

Lincoln and the Power of Silence

by Lewis E. Lehrman

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Known for their speaking abilities, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill often knew when and why to be quiet. “Solomon says there is ‘a time to keep silence,’” President-elect Lincoln told the Indiana Legislature in February 1861. “I am rather inclined to silence, and whether that be wise or not,” he told a Pittsburgh crowd a few days later. “It is at least more unusual nowadays to find a man who can hold his tongue than to find one who cannot.”¹

In the month before his inauguration, Lincoln felt growing pressure to speak out about the Union and secession. When the President-elect arrived in New York City on February 19, he declared: “I have not kept silence since the presidential election...from any indifference to the anxiety that pervades the minds of men about the aspect of the political affairs of the country. I have kept silence for the reason that I supposed it was peculiarly proper that I should do so until the time came when, according to the custom of the country, I could speak officially.”²

Silence came easier to Lincoln than to Churchill. In the winter of 1860 after Lincoln concluded a series of speeches at Cooper Union in New York and in cities around New England, he ceased making public pronouncements for almost a year.

Even on the long train trek from Springfield to Washington before his inauguration in 1861, Lincoln tried to say little while speaking in vague generalities. In New York City, the President-elect told a local group that expected a speech from him: “I have been occupying a position, since the Presidential election, of silence, of avoiding public speaking, of avoiding public writing. I have been doing so because I thought, upon full consideration, that was the proper course for me to take.”³

Raised in rural Kentucky and Indiana, Lincoln found solace, even as an adult, in quiet walks around town and in the country. In his Springfield law office, he could become lost in his own thoughts while lying on the office couch. As President, Lincoln’s silences were even more striking. Historian William E. Gienapp wrote: “Slow and deliberate, Lincoln carefully thought through problems, weighing alternatives in his mind, before reaching a decision. [Secretary John G.] Nicolay reported that ‘he would sometimes sit for an hour in complete silence, his eyes almost shut,’ pondering some question.”⁴

The silences of Prime Minister Churchill were less frequent. But, like Lincoln, Churchill needed time to think. Trusted bodyguard Walter H. Thompson wrote: “Churchill often acted impulsively but it would be wrong to think he acted capriciously. On many occasions during the first two years of the war, often right after a film showing, he would come down to the Great Hall locked up in deep thought of his own, then go suddenly and alone to a small table and play

¹ CWAL, Volume IV, p. 209 (Remarks at the Monogahela House, February 14, 1861).

² CWAL, Volume IV, pp. 230-231 (Address at New York City, February 19, 1861).

³ Roy P. Basler, editor, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume IV, p. 230 (Speech at the Astor House, New York City, February 19, 1861).

⁴ William E. Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography*, p. 92.

bagatelle. He would work seriously at this anything but serious game, trying for the highest possible score, and jotting down each result on a piece of paper with religious bookkeeping exactness. Callers seeing such action for the first time went away thinking it an odd caprice, and no doubt reporting it as such. But it was not.”⁵

“When he walked away quickly from large groups and did something alone with what very often appeared as spectacular and unnecessary brusqueness, it was to be alone with a problem until he could find his own answer to it,” continued Thompson. “He always came back with one and laid it out thoroughly for those involved. And they always expected it. What they did not know was where Winston had got it. He had got it, often, right there over the game of bagatelle, or upstairs in the cinema room, or marching with crazy relentlessness up and down the Great Hall.”⁶

Churchill colleague Oliver Lyttleton recalled: “Describing himself as a conversationalist, Winston once said, ‘I am either sunk in a sullen silence or else I am shouting the table down.’ There is a grain of truth in this. I have often seen him sitting silent beside some embarrassed woman at dinner, the fingers of both hands but not the palms on the table, a frown on his face, his head pushed a little forward and downward, his expression clouded and sombre.”⁷

The Prime Minister was capable of strategic silences when necessary. The most conspicuous example occurred on the morning of May 10, 1940 when Lord Halifax, then Foreign Secretary under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, outlined possible objections to elevating a peer, such as Halifax himself, to war-time Prime Minister. Churchill’s friends had warned him not to minimize or contradict Halifax’s inability to act as the government’s spokesman before the House of Commons.

