

Churchill and Lincoln: Glow Worms Walking a Tightrope

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As young men, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill found themselves awkward among women. For much of his life, Churchill's female confidante, in addition to his wife, was Violet Bonham Carter. She was an accomplished politician and the daughter of Lord Herbert H. Asquith, British prime minister from 1908 to 1916. Churchill and Bonham Carter met at a dinner party in 1906. "Of course, we are all worms," Churchill declared to her, "but I do believe that I am a glow worm."

Years later, during World War II, the outspoken Bonham Carter visited 10 Downing St. to take lunch with Prime Minister Churchill and his wife Clementine. They argued good-naturedly about the future of European kings. Churchill was, in his own democratic way, an unreconstructed monarchist. "I don't bother about Kings one way or the other," said Bonham Carter.

As they chatted, Churchill said: "My dear -- there must be some worms in this world for you and me to tread on!" Churchill, pleased with his unconventional irony, added another clever observation as they climbed the stairs, saying: "Now remember that. I shall never say it so well again."

On May 9, 1940, just one day before the Nazi invasion of France, and one day before Churchill was named to succeed Neville Chamberlain as prime minister of Great Britain, Bonham Carter wrote then First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill: "I wish that your present ship may sink -- and I look forward to the launching of a greater one, of which you will hold the supreme command. There is a great tide flowing which you can direct."

When Churchill's appointment was announced, she wrote in her diary that the new prime minister "will indeed have to ride the whirlwind and direct the storm. If any man can he will."

Both Lincoln and Churchill chafed at the constant and harsh criticism to which they were subjected after setbacks. In March 1944, Churchill observed in a BBC broadcast: "The harshest language is used (by our critics); and this National Government, which has led the nation and the Empire, and, as I hold, a large part of the world, out of mortal danger . . . is reviled as a set of dawdlers and muddlers."

On a day early in the Civil War, President Lincoln was accosted by a delegation highly critical of his administration. Lincoln responded with a classic Lincoln parable: "Gentlemen, suppose all the property you possess were in gold, and you had placed it in the hands of (the famous tightrope acrobat) Blondin to carry across the Niagara River on a rope. With slow, cautious, steady step he walks the rope, bearing your all. Would you shake the cable, and keep shouting to him, 'Blondin! Stand up a little straighter! Blondin! Stoop a little more; go a little faster; lean more to the south! Now lean a little more to the north!' Would that be your behavior in such an

emergency? No, you would hold your breath, every one of you, as well as your tongues. You would keep your hands off until he was safe on the other side."

Lincoln continued: "This government, gentlemen, is carrying an immense weight; untold treasures are in its hands. The persons managing the ship of state in this storm are doing the best they can. Don't worry them with needless warnings and complaints. Keep silence, be patient, and we will get you safe across. Good day, gentlemen. I have other duties pressing upon me that must be attended to."

Churchill and Lincoln walked the tightrope, self-conscious of the stakes and the plausibility of failure. One Churchill aide wrote that working with Churchill "was sometimes wearisome and sometimes exasperating; but it was the most exhilarating of all experiences to serve, at close quarters and in war, that wayward, romantic, expansive and explosive genius, with the inspirational qualities of an Old Testament Prophet." MP Harold Nicolson recorded Churchill's visit to the smoking-room of the House of Commons in October 1940 during the London Blitz by Nazi bombers: "He sits there sipping a glass of port and welcoming anyone who comes in. . . . His very presence gives us all gaiety and courage." Nicolson concluded his diary entry: "We all drift out of the room thinking, 'That was a man!'"

During the Civil War, a Union Army officer recalled a "gentleman (who) was conversing with the president at a time during the war when things looked very dark. On taking leave, he asked the president what he should say to their friends in (slaveholding) Kentucky." The answer was quick and meant to reassure those who doubted the commander-in-chief. "'Tell my friends,' said Mr. Lincoln, drawing himself up to his full height, 'There is a man in here!'"

Churchill summed up the case for the hero in history: "I have always taken the view that the fortunes of mankind in its tremendous journey are principally decided for good or ill . . . by its great men and its greatest episodes."

Churchill and Lincoln aspired to be such men during the great episodes of civil war and world war.

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