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Why Winston Wouldn't Stand For W

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George W. Bush always wanted to be like a wartime British prime ministers. He is. But it's not the one he had in mind.

By Lynne Olson
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[President Bush](#)'s favorite role model is, famously, Jesus, but Winston Churchill is close behind. The president admires the wartime British prime minister so much that he keeps what he calls "a stern-looking bust" of Churchill in the [Oval Office](#). "He watches my every move," Bush jokes. These days, Churchill would probably not care for much of what he sees.

I've spent a great deal of time thinking about Churchill while working on my book "Troublesome Young Men," a history of the small group of Conservative members of Parliament who defied British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasing [Adolf Hitler](#), forced Chamberlain to resign in May 1940 and helped make Churchill his successor. I thought my audience would be largely limited to World War II buffs, so I was pleasantly surprised to hear that the president has been reading my book. He hasn't let me know what he thinks about it, but it's a safe bet that he's identifying with the book's portrayal of Churchill, not Chamberlain. But I think Bush's hero would be bemused, to say the least, by the president's wrapping himself in the Churchillian cloak. Indeed, the more you understand the historical record, the more the parallels leap out -- but they're between Bush and Chamberlain, not Bush and Churchill.

Like Bush and unlike Churchill, Chamberlain came to office with almost no understanding of foreign affairs or experience in dealing with international leaders. Nonetheless, he was convinced that he alone could bring Hitler and [Benito Mussolini](#) to heel. He surrounded himself with like-minded advisers and refused to heed anyone who told him otherwise.

In the months leading up to World War II, Chamberlain and his men saw little need to build up a strong coalition of European allies with which to confront Nazi Germany -- ignoring appeals from Churchill and others to fashion a "Grand Alliance" of nations to thwart the threat that Hitler posed to the continent.

Unlike Bush and Chamberlain, Churchill was never in favor of his country going it alone. Throughout the 1930s, while urging Britain to rearm, he also strongly supported using the newborn League of Nations -- the forerunner to today's [United Nations](#) -- to provide one-for-all-and-all-for-one security to smaller countries. After the League failed to stop fascism's march, Churchill was adamant that, to beat Hitler, [Britain](#) must form a true partnership with [France](#) and even reach agreement with the despised [Soviet Union](#), neither of which Chamberlain was willing to do.

Like Bush, Chamberlain also laid claim to unprecedented executive authority, evading the checks and balances that are supposed to constrain the office of prime minister. He scorned dissenting views, both inside and outside government. When Chamberlain arranged his face-to-face meetings with Hitler in 1938 that ended in the catastrophic [Munich](#) conference, he did so without consulting his cabinet, which, under the British system, is responsible for making policy. He also bypassed the House of Commons, leading Harold Macmillan, a future Tory prime minister who was then an anti-appeasement MP, to complain that Chamberlain was treating Parliament "like a Reichstag, to meet only to hear the orations and to register the decrees of the government of the day."

As was true of Bush and the Republicans before the 2006 midterm elections, Chamberlain and his Tories had a large majority in the Commons, and, as Macmillan noted, the prime minister tended to treat Parliament like a lapdog legislature, existing only to do his bidding. "I secretly feel he hates the House of Commons," wrote one of Chamberlain's most fervent parliamentary supporters. "Certainly he has a

deep contempt for Parliamentary interference."

Churchill, on the other hand, revered Parliament and was appalled by Chamberlain's determination to dominate the Commons in the late 1930s. Churchill considered himself first and foremost "a child" and "servant" of the House of Commons and strongly believed in the legislature's constitutional role to oversee the executive (even when, after becoming prime minister, he often railed against MPs who criticized him). In August 1939, when Chamberlain rammed through a two-month parliamentary adjournment just weeks before the war began, Churchill -- then still a backbencher -- exploded with anger in the House, calling the prime minister's move "disastrous," "pathetic" and shameful." He encouraged his anti-appeasement colleagues to mount similar attacks against Chamberlain, and when one of them, Ronald Cartland, called the prime minister a dictator to his face in the same debate, Churchill congratulated Cartland with an enthusiastic, "Well done, my boy, well done!"

Likewise, Churchill almost certainly would look askance at the Bush administration's years-long campaign to shut down public debate over the "war on terror" and the conflict in Iraq -- tactics markedly similar to Chamberlain's attempts to quiet his opponents. Like Bush and his aides, Chamberlain badgered and intimidated the press, restricted journalists' access to sources and claimed that anyone who dared criticize the government was guilty of disloyalty and damaging the national interest. Just as Bush has done, Chamberlain authorized the wiretapping of citizens without court authorization; Churchill was among those whose phones were tapped by the prime minister's subordinates.

Churchill, by contrast, believed firmly in the sanctity of individual liberties and the need to protect them from government encroachment. That's not to say that he was never guilty of infringing on them himself. In June 1940, when a Nazi invasion of Britain seemed imminent, he ordered the internment of more than 20,000 enemy aliens living on British soil, most of them refugees from Hitler's and Mussolini's fascist regimes. But as the invasion scare abated over the next few months, the vast majority were released, also by his order. "The key word in any understanding of [Winston Churchill](#) is the simple word 'Liberty,' " wrote Eric Seal, Churchill's principal private secretary during the early years of the war. "He intensely disliked, and reacted violently against, all attempts to regiment and dictate opinion. . . . He demanded for himself freedom to follow his own star, and he stood out for a like liberty for all men."

Writing about Churchill and Chamberlain, I've discovered, is like administering a Rorschach test to one's readers. People see in Churchill and Chamberlain what they want to see. They draw parallels between the 1930s and the events of today according to their own political philosophy. I've received congratulatory letters and e-mails from people who see similarities between the current U.S. woes in Iraq and Chamberlain's disastrous conduct of the so-called phony war in 1939-40. But I've also gotten fan mail from readers who favorably compare the Tory rebels' courageous fight against Chamberlain to the Bush administration's campaign against those opposing the Iraq war. Among those who've written me in praise of the book are Bush adviser [Karl Rove](#) and Howard Wolfson, the communications director of [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#)'s presidential campaign.

The president no doubt has his own Churchill. "He was resolute," Bush has remarked. "He was tough. He knew what he believed." But Churchill would snort, I believe, at the administration's equation of "Islamofascism," an amorphous, ill-defined movement of killers forced to resort to terrorism by their lack of military might, to [Nazi Germany](#), a global power that had already conquered several countries before Churchill took office in 1940. Still, key members of the Bush administration have compared critics of the wars on terrorism and in [Iraq](#) to the appeasers of the 1930s, thus implicitly equating their boss and themselves to Churchill and the "troublesome young men" who helped bring him to power. During bleak days in Iraq, the administration's hawks can be forgiven for hoping that history will show them to be as far-sighted about a gathering storm as Churchill was in the 1930s.

But history has its own ways, and we cannot make the long-dead titans we admire give us their modern blessing. As the world's two most prominent and powerful democracies, the United States and Britain had a responsibility to serve as exemplars of democracy for the rest of the world, Churchill believed.

But to be fitting role models, he argued, both countries had to do their best to ensure that the "title deeds of freedom" were strongly safeguarded within their own boundaries. "Let us preach what we practice," he declared in his 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech in Fulton, [Mo.](#) "But let us also practice what we preach."

contact@lynneolson.com

Lynne Olson, a former White House correspondent for the [Baltimore Sun](#), is the author or coauthor of four books of history.

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