

Lincoln's Ambition (and Churchill's)

by Lewis E. Lehrman

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"Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition," declared Abraham Lincoln in announcing his first political campaign in 1832. "Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed."¹ Fourteen years later, Lincoln wrote: "With *me*, the race of ambition has been a failure -- a flat failure."² He was then 37 years old.

"That man who thinks Lincoln calmly gathered his robes about him, waiting for the people to call him, has a very erroneous knowledge of Lincoln," wrote Abraham Lincoln's law partner. "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." In 1858, Lincoln admitted: "I have never professed an indifference to the honors of official station; and were I to do so now, I should only make myself ridiculous."³

In 1838, a 29-year-old Lincoln had declared of another:-- "Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored."⁴ A decade later, Congressman Lincoln told the House of Representatives: "Determine that the thing can and shall be done, and then we shall find the way."⁵ A month later, Lincoln again wrote his law partner, William H. Herndon, from Washington: "Now, as to the young men. You must not wait to be brought forward by the older men. For instance, do you suppose that I should have ever got into notice if I had waited to be hunted up and pushed forward by older men?"⁶ Personal ambition was necessary for success.

"You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm." Lincoln wrote General Joseph Hooker, the newly appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac, on January 26, 1863.⁷ The President's greatest respect was reserved for fighting generals -- not the hesitant George B. McClellan, but instead the bold Ulysses S. Grant. Lincoln and Grant set winning goals and pursued them to victory in the Civil War -- a war of national survival. Lincoln had little patience for those who did not persevere. Thus, after the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, Lincoln grew increasingly frustrated with General George Meade who refused aggressively to pursue the Confederate Army of North Virginia under General Robert E. Lee. About the same time, Lincoln commented of Grant that he was "a copious worker, and fighter, but a very meager writer, or telegrapher."⁸

¹ CWAL, Volume I, p. 8 (Announcement for office, March 9, 1832).

² CWAL, Volume II, p. 383 (Fragment, ca. December 1856).

³ CWAL, Volume II, p. 482 (Fragment, ca. July 1858).

⁴ CWAL, Volume I, p. 114 (Lyceum Address, January 27, 1838).

⁵ CWAL, Volume I, p. 489 (Speech in the House of Representatives, June 20, 1848).

⁶ CWAL, Volume I, p. 491 (Letter to William H. Herndon, June 22, 1848).

⁷ CWAL, Volume VI, p. 78 (Letter to Joseph Hooker, January 26, 1863).

⁸ CWAL, Volume VI, p. 350 (Letter to Ambrose Burnside, July 27, 1863)

Great Britain had its own war of national survival -- World War II -- and a leader worthy of President Lincoln. Winston Churchill's ambition also emerged at a young age. "I am so conceited," Churchill wrote his mother in 1898, that "I do not believe that the gods would create so potent a being as myself for so prosaic an ending." (Lincoln by contrast was modest.) Four decades later, at the onset of World War II, Churchill was named First Lord of the Admiralty. One cabinet official commented: "From the beginning we speculated on his chances of becoming PM and on his behaviour at this time. We were not happy at the prospect. His drive and pugnacity were obvious, but we could not foresee how far, once he was in command, these would outweigh the disadvantage of his impulsive imagination."⁹

Churchill's chance to fulfill his ambition for Britain's top job came in May 1940 as German armies blitzed into Belgium, Holland, and France. Lord Halifax's report of the meeting leading to Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister is considered more reliable than Churchill's own, which was written later and contained some obvious errors. In his notes, Halifax wrote: "PM [Chamberlain], Winston and I discussed possibilities. PM said I was the man mentioned as the most acceptable. I said it would be hopeless. If I was not in charge of the war [operations] and if I didn't lead in the House [of Commons], I should be a cipher. I thought Winston was a better choice. Winston did not demur. Was very kind and polite but showed that he thought this right solution."¹⁰

Churchill wrote in his memoirs: "By the confidence, indulgence, and loyalty by which I was upborne, I was soon able to give integral direction to almost every aspect of the war. This was really necessary because times were so very bad. The method was accepted because everyone realised how near were death and ruin. Not only individual death, which is the universal experience, stood near, but, incomparably more commanding, the life of Britain, her message, and her glory."¹¹ Churchill prevailed by forging and inspiring the Anglo-American-Soviet Alliance to destroy the Nazi regime and the Japanese Empire.

Both Lincoln and Churchill, the greatest English-speaking statesmen of the 19th and 20th centuries, led their countries to victory in wars of national survival.

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⁹ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Finest Hour, 1939-1941*, p. 47.

¹⁰ David Dilks, editor, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, O.M., 1938-1945*, p. 280

¹¹ Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, p. 20