Clementine Churchill and Eleanor Roosevelt

Winston Churchill was half-American—an accident of birth that served him well when he began courting U.S. involvement in World War II. His wife, Clementine, had to form her own ties to the United States, which were more complicated than her husband’s, but became in some ways even more enduring—especially the bond she developed with Eleanor Roosevelt.

We think of Winston and Franklin Roosevelt as enjoying a close relationship, but FDR didn’t initially think much of his cigar-smoking British counterpart, and the two men held divergent views on subjects ranging from the British Empire to the eventual role of the Soviet Union and its leader Marshal Stalin. That their alliance was so effective was in part due to the strategic meddling of their respective wives. It repeatedly fell to Eleanor and Clementine to paper over the cracks between Washington and London as the war took its inevitable toll on the two men jointly tasked with saving the world from tyranny.

Early reservations
It didn’t start out that way, however. As a young woman, Clementine had reservations about America. In the 1920s, she was wary of the way it was displacing Britain as the world’s superpower and was put out by President Coolidge’s refusal to forgive Britain’s debts from the Great War.

Though shy by nature, her close involvement in her husband’s political career and canny judgment of people turned her into Winston’s de facto chief adviser and strategist during the First World War, and she adroitly stage managed his subsequent rehabilitation from the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. She continued to play a role demonstrably greater than any other political wife in Britain for the rest of Winston’s career, but in the 1920s she was no supporter of a great Anglo-American alliance.

It was only when she visited the United States in 1930 that she began to change her mind. She attended speakeasies with her son, 19-year-old Randolph, and rather more sedate luncheons with senators. She visited the White House and swam in the warm waters of the Deep South. Soon she was reporting back to Winston that many Americans were “extremely nice,” and she was entranced at a newfangled idea of female “networking,” a term she had not come across before. It was clear that American women were more emancipated than their British cousins, and Clementine—who had been a suffragette supporter in her youth—came away smitten.

When Winston became prime minister less than a decade later, Britain stood alone against the full might of Nazi Germany. France was falling, the Benelux countries had already gone, and the forces of the Third Reich were preparing for an invasion of Britain, a country that had neither the money, the men nor the armaments to defend itself for long. Winston’s solution was to turn to America for support.
From the summer of 1940 on, this was the mission of both Churchills, acting, as they always did in a crisis, as a team. Together they entertained, persuaded and ultimately bewitched a number of influential Americans who had President Roosevelt’s ear—Harry Hopkins, Averell Harriman and Gil Winant most prominent among them. The journalist Ed Murrow was another who came to believe fervently that Britain could be saved and was—equally importantly—worth saving.

All—particularly Hopkins and Winant—were dazzled by Clementine. Hopkins, a one-time arch critic of Britain, changed tack after spending six weeks in her company, declaring her the “most charming” person in the entire country, and vowing he would back her country’s cause until “the very end.”

While America did not formally enter the war as a combatant until Pearl Harbor some 18 months later, she started supplying vital hardware and offering other essential support in large part as a result of the Churchills’ combined force of personality.

The Churchills set about a meticulous charm offensive when Eleanor came to Britain in October 1942 to see for herself what war was like on the Home Front and to visit U.S. troops. Every minute of her day was arranged to present Britain and its people in the best possible light. It is fair to say that Clementine—rather than Winston, who was uncomfortable with most women other than his wife—was the more successful of the two. Her efforts in making her VIP visitor welcome reaped considerable dividends.

A model and an inspiration

Always a keen observer, Clementine learned a great deal from her American counterpart. Eleanor received an ecstatic welcome everywhere she went. Her informal but pragmatic style was surprisingly effective. She took a concerned interest in everyone from all walks of life, and the British people, who were suffering greatly from the privations of war, loved her for it. Clementine was inspired by how effectively Eleanor used her own popularity to further the causes she believed in.

Eager to cement Anglo-American ties, she wrote a gushing letter to FDR (whom she had not met at that point) about the vital effect his wife had had in boosting the morale of women and girls in particular. Part of her motive in writing was strategic, but the sentiments she expressed were genuine. “I was struck by the ease, the friendliness and dignity with which she talked with the reporters,” she wrote, “and by the esteem and affection with which they evidently regard her.”

From that point on, Clementine realized that she could do more to help win the war by conquering her natural reserve and pushing herself forward. The following year she broke with all traditions and accompanied Winston to the Quebec conference with President Roosevelt. Eleanor was not there—FDR had sent her on a mission to visit U.S. troops in the Pacific. In fact, the president was taken aback by the entirely novel idea of a leader’s wife attending one of these conferences.
Now she invoked Eleanor’s spirit and embarked on her first solo press conference. She handled the journalists with aplomb, doing much in the process to boost the British cause with the American people. Clementine was hailed by an enamored media for being “witty, daring and direct.” Her press conference was almost certainly a deliberate ploy to bypass an increasingly distant president and woo public opinion directly—and was spectacularly successful. *The Washington Times Herald* declared the next day that Clementine was Winston’s greatest asset.

