

## Heroes: What Great Statesmen Have to Teach Us

Paul Johnson  
Historian



**PAUL JOHNSON** is the author of several best-selling books, including the classic *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, *A History of the American People*, *A History of Christianity*, *Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky*, *A History of the Jews*, *Creators: From Chaucer and Durer to Picasso and Disney*, *Art: A New History*, *George Washington: The Founding Father*, and most recently, *Heroes: From Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar to Churchill and de Gaulle*. His articles have appeared in numerous publications, including *National Review*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Spectator*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Daily Mail*. In 2006, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

*The following is adapted from a lecture delivered on November 1, 2007, on board the Crystal Symphony, during a Hillsdale College cruise from Montreal to Miami.*

**If we** look at what heroic statesmen can teach us, the sartorial dimension—what they wear—is indicative. Prince Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian who created Germany in its modern form, always put on uniforms when he addressed the Reichstag on an important constitutional issue. His successor as Chancellor, Bethman-Hollweg, had himself specially promoted from major to colonel so that, when declaring war in 1914, he could speak to the Reichstag from a suitable rank.

The English and American traditions and instincts are quite different. George Washington might wear a uniform when the Republic was in danger, to indicate his willingness and ability to defend it. As a rule, however, he deliberately stressed his civilian status by his dress. He was anxious to show that, unlike Cromwell 150 years before, he would not use his military victories to become a Caesar. His self-restraint fascinated contemporaries. After American independence was secured, King George III asked an American, “What will George Washington do now?” He was told: “I expect he will go back to his farm.” The King commented, in frank admiration: “If he does that, he will be the greatest man on earth.” And that is what he did. When he finally—and reluctantly—accepted political office, he waited to be summoned by election. The importance of Washington’s behavior should never be underrated, contrasting, as it did, so markedly with the behavior of Napoleon Bonaparte a few years later. It illustrated all the difference between a civil and a military culture. In statesmanship, personal self-restraint in the search for and exercise of power is a key lesson to teach.



The Duke of Wellington, for instance, though known as the Iron Duke and the victor in some 50 battles, would never have dreamed of appearing in Parliament in military attire. On the contrary: he fought the Battle of Waterloo in dark blue civilian dress. Winston Churchill, too, never set foot in the House of Commons as a soldier. He loved uniforms and often wore them on non-Parliamentary occasions, including his semi-nautical rig as an Elder Brother of Trinity House. He had a right, too, to dress up. For he had taken part in active campaigns in Asia and Africa, and in 1899, at the Battle of Omdurman, had taken part in one of the last successful cavalry charges in the history of warfare. At the Potsdam Conference in 1945 he appeared in Royal Air Force uniform, one of his favorites. Marshall Stalin, as he liked to call himself, appeared in the white full dress uniform of a Marshall of the Red Army. But my award for statesmanship goes to the third member of the Big Three, Harry S Truman, who wore a neat blue civilian suit. No one had a better right to military rig. He was, *ex officio*, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Armed Forces. He had seen action in the First World War as an army major, and took an active part in the Reserve throughout the interwar period, probably knowing more about the military state of the world—and periodically issuing well-argued warnings—than any other member of Congress. But he rightly followed Washington's example and stuck to the constitutional proprieties. How sensible he was became clear later when he had to deal with the popular but difficult General Douglas MacArthur.

It is worth noting that one of the greatest victories of the 20th century, the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War at the end of the 1980s, was achieved by three eminently civilian heroes: Pope John Paul II, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The popes always wear white,

the symbol of peace. Mr. Reagan, quite capable of acting heroic roles on screen, never succumbed to the temptation of wearing uniform in office. Margaret Thatcher was a war leader as well as a great leader in peace. She showed considerable courage during the Falklands War, a hazardous business for Britain with its limited military resources, but she never once stepped outside her strictly civilian role, even sartorially—though, as I often noted, she could snap her handbag with a military ring.

## Statesmen at War

War is the most serious business that statesmen—heroes have to undertake, and a proper understanding of the precise frontier between civilian and military decision-making is one of the most valuable lessons they teach, never more so than today. In Western democracies like the United States and Britain, the civil power, elected by the people, has the sole right to declare war and make peace. In the conduct of operations, it must lay down clear objectives and give the military commanders their orders accordingly. But then,

having done that, it must leave the way to secure these objectives, subject to the rules of law, to the professional commanders. It is not for the military to dictate policies, as General MacArthur tried to do, but equally it is not for the politicians to tell the generals how to fight.

