6. TO CONTINUE ALONE? MAY–JULY 1940

The period of May–June 1940, the months of the fall of France, was a time of the highest stress and instability for all those who lived through it in Europe. By the same token it raised once more the most basic and prominent questions with which decision-makers are ever likely to be confronted – those of war or armistice. It would seem that, as in the previous September, the problem facing British ministers could not have been more conducive to uninhibited debate. The crude facts of physical danger and potential resistance were apparent to all: there existed only a narrow and defined range of available strategies; there could be no question of taking any imaginative initiative such as that of the guarantees of 1939 to transform the political environment. With Hitler in a position of military invulnerability, and with no immediate prospect of attracting new allies by diplomacy, all proposals raised inside the British government would inevitably be subsumed under the crude but clear alternative of fighting on until the situation changed or of coming to terms of some kind with Hitler. Since the War Cabinet met at least once daily,[1] it might be thought that in mid-1940 suitable conditions existed for full Cabinet participation in the making of these major political decisions.

Despite these factors, the data present a different picture. It will be argued here that the period in which France left the war demonstrates how an energetic Prime Minister (in wartime necessarily absorbed by military and foreign policy) could lead the opinion of his colleagues into channels of which only he and perhaps a small circle had a very clear advance idea. In practice this happened in two ways: first by systematically excluding the genuine consideration of some options, and secondly by successfully transforming an existing policy to meet dramatic new circumstances and pressures. The ability of the Prime Minister to play such a role was made possible by

the profound impact of external events on existing attitudes, in such a way as to precipitate a highly fluid situation in which uncertainty and shock were the predominant mood. Churchill – who had replaced Chamberlain as Prime Minister on 10 May after a crisis of confidence within the Conservative party over the handling of the war – was thus presented with opportunities which enabled him to direct the nature of the debate into the areas which he judged important. That he formed very definite personal ideas on how to deal with the new problems was partly the result of necessity, partly of predisposition and partly of character;[2] it also meant that the Prime Minister took advantage of the opportunity inherent in the crisis to exert executive leadership. (See Table 6 for the composition of the new Cabinet led by Churchill.)

One clear example of the routine freedoms of the foreign policy executive in implementing policy was Churchill's direct approaches to Roosevelt, outside the scope of Cabinet business and building on the contacts established since Churchill had become First Lord of the Admiralty at the outset of war. These were the famous 'Former Naval Person' letters and telegrams which continued throughout the war at an average of nearly four a week, on many and varied subjects.[3] Between 15 and 20 May the content of these declarations gave clear indications that the Prime Minister intended to make it very difficult for his colleagues within the government to renege on their commitment to the war. Indeed he distributed the telegrams for information to members of the War Cabinet, which was not always routine procedure.[4]

Churchill's messages made important presumptions about the content and consistency of his government's policy at this time. On 15 May he asserted that 'If necessary, we shall continue the war alone', and went further on 18 May in stating that 'We are determined to persevere to the very end, whatever the result of the great battle raging in France may be.' Churchill reiterated this determination two days later with the argument that any British 'parley' with the Germans could only take place after the fall of the present administration, since 'in no conceivable circumstances will we consent to surrender'.[5]

Clearly these gestures of defiance were in part calculated to encourage Roosevelt into giving Britain diplomatic support – and in particular to entice steel, destroyers and ammunition from the USA. Churchill could not technically commit his government to acting in

Table 6. *Membership of the War Cabinet in the Coalition Government, 11 May 1940–22 June 1941*

Prime Minister	Winston Churchill (C)
Minister of Defence	Winston Churchill (C)
Lord President of the Council	Neville Chamberlain (C); from 3 October 1940, Sir John Anderson, (Independent National MP for Scottish Universities)
Chancellor of the Exchequer	Sir Kingsley Wood (from 3 October 1940) (C)
Lord Privy Seal	Clement Attlee (Lab.)
Foreign Secretary	Viscount Halifax (C); from 22 December 1940, Anthony Eden (C)
Minister of Aircraft Production	Lord Beaverbrook (C) (in War Cabinet from 2 August 1940; out of War Cabinet again when J. Moore-Brabazon took over on 1 May 1941)
Minister of State (from 1 May 1941)	Lord Beaverbrook (C)
Minister of Labour and National Service	Ernest Bevin (Lab.)
Minister without Portfolio	Arthur Greenwood (Lab.)

Note:
As we have seen with Chamberlain's War Cabinet, many other ministers attended the War Cabinet from time to time, and some can be categorised as 'constant attenders', particularly Eden as Minister of War before 22 December 1940, and Duff Cooper as Minister of Information.
Source:
David Butler and Anne Sloman, *British Political Facts 1900–1979*, 5th edn (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 26–31.

the way that he had baldly outlined. He could impose no physical constraints on future choices, such as those which might be imposed by irrevocable steps like a declaration of war, or a running down of the armaments industry. But this is not to say that the declarations were devoid of commitment, in terms either of Anglo-American relations or of the thinking of his own colleagues about the future of the war. Just as the Anglo-French military conversations of 1905 and beyond had created an increasing expectation in France of alliance with Britain, and had helped to impregnate the minds of Asquith, Grey and Haldane with the same belief,[6] so Churchill's solitary diplomacy fostered an increasing closeness of Anglo-American relations that in its turn may have encouraged his fellow ministers to hope first

for survival, through the prospect of endless material supplies, and then for victory, through a reliance on an American entry into the war.

Furthermore, Churchill's automatic assumption that future policy would be to continue the war, and of his right to anticipate it, was a difficult initiative to resist, for both tactical and psychological reasons. By asserting first that Britain would continue to fight despite the likely defeat of France and then that the present government would not consider compromise in any form, despite her apparently desperate military situation, Churchill was placing the onus on his colleagues to challenge his prejudgement of the issue, while at the same time directing their attention away from any balanced consideration of the pros and cons. Through presenting his opinions as facts and moral imperatives, the Prime Minister created a momentum for his interpretation of British interests that would have required a major confrontation within the Cabinet to stop. With the implication that argument was unthinkable, Churchill had begun to pre-empt his government's decision on the issue of fighting alone.

MILITARY DISINTEGRATION

Even at this early stage, Churchill was becoming aware that the bases of British war policy were on the verge of dissolution, and that the government might imminently be faced with a totally changed set of circumstances, demanding the rapid reformulation of expectations long-established but now rendered obsolete by the destruction of the Western Front. For although Allied military opinion had long anticipated a German attack in the west, even possibly as the first stroke of war,[7] it quickly became clear after the invasion of 10 May that a new scenario had to be considered: that of a rapid French defeat. On 13 May Guderian's armoured forces crossed the Meuse and broke through the French defences where they had been least expected to do so. By the evening of the next day Churchill was reading a message from Paul Reynaud to the War Cabinet which warned that the breach in the defences had allowed the Germans to drive for Paris and which thought that the only hope of preventing them was by massive attacks on the supporting German bomber force. The outlook had evidently deteriorated very quickly.[8]

Even so, neither Churchill nor the Cabinet yet regarded the situation as sufficiently grave to require the dispatch of home-based

fighter squadrons. After Paul Reynaud's statement to Churchill on 15 May that France had effectively been defeated, the Prime Minister gave the distinct impression to his colleagues that the outlook was not disastrous. In those days of hectic military activity, the Cabinet relied on Churchill for its sources of information; now he told them that Reynaud's message had been 'alarmist', and that in personal telephone conversations with Generals Georges and Gamelin it had been clear to him that they remained calm, and believed that the German advance in the south had been halted. Supported by Air Marshals Newall and Dowding, Churchill directly opposed the dispatch of further fighters to help the French, and the Cabinet took a decision to this effect.[9]

But it took less than twenty-four hours to reverse their decision. Information from the front about renewed German penetration indicated that, in General Ironside's words, 'the situation was critical ... All now depended on whether the French will fight with vigour in the counter-attack which General Gamelin proposed to launch.' Halifax said that Reynaud feared the German attainment of Paris that night.[10] In the evening Churchill arrived in Paris, and heard for himself about the vulnerability of the French military situation; losses of artillery and fighter aircraft had been severe, and the German tank corps was in a position either to move on to Paris or to advance to the coast so as to split the Allied forces. He passed on this information to the War Cabinet, which met without him at 11 p.m. so as to authorise the second reinforcement that day of fighters to France, a volte-face in policy.[11] The Cabinet, however, only sent half the number of squadrons to French bases that Churchill had asked for (admittedly in an unusually decisive tone),[12] since otherwise Britain would have been left without any fighter defences itself. The discretionary powers that military operations often confer did not always work in favour of the Prime Minister.

Thus by 17 May it was clear that France was in an extremely serious military situation. If her defeat and exit from the war were not yet seen as certain in London, ministers could not fail to realise that this was now a distinct possibility. Within a week of the German move against the Allies, the balance of strength had been transformed, and British policy-makers were increasingly and rapidly faced with a new series of conditions to be accepted, understood and processed into attitudes or policies. However, the full impact of the changed situation did not take effect immediately, despite French defeat having

been made militarily probable by the German advance on Amiens and Arras.

This was partly because, without the benefit of hindsight, few of the participants could clearly see the pattern of the battle, and its inexorable conclusion. It was also because Churchill's interpretation of developments continued in an optimistic vein, in the belief that the trend of the conflict could still be reversed, given will, effort and the correct strategy. On 18 May, he praised to the Cabinet the efforts of the RAF and of recent French resistance, saying that 'On the whole the military situation in France is better.'[13] During the next few days, further Allied reverses, culminating in the German arrival at the Channel coast on the 20th, made the likelihood of defeat more clear. Yet those responsible for British policy were still cushioned from the direct implications of the changes. Not until late on 25 May did the Service ministers and Chiefs of Staff take the decision that Lord Gort should make haste to evacuate as much of the British Expeditionary Force as he could salvage from France.[14] Right through the previous four days Churchill had hoped that the trapped forces would be able to fight their way southwards to meet a new French army advancing to the north. On the 21st the Prime Minister told the War Cabinet that 'The situation is more favourable than certain of the more obvious symptoms would indicate . . . We must now be ready to fight hard under open warfare conditions.'[15] The next day he described the plan in more detail for the Cabinet after seeing Weygand, and forecast a crucial battle for 23 May, despite doubts from Ironside and a gloomy report from Gort's staff.[16] On the 23rd itself, frustrated by the lack of any sign of a reversal of the campaign, Churchill cabled Reynaud demanding the immediate implementation of Weygand's pincer plan, which could 'turn defeat into victory'.[17] It was thus partly due to Churchill's refusal to accept that the battle was lost and the BEF should cut its losses that the excision of France from the contest did not become more plain at an earlier stage.

