

What Would Winston Do?

Boris Johnson recalls Winston Churchill as he confronts today's challenges

By Andy Ross

1 Boris on Churchill

Boris Johnson, who served a disappointing term as UK foreign secretary from July 2016 to July 2018, paid fulsome homage to his hero Sir Winston Churchill in his delightful 2014 book *The Churchill Factor*.

From the start of the introduction – “Churchill was quite the greatest statesman that Britain had ever produced” – to the last phrase of the book – “I am firmly with those who think there has been no one remotely like him before or since” – Johnson showed himself to be a true fan of The Greatest Englishman.

Like Jesus, Napoleon and Hitler, Churchill has had a huge number of books written about him. Johnson's book is one of the better ones, though as he freely admits it's not a patch on the solid biography published in 2001 by his distinguished parliamentary forebear Roy Jenkins, let alone on the long row of volumes produced over several decades by the historian Sir Martin Gilbert. Call it instead an inspired career move.

Boris “BoJo” Johnson has obvious ambitions to become British prime minister, although his secretarial stint left him with a bad press that will haunt him not only in Britain but also in many capital cities around the world. His ambition still burns, I confidently presume, though his prospects for launching a comeback from the back benches seem uncertain. He does, however, have a trump card to play – he has US president Donald Trump on his side.

Churchill too suffered some ups and downs during his long parliamentary career. In 1915, after the disastrous Dardanelles campaign led to the bloodbath at Gallipoli, he looked ruined, but within a year he was back. In his book, Johnson dutifully and candidly chronicles Churchill's cock-ups over the Gold Standard, India, the abdication of the King, and the catastrophic Norway campaign of 1940 that should have finished him, until the summer of 1940 brought a quite astounding personal salvation. You can almost hear Johnson saying, “Look, he triumphed – and so can I!”

Johnson's book is not just fun to read but also a warmly appreciative tribute to the great human qualities of his subject. Up close and personal, Churchill was by all accounts a truly lovable character, despite his moods and caprices, and no reader of Johnson's words can fail to catch that side of the parliamentarian turned imperial warlord. What Johnson portrays

less vividly, in my humble opinion, are the steely warrior qualities of the man who masterminded the greatest military exertion ever undertaken by the British Empire.

Churchill defied Hitler through the Ardennes Blitzkrieg, the Dunkirk evacuation, the Fall of France, and the Battle of Britain. He did so not as an act of vainglorious bluster, even though he faced the real risk of utter defeat, but because his military background gave him good reason to expect that an island nation with a strong navy and air force, a huge empire, and a powerful friend in the United States could indeed hold out for long enough to assure final victory. All it took – and this is where Churchill's greatest achievement lay – was to prompt a sufficiently urgent and thorough mobilisation of the home population to sustain his ruinously expensive resistance against the Nazi war machine.

Churchill's achievement in motivating and organising the British people to live through their finest hour was unique. No conceivable scenario in a modern Britain shorn of both its industrial might and its imperial glory, particularly one orchestrated by the genial journalist and bon vivant Boris Johnson, can reconstruct a shadow of that hour, whatever the provocation from the diehards of Brexit.

2 Boris on Brexit

It is well known and amply reflected upon that Johnson was conflicted about whether the European Union deserved to count the United Kingdom among its members. As a young journalist in Brussels, he waxed lyrical in his lampoonery of the excesses of the Brussels bureaucracy and surely felt this was not a club for a nation as splendid as his own, but he had enough sense to see the economic benefits, even long after the Common Market had morphed into an ever-closer union that left old-school nationalists searching wildly for the exit. During the run-up to the 2016 referendum, Boris wrote two columns, one arguing that Britain should leave the EU and the other arguing the case for remaining, and only then plumped for the Brexiteers.

For many people in Britain, it was a case of head versus heart. The head said the reasonable benefits of general prosperity and continental peace favoured remaining, while the heart of anyone who stirred to the call of Queen and country felt the romantic lure of a more sovereign destiny. Boris fell headlong for the romance and soon began to rhapsodise about his beloved state of independence with effulgently passionate rhetoric.

Without Johnson's weighty presence, the Brexiteers would surely have cut a thin and unconvincing dash in British politics, and Theresa May and others were right to see him as the figurehead and champion of the Leaver cause in Westminster (leaving Nigel Farage to cut an execrable figure in the limbo of the European Parliament). Boris has bottom, in the parliamentary slang, and he mobilised it to wave the Brexit flag with all the gusto his new role as foreign secretary allowed. Boris was the silverback gorilla among the buccaneers of Brexit.

