

CHURCHILL ON LEADERSHIP: EXECUTIVE SUCCESS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JIM FRIEND²

Winston Churchill—the very mention of the name unleashes a flood of powerful emotions and images. In that awful Summer of 1940, France is subjugated; England stands alone, teetering on the brink of collapse. The Luftwaffe relentlessly pounds London. The Thames River is on fire. Yet, amid the drone of sirens, the shriek of falling bombs, and the shattering roar of explosions, there is hope. Rising above this crescendo of destruction, a defiant voice crackles across the air waves:

Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization
. . . Hitler knows that he will have to break us on this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free
But if we fail, then the whole world . . . will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “this was their finest hour.”³

Churchill’s leadership during the Battle of Britain merely scratches the surface of his legend. His political career spanned five decades. Churchill was one of the youngest cabinet members ever to serve in parliament yet the oldest Prime Minister in English history.⁴ He held nearly every major cabinet post in the British government, switched political parties twice, endured humiliating defeat, and enjoyed breathtaking success.⁵ He was a prolific writer, a talented painter, and a union certified brick layer.⁶ He had a keen grasp for the importance of technology, and pushed

1. STEVEN F. HAYWARD, *CHURCHILL ON LEADERSHIP: EXECUTIVE SUCCESS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY* (Rocklin: Prima 1997); 196 pages, \$20.00 (hardcover).

2. Judge Advocate General’s Corps, United States Army. Written while assigned as a student, 46th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. WINSTON CHURCHILL: *HIS WIT AND WISDOM 18-19* (Hyperion Books) (undated materials purchased by author in 1989 at the Churchill Museum in London) [hereinafter *WIT AND WISDOM*].

4. HAYWARD, *supra* note 1, at 22.

5. *Id.* at 22, 122.

6. *Id.* at 22, 124-25; *WIT AND WISDOM*, *supra* note 3, at 8.

the development of the tank and naval aviation.⁷ He had a delightful sense of humor, a lightning wit, often prescient insight, and towering strategic genius. In short, Winston Churchill was one of the most fascinating men who has ever lived.

In writing a book about Churchill's leadership, Steven F. Hayward shouldered a daunting task. His goal was to "dissect the harmonious mix of personal attributes, principles, and practices that contributed to Churchill's success as a leader, and to recombine them at the end to appreciate the whole of what has often been called the *Churchillian style*."⁸ By embarking on such an ambitious course, Mr. Hayward ran a significant risk of falling short of his objective and being second-guessed by a vast legion of Churchill enthusiasts and scholars.

Indeed, Mr. Hayward's major shortcoming is the failure, in his own words, to "recombine [and] appreciate the whole of . . . the *Churchillian style*."⁹ Although Mr. Hayward does a masterful job of describing Sir Winston's leadership principles, practices, and traits, he does not incisively synopsise and explain Churchill's leadership. Such an accomplishment, however, may not have been practicable considering the complexity of the subject matter. In fairness to Mr. Hayward, his goal was not to discover the magic formula that created such a man as Churchill. However, a more complete identification of the sources of Churchill's leadership success would have been appropriate. Was his success primarily attributable to innate genius or experience and hard work? Mr. Hayward could give his readers a more realistic appraisal of those aspects of Churchill's character to be admired and perhaps emulated.

Churchill is a fertile subject for such explorations. It is difficult to find in history another leader who matched his combination of raw talent and experience. Sir Winston was a brilliant man who lived through an incredible diversity of jobs, adventures, triumphs, and disappointments. Perhaps his experiences explain Churchill's remarkable insight. Though I do not believe Mr. Hayward adequately explores this issue, I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in Churchill or leadership.

7. HAYWARD, *supra* note 1, at 132, 137-41.

8. *Id.* at xx.

9. *Id.*

Mr. Hayward's book is the finest collection of Churchill leadership anecdotes and quotations that I have ever encountered.

In his introduction, Mr. Hayward makes a profound case for the proposition that, to truly learn about leadership, one must study great leaders. He courageously asserts that, "[t]he scribblers of the ivory tower are employing a decayed version of the reductionist way of thinking While [they] chatter on that the world is determined by impersonal forces, business leaders today have come to see ever more clearly the essential role of personal forces in shaping our destiny."¹⁰ Mr. Hayward rejoices in the demise of managerialism and its emphasis on bureaucratic routine.¹¹ He justly criticizes systems analysis and its most notable proponent, Robert McNamara.¹² Mr. Hayward is dead right—charts, graphs and statistics are poor substitutes for the force and vision of personal leadership. He quotes with approval a Wharton School of Finance study that concluded, "[w]e're learning again what the military has known for thousands of years: Leadership is important."¹³

Mr. Hayward's book explains best the most compelling aspects of Churchill's leadership: learning from failure (Chapter 3) and communicating effectively (Chapter 7). Rarely in history has a politician been able to survive, let alone learn from, failures as disastrous as those Sir Winston Churchill endured. The most notable of these occurred during World War I while Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty.

