

The New Criterion

Books September 2018

Lincoln & the lion

by *Andrew Roberts*

A review of *Lincoln & Churchill: Statesmen at War* by Lewis E. Lehrman

Books in this article

Lewis E. Lehrman

Lincoln & Churchill: Statesmen at War

Stackpole Books, 544 pages, \$34.95

Although Winston Churchill was born nine years after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and they therefore never met, the concept of a book that compares and contrasts their war leadership works extraordinarily well.¹ This is partly because of the many similarities that the author, Lewis E. Lehrman, has found in the leadership techniques shared by the president and prime minister. It is also because Lehrman has researched and written extensively about both men, and is therefore able to pull the strands together expertly in his new book, *Lincoln & Churchill: Statesmen at War*. As Lehrman points out, Churchill learned a great deal from Lincoln, whom he greatly admired all his life.

Churchill had several role models for his war leadership of Britain between 1940 and 1945. His great ancestor, the First Duke of Marlborough, taught him how to bind a coalition together by trying only to disagree with allies over matters that it was absolutely necessary to disagree about. Another was William Pitt the Younger, Britain's prime minister during the early part of the Napoleonic Wars, whose example he followed in delivering inspiring war speeches to the House of Commons, and thus to the nation. A third was David Lloyd George, whose leadership of Britain during the latter part of World War I taught him the vital importance of establishing civilian control over the military. Georges Clemenceau, the French leader during that same war, showed Churchill how to present a spirit of defiance to the enemy, however desperate the circumstances. Clemenceau's remark to Churchill during the German Spring Offensive of March 1918—"I will fight in front of Paris; I will fight in Paris; I will fight behind Paris"—was a direct precursor to Churchill's own speech of June 1940 about fighting on the beaches, landing grounds, hills, and streets.

Lewis Lehrman now adds Lincoln as another indisputable hero and role model to the previous four already acknowledged by historians—an American to add to the three Britons and a Frenchman. "Strength was certainly given him," Churchill wrote of Lincoln in his post-war book *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. "It is sometimes necessary at the summit of authority to bear the intrigues of disloyal colleagues, to remain calm while others panic, and to withstand misguided popular outcries. All this Lincoln did." One of the glories of Lehrman's book is that he not only shows where Lincoln did indeed do all this, but also where Churchill reprised him in his own career. For much of this book Lehrman uses alternative paragraphs to achieve this, constituting a triumph of erudition and scholarship, as well as of literary flair.

Very often when Churchill eulogized others—one sees the phenomenon again and again in his writings—he was also either consciously or subconsciously referring to himself. (The phrase about remaining calm while others panic was surely a reference

to the poem “If”—by his favorite poet, Rudyard Kipling—about the need to “keep your head when all about you/ Are losing theirs and blaming it on you.”)

“The President’s faith in the Union cause was never dimmed by disappointments,” Churchill wrote of Lincoln, adding that the president “was beset by anxieties, which led him to cross-examine his commanders as if he were still a prosecuting attorney.” Just as Lincoln had to get through Generals Winfield Scott, George McClellan, and Henry W. Halleck before finally arriving at Ulysses S. Grant, so too Churchill became adept at moving on commanders and senior military advisors in World War II. Generals Archibald Wavell, Claude Auchinleck, John Gort, Edmund Ironside, and John Dill all had to go before Churchill could settle on the winning team of Alan Brooke, Bernard Montgomery, and Harold Alexander. Lehrman is acute and insightful in his handling of these relationships between the politicians and soldiers, so vital for eventual victory.

In background and temperament, the British premier and American president could hardly have been more different. Churchill was the cigar-smoking, Tory soldier who had been born in a palace, Lincoln the rail-splitting lawyer born in a log cabin. Lincoln could read individuals to an almost preternatural degree, which largely passed Churchill by, though they could both play on the mood of a crowd as if Mozart had a Stradivarius.

For all his occasional lack of empathy for individuals, Churchill joined Lincoln in having a powerful empathy for entire nations. During World War II, his broadcasts to the French, the Poles, the Americans, but most especially of course the British continually struck precisely the correct notes. And the two men had several other traits in common, as Lehrman draws out, including fine senses of humor and an ability to tune the English language so that it could send men into battle, with phrases that will live as long as our tongue is spoken. As Lehrman puts it, “For them, war rhetoric was a sword of victory.”