Another major factor, however, was the failure of the information and co-ordination process between London and the battlefront. Ministers did not realise the extent of the German advance or the weaknesses of the Allied forces and positions. Liaison with the French army was bad. There was always an important time-lag between events on the continent and decisions in Whitehall. Towards the end, on 24 May, Churchill and Ironside had believed

that Gort was still trying to strike to the south, when in fact he had begun to retreat to the ports. The information was finally conveyed to them by the French.[18] Political and military decision-making were right out of phase; Gort did not even know that Belgium was about to surrender. But the lack of synchronisation was compounded so far as the Cabinet were concerned by their reliance on Churchill for what up-to-date knowledge there was, and for an overview of the general trend of the conflict. As far as we can see from the continuing decisions to approve the counter-attack to the south, the Cabinet were no more convinced than Churchill of the irrevocability of French defeat until 26 May, when the BEF was already preparing for embarkation. In any case being even more out of touch they had little choice but to accept the Prime Minister's version of events. This was particularly true for ministers outside the War Cabinet, who attended the latter's meetings only on an occasional basis, and by grace of the Prime Minister. Moreover those in the War Cabinet by right (Halifax, Chamberlain, Attlee and Greenwood) were still recovering from the change in government, although not all for the same reason.

A POLICY VACUUM: THE IMPACT OF CRISIS

This outline of the military events of May 1940 is designed both to make clear how the world of British policy-makers at the time was suddenly overturned, and to show how that catastrophe generated the greater impact by being partially disguised until its final dénouement. It may also serve as a secondary example (because to do with military rather than foreign policy) of the way in which the Prime Minister could, by strength of leadership, influence strongly the conclusions of his Cabinet. But primarily it is important to realise the fluidity of the events into which the Cabinet found themselves plunged, with little mental preparation. Ministers were faced with the immediate need to reassess the factors on which they had pinned their hopes for survival and ultimate victory. Previous images of the way the war would develop, with Britain and France jointly draining off the German military effort and isolating the German homeland by blockade,[19] were inevitably dissolving under the pressure and speed of events. They had to absorb the fact that to all intents and purposes Britain would now have to fulfil her war aims entirely alone, being deprived not only of French manpower and *matériel*, but also

of the strategical advantages of a Western Front and a long stretch of European coastline from which to administer the vital blockade.[20] As a result of this increasingly obvious circumstance, there arose the problems of deciding whether in practice Britain should (or would be able to) continue the war in the new environment and, in the event of an affirmative answer to this first question, of determining the ways in which it could be done. It was a time which required a fundamental yet expeditious change in focus.

This task presented little difficulty for Churchill, despite his belated recognition of the collapse of France. His attitude to the war was clearly defined, strongly held and consistent. Simply, it added up to a determination to prolong the fight in all foreseeable circumstances, and to a preference for complete defeat over the stigma of a compromise peace, which would mean accepting that victory was impossible without avoiding what he believed would be subjugation. Thus for the Prime Minister defeat in France constituted only a severe setback, and by no means an irresistible pressure to rethink Britain's position. He believed that Britain should fight to the death, however imminent annihilation might seem.[21]

For some of his colleagues, however, the issue was less clear. They had held no brief for a compromise solution to the war while the Allies remained in a position from which the achievement of their objectives remained possible, given sufficient patience, even if the exact methods of this success could not yet be predicted. Since defeat seemed remote, there was good reason to hope that the means of victory would eventually be engineered. Because they were willing to allow Britain to undergo the toils and suffering of war as such, there was no reason for ministers to consider the possibility of a settlement which satisfied their aims less than completely, so long as the danger of defeat did not figure in their thinking. But in May 1940 that danger appeared with a vengeance.

In this inchoate environment the Prime Minister set a clear lead on the attitude he expected the government to adopt. Although Churchill was determined not to believe the worst of any situation until it was inevitable, he did not blind himself to the possibility that the worst could in fact occur. As early as 17 May he had initiated a special ministerial sub-committee under Chamberlain to consider the consequences for Britain of the fall of France.[22] But, as Chamberlain, the new Lord President of the Council, told the Cabinet, its brief did not involve a discussion of whether Britain

would be able to continue the war, or of whether she should revise her whole expectations of the conflict: 'He had been concerned in the main with a situation in which we might find ourselves *obliged to continue our resistance single-handed in this country* until the United States of America could be induced to come to our help.'[23] Thus Chamberlain went on, because of the above premise, merely to describe the extensions of government powers over internal activities which the sub-committee had recommended as a necessary means of continuing the resistance – and this although a day later Chamberlain was to write in his diary that although a German ultimatum to Britain would be rejected, 'we should be fighting only for better terms, not for victory', considering the Americans to be Britain's 'only hope' and that even they 'can do little to help us now'.[24] By 22 May the Lord President had come to regard the crisis as 'the gravest moment in our history', and anticipated 'an attack on this country very shortly'.[25] Yet, emasculated by his recent fall from leadership and possibly by a fear of reviving the accusation of appeasement, Chamberlain took no initiative towards raising the issue of what Britain should do in her new position, in any wider context than that of providing efficient domestic powers to meet the emergency of a German attack. Nor, as we shall see, was this because he was as resolutely determined as Churchill to continue the war even when defeat might appear certain.

The Prime Minister took a further initiative on 26 May, when he asked the Chiefs of Staff directly to describe what situation would arise if France were forced into an armistice after Belgium had capitulated but also after the BEF had reached the coast (and were in the process of escaping). The Chiefs of Staff were given formal terms of reference, of which it is worth quoting the rest in full:

> [what situation would arise] in the event of terms being offered to Britain which would place her entirely at the mercy of Germany through disarmament, cession of naval bases in the Orkneys etc.; *what are the prospects of our continuing the war alone against Germany and probably Italy. Can the Navy and the Air Force hold out reasonable hopes of preventing serious invasion, and could the forces gathered in this Island cope with raids from the air involving detachments not greater than 10,000 men*; it being observed that a prolongation of British resistance might be very dangerous for Germany engaged in holding down the greater part of Europe.[26]

As will be observed, the purely military question on which the Chiefs of Staff were uniquely qualified to pronounce occupies only part of

these terms of reference, that is the two italicised sentences. The rest of the document consists of value-judgements which intrude on the neutrality of the question, and seek to pre-judge the issue. It is clear what answer Churchill wants to his question, about the prospects of holding out. His mention of the terms which Britain might be offered is couched in the language of a Carthaginian peace; Germany is seen as incapable of offering terms other than those which would put Britain 'entirely' at her mercy. The examples chosen strike at the most sensitive points of British conceptions of her national interests – the capacity for self-defence and the sea-power on which her commercial and Imperial safety was based. This political pre-judgement is followed at the end of the terms of reference by an equally direct attempt to load the question, this time on the military side. The Prime Minister was so eager to anticipate a conclusion from the Chiefs of Staff to the effect that Britain would be able to carry on that he tried to begin their task for them by stating one of the main arguments in favour of the capacity to continue the fight; he did not balance this out by an example from the other side of the question.

It would be impossible to show whether the form in which Churchill cast the question in some way predetermined the Chiefs of Staff's eventual conclusion (proved correct by a hair's breadth as the year wore on), which was that the outcome would depend on the ability of the British aircraft industry to withstand bombing and provide the RAF with constant superiority in the air, and that the Chiefs believed in this ability.[27] Conversely, it is impossible to show that it did not help to condition their findings. In any event, that is not the only relevant issue. Just as important is the effect of Churchill's lead on the direction and tone of the discussion within Cabinet in general. (The Chiefs of Staff's answer was not delivered until the next day, two Cabinets later.)[28]

As we have seen so far, Churchill was the source of the only two initiatives in the government for discussing the effect of the possible fall of France on Britain's position. Moreover he formulated the questions which sprang from these moves in such a way as, in the first case, to delimit the scope of the issue under consideration and, in the second, to indicate strongly the form of answer that he expected and desired. The rest of the Cabinets for May 1940 show Churchill continuing to give a clear lead on the attitude he wanted from the Cabinet, and finally achieving the agreement of his

colleagues after a period of some considerable doubt and uncertainty.