For all their admiration, American journalists knew only half of it. They did not know how powerful Clementine was behind the scenes or how she knew more about the conduct of the war than the British cabinet. Nor could they have guessed that the adept performer before them was deep down a timid woman from a broken home, haunted by fears of finding herself penniless and homeless. She had learned to handle such a challenging public occasion by scrutinizing the methods and style of Eleanor Roosevelt—but now she was adding her own style and humor to the mix.

**A reciprocal relationship**

It was not all one way. There were many occasions during World War II when the two women united to reinforce and even on occasion mend that vital Anglo-American alliance, and Eleanor became a great admirer of her British counterpart. Diplomacy then was far more personal; the fate of the world relied heavily on the chemistry between two men, FDR and Winston, and two women, Eleanor and Clementine. FDR and Winston had radically different outlooks, and were on occasion also jealous of each other’s position. Clementine worked hard to smooth ruffles by strengthening her relationship with Eleanor whenever she could. Neither man thought much of the other’s wife. And neither did these very different women much like each other’s husband.

Eleanor was not Winston’s type. He thought her an unappealing mix of opinion and disapproval who seemed to be frequently absent, was not bothered by dress or decor and ran a White House notorious for its unappetizing food. By contrast, Clementine kept files on the preferences of her guests and went to enormous lengths to serve them their favorite dishes, even in ration-struck Britain.

Eleanor thought Winston a drunken warmonger in danger of leading her husband astray with offensive views on (among other subjects) women and the Spanish Civil War. Clementine, meanwhile, disliked the fact that FDR presumed to call her “Clemmie,” a privilege normally earned only after years of devoted friendship. She fretted that Winston was too emotionally transparent with a man who ultimately valued tactical advantage above friendship, and intervened more than once when she thought her husband was in danger of alienating him altogether. She knew how important U.S. support was for Britain—and how such a precious asset could be jeopardized by Winston’s monarchist sympathies. At the same time, FDR thought Clementine difficult and surprisingly resistant to his charms.

While they looked different—Clementine serene and immaculate, Eleanor homely and slightly windswept—the two first ladies shared much in common.

Their concern for the poor and a dislike of extravagance led some to consider them crashing bores. Both had been schooled in England and taken in hand by an inspirational headmistress. They had both endured difficult and fearful childhoods and had lost an infant child. And both were married to compelling but egotistical men who were unwilling to impose discipline on their broods. Both felt inadequate as mothers but enjoyed being grandmothers and were prone to depression. They were also both keepers of their husbands’ consciences.
Eleanor initially thought Clementine was too constrained by her husband's notion that women should remain in the background. "She has had to assume a role because of being in public life," she noted in her diary after their first meeting. "The role is now part of her but one wonders what she is like underneath."²

Their bond grew stronger after a trip to Canterbury during Eleanor's tour of Britain in October 1942, when excited crowds of women and children surged forward to greet them. The next day, the Germans bombed the city and it was more than likely that those who had beamed at them so cheerily were among the casualties. Badly shaken, Eleanor wrote to FDR that the "spirit of the English people is something to bow down to."³

Clementine slowly lowered her guard. At a small dinner party held in Downing Street in Eleanor's honor, Winston brought up the subject of the civil war in Spain. Eleanor annoyed her host by criticizing the fact that more had not been done to help the Republicans. Winston was furious and rose from the table, but Clementine leaned across the table and said pointedly: "I think perhaps Mrs. Roosevelt is right." Astonished, Winston signaled that dinner was over.⁴

Clementine may have welcomed Eleanor's willingness to challenge her husband (few others did). Or maybe she foresaw trouble if Eleanor felt she had been slighted. In any case, it was evident that the First Lady was not afraid to speak her mind, and that was yet another trait the women had in common.

Clementine was immersed in every aspect of the war. Winston took it for granted that she was his political as well as personal partner and once expressed surprise over drinks at the White House that FDR did not involve his wife more in government. "I tell Clemmie everything," he told the president, who replied that he could not do the same with Eleanor because she might accidentally reveal vital information in her newspaper column if he did.⁵

Eleanor knew she had been sidelined, writing sadly in one letter to her daughter that she thought it better to absent herself altogether from the White House so that what she called "important people" could make all the decisions.

While Eleanor's influence waned, Clementine's continued to grow. Following her DC press conference, she made more broadcasts on both sides of the Atlantic (some in tandem with Eleanor). She lowered her reserve when meeting people on her tours of bombsites or factories—becoming more chatty and informal. Her popularity began to soar and her mailbag bulged with letters; her personal power was becoming a force in its own right.

Previous critics became fans of the new Mrs. Churchill. When Winston's popularity began to fall as the war ground on, hers only rose. "The dame is unbelievable," noted the U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau on a visit to Britain in 1944. "She is just like Mrs. Roosevelt."⁶

---

¹ Clementine Churchill to Franklin D Roosevelt, November 1, 1942, FDR Library.
² Eleanor Roosevelt's diary, FDR Library, October 20, 1942.
³ Joseph Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, Deutsch 1977, p. 662.
⁴ FDR Library, Box 1364, diary of Mrs. Roosevelt's trip to London.