The big challenge for the British government in the summer of 2018 is to drum up support for the plan detailed in Theresa May's new "softer Brexit" white paper. Rallied against the

Conservative softies is a gang of hard Brexiteers who would risk the fragile gains of a decade of austerity on a final push toward the sunlit uplands of a sovereign nation striking trade deals around the globe in proud defiance of the grey suits in Brussels. Out on his summer break, no doubt plotting wicked schemes to overturn May's plan in an autumn of the long knives, is the diminished but by no means impotent figure of Boris the Brexiteer.

In terms of party-political tactics, Johnson has a possible path to power. Conflicts between proponents of soft and hard Brexit within the Conservative party could prompt a caucus of parliamentarians to lose confidence in Theresa May, triggering a leadership contest within the party. Boris stands out among a field of highly talented but relatively uncharismatic hard and soft candidates, and he could conceivably win the vote and become prime minister.

A Johnson government could ruin relations between the UK and the EU. Boris and Trump would sing a populist duet, vying with each other in chorus to insult pious liberals in Europe with ever more visceral and vulgar invective. Britain would then crash out of the EU on the hardest possible terms, no doubt saving £40 billion but also creating what people on both sides of the Channel would experience as a British national emergency, with dire shortages of food and medicines, hopelessly blocked ports, confusion in Whitehall, ill-tempered pushing and shoving with Brussels, and possibly violent mass protests on the streets.

Winston Churchill was sterner and wiser than the Brexiteers. He loved France and admired Germany, supported a United States of Europe so strongly that he counts as one of the founding fathers of the European project, and on top of that had a lifelong respect for the hard work of establishing a solid industrial and scientific foundation for any endeavour, such as NATO, to secure the common defence. By contrast, as prime minister, Boris would likely favour flamboyant gestures and florid rhetoric to kiss up to Trump and kick down the Europeans, weakening military and security cooperation and losing any Churchillian magic he may once have had in shameless showmanship.

3 The Trump Factor

President Donald Trump is the wild card in any attempt to play out the near future in global politics. The chemistry between the US president and British prime minister Boris Johnson would set the course of the Anglo-American special relationship for a generation. Boris is handsomely up to the challenge of bonding with the great dealmaker by deploying his proven Bullingdon Boys charm in the service of the nation, but he may not be up to tempering the bond with sufficiently steely sobriety.

Trump would respond to the blast of BoJo's special magic not like a trembling virgin but like King Kong in love. The new First Couple, with their matching blond bouffant hair crimes, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, would perform a double act on the world stage as they sang out in praise of their heroic struggles against the Anglophone world's dastardly Chinese and European foes, but the global audience might soon be booing and whistling in loud derision. No waving of the respective red, white and blues could cover for the threadbare state of the US and UK social fabric, woven as it is on a populist loom that looks desperately antiquated in a world where old ways are being trashed by colossal global corporations.

The great man theory of history has been held in some suspicion at least since Leo Tolstoy sought to play down the role of Napoleon in inadvertently expediting one of Mother Russia's greatest victories, but Boris is still a true believer. He idolises Churchill to the point where he sees world history as turning on the personal success of Churchill's bulldog defiance of Hitler Germany. Similarly, we may reasonably infer, he will likely see the Trump phenomenon as representing at least potentially a pivot of huge significance for the history of the West, and therefore will see his own future influence on the Artist of the Deal as an opportunity of world-historical proportions.

This shot at historical fame can only be a powerful inducement for Boris, the buccaneer of Brexit, to take the helm of HMS Britannia and steer her toward the Americas. The chance to forge the destiny of a generation of world citizens is granted only rarely to British premiers, and the last such chance was taken with some aplomb by his hero Churchill. The challenge Boris faces is to shape the clay of popular sentiment, which Trump stroked and punched and soothed so deftly in America as to make the Republican base his own, but to do so on both sides of the Atlantic, among Trump Republicans as well as British Conservatives, to sculpt a pot of pleasing proportions that might do some good in the world.

The challenge is one that the former mayor Boris Johnson, whose parliamentary initiation into the art of statesmanship went no more smoothly than that of his hero Churchill, may find hard to comprehend, let alone to meet. For it is a lamentable fact that the Westminster parliament, even for a chap with time at Eton and Oxford behind him, is not the ideal place to get a training in the task of tackling the supreme test of setting the destiny of the western world on a historic new course that will command the admiration and respect of a global public for centuries to come. To master that task, a steelier soul forged in the heat of more than parliamentary skirmishes is required, as again the experience of young Winston, this time on the far-flung battlefields of empire, will attest.

