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Three Lessons of Statesmanship

Larry P. Arnn

President, Hillsdale College

LARRY P. ARNN is the twelfth president of Hillsdale College. He received his B.A. from Arkansas State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. in government from the Claremont Graduate School. From 1977 to 1980, he also studied at the London School of Economics and at Worcester College, Oxford University, where he served as director of research for Martin Gilbert, the official biographer of Winston Churchill. From 1985 until his appointment as president of Hillsdale College in 2000, he was president of the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy. He is the author of *Liberty and Learning: The Evolution of American Education*; *The Founders' Key: The Divine and Natural Connection Between the Declaration and the Constitution*; and *Churchill's Trial: Winston Churchill and the Salvation of Free Government.*

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on December 1, 2017, at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C.

"Wars and rumors of wars" are all around us. At Hillsdale College we have been thinking about the greatest of all wars, the Second World War. If we study that war and the actions of its profoundest statesman, we can find some lessons to guide us today.

We think of World War II in part because a fine film has just come out about the beginning of that war. The film is called *Darkest Hour*, and we know and admire its lead actor Gary Oldman and its producer Doug Urbanski, both of whom will be visiting our campus soon. We also think of that war because we have just sent to

the printer Volume 20 of *The Churchill Documents*, the series of documentary volumes that will soon complete the official biography of Winston Churchill, of which Hillsdale College Press is the publisher. Volume 20, entitled *Normandy and Beyond*, ends on December 31, 1944.

The film, then, concerns the beginning of that largest and worst of wars, and the document volume covers the end of its last full year. The beginning and the end of things reveal their meaning in particular ways. From the beginning and the end of World War II, we draw three lessons, relevant to the choices we Americans must make now.

The first lesson of the war concerns what Churchill called the "profound significance of human choice, and the sublime responsibility of men."

We see in *Darkest Hour* that the war begins in disaster. There was the disaster that led to the war: the advent of Hitler in 1933 and his increasing domination of Central Europe. In 1940, the disaster extended across Western Europe to the Atlantic: beginning the very day Winston Churchill became prime minister of Great Britain, Hitler launched his armies west across Belgium and France to begin an utter rout. No one, including Churchill, believed that a great nation like France could be overcome in a matter of weeks, but that is what happened. The British Army escaped from Dunkirk back to England by the skin of its teeth.

This military crisis gave rise to the political crisis that is portrayed in the film. With the fall of France, Britain stood alone, decisively inferior in military power to the Nazis. The only thing that could save it was the English Channel—and ultimately, as Churchill believed, the entry into the war of the United States. As France fell, the greatest air battle in history commenced over the Channel. The Royal Air Force, like the army that escaped Dunkirk, survived by the skin of its teeth. Had it failed, the German Army could have crossed the Channel and London itself would likely have fallen.

In *Darkest Hour*, we see in dramatic detail the British cabinet battle over whether to continue the war. Mussolini of Italy, Hitler's ally but not yet a combatant, offered to organize a peace conference. Some in the British cabinet wished to take Mussolini up on the offer. Churchill thought that if a peace conference were to open, the British war effort would collapse. He resisted this skillfully, sometimes quietly, finally eloquently, in a series of steps that make the culmination of the film.

And here is the first lesson. It is not trends but choices that matter most at the key moments of history. These days we tend to think of history as a story of great sweeping trends and evolutions. We imagine that forces gather and play themselves out over time, and that we humans are merely the pawns with which they play. This is one reason so many are often quick to believe that the United States is in an eclipse, that new emerging powers, younger, more numerous, and located on the Eurasian center of world population, will overcome us.

The day on which Churchill put an end

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to the idea of a peace conference was May 28, 1940. He walked into the cabinet room and made a stirring speech, which in the diary of Minister of Economic Warfare Hugh Dalton ended with these words: "If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground." This speech, which provoked a demonstration of enthusiasm that swept throughout the government, was not a product of any trend or great evolution of history. It spoke in defiance of those forces.

If everything were fate, Hitler would have won the war, for he was the one who believed that everything was fated in the historical process.

No one else on that day was either inclined to make or capable of making that speech, and Churchill had only become prime minister by a series of narrow chances. No story better illustrates one of Churchill's favorite lessons—a lesson valuable for us to keep in mind: both chance and choice play a large part in human affairs. If everything were fate, Hitler would have won the war, for he was the one who believed that everything was fated in the historical process.

