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Puncturing the myth: 'The greatest Englishman of his time,' with generals and the Allies in 1941

## Debunking Winston Churchill

A revisionist look at Britain's wartime leader

All great men make mistakes." Such is the hubris of the Churchill family that Lord Randolph Churchill wrote those words about himself. His son, Winston, was never one to dwell on his own mistakes, but he had no doubts about his greatness. Faced with the prospect of being killed as a young soldier in India and the Sudan, he wrote that he could not believe that "the Gods would create so potent a being as myself for so prosaic an ending." Now a revisionist political biography of Churchill, newly published in London, has sparked public controversy among Britons about the true greatness of the man who led them through "their finest hour"—and the greatness of his mistakes.

The book "Churchill: The End of Glory," is by John Charmley, a blustery British academic who revels in his self-appointed role of iconoclast with all the exuberance to be expected of an Oxford-educated son of a Birkenhead docker. It is heavy on the mistakes; but concentrates on one. To Charmley, that was Churchill's obsession with the total defeat of Hitler which, he argues, unnecessarily prolonged World War II and triggered the cold war that followed, not to mention loss of the empire and Britain's postwar subservience to the United States. Such a heavy burden of error is not often heaped upon the man who at his death in 1965 was described in the headline of *The Times* of London as "the greatest Englishman of his time." Such, though, is the fate of great men today: historians now present them feet-of-clay first.

Churchill certainly had size-eleven feet of clay, though from the end of his active political life in 1955 to well after his death it was near heresy in Britain to puncture the Churchill-as-national-savior myth. Charmley himself, who was born in 1955, remembers growing up hearing his grandmother, a working-class Tory, always speaking "of Mr. Churchill in the same voice she kept for the Lord God Almighty." Robert Rhodes James, an earlier questioning biographer, writes that "When in 1970 I published my study of [Churchill's] career up to 1939 and entitled it 'A Study in Failure,' I was much excoriated, notably by people who had only read the title."

Yet Churchill's career was marked repeatedly by huge political mistakes. As a soldier he infuriated his superiors with his work as a freelance (and critical) war correspondent for a popular newspaper. As First Lord of the Admiralty in the Great War, he presided over the fiasco in the Dardanelles. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in Baldwin's cabinet he played a leading and vituperative role in breaking the General Strike in 1926, dividing Britain along class lines and earning him among Labor Party supporters a hatred that was not suppressed until the outbreak of war. His own Conservative Party shunned him for a decade. Before he succeeded Neville Chamberlain as prime minister in 1940, following the failure of Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Hitler, he had been "a bellicose warmonger sitting in the wilderness," as one Labor veteran still recalls him today.

Even at his hour of triumph, Britain's voters returned him to the wilderness; Churchill's Conservatives lost the 1945 general election.

Time glossed over such memories, and Churchill, as he had done throughout his career, was swift to polish his myth in his own copious writings and through his spellbinding oratory. But this book has hit a raw nerve in Britain (it has already had to be reprinted), and the reason is more than the lifting of a national amnesia. One boost came from *The Times*, which published a mischievous prepublication review by Alan Clark, a former minister from the Tory hard right. As Charmley acknowledges, Clark changed the "could" of the

book's main thesis to a "should." Where Charmley argues that Churchill *could* have made peace with Nazi Germany in 1940 and thus left Britain better off than it was after winning in 1945, Clark believes that Britain *should* have done so, so that Hitler could turn east to destroy communism undistracted. This brought into the fray a predictable army of outraged critics saying, with some justification, that Hitler's intentions toward Britain looked very different in 1940 than they do in hindsight, especially that of someone born in the safety of 1955.

**Making waves:** Charmley—currently taking a year's sabbatical from the University of East Anglia to work at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill gave his "Iron Curtain" speech in 1946—touched on the same theme in earlier books without causing ripples. He is delighted that he is making waves. In part he wants to debunk the modern Churchill-as-living-god myth—"Churchill did not take some pill in 1940 that suddenly made him a genius and another one in 1945 to reverse the effect," he says. But he also wants to make Britons reflect on the consequences of a war which so defines their character but after which "there were no 'sunlit uplands,' only a 'darkling plain.'" "In the long story of British decline, the part played by the failure of leadership has yet to be properly told," he says. "That there was such a failure is hardly in doubt." Britons can take a debunked hero but not the notion that their "finest hour" was wasted time. And especially not when they are again debating their national identity in the context of European unity—and when many of the institutions that hold that identity together, notably the monarchy, look to be debunking themselves without the help of a historian.

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