

WALKING WITH DESTINY

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It's a great honour to deliver this, my inaugural Lehrman Institute lecture on Winston Churchill here at the New-York Historical Society. You may think that a ten-part lecture series might find it hard to find things to say on one man – however multi-faceted and brilliant he was – but in fact Lew Lehrman and I very quickly came up with twenty subjects I could lecture on, so please think of this more in terms of a marathon over the next three years than a sprint.

It was one of the great one of the great coincidences of history that on the same day that Adolf Hitler unleashed Blitzkrieg on the West, at dawn on Friday, May 10, 1940, that same evening at 6pm, Winston Churchill obeyed an instruction to attend King George VI at Buckingham Palace in London, where he kissed hands and became Prime Minister. Yet it was a coincidence, because he had been chosen as Neville Chamberlain the previous afternoon, before the attack took place, and without Hitler knowing whom his ultimate adversary would be.

Churchill wrote of that moment in his memoirs eight years later, 'I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.' Yet in fact Churchill had felt that he was walking with Destiny all his life, and the whole concept of Destiny played a central role in his psychological make up.

So in this inaugural lecture I'd like to explore this key aspect of him, because once we understand that, everything else about him falls naturally into place.

In his ninety years, Churchill was a statesman sportsman, artist, orator, historian, parliamentarian, brick-layer, essayist, gambler, soldier, war correspondent, newspaper editor, butterfly-collector, big-game hunter, legal plaintiff, novelist, and loving husband and father. But perhaps most of all, he was a Man of Destiny, primarily because he believed himself to be. Whether you or I philosophically believe such a thing as Destiny exists is immaterial. He did, and he therefore carried himself in such a way that he did not, in his phrase, 'fall below the level of events'.

Churchill didn't mention his destiny at the time of his appointment as Prime Minister. Her Majesty the Queen has graciously allowed me to be the first Churchill biographer to be permitted to read the full, unexpurgated diaries kept by her late father King George VI. The King lunched with his Prime Minister every Tuesday of the war alone – they served themselves from a side-table so servants didn't have to be present - and afterwards the King noted down what Churchill told him, providing us with a wonderful new historical source.

Churchill trusted the King implicitly and spoke to him openly about whatever was most on his mind, knowing that the King was the one person in public life who wasn't after his job. He told him about the Ultra decrypts of the German Enigma machines, for example. The King noted of that fateful evening on the tenth of May 1940 that Churchill 'was full of fire and determination to carry out the duties of Prime Minister'.¹

Then, in the car coming back from Buckingham Palace, Walter Thompson, Churchill's bodyguard, a tall, strong Detective Inspector who had been with Churchill on and off for almost twenty years, congratulated him, but said his task was enormous. 'God alone knows how great it is,' the new Prime Minister replied. 'All I hope is that it is not too late. I am very much afraid it is. We can only do our best.'² The third person Churchill spoke to of the job at the time was his wife, Clementine, to whom he said the next morning, 'There is only one man who can turn me out and that is Hitler.'³ Years later he also told his doctor, 'I could discipline the bloody business at last. I had no feeling of personal inadequacy, or anything of that sort.'⁴

(At this point it is worth pointing out that Churchill only kissed hands in the constitutionally figurative sense; nothing as unhygienic as actual lips touching the monarch's hand took place. Please don't believe everything you see in *The Crown*, in which the six foot five John Lithgow – Churchill was five foot six – kisses the Queen's hand every time he sees her. Indeed one of the messages I'd like you to take away from this lecture series is, don't believe *anything* you see in *The Crown*.)

The reasons that Churchill had 'no feeling of personal inadequacy' was that he was a Victorian aristocrat born when the British upper-classes were at the apex of the largest Empire that the world had ever seen, and in his background, education and military career he genuinely felt no reason to feel inadequate about anything. He had been born in the grandest palace in England – not excluding the royal ones - was not the dunce he made himself out to be in his autobiography *My Early Life*, and was the grandson of a duke. Furthermore he had already held several of the great offices of State, and knew that he could fill the premiership too, a post he had wanted ever since he entered politics over four decades earlier.

