

Lehrman: U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James

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On Dec. 8, 1941, U.S. Ambassador [John "Gil" Winant](#) dined with Prime Minister [Winston Churchill](#) at Chequers. Uncharacteristically, Churchill tuned the radio to the 9 p.m. BBC news. Together, they heard a vague report of a Japanese attack. [Churchill's](#) valet quickly confirmed: "The Japanese have attacked the Americans." Ambassador Winant called President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), then handed the phone to the prime minister. "It's quite true," FDR said. "They have attacked us at Pearl Harbor. We are all in the same boat now." Winant had long believed America must join Britain in the same boat. So did Churchill.

Winant was widely thought to look like Abraham Lincoln, an asset at the Court of St. James. Although he lacked Lincoln's rhetorical skills, Winant suggested the quiet charm and modesty of the 16th American president. Above all, he was not [Joseph P. Kennedy](#), the former U.S. ambassador to England. FDR's untoward sense of irony may have been at work in his appointment of an Irish-American to the British court. But Kennedy was pro-appeasement of Hitler, even sympathetic to some German propaganda. Especially after the German invasion of France in May 1940, Kennedy, thinking the Nazis invincible, had worn out his welcome in England.

Kennedy quit in October of 1940. Roosevelt then had the chance to appoint the former Republican governor of New Hampshire -- whose nomination to the diplomatic post had been repeatedly urged by the influential CBS radio bureau chief in London, [Edward R. Murrow](#). Like [John Adams](#), the first U.S. diplomat to represent the United States in London, Winant took up residence on Grosvenor Square in London.

Winant was as reserved and shy as Kennedy had been brash and garrulous. But he could rise to the occasion. At a luncheon in March 1941, Winant won the hearts of most Brits -- and never lost them for the rest of the war. Speaking after Prime Minister Churchill, Winant said he was no orator, but then proved he knew how to reach deep into the hearts of his listeners: "Today it is the honor and destiny of the British people to man the bridgehead of humanity's hopes. It is your privilege to stand against ruthless and powerful dictators who would destroy the lessons of two thousand years of history. It is your destiny to say to them: 'Here you shall not pass.'"

Winant paused before he continued: "The lost years are gone. The road ahead is hard. A new spirit is abroad. Free peoples are again cooperating to win a free world, and no tyranny can frustrate their hopes . . . with the help of God (we shall) build a citadel of freedom so strong that force may never again seek its destruction." For the rest of the war, Winant would suffer along with British citizens under the Nazi siege. Indeed, the English suffered with him when his son, bomber pilot [John G. Winant, Jr.](#), was shot down by the Germans in October 1943.

Prime Minister Churchill had forged important relationships with several Americans before and after Pearl Harbor. The prime minister embraced American emissaries such as Winant, [Averell Harriman](#) (later ambassador to Russia before he briefly succeeded Winant in Britain), and

presidential aide [Harry Hopkins](#). These Americans helped Churchill to bring FDR to the aid of Great Britain before Pearl Harbor. Churchill also understood the importance of journalists such as Murrow, who would form American public opinion about the war in Europe. Churchill even gave a crucial interview to [Whitelaw Reid III](#), grandson of Whitelaw Reid, the journalist who had covered the Lincoln administration during the Civil War. Later Grandfather Reid had become the American ambassador in London when Churchill began his political career at the beginning of the 20th century. We remember that Churchill and FDR had forged the "special relationship" between America and Great Britain. But it was not always so. Two wars with the [British Empire](#), early in American history, had made Americans wary of the mother country. For their part, the British were condescending toward the upstarts across the pond. Nevertheless, for much of America's first two centuries, the post of U.S. ambassador to Great Britain was filled by distinguished Americans who, like Churchill, understood the importance of the Anglo-American relationship. Most 19th century U.S. ministers knew it was the British Navy which secured America's splendid isolation between the vast Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

It was no accident that prominent senators, governors, congressmen served in the post. Indeed, presidents had served as U.S. ambassador -- or "minister" as envoys were called during the first American century -- e.g., James Monroe, [Martin Van Buren](#) and [James Buchanan](#). [Charles Dawes](#), vice president under [Calvin Coolidge](#), later served as ambassador in London.

Churchill knew it was not a post to be taken lightly -- as it is today. America's first ambassador to London was future President of the United States, John Adams. His son, [John Quincy](#), briefly served there after the War of 1812. So did his grandson, [Charles Francis Adams](#) -- envoy in London for seven years during and after the Civil War.

In the Civil War, President Lincoln's goal had been very simple -- keep Great Britain out of the war, keep Britain from recognizing the Confederacy. Ambassador Charles Francis Adams had a very challenging task dealing with the British prime minister, Lord Palmerston, and his foreign secretary, Lord Russell, both of whom harbored deep resentments and suspicions toward the United States. President Lincoln's son, [Robert Todd Lincoln](#), served as ambassador in the 1890s, as did Lincoln's secretary and biographer, [John Hay](#). Whitelaw Reid was just one of many prominent writers, academics, and journalists who occupied the post. Churchill the historian well knew this tradition. Fortunately, for the outcome of World War II, Winston Churchill, half-American, took an immediate liking to Gil Winant, the full-blooded American ambassador. Whereas Lincoln wanted Britain out of the Civil War, Churchill wanted America in the war of survival against Nazi Germany. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor achieved Churchill's aim. But it was Winant who had helped Churchill to prepare FDR and the American people for the Grand Alliance which led to the ultimate victory over Germany.

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