and in shock, Churchill hauled himself onto the dock and hugged his throbbing shoulder. It wasn't dislocated, but the injury was much worse than Churchill realized at the time, and it would be a substantial handicap for the rest of his life.

Describing his bad arm as "a grave embarrassment" in moments of "peril and violence," the more immediate threat was to his polo playing – the "Emperor of Games," he called the sport. He had embraced polo at Sandhurst at the encouragement of the school, since it was superb training for combat on horseback. Despite Churchill's slight build, he was a fearless and combative sportsman. Following the injury, he resorted to strapping his arm to his side while playing polo. Despite the added handicap, Churchill was still regarded as one of the regiment's better players.

Regarding his shoulder injury as bad luck, he was philosophical about it and always believed that what seemed to be a misfortune often worked out for the good. Bad luck, Churchill insisted, sometimes saved you from worse luck.

The British Empire in India was at its apex when Churchill arrived with the Hussars. In Bangalore, he and two other officers shared a bungalow crowded with servants. The regiment drilled in the morning, played polo in the early evening, and raised many glasses in the cool nights. It was colonial army service in the classic tradition. The British sahibs, or masters, were an elevated class presumed to be both culturally and legally superior to the local citizenry. Some of the Brits immersed themselves in Indian life, but many more took refuge in private clubs and suburban enclaves.

Finding himself in this exotic locale, Churchill felt at a disadvantage because of his ignorance of the history and political forces that had shaped this world over which Britain had such vast control. Always a realist, he recognized that his "purely technical" education lacked intellectual refinement. So he set out to remedy the situation by writing to his mother, asking her to send books. She complied with monthly shipments of what he called "standard works."

While his fellow soldiers napped during the heat of the day, Churchill read, beginning with [Edward Gibbon](#). Churchill knew that Gibbon had been one of his father's favorites. He plunged into *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and was beguiled. He devoured the author's works, marveling at the writing and scribbling notes in the margins.

When he discovered that the edition he was reading also included Gibbon's *Autobiography*, he read that, too. Churchill was especially moved by Gibbon's recollection of a nurse he had loved as a child.

Even with its many amenities, Churchill found garrison duty in Bangalore boring, but there was adventure to be had. India was a fractious country, a loose assemblage of more than 600 states, each ruled by independent rajas under Britain's wing. When Churchill heard of an insurrection in 1897 in [Swat](#), then on India's northwest frontier and now part of Pakistan, he got himself assigned to the contingent sent to quell the uprising. He also landed an assignment to cover the expedition for London's *Daily Telegraph* and India's *The Pioneer*, the newspaper that once employed Rudyard Kipling. In July and August, Churchill fought with gusto in the ensuing [Siege of Malakand](#), eventually expanding his dispatches into a book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*.

In it, he wrote that those who lacked military service could not appreciate what he called "the compensations of war," of which there were many. Churchill mentioned the exhilaration of living in the open and those thrilling moments of keenest action - if one survived, of course - and the equally enjoyable anticipation and recall. There was also the camaraderie among soldiers, each of whom had an equal chance of distinguishing himself in battle. These, Churchill wrote, were among the most intense and rarest of pleasures. [Colonel Blimp](#), the satirical prototype of the English jingoist, couldn't have put it better, and for good measure, Churchill added an even more Blimpish caveat: "When all has been said, we are confronted with a mournful but stubborn fact. In this contrary life, so prosaic is the mind of man, so material his soul, so poor his spirit, that there is no one who has been six months on active service who is not delighted to get safe home again, to the comfortable monotonies of peace."

Still in his early twenties, Churchill had all the stuffiness of a retired major in a London club, deploring the feeble quality of today's young men. The book earned Churchill 600 pounds and praise from Prime Minister [Robert Salisbury](#).

In 1898, Churchill departed India to serve in the last stages of retaking Sudan, led by Lord [Herbert H. Kitchener](#). Britain's involvement in northern Africa was the latest chapter in a long and complex history of foreign intrigue and conquest in a region dominated by Egypt. Ruled by its pharaohs for 3,000 years, Egypt successively fell into the clutches of Greece, Rome, and Turkey. France was the first European country to lay claim to it when [Napoleon](#)'s army occupied the country between 1798 and 1801,

after which Egypt regained her independence. Then, in 1820, Egypt conquered the northern part of Sudan, its neighbor to the south. Over the next few years, the two countries came to be regarded as a single state.