He had been the youngest Home Secretary in seventy years, the First Lord of the Admiralty who had mobilized the Royal Navy at the outbreak of the Great War, Minister of Munitions when it employed two and a half million people and was easily the largest employer in the Empire, and a Chancellor of the Exchequer who had delivered five annual Budgets. He was sixty-five when he became Prime Minister, three years older than the age that civil servants retired, and had delivered well over a thousand speeches. As he also put it in his war memoirs, 'I thought I knew a good deal about it all, and I was sure I should not fail. Therefore, although impatient for the morning, I slept soundly and had no need for cheering dreams. Facts are better than dreams.'⁵

Before Churchill had even taken won seat in Parliament aged twenty-five, he had already fought in four wars, published five books, written 215 newspaper and magazine articles, participated in the greatest cavalry charge in half a century, and made a daring escape from a prisoner-of-war camp. 'At twenty-five he had fought in more continents than any soldier in history save Napoleon,' a contemporary profile of him was to state, 'and seen as many campaigns as any living general.'⁶

Yet the other reason – indeed the key reason – that Churchill felt that he could 'discipline the bloody business at last' and 'had no feeling of personal inadequacy, or anything of that sort' was because he always felt that he was walking with destiny. And this was as much true in the terrible mistakes and errors and disasters of his life – most of which were self-inflicted – as in his triumphs as and successes. 'When you make some great mistake,' he wrote in his autobiography, *My Early Life*, 'it may very easily serve you better than the best-advised decision. Life is a whole, and luck is a whole, and no part of them can be separated from the rest.'⁷

To Clementine, writing from the trenches of World War One at the lowest point of his life, after the catastrophe of the Dardanelles when he had proposed a military campaign in Turkey that had failed miserably, he wrote one of the most profound sentences of his prodigious literary output of six million words – with eight million spoken - when he said, 'I should have made nothing if I had not made mistakes.'⁸ (One of the frustrations about trying to analyze Churchill is that he always analyzed himself far better.)

We admire Churchill for his prescience. Although the Dardanelles went wrong, here is another vision of the future that he had. 'I can see vast changes coming over a now peaceful world,' Churchill predicted to his friend Murland Evans, 'great upheavals, terrible struggles; wars such as one cannot imagine; and I tell you London will be in danger – London will be attacked and I shall be very prominent in the defence of London. ... I see into the future. This country will be

subjected, somehow, to a tremendous invasion, by what means I do not know, but I tell you I shall be in command of the defences of London and I shall save London and England from disaster ... dreams of the future are blurred but the main objective is clear. I repeat – London will be in danger and in the high position I shall occupy, it will fall to me to save the capital and save the Empire.’⁹

Now, if he had said this in 1931, one would have been impressed with his prescience, as Hitler only came to power in 1933. If he had said it in 1921, we might have also been impressed by the fact that he had seen the Versailles Treaty would not bring lasting peace, only two years after it was signed. Such a prediction might have been possible in 1911, before the outbreak of the Great War, though it would have seemed extraordinary in 1901, when the British Empire was at its height.

Ladies & gentleman, Churchill said those words in 1891, when he was only sixteen years old and a schoolboy at Harrow. He had mapped out precisely his destiny as a teenager, and did not deviate from it until, aged sixty-five and considered by many – including Hitler - as a hopeless has-been, he came to power and walked with precisely the destiny that he had prescribed for himself half a century earlier.

As the historian J.H. Plumb observed soon after Churchill's death, historians still 'move down the broad avenues which he drove through war's confusion and complexity.' But Plumb also noted that Churchill the historian was 'far more than Churchill the writer of history books,' being also 'the last great practitioner of the historic theme of England's providential destiny.'¹⁰

It has long been assumed that it was his near-death that made Churchill so certain that his Destiny would protect him until such time as he could save London and England. Even if you strip out those very frequent near-death experiences from warfare when he deliberately put himself in danger, such as on the no fewer than thirty occasions when he ventured out into no-man's-land in the trenches of the Great War, there were any number of other times which made it unlikely that he would live long enough to fulfil his destiny.

