

Lincoln & Churchill: Action This Day

by Lewis E. Lehrman

Putnam County News & Record, February 12, 2018

“Let this be done without fail,” wrote Prime Minister Winston Churchill in June 1940 in a memo advocating “investigating radio methods likely to be used against us by the enemy in the air or elsewhere.”¹ Speedy action would counter the development of a German radio beam designed to guide Nazi bombers over Britain. “I’m certainly not one of those who need to be prodded; in fact, if anything, I am the prod,” Churchill once declared.² Action had been his guiding principle. Nearly two decades before World War II, Churchill had observed of his World War I experience as First Lord of the Admiralty: “There is always a strong case for doing nothing, especially for doing nothing yourself.”³ Churchill in his memoirs discussed his investigation of German radio beam guidance. “I gave all the necessary orders that very day in June for the existence of the [German] beam to be assumed, and for all counter measures to receive absolute priority.”⁴ The British did devise a counter measure that deflected the beam and thus the German bombers from their intended targets. Churchill’s decisiveness helped RAF pilots win the Battle of Britain.

For eight months in 1939-40 before he was elevated to Prime Minister, Churchill had been First Lord of the Admiralty where his memos were known as “the first lord’s prayers.” Characteristically, they began, “Pray inform me” or “Pray why has...not been done?”⁵ Born in 1874, Churchill inherited “Pray,” customary in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

As Prime Minister, Churchill would grow impatient with a lack of military initiative in developing aggressive plans: “I have found it necessary to have direct access to and control of the Joint Planning Staffs because after a year of war I cannot recall a single plan initiated by the existing machinery,” complained Churchill in August 1940.⁶ Churchill insisted that military resources must be actively engaged. “Idle ships are a reproach,” the Prime Minister wrote.⁷ “I never ‘worry’ about action, but only about inaction,” Churchill wrote to Britain’s top general in November 1940. He complained that “General [Archibald] Wavell is only playing small, and is not hurling in his whole available forces with furious energy.” Churchill wrote that the British commander in the Middle East “will have failed to rise to the height of circumstances.”⁸ Churchill’s leadership style, he admitted, was “to pester nag and bite.” In 1943, Churchill complained about idle manpower to U.S. General George C. Marshall saying that “Muskets must flame!”⁹

¹ Adrian Fort, *Prof: The Life of Frederick Lindemann*, p. 262.

² Richard Langworth, editor, *Churchill by Himself*, p. 517.

³ Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1918*, p. 193.

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour: The Second World War*, p. 342.

⁵ Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Close: The Royal Navy in the Second World War*, p. 59.

⁶ Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour: The Second World War*, p. 221 (August 31, 1940)

⁷ Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, p. 285.

⁸ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Finest Hour, 1939-1941*, p. 935.

⁹ Max Hastings, *Winston’s War*, p. 340.

One Churchill contemporary noted that “mental robustness was an enormous factor in his getting through the war and getting us through as well.”¹⁰ Brendan Bracken, the British minister of information and longtime Churchill friend, once told Churchill’s physician: “Winston has been so successful in controlling his fears that most people think of him as reckless.”¹¹ Bracken noted that “of the last seven Dukes of Marlborough five suffered from melancholia. You and I think of Winston as self-indulgent...but when a mere boy he deliberately set out to change his nature, to be tough and full of rude spirits.”¹² The Prime Minister willed himself into action. “Churchill was constantly on the move, visiting defences, new weapon displays, bombed cities and military formations or, as the war expanded, Washington, Moscow and the theatres of war,” recalled aide John Colville.¹³ “Action this day” was often stamped on Churchill’s memos. It was a guiding principle of his leadership.

President Lincoln was less categorical in his directives. “Let this be done if possible” was his phrase. Lincoln understood -- Churchill less often -- that some conditions might interfere with the President’s intended orders. Lincoln’s more subtle language did not mask his desire for action. Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass recalled a conversation in which Lincoln said: “Mr. Douglass, I have been charged with vacillating; but, Mr. Douglass, I do not think that charge can be sustained; I think it cannot be shown that when I have once taken a position, I have ever retreated from it.”¹⁴ Lincoln was prudent, noted Civil War historian Mackubin Thomas Owens: “Before he became president, his approach was primarily rhetorical, aimed at changing public sentiment regarding the institution of slavery. As president, he both spoke and acted, but his actions were of necessity constrained by his constitutional responsibilities and powers.”¹⁵ An impatient President Lincoln prodded Generals George B. McClellan and Don Carlos Buell, who made excuses instead of initiating forward troop movements. Snatching defeat from potential victory angered both Churchill and Lincoln. “We had them in our grasp,” Lincoln said of the Confederates after the Union victory at Gettysburg. “[W]e had only to stretch forth our hands and they were ours. Our army held the war in the hollow of their hand and would not close it.” General Meade had failed to follow up victory at Gettysburg, then disable Robert E. Lee’s army.

Abraham Lincoln, like Churchill, could be over-confident. The President joined Navy Secretary Gideon Welles in believing that the woefully underarmed ironclad ships of war could capture Charleston in early 1863. Lincoln thought that raising black troops were the “great *available* and yet *unavailed* of, force for restoration of the Union. The bare sight of fifty thousand armed, and drilled black soldiers in the banks of the Mississippi, would end the rebellion at once,” Lincoln wrote Tennessee Governor Andrew Johnson in 1863.¹⁶ Black soldiers made a great difference, but the rebellion continued until the spring of 1865.

Not all of Lincoln’s or Churchill’s bold initiatives would prove successful, but they

¹⁰ David Cannadine and Roland Quinault, *Winston Churchill in the Twentyfirst Century*, p. 228.

¹¹ Lord Moran, *Churchill: Taken from the Diaries of Lord Moran: The Struggle for Survival, 1940-1965*, p. 774.

¹² Lord Moran, *Churchill: Taken from the Diaries of Lord Moran: The Struggle for Survival, 1940-1965*, p. 794.

¹³ John Colville *Footprints in Time*, p. 77.

¹⁴ Frederick Douglass, “Third Decade of the American Anti-Slavery Society: Speech of Frederick Douglass,” *The Liberator*, January 29, 1864.

¹⁵ Frank J. Williams and William D. Pederson, editors, *Lincoln Lessons: Reflections on America’s Greatest Leader*, p. 118 (Mackubin Thomas Owens, “Lincoln and the Meaning of Equality”)

¹⁶ Roy P. Basler, editor, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (CWAL), Volume VI, p. 149 (Lincoln to Ulysses S. Grant, March 26, 1863).

proved useful on path to victory. Like Churchill, Lincoln prodded and poked his military leaders in order to get action. In August 1864, Lincoln telegraphed General Ulysses S. Grant: “I have seen your despatch expressing your unwillingness to break your hold where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew & choke, as much as possible.”¹⁷ In early April 1865 Lincoln read a dispatch that Philip Sheridan had written General Ulysses S. Grant: “If the thing is pressed I think Lee will surrender.” Lincoln telegraphed Grant: “Let the thing be pressed.”¹⁸

Lewis E. Lehrman, co-founder of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, is author of “Lincoln and Churchill: Statesmen at War (Stackpole, 2018) and “Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point” (Stackpole, 2008).

¹⁷ CWAL, Volume VII, p. 499 (Lincoln to Ulysses S. Grant, August 17, 1864).

¹⁸ CWAL, Volume VIII, p. 392.