

Churchill and Lincoln: Men of Principle; Men of Ideas

By Lewis E. Lehrman

February 12, 2014

Putnam County News & Recorder

In February 1943, now 68 years of age, Winston Churchill flew to Algiers after meetings in Turkey and Egypt. He slept in a rigged up bunk in the hold of his very cold airplane (there were none of the comforts of Air Force One). A top British general heard Churchill's valet tell the Prime Minister: "You are sitting on your hot water bottle. That isn't at all a good idea." The Prime Minister responded: "Idea? It isn't an idea, it's a coincidence." Churchill was always a stickler for English usage -- even in the most intimate circumstances. His use of the English language in public speeches was especially practiced, even memorized.

In January 1941, Prime Minister Churchill, anxious to impress his powerful American visitor, delivered an eloquent, private lecture on British war goals during the first visit of Franklin Roosevelt's representative Harry Hopkins: "We seek no treasure, we seek no territorial gains, we seek only the right of man to be free; we seek his rights to worship his God, to lead his life in his own way, secure from persecution. As the humble labourer returns from his work when the day is done, and sees the smoke curling upwards from his cottage home in the serene evening sky, we wish him to know that no rat-a-tat-tat -- here he rapped on the table -- of the secret police upon his door will disturb his leisure or interrupt his rest. We seek government with the consent of the people, man's freedom to say what he will, and when he thinks himself injured, to find himself equal in the eyes of the law. But war aims other than that we have none." Churchill, the romantic realist, here summed up those of his ideas which he held fast as first principles.

On June 22, 1941, Churchill told his aide, John Colville, "that he had only one single purpose -- the destruction of Hitler... If Hitler invaded Hell he would at least make a favourable reference to the Devil!" That night, Churchill used very similar language in a broadcast speech: "We have but one aim and one single, irrevocable purpose. We are resolved to destroy Hitler and every vestige of the Nazi regime. From this nothing will turn us -- nothing."

President Abraham Lincoln, too, embraced overriding goals in the Civil War -- first Union, then emancipation; then, their inseparability. In his special message to Congress on July 4, 1861, Lincoln wrote: "This is essentially a People's contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men---to lift artificial weights from all shoulders---to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all---to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life. Yielding to partial and temporary departures, from necessity, this is the leading object of the government for whose existence we contend." This may be considered Lincoln's idea of the first principle of the American Republic. President Lincoln, whose confidence in the American people never wavered, continued: "I am most happy to believe that the plain people understand, and appreciate this. It is worthy of note, that while in this, the government's hour of trial, large numbers of those in the Army and Navy, who have been favored with the offices, have resigned, and proved false to the hand which had pampered them, not one common soldier, or common

sailor is known to have deserted his flag. President Lincoln insisted upon loyalty to the Union to which officers had sworn an oath of allegiance. Betrayal of the oath was tantamount to treason.

Law partner William H. Herndon noticed how Lincoln wrestled with ideas: "The convolutions of his brain were long; they did not snap off quickly like a short, thick man's brain....The enduring power of Mr. Lincoln's thought and brain was wonderful. He could sit and think without food or rest longer than any man I ever saw." Observing his son Willie, Lincoln said: "I know every step of the process by which that boy arrived at his satisfactory solution, as it is by just such slow methods I obtain results." The overwhelming evidence of contemporaries suggested that Mr. Lincoln was more deliberate, less impetuous than Mr. Churchill -- in peace and in war.

Herndon said of Mr. Lincoln:- "With him justice and truth were paramount." Springfield attorney Charles Zane wrote that Lincoln "had a mental Capacity for classifying and forming general abstract truths or principles and of applying and using them; and for Contemplating the particular nature of things divested of all superfluous and specific circumstances." This mental capacity is on display in the original Lincoln documents one reads in Roy Basler's "Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln".

Democratic principles, humane values, self-reliance, and personal responsibility motivated Churchill and Lincoln. President Lincoln said in 1862: "In times like the present, men should utter nothing for which they would not willingly be responsible through time and eternity." Speaking before the House of Commons, Prime Minister Churchill eulogized his predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, recently dead of cancer: "History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days. What is the worth of all this? The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of our calculations; but with this shield, however the fates may play, we march always in the ranks of honor."