He was born two months premature. He had three car and crashes, including a very serious one on Fifth Avenue, but also two plane crashes. He was concussed for days after jumping thirty foot off a bridge, was staying in part of a house that burned to the ground in the middle of the night, very nearly drowned in Lake Geneva, was stabbed as a schoolboy, and had four serious bouts of pneumonia, one that very nearly killed him as a child, three serious ones as an adult, as well as a series of heart attacks. In retrospect the lack of an assassination attempt on his was a curious

oversight in an otherwise very dangerous life. He complained to Clementine that he found it difficult to buy life insurance, but on this occasion, it's hard to sympathize with him.

'Sometimes when [Fortune] scowls most spitefully,' Churchill wrote, 'she is preparing her most dazzling gifts.'¹¹ When he wrenched his shoulder jumping off the boat that took him to his first overseas official posting in India in 1896 – an injury that stayed with him for many years – it meant that he had to use his Mauser revolver rather than a sword during the Charge of the 21st Lancers at the battle of Omdurman two years later. This allowed him to shoot four Dervishes at point-blank range, including one who was trying to chop at the hamstrings of his horse with a scimitar. Being unhorsed in that melee, where the Lancers were outnumbered by ten to one, meant almost certain death: indeed the regiment suffered almost 25% casualties.

It was partly Churchill's time on the Afghan-Pakistan border in 1896 and 1897 and in the Sudan in 1898, which had brought him up close to militant Islamic fundamentalism, that allowed him to spot the fanatical nature of Nazism that so many of his fellow politicians missed in the 1930s. Neville Chamberlain met Adolf Hitler three times, yet he utterly failed to notice the cold fanaticism of the Nazis and their creed, just seeing the Fuhrer in class terms as 'the commonest little dog you ever saw.' Churchill never met Hitler, but having seen fanaticism in action earlier in his life, and remembering friends who had been butchered by Pathan, Talib and Dervish tribesmen, he immediately spotted the same phenomenon in the Nazis.

The other essential feature in this was Churchill's philo-Semitism. One of the only good things he inherited from his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was that he was brought up to like, admire and socialize with Jews, attitudes that were very unusual, and different from the majority of the upper-class Victorians of his youth. Churchill therefore had an early-warning mechanism that allowed him to place Hitler very early on as a malevolent force on the world scene. Clement Attlee said that in the House of Commons before the war, Churchill told him in tears about the plight of the Jews in Nazi Germany, and Churchill never failed to denounce it. That was emphatically not the stance of most British politicians – of both the Left and Right – in the House of Commons at the time. 'Why is your chief so violent about the Jews?' Churchill asked Hitler's publicist Putzi Hanfstaengl when there was a chance of his meeting Hitler in Munich in 1932, 'What is the sense of being against a man simply because of his birth? How can any man help how he is born?' Unsurprisingly, the meeting did not take place.

Although Churchill believed in an Almighty, the role of the Supreme Being in his theology seems to have been primarily to look after the safety of Winston Churchill. Churchill did not believe Jesus Christ was divine, although he did think of him as a very wise and charismatic rabbi, who

gave Mankind a superb system of ethics. In that sense, Churchill's belief-system, which he himself called The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness, was theologically a lot closer to Judaism than to the Anglican Church into which he was born. He joked that he saw his relationship to the Church of England as like a flying buttress, in that he supported it, but from the outside. His belief system therefore tended to augment and support his sense of a personal destiny.

Other than his philo-Semitism – which was to turn into fully-fledged Zionism - Churchill received little that was commendable or worthwhile from his father, who despised him and undercut him at every opportunity. Indeed the more his father was aloof and disdainful towards him, the more he seems to have worshipped him. Lord Randolph's only other service to his son was to die at the age of forty-five, when Churchill was only twenty, allowing him to escape the stultifying influence of this mercurial, quick-witted, intellectually brilliant, unstable, controlling and at times deeply unpleasant man. In a sense, Winston Churchill was striving to impress the shade of his missing father all his life, despite having received little from him but irritation and occasionally contempt.

