

Mr. Churchill in the White House: The Untold Story of a Prime Minister and Two Presidents by Robert Schmuhl (Norton 2024) Book Review

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Robert Schmuhl's *Mr. Churchill in the White House* provides a remarkable and previously unknown account of episodes in the twentieth century, during which the White House served as a "home away from home" for British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The text attests to Schmuhl's well-honed skill of interpreting and providing insights into the inner workings of public figures through a masterful assemblage and decoding of vignettes, anecdotes, correspondence, and journals, including the written commentaries and reflections of witnesses—whether to pivotal events or to the behind-the-scenes developments that shaped them.

Schmuhl, long before serving as the Walter H. Annenberg–Edmund P. Joyce Chair in American Studies and Journalism at the University of Notre Dame, had already sharpened his talents in explicating and framing the attitudes and intentions—whether noble or flawed—of the individuals he has chosen to profile. He developed a five-decade-long friendship with Theodore Hesburgh, Notre Dame's towering academic leader, who, over his thirty-five-year tenure as president, instilled in the university and its stakeholders an innovative and compelling sense of institutional identity. Hesburgh's leadership attracted a world-class faculty, and led to the expansion and modernization of an already enviable physical campus, and to the building of a massive endowment, making Notre Dame one of the wealthiest universities in the world.

Hesburgh grew increasingly convinced that Schmuhl understood him better than anyone else and could best explain what made Hesburgh "Hesburgh," honored with both the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal; the first priest to serve as President of the Harvard University Board of Overseers; Chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission—dismissed by Richard Nixon for daring to criticize him; and the recipient of more than 150 honorary doctorates for his contributions to education, religion, civil rights, and government.

In his final years, Hesburgh approached Schmuhl, expressing his desire for him to author his definitive biography. Humbled and touched by the request, Schmuhl reluctantly declined due to preset commitments. Yet, he could not entirely set aside Hesburgh's wish. The result was *Fifty Years with Father Hesburgh: On and Off the Record* (2016), a moving and deeply personal study of the priestly leader whom Schmuhl had known from his student days through Hesburgh's retirement. Even in later years, despite physical impediments—including near blindness—Hesburgh remained steadfast in his convictions, deeply engaged with contemporary challenges, welcoming visitors to his office, and always open to sharing his thoughts. Schmuhl met with him regularly over five decades, preserving and chronicling the insights of a remarkable life.

Schmuhl's primary research interest has been the relationship between American political life and popular communication. He is uniquely gifted as a storyteller of public service and public servants.

The propriety of this characterization of his focus is reflected in *Mr. Churchill in the White House* (2024). Just prior to this latest work, he wrote *The Glory and the Burden: The American Presidency from FDR to Trump* (2019), profiling each of the presidencies within this timeline of U.S. history. As expected, Schmuhl did not shy away from casting a critical light on ill-fated or flawed presidencies of that period. In *The Glory and the Burden*, he also outlined in detail his reservations about existing protocols in the Democratic and Republican parties' presidential primaries, particularly how early-voting states influence the later primaries and signal to candidates where to focus resources to improve their chances. Schmuhl also outlined his concerns about America's continued reliance on the Electoral College to make the final call in the selection of each American president. He advocates for states allowing their electors the option to vote for the winner of the popular vote rather than simply represent the vote in their home state.

No doubt, Schmuhl's study of the modern presidency provided an entrée for his latest writing on Churchill, a figure whom he has long admired. In *Churchill in the White House*, the author studies the relationships fostered by Winston Churchill with American Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dwight David Eisenhower and reflects on uplifting and disappointing outcomes of those chapters in the history of what Churchill described as the US-UK "Special Relationship." Schmuhl's account allows the reader to appreciate the ways in which the rise of the United States and the observable and inevitable decline of the British Empire, for which Churchill lived each day, led him to ponder and propose strategies to leverage Britain's weakened hand in the "American Century." He advocated not just for another alliance, but even potentially a formalized union with the United States, the world's uncontested power of the time. Churchill managed to "float" this proposal in his commencement address to Harvard's graduating class of 1943. The ostensible downgrade in British primacy may have been easier for Churchill to accede than many of his countrymen because of his American roots on his mother's side. Indeed, Schmuhl reminds readers that, on December 27, 1941, three weeks after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Churchill became the first foreign head of state invited to address the United States Congress in the twentieth century. He pointed out to the Members of Congress who welcomed him that his "American forbears" had "for so many generations played their part in the United States" and then quipped to his hosts that "if my father had been American and my mother British, instead of the other way around, I might have got here on my own."