Soon after Churchill had posed his question to the Chiefs of Staff on 26 May, and in the same meeting, Halifax indicated that for him at least recent events had deeply disturbed the notions about war aims which had been evident in the discussions of the previous October. He stated that 'we had to face the fact that it was not so much now a question of imposing a complete defeat upon Germany but of safeguarding the independence of our own Empire and if possible that of France'.[29] The implication was that this implied that the Foreign Secretary was coming to think that a compromise settlement might be preferable to a German invasion of the United Kingdom and possible territorial gains in the Mediterranean, particularly since he went on to recount his conversation of the previous evening with the Italian Ambassador, in which he had told Bastianini, after the latter 'had clearly made soundings as to the prospect of our agreeing to a conference', that 'peace and security in Europe were equally our main object, and we should naturally be prepared to consider any proposals which might lead to this, provided our liberty and independence were assured'. Bastianini was coming for a further interview that morning, 'and he might have fresh proposals to put forward'.[30] The trend of Halifax's thought – towards an acceptance of a dramatically changed balance of power – was confirmed nearer the end of the meeting. He observed that if France collapsed the Germans would be able to switch their productive effort *en masse* towards the construction of aeroplanes. Since Halifax and the Chief of the Air Staff had just agreed that Britain's ability to survive, as argued in the first Chiefs of Staff draft on the question, would depend on preventing the Luftwaffe from achieving sufficient air superiority to mount an invasion, the pessimistic inference of this remark was that the outlook for survival might be poor.[31]

None of Halifax's fellow-ministers attacked either his pessimism or the particular implications of his remarks. On the other hand, they did not express positive support. They were in a state of genuine indecision, open to formative influences in either direction, from both the course of events and the nature of the leadership exerted in Cabinet. Clement Attlee, the Lord Privy Seal, merely made two piecemeal observations to the effect that Italy might be nervous about the prospect of a German hegemony in Europe and that the best way of keeping France in the war would be to convince her of the fact that

'destruction' would ultimately follow capitulation. He thought the Cabinet should await the Chiefs of Staff's report. Chamberlain, similarly, had no positive views. He confined himself to some low-key remarks on the best way to keep Italy from attacking France, suggesting that France might be able to buy Mussolini off with concessions. Finally he added that undertakings by the French not to make available their productive capacity to Germany would be useless, since the Germans would impose terms designed to prevent such an arrangement. Arthur Greenwood, the remaining member of the War Cabinet, seems to have made no comment.[32]

Churchill agreed that there could be no reliance on France to obstruct Hitler once it was out of the war. However, he showed no sign of backing down from the view he had expressed in the messages to Roosevelt of a week earlier. On the contrary, he stressed that Halifax's criteria of 'peace and security' were insufficient. Both aims 'might be achieved under a German domination of Europe'. For the Prime Minister it was a question of a different interpretation of national interest: 'We must ensure our complete liberty and independence.' Whereas Halifax had been willing to define these terms on the one hand widely enough to admit the possibility of recognising an immovable German domination of Europe, and on the other within sufficient limits as to avoid any danger of a complete loss of security, Churchill would accept nothing less than 'complete' independence, or positive liberty. He would envisage no solution which demoted Britain from her apparent pre-war status of a great power, subject to the will of no other single power: 'He was opposed to any negotiations which might lead to a derogation of our rights and power.' This was a conception which at the time none of his colleagues in the War Cabinet shared with such implacable enthusiasm.[33]

The Prime Minister did not contribute a great deal to this meeting in quantitative terms; what he did say, however, was couched in positive language: 'we could *never* accept . . . *our complete liberty and independence*'. Whereas Halifax now felt the pressure of conflicting criteria (survival versus 'liberty'), and other ministers felt sufficiently unsure of their views as to want to await the outcome of further developments and information, Churchill had an uncomplicated and internally consistent picture of the future. Having entered the war for the right reasons, his ideas ran, Britain should continue the fight until her aims had been fully realised. Military setbacks were

inevitable in some form or other. So long as Britain remained actually undefeated, she possessed the potential capacity to achieve victory, since time would inevitably work against Germany.[34] These opinions could not but stand out in a small War Cabinet in which others neither adhered as fiercely to ideas they had formulated in a previous and now remote situation or could conceive of any compelling alternatives. Churchill was the only member, and one in an institutionally powerful position at that, with an exceptionally sharp definition of how Britain should act.

It would be possible to trace the whole development of this formulation of policy by describing the events of each individual Cabinet, in sequence. This would not only be repetitive and space-consuming, but it would not bring out clearly the basic structure of the debate, or how its outcome was affected by the way in which the argument was conducted and the limits within which its propositions were cast. Such phenomena can be better demonstrated by a direct analysis of the principal issues discussed throughout what is already a short time-span – from 26 May to 19 July (the date of Hitler's second 'Reichstag' peace offer, whose rejection marked the end of a phase of uncertainty in Cabinet policy-making).[35]

As will be clear already from the events of the 9 a.m. Cabinet meeting on 26 May, the main question involved the way in which the government might or might not adapt its attitude to the war as a result of the projected loss of her ally. To a large extent, however, this issue was entangled with the particular point from which it sprang, that of a possible bribe to Mussolini to keep Italy out of the war. Strictly speaking, the attempt to influence Italian policy was principally the concern of France – for two reasons. The security of the French homeland would be immediately threatened by an Italian declaration of war and the doubt as to Mussolini's intentions only lasted as long as there was a prospect of France herself escaping defeat. Nevertheless Britain was also very concerned with Italy, as she had been throughout the 1930s, and the British government was continually consulted during the French deliberations over whether to make an approach.[36] But in the discussion within the British Cabinet, the issue was quickly blurred into that of a more general settlement. After the initial French suggestion of a *démarche* and the first, fairly open-minded, reactions from the Cabinet as to its utility,[37] both Churchill and Halifax showed signs of a willingness to discuss the question of negotiations in terms which went

beyond Mussolini to Hitler – although for diametrically opposite reasons.

The Prime Minister himself felt under no illusion about the buying off of Italy being separate from the Anglo-German dispute. He wanted to alleviate France's difficulties, but 'At the same time we must take care not to be forced into a weak position in which we went to Signor Mussolini and invited him to go to Herr Hitler and ask him to treat us nicely.'[38] He was afraid that France would 'drag us into a settlement which involved intolerable terms'. This was because, as he remarked slightly later, of the suggested approach to Mussolini, 'it implied that if we were prepared to give Germany back her colonies and to make certain concessions in the Mediterranean, it was possible to get out of our present difficulties'. Churchill saw this as unacceptable: 'He thought that no such option was open to us. For example, the terms offered would certainly prevent us from completing our rearmament.'

Halifax was equally prompt in raising broader considerations than those of Franco-Italian relations. *Vis-à-vis* any offer to Mussolini, he said 'that he attached perhaps rather more importance than the Prime Minister to the desirability allowing France to try out the possibilities of European equilibrium'. As we have seen, the Foreign Secretary had already told Bastianini the previous day that he was free to tell Rome 'that His Majesty's Government did not exclude the possibility of some discussion of the wider problem of Europe in the event of the opportunity arising'.[39] This elision of the Italian problem into that of the wider war is not an academic mirage. Halifax himself noted it in his papers, with regard to the continued discussion on 27 May: 'At the 4.30 Cabinet we had a long and rather confused discussion about, nominally, the approach to Italy, but also largely about general policy in the event of things going really badly in France.'[40] The Foreign Secretary was not optimistic about an approach to Mussolini, but did 'not wish to give the French an excuse for complaining'.[41] At least this is how he justified it to himself. Halifax was grasping at the broadening of the debate because of his growing feeling that hostilities were no longer the unquestionably right course. Chamberlain thought that his friend's view was that 'there could be no harm in trying Musso & seeing what the result was. If the terms were impossible we could still reject them. I supported this view.'[42] The probing of Italy was an opportunity to test the ground, just as Ciano's intervention on 2 September 1939 had been

a (spurned) opportunity to delay a declaration of war. Indeed, he was positively anxious to avoid particular issues, and to concentrate on a general focus, in which difficulties might more easily be accommodated. He thought that any approach should avoid 'geographical precision' when touching on the problem of terms.[43]

But this very difficulty about the requirement of detail which Halifax felt when developing his argument is an indication of his basic disadvantage in this situation relative to the Prime Minister – that is, the disadvantage of a minister feeling his way to a new argument and general position, in a Cabinet where the majority of his colleagues were undecided, but where he was opposed by the one individual on whom custom and the nature of the institution conferred the role of leadership, and who in this case had an especially positive personality and idea of policy.

It is true that as Foreign Secretary Halifax was still in a position of privileged 'executive' responsibility over external relations, as I have argued before in this chapter. Moreover, he represented continuity and experience at a time when a new Prime Minister might have been expected to defer somewhat to his most senior colleagues in the interests of preserving harmony within the government. While Halifax had nothing of Churchill's charisma, he was not over-awed by his tempestuousness and theatricality – indeed he seems to have harboured a quiet contempt for it.[44] But circumstances had changed radically with the fall of the old administration. The War Cabinet, itself less than half the size of the peacetime body, had shrunk further (to five members) to the point where a 'foreign policy executive' of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary was less practicable – unless the two individuals were already close, as Churchill and Halifax were not. An insulated executive was particularly unlikely since two of the other three members were now drawn from the Labour Party and could not be left on the sidelines.[45] Furthermore, Churchill's personality was well suited to the taking on of major responsibilities from the moment of kissing hands. Encouraged over the previous twelve months by admiring friends, Churchill undoubtedly felt that history and the British people required great leadership from him. He was constitutionally ill-fitted to working in harness with anyone, let alone Halifax, newly discredited by his past association with Chamberlain and a man prone to vacillation and crises of conscience even in less catastrophic times.

Halifax's problem was heightened by the fact that because the

external environment of British foreign policy in mid-1940 presented unparalleled dangers and uncertainties, Cabinet discussion placed a premium on recommendations which were well-known, clear and strongly argued. The views of Lord Halifax at this stage were new, vague and ambivalent. His belief that France should be able 'to try out . . . European equilibrium' was hardly likely to convince the Cabinet that there existed a definite alternative to the line argued by Churchill which was worthy of serious consideration. Equally his eagerness to discuss the need to keep Italy out of the war in conjunction with the issue of whether to cut Britain's losses in the conflict with Germany (encouraged by both Churchill and French policy) could only increase the unsureness of his colleagues as to the right course on both questions.

Yet this ineffectiveness was more a function of the basic dilemma facing the Government than of personal failings in Halifax. It was soon clear that since the Italian question intrinsically involved that of 'general policy', confusion between the two was difficult to avoid. The comments of other ministers made the point. The Minister without Portfolio, Arthur Greenwood, believed that concessions to Mussolini would mean 'we should soon get to the point at which demands were being made which affected the security of the British Empire'.[46] This would obviously impinge on British abilities to fight Hitler, particularly as 'He doubted . . . whether it was within Signor Mussolini's power to take a line independent of Herr Hitler'. At a later stage, Greenwood spelt out the nature of the 'demands' Italy might make: 'Signor Mussolini would be out to get Malta, Gibraltar and Suez. He felt sure that the negotiations would break down; but Herr Hitler would get to know of them, and it might have a bad effect on our prestige.'

