

Churchill and Lincoln - Never give up

by Lewis E. Lehrman

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"Do not let us speak of darker days: let us speak rather of sterner days."

Thus spoke Winston Churchill to the students of Harrow School on October 29, 1941. The British prime minister visited the school, and made this speech, fewer than six weeks before the United States would enter World War II. Churchill spoke only one year after Britain had victoriously defended itself against the relentless Luftwaffe bombing of London. But for English bravery, the Battle of Britain could have ended the war before America joined it.

"These are not dark days; these are great days -- the greatest days our country has ever lived," Churchill told the students, "and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race." Churchill had in mind a new verse to the Harrow school song which the students had recently written:

Not less we praise in darker days
The leader of our nation,
And Churchill's name shall win acclaim
From each new generation.

Only four score years before Churchill's speech at Harrow, Abraham Lincoln, at a time of equally great crisis, had become president of the United States. If attacked, Lincoln was as determined as Churchill to fight. The president would persist in the face of great odds. Lincoln's public writings and speeches, combined with his persevering example, inspired the nation to wage relentless war for the Union, and for emancipation, until victory in 1865.

On perseverance, Lincoln in 1860 wrote a young friend of his son: "I have scarcely felt greater pain in my life than on learning yesterday from Bob's letter, that you had failed to enter Harvard University." Then Mr. Lincoln pressed the case for grit: "And yet there is very little in it, if you will allow no feeling of discouragement to seize, and prey upon you. It is a certain truth, that you can enter, and graduate in, Harvard University; and having made the attempt, you must succeed in it. 'Must' is the word." The future American president, who had less than a year of formal schooling, applied his "must" of determination to achieve victory in the Civil War. "Must" became President Lincoln's watchword until unconditional surrender by the rebel armies.

The constitutional commander in chief of the Union Armies, Lincoln would endure his own moments of temporary despair -- as in January 1862 when he declared of a financially bankrupt, demoralized nation: "The bottom is out of the tub. What shall I do?" But Lincoln found the will to persevere -- writing General Ulysses S. Grant in 1864: "I have seen your despatch expressing your unwillingness to break your hold [on the rebel armies] where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew & choke, as much as possible." General Grant understood that he must hold on and then prevail.

Only a few days later, President Lincoln told the soldiers in an Ohio regiment, themselves surely a bit older than the Harrow students Churchill would address: "I admonish you not to be turned from your stern purpose of defending your beloved country and its free institutions by any arguments urged by ambitious and designing men, but stand fast to the Union and the old flag." In many ways, defeating the well-prepared and well-generated rebel army of the South by 1865 was as daunting a task as defeating the remarkable German armies of the Third Reich by 1945. Lincoln was defiant until the moment of victory. Listen to the president's own words: "I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me."

Abraham Lincoln had been tested by the frontier, by poverty and by an arduous climb to professional success in pioneer Illinois. Winston Leonard Spencer-Churchill, grandson of the Duke of Marlborough, had been born to privilege, having been schooled at the elite Harrow and then Sandhurst, the British West Point.

Like President Lincoln in 1861-1865, Churchill in 1940-1945 involved himself in the strategy and some of the tactics of the great war effort -- including the development of superior new armaments and technology. Only the day before the Harrow speech, Churchill had written his air chief to urge improvements in bomber technology. Lincoln tested new, more effective rifles on the White House lawn and then insisted they be manufactured and used by the armies in the field.

Churchill told the students of Harrow that when he had earlier visited Harrow at the end of 1940, "we were quite alone, desperately alone, and we had been so for five or six months. We were poorly armed. We are not so poorly armed today; but then we were very poorly armed. We had the unmeasured menace of the enemy and their air attack still beating upon us." As one of the students remembered: "He left me in no doubt we were going to win the war."

The prime minister of Australia had seen Churchill firsthand in cabinet meetings, confiding to his diary: "There is no defeat in his heart." In his remarks at Harrow, Churchill uttered the immortal words of defiance to tyranny: "never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never in nothing, great or small, large or petty -- never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense."

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