

Churchill and Lincoln: Guardians of democracy

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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On April 9, 1865, Confederate General [Robert E. Lee](#) surrendered to Union General [Ulysses S. Grant](#), effectively ending the Civil War. Four score years later in April 1945, the [Allied coalition](#) in Europe effectively strangled the Nazi war machine. German [Führer Adolf Hitler](#) committed suicide on April 30. A week later on May 7, 1945, German military authorities surrendered to the Allies at Rheims, France.

On the evening of the Confederate capitulation in Virginia, President Lincoln had returned to Washington after a long visit to the war front near Richmond. At the White House, Lincoln spoke briefly to serenaders celebrating the Union victory -- postponing his formal comments for two days.

On May 8, 1945, Winston Churchill announced the Allied victory on radio -- declaring that the British should celebrate "to-day and to-morrow as Victory in Europe days." The British Prime Minister later told the House of Commons: "We have all of us made our mistakes, but the strength of the Parliamentary institution has been shown to enable it at the same moment to preserve all the title-deeds of democracy while waging war in the most stern and protracted form."

Prime Minister Churchill, who led a coalition government through the war, told his colleagues: "I wish to give my hearty thanks to men of all Parties, to everyone in every part of the House where they sit, for the way in which the liveliness of Parliamentary institutions has been maintained under fire of the enemy, and for the way in which we have been able to persevere -- and we could have persevered much longer if need had been -- till all the objectives which we set before us for the procuring of the unlimited and unconditional surrender of the enemy had been achieved." After a church service of thanksgiving, Churchill appeared to cheering crowds on the balcony of Buckingham Palace -- flanked by [King George VI](#) and [Queen Elizabeth](#).

President Lincoln spoke on April 11 as citizens of Washington illuminated the capital with candles: "We meet this evening, not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart. The evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond, and the surrender of the principal insurgent army, give hope of a righteous and speedy peace whose joyous expression can not be restrained. In the midst of this, however, He, from whom all blessings flow, must not be forgotten. A call for national thanksgiving is being prepared, and will be duly promulgated."

Eighty years apart, two of the gravest conflicts engaging the English-speaking peoples came to an end. So too did two American presidencies. On April 14, 1865, [Abraham Lincoln](#) was assassinated at Ford's Theater. On April 12, 1945, [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) died of a stroke at Warm Springs, Georgia. Unlike Britain, the United States held regular elections during war. Newly elected Vice President [Andrew Johnson](#) succeeded Lincoln

on April 15, 1865. Newly elected Vice President [Harry Truman](#) immediately succeeded Roosevelt.

In Britain, no parliamentary elections had been held for a decade, but one was scheduled for July 5, 1945. When the votes were counted, [Conservative Winston Churchill](#) was out and Labor leader [Clement Atlee](#), deputy prime minister during the war, was in.

Five years earlier in 1940, Churchill had appeared before the House of Commons, three days after he took office as prime minister: "We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind," said Churchill. "You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival."

Both Lincoln and Churchill faced conflicts in which the survival of democracy was at stake. They fought not only for their generation, but for ours. As Lincoln wrote in December 1861, "The struggle of today is not altogether for today; it is for a vast future also."

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