This last rule has been broken several times in my lifetime, and always with disastrous results. The first occasion was during the brief Suez War of 1956, which the British Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, with his French allies, launched against Egypt. Eden was a man of peace who hated war, and got involved in this one reluctantly. He made many mistakes. He acted in a secretive manner, not

**Imprimis** (im-pri-mis),  
[Latin]: in the first place

**EDITOR**

Douglas A. Jeffrey

**DEPUTY EDITOR**

Timothy W. Caspar

**COPY EDITORS**

Monica VanDerWeide  
Jeremy Young

**ART DIRECTOR**

Angela Lashaway

**PRODUCTION MANAGER**

Lucinda Grimm

**CIRCULATION MANAGER**

Patricia A. DuBois

**STAFF ASSISTANTS**

Kim Jackson  
Wanda Oxenger  
Kim Tedders

Copyright © 2007 Hillsdale College.

The opinions expressed in **Imprimis**  
are not necessarily the views  
of Hillsdale College.

Permission to reprint in whole or  
in part is hereby granted, provided  
the following credit line is used:  
“Reprinted by permission from **Imprimis**,  
a publication of Hillsdale College.”

**SUBSCRIPTION FREE UPON REQUEST.**

ISSN 0277-8432

**Imprimis** trademark registered in U.S.  
Patent and Trade Office #1563325.

taking into his confidence the House of Commons or even all his Cabinet colleagues, and above all his American ally, President Eisenhower. As a result there was great opposition to the war, at home and abroad, once it was launched. But his most serious mistake was to fail to give his military commanders clear orders about their objectives, and then leave them to get on with it. He tried to fight a kind of limited and political war, with the generals and air marshals restrained by political factors in what weapons they could use. He even told the Royal Air Force not to use bombs above a certain weight. The confusion of the commanders about what they were supposed to be doing was a factor in the war's failure, which ended with an ignominious Anglo-French withdrawal, dictated by political factors. The Suez War was a historic demonstration of how fatal to success it is to muddle politics and military operations together.

That being so, it is astonishing to think that, only a few years later, the United States made exactly the same mistake in Vietnam. It has always struck me as tragic that the decision whether or not America should get involved in Vietnam was not taken while President Eisenhower was still in the White House. He had seen, from his ample experience in World War Two, how vital it was for politicians to settle the objects of war, and soldiers the means to secure them. Confusion of the two roles, he learned in the Mediterranean and European campaigns of 1942 to 1945, invariably proved costly. My guess is that Eisenhower would have decisively rejected any direct U.S. involvement, and would not have agreed to any plan which meant fighting a land war there. In the unlikely event of his agreeing to fight a war, however, he would have insisted on fighting it properly—that is, going all out for total victory with all the resources America could command—just as he had done with the invasion of occupied Europe in June 1944. That was the simple but logical view of a man who had exercised power from both sides of the political-military divide: avoid war if you possibly can, but if you can't, fight it to win at all costs.

Unfortunately, Eisenhower was in retirement when the time for decision came. John F. Kennedy agreed to enter the war, and Lyndon B. Johnson agreed to extend it. At no point did either president formulate clear war aims or issue precise orders to their military commanders based on such aims. When I went to see President Johnson in 1967 and had an opportunity to discuss the Vietnam War with

## Hillsdale College Cruise

SEWARD | HUBBARD GLACIER | SITKA  
TRACY ARM | JUNEAU | SKAGWAY  
CAMPBELL RIVER | VANCOUVER



### CONFIRMED ON-BOARD SPEAKERS:

**MICHAEL LEDEEN**

AUTHOR, *THE IRANIAN TIME BOMB: THE MULLAH ZEALOTS' QUEST FOR DESTRUCTION*

**MICHAEL NOVAK**

AUTHOR, *WASHINGTON'S GOD: RELIGION, LIBERTY, AND THE FATHER OF OUR COUNTRY*

**LARRY P. ARNN**

PRESIDENT, HILLSDALE COLLEGE

### JUST ADDED FOR THE PRE-CRUISE TOUR OF DENALI NATIONAL PARK:

**MICHAEL BARONE**

FOX NEWS CONTRIBUTOR

### ADDITIONAL SPEAKERS TO BE ANNOUNCED!

### Space is limited!

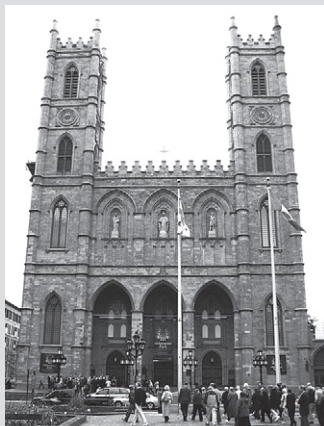
To sign up, call toll free: (877) 242-6397