Yet Churchill was to adopt his father's 'Tory Democrat' politics, many of his mannerisms, and take on several of his enmities. He wrote his father's biography in two volumes, named his only son Randolph, and fantasized about meeting his father in a beautifully written essay entitled *The Dream*. When Churchill was finally financially solvent – which did not happen until he was seventy-three years old – he bought racehorses and dressed the jockeys in his father's chocolate and pink racing colours.

'Solitary trees, if they grow at all, grow strong,' Churchill wrote in his book *The River War*, 'and a boy deprived of his father's care often develops, if he escapes the perils of youth, an independence and vigour of thought which may restore in after life the heavy loss of early days.'¹² Churchill was writing of the Sudanese spiritual leader the Mahdi, but like an extraordinary amount of his writing and speeches, and even his eulogies for his friends, there was a huge amount of self-reference there too.

Although Churchill was in tears when he spoke to Attlee about the fate of the German Jews, he was extraordinarily lachrymose. Tears welled up easily in his eyes, indeed he could use his lachrymosity as a political weapon on occasion, on top of those occasions when he was genuinely overwhelmed with emotion. On no fewer than fifty times, Churchill cried in public during the Second World War. 'I blub an awful lot, you know,' he told Anthony Montague Browne, his last private secretary. 'You have to get used to it.'¹³ Anthony, who I knew well, recalled that Churchill's tears would usually be induced by, 'Tales of heroism. ... a noble dog struggling

through the snow to his master would inspire tears. It was touching, I found it perfectly acceptable.' Churchill considered his lachrymosity to be almost a medical condition, telling his doctor that he dated it to his defeat by forty-three votes in the St George's, Westminster, by-election of 1924. Yet there were plenty of times that he cried before that; a better diagnosis was that he was an emotional, sentimental Regency aristocrat in a way that predated the Victorian stiff upper lip. Every admiral carrying Horatio Nelson's coffin at St Paul's Cathedral in 1806 was in tears, for example.

Another classic example of Fortune scowling at Churchill when in fact she was preparing a dazzling gift came when he arrived in South Africa in October 1899 and tried to get into the town of Ladysmith. He was unable to do this because by then the Boers had cut the rail link on the Tugela River and were about to lay siege to the town. Once again, Churchill had been fortunate in his misfortune, because had he got into Ladysmith he would have been incarcerated there until its relief three months later, instead of following the path that was to make him famous, to the ambushed train and his subsequent prison escape. (By the way, the casualty rate for British soldiers in that train ambush was 34%, even higher than at Omdurman.)

Churchill found again and again in politics that Destiny, Luck, Chance, Fate or Providence – he tended to use them interchangeably when writing about them, which he did a lot – worked in his favour, even when they seemed to be working against him. He only lost the by-election at Oldham in 1899 by a whisker. Had there not been a mere 2% swing to the Liberals, Churchill would have squeaked into the House of Commons, so he would not have gone to South Africa and have had the opportunity for making not just a local or national reputation for himself, but a truly international one only five months later.

Similarly, Churchill failed to get elected as a National Liberal Free Trader for Leicester West in the general election of December 1923. Being out of Parliament for that year, and thus not beholden to the Liberal whip, allowed him to move towards the Conservatives, and the following year he became a Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer. (His first thought on his appointment, tellingly, was not about the economy or tariffs or taxes, but that he could now wear the same robes that his father had worn when he had been Chancellor.)