In traditional diplomacy, the period leading up to the signing of summit agreements, peace treaties, or even sweeping trade agreements between heads of state, is typically precluded by extended deliberations amongst the advisors and envoys of the heads of state and government involved. A president and prime minister, such as FDR and Churchill, would normally only preside over a celebratory final ceremony where congratulatory remarks and the final signing of accords were featured. Schmuhl's *Churchill in the White House* contrasts such protocols with the bold, preemptive diplomatic plunge taken by Churchill, following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. In his desperation to stop Hitler's continued onslaught against Britain, Churchill circumvented the normal pomp, bureaucracy, and protocols, crossing "the Pond" himself to engage Roosevelt

directly and repeatedly in the White House and even the Roosevelt Estate in Hyde Park, New York to “seal” an ever evolving “deal.”

At moments in their partnership, Schmuhl relates how the two world leaders functioned virtually as co-leaders of a single government with Roosevelt, holder of the key assets needed to pursue the campaign, often deferring to Churchill, the *chargé d'affaires*, who dared to summon and provide direction not only to his own entourage but to members of the President's cabinet as well in the unfolding war effort against the Axis powers in Europe and Northern Africa.

On December 22, 1941, just fifteen days after Roosevelt's declaration of war against Japan, Germany, and Italy, Churchill arrived in the United States, choosing to stay in the Rose Bedroom on the White House second floor, rather than the Lincoln Bedroom recommended by Mrs. Roosevelt, because he found it more spacious and accommodating to his needs. The Rose Bedroom would serve as the base camp for each of Churchill's subsequent visits. On his first visit, he was scheduled for a one-week stay but he ended up remaining Stateside for twenty-four days. Between 1941 and 1944 Churchill returned to Washington to claim the Rose Room five more times. On four occasions, Churchill would also travel to “Springwood,” the Roosevelt family home in Hyde Park, New York, where FDR was born and raised, and looked forward to return to for solace once each month throughout most of his Presidency.

Schmuhl chronicles the ways in which Roosevelt discovered an empathic comrade in arms in Churchill who, prior to but like him, as the head of government of a world power, even if a diminishing one, had sustained the shock and yet resolutely responded, while underprepared, to an offensive of massive proportions in accordance with the mantle assigned to them as leader of a nation under assault. While FDR and Churchill both loved storytelling, they contrasted sharply in their approaches to war and to politics. Churchill, ever the historian, was a master at contextualizing the present through the optic of the past. FDR, visionary and master of political maneuvers, referenced not the past but the future in strategizing and in addressing challenges, always carefully weighing how best to leverage present circumstances to contribute to his architecture of the future.

Each regarded the other as the greatest leader at a critical juncture in history. Schmuhl relates that Roosevelt trusted Churchill to such an extent that, when FDR absented himself from Washington for a few days in September 1943 in favor of his beloved Hyde Park, he entrusted the White House to Churchill, the resident-in-chief. Churchill, in FDR's absence but with his seemingly unqualified support, convened a conference of high-ranking British and US cabinet officials in the White House to review plans for the “Allied” or what FDR, with Churchill's support, dubbed the “United Nations” plans for the invasion of Italy as the “Grand Alliance” crept its way towards victory over the Axis powers.

Britain had been targeted and devastated by German attacks following the 1940 Nazi aggression against Poland. In contrast, the United States' “Day of Infamy” had been perpetrated not by a German but a Japanese air attack that had decimated its meager naval assets. Although the United

States' seeming principal enemy was credibly Japan, Schmuhl studies Churchill's sincere yet persistent campaign to convince FDR that the Allied priority target had first to be Hitler's annihilation and only then could Japan's demise follow. Churchill, who functioned not only as Britain's Prime Minister but also as its Defense Minister, helped to shape the Allied focus and operations in Africa, and the offensive on Europe's Southern Flank, leading to a costly liberation of Italy, when German resistance proved far stronger than Churchill had anticipated. Unlike Eisenhower and Roosevelt, Churchill viewed the Southern Flank offensive as the strategic priority and he managed to drag the Allied forces' collective "foot," postponing the launch of D-Day or the cross-Channel attack on the German-Axis stronghold until 1944, an offensive which Stalin had been pleading for since the United States' entry into the War in order to deflect Hitler's relentless onslaught against Moscow, which he unleashed in 1940.