In Cabinet on the day following, Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Secretary for Air (and leader of the Liberal Party) took this point up in agreement: 'the suggestion that we were willing to barter away pieces of British territory would have a deplorable effect and would make it difficult for us to continue the desperate struggle which faced us'.[47] Attlee supported this argument; he thought the approach would be 'very damaging to us. In effect, the approach suggested would inevitably lead to our asking Signor Mussolini to intercede to obtain peace-terms for us'.[48] It is therefore clear that the objections to pursuing an approach to Italy rebounded by their very nature onto the issue of peace with Germany, and helped to associate the latter in the

minds of ministers with damage to British prestige and security, as well as to confuse the issue in general. It was felt that an approach in Rome would pre-judge the problem of what attitude to take to Germany, first by 'inevitably' leading Mussolini into interceding with Hitler (although it is not clear why this should have mattered in itself, given that the Cabinet certainly would have felt that it was free to take up or reject any terms offered by Hitler),[49] and secondly by irretrievably damaging Britain's bargaining position in the war, *before* the government had even formulated its final attitude to the effects of the defeat of France. It would have apparently constituted in itself a setback of near-military proportions. Undeniably, therefore, since the two problems were very easily and thoroughly blurred in the Cabinet's discussions, Halifax's arguments for a serious consideration of a compromise peace were weakened at the same rate as the proposal about Italy fell into disrepute, by a process of close association and confusion.

The Prime Minister's position and viewpoint was also strengthened by the pressures against challenging the leadership and splitting the government, in a wartime crisis of such severity and fluidity. After the long and divided Cabinet meeting of the afternoon of 27 May, Halifax was near to resignation. The Foreign Secretary's record reads:

> I thought Winston talked the most frightful rot, also Greenwood, and after bearing it for some time I said exactly what I thought of them, adding that if that was really their view, and if it came to the point, our ways must separate. Winston, surprised and mellowed, and, when I repeated the same thing in the garden, was full of apologies and affection. But it does drive me to despair when he works himself up into a passion of motion when he ought to make his brain think and reason. But none of these things, of course, really matter in comparison to the military events.[50]

Cadogan's account confirms that Halifax felt, 'I can't work with Winston any longer', and that Churchill had been 'v. affectionate' afterwards. Cadogan adds that he advised Halifax not to give way to the annoyance 'to which we were all subject' over Churchill's 'rhodomontades', and to consult Chamberlain before acting: 'He said that of course he would and that, as I knew, he wasn't one to take hasty decisions.'[51]

As is evident, 'it' never did come 'to the point', even though Churchill's 'sentimental' views were to represent the actual course of British policy far more closely than Halifax's 'reasoned' opinion. It

seems likely that Halifax reluctantly gave voice to feelings which he was partly repressing, and that Churchill gave him an easy exit from his threats of resignation, by a personal conciliation which did not concede the substance of the dispute (as we shall see). Despite the strength of his views, the Foreign Secretary found it an impossible strain to precipitate a major confrontation with his Prime Minister at such a hazardous time, let alone to take the issue to a more public arena, despite resentments which had their roots in the fierce arguments of the 1930s over first India and then appeasement.[52] Purged by his outburst, Halifax allowed himself to be talked out of any 'hasty decision'.[53]

THE ASSERTION OF LEADERSHIP

The surprise, danger and urgency of the new problems meant that decision-making was taking place in true conditions of crisis. The consequent hesitancy felt by most ministers, especially those serving in office for the first time, invited dominating, executive leadership. And Churchill was not a Prime Minister to pass up circumstances which particularly seemed to require creative action on his part. He was personally willing to broaden the question of the approach to Mussolini because of a genuine fear that Britain might be insidiously trapped into the compromise peace to which he was so strongly opposed. By 28 May he was certain that 'the French purpose was to see Signor Mussolini acting as an intermediary between ourselves and Herr Hitler. He was determined not to get into this position.'[54] Churchill went on to describe the grounds on which he opposed Reynaud's apparent attempt to get Britain to the conference table and end the war: 'If we once got to the table we should then find that the terms offered us touched our independence and integrity. When, at this point, we got up to leave the conference-table, we should find that all the forces of resolution which were now at our disposal would have vanished.'[55] The Prime Minister summed up his views of negotiations with the Axis by the political cliché of 'the slippery slope' onto which Britain would be enticed. The metaphor illustrates well the technique by which Churchill continually presented the problem in extreme terms: one move towards communication with Hitler, the phrase implied, would begin an inexorable draining away of the remaining strength of Britain's position. There could be no middle way. Because of his own strong views, Churchill's

natural tendency was to use his position as Chairman to polarise the argument between his own advocacy of a fight-on-with-no-compromise attitude, and what he cast as the only alternative, that of negotiations involving the surrender of British interests and security. Favouring one extreme, he preferred to argue against the other, rather than against an attitude of moderate compromise, since he could then more easily cast Halifax's arguments as an attempt at complete surrender and more firmly identify his own attitude with that of the status quo position, which was at least known and associated with patriotic sentiments of heroic defence. The opposite case, in its straw-man form, amounted not only to virtual defeat, but to the notably worse fate of dishonourable defeat.

For when it had finally been acknowledged that France was likely to suffer military defeat, Churchill had told Reynaud that 'We would rather go down fighting than be enslaved to Germany.'[56] This was not just to encourage French morale; twenty-four hours later Churchill informed his Cabinet that 'Even if we were beaten, we should be no worse off than we should be if we were now to abandon the struggle ... If the worst came to the worst, it would not be a bad thing for this country to go down fighting for the other countries which had been overcome by the Nazi tyranny.'[57] As a mere Service minister under Chamberlain, Churchill had not been able to set a strict moral example in this way. Then, his views only constituted one input among several, as to the criteria which ought to be adopted for the making of any given policy.[58] But now, as Prime Minister, he was able to use his stature and right to lead the discussion to get a special hearing and to put the onus for disagreement on his colleagues. In this same monologue, he asserted that the only way to reflate Britain's punctured prestige in the world was by remaining unbeaten, thus assuming that the need to boost prestige was a first priority. It was this natural appropriation, on Churchill's part, of a high moral authority which so much put his fellow Cabinet members at a disadvantage when they were in the process of reconsidering their attitudes, and possibly of feeling their way towards a new position, with all the attendant justification which that would require.

A prime example of this is Churchill's reaction on 28 May to the suggestion that the British Empire should directly appeal to the USA for the latter's entry into the war. The Prime Minister thought that this would be 'altogether premature': 'If we made a *bold stand* against Germany, that would command their *admiration and respect*; but a

grovelling appeal, if made now, would have the *worst possible* effect.'[59] Here Churchill both polarised the debate by casting the options in extreme form, and again adopted for his views the terminology of moral approval; for the opposing alternative, his tone was little short of demagogic. The importance of this does not lie in any argument that the use of such language is itself enough to give a minister a determining role in policy formulation; clearly most others expressed strong feelings of approbation or denunciation at various times. Nor is it argued that a Prime Minister has only to handle a discussion in this way in order to dominate his Cabinet. That would imply that low-key Premiers like Stanley Baldwin or Clement Attlee were never able to exert strong leadership over their peers. The point is rather that where the pace of events was so fast, where the data-base of previous policy-assumptions was in the midst of disintegration, there occurred, before the re-emergence of a definite set of attitudes in Cabinet, a crucial hiatus in which the Prime Minister was especially well placed to take an influential initiative should he wish to do so. And where a system is structured so as to give certain special opportunities to particular actors, it is not usual for those openings to be ignored. The strong moral line and polarisation of argument which characterised Churchill's behaviour on this occasion were the ways in which this Prime Minister took the opportunity. In so doing, he fulfilled a necessary function from the point of view of the Cabinet as collective organisation. Without an agreed and clear perspective during the disintegration of the Western Front, it vitally required an initiative from somewhere to clarify the issues. Because the environment was one of crisis, there was also an intrinsic need for rapid resolution of the issues into a single, settled policy, whatever its form. Churchill's immediate provision of a clear-cut opinion and his consistently strong inputs on its behalf were the relevant response to this need. The actual arguments employed were, in this one sense, of lesser importance for the final decision.

However, the Prime Minister's lead did not only take the form of righteous exhortation. He also annexed the arguments of practicality to his views. Halifax had made no pretence that a readjustment of war policy would carry any moral weight; his advocacy rested on tangible reasons of necessity. But here too he was outflanked by Churchill. Halifax based his argument by definition on the *prediction* that Britain could secure acceptable peace terms from Hitler.[60] Churchill argued from statements which were also essentially

speculative, but which he presented as indisputable objective facts, by basing them on the current scenario, in which Britain was still undefeated and had suffered no irreversible military losses. In this he was aided by the fact that the Foreign Secretary's prediction conflicted with the undividedly hostile image of Hitler and the Nazis which was common to all British policy-makers by this time. To gain acceptance, it would have to have achieved the reformation of an established image – albeit one hardened by the sense of having come belatedly upon the truth. Such an achievement was obviously not impossible, since general perspectives must and do change over time if policy is not to fall disastrously out of phase with the continually evolving external environment. But in this context most factors worked against any minister other than the Premier being able to shift the general focus of policy. Moreover, in this specific instance, the Prime Minister was not competing to gain acceptance for a new set of attitudes, but was rather seeking only to reinforce and perpetuate the existing criteria for war policy.[61]

The 'facts' and practical arguments which Churchill presented in support of this line added up to an optimistic picture of apparently disastrous events, by a selective interpretation of the value of allies. As we saw earlier, the Prime Minister was eager to represent any small sign of resistance to the German invasion as evidence of the continued ability of France to stay in the war. Yet when it ultimately became clear that this was not in fact the case, he quickly turned the implications of French defeat also to Britain's advantage. On 26 May, when it was realised that counter-attack was impossible, Churchill remarked that 'From one point of view, he would rather France was out of the war before she was broken up, and retained the position of a strong neutral whose factories could not be used against us.'[62] Cadogan noted this switch of view in his diary that night, with some scepticism. Five days later, however, he had come round to the same opinion.[63] It was a natural rationalisation to make. But Churchill had come to it first among those present at Cabinet, and because of the natural attention accorded to his reactions, he probably played a decisive part in setting the tone of the collective governmental feeling about Britain's new isolation, by affecting the delicate and momentary balance between pessimistic and optimistic perceptions.[64]

In similar vein, Churchill moved towards a position of regarding recent developments as positively beneficial in terms of their effects

on American policy towards the war. British policy-makers had been sanguine from the beginning about the back-up resources which the USA could provide for the Allied war effort,[65] but now there emerged a significant propensity to regard an American entry into the war at some stage as likely and even inevitable. Right back on 15 May the Prime Minister had said that 'American sympathy had recently been veering very much in our favour.'[66] The Cabinet naturally looked to Churchill, with his transatlantic connections, for its interpretation of Foreign Office data on American intentions – especially now that Hoare and Chatfield, who had both corresponded on a regular, private basis with the British Ambassador to the United States Lord Lothian about the war, had left the Cabinet.[67] Even the Foreign Secretary recognised the special advantages which Churchill possessed through his correspondence with Roosevelt. Halifax said, with regard to Britain's need for American planes 'that in his opinion the only chance of obtaining the equipment we required was through a direct approach from the Prime Minister to President Roosevelt'.[68] Halifax had become sidelined even in the process of bilateral diplomacy with a friendly power.

