‘We Shall Fight on the Beaches’ - A Rhetorical Analysis

I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone.

–Sir Winston Churchill, ‘We Shall Fight on the Beaches’.

Sir Winston Churchill’s speech, ‘We Shall Fight on the Beaches’ was a wonderful piece of moving rhetoric. The diction that Churchill uses to deliver his message is not so advanced that one cannot understand him easily, but still manages to portray a sense of Churchill’s deeply intellectual status without being condescending. It is a very inspirational piece, a moving speech, and a powerful call to action aimed to uplift the downtrodden population of Britain at the time. Churchill responded to the need for inspiration with his now-famous speech. His use of rhetoric not only inspired Britain, but was a powerful tool that brought about a final victory over the Nazis.

In order to fully comprehend the reasons for Churchill’s speech and the vast response of relief from the population, one must understand the events leading up to its giving. On June 4th, 1940, Europe was a very large battleground. The Nazi party of Germany had declared war on France and Britain, and was spreading throughout the continent like wildfire. They appeared to
be unstoppable. Earlier that year, the King of Belgium had called to the Allies for aid in protecting his country. Britain and France had complied, both sending large forces to defend Belgium from German capture. Their forces pressed forward to stop the German advance, allowing the grand Belgian Army to defend the coastal side, the only viable evacuation route, the Dunkirk bridgehead. Unfortunately, the Belgian king surrendered and ordered his army to stand down, exposing this evacuation route and the British Expeditionary Force.

However, on 24 May Hitler ordered a surprise halt to the German advance, inadvertently giving the Allies a three-day window of opportunity to prepare an evacuation. The Royal Navy had been moving destroyers and transport ships to the English Channel and together with a flotilla of hundreds of civilian-crewed merchant navy ships, lifeboats, fishing boats, pleasure cruisers and yachts they undertook the rescue of thousands of trapped soldiers as the Luftwaffe strafed the beaches and attacked the ships. In what Churchill described as a ‘miracle of deliverance’, over 300,000 Allied soldiers were evacuated ‘out of the jaws of death and shame’ in Dunkirk and the surrounding beaches between 26 May and 4 June (Abbot).

Thus came about a great celebration. The British Expeditionary Force had been delivered from the hands of the German army, which would surely have annihilated them. The country was in a state of euphoria, so great was the flood of relief that swept through the population.
This situation was perfectly suited to Churchill’s goals, and he knew that he but to inspire his people to rise up and he would effectively win his war. His ultimate goal was to keep fighting until he and his country were destroyed or had achieved victory against their enemies, and this event, the salvation of the British Expeditionary Force through serious German error, an error so great, in fact, that it singlehandedly lost the war for them. Had the B.E.F. been destroyed, Britain would have no fighting force, and would be forced to surrender, effectively ending the war before the United States had the chance to become involved. Playing upon the serious error made by the Nazis, he was prompted to deliver a message of hope and deliverance, but only after a certain amount of woe and hardship, a message that is now entitled “We Shall Fight on the Beaches”. It called on the British people to stand up to the tyranny of the Nazi regime, as well as on the American people, as the New World, to come to the rescue of Europe, the Old World.

Churchill was undoubtedly a great orator, gifted at writing and delivering his speeches with power, despite being born with a speech impediment. His life is an example of his spirit, overcoming the difficulties with which he was presented, and making himself stronger as a result of it. Churchill was a more than just a great speaker though; he was a great man and a great leader as well. He took over as Prime Minister of Britain during one of the most trying times ever to come upon the country, and led his country to eventual victory over their adversaries. The analysis of his speech allows one to come closer to understanding the true rhetorical genius of the man known as Churchill. In particular, We Shall Fight on the Beaches is a great example of his spirit, his diligence, and his unwillingness to give up.

Churchill was no fool however; he knew that the situation was still dire for him and his dear country. The British were vastly outnumbered and outgunned, and the loss of the Belgian army was a great blow. The speech was given even before France surrendered to the Germans
and left Britain alone in the time of war, and primed the British people for what was to come. “When we see the originality of malice, the ingenuity of aggression, which our enemy displays, we may certainly prepare ourselves for every kind of novel stratagem and every kind of brutal and treacherous maneuver,” (Churchill). Churchill gave his enemy lots of credit. They were, after all, very good at the art of war, deception, aggression, etc. The Nazi party also had a lot of resources and if anyone were to defeat them, they could not afford to overlook their enormous power and influence or their cunning tactics and strategy. With this statement, Churchill hopes to give his people hope while still reminding his audience of what their enemies are capable of.

Churchill was a master of the elements of rhetoric. He was a very respected and credentialed man whom many of his audience supported. Before the time when he was Prime Minister, he was purposely excluded from office by his predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, because of his predisposition against the Nazi party. Electing a man with such a vehement fighting spirit would mean dedication to war, which was contrary to Chamberlain’s wish to leave to the door of appeasement open to Germany. “To give Churchill office, he [Chamberlain] thought, would be to signal that Britain was now determined to fight,” (Addison). Because of this exclusion from office, he was formerly regarded with skepticism by many of the British population. At any time during this period, he could have given up on his country, moved to America and begun a new life, or gone anywhere in the world, but he instead chose to stay and fight for his country and his beliefs to the bitter end. When he was finally elected Prime Minister, his country was teetering on the edge of destruction, and they were still unsure about this new Prime Minister. After Operation Dynamo, however, no one questioned his quality anymore. Despite his apparent trustworthiness and respect, the country was tired of war, and there was no doubt the Churchill was dedicated to fighting the war out to its bloody and bitter end. It was
Churchill who had warned of the possible negative consequences of Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, and it was he whom they trusted as their leader during a time of war. As a result of all this, his character, quality, and ethos were excellent.

Where Churchill truly excelled was in pathos, for his speech was very moving and inspirational, filled with emotional appeals. This was a time of great struggle and hardship in the land of Great Britain, and he knew that he needed to pick everyone up and give them renewed hope for victory. He provided a trail of emotional appeals that led up to a satisfying and moving climax which inspired his people, the British people, to keep fighting until they or their enemies were defeated soundly. He related to the emotions of the soldiers whose lives had been saved, many of which were likely reluctant to go back to the fight, the families of those who had been lost in that great battle, who would probably either hate the Nazis for destroying their men, or would hate their own government for sending them to their deaths. Churchill did an effective job of swaying those who were precariously balanced in their beliefs to his side by providing sympathy and hope for everyone, soldier and civilian, bond and free, male and female, everyone.

The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old (Churchill).

The inspirational speech spends most of its time informing the audience of the facts that led up to Operation Dynamo, the salvation of the British Expeditionary Force. He tells the people
of the dire straits in which they found themselves factually, while still integrating heavy emotional appeals. This is one of the things that make him a great orator and rhetor, his ability to integrate emotion into fact and still have facts exist as true and unbiased. As a result of the heavy factual details, his *logos* in this speech was excellent.

By examining Churchill’s use of rhetoric we can see what exactly made him such a great leader. His speeches were able to do more damage to the Nazis than any bomb could have done because his language rallied the people together. His use of repetition proved his points and reminded the country of what mattered most. His descriptive words helped build up anger against the Nazi rule and persuade everyone to pull through the tough times. He used pronouns in such a way that it would personalize everything and help unify his country. Through his unique use of words Churchill was able to convince many that if they could just endure that they would at last be victorious (Bungay).
Works Cited


Churchill, Winston, and winstonchurchill.org. "We Shall Fight on the Beaches."