Donald Trump graduated from his own boot camp in the American underworld of real estate and gambling, of hustling and money laundering, of porn stars and lowlife show business, where dogs ate dogs and only the meanest rats survived. He can no more be tamed by parliamentary manners than Hitler could be tamed by British prime minister Neville Chamberlain. If Boris wants to ride the wave of populism across the western world, he will have to call on strengths more brutal than any he learned in the Bullingdon Club.

4 The European Union

Boris Johnson was born in New York and schooled in Brussels before he went to Eton and Oxford. With his pedigree, the higher calling of global citizenship should ring more insistently than the Church of England bells that call provincial Conservatives to prayer. One might fondly imagine he would harken to the call of European transnationalism and to the noble cause of establishing a United States of Europe on the old continent, heedless of the competing cries of breakaway nationalists staging an insurrection on the British Isles.

But Boris the romantic is too in thrall to the imperial heritage of the island race that once bestrode an Anglophone world of dominions and colonies and outposts stretching out to the

ends of the Earth to fall for that. No mere vision of a polyglot union of states on the continent stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals, especially one on which a master race once strutted until Churchill engineered its downfall, can outshine the imperial glory for Boris. For him, the European project can offer at best a template that tidies up the continental polity, so that Global Britain need only parley with one continental authority beside the strident crowd of eager customers waiting overseas for the Brexit buccaneers to strike advantageous trade deals with them.

For the record, I hope Johnson would find this depiction of his mental landscape cartoonish and unconvincing. However bitterly disappointed he may be by the machinations of the infrastructure of the European Union and however in thrall he may be to the siren calls of the empire over whose dissolution Churchill willy-nilly presided, I cannot believe that Johnson the pragmatist would fail to see the manifest strength and promise of the European Union compared with that other union, on the British Isles, where a monarch of Hanoverian descent rules sovereign over an establishment as far past its best-before date as the rotten and crumbling palace beside the Thames in which its parliament convenes.

Only a fool or a knave in politics believes his own populist rhetoric, and we must pay Johnson the basic respect of presuming that he is neither. The project of ensuring that Europe never again falls prey to a warlord along the lines of Napoleon or Hitler, and of preparing the continent for a future where only international cooperation on an unprecedented scale can exploit the opportunities that modern technologies and industries increasingly provide, requires an ambition and an effort of the sort we see in the European Union. Nothing less will do, and we can reasonably see even cock-ups on the scale of the shambolic euro crises or the continuing confusion over how to deal with migrants as par for the course, and certainly no excuse for going wobbly on the project.

Captains of industry across the British Isles endorse the importance in their eyes of keeping Britain in the European Union. Trade today is not just in commodities from anywhere that can offer the lowest price, where a marginally lower exchange rate can seal the deal and steal the other person's lunch, but an exquisitely convoluted dance of providers in supply chains that stretch across continents and require huge investments to secure the quality and compliance the market demands. Wilful changes to customs and excise controls of the sort that Brexit will drag in its turbulent wake are toxic for the investments and the supply chain contracts that keep this dance alive.

Boris must see that the prize of peace and prosperity on the continent is worth a lot of pain and patience along the way. The question is whether Boris is man enough to see that British participation in this project is a historic opportunity of the sort that the younger Churchill, before the strain of plotting years of total war took its toll on the older man, would have grasped eagerly and pushed as hard as he could. Sinking into warm and fuzzy nostalgia for a vanished empire or hoping that a transatlantic axis with a bully boy like Trump can save the day is an abdication of the basest kind, and steely discipline of the martial variety is the best medicine to cure the condition – or to kill it.

5 NATO and Russia

Churchill was clear about the dangers of Soviet communism from the start and sought to strangle Bolshevism in the cradle by sending in British troops to fight Trotsky's new Red Army. After the war that forced Churchill to help Stalin defeat Nazi Germany on the Eastern Front, the massively bulked-up Red Army became the new threat to the entire continent. The transatlantic NATO alliance was the logical result, and it has nobly served the cause of world peace ever since.

Rather like people in postwar Britain, Soviet Russians basked in the glow of victory in their Great Patriotic War, and Russians in the new polity presided over by Vladimir Putin still bask in the afterglow. Russian nationalism is not much less threatening to continental peace than German nationalism was a century ago, and indeed it nourishes its vision on a philosophy with related roots. British nationalism is a more parochial affair, less strident and militaristic, but it nurses the same angry belligerency against foreigners and has led to what for Britain is an equally ugly outcome, namely Brexit.

