



Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom by Thomas E. Ricks.

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In *Churchill and Orwell*, Thomas Ricks' explores the influence of his subjects on Western democracies in the dark days of World War II and the early Cold War.

[They] led the way, politically and intellectually, in responding to the twin totalitarian threats of fascism and communism.... When so many of their peers gave up on democracy as a failure, neither man ever lost sight of the value of the individual ... and all that that means: the right to dissent from the majority, the right even to be persistently wrong, the right to distrust the power of the majority, and the need to assert that high officials might be in error.... (3, 5)

In addition, Ricks argues that the careers of Winston Churchill (1874-1965) and George Orwell (1903-50) continue to be instructive in our own times:

As we deal with terrorism, global warming, domestic inequality, and racism, and also with panicky politicians and demagogic leaders, we would do well to remember how these two men reacted to the overwhelming events of their own time. They were especially good at recognizing the delusions of their own social sets.... (266)

Ricks's thesis is that Churchill and Orwell helped create the post-World War II liberal, democratic, economically prosperous states we live in today.

Though the book's sixteen chapters are apportioned relatively evenly, Churchill gets the most ink. The author espouses the "Great Man" theory of history, which holds that an individual can alter the course of human events. While Churchill's influence on history was *direct*, well documented and understood, Orwell's was *indirect* and remains mostly ill-understood. In alternating chapters, Ricks describes the early lives, personal relationships, and professional careers of both men.

Churchill was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during the most traumatic event in human history—the Second World War. Along with US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, he led the Western democracies to ultimate victory. Following the fall of France and the "Miracle of Dunkirk" in 1940, Churchill—while Britain stood alone—rallied his people and those of the British Empire to the cause of defeating Nazi Germany and, arguably, preserved Western democracy.

Churchill warned, too, of the expansion of Communism, recognizing early on the threat posed by the USSR's postwar emergence as a superpower. His "Iron Curtain" speech (5 Mar. 1946) marked the beginning of the Cold War. Ricks understands that he is retelling a history already well-told by many fine scholars, but his analyses of Churchill's decisions, speeches, actions, and their results are clear and compelling.

1. A Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and historian, Ricks is the author of, among other books, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (NY: Penguin, 2006), review at *MiWSR* 2006.10.01; *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (id., 2009); and *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (id., 2012).

George Orwell was one of Britain's greatest twentieth-century writers. His classic novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), as well as numerous scintillating and trenchant essays² remain highly influential in western popular and political culture. Ricks detects two leitmotifs in all Orwell's works: "the abuse of power in the modern world by both the left and the right ... [and] the relationship between the state and the individual" (250). While Churchill's contributions are facts of history, Orwell's may be more lasting in their effects. The dystopic world envisioned in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may be upon us. "Orwell saw that people might become slaves of the state, but he did not foresee that they might also become something else that would horrify him—products of corporations, data resources to be endlessly mined and peddled elsewhere" (263). In other words, corporations, Facebook, Google, Amazon, et alia have become Big Brother.

Orwell's most lasting contribution to Western culture may be the least noted. It is often observed that he is one of the few writers to have contributed words and phrases to our language—"doublethink," "Big Brother," "memory hole," "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." (262)

Ricks concludes that "The struggle to see things as they are is perhaps the fundamental driver of Western civilization" (269). In a time of existential peril, Churchill and Orwell helped citizens of Western civilization perceive and react to the threats facing them. In the age of Donald Trump, "fake news," omnipresent social media, vicious tweets, and rabid party ideologues, Thomas Ricks's salutary warning deserves serious and careful consideration.

2. See, esp., George Orwell, *Essays* (NY: Knopf, 2002).