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A Dual Vision of Greatness –Churchill and Reagan Through the Lens of History

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Steven F. Hayward would surely urge similar advice, and his writings on historical figures have helped to define greatness in terms of historical legacy.

Now, Hayward sets his sights on Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan in a new book entitled *Greatness: Reagan, Churchill and the Making of Extraordinary Leaders*, arguing that these two lions of the twentieth century represent parallel portraits of greatness. Hayward ought to know, for he has written works on both Ronald Reagan and Winston Churchill. A fellow at both the American Enterprise Institute and the Pacific Research Institute, Hayward is currently completing the second volume of his massive work on Ronald Reagan and his presidency.

Of course, books of this genre are now often discarded as out of date and superficial. After all, the academic elite has been steadily undermining what it dismisses as the “great man theory of history” for the last half-century. Minimizing the influence of strategic individuals and denying that individuals can actually make a major impact on history, the predominating view of the academy has been that history is the chronicle of impersonal forces, class struggle, and non-rational factors. This doesn’t deter Steven Hayward in the slightest.

Hayward agrees with Aristotle’s view that “political greatness [is] the ability to translate wisdom into action on behalf of the public good.” Hayward recognizes that “the egalitarian temper of modern intellectual life, combined with the reductionist methodology of social science, deprecates individual greatness and seeks to reduce the course of human affairs to material and subrational forces.”

Why Churchill and Reagan? Hayward argues that these two world leaders represent the opening and closing of one of the world’s most strategic and important eras of history. “Churchill, with his famous Iron Curtain speech of 1946, made in the presence of Harry Truman, might be said to have launched the Cold War for the West,” Hayward asserts. “Reagan, a former Truman Democrat, ended it. Churchill said in the Iron Curtain speech that World War II could have been prevented ‘without the firing of a single shot.’ Reagan, heeding Churchill’s vivid lesson, brought the Cold War to an end ‘without firing a single shot,’ Margaret Thatcher observed.”

Having researched the lives of both men, Hayward detected an underlying pattern of similarities. Both men were driven by ideas and believed that the force of personality and the call of leadership should serve the highest ideals. Both came to national and world leadership in the context of trouble, with Churchill’s leadership crucial to the winning of World War II, and Reagan’s statesmanship needed to end the Cold War. Both men loved freedom and were able to articulate a cry for freedom for their own peoples and the peoples of the world. Both were superbly gifted speakers, and each understood that politics was, at least in part, a dramatic enterprise.

At times, Hayward appears to push his argument for similarities too far. At one point, he credits Reagan with an interest in art because he had once considered becoming a professional cartoonist. This hardly seems commensurate with Churchill's stature as a watercolor artist. Still, Hayward makes his case with verve and insight, threading together the details and contours of these two lives and sustaining his argument for their historical greatness.

These two lives could not have begun more differently. Churchill was born to the British aristocracy, and his childhood was marked by his intense admiration of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill. The senior Churchill had begun his political career with tremendous promise, but destroyed his political ambitions in an act of rashness. Most significantly, Churchill longed for intimacy with his father and for his father's approval. Randolph Churchill was a cold and cruel father, who repeatedly told young Winston that he would never amount to anything.

Ronald Reagan's childhood is a portrait of small-town America. Nevertheless, his relationship with his father was also strained and distant due to the senior Reagan's tragic alcoholism. Both men gave evidence of considerable intellectual potential during their childhoods, but failed to excel in school.

For Churchill, all this changed when he arrived at Sandhurst, Britain's most prestigious military academy. For Reagan, the crucial turning point in his life came when he discovered his considerable gift for public speaking, acting, and leadership.

In an interesting succession of chapters, Hayward considers Churchill and Reagan in terms of their childhoods, education, faith, and relation to Christianity, as well as politics and world history.

When it came to their understanding of Christianity, Hayward suggests that Churchill was most likely an agnostic. He cites Churchill's private secretary, John Colville, as recording in his diary: "As regards religion he was an agnostic who, as the years went by, and I think more particularly as a result of the Battle of Britain, slowly began to conceive that there was some overriding power which had a conscious influence in our destinies."

Reagan, on the other hand, "seldom made a speech that did not include some divine reference," Hayward asserts. Even though Reagan "displayed few of the mannerisms of Protestant evangelicalism," Hayward argues that Reagan was driven by a sense of divine destiny and protection. Churchill may have adopted a basically secular worldview, but Reagan constantly referred to his role and his times in terms of divine providence. Still, much as was the case with Abraham Lincoln, Reagan's references to divine providence fell far short of a classic embrace of Christian orthodoxy. The specifics of his faith and understanding of Christianity were never fully explained, articulated, or acknowledged.

Interestingly, Hayward notes that both Reagan and Churchill switched parties as they moved through adulthood and the process of developing their own political philosophies. Churchill switched parties twice, but appeared to be driven by an inner consistency, even as he believed that party affiliation was secondary to the power of ideas. Reagan emerged into public life as a Roosevelt Democrat, but became the standard-bearer for American conservatism as he was elected governor of California and President of the United States as a Republican.

Greatness also includes an analysis of Churchill and Reagan in terms of national leadership and domestic policy. Hayward argues that both men affirmed a role for government, even as Churchill was more accepting of the welfare state. Still, the similarities override the differences, and both men emerged as vociferous opponents of both Communism and socialism.

The most important section of Hayward's book looks at the Cold War as "the connecting thread" that links these two great lives. Both men saw Communism as the greatest threat of the twentieth century's second half. Churchill, who had seen the threat of Nazism in Germany years before Hitler came to power, saw the Soviet Union and the spread of world Communism as the great crisis of the post-war period. Both men were willing to rankle their political enemies and their political allies with their fervent anti-Communism.

Churchill's 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech angered Harry Truman and alarmed his own government. Similarly, Reagan's 1983 speech before the National Association of Evangelicals lighted a firestorm when the President declared the Soviet Union to be the "evil empire." Historian Henry Steele Commager declared Reagan's speech to be "the worst presidential speech in American history." Columnists referred to the President as a "religious bigot" and to his speech as "outrageous" and "primitive." When Reagan famously demanded that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev "tear down this wall," (even as

he stood at the Brandenburg Gate of the Berlin Wall), he faced doubters within his own administration.

“The most remarkable and intriguing aspect of Churchill’s and Reagan’s anti-Communism is that both men believed that Communism would come to an end someday,” Hayward observes. Churchill’s greatness led him to see Communism for what it was. Reagan’s greatness was evident in his determination to bring Soviet Communism to an end.

“When I meet a historian who cannot think that there have been great men, great men moreover in politics, I feel myself in the presence of a bad historian,” observed British historian Geoffrey Elton. He continued: “And there are times when I incline to judge all historians by their opinion of Winston Churchill—whether they can see that, no matter how much better the details, often damaging, of the man and his career become known, he still remains, quite simply, a great man.” To this observation Hayward adds, “Much the same thing can be said of Ronald Reagan.”

Steven F. Hayward has performed a public service in bringing these two lives into parallel focus. Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan were men of great abilities, great legacies, great faults, and great times. Those who would deny the “great man” theory of history must explain how our times would be unaffected by the removal of these two men from the twentieth century. That century, deprived of these two lives, would surely have ended very differently.

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