him in the White House, I was dismayed to find him imprecise about his war aims. He used such phrases as "contain communist advance" and "defeat communism." But he did not lay down any object which could be secured by military means, and I wondered what exactly were the orders he issued to his generals or how they understood them. Johnson, like Eden before him, interfered almost daily in the conduct of operations, especially in the bombing war, deciding himself when and where raids should take place and what bombs to use, trying at times to orchestrate his military operations with his peace ventures. The mistakes Eden made at Suez were repeated, on a larger scale and for a longer period, and the predictable and disastrous results were of a correspondingly greater magnitude.

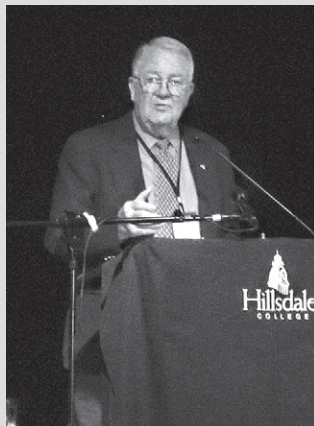
Let us turn now to Iraq, and see how the same considerations apply. In the first Iraq war, we were responding to the unprovoked invasion and occupa-

# Hillsdale COLLEGE CRUISE

## EXPLORING AMERICAN OCTOBER 24 - NOVEMBER 4,



*Hillsdale cruisers visit the Notre Dame basilica in Montreal, Canada.*



*Former U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese discusses the diaries of Ronald Reagan in a lecture at sea.*



*Hillsdale cruisers visit the Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts, site of the "Shot Heard 'Round the World" on April 19, 1775.*

tion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's forces. This was a matter directly involving the United Nations. If Mr. Reagan had still been in the White House, I have no doubt that he and Mrs. Thatcher would have adopted stern war aims, involving not just the liberation of Kuwait by armed force but the replacement of the Saddam Hussein regime with a democratic one under Western and U.N. supervision. Unfortunately Reagan had been succeeded by a much less clear-sighted, albeit well-meaning, president, George Bush Sr. It was not even clear, at first, that America would insist on reversing the invasion and occupation rather than be content with containing Iraqi aggression at the Saudi Arabian frontier. This disastrous response was jettisoned by the most forceful pressure from Margaret Thatcher, who insisted that Iraq be ejected from all Kuwait's territory. This was done, under a U.N. resolution, with the military assistance of over 50 allies in Operation Desert Storm. But there was no agreement about the future war aim of removing Saddam and his militaristic regime. The generals had no instructions to "go on to Baghdad" and therefore halted operations when Saddam and his forces asked for an armistice. Alas, by that time Margaret Thatcher was no longer in office and had been succeeded by the weak and uncertain John Major. There was, in fact, weakness in both Washington and London, and as a result Saddam Hussein was left in power.

It is important to remember all this when we consider the present situation in Iraq. In the first war, the outrage the world felt at the brutal

Iraqi conquest of Kuwait was overwhelming, and to destroy his regime and replace it by a peaceful and democratic one made obvious and popular sense. I have no doubt that when George Bush the younger authorized the second war against Iraq, he had in mind to complete the business left unfinished by the first—the son showing resolution where the father had shown doubt. But the actual reasons given for the second war were quite different, and much less plausible, and so carried less weight with the world. Many people failed to follow or agree with the line of argument which led from 9/11—an unprovoked act of aggression similar to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—to the subsequent American attack on Iraq. They welcomed the overthrow of Saddam and his regime, and his subsequent trial and execution. But they were not clear why America was occupying Iraq as part of its worldwide fight against terror.

