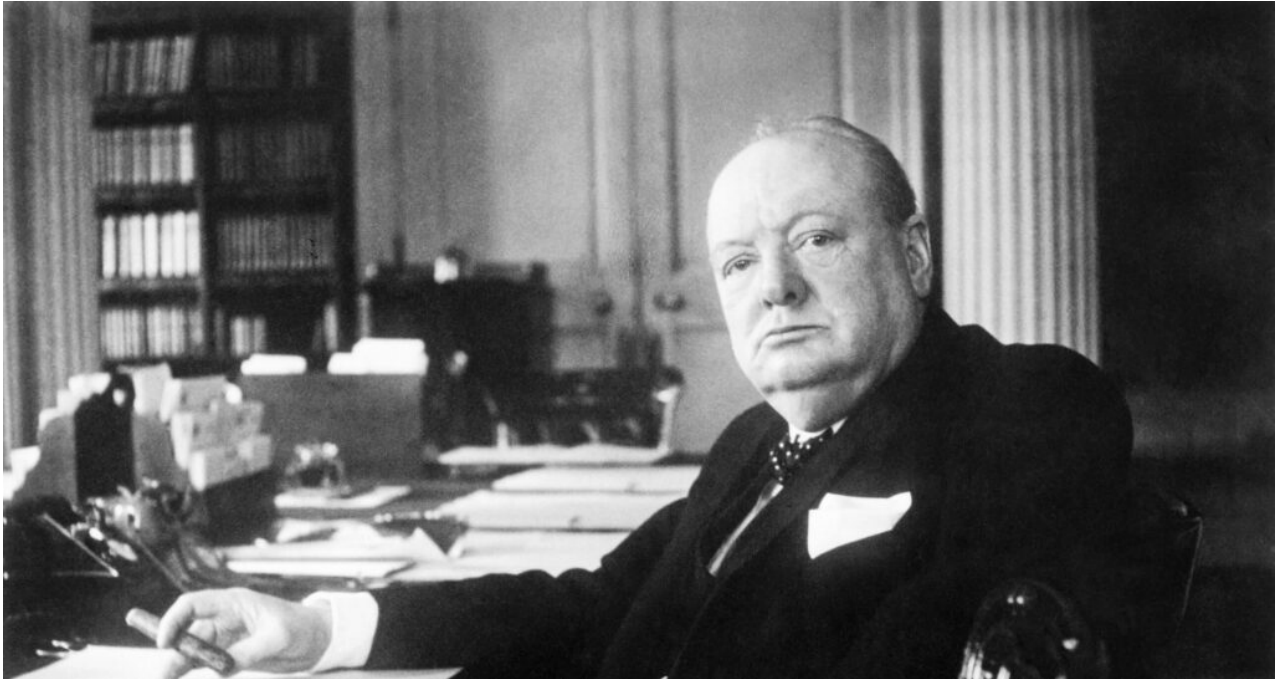


One hundred fifty years of Churchill

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An important anniversary approaches. On November 30, Winston Churchill will have been born one hundred fifty years ago.

There is a temptation to think of Churchill as a product of a bygone age. The truth is that he was the foremost opponent of the scientific and totalitarian impulse that was overtaking the world in war and peace. That impulse, partially defeated in his time by his indispensable efforts, threatens us still today.

There is also a temptation to see Churchill as a charming sort of foreign aristocrat, a man who drank too much, smoked big cigars, could not draw his own bath or pay his own bills, and careened among personal peccadilloes, extravagant statements, and lording it up all over the British Empire. The case has been made about all these points and more.

Being a man, Churchill had his faults. He often spent more money than he had, although he earned a lot. Especially when he was young, his ambition showed all over him. He did not have the gift of some politicians, such as Abraham Lincoln, to be underestimated. His fluency and quickness made some people think him erratic. I cannot now find the passage, but I remember one of his senior colleagues recording in his diary that Churchill's mind was a whirlwind of words that overcame his reason. Most criticisms of Churchill, of course, tacitly recognize his obvious excellence at many things.

Churchill had a curious relationship with his parents, especially his father. He was neglected by Lord Randolph Churchill, and he showed throughout his life, even after his father's death, that he wished to impress him. This leads some to think that his relentless ambition (yes, he had that too) was merely compensation for inner trouble.

There are countless such particularities about Churchill, and they are interesting and often picturesque. But they are not unique. Many people have had neglectful fathers and been hurt by it, or have at least thought they were. Many people have spent more than they earn. Many people have talked too much and raised resentment. These are not extraordinary, not nearly so extraordinary as the fact that Churchill was a serious man in the classical sense—a *spoudaios*, to use the Greek term.

Churchill's excellences are so rare it is hard to think of another who had them. Churchill wrote more than forty books. Some are better than others, but a few are great by any standard, and all are worth reading. He wrote them himself. His collected speeches, not quite exhaustive, consume more than eight thousand closely printed pages, and with one exception he wrote them himself. They are a monument to political reasoning as much as to eloquence.

He guided his life by a strategic sense, which, like most things he thought and did, he explained beautifully and often. Begin with Britain, which was to him a treasure. Its nature owes to the fact that it is an island, surrounded by stormy seas. Too small to grow all their own food, the British had to use those seas. Their merchant marine and their navy became huge and skillful. This affected fundamentally the governance of Britain. On the Continent, kings had big armies, which made them strong against their parliaments (Churchill's word for legislatures), and they became more absolute. Britain had a big navy, and the king had trouble getting money from Parliament even for that—and much more trouble for the army. Navies are not so handy for oppression at home. Britain became freer, power more divided.