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The second lesson concerns the limits of war, of politics, indeed of all human action. Churchill helped to save his country by his willingness to fight to the death and to inspire others to join him. He also saved it by his reluctance to do that.

In May 1940, Churchill had been absolute, and Britain took an absolute stand. But in his actions and writings, Churchill teaches us that absolute stands are justified only when they are absolutely necessary. From conviction, Churchill was cautious and hesitant about war: he saw its awful power to destroy whole nations or to take over all their energy and life. A nation fully marshalled is a nation with no room for private freedom, no room for citizens "to live by no man's leave underneath the law." It is much easier to unmake than it is to remake the world by war or any use of force.

One sees Churchill's caution in 1944-45, most vividly in the case of Poland. In the months covered by Volume 20 of *The Churchill Documents*, the fate of Poland hangs in the balance. Britain had come into the war on behalf of Poland, which was attacked in August 1939 by the combined power of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union—soon enough to be enemies, but bound at that time by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Poland was overrun, and there was nothing its ally Britain could do. The onslaught that followed meant the massacre of millions of Poles, including the vast majority of Polish Jews. This gave Britain powerful motive to do all that was possible for Poland at the war's end and in the peace settlement that would follow. But what was possible?

At the end of 1944 the mighty Red Army was rolling toward the Polish border, the last step before it swept into Germany. The Polish government was living in exile in London, and its cabinet met often with Churchill and his ministers—who in turn spoke often with Stalin and Roosevelt and their ministers about the future of Poland. Churchill worked persistently to make a deal for Poland, under which it would give up extensive territories to the Soviet Union, promise friendly relations with the Soviets, and be compensated by territories to the West at the expense of Germany. On those conditions Poland might be allowed to live in relative freedom and independence.

But the Polish Government-in-Exile, which had been elected before the war, told Churchill that it had no mandate to give up the homes of millions

of Poles to the Soviet Union. Why was that fair? What had Poland done wrong? Had not Churchill himself taken an absolute stand against Hitler, and did that not provide an example for Poland? More to the point, the Polish ministers wondered whether Churchill would join them if they made an absolute stand. Just as Britain had needed the help of the United States, so Poland needed the help of both Britain and the United States.

In one of many long and painful conversations between Churchill and the Polish cabinet, on November 3, 1944, Poland's Prime Minister Mikolajczyk mentioned another Polish statesman, General Anders. Churchill replied that he liked Anders, but added, "Keep in mind what he said to me: 'Today we are fighting the Germans, and tomorrow we shall fight the Russians.'" "This is sheer lunacy," Churchill said. "Don't reckon on our support in this." These were hard words. With sympathy and sadness, Churchill agreed that the Poles were entitled to decide for themselves, just as the British had been in 1940. But also as the British had, the Poles must be ready to bear the consequences. The Polish Prime Minister predicted that one day Poland would see better days. Those better days would come, but not until two generations of Poles would suffer under tyranny.

In the end, no agreement was reached between Poland and the Soviet Union. This owed something to the noble stubbornness of the Poles, but much more to the ruthlessness and duplicity of Stalin. The Red Army swept across Poland and halfway across Germany. Almost all the land that it "liberated" it also subjugated.

What happened in Poland is like what happened in every nation that the Soviet Union, or for that matter Nazi Germany, ruled. It was what Churchill feared would happen to Britain in 1940, if it were to fall under the influence of Hitler. In 1940, Churchill would take an

absolute stand for his homeland, knowing that utter defeat was a possibility. In 1944, he would not take such a stand for Poland.

Then there was Greece, a very different case from Poland. Britain had also made common cause before the war with Greece, and when Hitler invaded Greece, Churchill sent troops from his tiny resources to the unsuccessful relief of Greece. Now the war was approaching its end and the Germans were leaving Greece. Who would replace them? Greece, mind you, is on the sea, and it would eventually form part of the southeastern flank of NATO, founded after the war to deter the Soviet Union.

During the same months that the Soviet Union was conquering Eastern Europe, Churchill made a deal, known as the "percentages agreement," with Stalin. This famous or infamous deal recognized that the Soviet Union would have chief authority in the nations over which the Red Army was rolling. But it gave Britain chief authority over Greece, where Soviet allies in the Greek Communist Party constituted the most powerful partisan group. These communists were besieging Athens and threatened to establish a communist government in Greece as the Nazis were driven out.