It seems to me that this confusion, originating in the first Iraq war and deepened in the second, lies at the root of our present difficulties. What successful statesmanship in the past teaches us, again and again, is that clarity of aim is paramount, above all in the deadly serious business of war-making. The Allies in the First World War were never clear about why they were fighting it—and Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, it can be argued, added to the confusion. Therein lay the weakness of the Versailles settlement, which laid the foundations of another conflict. In the Second World War, the Allies agreed on at least one thing:



# HISTORY: MONTREAL TO MIAMI

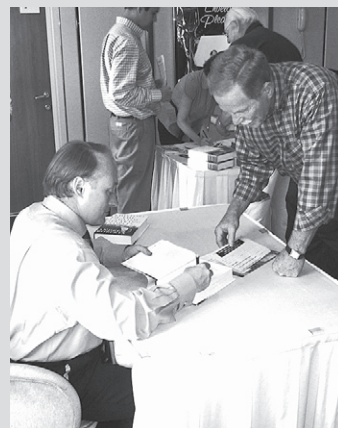
## 2007 • ABOARD THE CRYSTAL SYMPHONY



*Historian and journalist Richard Brookhiser speaks on Alexander Hamilton at Bayard's in New York City.*



*Hillsdale cruisers visit Fort Sumter, where the Civil War began, during a Hillsdale land tour of Charleston, South Carolina.*



*Historian Andrew Roberts signs a copy of his recent book, A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900, following a lecture at sea.*

the unconditional surrender of Germany and the total destruction of the Nazi regime. It was not everything but it was something. By contrast, it is worth adding, the Western victory in the Cold War—achieved not by military force but by politics, economics, ideology and psychology—had no provision for what was to happen in Russia. There was no de-communization, as there had been de-Nazification in Germany after 1945, no trial of communist leaders for crimes against humanity, and none of the efforts, so successful in post-war Germany, to demonstrate the benefits of political and economic freedom and the rule of law. The result was to leave the communist apparatus intact beneath the surface—especially its most resilient and ruthless part, the secret police. And it is the secret police, personified in the presidency of Mr. Putin, who have inherited the state. Russia is no longer capable of challenging the United States and the West militarily, as it did until the late 1980s. But it is still capable and ready to make a great deal of trouble for us all, on a scale which makes Saddam's Iraq seem insignificant.

## Five Keys to Democratic Statesmanship

All these examples are reasons why I say that the ability to see the world clearly, and to draw the

right conclusions from what is seen, is the foremost lesson which great men and women of state have to teach us. But there are many more, of which I would single out the five most important.

First, ideas and beliefs. The best kind of democratic leader has just a few—perhaps three or four—central principles to which he is passionately attached and will not sacrifice under any circumstances. This was true, for instance, of Truman, of Konrad Adenauer of Germany, Alcide de Gasperi of Italy, and Robert Schuman of France—all the outstanding men who did most to raise Europe from the ashes of the Second World War and who built up the West as a bulwark against Soviet advance and a repository of a free civilization. It was also true of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the two outstanding leaders of the next generation who carried on the work. I am not impressed by leaders who have definite views on everything. History teaches it is a mistake to have too many convictions, held with equal certitude and tenacity. They crowd each other out. A great leader is someone who can distinguish between the essential and the peripheral—between what must be done and what is merely desirable. Mrs. Thatcher really had only three musts: uphold the rule of law at home and abroad; keep government activities to the minimum, and so taxes low; encourage individuals to do as much as they can, as well as they can.

There are also, of course, statesmen who are necessarily dominated by one overwhelm-

## SPRING CONSTRUCTION PLANNED!



### INDEPENDENCE GROVE *at Hillsdale College*

## We Made a Great Retirement Community Even Better!

**NEW!**

#### Enhanced Value Plan Includes:

- Lower Entrance Fees
- Revised Floor Plans
- Significantly Reduced Service Fees
- More Options with Amenities: Customized to meet more of your needs

1620 Barber Drive, Hillsdale, MI 49242

**Call : 1-800-398-8193**

[www.independencegroveathillsdalecollege.com](http://www.independencegroveathillsdalecollege.com)



ing object dictated to them by events or destiny. Thus Abraham Lincoln felt all else had to be sacrificed to the overwhelming necessity of holding the Union together, behind the principles of 1776. Likewise, Charles de Gaulle, in 1940, advanced the simple proposition that France was not defeated and incarnated it in his person. The way in which both men concentrated all their thoughts, energies, and skills on one end are lessons in single-mindedness and the power this can bring to action. A statesman must also be able, for a spell, to place one object of policy before all others, and this Winston Churchill did in 1940, when keeping Britain in the war by successfully preventing a Nazi conquest took precedence over all other aims. Such concentration of effort is itself a product of clarity of vision which includes a strong sense of proportion.

