

Book Review by Steven F. Hayward

## TWIN PEAKS

*Lincoln & Churchill: Statesmen at War*, by Lewis E. Lehrman.  
Stackpole Books, 544 pages, \$34.95



**A** BRAHAM LINCOLN AND WINSTON Churchill are commonly regarded as the preeminent statesmen of the modern democratic era. Until now, however, no thorough study has ever compared their statecraft. Lewis E. Lehrman's ambitious new book, *Lincoln & Churchill: Statesmen at War*, rewards careful attention, like its two subjects. Lehrman, a businessman, philanthropist, and author of two previous books on Lincoln and one on Churchill, focuses on their wartime command, finding commonalities and principles that transcend their disparate circumstances. Lincoln confronted a civil war limited to American soil, while Churchill had to manage, alongside sometimes quarrelsome allies, a world war fought for the sake of civilization itself. There are many other obvious differences between the two men and their situations, but to paraphrase Churchill, the distinctions dissolve as the point of view is raised.

The observations in Lehrman's richly detailed book clarify the properties of statesmanship as such, and vindicate honorable ambition. *Lincoln & Churchill* not only proves

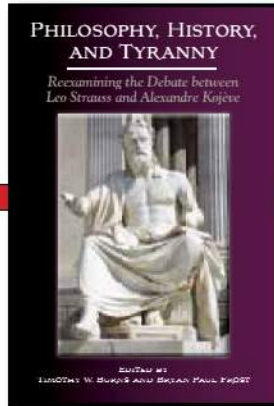
that, despite the mountain of books about each, there are vital things still to be said about its subjects. It also refutes the debunkers who have attempted to cut each great man down to size, or exploit one or the other for their own purposes. These misrepresentations have been going on for decades. The best biography of Lincoln is still one of the oldest, Lord Charnwood's compact 1917 effort, appearing when Progressives like Woodrow Wilson and Herbert Croly were doing their best to reimagine Lincoln as a Progressive, which required stripping away his actual principles.

**R**ECENT BIOGRAPHIES HAVE TENDED to follow this corrupt model. David Herbert Donald described his much heralded 1995 biography of Lincoln as having been written "from Lincoln's point of view," before stating, "My interpretation of Lincoln's political philosophy and religious views has been much influenced by the ideas of John Rawls." So much for understanding and presenting his subject as Lincoln understood himself.

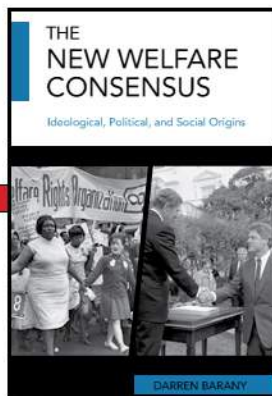
Likewise, Churchill has come under fresh attack and gross distortion due to the success of the 2017 film *Darkest Hour*. Whereas former leading liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Isaiah Berlin, and especially John F. Kennedy strongly admired Churchill, he is attacked in our century for failing to anticipate multiculturalism. (A few unhinged critiques call Churchill a genocidal mass murderer no better than Hitler or Stalin.) *Time* magazine chose Churchill as "Man of the Half-Century" in 1950, but 50 years later declined to name him Person of the Century. Why? "In his approach to domestic issues, individual rights and the liberties of colonial subjects, Churchill turned out to be a romantic refugee from a previous era who ended up on the wrong side of history." Happily, after eight years of President Barack Obama overusing this empty, cant expression to make pronouncements in lieu of advancing arguments, the "wrong side of history" is, itself, on the wrong side of history.

To consider the two men together, start with their similarities. Although Churchill

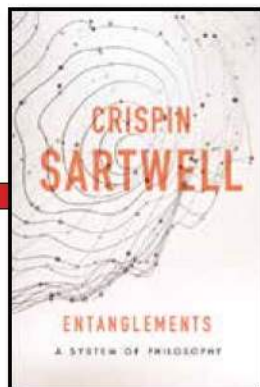
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attended British private schools and Sandhurst, while Lincoln received almost no formal education, both were self-educated with respect to political rhetoric and statecraft. Lehrman fully captures the discernment both men brought to their study of history and literature, especially Shakespeare and the Bible. Both were accomplished storytellers. Both had famously strained relations with their fathers. Both were notably fond of inventions and technology: Lincoln's interest in, and work on behalf of, railroads closely resembles Churchill's early, abiding interest in aviation. Within their own parties, both faced serious doubts about their capacities and judgment, but ultimately won over nearly all their intra-party critics. Both faced a crisis within their own cabinets in their administration's opening weeks, necessitating supreme skill and forcefulness.

**T**HEIR INVALUABLE ABILITY WAS TO express compellingly the causes and likely consequences of the crises their countries faced, and render unfolding events comprehensible to their countrymen. In a brilliant aperçu, Lehrman compares Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech to the Gettysburg Address, each memorably explicating a conflict's deeper meaning. Like Churchill in the many books he wrote, Lincoln was able to draw from history to inform his arguments, most especially in the Cooper Union address he delivered months before being elected president.