By 1915, the fighting on the western front had stagnated into bloody trench warfare. Churchill began to openly wonder: "Are there not other alternatives than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders?"¹⁴ Churchill reasoned that the answer to the trench stalemate was to open up a new front.¹⁵ He looked South toward Turkey, the seemingly weak sister of the Central Powers alliance. Churchill wondered whether a purely naval operation could force open the narrow Dardanelles Strait and subjugate Constantinople, the capital of the decaying Ottoman Empire.¹⁶ Although British strategists had long believed such an operation impracticable due to the capabilities of modern coastal artillery, Churchill asked his staff

10. *Id.* at xviii.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.* at xix.

13. *Id.* at xx.

14. *Id.* at 33.

15. *Id.* at 34.

16. *Id.* at 35.

whether the Dardanelles could be forced “by ships alone.” He was thrilled when the Royal Navy responded that such an attack could succeed “by extended operations with a large number of ships.”¹⁷

Churchill pushed his Dardanelles idea through a bitterly divided British cabinet.¹⁸ Ultimately, his purely naval operation gave way to a more ambitious plan for a full-scale amphibious invasion.¹⁹ The British cabinet delayed the operation and issued conflicting orders until the last minute.²⁰ When the attack finally began, the commander of the British fleet lost his nerve when his forces incurred unexpectedly high casualties.²¹ Although the collapse of Turkish resistance was imminent, he halted the attack for one month to wait for the Army invasion force.²² This gave the Turks ample time to react to the threat and prepare elaborate defenses.²³ The result was another trench stalemate and bloodbath. After sustaining 252,000 casualties, the British withdrew their forces from Turkey.²⁴ Thus, the Dardanelles Operation, though brilliant in conception, was severely flawed in execution. Although this was not Churchill’s fault, he became the scapegoat for the operation and was dismissed from the cabinet.²⁵ Characteristically, Churchill did not seek to blame those who were more responsible for the Dardanelles fiasco. Instead, he stubbornly defended his original idea and promptly joined the fighting as an infantry battalion commander in France.²⁶ Churchill demonstrated the character of a true leader by persevering through adversity and eschewing the natural temptation to blame others.

According to Hayward, Churchill learned two important lessons from the Dardanelles tragedy: (1) responsibility must be combined with authority, and (2) decisive leadership is essential to military success. Churchill believed that his fatal mistake in the Dardanelles was in “trying to achieve a great enterprise without the plenary authority which could so easily have carried it to success.”²⁷ He also believed that the tentative and vacillating

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.* at 36-38.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 37.

21. *Id.* at 38.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 39.

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.* at 39, 145.

27. *Id.* at 40.

behavior of the British cabinet doomed the operation from the start. He concluded that: “Nothing leads more surely to disaster than that a military plan should be pursued with crippled steps and in a lukewarm spirit in the face of continual nagging within the executive circle.”²⁸ Mr. Hayward notes that Churchill’s memory of World War I’s confused war counsels “led him to be his own defense minister during World War II” so that he could “hold all the reins . . . and press for firm decision.”²⁹

Notably absent from Churchill’s response to this failure was any effort to hold a grudge, become embittered, or give in to despair. His idea had caused a quarter of a million men to be needlessly maimed, crippled, or killed. His disloyal colleagues laid the blame at his doorstep and walked away. No one could have faulted Churchill if he quit politics altogether.

Churchill is perhaps best known for his rhetorical skills. What is less well-known is that Churchill’s brilliant oratory and masterful writing were as much a result of hard work as they were of talent.³⁰ Mr. Hayward shows us the keys to Churchill’s success by summarizing Churchill’s four principles of effective communication.

As a twenty-four year old army officer in India, Churchill wrote a short essay entitled “The Scaffolding of Rhetoric” in which he described four principles of effective communication.³¹ These principles were (1) correctness of diction, (2) use of rhythm, (3) accumulation of argument, and (4) use of analogy.³² A close analysis of Churchill’s speeches reveals that he adhered to these principles throughout his career.³³

Under “correctness of diction,” Churchill emphasized the use of short words and clear sentences. He scorned, “those professional intellectuals who revel in . . . polysyllables.”³⁴ Churchill preferred clear, direct language because he realized that, to be persuasive, he had to be understood.³⁵

Churchill instinctively grasped the pleasant and compelling effect that rhythm can have on a reader or listener. He wrote that, “[t]he sen-

28. *Id.* at 39.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.* at 98-99.

