Politically outcast in the 1930s, Winston Churchill was far from being a charismatic leader. Not long before he became Prime Minister, he was one of the least popular leaders in Britain. Only with the outbreak of war did he rise to power in two stages: first, when war was declared on 3 September 1939, to First Lord of the Admiralty; then, eight months later, to Prime Minister on the eve of the German invasion of France. Now, with virtually unanimous support in Parliament, Churchill was given a rapturous welcome wherever he went and treated at times almost as if he had talismanic qualities. His oratory which a few months before had been put down as the overblown antiquated ramblings of a man whose career as a politician had already ended in failure, now held Parliament in thrall. Rarely has the elusive nature of charisma been illustrated so dramatically. At this moment, and at this moment alone, Churchill and Britain found one another to be at one, and Churchill’s inner world and motives and the national will coincided.

Whether or not Churchill’s leadership was decisive in winning the war or, at any rate, in Britain’s decision to fight on, is open to question. The military historian Basil Liddell Hart thought not, for although Churchill shone by his fighting spirit, ‘The British have always been less dependent than other people upon inspiring leadership . . . in their case, inspiring leadership may be regarded as an additional asset rather than a necessity’ (Taylor, ed., 1973, p. 187). Against this view is the fact that until the summer of 1940, there were still influential members of the British government, such as Lord Halifax, who were ready to negotiate a peace settlement with Germany. When Hitler made his peace offer to Britain on 19 July 1940, a leader less pugnacious and determined and less capable of inspiring the nation than Churchill – Halifax was the second choice for Prime Minister after Churchill – might have lost heart and succumbed.
A great shift in national morale was achieved by the first of Churchill’s great speeches in the Commons on 13 May 1940, three days after he became Prime Minister. In this speech, Churchill set the tone for Britain’s conduct during the war:

I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat... You ask, what is our policy? I can only say: It is to wage war by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us, to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be.

The historian Robert Rhodes James comments movingly on the impact of this speech:

What will always be remembered as the ‘blood, sweat and tears’ speech was a real turning point. It stirred the Commons to its depths. It came to the British people as a call to service and sacrifice. It rang round the world, and thrilled the many friends of Western civilization with the realization that Britain was going to fight. There were those in 1940 who believed that Britain should seek a negotiated settlement with Hitler; perhaps it was, technically, the wisest thing to do. But after that first, unforgettable speech, such arguments lost whatever appeal they might have had. Here was the authentic voice of leadership and defiance. It was Churchill’s outstanding quality as a war leader that he made the struggle seem not merely essential for national survival, but worthwhile and noble. No one – not even a child, as I was – who was in England in the summer of 1940 will ever forget the cheerfulness of the people. It was not even a gallows-humour mood. One caught Churchill’s infectious spirit that this was a great time to be alive in; that Destiny had conferred a wonderful benefit upon us; and that these were thrilling days to live through. Of course, this mood could not be permanent, and the reality of sacrifice was a very different thing to the prospect. But the horror of war was to a remarkable extent exorcized by the exhilaration of the struggle, and I have no doubt that it was this that brought the British people through their ordeal (ibid., pp. 108–9).

Even a revisionist historian such as Charmley (1993) acknowledges Churchill’s strengths as a war leader: ‘He realized the importance of emotion and symbols, and it was through their utilisation, via the medium