

It's time to rouse your inner Churchill

Steve McKee · April 1, 2020



Churchill in 1941 (Photo from Imperial War Museum/Wikimedia)

A friend of mine recommended "The Splendid and the Vile," an intimate portrait of the first year of Winston Churchill's leadership in the early days of World War II. Given the current circumstances, it occurred to me that it might be a good, perspective-giving read, so I picked up a copy. It has not disappointed.

The British in 1940 had it much worse than the US circa mid-2020. They dealt with more fear, more uncertainty and more death than we are projected to face. It's remarkable how they persevered and pulled through to victory. That doesn't mean, however, that things aren't frightening in the here and now. A client of mine recently said, "Everybody in the world right now is just picking between bad options." Sometimes that's all you've got.

As our small company valiantly fights its way through current circumstances, here are a handful of Churchillian principles we're trying to follow.

Keep a stiff upper lip before those who are trusting in you

Churchill's private secretary said he "gave forth a confidence and invincible will that called out everything that was brave and strong." One of the new prime minister's most daring pronouncements came during his first speech before the House of Commons: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat."

A few days later, in his first broadcast as prime minister, Churchill boldly encouraged the British public: "After this battle in France abates its force, there will come the battle for our Island, for all that Britain is and all that Britain means. ... In that supreme emergency we shall not hesitate to take every step, even the most drastic, to call forth from our people the last ounce and inch of effort of which they are capable." Brave words from a strong leader.

Go ahead and cry before those you trust

Two days after that valiant speech, a member of Churchill's inner circle wrote in his diary, "I have not seen Winston so depressed." Throughout the war years, and particularly in those early, lonely days, Churchill shared the incredible load on his shoulders with few people.

Shortly after Churchill's appointment, some bystanders near 10 Downing Street were elated to see him as he walked by. "Good luck, Winnie. God bless you," they shouted, reflecting the faith so many Britons had in him in those early days. Waiting until he got into the building, alone with his military chief of staff, Churchill wept, saying, "Poor people, poor people. They trust me, and I can give them nothing but disaster for quite a long time."

Make tough calls when you need to

As France was falling to the Germans in early 1940, the French prime minister begged that 10 squadrons from the Royal Air Force be sent to help. While at first inclined to do so, Churchill ultimately realized that they would not prevent the fall of France and would dangerously limit the RAF's ability to defend the homeland. He said no. And he made many more excruciating decisions throughout the war, including attacking the French fleet to prevent it from falling into German hands.

Step into the challenge creatively and aggressively

Characterizing Churchill's first 48 hours in office, Cabinet Secretary Edward Bridges said, "It was as though the machine had overnight acquired one or two new gears, capable of far higher speeds than had ever before been thought possible."

We now all know the story of "Operation Dynamo," the evacuation of British forces from Dunkirk. Estimates at the time suggested that, at best, 50,000 soldiers would escape; the final count was more than 338,000, ferried home by nearly 900 ships, the vast majority of which were fishing boats and other private vessels.

Be continually looking for how you might counterattack

On the last day of the Dunkirk evacuation, Churchill spoke to the House of Commons, saying, "Wars are not won by evacuations" and promising, in part, "We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air."

One of Churchill's first official acts was to send three dozen bombers from the Royal Air Force to attack a German industrial district. They didn't (and couldn't have been expected to) cause much damage, but they sent a signal -- to the British as well as the Germans -- that the fight was on.

Don't tear off heads. Touch hands

Churchill was known to have both a bad temper and a knack for not apologizing. But according to his minister of aircraft production, Lord Beaverbrook, "He could get very emotional, but after bitterly criticizing you he had a habit of touching you, of putting his hand on your hand -- like that -- as if to say that his real feelings for you were not changed. A wonderful display of humanity." (You might not want to *literally* touch someone's hand under our current circumstances, but you get the point.)

There are many, many more principles from Churchill's example we would do well to follow. That's not to say we should emulate him in every way -- beginning each morning with a cigar, drinking to excess and making cutting remarks to friends and foes alike, to name a few. But despite his faults, Churchill was the right man in the right place at the right time, in no small measure because he recognized that God rules in the affairs of men.

"There is someone looking after me besides you," he said, confidently, to his rattled bodyguard after a near-miss explosion during the German blitz. "I have a mission to perform and that person intends to see it is performed."

May that Someone look after us all through this difficult time.