31. *Id.* at 99.

32. *Id.* at 100-02.

33. *Id.* at 100-04.

34. *Id.* at 100.

35. *Id.*

tences of the orator when he appeals to his art become long, rolling, and sonorous. The peculiar balance of the phrases produces a cadence which resembles blank verse rather than prose."³⁶ Indeed, Hayward shows us that Churchill wrote his speeches like sonnets, paying careful attention to rhythm and pausing for appropriate emphasis.³⁷

By "accumulation of argument," Churchill meant that, "[t]he end should appear in view before it is reached."³⁸ He asserted that arguments are most effective when, "[a] series of facts is brought forward all pointing in a common direction."³⁹ Hayward points to Churchill's speech after the signing of the Munich agreement as an example of Churchill's use of climax to great effect:

I do not begrudge our loyal, brave people . . . the natural and spontaneous outburst of joy and relief when they learned that the hard ordeal would no longer be required of them at the moment; but they should know the truth. They should know that there has been gross neglect and deficiency in our defenses; they should know that we have sustained a defeat without a war, the consequences of which will travel far with us along our road; they should know that we have passed a milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged, and that terrible words have for the time being been pronounced against the Western democracies: "Thou are weighed in the balance and found wanting."⁴⁰

Churchill also understood the power of analogy. As Hayward notes, "[t]he beauty of an apt analogy is that it conveys in one or two sentences a truth or insight that is less convincing or clear when explained at more length."⁴¹ Churchill wrote that analogy "appeals to the everyday knowledge of the hearer and invites him to decide the problems that have baffled his powers of reason by the standard of the nursery and the heart."⁴² Regarding the importance of supply in warfare, Churchill once noted,

36. *Id.* at 101.

37. *Id.* at 101-02.

38. *Id.* at 103.

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.* at 104.

41. *Id.* at 102.

42. *Id.*

“[v]ictory is the beautiful, bright colored flower. Transport is the stem without which it could never have blossomed.”⁴³

Mr. Hayward notes that Churchill was also a master of “anti-climax.”⁴⁴ He cites an occasion during World War II when Churchill, upon hearing that a captured German officer was to dine with Field Marshall Montgomery, replied: “I sympathize with General von Thoma. Defeated, humiliated, in captivity, and—dinner with General Montgomery.”⁴⁵

Hayward’s book is a valuable addition to the rapidly growing body of literature about leadership. In emphasizing the critical importance of personal leadership, he has taken a bold step in the right direction. If the most effective way to learn about leadership is to study those who have mastered the art, Hayward could not have picked a better subject than Sir Winston Churchill. No one has ever had to lead under more trying circumstances.

Imagine being Churchill in May of 1940! Mr. Hayward does a superb job of helping us put the difficulty of Sir Winston’s position at that time into proper perspective. He reminds us that when Churchill became Prime Minister, his party held him in contempt and anticipated that he would soon be replaced.⁴⁶ On his first visit to Parliament as Prime Minister, the members of his own party refused to clap for him.⁴⁷ His first war cabinet meetings were marked by bitter dissension from those who wanted to sue for peace. As the peace element gained support, it appeared that Churchill would soon lose his shaky grip on power.⁴⁸ Churchill realized that his only hope was to bring the issue before the full cabinet for resolution. After summarizing the current war situation, Churchill told his cabinet members that he expected the Germans to offer terms for peace. He explained that if Britain tried to make peace, the Germans would likely demand the Royal Navy as “disarmament.”⁴⁹ Churchill reasoned that such a situation would result in England becoming a slave state. He concluded his remarks by telling the full cabinet:

I am convinced that every man of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment to contemplate

43. *Id.* at 82.

44. *Id.* at 104.

45. *Id.* at 105.

46. *Id.* at 146-48.

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*

49. *Id.*

parley or surrender. 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.⁵⁰

There was no more talk of peace. After the meeting, Churchill was mobbed and congratulated by the full cabinet.⁵¹ He had consolidated his position by the sheer eloquence and force of his convictions.

There can be little doubt that the world is a far better place because of Winston Churchill's leadership. Thus, it is not surprising that Churchill is almost universally respected and admired. As Jo Grimond so aptly noted on the occasion of Churchill's death, "[a]ll freedom-loving men and women claim Sir Winston as their own, and mourn his death, and well they may, because it is in large measure due to him that some of us are free at all."⁵²

50. *Id.* at 148.

51. *Id.*

52. WIT AND WISDOM, *supra* note 3, at 8.