Always strategically significant because of its location on prime trading routes, Northeastern Africa's importance multiplied with the 1869 completion of the [Suez Canal](#). Built by an independent French-owned company, Britain opposed the canal, though when it opened a British ship was first in line to navigate the waterway. Ten years later, when Egypt was wracked by debt and political turmoil, Britain bombarded the port of Alexandria and invaded. Eventually, the English seized Cairo, too, and in 1882 they occupied all of Egypt and Sudan.

Supposedly, the occupation was "advisory," but in reality Britain ruled the region. Then, in 1885, a Sudanese rebellion led to the collapse of British authority. Little more than a decade later, Lord Kitchener led a combined British and Egyptian army to retake Sudan. When Churchill arrived on the scene, he was swept up in the last real British cavalry charge, the charge of the [21st Lancers](#) at the [Battle of Omdurman](#). He was profoundly shaken by the experience. His patriotism and pleasure in taking part in battle remained intact, but he was finally forced to acknowledge the dark side.

Churchill described the battle and its aftermath for the *Morning Post*, vividly recounting how it seemed to take place in silence, flickering like a cinematograph. Though the attack was militarily useless, Churchill wished that his comrades had turned around and charged back through the melee. Back in Britain, he wrote a two-volume account, *The River War*, of the Sudan campaign. Churchill's description of the Lancers' charge against an entrenched force of Sudanese Dervishes revealed shocking violence and its ghastly aftermath.

As the 21st Lancers, 400 strong, galloped across a broad plain, they began taking fire from riflemen in what appeared to be a comparable Sudanese force just 250 yards away. Bullets kicked up blinding bits of sand and gravel as the Lancers charged forward. As they surged near the enemy position, 2,500 white-cloaked Dervishes burst from a shallow depression where they had been hiding. Waving flags and screaming, they rushed to join their comrades, holy warriors who attacked with fanatic frenzy. The Dervishes, both feared and respected, appeared to have the Lancers up against overwhelming odds.

But the Lancers rode even faster, with men on either flank driving their horses inward to focus the charge on the enemy's center; the first wave broke through the ranks of the Dervishes. Both sides collected themselves for a few moments, then the main body of the Lancers completed the charge, smashing into the Dervish horde. Hand-to-hand fighting broke out, with lances, swords, and pistols being leveled. As Churchill later said with understatement, every man who left that bloody field alive had a tale to tell.

The Dervishes fought bravely, hacking down horses, spearing attackers, firing rifles at point-blank range, and savagely swinging sharp, heavy swords that left men and horses with gaping wounds. But the close-in fighting lasted only a few minutes. The Lancers remounted and rode beyond the clamor, turning to watch as the Dervishes slaughtered the Englishmen left behind with what Churchill described as cold efficiency.

Though dimly aware of a much larger battle taking place beyond the surrounding hills, one in which the British had a tactical edge and superior arms, the Lancers remained focused on what Churchill called a "private quarrel" with the Dervishes at hand. Regrouping, the Lancers charged back into a nightmarish scene. Horses without riders galloped across the plain, while others trotted in circles carrying their wounded and helpless riders. Five officers and sixty-five men had been killed or gravely wounded. As for the far larger force of Sudanese warriors, the toll was much greater.

As Churchill later told it, the Dervish line was broken by the charge, but the men began to regroup at once, pulling themselves together and courageously preparing for another shock. As for the Lancers' squadrons, they were back in formation, wheeling to the right and galloping around the Dervish flank, whereupon they dismounted and leveled heavy fire with their carbines.

Under the pressure of this assault, the enemy switched front to meet the new attack, so that both sides were at right angles to their original lines. When the Dervish completed their change of front, they began to advance against the dismounted men. "But the fire was accurate," Churchill wrote, "and there can be little doubt that the moral effect of the charge had been very great, and that these brave enemies were no longer unshaken. . . . [T]hey retreated swiftly, though in good order, towards the ridge of Surgham Hill, where the Khalifa's Black Flag still waved, and the 21st Lancers remained in possession of the ground - and of their dead."