In March 1931, Churchill wrote an article in the *Strand Magazine* entitled 'A Second Choice', about all the twists his life had taken, and how it might have gone otherwise: 'If we look back on our past life we shall see that one of its most usual experiences is that we have been helped by our mistakes and injured by our most sagacious decisions.'¹⁴ Although he wasn't to know it for several years, he was about to be helped enormously by his decision to resign from the shadow

cabinet over Indian self-government, saving him from being held responsible for any of the decisions regarding the appeasement of Germany. He concluded in that article, 'Let us reconcile ourselves to the mysterious rhythm of our destinies, such as they must be in this world of space and time. Let us treasure our joys but not bewail our sorrows. The glory of light cannot exist without its shadows. Life is a whole, and good and ill must be accepted together. The journey has been enjoyable and well worth making. Once.'¹⁵

Two months after Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933, Churchill told the Society of St George, 'It may well be that the most glorious chapters of our history are yet to be written. ... We ought to rejoice at the responsibilities with which destiny has honoured us, and be proud that we are guardians of our country in an age when her life is at stake.'¹⁶ Hitler had by that stage not invaded anywhere, and would not for nearly three years, but Churchill was already seeing his own and his country's destiny in opposing the Nazis, and the historian in him led him often to liken Britain's role in his own time to that of Elizabeth I at the time of the Armada, his great ancestor the Duke of Marlborough fighting Louis XIV, and Nelson and Wellington opposing Napoleon's ambitions, and of course to the prevention of the Kaiser achieving his hegemonistic ambitions in the twentieth century.

In the 1935 General Election, the National Government, which Churchill supported, won a landslide victory, and Churchill hoped to be given a ministerial job co-ordinating Britain's defences. But Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, did not call. At the time he was profoundly disappointed, but later he understood how good it was not to have been in a Government that was refusing to rearm adequately. 'Now I can see how lucky I was,' he later wrote. 'Over me beat the invisible wings.'¹⁷ There is a clue in the use of the definite article – the invisible wings – that he believed an angel had been specially deputed to ensure he fulfilled his destiny.

Although Churchill was again profoundly disappointed when, the following March, a minor figure named Sir Thomas Inskip was appointed as Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence instead of him, he told Clementine, 'I do not mean to break my heart whatever happens. Destiny plays her part.'¹⁸ Yet he rightly saw it as another missed opportunity to send Hitler an unmistakable message about British resolve.¹⁹ When Chamberlain became prime minister in June 1937, he did not call for Churchill any more than Ramsay MacDonald had in 1931 or Stanley Baldwin in 1935. At that point even Clementine Churchill gave up hope of her husband ever becoming prime minister. Only one person never gave up hope – Churchill himself.

As Britain stumbled towards the humiliation of the Munich debacle, Churchill wrote an article which said that, 'The shores of History are strewn with the wrecks of empires. They perished

because they were found unworthy. We would court – and deserve – the same fate if, in the coming years, we so denied our destiny and our duty.’²⁰ For him, therefore destiny and duty were one and the same thing. Churchill’s denunciation of Munich, the only front rank Conservative politician to do so besides Alfred Duff Cooper and to a much lesser extent Anthony Eden, meant that he was the chief beneficiary when Hitler ripped up all his promises and marched into Prague in March 1939.

By 1939, Churchill was in that penumbra between older statesman and elder statesman, but he had not given up his hopes for the premiership, however unlikely it must have seemed considering his following in the Commons could be counted on the fingers of one hand. By that stage even Clementine no longer believed he would become Prime Minister, but crucially he himself never lost hope.

Attempts were made by his own Party to de-select Churchill from his constituency of Epping in early 1939. A young man called Colin Thornton-Kemsley worked tirelessly attempting to destroy Churchill’s parliamentary career. The Chigwell Branch of the constituency association had voted by fourteen members to four against Churchill and the Loughton Branch by thirty-one to fourteen. These were, of course, tiny numbers in the context of the world-historical events that would have ensued had Churchill not been available to take public office in the opening stages of the Second World War.