“Lincoln’s popularity with the troops stood high,” Churchill wrote. “They put their trust in him. They could have no knowledge of the relentless political pressures in Washington to which he was subjected. They had a sense however of his natural resolution and generosity of character. He had to draw deep on these qualities in his work at the White House.” Written after World War II, it is impossible to believe—true as these words undoubtedly were of Lincoln—that there was no element of self-reference in Churchill’s words, for as Lehrman acutely notes, “During World War II, such a description could have fit Prime Minister Churchill at 10 Downing Street.”

“Lincoln’s political foes,” Churchill also observed, “gazing upon him, did not know vigor when they saw it. These were harsh conditions under which to wage a war to the death.” The steely ruthlessness of both men as they fought two of the most important and morally justifiable wars in history, wars that absolutely had to be won for mankind to remain civilized, was extraordinary. As Lincoln put it in his last public address: “Important principles may, and must, be inflexible.”

The strategically vital port of Tobruk in North Africa changed hands four times during World War II, and Harper’s Ferry no fewer than fourteen times in the American Civil War. The reversals of fortune faced by Churchill and Lincoln would have broken lesser men, but Lehrman firmly puts the resilience of the president and prime minister down to their belief in democracy. “Trust the people” had been the slogan of Churchill’s father, Lord Randolph Churchill, and Lincoln’s two inaugural addresses were essentially the same message writ larger and longer.

Lincoln’s strategy against the South undoubtedly influenced Churchill’s towards the Germans. “If the Germans are to be beaten decisively,” Churchill said in a speech in May 1916 during World War I, “they will be beaten like Napoleon was beaten and like the Confederates were beaten—that is to say, by being opposed by superior numbers along fronts so extensive that they cannot maintain them or replace the losses incurred along them.” Winfield Scott’s “Anaconda Plan,” whereby the Confederacy would be surrounded, blockaded, and strangled by land and sea forces, was much the same strategy as Churchill adopted with the Mediterranean strategy

that he persuaded Franklin Roosevelt to adopt prior to the Torch landings in North Africa in November 1942. Churchill had walked many of the Civil War battlefields, and thought deeply about their place in the overall strategy of the Union forces.

Churchill's oratory was probably affected by Lincoln's also. Lehrman hears echoes of the Gettysburg Address in Churchill's dedication in May 1948 of a memorial in Westminster Abbey to Britain's commandos. It is a pleasing thought that, even in death, Lincoln's oratory might have continued to promote liberty and decency through the thoughts and words of his successor-hero. In his seminal work *The Literary Churchill*, the historian Jonathan Rose states that Churchill was one of the most expert Englishmen in his generation on the American Civil War, pointing out that Churchill's maternal grandfather, Leonard Jerome, as part owner of *The New York Times*, had "staunchly supported Abraham Lincoln in a city where anti-war feelings were vehement."

Much as he admires Churchill, Lehrman is too honest an historian not to point out unflinchingly where Churchill got Lincoln wrong. Churchill's criticisms of Lincoln for appointing "political" generals were unfair, for example, because, as Lehrman points out, Churchill did not recognize that "Lincoln's war strategy included appointing 'political' generals from both parties, with the express purpose of consolidating bipartisan Northern Democrat and Republican war leadership behind his strategic goal of national reunion." There were also aspects of the legal issues concerning slavery, specifically the Dred Scott decision of 1857 and its overriding by Congress in June 1862, that Churchill did not fully grasp.

At ease as much with the military as with the political aspects of his subjects, this is probably Mr. Lehrman's lifework, the product of a fantastic amount of research and background reading. It should be read by today's statesmen. It is also illustrated by many fine photographs from the famous Gilder-Lehrman Collection, some of which will be refreshingly unfamiliar to readers. Perhaps in heaven's library there is a book written by Abraham Lincoln on Winston Churchill's war leadership,

which would contain as many fascinating passages as are to be found in Churchill's work on Lincoln's war leadership. Until we are in a position to read that, however, easily the best book on the subject is Lewis Lehrman's *Lincoln & Churchill*.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 37 Number 1, on page 54

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