Next comes willpower. I think the history of great men and women teaches that willpower is the most decisive of all qualities in public life. A politician can have immense intelligence and all the other virtues, but if will is lacking he is nothing. Usually a leader has it in abundance. Will springs from unshakeable confidence in being right, but also from a more primitive instinct to dominate events which has little to do with logic

or reason. Churchill had it. De Gaulle had it. Margaret Thatcher had it, to an unusual degree. It could be seen that, surrounded by her male Cabinet colleagues—whose knowledge and technical qualifications were often superior—she alone possessed will, and one could almost watch them bowing to it. Of course, will is often in history the source of evil. Hitler came from nothing to power, and the absolute control of a great nation, almost entirely through the force of his will. And it remained in him virtually to the end. Stalin's dictatorship in Russia, and Mao Tse-Tung's in China, were also largely exercises in personal will. Mao's overwhelming will, we now know, led to the deaths of 70 million fellow Chinese. The cost of a misdirected will is almost unimaginably high. Those three or four simple central beliefs behind the will must be right and morally sound.

A third virtue is pertinacity. Mere flashes of will are not enough. The will must be organically linked to resolution, a determination to see the cause through at all costs. There are dark days in every venture, however just. Washington knew this in his long, eight-year war. Lincoln knew this in his long and often agonizing struggle with the South. One aspect of pertinacity is patience. Another is a certain primitive doggedness. One

learns a lot about these things by studying Martin Gilbert's magnificent record of Churchill's leadership. "It's dogged as does it" is an old English proverb. True enough. But doggedness should not be confused with blind obstinacy—the obstinacy of a George III or a Jefferson Davis. As with will, resolution must be linked to sound aims.

Fourth is the ability to communicate. The value of possessing a few simple ideas which are true and workable is enormously enhanced if the leader can put them across with equal simplicity. Ronald Reagan had this gift to an unusual degree—quite unlike his co-worker, Margaret Thatcher. While Reagan charmed and mesmerised, she had to bludgeon. There was a comparable contrast between Washington, who had no skill in plausible speechmaking, and Lincoln, not only a great orator for a set occasion, but a man whose everyday remarks carried enormous verbal power. But where words fail, example can take their place. Washington communicated by his actions and his personality. He was followed because Americans could see that he was an honest, incorruptible and decent man. Mrs. Thatcher too governed by personality. The Russians called her the Iron Lady. You do not need to charm when you are manifestly made of iron. It is a form of communication in itself.

The fifth and last of the virtues we learn about heroes is magnanimity: greatness of soul. It is not easy to define this supreme quality, which few even among the greatest leaders possess. It is a virtue which makes one warm to its possessor. We not only respect and like, we love Lincoln because he had it to an unusual degree. It was part of his inner being. And Churchill, who also had it, made it one of the top quartet of characteristics which he expected the statesman to show. A passage he penned as the First World War was about to end reads: "In war, resolution. In defeat, defiance. In victory, magnanimity. In peace, good will." This is a sentiment which all those in public life should learn by heart. It encapsulates the lessons of history better than entire books.

\* \* \*

I would like to end by stressing that my perception of heroic virtues is not

inclusive. I merely stress the central and essential ones. One thing you learn from history is that a hero who can make the public laugh as well as admire is likely to have a strong and lasting hold on its affections. Here again Churchill stands high. He made us laugh even in the darkest days of 1940, when in reply to the Nazi jibe that "England in three weeks will have her neck wrung like a chicken," he said, simply but forcefully: "Some chicken! Some neck!" As a teenager, when I had the chance to meet him in 1946, I was bold enough to ask: "Mr. Winston Churchill, sir, to what do you attribute your success in life?" He replied, instantly: "Conservation of effort: never stand up when you can sit down, and never sit down when you can lie down." There was a delicious irony with which this supreme man of action put the case for the sedentary, even the supine. Abraham Lincoln, too, loved irony. He often achieved an effect with jokes where mere oratory would not work so well. And Mr. Reagan communicated and ruled through his enormous collection of one-liners, which he suited to all occasions. And a joke can often enshrine truth, as for instance when I heard him say: "I'm not too worried about the deficit. It's big enough to take care of itself."

