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The Legendary Churchill

SHORTLY AFTER a recent book of mine on Churchill appeared, I took part in a radio discussion about his place in history. The moderator asked us, toward the end of the discussion, how we thought Churchill's reputation in Britain would look a century from now. Would things have so changed, he asked, that the achievement which looms so large today would have shrunk greatly in size? Or might Churchill's reputation have vanished altogether?

It is not an easy question to answer, whatever the historical figure under discussion. Most reputations go up and down from generation to generation, depending on the political or social mood of the moment, on the prevailing fashion of historians, and on the revelation of new evidence or reinterpretation of old evidence. In the discussion, however, Sir Colin Coote, an old friend of Churchill, former member of Parliament, and once editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, was adamant: he argued that if the serious denigration of Churchill had not taken hold by now, then it never would. And Lady Longford, biographer of Churchill and Queen Victoria, pointed out that the disparaging works which have already appeared have done little damage to Churchill's reputation. I was less sanguine. It is certainly true that Churchill has lost none of his grasp on the popular imagination in Britain, but I fully expect a later generation of historians to bring about a decline in the standing which he enjoys among his countrymen. That decline, however, will only be temporary, for I think Churchill occupies an unshakeable special place in the hearts of the British. And that place will be enhanced rather than diminished by the difficulties and decline of grandeur that Britain now endures.

The people, moreover, tend to ignore academic historical debate (on the whole very sensibly), and as they do not have a very factual grasp now of what precisely Churchill did, of how he saved his country, or of why they should think him great, so

are they unlikely to have one in the future. No doubt his role in history will assume different legendary shapes, and a historian in the year 3000—if there are any historians then—who is anxious to make his reputation as a clever fellow, will publish a learned article raising the question of whether Churchill ever existed, just as historians have recently raised the question of whether Robin Hood ever existed. It will make no difference to the permanence of his reputation.

I should not speak quite so lightly of the worthy and industrious efforts of academic historians, however. They do seek the truth insofar as it can be found, and most of them are conscientious enough in their efforts. But it is very difficult for the academic historian to grasp or analyze a reputation which very quickly attains the status of myth. (I do not use the word myth here in its cant sense of a romantic untruth, but rather in its original sense of something essentially true but with inaccurate details.) The profuse mass of documentation which historians increasingly depend on lends itself more easily to interpreting policy than to describing the popular imagination. For example, in the first volume of my book *Churchill at War*, I tried to explain how the unrivalled power of Churchill's rhetoric inspired the people of Britain in 1940. But I did so by analyzing the network of decision-making which lay behind that rhetorical appeal and was for the most part invisible to the people, and by trying to show that, on balance, Churchill's decisions were necessary and wise and the people sensed as much. It would have been a far more difficult task, and one that I am not sure can ever be accomplished, to trace a profile of Churchill's popular reputation; and it would be the summation of popular historical achievement to connect the governor, in his most intimate Cabinet decision-making, with the mythical popular hero.

Nevertheless, there is a certain amount of

evidence about Churchill's popular reputation, and a personal anecdote, moreover, a recurring anecdote, can illustrate its persistency. I have two bulldogs, and I walk them regularly in the area of London in which I live, a racially-mixed neighborhood. I have become accustomed, over a period of four years, to being stopped regularly by middle-aged or elderly folk who exclaim over the dogs. Invariably, they make two remarks. First, they observe that one rarely sees bulldogs nowadays: for though they are a symbolic British breed, bulldogs are expensive and difficult to keep, and there are not many about. Second, they note the similarity of the dogs to "Winston," who, as is now well known, practiced his bulldog visage in front of a mirror as soon as he heard that he was being compared with the animal. Now I expect such remarks from the elderly and the middle-aged, who remember vividly both Churchill and his resemblance. But I am astonished at the attention which the rarity value of a bulldog—and the seemingly extraordinary prodigality of having two—attracts among young people. And I have now lost count of the number of young people, and especially West Indian young people, who have asked me which of the dogs is called Winston. Thus does a mythic reputation grow through generations and across classes, creeds, and races. It is something the academic historian would find difficult to pin down and therefore irritating, but it has power nonetheless and, very likely, a power greater than all his volumes.

George Orwell, the celebrated socialist writer, patriot, and author of 1984, carried out some empirical observations of his own, collecting evidence about the nature of the Churchill myth and its real substance. One choice anecdote he collected refers to the day when Churchill's body was taken by boat down the Thames, and the London dockers—one of the most bloody-minded of British trade unions—dipped their cranes in tribute to the war leader. According to

Orwell, the workers in dockland were convinced that the BBC had censored Churchill's broadcasts, and prevented him from giving free rein to a ribald element in his speech. Thus, the celebrated passage about fighting the Germans on the beaches and on the landing grounds was to have been followed by a sentence asserting, "We'll throw bottles at the buggers, because we'll have nothing left." The point about the story—and Orwell was an acute observer of behavior—was that dockland not only relished Churchill, but also attributed to him some of its own spirit, language, and style.

