

His Finest Hour

Winston Churchill championed the civilized world when it counted most

BY LISA DE NIKE

Winston Churchill's courageous and visionary leadership as prime minister of England during World War II guided the Allies to victory against fascism and terror. Indeed, historians agree that without Churchill's guidance, the world would be very different today.

Those who knew Sir Winston Churchill during his childhood and adolescence likely never predicted that the troublesome child afflicted with a speech impediment would someday become one of history's greatest figures. He was born prematurely on Nov. 30, 1874, eight months after the marriage of his parents, Tory politician Lord Randolph Churchill and Jennie Jerome, the beautiful daughter of New York businessman Leonard W. Jerome.

Churchill did poorly in the early years of his schooling, but despite early challenges, he eventually excelled in the study of history and English and became the Harrow School's fencing champion before graduating in 1893 and entering the Royal Military College at Sandhurst.

Upon graduation, he entered the British army as a cavalry officer. Over the next few years, he saw action in three campaigns: the North-West Frontier campaign in India in 1897 and Spanish-Cuban conflict and Sudan campaign in 1898. This is also when Churchill began what would become an illustrious, lifelong career as a writer and wordsmith, serving as a war correspondent for a number of London newspapers.

His writing career began with reports from his time as a soldier at war and eventually included a novel, two biographies, as well as a four-volume history of World War I and a set of memoirs from World War II. In addition, after he retired, Churchill wrote a *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* in four volumes, and his lectures have survived in *The Dawn of Liberation*, *The Unrelenting Struggle*, *Victory* and dozens of other volumes.

In 1953, his historical writings won him literature's top honor: a Nobel Prize. The committee wrote that Churchill was being honored "for his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values."

Many historians, in fact, contend that it was Churchill's love of words—cultivated as he stood in front of a mirror and battled speech problems in the early years—that catapulted



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him onto the world stage years later. This love manifested itself in speeches (including his famous "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" and "This Was Their Finest Hour" addresses, both given before the House of Commons in June 1940) that are considered masterpieces of oratory. (The full text of his most famous speeches can be found at www.winstonchurchill.org.)

Churchill's career in politics began in 1901 when he entered Parliament at the age of 26. Nine years later, he became home secretary (the country's top security official) and a year after that, first lord of the admiralty, a position that gave him responsibility for the command of the royal navy.

Though he was credited with encouraging the development of naval aviation and of tanks, he also was blamed for what historians considered "a heroic failure": the 1915 deployment of the British navy and army to the Mediterranean to outflank the Germans at the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey. Though initial attacks were successful, the Turks proved to be fiercer enemies than Churchill had anticipated. On March 18, 1915, three British battleships were sunk and three more

In 1921, Winston Churchill was sent to the Middle East as colonial secretary, charged with making a new and more just settlement after World War I. Here he stands with T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan (later king of Jordan).



were crippled. Overall, the campaign was a disaster, with more than 200,000 Allied casualties. As a result, Churchill resigned in disgrace.

Though Churchill did occupy several other governmental positions between World War I and World War II, his real return to prominence began on September 3, 1939, the day that Britain declared war on Germany and the day that Prime Minister Lord Neville Chamberlain again appointed Churchill first lord of the admiralty and a member of the war cabinet. Historians assert that the force of Churchill's strong personality and original ideas began immediately to resonate throughout the Chamberlain administration.

Indeed, as far back as the mid-1930s, it was Churchill who had loudly declared that Adolf Hitler posed a serious threat to world peace, and that no government should make deals with the Third Reich and its despots.

So when Chamberlain (who did broker deals with the Nazis) lost the confidence of his people in 1940, Churchill became the obvious replacement. He inherited a perilous situation, with France soundly defeated and England under constant German air attack.

Still, Churchill stood strong. Instead of accepting

Hitler's offer of peace in exchange for surrender, Churchill organized the successful air defense that led to victory at the Battle of Britain. Many say that America's entry into World War II marked the culmination of Churchill's leadership, with the prime minister undoubtedly exalting in the success of the D-Day invasion in 1944.

Though there is no doubt that Churchill's unwavering leadership and inspiring words held his country—indeed, the civilized world—together against its common enemy during World War II, he lost the 1945 general election to the Labor Party's Clement Attlee and retired from public life temporarily. Unable to resist the lure of political life, however, he again resumed the premiership in 1951 and governed for four years. He remained a member of Parliament until 1964, when he did not seek re-election. He died just one year later, at age 90.

Churchill is clearly one of history's great men—a person who found his own "finest hour" during one of modern history's most challenging times. ■

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