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Review: 'Lincoln & Churchill,' United by a Common Language

Both leaders had not only a genius for waging war but a gift for explaining why it must be waged.



Churchill at the Royal Albert Hall on Thanksgiving Day, 1944. PHOTO: UIG VIA GETTY IMAGES

By Michael F. Bishop

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The enduring fame of Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill rests chiefly on their leadership during existential conflicts. And while the American Civil War and World War II differed in scale, strategic difficulty and technological complexity, the two leaders indelibly stamped their respective causes in similar ways, as **Lewis E. Lehrman** observes in his penetrating new book, "Lincoln & Churchill: Statesmen at War." Decades and much else divide the two men, but the qualities they share inspire all who defend the cause of freedom.

At first glance, their contrasts seem to loom larger than their similarities. Lincoln was born in a frontier cabin, Churchill in a ducal palace. The American president was nearly monkish in his asceticism, eating little and drinking not at all; Churchill relished fine food and champagne (and whisky and brandy). “My tastes are simple,” Churchill said, “I am easily satisfied with the best.”

Lincoln was an enigmatic figure even to his closest associates; his longtime law partner called him the most “shut-mouthed” man that ever lived. Churchill was ceaselessly voluble, pouring out his thoughts and opinions in an endless geyser of rhetoric, publishing more words than Shakespeare and Dickens combined.

Their martial experience, too, could hardly have been more different. At about the age when Churchill was charging with the British cavalry in the Sudanese desert, Lincoln waged “bloody struggles with the mosquitoes,” as he self-mockingly put it, during the Black Hawk War in Illinois. Pacific by nature, the young Lincoln refused even to hunt game, while Churchill lunged into conflicts from Cuba to India to Africa.

Ultimate power came to Churchill late. He was 65 when a reluctant King George VI appointed him prime minister. By that time, he had held every high cabinet post save that of foreign secretary. Lincoln was inaugurated a few weeks after his 52nd birthday, one of the youngest presidents yet elected, having served only a single term in Congress.

The offices they held were also profoundly different. The American Constitution explicitly states that “the President shall be Commander-in-Chief,” while the prime ministerial authority over the armed forces was murkier upon Churchill’s appointment in May 1940. Having learned from the shambolic conduct of the war since its outbreak the previous year, Churchill recognized the need for unified command. He not only created the position of minister of defence; he appointed himself to it.

For all these differences, however, the frontiersman and the aristocrat had much in common. Modern history’s two greatest war leaders were masters of the English language. Their pre-eminence rests not only on a genius for waging war but also a peerless gift for explaining why it needed to be waged. “They had,” as Mr. Lehrman puts

it, “mastered the natural rhythms of their native tongue.” During the fateful first weeks of Churchill’s premiership, when Hitler’s armies swept all before them and the British war cabinet teetered on the brink of capitulation, Churchill’s words were the most powerful weapons in the British arsenal. He rallied Parliament and the people with declarations that “we shall fight on the beaches” and “never surrender.” Lincoln’s prose, borne of his immersion in Shakespeare and the King James Bible, invested the Union cause with a moral majesty that sanctified a fratricidal conflict. “The struggle of today, is not altogether for today,” he declared to Congress in 1862, but “for a vast future also.”

Churchill was compulsively peripatetic. He embarked on perilous journeys by sea and air throughout his premiership, traveling some 180,000 miles before the war was over. Whether haranguing commanders in distant theaters or conducting personal diplomacy with Roosevelt and Stalin, Churchill was not content to lead from London. Lincoln, too, was often on the move, visiting battlefields and encampments and rallying the men charged with delivering his “new birth of freedom.”

Both Lincoln and Churchill had a strategic sense that was often at odds with that of their generals. They felt certain that they possessed, as Mr. Lehrman puts it, a “superior understanding of military reality.” Alan Brooke, chief of the imperial general staff, filled his diary with condemnations of Churchill’s interference in military affairs. Gen. George McClellan, Lincoln’s general in chief during the first part of the Civil War, dismissed the president as “a well-meaning baboon.” Brooke sometimes had a point, and Churchill was lucky to be surrounded by such excellent military advisers. The feckless and preening McClellan, however, was the Confederates’ secret weapon; Lincoln far outclassed him as a strategist and dismissed him as soon as he could. The president would have to wait until the emergence of Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman before enjoying the kind of military counsel on which Churchill could more readily rely.

Lincoln’s was the sort of death Churchill envied, cut down at the moment of victory like Churchill’s hero, Horatio Nelson. Churchill’s own tenure ended differently: The prime minister who defeated Hitler was himself defeated weeks later in a Labour landslide. It was a terrible blow, but it allowed him to quickly begin his war memoirs and make good on his promise that “history will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.” Lincoln never had

the chance to write his own record of the Civil War, but in his second inaugural address—the greatest speech ever uttered by an American statesman—he submitted his own first draft of history, declaring that slavery “was somehow the cause of the war” and marveling at the conflict’s “fundamental and astounding” result.

“Courage,” Churchill observed, “is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities.” He and Lincoln possessed it in abundance. Heedless of their own safety, they exposed themselves to enemy fire and risked their reputations on behalf of unpopular causes. Both suffered the slings and arrows of critics while remaining faithful not only to their country’s interests but also to those of posterity. The world is a freer and nobler place for their having lived.

Deeply researched and elegantly written, Mr. Lehrman’s “Lincoln & Churchill” is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the past. By expertly conjoining two great leaders in a single volume, he has enhanced our understanding of both.

—Mr. Bishop is executive director of the International Churchill Society, director of the National Churchill Library and Center, and the former executive director of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.