We have already noted how Churchill stressed the need to win America's 'administration and respect'; on that occasion the War Cabinet had agreed with him that there should be no appeal to the USA for fear of confirming any fears as to British weakness.[69] As time went on Churchill could argue that positive American intervention was near at hand. On 9 June he brought up in Cabinet a complaint from General Smuts that the Dominions Office had urged the propagation of the idea that it was neither Britain's wish nor interest to involve the USA in 'totalitarian warfare'; Smuts believed that 'as events were now moving any day anything might happen to precipitate the United States into the war. Why should we arrest this process of conversion by the logic of events?' The Prime Minister said that he entirely agreed with the view expressed by General Smuts. He had therefore already ordered the sending of a telegram to the Dominions to correct the impression given in the previous dispatch.[70] Thus Churchill got his way on two diametrically opposed decisions twelve days apart. After a further three days, the question of the war itself was almost subordinated to the acquisition of American aid. Churchill stated: 'A declaration that we were firmly resolved to continue the war in all circumstances would prove the best invitation to the United States of America to lend us their

support.'[71] The circular argument here, that Britain should commit herself to the war so as to encourage America to help it continue the war, seemed to pass unnoticed.[72]

Thus, when Roosevelt sent a message of encouragement to Reynaud on 13 June, the Prime Minister was ready to interpret it as a virtual declaration of war – that is, as far as the President could go without Congress. He thought that Roosevelt would hardly urge France to fight on if he did not intend to join her. He expected America's entry 'in the near future'.[73] Churchill's friend Lord Beaverbrook agreed: 'It was now inevitable that the United States of America would declare war.'[74]

There seem to have been some in the Cabinet who were less convinced than Churchill of this likelihood,[75] but if so their doubts were inconsequential in the absence of hard information to place against Churchill's convictions. (In 1940 the British political class, especially on the Labour side, had a far less intimate knowledge of the American political system than was to become the case after 1945.[76]) Although it was pointed out in discussion both that Roosevelt 'had not stated in terms that the United States would declare war' and that the implications of the message might not be as clear to the French as to the 'Anglo-Saxon mind', Churchill relentlessly stressed the significance of the declaration. Hitler might 'turn on' Britain 'very quickly, perhaps within a fortnight; but before that the United States of America would be in the war on our side'. Ultimately the War Cabinet tended to agree, although they still 'generally felt' that it needed pointing out to France that the President's message 'contained two points which were tantamount to a declaration of war – first, a promise of all material aid, which implied active assistance, and second, a call to go on fighting even if the Government was driven right out of France'.[77]

It will be noted, with hindsight, that these hopes and inferences were wildly unrealistic, and indeed that they were soon replaced by a more sober assessment. In May–June 1940, however, they were both a typical product of the sense of crisis and one of the means by which the strain was alleviated. Churchill inspired and inflated the feeling that Britain might soon have a new ally, by his positive introductions of the possibility during discussions on war policy and by the way he presented Roosevelt's evident sympathy for the Allied cause as proof of an almost immediate American declaration of war – despite his simultaneous acknowledgement of the restraints imposed by

Congress on US foreign policy, and the general feeling that this interpretation would not be obvious to the French.[78]

THE EXECUTIVE DIVIDES

Halifax was thus confronted by a Prime Minister who fully utilised the opportunities inherently open to him in this particular development of the war, first to determine the direction of Cabinet thinking and then to consolidate tentative preferences into general policies. It was not surprising that Halifax failed to gain Cabinet support for his differing views. The actual course of the major confrontation between the two men (from 26 to 28 May) illustrates the way in which Churchill was able to identify his views with the maintenance of the status quo, and to place the onus of proof upon Halifax: that is, he took refuge in non-decisions, as those holding the reins of power are often able to do when faced with those who would revise policy. The power to ignore can be the most difficult of all ploys to counter.[79]

The disagreement centred on the likely nature of any German terms. Halifax raised the subject during discussion of the approach to Mussolini: 'He was not quite convinced that the Prime Minister's diagnosis was correct and that it was in Herr Hitler's interest to insist on outrageous terms. After all, he knew his own internal weaknesses.'[80] The Prime Minister did not respond immediately to this challenging of one of his fundamental assumptions. However, later in the proceedings, as I have already noted, he stressed that any terms offered would certainly involve unacceptable conditions, such as a limitation on British rearmament. Halifax agreed that this condition would be unacceptable – but Hitler might not seek to impose it.

The next day Halifax pressed the point again, but by then he had been put on to the defensive. Inevitably in such a dispute, the Foreign Secretary was forced to answer objections from the Prime Minister, and not vice versa. For Churchill refused to take seriously the possibility of Hitler offering reasonable terms or of Britain negotiating them. Halifax had to deny that he proposed suing for terms which would lead to disaster and constantly to reiterate that realistic terms were not an impossible contingency, solely to keep the idea in the forefront of the debate.[81] Halifax's central points through the arguments of the five relevant meetings were, in summary: (1) that the terms which Germany might offer need not be unacceptable, as such, to Britain, and (2) that in the event of terms being

offered which did not promise to destroy British independence, the risk of fighting on might become too great given the strength of Germany's new position.

In fact at this time even Churchill was able to conceive of British war aims less ambitious than those of October 1939 – because of the desperate military situation – but he did so in a purely hypothetical context. He would not allow the issue an important place in policy-formulation:

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he thought the issue which the War Cabinet was called upon to settle was difficult enough without getting involved in the discussion of an issue which was quite unreal and was most unlikely to arise. If Herr Hitler was prepared to make peace on the terms of the restoration of German colonies and the over-lordship of Central Europe, that was one thing. But it was quite unlikely that he would make any such offer.[82]

After another twenty-four hours and three Cabinet meetings, Halifax was still arguing that the present might be the best opportunity of getting good terms, and that he had again been misrepresented as pursuing 'ultimate capitulation' (so successful had Churchill been in polarising the issue). But by this time he was reduced to a mere restatement of the desirability of 'trying out the possibilities of mediation'; the fact that he was requesting a major change in policy was inhibiting even the development of his case.[83] Churchill could contrast the physical fact of Britain's survival, however temporary it might be, with the speculation of the Foreign Secretary's point. The Prime Minister thought 'that the chances of decent terms being offered to us at the present time were a thousand to one', and that 'it was impossible to imagine that Hitler would be so foolish as to let us continue our rearmament'.[84] By continuing to assert flatly that any German terms would enslave Britain, and that negotiation *in itself* would be harmful, Churchill was drawing attention to the inherent difficulties of Halifax's standpoint, that it contravened the generally held image among ministers of a dynamically aggressive Nazi regime and at the same time raised the spectre of previous and apparently mistaken negotiations with Hitler. In short, his was – in context – a very strong case. Moreover since he had been accepted on all sides as the new Prime Minister only two weeks before, Churchill was in a powerful position to demand the rejection of Halifax's viewpoint – especially as he along among major political figures had escaped the retrospective 'shame' of both Munich and the failure to support rearmament.[85]

No less on the argument that Britain should not ignore a chance to avoid the costs of a German attack was Halifax fighting a losing battle. Even when it seemed that the BEF might be lost, Churchill compared Britain's intact strength with the disintegrating powers of France (rather than with France's position before the German attack, which would have been a truer comparison). He believed that Britain's situation could only improve, and because of rather than despite an attempt at invasion. In opposing what he saw as French attempts to entangle Britain in negotiations, Churchill argued that 'the position would be entirely different when Germany had made an unsuccessful attempt to invade this country'. Thus the only incentives were to continue in the war: 'We should get no worse terms if we went on fighting, *even if we were beaten*, than were open to us now. If, however, we continued the war and Germany attacked us, no doubt we should suffer *some damage*, but they also would suffer severe losses. Their oil supplies might be reduced.'[86]

It is clear that Churchill's argument was based at least as much on assertion as that of Halifax – an invasion attempt will be unsuccessful, Hitler's terms will be crippling (yet no more so after a total defeat of Britain), Germany will suffer 'severe losses' but Britain only 'some damage'. These were desperate rationalisations. Nevertheless, it was here that the innate advantages of the Prime Minister counted in his favour. Because of the premium on a positive and formulated policy at this time, and because of the opportunity Churchill had to determine the terms of reference of the discussion, his assertions were likely to be more influential in Cabinet than the assertions of any colleague, particularly as the Prime Minister was hardly reluctant to capitalise on the privileges which his institutional status conferred on him. For example, stimulated by reports that the Australian High Commissioner was spreading counsels of 'defeatism', Churchill both admonished his ministers and wielded the idea of public support as a further means of exhortation:

> THE PRIME MINISTER thought that it would be as well that he should issue a general injunction to Ministers to use confident language. He was convinced that the bulk of the people of the country would refuse to accept the possibility of defeat.[87]

The War Cabinet 'completely agreed' with Churchill. But once again they were following in the Prime Minister's wake, not sharing in the initiative.