Had Thornton-Kemsley succeeded in deselecting Churchill at Epping, the Party establishment would have ensured that no other winnable Conservative constituency would have taken Churchill after Munich, and he would have been very unlikely to win as an Independent Conservative in that political environment. Almost any other politician, faced with a revolt in his constituency with a General Election pending, would have made compromises, or toned down his speeches to head off a potentially disastrous outcome. What Churchill did was to go straight to Thornton-Kemsley’s own branch of Chigwell and make a speech in which he told them that he did not withdraw a single word of his denunciation of the Munich Agreement, indeed, ‘I read it again only this afternoon, and was astonished to find how true it had all come.’²¹ When Hitler occupied the rump of Czechoslovakia within days, all opposition to Churchill ceased in his constituency, but for a moment it had been touch and go over whether he could survive in Parliament.

By 1939, however, Churchill was surrounded by ghosts, and did not feel himself beholden to political pygmies such as Thornton-Kemsley, but instead to the memory of the dead friends of his youth. ‘The South African War accounted for a large proportion not only of my friends but of

my company,' Churchill was to write of his Sandhurst cadet company in *My Early Life*, 'and the Great War killed almost all the others.'²² His greatest friend at Harrow had been Jack Milbanke, who had won the Victoria Cross in the Boer War, but had died, in Churchill's words, 'leading a forlorn attack in the awful battle of Suvla Bay'.²³ That was on the Gallipoli peninsula, the campaign that sprung from the reverses in the Dardanelles.

Major Cecil Grimshaw, Churchill's cell-mate in Pretoria, who had raised the Union Flag when Churchill liberated the prison, was killed at Cape Helles, also in Gallipoli. In Churchill's house at Harrow had been John Morgan who was killed at Lala Baba in Gallipoli. Indeed of the sixty-seven boys in his 1892 house photograph, a total of forty-one had served in either the Boer War or Great War or both, and eleven were dead by 1918. Lady Diana Cooper told her son, my friend John Julius Norwich, that by the end of 1916, every single man she had ever danced with was dead.

People who had fought in the trenches, like Churchill, Alfred Duff Cooper, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, did not feel beholden to opinion polls and focus groups, or even the media or party apparatchiks. They followed what they thought of as their duty, and in Churchill's case his destiny too: which was to stay true to their friends' sacrifice in denying the Germans control over the Continent of Europe. During the Wilderness Years when he was out of office in the 1930s, Churchill had also lost his great friends FE Smith aged fifty-eight, Lawrence of Arabia aged forty-six, Ralph Wigram also aged forty-six, and Freddie Guest aged sixty-one, on top of all of those friends who had died earlier. So when Churchill after Munich wrote to his friend Lord Craigavon, who had also been captured by the Boers and was Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, he undoubtedly meant it when he said, 'You are one of the few who have in in their power to bestow judgments which I respect.'²⁴

For by the dawn of 1939, the year the Second World War broke out, the aristocrat in Churchill had narrowed down the number of people whose opinion he gave a damn about to relatively few. It was a prerequisite for continuing on his way in the face of so many who opposed him. He cared more for the approval of the shades of his dead father and dead friends than for what he had contemptuously described in the Munich debate as 'currents of opinion, however swift and violent they may be'.²⁵

Some of Churchill's dead friends had been members of the Other Club, a dining society founded in 1911. The Other Club's rules stated that, 'Nothing in the rules or intercourse of the Club shall interfere with the rancour or asperity of party politics.'²⁶ Yet in fact it was actually set up precisely in order to try to assuage political rancour, and to provide a forum where senior

Liberal and Conservative politicians could meet socially. Membership required a fairly sturdy constitution for their six-course dinners. By 1940 the Club consisted of many of Churchill's closest friends from the fields of politics, the military, writing, the theatre and arts, regardless of political beliefs. PG Wodehouse and HG Wells were members, for example.

In his incredibly powerful capacity for friendship – FE Smith wrote of Churchill that, 'He has never in all his life failed a friend, however embarrassing the obligations' – Churchill was also building up a group of people who came to his aid when he was walking with destiny.²⁷ Of the seven people who made major speeches during the Norway Debate that brought down the Chamberlain government and catapulted Churchill into the premiership in May 1940, six were members of the Other Club. When he created his caretaker government in May 1945, no fewer than a quarter of the ministers were members of the Other Club. For thirty years Churchill had been building up a friendship base at the Other Club that could step into Government when his moment of destiny came.