Two key traits of their shared character stand out: magnanimity and wit. Their high-mindedness is well recalled from Lincoln's admonition to have "malice toward none," and Churchill's motto "In victory, magnanimity." But their character and gifts of perception transcended generosity of spirit or even forgiveness. Both men understood that vindictiveness was as bad for the victors as for the vanquished. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln argued carefully and movingly that the guilt of slavery belonged to the whole nation, not just the South. He matched these words with deeds, standing athwart congressional measures to impose a punitive postwar reconstruction on the South. Churchill wrote in his World War II memoirs, "Nothing is more costly, nothing is more sterile, than vengeance." After Neville Chamberlain's untimely death due to cancer in November 1940, Churchill gave full credit to his rival's desire for peace without referring even indirectly to their bitter clashes over appeasement. "It fell to Neville Chamberlain," Churchill said in his eulogy, "in one of the supreme crises of the world to be contradicted by events, to be dis-

appointed in his hopes, and to be deceived and cheated by a wicked man."

As a practical matter, Churchill learned from what he regarded as the imprudent and vengeful terms of the Versailles Treaty concluding the First World War, and for a time thought appeasement of German grievances appropriate and just. That stopped abruptly, of course, when the Nazis came to power, and Churchill grasped early on that the evil character of that regime could not be contained or moderated through appeasement. To the contrary. Churchill understood, almost alone, that appeasement would aggravate the threat of totalitarian aggression.

**T**HOUGH LEHRMAN DOES NOT PUT IT in these terms, appeasement's nature and dangers turn out to be a key common thread between Lincoln and Churchill, even if "appeasement" is seldom if ever used in connection with the slave controversy. The rising demand to placate the slave interest in the 1850s aroused Lincoln's resolve and clarity. The slave interest's territorial demands resembled Hitler's—both sought "living space" to implement a supremacist ideology. Lincoln understood that appeasing the South would eventually entail the erosion of liberty everywhere. He grasped the Cold War idea of "containment": accepting slavery as a fact on the ground, like Communism after World War II, but resisting its expansion in order to confine it strictly within its present ambit, thereby placing it in the course of ultimate extinction. Churchill thought vigorous rearmament and diplomatic concord with Germany's neighbors would be sufficient to deter Germany, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Lincoln and Churchill had to contend with confusion within their own ranks, with party rivals (like William Seward for Lincoln, and Lord Halifax for Churchill) who thought it possible to strike a compromise.

When to be flexible and when to be resolute? This dilemma helps us appreciate how profoundly each man understood the central problems he faced. If they were necessary to preserve the Union, Lincoln was willing to compromise by extending constitutional guarantees to slavery where it presently existed; but he rejected proposals, tempting to many in his own party, that would have reestablished the old Missouri Compromise and allowed the further expansion of slavery—albeit, even then, not to the extent the South demanded. Lincoln promoted the Homestead Act of 1862 partly as an anti-slavery measure, hoping to populate western territories and new states with settlers who would oppose the extension of slavery, if the Union were reestablished without its aboli-



tion, which seemed possible at that point. Fortunately for Lincoln, he did not have to deal with someone like Stalin, either as an ally or adversary, nor with a too-conciliatory ally like Franklin Roosevelt, and of whom compelled Churchill to make concessions over the post-war fate of eastern Europe.

SOMETIMES LINCOLN'S AND CHURCHILL'S perceptions of the core principles at stake were illustrated by seemingly minor details, especially semantic ones. Lincoln upbraided General George Meade for boasting after Gettysburg that he intended to "drive from our soil every vestige of the invader." Lincoln sent along a sharp rebuke: "Drive the invaders from our soil! My God! ... The whole country is *our* soil." The confederates were not foreign invaders; they were an insurrection, a rebellion against lawful constitutional authority. Similarly, Churchill disdained the use of the term "invasion" in any discussion of D-Day:

Our object is the liberation of Europe from German tyranny...we "enter" the oppressed countries rather than "invade" them and...the word "invasion" must be reserved for the time when we cross the German frontier. There is no need for us to make a present to Hitler

of the idea that he is the defender of a Europe we are seeking to invade.

The beating heart of Lehrman's book is the challenge of war leadership, where the similarities between Lincoln and Churchill are most striking, and most instructive. Both had to contend with recalcitrant, shortsighted, ineffective generals who, in the early phases of the war, lacked a sense of grand strategy. For Lincoln, it was George B. McClellan—"Churchill's self-absorption paled by comparison with the self-centered arrogance of McClellan," Lehrman observes. Even more challenging were the egos of the effective ones, such as Alan Brooke and Bernard Montgomery. Although Lincoln didn't have the kind of military education or command experience that Churchill had, he was a quick study. Both leaders constantly browbeat their narrow-minded commanders over geostrategy and the importance of gaining the initiative. For the first two years of their wars, each man had to endure numerous battlefield defeats before the tide turned in his favor.

Diplomatic relations between the U.S. and England were a mirror image in the 1940s of what they had been in the 1860s. Lincoln labored to keep the British *out* of the conflict, or at least from recognizing the South as a separate sovereign nation, while Churchill

from the earliest moments wanted the U.S. *in* the war at his side. The most gripping part of Lehrman's narrative is his unfolding year-by-year account of how the two wars proceeded, how each man sized up the scene and reached his key decisions.

Lehrman thinks Lincoln a more patient person than Churchill, and therefore the more prudent of the two. "The president knew when to be bold, when to exercise restraint." Although Lehrman is surely correct that Churchill's boundless energy and lightning-quick mind made him restless and impatient, one may doubt whether this justifies subordinating his prudence to Lincoln's. The more desperate circumstances of Britain in 1940, and the vagaries of Britain's cabinet government, are two differences that allow latitude for Lincoln's patience to exhibit itself. But this is precisely where the calibration of statesmanship begins to escape objective measure, and why the best way to cultivate the qualities of statesmanship is to study such figures in the fine, loving, painstaking detail that Lehrman does in *Lincoln & Churchill*.

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