Moreover Churchill was able to mobilise ministers outside the War Cabinet as another way of weighting the balance of argument within it. In between the two halves of the meeting which began at 4 p.m. on 28 May and was adjourned for three-quarters of an hour in its midst, he saw the group of other ministers and gave them the most recent information:

> They had not expressed alarm at the position in France, but had expressed the greatest satisfaction when he had told them that there was no chance of our giving up the struggle. He did not remember having ever before heard a gathering of persons occupying high places in political life express themselves so emphatically.[88]

Thus the Prime Minister not only pre-judged the outcome of the Cabinet's deliberations, but also communicated to the Cabinet the views of other ministers in the form of a uniquely homogeneous and emphatic endorsement of his own position. The previous practice with such meetings had been simply to disseminate information, not to involve a wider circle in disputes internal to the War Cabinet. While the views of the below-the-line ministers were generally in favour of fighting on, it is reasonable to wonder how far Churchill over-estimated their enthusiasm, and also whether he would have reported their views so readily had they taken another form. Dalton's private account confirms the meeting's agreement with the Prime Minister, but also gives the impression that its response was much more passive. Churchill had said that if Britain were to face defeat, let her face it not through surrender, but 'only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground'. In response:

> There was a murmur of approval round the table, in which I think, Amery, Lord Lloyd and I were loudest. Not much more was said. No-one expressed even the faintest flicker of dissent. Herbert Morrison asked about evacuation of the Government, and hoped that it would not be hurried.[89]

Churchill had thus verged on hysteria when addressing the junior ministers and exaggerated their enthusiasm when reporting back to the War Cabinet. Such was the force with which the Prime Minister was arguing for a continuation of the war. His colleagues, whether they disagreed or were simply less certain in their judgements, were under extreme pressure to follow Churchill's lead, since he would not admit even the possibility of doubt. Anything less than unqualified belligerence was in danger of being cast as treason. At that deli-

cate point in the formation of a consensus within the War Cabinet, the Prime Minister's armoury of weapons in discussion may have been of some significance.[90] On 29 May, indeed, Churchill overtly waved the big stick, by circulating the general minute which he had had in mind to all Cabinet colleagues and high officials. This enjoined them to maintain 'a high morale' in their circles and show an 'inflexible resolve to continue the war until we have broken the will of the enemy to bring all Europe under his domination'.[91] In a military crisis he used the language of command naturally, and his civilian colleagues could not help but be affected by it.[92]

WAR CABINET COLLEAGUES

At this point we should turn to the opinions of the other three members of the War Cabinet, and of those who were occasionally present. The two main protagonists monopolised the dispute, but not the discussion. However, the meetings of the Cabinet at this time reveal Attlee, Chamberlain, Greenwood and the few other major contributors as moderate, hesitant and influenced by the arguments of Churchill and Halifax. Although they all held individual views on the situation, these were nothing like so consistent or strongly affirmed as those of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

At the height of the crisis, for example, on the morning of 27 May, Chamberlain told the Cabinet that he had replied to Stanley Bruce (the Australian High Commissioner) and his pessimism about British prospects by pointing out 'that it was too soon to give any definite opinion in the matter'. The lack of conviction in his language, albeit due to his crushed psychological condition, can hardly have reassured Bruce: 'Our dangers were clear, but Germany would have her difficulties also, and *even fighting single-handed we might well outlast her.*'[93] Chamberlain implicitly recognised that *not* 'outlasting' Germany was at least a serious possibility, to be weighed in advance when determining policy – an admission Churchill would never have conceded. On the 27th Chamberlain went on to develop this attitude further. In terms of sheer survival, he was determined and sanguine about fighting on; but he was not so certain about the ultimate wisdom of continuing to exclude a compromise peace from the range of possible futures. Chamberlain suggested, and the Cabinet agreed, that he should see the Dominion High Commissioners again, to

inform them that 'even if France went out of the war, there was no prospect of our giving in. We had good reason to believe that we could withstand attack by Germany, and were resolved to fight on.' (This statement would apply of course to the immediate situation arising out of the hypothetical collapse of France. It would not mean that if at any time terms were offered they would not be considered on their merits.)[94] Such a position represents an important *via media* between the two extremes of (1) fighting until the war ended in total victory or total defeat, and (2) being willing to contemplate immediate negotiations for peace so as to avoid the risks of bombing and attempted invasion. Chamberlain was still looking at external policy through the lens of compromise, even if the parameters of choice were now deeply changed. The other ministers seem to have endorsed his approach. While the First Lord and the Dominions Secretary spoke against Bruce's 'defeatism' about Britain's chances of survival in isolation, the Cabinet approved Chamberlain's remarks in their entirety, including the new qualification on Britain's ability to achieve victory and keep out of negotiations with Hitler. Ministers were against 'capitulation' before the first stone had even been cast, but equally they were no longer wholly confident about an irrevocable, open-ended, prosecution of the war.[95]

The lengthy discussion on 28 May makes this clearer. Again the Cabinet Minutes give the impression that it was Chamberlain of the uncommitted ministers who contributed the most. First he stressed that 'mediation at this stage, in the presence of a great disaster, and at a time when many people might think that we had no more resources left, could only have the most unfortunate results. We in this country felt that we had resources left to us of which we could make good use.' Yet there was no doubt that Chamberlain was here arguing for the continuation of the war on the criterion of achieving a better ultimate compromise peace, rather than on that of pursuing total victory. He agreed with Churchill that resistance to invasion would improve Britain's position, but where the latter believed that any terms offered thereafter could not be worse than at the present, and essentially hoped that time would bring Britain allies who would restore her capacity to defeat Hitler, the Lord President thought that Britain's ability to resist would secure for her an acceptable settlement which should be considered seriously the moment it appeared on the horizon. The following records of Chamberlain's statements express this view fully:

There could be no question of our making concessions to Italy while the war continued. The concessions which it was contemplated we might have to make, e.g., in regard to Malta and Gibraltar, would have to be part of a general settlement with Germany . . . It was clear to the world that we were in a tight corner, and he did not see what we should lose if we said openly that, while we would fight to the end to preserve our independence, we were ready to *consider decent terms if such were offered to us* . . . THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that it was our duty to look at the situation realistically. He felt bound to say that he was in agreement with the Foreign Secretary in taking the view that *if we thought it was possible that we could now get terms which, although grievous, would not threaten our independence, we should be right to consider such terms* . . . If, as we believed, we could hold out, we should be able to obtain terms which would not affect our independence.[96]

These arguments have the appearance of consistency. But even aside from the fact that they were a loose amalgam of the two different standpoints of survival at all costs and victory at all costs, it will have been observed that their attitude to the prospect of immediate negotiations was distinctly ambiguous. At various points Chamberlain emphasised that mediation would harm Britain's bargaining position and morale, and that better terms would be available once the contest had been joined. At others he suggested (as in the italicised passages above), that the possibility of an imminent settlement should not be ruled out. Given the events of 2 September 1939, and the tide running against the 'guilty men', he was hardly in a position to press strongly for negotiations – assuming that he was inclined so to do.[97]

Dalton colourfully expressed his impression after the meeting of below-the-line ministers that the War Cabinet might not be completely or actively behind Churchill: 'It is quite clear that whereas the Old Umbrella – neither he nor other members of the War Cabinet were at this meeting – wanted to run very early, Winston's bias is all the other way.'[98] And indeed Attlee, Greenwood and Sir Archibald Sinclair seem to have shared Chamberlain's rather diffuse and tentative attitude, even if 'running very early' caricatures Chamberlain's position crudely. None of the three figures prominently in the Cabinet Minutes, and unless for some inscrutable reason the Secretary to the Cabinet, Sir Edward Bridges, decided to pare down their contribution to the debate, it is reasonable to infer that they did not feel sufficiently certain or positive in their views to speak forcefully and at length. (All three were relative newcomers to government, and representatives of the former Opposition[99]). Generally

speaking, we may say that they were definitely opposed to peace negotiations merely on the grounds that France was certain to be defeated – and in any case sceptical about their likelihood. Attlee tended to take his lead from others. He felt that Hitler would be in a worse position if he had been frustrated in his plan for victory by the end of the year, and that approaches to Mussolini should be avoided because they would lead to an immediate attempt by him to intercede between Britain and Germany. His views were expressed in the most clipped way, but it is clear that he was opposed to such a move in part because of the great damage it might do to the morale of the British people and their consequent ability to survive a German onslaught.[100] As Chamberlain had noted on the 26th: 'Attlee said hardly anything but seemed to be with Winston.'[101]

Greenwood also subscribed to these two points. He believed that any course of action open to the Cabinet would be highly dangerous, but still came down just about in favour of continuing the war, for the present: 'The line of resistance was certainly a gamble, but he did not feel that this was a time for ultimate capitulation.' In the 2 p.m. meeting of 26 May Greenwood had been willing to see Halifax's 'line of approach' (about Mussolini and general 'European equilibrium') tried. Two and a half hours later, however, when he joined Churchill, Attlee, Halifax and Chamberlain in the Admiralty after their discussions with Reynaud, he gave Chamberlain the impression of not having thought things through, although he saw 'a good chance of outlasting Hitler'.[102] On the 28th he remained aware of the fragility of Britain's position but wanted no 'weakening' in the immediate crisis.[103]

The only other participant in high-level policy formulation within the Cabinet at this time (as opposed to the intermittent attenders) was Sinclair, in his function of representing the minority party in the National Government. The Liberal leader was equally opposed to any concessions while the outcome of a German attack on Britain still remained to be determined; in any case, he thought that 'there was no possible chance of acceptable terms being open to us at the present moment'. Sinclair's clear pronouncement nonetheless carried the implication that at some future stage, 'acceptable terms' might conceivably be available to Britain. The two Labour ministers also accepted the implication, endorsing Chamberlain's remarks to that effect. The Minutes explicitly and repeatedly record that 'There was complete agreement with the views which had been expressed by

