

Churchill: The meaning of greatness

By MICHAEL DAVIS

Had Winston Churchill died at sixty, history would scarcely have noted his passing.

He would have been recorded as neither a statesman nor a popular man. An imaginative First Lord of the Admiralty during World War I, he conceived a brilliant flanking strike at the Dardanelles, only to see it fail for want of proper execution—a failure for which he was not entirely blameless.

An innocent Tory in economics, he was an inadequate Chancellor of the Exchequer at a time when bold economic thinking was demanded. He gained the workingman's odium for his perhaps excessive measures to end the General Strike of 1926.

A parliamentary maverick in a country where party infidelity is a sin second only to godlessness, he horrified the regulars by twice switching parties. Precocious, but lacking sound judgment, his historical footnote would conclude. He might have been a Rab Butler.

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Yet he shortly became one of the Great Men—if that frequently abused term has any meaning at all. One cannot help but feel that things would be quite different today—and immensely more difficult — if Churchill had not rallied British might and will in the dark June days of 1940 when England stood alone.

"Oddly enough, most of us were very happy in those days,"

C. P. Snow recalls. "There was a kind of collective euphoria over the whole country . . . We had a purpose." It was Churchill, more than any other force, who defined and articulated that purpose, which was no less than the defense of all that was worthwhile in Western Civilization. And Englishmen who but a short time before had sworn never to die for King and Country, stepped forth into their finest hour.

Apotheosis Begins

He sleeps now in that shadow land between the present and the past, wherein great men are transformed into great myths that will inevitably lie under the merciless little scalpels of revisionists not yet born. But be-

fore the myth smothers the man, we can grasp what it was that, manifested in great deeds, set him apart from lesser men.

To appreciate Churchill's life is to appreciate the qualities of greatness. The factors that give birth to great men are difficult to isolate—not the least of them is fortuitous circumstance.

But the most significant of these factors is strength of will, and Churchill was nothing if not the incarnation of simply enormous will and determination. Vacillation, apathy, and cynicism were foreign to his nature. His commitment to those things worthy of it was total. Painting a landscape, building a navy, laying a wall, writing a history, leading a troop of cavalry, scolding a parliament, saving a nation—these he pursued with a singular passion.

Shimmering Colors

The source of that great will, I think, lay in his Romanticism. Churchill was an unabashed Romantic. A biographer concludes that "he is incapable of seeing life in terms of monotones. Whatever subject his mind touches is at once transformed into shimmering lights and colors."

British and Americans were not jealous and oft-quarreling rival nationalities, but "English-speaking peoples" whose common origins and mission rendered differences insignificant.

British tommies of the Second World War were not just soldiers but white warriors engaged in combat a **outrance** with the forces of wickedness. 1940 was the Christians and the Turks before Vienna, with civilization in the balance.

Out of his Romanticism, and the engine of his will, came Churchill's fixed belief that he was a child of destiny. It was more than mere ambition. Born in a castle in the afternoon of a mighty Empire, sired of a brilliant and stormy father, descended of the great Marlborough, he knew he was preordained to fulfill some great purpose.

Kings, Parliament, Empire—these were not historical curiosities, but mystical and transcending entities. He did not merely acknowledge their presence, but he believed in their greatness and knew he was their champion.

Faith in his destiny colored his every decision and carried him through his numerous falls from public grace. His magnificent self-confidence (had he failed, history—with his critics—would have called it "damned arrogance") occasioned the opprobrium of contemporary politicians not of the elect.

Merely Quaint?

Romanticism, a passionate belief in personal destiny and high purpose, and a will powerful enough to fulfill what his destiny required of it—these were the peculiar qualities that lifted Churchill to greatness and profoundly shaped our times.

They sound quaint and old-fashioned to our homogenous and detached generation. But it will be prudent for us to ponder these qualities—the example of which may be Churchill's greatest legacy—and to reflect whether or not any generation, whatever its gods, can do without men who share them.