Margaret Thatcher was often criticized for having no sense of humor. Not true. I once heard her tell a joke to great effect. At the end of a long wearisome dinner with ten speeches, she—as Prime Minister—was scheduled to speak at the end. I could see she was furious. She began: "As the last of *ten* speakers, and the only *woman*, I have this to say. The cock may crow, but it's the hen who lays the eggs." I think I was the only one to laugh. The rest were shocked. I reminded Mrs. Thatcher of this recently, and she was delighted. She said: "My father told me that joke." And that itself is a reminder that we learn from our parents at the

fireside in our childhood perhaps as much or more than from anyone. But from the heroes of the past we learn, too, and what they teach, by the example of their lives and words, has the special quality of truth by personal example. Thus the good hero lives on, in our minds, if we are imaginative, and in our actions, if we are wise. ■

## HILLSDALE COLLEGE

Educating For Liberty Since 1844

### DID YOU KNOW?

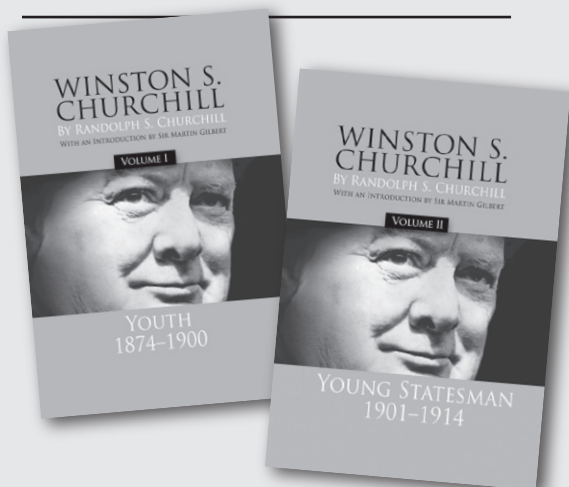
Victor Davis Hanson, the Wayne and Marcia Buske Distinguished Fellow in History at Hillsdale College, was presented with a National Humanities Award by President Bush in a ceremony on November 15 at the White House. A classicist and military historian, Dr. Hanson was recognized "for scholarship on our civilization's past and present. He has cultivated the fields of history and brought forth an abundant harvest of wisdom for our times."

# OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY OF WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

VOLUMES 1-2 BY  
RANDOLPH S. CHURCHILL

VOLUMES 3-8 BY  
SIR MARTIN GILBERT

PLUS 22 DOCUMENT VOLUMES



## BIOGRAPHY VOLUMES 1 AND 2 AND DOCUMENT VOLUMES 1-5 ARE NOW AVAILABLE.

“I am delighted that Hillsdale College Press is to re-publish the whole of the monumental biography of Winston Churchill, plus all the volumes of supporting documents, including a number hitherto unpublished. This work is one of the most important biographies of the twentieth century and with its unique documentation constitutes a vast printed archive and source book for historians—as well as a fascinating experience for the general reader.”

—Paul Johnson

Author, *Modern Times*

“A milestone, a monument, a magisterial achievement. Sir Martin Gilbert’s life of Sir Winston Churchill—started by the subject’s son Randolph—is rightly regarded as the most comprehensive life ever written of any age. Wise, honest and all-embracing, the work stands as a testament to the quality of Gilbert’s scholarship. The companion volumes, moreover, represent fine works of literature in their own right, since they comprise Sir Winston’s own correspondence. No praise could be higher than that Gilbert has produced a tribute entirely worthy of the saviour of modern Western Civilisation.”

—Andrew Roberts

Author, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*

BIOGRAPHY VOLUMES: \$45 EACH (+ S&H)

DOCUMENT VOLUMES: \$35 EACH (+ S&H)

SPECIAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICES.



TO ORDER CONTACT  
HILLSDALE COLLEGE PRESS  
[www.hillsdale.edu/churchill](http://www.hillsdale.edu/churchill)  
(800) 437-2268

NONPROFIT ORG  
US POSTAGE

PAID

HILLSDALE  
COLLEGE

### HAS YOUR ADDRESS CHANGED?

Please use the enclosed postage paid envelope, e-mail us at [imprimis@hillsdale.edu](mailto:imprimis@hillsdale.edu) or telephone (800) 437-2268.

D07  
**Imprimis**

HILLSDALE COLLEGE  
33 E. COLLEGE ST. • HILLSDALE MI 49242