Boris Johnson played his ignoble part in this sad British development. Western solidarity against bellicose neighbours like Putin's Russia is the only reliable defence in a world where military hardware for a major ground war is ruinously expensive and nuclear weapons bring the risk of uncontrolled escalation to catastrophic outcomes within days. This solidarity cannot be restricted to the level of military cooperation and security guarantees within the framework of NATO but must also expand to include legal and industrial cooperation at many levels, to embrace for example seamlessly integrated continental supply chains for weapon systems, usable and available infrastructure such as bridges and airfields for military deployments at short notice, agreements on how to handle refugees and mass casualties, and a whole lot more. Without civil cooperation at a level at least equal to that embodied in the institutions of the European Union, all this is moot, and NATO can only offer a nuclear tripwire. As Her Majesty's appointed commander-in-chief, prime minister Johnson would reflect on all this and recall what Churchill felt in May 1940.

Johnson is not a military man. He is too ensconced in a life of luxury to relish planning for megadeath scenarios in Europe. But Britain's island status will be irrelevant to its fate next time. Forget invasion barges filled with seasick troops chugging across the Channel, offering easy pickings for naval and air defences. Nuclear bombs or tons of nerve agents in freight ships in British ports, plus a few hundred shock troops inserted in key locations, plus targeted killings, plus cyberwarfare, plus fake news – the playlist is dismally familiar.

Prime minister Johnson would soon be briefed on the horror scenarios that keep military men awake at nights. Russia doesn't need to sweep Europe with massed tank formations, even if it could afford to do so. Thanks to German defence budget shortfalls and dependence on Russian gas supplies, the mere threat of massive hostile agitation would trigger a deal with EU member states that pacified the entire continent and brought a Russian political influence up to the Channel coast, for example to crush any dissent with the same brutality Putin showed against Georgia and Ukraine.

Imagine, if you will, a pact between Putin's Russia and all the EU member states, and Brexit Britain dependent on promises from the Trump administration about honouring the NATO commitment to the defence of the UK. A populist demagogue in Europe could agitate against the "rotten" establishment in the UK and threaten a "sanitising" intervention. Trump may then decide to jilt Boris and side with his old flame Vladimir, leaving prime minister Johnson to live his 1940 moment for real.

Awakening from this nightmare is simplicity itself for an ambitious man like Johnson. Ease back on the Brexit rhetoric, see that making common cause with our European friends and neighbours is far better than letting them fall victim to Russian agitation, and accept that reasonable Americans would rather see all Europeans make friends with each other than have to pull British nuts out of the fire for the third time in little more than a hundred years. Better still, abandon Brexit and embrace EU membership.

6 South and East Asia

The region around Iran and Pakistan is looking alarmingly like Ground Zero for a new war that will define the Trump presidency. Meanwhile, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula offer tempting playgrounds for even more perilous military undertakings. As Trump's right-hand man, UK prime minister Johnson would face some difficult decisions.

The EU foreign policy establishment is developing a mind of its own when it comes to following or not following Americans into battle. Not so Britain, which after Brexit will be beholden as never before to US policy initiatives on war and peace. The British involvement in the Iraq invasion started by US president George W. Bush was a disaster, and any British involvement in a Trump war to tear down the Islamic Republic of Iran would almost certainly be equally unhappy. The verdict of history would be that Brits should have heeded EU voices and kept well away from the whole unholy mess.

As for China and its Pacific seaboard, Britain has no dog in the fight and no excuse to get involved. As wartime premier, Churchill saw that British interests in the region were no longer tenable in face of Japanese aggression, though not before he lost two battleships in a doomed attempt to save Singapore. But even those desperate days are long behind us now. The best recourse for Britain with regard to China and Japan is to take such advantage as it can of the trade deals they strike with the European Union.

Boris the buccaneer may be tempted by bolder ambitions. He may imagine his envoys could strike yet better deals for Brexit Britain with the potentates of East Asia. But wise observers will disagree with him on this sensitive point. The philosophy that has prevailed for centuries in East Asia is critical of rebels and individualists and supportive of harmony and consensus to a level beyond imagining amid the stormy clashes that now seem normal in British and American corridors of power. Buccaneers from Britain will appear in the orient like mutinous scum beside the sleek and dapper mandarins of European power. The General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission Xi Jinping will brush them off with contempt.