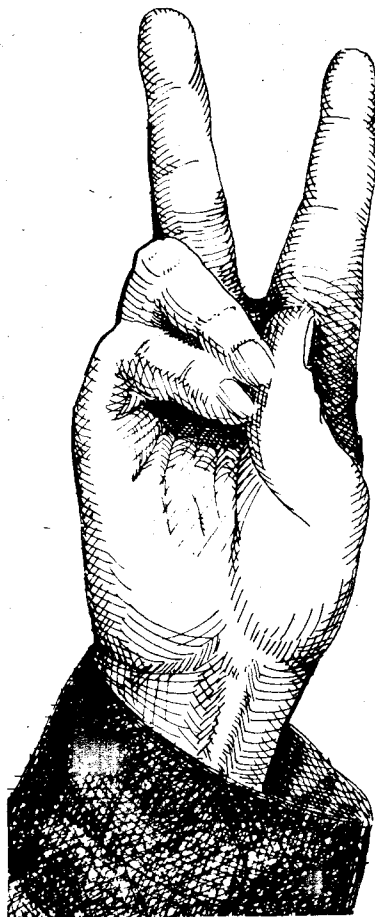
Fuller and more scientific evidence as to how the British people regarded Churchill in his greatest days may be found in the files of one of the earliest British public opinion poll organizations, Mass Observation; this material has been used in a number of studies, notably a recent article by Paul Addison on Churchill and the people. The conclusion of researchers delving into these files is much as I have suggested above: there was a widespread feeling of fierce identification with and love for Churchill, but it was founded less on any precise understanding of his strategy or personality than on a general appreciation of his unique combativeness.

Churchill was also appreciated as a leader of his people who insisted on sharing their dangers and suffering as far as possible. On one occasion, while he was visiting the East End of London, an air raid occurred. His aides naturally tried, in the midst of panic and confusion, to turn his car and enable the priceless commander to escape, but Churchill refused to depart. He understood, to be sure, that he was invaluable to the war effort, and that no leader could command as well as he. But he also understood that, fate having taken him in this difficult moment, he could not rush for safety either, nor would he want to: the whole principle of his nature and leadership was that of standing his ground. In any case, two observations are recorded of this occasion. The first, when Churchill began to weep at the destruction, was by a woman who said, "Look. He cares." The second was by another woman who shouted fiercely to him, as German bombs descended, "Give it 'em back, Winston." Thus, I believe, was born the strategy of bombing German cities.

In the radio discussion which I mentioned earlier the question of Churchill's greatness was discussed as usual in the abstract. I end my book with a quotation about Churchill from General Lord Ismay, who was his closest aide during the war: "I shall be accused of making him out a superman, but that is exactly what he is." The moderator of the program insisted that I was a partisan of Churchill's, and implied that the conclusion of my book—that, in General DeGaulle's words, "He forged a victory"—was the less to be trusted for that reason. Of course I am partisan, but I hope that my work on Churchill has both of the qualities which he wished to see in his own biography of his father, which he aimed to make "both filial and objective." The question of greatness, however, seemed to me to demand another. The attribution of greatness or supremacy in the common mind seems to be associated with the making of correct decisions, and, of course, one cannot call great in action a man who, in lead-

ership, makes all the wrong decisions. Nonetheless, greatness may also reside in a personality, even apart from action.

It is commonly thought that Churchill was ailing badly before he retired as Prime Minister in the middle fifties, and it is certainly true that he was nothing like the man he was in 1940—though I would hazard the judgment that his great skill and experience were a crucial factor in the life of one of the best British governments we have seen in a generation. Certainly, it is thought, the decline was rapid and absolute after his retirement. Indeed, both his doctor, Lord Moran, and such close friends as Lord Bracken tried to keep him in office even after he was not really fit for the job, lest he fall into depression on leaving it. In July 1956 the distinguished American journalist C.L. Sulzberger, an old friend, visited Churchill in retirement at his country home, Chartwell, in Kent. At first Sulz-



berger observed only Churchill's torpor, but then: "After Lady Churchill had departed, we sat down in the sitting room again, he plonked himself into an armchair, ashes over the front of his siren suit, and suddenly, slowly came alive; not just the shreds of a great character and the impeccable courtesy of his personality, but the old flame and wisdom began to emerge."