As Chamberlain’s star fell during the 1939-40 “Phoney War,” Churchill’s star had risen - to the consternation of many in the elite. Britain’s top general observed on May 3, 1940 of the growing movement to oust Chamberlain: “Naturally the only man who can succeed is Winston and he is too unstable, though he has the genius to bring the war to an end.”⁸ Chamberlain’s intent was to form a national government. Churchill’s allies drummed up opposition to Halifax among Labour Party leaders, Clement Atlee and Arthur Greenwood, who visited Chamberlain on the afternoon of May 9. They told him that Labour would not be part of a Chamberlain-led government but Labour might be part of a government headed by another Conservative leader. Labour was about to hold a conference at Bournemouth where such a decision might be ratified. The pressure for change could no longer be ignored.

“I have had many important interviews in my public life, and this was certainly the most important. Usually I talk a great deal, but on this occasion I was silent,” wrote Churchill in his memoirs. “As I remained silent a very long pause ensued.”⁹ Instead of engaging Chamberlain and Halifax, Churchill stood at the window, looking away from them. Silence worked. Halifax proposed Churchill as the better option to succeed Chamberlain. As British politicians talked,

⁵ Walter H. Thompson, *Assignment: Churchill*, p. 98.

⁶ Walter H. Thompson, *Assignment: Churchill*, p. 181.

⁷ Lord Chandos, *The Memoirs of Lord Chandos*, p. 164.

⁸ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Finest Hour, 1939-1941*, p. 286.

⁹ Winston S. Churchill, *Gathering of Storm*, p. 663.

Nazi soldiers were blitzing their way into Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg on their way to France.

Talking and writing was Churchill's way of life. Churchill had begun his political career believing that he should be paid to talk. No sooner had he been elected to the House of Commons in 1900 than he began a lecture tour, first in England, then in the United States and Canada about his role in the Boer War. In July 1900, Churchill wrote his agent: "I don't want to be dragged about to any social functions of any kind nor shall I think of talking about my experiences to anybody except when I am paid for doing so."¹⁰ Churchill's father had died in debt so the 26-year-old knew he needed to make money to support himself; he was proud when his literary and speaking efforts cleared £10,000. Churchill described his early American audiences as "cool and critical, but also urbane and good-natured."¹¹

Lincoln experienced life very differently. Emancipated at 21 from his duty to work for his father, Lincoln would make his living as a self-taught lawyer – giving free political speeches as he worked his way around the Eighth Judicial Circuit in Illinois. Indeed, when he finally charged \$200 for a political speech – the Cooper Union address of February 1860 -- it became something of a partisan scandal. Churchill would make a very good living as a writer and speaker. Lincoln tried and failed to as a paid lecturer in the late 1850s. Usually, his political speeches fell into clearly defined areas. In the 1840s, he was known for his expertise on trade and economic issues. In the 1850s, Lincoln focused on opposing the expansion of slavery.

Both Lincoln and Churchill used their silences both to compose their thoughts and to reflect. In August 1940, the Prime Minister was driving to Chequers after visiting the headquarters of the No. 11 Group, Fighter Command, where that night he observed that every single British plane was engaged in fighting German attackers. "Don't speak to me," Churchill cautioned to a top military aide. "I have never been so moved."¹² The Prime Minister broke the silence a few minutes, saying: "Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few." Some days later, Churchill delivered a radio address and declared to the nation: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many owed to so few."¹³

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¹⁰ Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and America*, p. 33.

¹¹ Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life*, pp. 356-357.

¹² Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill: A Life*, p. 67.

¹³ Winston S. Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy: The Second World War*, p. 766.