For Churchill, Britain needed not just to defend itself militarily but to find a way forward that would allow it to maintain its global relevance and prominence. Churchill's 1943 Harvard Commencement address, already referenced, also included in its entirety in the appendices of the book, divulged Churchill's calculated aspirations for the strengthening of ties between the two powers that could even lead to a formalized federation. Through this initiative, which Churchill strongly favored, one can read between the lines that the United Kingdom would retain its voice as part of the world's new principal power. "The English speaking peoples," as Churchill liked to frame it, and their shared cultural heritage, could thus provide the pivotal thrust for what he viewed as the world's geopolitical destiny, reconfiguring and yet reaffirming the United Kingdom's cultural, linguistic, political, military, and economic footprint.

For his part, Roosevelt, the visionary, came to fix his sights on a different prize—the world itself, that would resonate with the American ideal and FDR's vision of Four Freedoms—Freedom of Worship, Freedom of Speech, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. To achieve this goal, Roosevelt decided, as the war proceeded, to become more reliant on a new consort, the Soviet Union. The realization of an America-inspired, indeed, an FDR-inspired United Nations System, required Roosevelt to forge an alliance with Stalin and the Soviet Union as his principal partner. FDR grew convinced, though somewhat deluded, that he might induce Stalin to embrace his vision. As the war progressed and the defeat of the Axis Powers increasingly became a given, Roosevelt seemed, in the eyes of the British Prime Minister, to prioritize his relationship with Josef Stalin over Sir Winston. Schmuhl relates an occasion when Churchill found himself the brunt of an FDR joke designed to cull favor with Stalin. Churchill inferred from this and other gestures that Roosevelt was prepared to downplay Britain's role in the future world order and scale down the Prime Minister's level of participation in some of the interaction between Stalin and Roosevelt, which led to an apparent cooling in the relationship between Churchill and FDR.

When FDR, the man for whom Churchill had crossed the Atlantic six times, passed away in April 1945, Churchill opted against another voyage across the Atlantic to honor and bid a final farewell to his partner in their shared charge against tyranny. Schmuhl's account suggests that the two leaders' trusting relationship had begun to sour because of Churchill's sense of having been cast

aside. Instead of prioritizing the special relationship, Churchill painfully came to recognize that, with the winding down of the war in Europe, FDR envisioned Russia, rather than Britain, as his key partner in building the United Nations System and in facilitating its implementation. Woodrow Wilson, chief architect of the League of Nations, witnessed the collapse of his dream in 1919 when, by a vote of 49 against and 35 in favor, the United States Senate voted against American participation. FDR, feeling that more than the United States Senate which would strongly endorse the creation of the United Nations in 1945, he needed “Uncle Joe,” as the Soviet dictator was known affectionately in circles in the West, to commit to the project. Churchill suffered the humiliation and pain of a jilted lover in the process and yet would later lament that his failure to attend FDR’s funeral as the most serious *faux pas* of his entire political career.

My wife’s grandfather, New York Congressman Hamilton Fish III, and FDR, beginning with FDR’s creation and implementation of the New Deal, were bitter enemies. The hostility between Roosevelt and Fish would worsen as Hamilton Fish, then a sitting member of Congress in a district that included Roosevelt’s beloved Hyde Park, recognized that in spite of his assurances of peace, and his 1940 campaign promise to Americans that “Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars,” Roosevelt was subtly sending signals that the United States would soon find itself enveloped in war against Japan and Germany. In his writings, Fish also claimed that Roosevelt had shared with those in his inner circle that his ultimate ambition was not the United States’ presidency; he claimed that FDR wanted to be the first Secretary General of the United Nations. Valid assertion or not, FDR was a key architect of the United Nations project and he understood that, without the support of the Soviet Union, the formation of the United Nations, a dream that FDR clung to at least as much as Wilson did to the League of Nations, would be out of the question.

In the later part of *Mr. Churchill in the White House*, Schmuhl turns his attention to the relationship between Winston Churchill and Dwight David Eisenhower whom Churchill had partnered with during the Allied Offensive on Europe led by Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander. In the Eisenhower presidency, Churchill, who was re-elected Prime Minister in 1951, would again find refuge in the White House’s Rose Bedroom following the inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower as President in 1953. Churchill, ever wanting to preserve a role for Great Britain as a major player in the Post World War era, aspired anew to lobby Eisenhower, as he had Roosevelt, regarding his hope for a greater and formalized US-UK partnership going forward. On his agenda in their 1954 White House meetings was a proposal for an improbable summit amongst Eisenhower, Stalin, and Churchill. Eisenhower tactfully deflected Churchill’s proposal and the Prime Minister returned to 10 Downing Street with his plans for a diplomatic triumph dashed. He stepped down as Prime Minister in 1955 although he remained a Member of Parliament until 1965.