The two men discussed a variety of subjects, and Churchill descanted with wisdom and insight on the problems of the world. But Sulzberger's "final impression was an extraordinary experience of seeing him come alive and then, tired out by the effort, by the walk, our long reading from his work, the conversation, the entire physical and mental effort, to see all that dynamism fade away. It was like watching a very strong light bulb during an electrical crisis: First a faint reddening of the filament, then a flickering, then a glow, and then a bril-

liant blaze of light. Finally, after being blinded by the sustained glare, again flickering, subsiding, just a red filament; then nothing." There was no doubt of the extraordinary power of Churchill's personality at all stages of his life: as one wartime colleague put it, he could frighten people, and this capacity, which is so hard to bring to life in history books, undoubtedly contributed in large measure to his capacity to galvanize the British war machine. As Sir Colin Coote said, there has been little effective or wholehearted criticism of Churchill's general conduct of the war. To be sure, episodes have been picked out and the finger of attack pointed, and this is true of his general career as well. But Churchill was built on such a gigantic scale, with such an extraordinary array of talents, and he was blessed, though only after much travail, with such destiny and fortune, that small forays against his reputation seem to inflict but flesh wounds.

It is very frequently said in Britain, even by those who admire the historical Churchill, and would not seek to criticize his conduct of affairs during the Second World War, that he is nonetheless a great figure frozen in the past, that he has nothing to say to Britain today. In this respect he could be unfavorably compared with a great contemporary, General DeGaulle; during his last period in office DeGaulle altered French policy in some important respects, and redefined its course in others, so that even today opponents of Gaullism often share established attitudes—e.g., in regard to the French nuclear weapon, or to the Middle East—which have not subsequently been changed. The outburst of indignation when President Giscard d'Estaing criticized President Ford, even more when he continued a series of French nuclear tests, was all the greater because the new President was not thought to be Gaullist—the epithet of criticism as applied to French policy. There is no equivalent abstract in English: a Prime Minister who uses Churchill's rhetoric—as Mr. Wilson did more than once during his first period of government—invites ridicule more than he excites admiration or anger.

But this is perfectly understandable. So large does Churchill loom in our imagination that it is inconceivable that any politician could approach him, let alone emulate him. He is to the British almost as the Constitution is to the Americans. At the present time memory of him merely causes sorrow—a certain pain that we no longer have anything like him. But, as time passes, as he recedes into the distance and his record and character become more manageable, we shall begin to be able to make use of him, of parts of his record and achievement, for inspection and teaching. For example, at a time when Parliament is under threat, both from an expanding bureaucracy and from seriously dissident elements in the community, it will become useful to recall how great a parliamentarian Churchill was, and how devoted to the institution. For no country can ever possess a statesman as great as Churchill and not have his impact sunk deeply into its character. However antedeluvian his style looks at the moment, he was, as Malraux said of DeGaulle, "a man of the day before yesterday and of the day after tomorrow." His tomorrow will come again. □

The Imperial Churchill

IN HIS ESSAY, "Consistency in Politics," Winston Churchill suggests that the most important thing to know about a reputed statesman is the nature of the broad purposes which guided his judgments and actions. If, however, we attempt to discern the ends of Churchill's own "life of action and advocacy" we are at first bewildered. Churchill was a defender of democracy, but he was keenly aware of the inherent inequalities among men; he was a partisan of human excellence, but he strongly supported efforts to raise the minimal level of well-being of the common man; he was the friend and imaginative utilizer of technology and the fruits of industrialization, and yet he could not reconcile himself to the scientific attitude toward man and nature and favored the martial over the commercial virtues; he spoke of man's rights, and yet he also took his bearings from man's obligation to perfect himself. Although we may safely reject the view of some of Churchill's detractors that he was little more than a gifted opportunist, we must also admit that it is difficult to discern the ultimate purpose or principles to which he consistently adhered. In a letter to his cousin, written in 1899, Churchill observed that "the improvement of the British breed is my political aim in life," but he noted that this aim was often in conflict with "another great principle" to which he was also committed—"Liberty." Churchill was a man of principle, but he seems to have been torn between his dedication to virtue and human excellence and his dedication to liberty and the democratic regime of liberty.

Our times and our democratic regime lead us to be familiar with, and receptive to, the democratic more than the aristocratic Churchill. We remember the great war leader and protector of liberal democracy against Nazi tyranny. We like to forget that in the 1920s and 1930s Churchill, in his great Marlborough and in numerous essays, expressed grave doubts about the viability and goodness of modern mass democracy. And we find even more unpalatable Churchill's dogged commitment to empire at a time when that kind of rule had long ceased to be defensible in the eyes of all right-thinking men. Those who want to understand Churchill's statesmanship, however, must take seriously both the aristocratic and the democratic Churchill. It will not do to dismiss his advocacy of empire as his one great "blindspot," for that advocacy had deep roots in his whole political outlook. Consideration of his views on empire suggests, in fact, that Dorothy Thompson was correct when she observed that Churchill was an "aristocrat" whose "spirit is Aristotelian."