Britain is a regional power, with a domain extending from the Atlantic to the North Sea, from the Shetlands to the Channel Islands. Its writ in East Asia ended in 1997, when Prince Charles handed Hong Kong back to China. Its sway in South Asia consists largely of a residual interest in events in India, where the young Winston Churchill patrolled the North West frontier and spent happy months reading history in Bangalore. Boris Johnson is unlikely to rekindle any spark of life from the ashes of the British Raj.

Britain retains only scattered fragments of the old empire: a base in Cyprus, a garrison in the Falkland Islands, a fortress in Gibraltar, and that's about it. Since both Cyprus and Spain, claiming Gibraltar, are in the European Union, British freedom to weld a power base from its fragments is almost zero, quite apart from the economic weakness that lames any attempt to project its power overseas. British global clout today is invested symbolically in its Trident nuclear deterrent, which embodies an existential umbilical connection to America.

Boris too has an umbilical connection to America, from his birth in New York, but this hardly qualifies him to poise his finger over the button for the British bomb. Winston already had his own ideas about the deterrent. He felt documented shame at his presiding over the RAF carpet-bombing of German cities in the second world war, and the prospect of incinerating millions of Russians or others at the press of a button struck him later in life as an obscene option. The question now is whether Boris or any other British statesman can summon up the courage to sort out this lingering relic of twentieth-century brinkmanship.

7 Technology and Globalisation

The entire world of human affairs on planet Earth is changing fast. The electronic and digital technology of the internet and of online transactions has turbocharged capitalism so far that a global oligarchy of trillion-dollar corporations looks set to dominate the business world in the near future. No individual nation will be able to control these terabuck behemoths. The only viable governmental response will be a concerted push for global harmonisation and enforcement of the legal constraints upon their depredations.

In the present world order, only China and the European Union have institutions and policies geared to attempt the task of orchestrating an effective response to the challenge of the new robber barons. America will doubtless evolve a response in due course, but for the duration of the Trump presidency at least there seems little hope of federal control of corporations that in most cases have American roots and can lobby Washington to act in their own predatory interests. The shift of power from little national polities to big global corporations will likely leave many smaller, weaker, and older nations defeated and dead before a balance is struck.

Key to that new balance will be political agreement at global level on how to go about establishing worldwide harmonisation of legal and fiscal codes in order to stop the big corporations from gaming the present system, or rather the lamentable lack of it. And key to that agreement will be high-level policy guidelines of the sort that are now emerging from Chinese and European attempts to rein in the big beasts of the corporate jungle. Needless to say, Brexit Britain won't get a look in.

Winston Churchill would not have been amused at the thought that Britain would exclude itself from the most historically fateful and momentous political negotiations of our time. Establishment of a global political forum is proceeding apace through such gatherings as the G7 and G20 summits, not to mention older forums like the UN Security Council and all the international bodies that offer more specialised input to the global political process. The permanent British seat on the UN Security Council is certainly not a given in the longer term, when Germany, Japan, and India all have strong cases for taking the seat. And while Britain is still ranked sixth in the world for its economic clout, we all know that won't last as emerging economies overtake us.

The emergence to dominance of giant global corporations carries huge lessons for politicians worldwide. No big company is organised as a democracy, and most of them resemble totalitarian mini-states or absolute monarchies more than anything democratic. Yet they flourish, and many of the world's most enterprising and intelligent people are happy to let them define their entire careers. Wherever technical standards are agreed, and experts are available, there is little scope for democratic processes to add their secret sauce to the mix. So too in Europe, where technocrats rule on many questions, and in China, where the top layer of politicians resembles a board of directors more than a parliamentary cabinet, politics will follow the business lead and take the people, with their vulgar and ignorant opinions, increasingly out of the mix.

The outliers in this new world of experts and managers look set to be – and then to persist for longest – in the Anglo-American world, where the ideological commitment to one-man, one-vote democracy and uncensored popular debate on the political process seems to be more deeply rooted. We think this is a good thing, of course, and will fight long and hard to preserve it, as Churchill did in his time and no doubt would do today. But we must look deeper, as Boris Johnson tried to do before the Brexit referendum with his pair of articles for and against the EU. We must make a serious effort to understand the superhuman technical and historical forces arrayed against blind trust in the massed ayes and nays of the people.

Already in America, voters are manipulated shamelessly by partisan media, fake news, manufactured celebrities and so on to vote for their own more perfect oppression and degradation. It's happening in Britain too, as the Brexit story takes a turn for the abyss. Perhaps Boris will take his cue from Churchill's many policy flip-flops and undergo a Damascene conversion to the Remainer cause. That might save us all.

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