. . . The Lord President of the Council' that (after Chamberlain's statement that making peace soon would involve a 'considerable gamble', but equally that Britain should be ready to consider 'decent terms') 'The War Cabinet agreed that this was a true statement of the case', and that 'In further discussion, general agreement was expressed with the views put forward by the Lord President.'[104] Chamberlain, as in so many different contexts, saw himself as the broker or peacemaker, and after the 'rather stormy discussion' in Cabinet on 28 May it was he who drafted the reply to Reynaud on which all finally agreed.[105]

Ultimately Attlee and Greenwood went along with the low-profile stance articulated by Chamberlain. They were willing to state positively their opposition to joining France in an imminent armistice, but they also bestowed approval on Chamberlain's further comments about the need to consider any reasonable terms – as did Sinclair. Essentially they were reluctant to voice such sentiments positively, their expressions of opinion being generally tentative and piecemeal.[106] Their muted agreement with Chamberlain's compromise position was based both on a recognition that peace might be an *eventual* hard necessity, and on the history of their own previous commitment to make no more 'dishonourable' agreements, and to vanquish Nazism completely.[107]

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Thus after intensive debate in the last week of May, a pattern of attitudes had emerged in the War Cabinet: Halifax and Churchill in basic conflict, with the other senior ministers pulled both ways and tending towards compromise as much through a desire for consensus as through any conviction about the precise policies to be followed in future.[108]

Of course, the progress of the war, France's collapse and many other factors outside Britain's control were the major determinants of the history of this period. Put in a wider perspective, arguments within the War Cabinet of the kind we have plotted may seem of only passing significance. The assumption behind any analysis of decision-making, however, is that external forces continually interact with domestic variables to produce choices whose character and outcomes are far from being predetermined. There will always be a variety of ways in which a country may react to a given international

development, according to the state of her own politics and government at the time. In the case under review here, hindsight has tended to distort our understanding by making the path that Britain did follow in 1940 seem obvious and inevitable. The Cabinet records make it clear that policy-makers did not, of course, see it in that way. Fear, uncertainty and speculation abounded in a 'world turned upside down'. The meaning for Britain of the terrifying events in France was obscure, except in their demonstration that nothing could be taken for granted about the war. Recommendations about policy were bound to be even more subjective than usual. In these circumstances, then, choices were especially crucial and problematical, and the decisions which did emerge are worthy of the closest attention. As it was, the very unpredictability of events contributed to the strengthening of Churchill's arguments, precisely because the latter resembled articles of faith more than a detached measuring of pros and cons. Behavioural research suggests that when decision-makers perceive external threats to be severe, they tend to fall back on conviction far more than logic, thereby resolving some of the anxiety that might otherwise paralyse decision.[109] In May 1940 Churchill enjoyed not only the powers of prime ministerial office, but also a capacity for conviction unrivalled among his colleagues.

Moreover, the absence of certain pressures worked in the Prime Minister's favour. It was important, for example, that there had been no *German* peace offers made during the crucial last weeks of French independence, and especially in the week before Dunkirk, when the course of the campaign had become clear, including the prospect for Britain of the loss of her entire army, and the Cabinet had been in the midst of its anxious discussions about a possible end to hostilities.[110] There was a strong inhibition in the British government against beginning contacts with Germany about peace. Such a positive step would have been an overwhelming responsibility at such a time of tension between basic aims and values on the one hand and apparent lack of capabilities on the other. It would have meant a risky pre-judgement of Hitler's interest in a moderate peace. It would also have involved massive humiliation at home and abroad.

Finally, the way in which such a step might be taken had particular complications. The raising by the French of the question of a possible bribe to Italy inevitably introduced for Britain the added unpleasantness of likely concessions in the Mediterranean to a country not yet at war, as part of the price for achieving a general

settlement with Germany. The Mediterranean, furthermore, was an area of long-term strategic importance to the British Empire.[111]

Given that these factors militated against a positive move by the Cabinet for an armistice, a *démarche* by the Germans themselves, on the relatively moderate lines of the July feeler in Berne,[112] would at least have brought an important new element into play during the formulation of British policy. It would have relieved the government of the responsibility for initiating distasteful contacts with Nazism, and it would have removed the difficulties of having Mussolini as middle-man. At the same time a serious proposal would have forced on the War Cabinet detailed consideration of a scenario based on peace, at the very point when they were most in a state of flux over attitudes to that question and when a specific decision in either direction was being avoided. As the American Ambassador in London actually reported on 27 May, a German offer of peace to both Britain and France would have produced 'a row among certain elements in the Cabinet here; Churchill, Attlee and others will want to fight to the death, but there will be other numbers who realize that physical destruction of men and property in England will not be a proper offset to a loss of pride'.[113] Kennedy's own pessimism about Britain's chances of survival probably led him to play up the existence of a defeatist camp, although his failure to mention names indicates the difficulties they would have been in, but he was correct in seeing the reaction to the defeat in France as a critical point of political as well as military decision.[114]

In the light of this, Hitler's non-decision on a serious peace offer at the end of May, and the timing of his eventual peace offensive in July, were tactical errors comparable with the military failures to press home both the attack on the BEF before Dunkirk and the blitz of British fighter bases during the Battle of Britain. On the other hand even a generous offer around 27 May would probably have done no more than strengthen Halifax's hand without changing the policy, while it is likely that Hitler saw the developing options no more clearly than did his victims.[115]

Too much should not be made of this point. There is no strong case for believing that a German peace proposal at, say, the start of June would have led to a compromise settlement of the war. The relevance of the absence of such a proposal is more limited to illustrating the truism that policy formulation within the Cabinet does not exist in a vacuum: that where internal considerations of power or

personality may favour one point of view but still be finely balanced, outside changes or the lack of them will have the capacity at least to tip the balance of decision-making.[116]

The opinions of the Chiefs of Staff were more predictable than the actions of Hitler, but they too constituted a form of external pressure on the sorts of conclusions which the Cabinet might come to. Had the Chiefs, when they presented their revised views in reply to Churchill's slanted brief of 26 May, argued that Britain's thinly stretched resources were regrettably insufficient to survive an attempt at invasion, more ministers than Halifax might have been nervous of putting the matter to the test. While it is true that Churchill only asked for the opinion because he was fairly sure of the answer,[117] even he could not have kept the Chiefs of Staff's views from the Cabinet had they been adverse. (Eleanor M. Gates suggests plausibly that Churchill revised his brief to the Chiefs after preventing ministers from seeing the first, rather pessimistic paper – 'a possibly significant bit of shuffling which no doubt helped Churchill to control his Cabinet'.[118]) As it was the Chiefs of Staff came down on the side of Britain's ability to survive, but made clear the element of subjectivity in this knife-edge judgement. After outlining the difficulties facing Britain, with only her bombing fleet as a countervailing force (the substance of the report already prepared), they ended on a note of faith and hope more than conviction:

> To sum up, our conclusion is that *prima facie* Germany has most of the cards; but the real test is whether the morale of our fighting personnel and civilian population will counter-balance the numerical and material advantages which Germany enjoys. We believe it will.[119]

Bearing in mind the even more negative tone of their first paper, the conclusion is irresistible that the military were distancing themselves as far from a prediction of success as was possible without being actually defeatist. Of the ten substantive paragraphs in the report which preceded their rather depressed summation, five were pessimistic, two optimistic and three neutral. Nevertheless Churchill had the definite opinion that he wanted, 'to be able to assure Parliament that our resolve was backed by professional opinion'[120] and it closed off an important line of argument for those, like Halifax, who might have been considering the possibility of compromise as a response to harsh necessity.

Dunkirk provided a more positive boost to Churchill's outlook of

uncompromising resistance. The rescue of the greater part of the BEF from enemy hands was a great objective contribution to Britain's home-defence capacity and even, in the far-distant future, to the reconstruction of a force for continental invasion.[121] Yet there were also psychological benefits. It was not difficult for the Prime Minister to use the success of the evacuation as a means of reinforcing his strenuous arguments of the previous week, and of proving Britain's basic resilience (in the particular form of her air-power) in the face of the forthcoming adversity. Chamberlain's diary shows how much better things had turned out than had been assumed at first.[122] Paradoxically defeat meant that the talk of 'resolve' now had greater plausibility. On 11 June Churchill reported that he would impress on Reynaud that if France could delay a German success 'we should hold out, even if the whole resources of the enemy were turned on the United Kingdom'.[123] A day later the War Cabinet decided that a study should be made, on the assumption of French collapse, of the economic harm that Britain could do to Germany and of the aid that Britain would require from the USA both to survive and to defeat Germany.[124] Horizons were widening once more; the question of an imminent peace was no longer an issue.

Perhaps the most important way in which Dunkirk reinforced Churchill's arguments, however, was in the negative respect of the prevention of a disaster. Had the BEF in fact been lost, Britain's military position would have seemed irredeemable. That it came so near to disaster was a measure of her intense vulnerability. The Chiefs of Staff had reported that the primary conditions for repelling an invasion were air superiority and the morale of the work-people who manufactured aircraft. If the army had been captured, it would both have demonstrated that the RAF could not dominate the air over the Channel and have been a major blow to civilian morale, with the loss of a key symbol of defence and one that was largely made up of the friends and relatives of industrial workers.[125] As it was, the assumptions of the new policy were fortunately reinforced.

Yet, even without the turn of events, Churchill had effectively managed to impose his strategy upon the Cabinet. For the very nature of the compromise which we have described was weighted against the conclusion of a negotiated peace. The War Cabinet had come to an informal decision to continue the war, wait on events and delay the consideration of peace terms to a later stage, when the blunting of an invasion would have restored the semblance of a

bargaining position. In practice this solution meant that British policy was likely to follow one or other of the two scenarios set out by Churchill – glorious defeat or the open-ended continuation of the war. For if an invasion were to be repelled, then the Prime Minister would be able to capitalise on the relative improvement in British futures to encourage the belief that if survival was possible, then victory could be also. The prospect of imminent defeat would no longer exist to provide an incentive for accepting negotiations. Alternatively, if an attack on Britain began to prove successful, it is implausible that a satisfactory compromise peace could have been achieved at such a late stage, with even less leverage than in June. Once an air bombardment and an invasion had been launched and was bearing fruit, Hitler was unlikely to accept an armistice on anything less than the most favourable terms. At worst, the momentum of the military campaign would carry him on to achieve complete victory by conquest.