When the fighting came to an end, the Battle of Omdurman was

judged a British triumph. Some 10,000 Sudanese were killed, another 13,000 wounded, and 5,000 taken prisoner. By comparison, only forty-seven British soldiers were killed and 382 wounded. But when Churchill surveyed the carnage three days later, he was stunned. The scene forever altered his view of war, and he remembered it in stark detail: "All over the ground - on average three yards apart - were dead men, clad in the white and patched smocks of faithful Dervishes. Three days of burning sun had done their work. The bodies were swollen to almost gigantic proportions. Twice as large as living men, they appeared in every sense monstrous. The more advanced corpses hardly resembled human beings, but rather great bladders such as natives use to float down the Nile. . . . Frightful gashes scarred their limbs, and great black stains, once crimson, covered their garments. The sight was appalling."

A hot wind blew the day Churchill and his fellow Lancers rode through the battlefield. The omnipresent stench of death, Churchill wrote, "redoubled the horror." No one who ever saw such a killing field could put it out of mind. It made him reconsider the nobility of war while driving home the truth that glory and honor are not the universal reward for the dead and wounded. "I have tried to gild war," Churchill admitted, "and to solace myself for the loss of dear and gallant friends with the thought that a soldier's death for a cause that he believes in will count for much, whatever may be beyond this world."

When the soldier of a civilized power dies in action, Churchill said, his body is borne reverently to the grave by friendly arms. The wail of the fifes, the roll of the drums, the triumphant words of the funeral service all conceal the inherent wretchedness, and the spectator sympathizes with, almost envies, the comrade who is exiting this earth. "But there was nothing *dulce et decorum* about the Dervish dead, nothing of the dignity of unconquerable manhood - all was filthy corruption. Yet these were as brave men as ever walked the earth," Churchill remarked. "The conviction was borne in on me that their claim beyond the grave in respect of a valiant death was not less good than that which any of our countrymen could make. The thought may not be original; it may happily be untrue; it seemed certainly most unwelcome. . . ."

Churchill's sense of victory was spent, he said, replaced by feelings of disgust at the enormity of the carnage. And as awful as it was to see the dead, the silent and gruesome testimony of the wounded men was even worse. The British men wounded on the field of battle were rewarded - with a pension, an elevation in rank, perhaps a

mention of gallantry in a dispatch back home. Nothing of the kind awaited the fallen Dervishes.

Churchill saw one fighter who, after losing a foot in the battle, crawled for three days and covered just a single mile. Churchill never learned if the man reached the river toward which he was moving, inch by excruciating inch. Another sat upright while dragging himself backward, hunching along with his hands, his smashed legs trailing uselessly. What remarkable men, Churchill thought. How could they survive such torment?

Churchill was appalled at press reports claiming the Dervishes had been tended to with great respect after the fighting. It was a lie, he said. He and his comrades had had no desire to linger among the fallen or to help those still alive. All they wanted was to return to camp and leave behind the blood and gore and memories. As for retribution, tempting as it may have seemed in the abstract, Churchill was ready to quit the fight that he and his compatriots had so convincingly won.

"So as the haze deepened into the gloom of the night, and the uncertain outlines of the distant hills faded altogether from view," Churchill wrote, "we rode back to camp – home to Omdurman – and left the field of battle to its silent occupants. There they lie," he intoned, "those valiant warriors of a false faith and fallen domination; their only history preserved by their conquerors; their only monument their bones - and these the drifting sand of the desert will bury in a few short years."

Three days before, he had seen the enemy rise - eager, confident, resolved - as the roar of their shouting swelled like the surf on a rocky shore. Flashing blades boasted of their numbers, vitality, ferocity, and confidence in their strength and the justice of their religious cause. Now only the dead and dying on the plain and the fugitives scattered in the wilderness remained. The terrible machinery of scientific war had done its work, destroying the Dervish host. "Their end, however, only anticipated that of the victors," Churchill reminded, "for time, which laughs at science, as science laughs at valor, will in due course contemptuously brush both combatants away."