Once the British had conquered the stormy seas near Britain, they could go anywhere in the world. And they did. The next thing you know, Britain had a great empire, little of which was gained by state conquest, that is, conquest on the orders of the British government. India, the jewel in the crown, was conquered by the British East India Company, led by Robert Clive, a junior clerk without military training when he began. This means that Britain was influential everywhere, and yet she did not usually appear as a mighty conquering host. Churchill thought this unique and opportune for the whole world. Some have said that Churchill loved the empire above all else. I think, rather, he loved it as the projection of the treasure that was Britain. Anyway, it would not be sensible for him or anyone else to think that nations exist just to conquer or rule other nations. That is a despotic understanding of politics and will not work. It was not Churchill's.

Nonetheless, to Churchill the British Empire was important. It meant that Britain could be great beyond its size. He gloried in the fact that in the two World Wars, the British effort was about half supplied by nations who were members of the empire and commonwealth. In London, mind you, there was no power to conscript a single soldier from them.

In politics, Churchill was a reformer. He helped to invent the social safety net. His version had many protections against idleness and other excess, and it worked well for over twenty years until the socialists came in. He sought to revise the British constitution to increase federalism and separation of powers. He believed in the British people both of

necessity and inclination: necessity, because he thought they had a right to govern themselves, and inclination because he thought that they would ultimately do the right thing.

Churchill did his most important deeds in war. This violates his understanding of the priority between war and politics. To him, politics is higher, and war must be the servant of freedom. But war is very urgent and has a way of overwhelming everything else, and Churchill was good at it. Both on the battlefield and in the cabinet room, Churchill was courageous and farseeing. He distinguished himself in the battlefields of India, the Sudan, and South Africa, and in the trenches of World War I. He was at the center of power in the British Cabinet for most of the First World War and all of the Second.

Churchill was good at administration. In neither of the two World Wars, both of which he predicted and attempted to prevent in numerous ways, was he in command at the outset. But near the beginning of both, the prime minister of that day placed him in charge of coordinating the whole war. He was the one who could do it. He had ideas, he pursued them, and he got others to join him.

It is both a glory and a sadness in his life that his great moment came in 1940. His term for the Second World War was always “the unnecessary war.” He gained power only after it was well underway, on the very day that Hitler began his attack westward that would destroy France and take him to both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Churchill assumed command when Britain was alone against overwhelming force.

On May 28, 1940, there were meetings first of the wider cabinet and then of the War Cabinet. Mussolini had offered to host a peace conference. Churchill made one of the greatest speeches of his life to the full cabinet. Remarkably, the speech was impromptu, and we only know what he said from notes taken by two cabinet members. He said that there could be no safe peace with Hitler. The British must be prepared to fight to the end: “If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground.” Churchill’s speech was thrilling to those who heard, and it stiffened their resolve for war. This is the only period in Churchill’s life where he used such dire terms. Mostly he tried to avoid war and, failing that, to limit its cost.

There has been no better eulogy for Churchill than that given by Leo Strauss, a German Jew who left Germany in time to escape the death camps. One of his teachers was Martin Heidegger, a philosopher of note and a Nazi, who provided some of the impulse for Strauss to return to the classics and begin the recovery of political philosophy as a quest for the truth. Churchill died on January 24, 1965. When Strauss came into class and was informed of Churchill’s death, he said:

The death of Churchill is a healthy reminder to students of political science of their limitations, the limitations of their craft.

The tyrant stood at the pinnacle of his power. The contrast between the indomitable and magnanimous statesman and the insane tyrant—this spectacle in its clear simplicity was one of the greatest lessons which men can learn, at any time.

No less enlightening is the lesson conveyed by Churchill's failure, which is too great to be called tragedy. I mean the fact that Churchill's heroic action on behalf of human freedom against Hitler only contributed, through no fault of Churchill's, to increase the threat to freedom which is posed by Stalin or his successors. Churchill did the utmost that a man could do to counter that threat—publicly and most visibly in Greece and in Fulton, Missouri.

Not a whit less important than his deeds and speeches are his writings, above all his *Marlborough*—the greatest historical work written in our century, an inexhaustible mine of political wisdom and understanding, which should be required reading for every student of political science.

The death of Churchill reminds us of the limitations of our craft, and therewith of our duty. We have no higher duty, and no more pressing duty, than to remind ourselves and our students, of political greatness, human greatness, of the peaks of human excellence. For we are supposed to train ourselves and others in seeing things as they are, and this means above all in seeing their greatness and their misery, their excellence and their vileness, their nobility and their triumphs, and therefore never to mistake mediocrity, however brilliant, for true greatness.

Though Churchill was a statesman and not a philosopher, this statement is very much in the spirit of Churchill. In a wonderful essay titled "Fifty Years Hence," Churchill wrote that our ability to wonder, to ask the fundamental questions "Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Whither are we going?" was the guarantee that mankind could not be remade by force nor its spirit crushed:

No material progress, even though it takes shapes we cannot now conceive, or however it may expand the faculties of man, can bring comfort to his soul. It is this fact, more wonderful than any that Science can reveal, which gives the best hope that all will be well.

Strauss's point towards the end of his eulogy underscores a specific and important place where so many of us fail today. If we cannot distinguish Churchill and Hitler, we cannot understand, defend, or deserve our own freedom. This anniversary year is a good place to begin anew that work of understanding and preservation. We should follow Churchill.