DENOUEMENT

In the event, the way the war unfolded during the next three months conformed with the first of Churchill's preferences. The War Cabinet moved naturally away from their original opinion that successful resistance would lead to a better position from which to obtain independence-without-victory, even though the latter had seemed the best possible outcome after the loss of France. The Battle of Britain and the abandonment of Operation Sealion enabled Churchill to recruit ministers to his belief (and their own, prior to May 1940) that Britain must and could continue to strive for complete victory.[126]

Thus neither Halifax nor the cautious centre of the War Cabinet ultimately had a decisive influence on the attitude of the British government to the war after the attack of France. The Foreign Secretary failed to convince his colleagues of the need to work for peace before an invasion; Chamberlain, with Greenwood and Attlee in train, appeared to have kept open the option of an 'honourable issue' at some point in the future, but by siding with Churchill against Halifax on the immediate issue, they had in fact rejected the idea of peace negotiations at the very point when they might have been most seductive.[127]

During June Churchill actively consolidated his implicit success in

preventing the consideration of a compromise peace. As it became finally clear that France was lost, the Prime Minister began to cast any discussion of the future more in the optimistic terms of prospective victory. The recent past had been catastrophically unsuccessful; accordingly Churchill stressed that a 'new phase' was commencing, and one that he viewed with confidence: 'we should maintain the blockade, and win through, though at the cost of ruin and starvation throughout Europe'. He added that such resolution would attract the support of the USA.[128] In other words Churchill was no longer paying even lip-service to the idea that a hard-fought compromise might be the best realistic goal. He resurrected the idea of military victory on the basis that Britain's retreat behind the safety of her coasts would of itself assure eventual victory through the working of time and a blockade against Germany. He reported to the Cabinet his words to Reynaud of 13 June, without a trace of disingenuousness: '[Britain] believed that Hitler could not win the war without overcoming us. Our war aim still remained the total defeat of Hitler, and we felt that we could still bring this about.'[129] This was despite the clear scepticism among his own colleagues about total victory, expressed in the War Cabinet only two weeks before, and despite the circumspect Chiefs of Staff paper of 25 May, which had said that success was only likely on the twin assumptions of (1) 'full economic and financial support' from the USA, and (2) the accuracy of the Ministry of Economic Warfare forecasts as to German economic weaknesses.[130]

In this highly unstable environment, where most other predictions and options were highly tentative, Churchill fully exploited his institutional privilege of collecting the voices within the War Cabinet, his penchant for certainties becoming even more pronounced. Statements to colleagues came to resemble orders more than suggestions. On 6 June, in the midst of a quite specific discussion about the French armistice, Churchill announced that 'in no circumstances whatsoever would the British Government participate in any negotiations for armistice or peace' and 'At the present juncture all thoughts of coming to terms with the enemy must be dismissed as far as Britain was concerned. We were fighting for our lives and it was vital that we should allow no chink to appear in our armour.'[131]

During this kind of pressure the Prime Minister's colleagues, who had only ever been concerned to qualify his arguments by

postulating a later consideration of the peace issue, were unlikely to voice any disagreement. Yet by supporting Churchill's dismissal of an armistice before the invasion attempt they were also drawn into a tacit approval of the whole burden of the Prime Minister's remarks, including the implication that a compromise peace would be possible 'in no circumstances whatever'. Once Churchill had elided the two issues, of unmitigated resistance to attack and of unyielding commitment to final victory, it was impossible for other ministers to disentangle them without appearing both premature and faint-hearted. Certainly Halifax had come round to follow Churchill's lead. Two weeks after his advocacy of peace to the War Cabinet, he remarked that France ought to realise that 'if they made an armistice, they would embark on a slippery slope which would lead to the loss of their fleet and eventually of their liberty'.[132] Three days later he expressed the belief that if Hitler forced onerous terms on France, then the United States would enter the war.[133] Without Churchill's leadership and exhortation it is unlikely that the Foreign Secretary would so easily have abandoned his belief in the feasibility of peace. Nothing in the meantime had happened in the war to undermine his previous argument that reasonable terms might be available. Indeed, if anything, Dunkirk should have led to some speculation about whether Hitler had deliberately allowed the BEF to escape in order to improve the chances of peace with Britain. It did not, largely because it was no longer easy to think of Hitler as a rational actor, but also because Churchill was inspiring a psychology of defiance in which a successful evacuation became the apprehension of victory, the loss of France a palpable advantage and optimism a test of loyalty.[134]

For himself Churchill was increasingly concerned to shift his government's attention away from the difficult present: 'It might well be to our advantage that the Germans should have to hold down all these intelligent and freedom-loving people; the task of this holding down all Europe should prove beyond even the strength of a Gestapo, provided England could retain her liberty.'[135] While it was probable that his colleagues held hopes along these lines, the Prime Minister relentlessly expressed such views with complete confidence. Each turn of events was presented through the same filter of inflexible optimism and determination, despite the fact that a prediction six months previously of the current difficulties would have made even Churchill pause for thought. The peace terms offered to

France, for example, were cast as 'murderous' and depriving that country of 'all liberty'.[136] Apparently unaffected by his frenetic involvement in detail of all kinds, Churchill also took care to monopolise interpretations of the general outlook. The Cabinet was rarely allowed to forget the spirit in which it and the populace at large ought to be approaching the future. The Prime Minister was strongly opposed to the evacuation of children to North America: 'A large movement of this kind encouraged a defeatist spirit, which was entirely contrary to the true facts of the position, and should be sternly discouraged.' As a consequence of these remarks the Cabinet gave its approval to a stern prime-ministerial warning to higher officials 'to maintain a spirit of alert and confident energy' since 'there are no grounds for supposing that more German troops can be landed in this country . . . than can be destroyed or captured by the strong forces at present under arms'. The RAF was said to be at the zenith of its strength, and the German Navy at its nadir. Subordinates who were deliberately exerting a 'disturbing or depressing influence' should be removed or reported.[137] In such ways did Churchill display the powerful prime-ministerial leadership for which he has so often been praised.

In the light of the way opinions on the future of the war had been dominated by Churchill, and their subtleties submerged by the cumulative effects of his 'never surrender' reprovals, such German initiatives as there were for a settlement came far too late to have any impact within the Cabinet. Whereas an offer in late May or early June might have further disturbed the uncertain feelings of Churchill's colleagues, by the end of June peace feelers encountered a government once again operating on a basic consensus. As a result the Prime Minister was able to set in motion a negative response with little collective deliberation.

The Papal suggestions for an agreement of 28–30 June did not even get as far as the War Cabinet, despite the fact that 'Silly old Halifax [was] evidently hankering after them.'[138] According to Cadogan, Churchill did not allow the Foreign Secretary to begin talking seriously again about peace. He minuted: 'I hope it will be made clear to the Nuncio that we do not desire to make any inquiries as to terms of peace with Hitler, and that all our agents are strictly forbidden to entertain any such suggestions.'[139] The Prime Minister here interpreted the Cabinet's general feelings about a settlement, never expressed in a formal decision, with a certain licence. As with

the Prytz affair around the same time, this was a good example of the Prime Minister's capacity to remove all doubt as to the implications of a general attitude formed in Cabinet, by acting decisively on his image of that attitude when a specific occasion arose.[140] By acting in this way a Prime Minister could create a *fait accompli* in a particular instance, and possibly lead his colleagues into a view of their own policy which might not have been fully formed until that point.

On 10 July, the War Cabinet did get the chance to consider a possible German peace move, when the Foreign Secretary reported a conversation in Berne between the British Minister and the Acting President of the Red Cross, Dr Burckhardt, who had communicated that Hitler was once again urging 'a working arrangement' with the British Empire, and a 'white peace like Sadowa'.[141] By this stage Churchill had given sufficiently clear expositions of British policy to leave even Halifax in no doubt of the response which should be made. He suggested, and the Cabinet agreed, that no reply should be made to the feeler. (Although it should be noted that there was at least enough interest to rule out 'a flat negative', in the thought that silence might lead Germany into confirming the sounding.[142]) There was no deliberation of any length on the issue, and the predominant impression is that of a pre-formed attitude applied automatically as the occasion arose.

The War Cabinet's reaction to the major peace initiative of this period, Hitler's speech of Friday 19 July,[143] confirms this picture. Ministers did not consider the speech until 22 July, by which time Churchill had acted quickly to ensure that the parallel attempt to contact the British Ambassador in Washington about peace was given no encouragement. He had sent the following telegram on Saturday the 20th: 'I do not know whether Lord Halifax is in town today, but Lord Lothian should be told on no account to make any reply to the German Chargé d'Affaire's message.'[144] When ministers did meet, there was no serious consideration of Hitler's 'appeal to reason', but rather a discussion of whether it would be best formally rejected in Parliament or simply ignored. In the event, Halifax made a radio broadcast on the same night which dismissed the peace offer by announcing that 'we shall not stop fighting until freedom is secure'.[145]

By the end of July the Prime Minister's consistently forceful advocacy had united the Cabinet behind him after a short but important

period of uncertainty and division. Churchill had succeeded in maintaining the bases of British war aims, despite a massive upheaval in both the operational and psychological environments. The confusion into which British policy was plunged in May 1940 had allowed full scope to the clear definitions of goals that in this instance the Prime Minister alone possessed. Churchill was no Machiavelli; although far from being innocent of the political skills needed to acquire and hold onto power, he preferred the risk of rejection implicit in offering emotional leadership to the stratagems of palace politics. For once in his career this proved a positive advantage.[146] In the critical early months of Britain's isolation, circumstances and personality conspired to produce a concentrated period of prime-ministerial government.[147]