

The Root of the Matter
Putnam County News & Recorder
February 11, 2015
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Winston Churchill wrote and spoke millions of words, but he admired those who could quickly get to the essence of an argument. He once said: "Anything worthwhile can be put on one side of a page."

Throughout his life, one of Churchill's favorite phrases was the "root of the matter." In 1909, Churchill wrote his wife Clementine about his martial desire to command large units of soldiers in battle: "I am sure I have the root of the matter in me -- but never in this state of human existence will it have a chance of flowering -- in bright red blossom."

Three decades later in July 1940, Prime Minister Churchill complained about a recalcitrant admiral after the failure of a joint British-French operation to take Dakar in Africa: "It is evident that Admiral Dudley North has not got the root of the matter in him, and I should be very glad to see you replace him by a more resolute and clear-sighted officer." A few months later, as Churchill considered a former prime minister for a cabinet post, Churchill observed that he would determine "through an inquisition first, as to whether he had the root of the matter in him."

The half-American Churchill saw this ability to get to the root of the matter as an American strength. In June 1941, before America entered World War II, Churchill prepared a broadcast to the American people: "At intervals during the last forty years I have addressed scores of great American audiences in almost every part of the Union. I have learnt to admire the courtesy of these audiences; their sense of fair play; their sovereign sense of humour, never minding the joke that is turned against themselves; their earnest, voracious desire to come to the root of the matter and to be well and truly informed on Old World affairs."

By then, American presidential advisor Harry Hopkins had twice visited Churchill in Britain. The Prime Minister had quickly dubbed Hopkins "Lord Root of the Matter." President Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed. In September 1943, FDR acknowledged "that when a group of men are arguing and haggling over the details of some problem, and perhaps talking at cross purposes, Harry will be sitting quietly saying nothing, taking it all in, and then, in one sentence, he will put his finger on the point of the argument, and clarify the whole thing."

Roosevelt's chief of staff noted in his memoirs: "Churchill's jesting title, 'Lord Root of the Matter,' was an accurate description. Hopkins had an excellent mind. His manner of approach was direct and nobody could fool him, not even Churchill. He was never influenced by a person's rank." When Hopkins died of cancer in January 1946, Churchill wrote: "I have a great regard for that man, who always went to the root of the matter and scanned our great affairs with piercing eye."

From 1940 to 1943, Hopkins lived at the White House -- in a bedroom where President Abraham Lincoln had once had his office. More even than Churchill and Hopkins, Lincoln went to the root of the matter -- whether the matter was large or small. Lincoln's law partner wrote that Lincoln "was not a general reader in any field of knowledge, but when he had occasion to learn or investigate any subject he was thorough and indefatigable in his search. He not only

went to the root of question, but dug up the root, and separated and analyzed every fibre of it."

Lincoln's prodigious memory allowed him to bring ancient wisdom to bear on new situations. At Cosmopolitan Hall in Cleveland in late May 1864 a convention was held with about 350 anti-administration radicals from 15 states calling themselves "Radical Democracy." When President Lincoln heard the convention had attracted just four hundred dissidents, he immediately took up his Bible. From I Samuel 22:2, Lincoln read: "And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them; and there were with him about four hundred men."

In his Second Inaugural Address in 1865, President Lincoln swept aside all rationalizations for the Civil War in order to get to the root of the matter: "One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war...."

As Lincoln had demonstrated in his 272-word Gettysburg Address, he got quickly to the root of the war's causation. Near the end of the war, Lincoln wrote out what a journalist sardonically called Lincoln's "last shortest and best speech."

"On Thursday of last week two ladies from rebel Tennessee came before the President asking the release of their husbands held as prisoners of war at Johnson's Island," the reporter wrote. "They were put off till Friday, when they came again; and were again put off to Saturday. At each of the interviews one of the ladies urged that her husband was a religious man. On Saturday the President ordered the release of the prisoners, and then said to this lady: "You say your husband is a religious man; tell him when you meet him, that I say I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread on the sweat of other men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven!"

On such occasions beset by hordes of petitioners, Lincoln must have felt as afflicted himself as the biblical Job. The biblically literate President probably knew that it was in the book of Job from which the "root of the matter" had sprung: "But ye should say, Why persecute we him, seeing the Root of the matter is found in me?"

Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln discovered where -- and in whom -- to find the root of the matter.

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