Churchill made this deal with Stalin only after repeated attempts, from 1942 onwards, to move the Allied armies south and east, to give more help to Southern and Eastern Europe. These attempts had failed. The United States had responded, not without merit, that the shortest line to Berlin did not go through the Mediterranean, and certainly not the Eastern Mediterranean. Churchill had hoped to forestall or at least limit the extent of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. Only when that failed did he seek Stalin's agreement for Britain to take a strong hand in Greece. Within weeks, 5,000 British soldiers marched into Athens and broke the siege of the central government district. By force of arms, a coalition government was established that denied the Greek Communist Party domination.

Right, Churchill believed, makes might. But it does not make it all the time and everywhere—a lesson America's leaders in recent decades have too often forgotten.

As the Second World War wound down, Greece could be saved from Soviet domination at an acceptable cost, and it was worth saving; Poland, also worth saving, could not. Right, Churchill believed, makes might. But it does not make it all the time and everywhere—a lesson America's leaders in recent decades have too often forgotten. Statesmen must do as much as it is possible to do, at a cost that is acceptable, and they must not try to do more.

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If we compare the three cases of Britain, Poland, and Greece, we can draw the third lesson. It concerns strategy.

Strategy must be rooted in the purposes of the nation: it aims to preserve the nation in pursuit of those purposes. This means that strategy is not confined, when it is pursued by the statesman, to war alone. Churchill wrote: "The distinction between politics and strategy diminishes as the point of view is raised. At the summit true politics and strategy are one."

Churchill lived, loved, and fought for the liberal society. Liberal societies protect the rights of their peoples: their right to make their livings, to raise their children, to speak their minds. These are the elements of a fully human life. Under a free and limited government, the right of all to pursue this life is recognized and defended. The justice of this kind of government is the reason that Churchill, the

grandson of a duke, was not an aristocrat but a defender of democracy.

War, Churchill explained, has a curious relationship to democracy and limited government. Free nations are innovative: they produce new and more powerful tools, including weapons of war. They are productive: wealth is generated when free people work, save, invest, and trade. These new tools or technology and this new wealth have transformed the world. This trend is led by the nations who leave their people free. They are the most innovative and productive.

To the same extent that technology and wealth make us comfortable and safe, they make war more terrible. In the midst of a modern total war, every aspect of life is conscripted, regulated, brought under central control. Churchill feared that this condition would become perpetual.

These developments in war were matched by others stemming from the same cause and unfolding in regular domestic politics. War was becoming bigger, but also government was becoming bigger, and for the same reason: technology. The idea was born of scientifically managing society from a central source. Such management could cure the ills of society—including war. To achieve this, government should have access to all or most of the major resources of the society. But this was the very effect that Churchill feared modern war would have.

Churchill was a lifelong opponent of socialism and bureaucracy. He saw in them a conscription of private resources that would undermine the ability of people to live freely and under their own command, just as modern war threatened to do. If the government deploys, directly or indirectly, more than half the resources in the economy, what place is there for ordinary people to control the government and to control their own lives?

In recent days there has been a struggle between President Trump and a retiring civil service appointee over who gets to appoint the latter's successor to lead the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. This agency is exempted from the control of its budget by Congress. In other words, it operates outside the control of anyone popularly elected. If the key to the preservation of liberal government is the proper arrangement between public and private, one can see that the basis of liberal government may be eroding. Churchill warned of this all his life.

Churchill's was a certain kind of statesmanship focused on a certain kind of strategy. This statesmanship would be deeply aware of the purposes of free government, most importantly freedom, but also justice or equality. The strategy in war was to fight only when necessary, and then to fight shrewdly, which means rapidly and ruthlessly, to get the war over with and spare as much life as possible. Churchill was deadly in war—he thought that was more merciful. One wonders what he would think about our generation-long battles in the Middle East.

Churchill's strategy in peace can be summarized with the word "economy." There is much for the government to do. There can be a social safety net, but it should resemble private savings as much as possible and be run efficiently. There can be regulation of many kinds to protect people from infringement of private rights. But all this must be done cheaply, because money held in private hands is a public as well as a private good. If that principle is abandoned, the government grows unaccountable, and majorities will say as they say in America today that they are afraid of their government.

In war and peace, Churchill had a strategy for freedom. They were related. They both required an utter commitment to freedom. They both required recognition of the limits of politics and the limits of war. They both required the protection of the right of the people to control their government.

We could use a strategy like that today. It is not hard to find. Go to the movies to see one part. Read the Churchill biography to see the rest. ■