Book Review - Churchill, Roosevelt & Company by Lewis E Lehrman

by Bill Collier | Jun 17, 2017 | Arts |

*Churchill, Roosevelt & Company: Studies in Character and Statecraft*

By William R. Collier

How, and why, did the US enter the war against the Nazis and come to the rescue of Great Britain? Lewis E. Lehrman richly unpacks the whole story, centering around the “special relationship” between America and Great Britain. That relationship was born from a personal relationship between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, as well as between the men surrounding these titanic figures.

Lewis E. Lehrman applies scholarly yet lucid treatment to complicated relationships. Lehrman is a holder of the National Humanities Medal, one of America’s most distinguished awards. The medal “honors individuals or groups whose work has deepened the nation’s understanding of the humanities and broadened our citizens’ engagement with history, literature, languages, philosophy, and other humanities subjects.” This work certainly lives up to these criteria.

*Churchill, Roosevelt & Company* is written to be enjoyed by lay readers and scholars alike. It is immediately accessible. Even if you are not a history buff, the drama behind the story Lehrman provides is as compelling as a work of great fiction. As a bonus, if you will, it contains reveal after reveal that helps make sense of contemporary politics, both national and worldwide.
On one side, Lehrman demonstrates the polished political legerdemain of a consummate political operator, FDR, and, on the other, the blunt but persuasive stratagems of a staunch realist, Winston Churchill. On one hand, the new, rising, power — America — was chary to enter someone else’s war, with all the blood and treasure that surely would spill.

On the other hand, Great Britain, and its Empire, was being brutally assaulted by the Axis powers. England seemed on the ropes. The rebel child of the British Empire, America, still had sympathy for its mother country. Also, consider the enemy: Hitler.

America was on the cusp of becoming a greater global power than its progenitor.

This book recounts an exciting time. It easily could have devolved to a much uglier — Nazi and fascist — world order. Churchill laid the groundwork by statecraft, which, when triggered by Pearl Harbor and Germany’s declaration of war on the US, led America to heroically seal the defeat of the Axis powers. Thus, America ended one of the greatest menaces to humanity ever, defeating an evil empire bent on exterminating and enslaving whole peoples.

The story Lehrman reports appears to be the fruit of a lifetime of research. There is hardly a point he makes that is without substantial documentation. His fascinating endnotes encompass over 100 pages. This provides an immediately accessible story that is easy to read and follow. But the endnotes and documentation add further depth of understanding of a formative period of our age.

Churchill, Roosevelt & Company: Studies in Character and Statecraft reveals that Roosevelt also was callous, if not ruthless, toward the British Empire, while naïve about the Soviet Union. FDR’s handling of lend-lease was brutal to the British both in terms of territory and coin. His administration was more generous to the Soviets.

Churchill understood the price of defeating Hitler could entail the end of the Empire. And yet, he did what was necessary. This is the main point I took from reading this revelatory work of history: Churchill’s recognition that unless he could draw a reluctant USA into WWII Nazi Germany would win. Coaxing the US into committing troops was Churchill’s entire purpose, statecraft-wise, even recognizing the high cost — Britain’s loss to America of world supremacy. It was a sobering, although necessary, trade.

I have always believed that great figures in history understand both the real crisis and the price to be paid in confronting it. Nazism was the great threat to human civilization. Churchill understood this and engaged his whole being into overcoming that at great risk and at great cost. He did so with his eyes wide open. This story of this existential trade makes for a compelling one. America had no dream of empire. History records we were, and are, a rare great power who went to war not motivated to create its own empire. But we were determined to dismantle one.

Yes, the story Lehrman tells, with great human interest, documents the events leading America into the war against, and victory over, Hitler. At the same time, it also recounts the cost imposed by America — the destruction of the British Empire — also at the hands of Americans who actively sought to dismantle their rival power, Great Britain.