

We Need the Spirit of Dunkirk

by Michael Curtis



These are the times that try the souls of Americans. Those that stand by the country deserve the love and thanks of their fellow citizens. Difficulties are not easily conquered. The scene is depressing with two factors: the continuation, if some mitigation, of the pandemic, Covid-1; and the violent protests over the death of a 46 year old African-American man by a police officer in Minneapolis. The fight against the virus has been a collective national effort, with medical staff, doctors, nurses, going far beyond their normal duties, and a considerable part of the U.S. population helping in mutual aid and abiding with the official advice of social distancing.

But the death of George Floyd has caused divisions, not unexpected if more acute and violent than envisaged. The U.S. is politically and culturally a federal system, a divided nation with people of widely different background, occasioning

suspicion, socially, financially, and geographically uneven and disproportionate. The death of the black man has led to agitation, distressing scenes, not only of peaceful protests but also of a complex picture of agitators in effect sabotaging those peaceful individuals by creating violence and chaos. The agitation continues even after the main suspect, the police officer pictured in videos, has been charged with murder. The country is witnessing violent street protests, fires, window smashing, torched vehicles, blocked roads, clashes with police in more than 30 major cities. It has even taken the form of calls for the removal of confederate monuments in cities in a number of states, Virginia, the Carolinas, Mississippi.

If the country is not tearing itself apart, events have not brought a wave of unity. What is missing is the Spirit of Dunkirk, a reminder of history and a rallying cry exactly 80 years ago in May 1940 with the extraordinary rescue of British and French armed forces from almost certain death or capture.

The setting is well known, if only from movies depicting the period. Britain was threatened with defeat by Germany in the dark days of 1940 when Nazi forces after the "phony war" had advanced in France through the Ardennes forest and were moving towards the French coast and the English Channel. A British unit of 4.000 under the command of Brigadier Claude Nicholson with a battalion of tanks and 1,000 French military held Calais for a time but were overcome by two Nazi armored divisions. British casualties were heavy but the Allied defense delayed the attack on the port of Dunkirk 38 km away which was kept open.

The rapid Nazi advance had cut communications between parts of the BEF, British Expeditionary Force, and French Allied forces, and several hundred thousand Allied troops were retreating to a small area of the French coast. They faced annihilation, and one option, reluctantly suggested at first, was evacuation by sea of as many of the military as possible.

This had to be considered by Winston Churchill who became prime minister, replacing Neville Chamberlain who had lost a vote of confidence in the House of Commons, on May 10, 1940, the day that Germany invaded the Low Countries, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, and France.

Prime Minister Churchill in attempt to rally the BEF called for "our people to call forth the last ounce and inch of effort of which they are capable." Panzer divisions of the German Army had reached the Channel coast and fierce fighting broke out in the area. The perilous situation was worsened by the defeat of Belgium, to be followed by the surrender of the Belgian army by King Leopold III on May 28, 1940, and soon by the defeat of France with the fall of Paris on June 14, 1940, the fall of France, and the armistice with Germany signed by Marshal Petain on June 22 at Compiegne.

Adolf Hitler, for reasons still disputed and not fully understood, had accepted on May 24, 1940 the advice of his military leaders, the Generals of the German panzer divisions, to halt the advance for two or three days. Britain took advantage of this break, in a sense the salvation of Britain, and eighty years ago, on May 26, 1940 began the miracle of deliverance in Dunkirk, rescuing the troops before the Nazi panzers struck. The event, *Operation Dynamo*, lasted fourteen days until June 4, 1940 during which evacuation of Allied military forces by sea took place. The miracle was that about 338,000 Allied troops, including 198,000 British and 140,000 French troops were saved and shipped to safety in the UK. It was a crucial moment in the war.

In an extraordinary effort, the Royal Navy's overloaded destroyers, light warships and countless merchant seamen in 850 small vessels and 106 aircraft proving air cover, risked their lives rescued the troops. This was a flotilla of boats, an armada of small ships in which courage was displayed by amateur sailors risking their lives in fishing boats, lifeboats, and sail boats.

Casualties were heavy. Nazi Luftwaffe using Stuka bombers attacked Allied personnel and the harbor of Dunkirk. On one day, May 29, they destroyed ten destroyers, eight personnel ships, and many small vessels. In all, German attacks put more than 170 ships including 25 destroyers out of action, while Britain lost 177 aircraft. About 17,000 soldiers died during the operation. However, about 90,000 Allied troops were left behind, with enormous amount of more than 700 tanks and military equipment, enough for 8-10 divisions.

On June 4, 1940 in the House of Commons, PM Winston Churchill in a dramatic speech spoke of the event the week before when the troops seemed about to perish or to be led to ignominious and starving captivity. Churchill confessed he thought only 20,000-30,000 would be saved. The miracle had been achieved while under constant enemy attack, by valor, perseverance, perfect discipline, faultless service, skill, unconquerable fidelity. It was the 20th example, he said, of the defense of civilization by the skill and devotion of noble individuals, more important than the Knights of the Round Table and the Crusaders.

Dunkirk did not have, as Churchill said, attributes of victory, but it was a remarkable defense of the cause of civilization.

That defense turned into more aggressive activity. Churchill made clear that he and the country could not be content with a defensive war, wars are not won by evacuations. At the same time, British defenses had to be put in into a "high state of organization." Churchill uttered some of his most famous words, "we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields, we shall fight streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall go on to the end, we shall never surrender." Dunkirk was a turning point in World War II by stopping the Nazi momentum.

Though Churchill did not coin the term, the British action

exemplified the Dunkirk Spirit. There is no exact definition of the term, but it can be equated with courageous behavior, with fortitude and refusing to accept defeat in a difficult situation.

The world today is facing the enemy of the pandemic, and leadership, fortitude, perseverance, and courage are necessary to fight it. There is no current Winston available to lead the chorus, but we need appropriate alternative leaders for societies to prevail.

This is the moment for the U.S. and democratic countries to emulate the glorious memory of Dunkirk, and arouse the Spirit of Dunkirk. We should not flag or fail.