

Nov 04, 2016 by **Nicholas J. Cull**

The General speaks... ^[1]

Yesterday— 18 June 2010 – marked the seventieth anniversary of one of the great broadcasts in the history of international broadcasting: the broadcast from London of General Charles de Gaulle to the people of German-occupied France. Speaking at 10 PM from the fourth floor of Broadcasting House in London the general called for free Frenchmen to join him in the UK and fight on against the Nazis. ‘Whatever happens,’ the General pledged, ‘the flame of the French resistance must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished.’ His broadcast and subsequent talks over the BBC rallied many in France to fight on and the ‘appeal of 18 June’ is remembered in France as a moment of national rebirth. The day has been marked by a visit from President Sarkozy to the BBC and press hullabaloo on both sides of the English Channel.

The appeal of 18 June has a number of lessons for contemporary public diplomacy. It is a reminder of the historical impact of the radio, which still has a role to play in today’s world. More than this it is an example of the public diplomacy of empowerment. The British government could (and did) address the people of France themselves, but Churchill for one understood that there was infinitely more to be gained from empowering a credible Frenchman to speak. One can imagine how counterproductive it would have been if Churchill himself had broadcast to France that day, and told the people that he wanted them to fight on. Britain used a similar proxy approach in its broadcasting to the United States: placing special emphasis on facilitating the broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow and other American correspondents rather than appealing directly for American aid.

Finally it should be remembered that working with allies is not necessarily the easiest option. De Gaulle was a difficult customer even in the extreme situation of June 1940. He had pretty much appeared at the BBC that day and demanded to address his people. De Gaulle’s handler at the BBC – Leonard Miall -- became one of the first of many Britons to experience the legendary wrath of the great man. It fell to Miall to explain that because his appearance at Broadcasting House had been unexpected and the BBC had not scheduled a definite repeat transmission of the broadcast, his historic words had not been preserved on one of the only six recording circuits then possessed by the corporation. Suitably upbraided, the BBC was sure to record the General’s second broadcast on 22 June, which became the first of a daily series heard around the evening mealtime in France. The rest is history.
