

## Charles Salmans on The Splendid and the Vile, by Erik Larson

Back in 1985 when it first came out, I read Jock Colville's wartime diary, "The Fringes of Power," which is wonderful. It covers the time when Colville, recently appointed to the British foreign service, was made an aide to Neville Chamberlain at about age 25. He was very wary of Churchill and, along with the rest of the British establishment, would have preferred Halifax. But he soon came to realize Churchill's talent and unparalleled leadership, despite the fact that Churchill was maddening to work for. Colville went on to serve in this same capacity as prime minister's aide when Clement Attlee defeated Churchill and again when Churchill in old age briefly once again became prime minister -- in other words, he held this post from 1939 to 1955.

Jock Colville's book is now out of print, but I have a copy if you would ever like to read it. It's about 720 pages. I loved the book, and Larson had some wonderful passages to quote from.

I think one reason that Mary Churchill's diary was previously ignored was that historians who have pored over every contemporary account of the war years and the observations of Churchill's circle found her musings as an 18 year old "too frivolous." Of course Larson realized the interest readers would have about what Churchill's personal life was like in the first year of his premiership.

Finally, an observation about Churchill that is separate from the period covered by Larson and the scope of "The Splendid and the Vile."

When I lived in England, I was at first surprised that a number of my British friends didn't idolize the man as do so many Americans. The reason, I think, was that they had first-hand experience with a longer arc of his career, not just the period which was Britain's, and his, "finest hour."

In the 1930s, many in Parliament, including members of Churchill's own party, realized that India could not continue to be ruled, as it had been, as a colony in which Indians had almost no voice in their government. Perhaps the American revolution, the example of Canada, and the more recent example of Ireland had taught a number of MPs that stonewalling was not the best policy and that concessions early on could preserve British influence in the long run.

In any event, Churchill was extremely racist as it related to the people of India and in speech after speech railed against any concession or devolution of power no matter how modest. I think that extremism about India was costly to him as he warned about Hitler, where his instincts were of course correct.

Generally overlooked, because it was followed so closely by the fall of France in May, was the ineptitude of the British landings in Norway in April, 1940. Far too slow, far too little, and the British were quickly forced to evacuate by German troops. That happened when Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty, and had not the Nazi invasion of France and the Low Countries followed so quickly, he probably would have been removed from his post, especially given his connection to Gallipoli. Then there was Dieppe in August 1942, in which Canadian forces were sacrificed, much as the ANZAC troops had been sacrificed at Gallipoli. What was the realistic objective of Dieppe?

The book covers the period of Churchill at his best, but I would argue that by the end of 1943 his leadership was beginning to falter, in part because America was becoming the dominant player in the war. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if the allies had not got bogged down in fighting up the Italian peninsula, a battlefield ideally suited to defense as the allies had to take one mountain range, only to confront another. Not exactly a "soft underbelly" as Churchill described it.

Marshall and FDR had to keep fending off Churchill's pleas for invasion of Greece and fighting up through the Balkans as opposed to the landing in France. Another little known British adventure in September 1943, that Churchill insisted upon, was the Dodecanese campaign (small islands off the coast of Turkey such as Kos and Ceros). Marshall absolutely refused to divert air cover and landing craft to this adventure because he knew resources had to be husbanded for Normandy. The Dodecanese campaign was an unmitigated disaster, with 4,800 British casualties in two months, and another British evacuation. Due to German air strength, the British lost 6 destroyers, 2 cruisers, and three subs among other craft. Up until that point, the Germans had left the Jewish population of 1,800 in the islands alone. They were rounded up and 1,500 died.

In the election of 1945, Americans couldn't believe that Churchill was forced from office. But he was tone deaf as to the postwar aspirations of the electorate who had sacrificed so much and who had seen how the country could mobilize for war. They

wanted the same mobilization for housing and job security. Instead, Churchill was focused on the Soviet threat, and Clement Attlee was elected.

Harry Truman and the Democrats had a better handle on the pulse of the American people. The transition to peace was difficult in the US as well, but was eased by the GI bill, including education and low cost mortgages, etc. Of course it also helped that our manufacturing capacity was 50% of the world total and that the dollar became the world's reserve currency.

\*\*\*\*\*