Churchill returned to the Eisenhower White House once again in 1959. On this occasion, Eisenhower could welcome him not with tact and hesitation but as an esteemed and valued friend. There was no longer any jockeying for position. Eisenhower went out of his way to convey his respect and affection for the former Prime Minister, World Statesman, and friend. Schmuhl quotes Anne Whitman, Eisenhower’s personal secretary, who observed that Eisenhower related to

Churchill “like a son would treat an aging father and was just darling with him,” even bringing Churchill to his own “Hyde Park” in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where he personally drove Churchill in a golf cart around his 200-acre property and then escorted him to the Gettysburg Battlefield.

At the time of Churchill’s passing in January 1965, Eisenhower did not repeat the Churchillian error of abstaining from paying tribute to one of the most important figures of the Twentieth Century. He flew to Great Britain to attend Churchill’s funeral and, in a broadcasted eulogy to the Prime Minister, he observed that Britain and the United States could both commemorate Churchill as a “soldier, statesman, and citizen.” The title of “citizen” must be credited to President John F. Kennedy, a World War II naval veteran of the European front, who, as Schmuhl points out, in April 1963, just seven months prior to his assassination and less than two years before Churchill’s passing, took the extraordinary step of conferring honorary American citizenship upon Winston Churchill. At least on a personal level, Churchill’s dream of the united English-speaking peoples thus became a reality. Schmuhl writes that, although Churchill was the 1953 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, he considered the conferral of honorary American citizenship to be his greatest public recognition.

In compiling this unique text on a largely unstudied segment of Churchill’s life, Schmuhl often provides his readers with not just one original source’s recollection of an event but three, four, or even five. In preparing this study of Churchill, FDR, and Eisenhower, Schmuhl has deftly navigated diaries, personal notes, memoirs, and the formal writings of countless public figures and private individuals who share their takes on various incidents in the lives and encounters of these three historical figures.

Probably more than most presidencies, the team effort of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, a couple whose relationship saw its share of turbulence and triumph, needs to be studied. They did not necessarily agree on all matters. Eleanor chided FDR for his silence on the continuing lynching of blacks and for his decision, in spite of Eleanor’s fierce opposition, to go forward with the detention of US citizens of Japanese descent during World War II.

Schmuhl shares an encounter between Eleanor and Churchill, where having sensed her reservations to his handling of matters in the White House, and potentially to matters of State as well, Churchill remarked to her that she had never really “approved” of him and Eleanor quickly retorted that she did not recall ever having “disapproved” of him. It may have been of interest to have pursued the ups and downs of the “Eleanor Factor” in the “Special Relationship.” One wonders whether Eleanor, had Churchill not relied so heavily, as Schmuhl points out, on a circle exclusively composed of males in the pursuit of his agenda, could have helped Churchill to convince FDR of the primacy of the US-UK relationship.

Schmuhl references Churchill’s claim that “No lover ever studied every whim of his mistress as I did those of President Roosevelt.” Ironically, one finds an apparent and ironic lacuna in Mr.

Churchill's analogy—the First Lady herself. Throughout his entire life, FDR spent a grand total of approximately three weeks in Great Britain. For her part, Eleanor Roosevelt studied in London from 1899 to 1902 in the exclusive Allenswood Academy for girls. The Academy's Headmistress Marie Souvestre mentored Eleanor during those three years. The First Lady would reference Allenswood and Souvestre as foundational in the formulating of her core values, in the fostering of her appreciation for social causes and civil rights, and in shaping the defining dimensions of her public leadership role. Eleanor may have had a greater fondness and far more of an affinity and empathy for Churchill's celebrated future vision for the "English speaking peoples" than he calibrated in mapping out the best way to approach FDR and gain support for the Churchillian view of the future world order.

The "Big Picture" provided by Schmuhl of the Prime Minister's relationship with two American presidencies is needed even to explore this and surely many other tangential questions invited by his study. We are indebted to the author for sifting through and proffering so many unknown dimensions of this chapter of history. He provides his readers with so much to appreciate, reflect on, and speculate about as one arrives, as one must, to the closing pages of this significant work. Schmuhl has provided historians and their emulators with a personalized study of statecraft at the highest level, conducted in the midst of a seismic shift in geopolitics, shaped, to a large extent, by the decisions and behaviors of the personalities once again brought to life by Schmuhl.