A Unique Chronicle of World War II

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Lewis Lehrman on Churchill, FDR, “& Company.”

Churchill, Roosevelt & Company: Studies in Character and Statecraft
By Lewis E. Lehrman
(Stackpole Books, 459 pages, $29. 95)

When the world goes to war things fall apart. I do not know how often such a point is made in discussing World War I and World War II, but the thought has occurred to me repeatedly. When armies began to roll in Europe things steadily changed on the home front. Increasingly the military took government positions once held by civilians. Increasingly women took positions held by men. The men went out to fight. I have often wondered what Winston Churchill’s deepest thoughts were as World War II wound down. I know his critics thought he loved war and the stature it gave him on the world stage, but, though he certainly loved the limelight, my guess is that he greeted the war’s end with deep-seated sadness. It was all such a waste. If only the upper classes had followed him in the 1930s and resisted the Nazis. Now the civilization that he relished lay in ruins. The age of empire was over.

Lew Lehrman, an author who frequently appears in our pages, is well aware of the problems the allies faced both at the beginning of the war and toward the end. The English-speaking people were alike in many ways, but they were also vastly different. America was deeply isolationist, they were impatient with the British and other European empires, also America contained ethnic pockets that actually hated the British — my grandparents among them. What is more, in the Roosevelt Administration there existed sympathy for Stalin, not strong sympathy but it was there
Lehrman has done more. He has produced a unique chronicle of World War II, focusing not on chronology but on the interaction of the war’s major figures, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill and going down through the military commanders (for instance Ike and his rivals the British generals Montgomery and Alan Brooke), the president’s and prime minister’s aides, and lesser figures. Most get a chapter and sometimes more. There is repetition because of this organizing principle but not too much. The major themes — for instance: American neuralgia about imperialism, British anxiety about being mired in another land war in France, Stalin’s importunities on the Allies for action in the West — are all there as seen through the eyes of such participants as FDR, Churchill, and dozens of others — the “& Company” mentioned in Lehrman’s title.

How did they interact with one another? What pet ideas did they advance? What was, for instance, Harry Hopkins’ strategic goal or that of the Englishman Anthony Eden? There were a myriad of different ideas advanced throughout the war. The post-war United Nations supported by FDR, the resurgent British Empire supported by Churchill, Stalin’s Soviet Empire, oddly objected to not at all by President Roosevelt, though strenuously objected to by Churchill, at least most of the time.

For some reason, though the British Empire raised the New Dealers’ hackles, Stalin’s land grab almost never did.

How does one explain it? In Lehrman’s treatment of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, a light bulb went off in my mind. Morgenthau was the eponym for the Morgenthau Plan by which post-war Germany would be deindustrialized and returned to it “pastoral” stage in the 19th century. For a brief period in 1944 the crackpot plan was thought plausible, even by the President. Who was behind it? Well, Harry Dexter White was an energetic force, a top aide to Morgenthau, and, as luck would have it, he was one of a number of Communists in the New Deal. How many? That has yet to be determined, if it is ever finally determined.

I personally had some first-hand knowledge of the problem in the late 1970s, when I got to know Huntington Cairns, an old New Dealer from the Department of the Treasury. Huntington was not a Communist, but when I asked him about White he was nonchalant. He laughed and said something to the effect that “Good heavens, everyone in the Treasury knew Harry was a Red.” I got the impression from him that before the Cold War there were a lot of Reds in the New Deal. They were viewed benignly, much as the Obama people viewed their Progressives until recently. Maybe the Communists of the New Deal were not all that dangerous to our national security. At least some of them were not, but there were the Rosenbergs and of course Alger His, whom the Nation magazine still pines for.

Lehrman is particularly good on this aspect of the war, but he is very informative on other aspects too. His research is overwhelming and he writes elegantly. One final point, his treatment of FDR in the Age of Trump is worth contemplating. Roosevelt was the first of the modern presidents as Trump is the first of the post-modern presidents. Roosevelt was a great campaigner, who ran an unwieldy government seemingly according to his own whim. He did things his way independent of those around him. Finally, as Lehrman quotes the 1940s journalist Merriman Smith, one of FDR’s “great talents was his ability to put over sheer, unadulterated hokum.” Think about this the next time you hear a never-Trumper denouncing Donald. He follows in the tradition of the Great One.