

Lincoln, Churchill and D-day

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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President Abraham Lincoln, a student of Shakespeare's tragedies and histories, surely could have understood, in the overtures of Henry V, what transpired 80 years later in the invasion of Normandy. King Harry's Crispin-Crispian Day speech before the Battle of Agincourt evoked the momentous drama unfolding on the Normandy beaches, D-Day 1944. John Colville, an aide to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, well understood the Shakespearean undertones of the assault on France. Colville was an RAF pilot who pressed Churchill for leave to take part in D-Day operations. Churchill lived vicariously at times through Colville, who aspired to rejoin his RAF unit at the very inception of Operation Overlord — the cross-channel Allied attack on the Nazis. "It was unthinkable not to take part in what was certain to be the largest military operation ever planned," wrote Colville. "Happily the Prime Minister, part of whose charm was that he had never quite grown up and remained incurably romantic, was eventually persuaded to share this view, although he did ask me to bear in mind that 'this war is not being waged for your amusement.'"

Colville recalled that as his plane lifted off on the morning of June 7 to do aerial reconnaissance, "it was impossible not to feel exultantly melodramatic." He later recalled the famous words of Henry V: "I doubt if I was the only pilot that morning who told himself with commonplace self-satisfaction that 'Gentlemen in England, now a-bed, shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhood cheap.'"

Churchill became prime minister on May 10, 1940. From that moment, he cast the conflict with Nazi Germany in the colors of Henry V. Three days after taking office, Churchill told Parliament: "I would say to this House, as I have said to those who have joined the government, I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." Henry V offered no more to his loyal band of brothers.

Three months later, Churchill memorialized the Battle of Britain. "The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion." He added: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." Or, in the words of Henry V, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother."

In the words of Edward R. Murrow, Churchill had mobilized the English language and sent it into to war against the Nazis. Hear Churchill impeaching Hitler on Sept. 11, 1940: "This wicked man, the repository and embodiment of many forms of soul-destroying hatred; this monstrous product of former wrongs and shame, has now resolved to try and break our famous island race

by a process of indiscriminate slaughter and destruction.” He added: “What he has done is to kindle a fire in British hearts, here and all over the world, which will glow long after all the traces of conflagration he has caused in London have been removed.”

Mr. Lincoln loved the histories of Shakespeare perhaps more than Churchill. A White House aide recalled the night when Lincoln “read Shakespeare to me, the end of Henry the VI and the beginning of Richard III, until my heavy eye-lids caught his considerable notice, & he sent me to bed.” In April 1865, Lincoln had sailed up the Potomac to Washington as the Civil War came to an end at the Appomattox Court House. The president entertained his shipmates by reading to them. “Most of the passages he selected were from Shakespeare, especially Macbeth,” recalled a French writer who noted that Lincoln’s focus was on the intersection of morality and evil. “The lines after the murder of Duncan, when the new king falls a prey to moral torment, were dramatically dwelt on. Now and then he paused to expatiate on how exact (was the) picture. Shakespeare here gives of a murderer’s mind when, the dark deed achieved, its perpetrator already envies his victim’s calm sleep. He read the scene over twice.” As Lincoln said: “Nothing excels Macbeth.”

In war especially, Churchill and Lincoln knew the power of King Harry’s words to his British lieutenants: “You know your places: God be with you all!”

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