Churchill did not stress the economic impetus for empire. He thought there were more powerful and elevated causes of national expansion. Britain's Empire, moreover, was frequently an economic drain on the nation: "Imperialism and economics clash," Churchill observed, "as often as honesty and self-interest."

Nevertheless, he remained convinced that given its essentially artificial economic situation, the economic health of twentieth century Britain depended on the maintenance of her Empire. The Empire supported access to foreign markets and raw materials, and the imperial navy secured British trade and commerce. Now "that we have got this immense population here at this level of economic society . . . we must," Churchill noted, "be a strong, successful, scientific, commercial empire or starve. There is no half-way house for Britain between greatness and ruin."

Commerce gave impetus to British expansion, but Churchill thought the more fundamental cause of imperial growth was the need for military security. Even essentially defensive and satisfied nations are led into war and expansion just in order to protect themselves and their present possessions. And because of its necessary reliance on prestige as the dominant means of sustaining its authority, because of the general hostility—provoked or unprovoked—of the uncivilized peoples who border a widespread empire, and because of the threats to imperial security caused by the fear, envy, and ambition of other great powers, every imperial nation must become expansionist. In practice a defensive empire tends to become almost indistinguishable from a deliberately offensive or expansive empire. Churchill would have been sympathetic to current defenders of American empire who stress the connection between the growth and necessity of American empire and the nation's interest in its security and in world order. The imperial project cannot, however, be simply attributed to the compulsion of circumstances. Vigorous men and nations are also driven to empire by a desire to prevail or to be predominant. The "spirit of empire," Churchill observed, is "the desire for power" or the "desire to prevail," a "great fact which practical men must reckon with."

Churchill thought that true threats to self-preservation may justify a nation's expansion, but that desires for greater wealth and power do not in themselves legitimize imperial rule. He also distinguished between rule over civilized and rule over uncivilized nations. One civilized nation may not rule another without its consent unless the subservience of the subjugated nation is indispensable to the self-preservation of the ruler. A just empire over the uncivilized, on the other hand, need not be founded on the deliberate or freely given consent of the governed. It must, however, be directed to their improvement: It must be a "civilizing empire." Because only the rule of those of superior merit elevates the ruled, Churchill held that "intrinsic merit is the only title of a dominant race to its possessions." The true imperialist seeks to restrain the nation's desires for power and wealth by putting them in the service of a higher end—civilization.

Churchill's advocacy of civilizing empire was grounded on the view that all men are

under a sovereign obligation to perfect their higher, uniquely human faculties, to become, to the extent of their varying capacities, more complete human beings. The right of the uncivilized to liberty is subordinate to their obligation to improve; their right to self-government derives from their ability to govern themselves. Only when man is striving to perfect himself does he reach his full humanity and attain the happiness of which he is capable. Human life is not worth living when it has lost sight of a sound standard of human excellence and of the need to strive to attain that standard. A just empire puts the uncivilized in touch with civilization and provides them with the external assistance without which their development would be greatly retarded, if not completely prevented. The overriding importance of man's obligation to become civilized requires that he submit himself, when it is available, to the expeditious and assured agency of imperial rule.

Churchill thought that empire elevated the uncivilized by establishing law, order, and more efficient administration, by expanding the range of desires of the uncivilized, and by satisfying these desires by means of large capital improvements and the use of scientific technology. He saw the imperial aspiration for the uncivilized as being not the attainment of full human excellence, but the passing of the threshold which marks the boundary between barbarism and civilization—the development of a minimal capacity for self-government.

Churchill was less concerned with civilizing empire's ability to elevate the uncivilized ruled than he was with its tendency to further improve its civilized rulers. He did not view empire as a burden to be endured or as merely one of the inescapable responsibilities of a powerful nation. Nor did he think that empire is grounded in a self-denying obligation of the civilized to succor the needy. The ascent from barbarism to full civilization does not, in his view, entail a movement from the depths of narrow self-seeking to the peaks of selfless altruism. The moral foundation of empire, and thus also of civilization, rests not on the distinction between altruistic duty and self-interest but on that between narrow, "slavish," or undue self-interest and the pursuit of one's own good broadly or nobly conceived. The fully civilized man, the man of noble self-regard, wants the best things for himself, and he considers moral and political virtue to be the things most worth having. The direct consequence of his striving for excellence is that he benefits others who, in the absence of his striving, would have no claim to the benefits they receive. Civilized men and nations are obliged to themselves, to the high standard which they have set for themselves. Their obligation does not run down to the uncivilized, or across to their fellow men, but up to man fully civilized—to civilization.

For Churchill, human excellence was largely equivalent to political excellence, to