News of the carnage at the Battle of Omdurman journeyed the world. *The New York Times*, in an article filed via camel from the scene, reported on the larger fight raging all around the battlefields in which Churchill took part:

The bravery of the Dervishes can hardly be overstated. Those

who carried the flags struggled to within a few hundred yards of the British firing line, while the mounted Emirs absolutely threw their lives away in bold charges.

When the Dervishes withdrew behind the ridge in front of their camp, the whole force marched in battalions toward Omdurman. As the British troops surmounted the crest adjoining the Nile, [their men] on the right, came into contact with the enemy, who had re-formed under cover of a rocky eminence, and had massed beneath the Black Standard of the Khalifa in order to make a supreme effort to retrieve the fortunes of the day. A mass 15,000 strong bore down on the British.

General Kitchener swung round the centre and left. . . and [his] Egyptians, hitherto held in reserve, joined the firing line in ten minutes, and before the Dervishes could drive their attack home.

The flower of the Khalifa's army was caught in a depression, and within a zone of withering cross-fire from three brigades, with the attendant artillery. The devoted Sudanese strove heroically to make headway, but every rush was stopped, while their main body was literally mowed down by a sustained deadly cross-fire.

The *Times* story went on to say that, as the battle wore on, the dwindling Dervish forces began to flee. Its description of the aftermath echoed Churchill's observation that the white-clad corpses littering the field looked like "snow" on the battle-darkened landscape. The *Times* also took note of the Lancers' daring charge: "Among the chief incidents of the battle was a brilliant charge by the 21st Lancers, under Lieut. Col. Martin. Galloping down on a detached body of the enemy, they found the dervish swordsmen massed behind, and were forced to charge home against appalling odds. The Lancers hacked through the mass, rallied, and kept the dervish horde at bay."

In *The River War*, Churchill pondered what seemed to him the barbarism and irrationality of those local rulers whom Britain battled to preserve as part of its enormous Empire. "We may consider how strange and varied are the diversions of an Imperial people," he wrote. "Year after year, and stretching back to an indefinite horizon, we see the figures of the odd and bizarre potentates against whom the British arms are continually turned.

"They pass in a long procession: The Akhund of Swat; Cetewayo, brandishing an assegai as naked as himself; Kruger, singing a psalm of victory; Osman Digna, the Immortal and the Irrecoverable;

Theebaw, with his umbrella; Lobengula, gazing fondly at the pages of Truth; Prempeh, abasing himself in the dust; the Mad Mullah, on his white ass; and, latest of all, the Khalifa in his coach of state. It is like a pantomime scene at Drury Lane. "These extraordinary foreign figures," Churchill went on, "each with his complete set of crimes, horrible customs, and 'minor peculiarities,' march one by one from the dark wings of barbarism up to the bright footlights of civilization."

How strange it was, he thought, that such overlords are given their brief moments in the sun, but in the end, these minor actors are abruptly dismissed from the stage and then forgotten. "Perhaps the time will come when the supply will be exhausted, and there will be no more royal freaks to conquer. In that gloomy period there will be no more of these nice expeditions – 'the image of war without its guilt and only five-and-twenty percent its danger' – no more medals for the soldiers, no more peerages for the generals, no more copy for the journalists. The good old times will have passed away, and the most cynical philosopher will be forced to admit that, though the world may be much more prosperous, it can scarcely be so merry."

A growing reputation born of his war reporting, Churchill returned to England in 1899 to run for a seat in Parliament. He chose the working-class constituency of Oldham, near Manchester in the north of England. He campaigned hard, but lost narrowly in a national tide running against his Conservative Party.

Churchill's dashing image, earned as a fearless military man, was somewhat negated by an odd handicap: He struggled with a speech defect, a long-time affliction variously described as a lisp or a stammer. He worked diligently to overcome it, even having dentures made to help him. Finally, after years of public speaking, he was able to say "my impediment is no hindrance." But in his maiden political campaign, it might have been a factor in his defeat.



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“TOO MUCH
SURRENDERING”