

History Society: Churchill, Roosevelt and the Creation of the Allied Grand Strategy

On the same day that a Russian warplane was shot out of the sky by Turkey, and world leaders were meeting in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks to devise a strategy for confronting IS (Daesh) in the Middle East, it was somewhat poignant that, on 24th November 2015, the distinguished military historian Professor Andrew Roberts should profile the world leaders who, 75 years earlier, had devised the Grand Allied Strategy that determined the outcome of World War II. As Andrew Roberts explained, the success of the Grand Strategy of the Western Allies from 1941 to D Day in 1944 owed much to the special and friendly, yet sometimes tense, relationship between Sir Winston Churchill and Franklin D Roosevelt.

A lecture that includes genuine local interest is guaranteed to have members of the audience on the edge of their seats, so a dropped pin could have been heard when we heard that Gray's Inn itself had played a small part in the history of the Churchill/Roosevelt relationship. In July 1918, still in their younger days but already politicians of stature, the two men met each other for the first time at a Gray's Inn dinner where Roosevelt was standing in for the US Ambassador.

It seems that in later years Churchill struggled to recall this first encounter but not so Roosevelt who rather curiously remembered Churchill as a 'stinker', and even more curiously that 'vintage pepper' (snuff) was handed round the dinner table. Many years later during World War II, by which time the two great men were leaders of their respective nations, Gray's Inn invited them both to become Honorary Benchers. When Churchill accepted he expressed the hope that it would 'sharpen his wit and advance his learning'. Roosevelt's rather less serious acceptance was conditional on the proviso that snuff would continue to be handed round the dinner table.

In the 21st century the decision to go to war now requires the support of Parliament, which is increasingly interested in the strategic arguments that justify armed combat and particularly in the plans for

the aftermath of battle. Necessarily though, the mixture of political and military considerations that govern the decision for engagement by the armed forces will involve the joint deliberations of political leaders in conjunction with their military commanders.

So it was important to understand that the formulation and deployment of the Grand Strategy of the Western Allies in World War II was not reserved to Churchill and Roosevelt. Rather, in the words of



Andrew Roberts, it was a ‘four man minuet’ that included the top military leaders General Sir Alan Brooke and General George Marshall (Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff). The Allied Grand Strategy was thus created by a quartet of political and military leaders, each with his own strongly held views, struggling to agree a joint plan to win the war.

A common feature of the last two lectures to the history society is that both speakers have delivered their brilliant presentations completely without notes, let alone a script. Unlike David Starkey though, Andrew Roberts did at one point rely on the text of a long and moving quotation from General Sir Alan Brooke, describing the utterly desperate military situation that faced the Allies in the darkest days of 1942. Confronted by that awesome challenge, how did the individual qualities and characters of Churchill, Roosevelt, Brooke and Marshall combine to devise the Grand Strategy, culminating in the crucial decision on when the Allies should invade Europe? In answering that question Andrew Roberts looked briefly at the character of each member of the quartet.

It is well documented that in addition to his considerable experience in politics prior to 1941 Churchill had a strong military background. He had been commissioned at Sandhurst and had experienced battle in the Boer War when he was captured and escaped. In the First World War, as First Lord of the Admiralty, his core responsibility was to establish

and maintain the vital strength of the Royal Navy. In his dealings with people Churchill could also exude considerable charm and a fine sense of humour, encapsulated by one anecdote that when Turkey was dragging its feet about joining the war on the side of the Allies Churchill wryly commented, 'Tell Turkey that Christmas is coming'. But for all his warmth and humour Churchill also suffered from serious depression on what he called his 'black dog days'.

Roosevelt could not match Churchill's military credentials and leaned more towards the administrative side of politics. However, his lack of military experience was more than compensated by the crucial key he held to the massive munitions power of the USA. This key guaranteed him a pivotal role in the agonised and often heated debates about when and where to make the next move in the Grand Strategy.

The two military members of the 'four man minuet' were rather less colourful than the politicians. Brooke was a tough soldier, renowned for displaying his irritation and impatience by snapping pencils in half when losing an argument. Marshall was also a tough soldier and was credited by Andrew Roberts as a central figure in the making of 'one of the great decisions of the 20th century'. That decision was not to hasten into an invasion of Europe prematurely but first to launch a strike against Hitler in Africa, in November 1942. According to Andrew Roberts, that strategic decision was both correct and impressive, being counter-intuitive to the natural and strong instinct of the Allies to regain Europe as soon as possible in the wake of Hitler's declaration of war on the USA in 1941 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in the same year.

The timing of the decision to invade Europe was the source of major, even furious, disagreement when the 'four man minuet' gathered at conferences in various transatlantic locations. In the early days of planning the Grand Strategy, Churchill and Brooke argued for an invasion of Europe in 1943. For a while Roosevelt agreed, although Marshall was firmly negative, saying that the invasion should not go ahead until 1944. However in June 1943 Roosevelt changed his view and agreed with Marshall. The overwhelming munitions power of the USA thus became the deciding factor and plans were laid for the D Day invasion in 1944.

While the planning continued there was still room for strong disagreement, for example when the quartet met at the Quebec conference in August 1943. The discussion was so contentious that staff members

were ordered out of the meeting room, leaving behind only the principal leaders, one of whom was Lord Mountbatten. When the sound of gun shots was heard from within the room (caused by Mountbatten firing a bullet at a block of ice reinforced by wood chips, a supposed defence item) the word outside the room was that the anger level had risen to the point that 'they are now firing guns at each other'. The conference nevertheless agreed that the next step in the Grand Strategy Agreement should be the invasion of Italy in September 1943.

Consistent with the title of his lecture which concentrated on Churchill and Roosevelt, Andrew Roberts made only brief mention of Joseph Stalin as the third member of the leadership triumvirate. In his book *The Lords of War*, another distinguished military historian, Correlli Barnett, records a meeting of the triumvirate at the Teheran conference in December 1943 when Churchill reflected on the Stalin/Roosevelt/Churchill relationship with the wry comment that 'there was this little English donkey between the Russian bear and the American buffalo and only the donkey knew the way home'.

As the members and guests of the history society made their way home after Andrew Roberts's stimulating lecture they will have been much the wiser about the fascinating dynamics of the personal relationships between Churchill and Roosevelt and the other leaders who created and delivered the Allied Grand Strategy that secured the victorious outcome of World War II.

In his generous vote of thanks to Professor Roberts for his truly excellent lecture the Treasurer reminded the history society that in *Gray's Inn: A Short History* reference was made to the occasion when Churchill and Roosevelt first dined together at Gray's Inn, a gastronomic experience that Professor Roberts was duly invited to enjoy immediately as our guest.

Master Mike Napier