

NATIONAL REVIEW

Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, Wartime Leaders

By Lewis E. Lehrman — February 12, 2016

In his July 4 message to Congress in 1861, President Lincoln wrote that the secession crisis “forces us to ask: ‘Is there, in all republics, this inherent and fatal weakness?’ Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?”

Staying focused on the great questions of American politics and political philosophy, Lincoln continued:

Our popular government has often been called an experiment. Two points in it our people have already settled: the successful establishing and the successful administering of it. One still remains: its successful maintenance against a formidable internal attempt to overthrow it. . . . Such will be a great lesson of peace; teaching men that what they cannot take by an election, neither can they take by a war, teaching all the folly of being the beginners of a war.

Handling secession at the outset of a new administration was mind-bending for a president inexperienced in executive leadership. “Our poor President is having a hard time of it,” observed a Republican senator. “He came here tall, strong and vigorous, but has worked himself almost to death.”

Lincoln would not be diverted from his war strategy by the chatter of debate over slavery. His final war aims were unconditional: reunion and emancipation. His Cooper Union speech of February 1860 had set the tone of the president’s wartime strategy:

Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored — contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong as the search of a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man — such as a policy of “don’t care” on a question about which all true men do care — such as Union appeals beseeching true Union men to yield to Disunionists reversing the divine rule, and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance. . . . Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.

Lincoln’s friend Leonard Swett recalled that Lincoln “employed tactics wholly different from any other politician we ever had. He believed in the results to which certain great causes tended, and he did not believe those results could be hastened, changed, or impeded by personal interference. Hence he was no political manipulator. He believed from the first the agitation of slavery would produce its overthrow, and his personal tactics consisted simply in getting himself in the right place, and staying until events found him there.

A product of small-town life, Abraham Lincoln resolutely embraced the meaning he perceived in the Civil War and tried to communicate his view to the American people. Fidelity to principle and to his oath of office would guide his every effort in the Civil War. “The struggle of today is not altogether for today; it is for a vast future also,” he wrote in his first annual message to Congress. “With a reliance on Providence, all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us.”

Three years later, Lincoln faced another crisis: Union military operations bogged down just as his reelection campaign was getting underway. In the summer of 1864, to regiments passing through Washington, he made short speeches to convey, through the press, larger truths about the Civil War and about the promise of America. “We have, as all will agree, a free Government, where every man has a right to be equal with every other man,” he said to the 164th Ohio Regiment in August 1864. “In this great struggle,

this form of Government and every form of human right is endangered if our enemies succeed. There is more involved in this contest than is realized by everyone. There is involved in this struggle the question whether your children and my children shall enjoy the privileges we have enjoyed.

Lincoln was determined to pursue his twin goals of Union and emancipation. “I do the very best I know how — the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end,” he told artist Francis B. Carpenter. “If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won’t amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.”

In his annual message to Congress in 1864, Lincoln refused to backtrack on slavery: “I retract nothing heretofore said as to slavery. I repeat the declaration made a year ago, that ‘while I remain in my present position I shall not attempt to retract or modify the emancipation proclamation, nor shall I return to slavery any person who is free by the terms of that proclamation, or by any of the Acts of Congress.’” He added: “If the people should, by whatever mode or means, make it an Executive duty to re-enslave such persons, another, and not I, must be their instrument to perform it.”



To see the big picture, as Lincoln did, in the midst of relentless daily struggle in war requires an open and disciplined mind.

President Lincoln’s English-speaking counterpart during the 20th century was surely the great war leader and statesman Winston Spencer Churchill. Churchill, too, had a war strategy which encompassed all aspects of his struggle against Hitler and the Japanese Empire. His bodyguard Walter H. Thompson wrote of a visit during World War II by Prime Minister Churchill to the naval base at Scapa Flow:

He pointed to the impressive fake battleship that was on the far end of the northern string and told one of the warrant officers that it would be spotted by German pilots as a dummy and that they would not waste a bomb on her. "But she's not even been spotted by our own reconnaissance, sir," he was told. "Then they need spectacles!" "How so, sir?" "No gulls about her!" he snapped. "No seagulls. You'll always find gulls about a living ship. But not around a dummy. Not unless you drop garbage for the dummy too. Keep garbage in the water day and night, bow and stern, of all these dummies! Feed the gulls and fool the Germans!" And they did.

Churchill saw both the details which inform the tactics of war, and the strategy by which to defeat Hitler.

Lincoln and Churchill would also find strong leaders to execute their strategies — gritty warriors, such as General Ulysses Grant and General Sir Alan Brooke, both of whom could see the big picture. "It is hard to overemphasize how radical Winston was. He always believed that opposition to his ideas sprang from conservatism," wrote historian Richard Holmes, who went on to quote Sir Ian Jacob, a member of Churchill's war cabinet: "Being very receptive to new ideas, he [Churchill] welcomed those who could put them forward, and was naturally inclined to favour those who could speak boldly, and hold their own in the rough-and-tumble of controversy. He could be very rough indeed, but the purpose was always to test the man as well as his ideas."

Churchill communicated his view of the world directly to other nations. He recorded a broadcast for Czechoslovakia in September 1940: "The hour of your deliverance will come. The soul of freedom is deathless; it cannot, and will not, perish." In October 1940, Churchill broadcast to France: "Français! C'est moi, Churchill, qui vous parle." In English, he continued: "Frenchmen — rearm your spirits before it is too late. Remember how Napoleon said before one of his battles: 'These same Prussians who are so boastful today were three to one [against the French army] at Jena, and six to one [against the French army] at Montmirail.' Never will I believe that the soul of France is dead. Never will I believe that her place amongst the great nations of the world has been lost for *ever*." On December 23, Churchill broadcast to the Italians, ending with an attack on Mussolini: "One man, and one man only, was resolved to plunge Italy, after all these years of strain and effort, into the whirlpool of war."

President Abraham Lincoln and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill could not foresee the future clearly, but they had a profound grasp of impending disaster and its consequences, as they did of the promise of victory. The English-speaking peoples of America and Britain are co-heirs of their victories.

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