Churchill believed in his destiny enough not to give up on his hopes of the premiership even after the disastrous Norway campaign of April 1940, for which he was far more responsible as First Lord of the Admiralty than Chamberlain had been. By late April, Chamberlain seems to have considered using Churchill as the scapegoat for the coming defeat in Norway. Had Churchill been humiliatingly demoted or dismissed during the campaign for lack of judgement, it is hard to envisage how he could have become Prime Minister two weeks later. In the very first biography of Churchill, by MacCallum Scott in 1905, published when Churchill was only 31, it stated, 'The men of destiny do not wait to be sent for; they come when they feel their time has come. They do not ask to be recognized, they declare themselves; they come like fate; they are inevitable.'²⁸ Churchill was by no means the inevitable choice in May 1940, however, though he was clearly the man of destiny in a way that his rival, Lord Halifax, was not.

Even some of the British defeats early in the war can be put down as being a case of Fortune seeming to scowl spitefully even as she was preparing a dazzling gift. The most dazzling gift of World War II, the thing that killed 80% of all the Germans who died in battle during that conflict, was Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941. Operation Barbarossa could have taken place six weeks earlier, but Churchill had supported the Yugoslavian uprising in late March and sent an expeditionary force to Greece. The Greeks were forced to capitulate on April 24, 1940, yet although Churchill's support for the Yugoslavian coup and Greece intervention looked like fiascos at the time, later on it seemed inspired, though not for any reason to do with British arms.

By August 1941, Churchill was telling his private secretary, Jock Colville, that the Yugoslav coup 'might well have played a vital part in the war', in that it caused Hitler 'to bring back his panzer divisions from the north and postponed for six weeks the attack on Russia.'²⁹ He was supported in this assertion after the war by the senior German Staff officer General Günther Blumentritt, who stated that the 'the Balkan incident postponed the opening of the [Russian] campaign by five-and-a-half weeks', while another senior strategist, General Siegfried Westphal, put it at six.³⁰ Since the Germans were unable to reach Moscow until the autumn, when Russia's rainy season turned to a winter so cold that petrol froze and the Wehrmacht stalled outside the city, giving the Russians an opportunity for their counter-attack in December, the iron law of unintended consequences had once more acted in Churchill's favour.

When a Tory MP criticized Churchill for visiting the Front only six days after D-Day, Brendan Bracken, the Minister of Information and the Prime Minister's closest friend, gave a witty and impassioned reply, in which he said, 'Neither the honourable and gallant Member nor anyone else can persuade the Prime Minister to wrap himself in cotton wool. He is the enemy of flocculence in thought, word or deed. Most humbly do I aver that, in years to come, a grateful and affectionate people will say that Winston Churchill was raised to leadership by destiny. Men of destiny have never counted risk.'³¹

Many times in his life Churchill's failure to count risk had let him down. His inability to weigh risk and reward had led him to disaster. But he learnt from each mistake, which is truly the only thing that mattered. Meanwhile, those politicians who carefully weighed out risks and rewards recommended a path that if we had followed it, might have led to the extinguishing of Freedom on this planet – including here in the United States - for centuries to come.

If Britain had fallen in 1940 and the Royal Navy – easily the most powerful Navy in the world at the time – had been forced to join the German, Italian and French Navies, then the United States Navy could have done little to protect the eastern seaboard. The Americans could therefore have not have entered the war, otherwise Manhattan and Boston would have been destroyed by naval bombardment. Instead of these nightmares coming to pass, there was a man who, aged sixteen, said, 'I shall be in command of the defences of London and I shall save London and England from disaster'. This profound sense of destiny meant that Winston Churchill was able to save not only London and England from disaster, but ultimately Civilization itself.

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