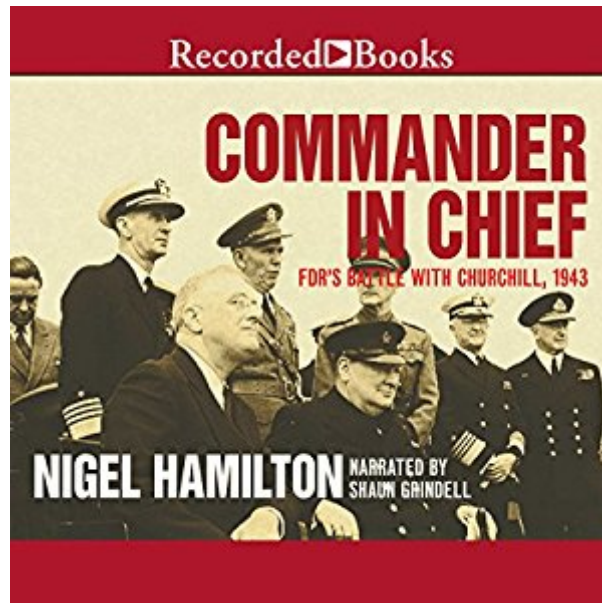




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Commander In Chief: FDR's Battle With Churchill, 1943



Synopsis

In the next installment of the "splendid memoir Roosevelt didn't get to write" (New York Times), Nigel Hamilton tells the astonishing story of FDR's yearlong defining battle with Churchill as the war raged in Africa and Italy. Nigel Hamilton's *Mantle of Command*, long-listed for the National Book Award, drew on years of archival research and interviews to portray FDR in a tight close-up as he determined Allied strategy in the crucial initial phases of World War II. Commander in Chief reveals the astonishing sequel - suppressed by Winston Churchill in his memoirs - of Roosevelt's battles with Churchill to maintain that strategy. Roosevelt knew that the Allies should take Sicily but avoid a wider battle in Southern Europe, building experience but saving strength to invade France in early 1944. Churchill seemed to agree at Casablanca - only to undermine his own generals and the Allied command, testing Roosevelt's patience to the limit. Churchill was afraid of the invasion planned for Normandy and pushed instead for disastrous fighting in Italy, thereby almost losing the war for the Allies. In a dramatic showdown, FDR finally set the ultimate course for victory by making the ultimate threat. *Commander in Chief* shows FDR in top form at a crucial time in the modern history of the West.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I took a little longer than I usually do to write a review for a Vine Program item because I felt I needed to read the first book in what will be, when completed, a multiple volume history of FDR as a military leader in WW II. I have to confess that I was sceptical that I would learn much from this

book. FDR is, after all, one of my passions in studying presidential history. I've read the standard biographies by Geoffrey Ward (including the wonder volume of letters that FDR wrote to his cousin and perhaps closest friend Daisy Suckley), Jean Edward Smith marvelous one-volume biography, James MacGregor Burns's marvelous two-volume one, the first three volumes of Kenneth Davis's five-volume one (something I intend to get back to), Doris Kearns Goodwin's elegantly written account of the White House in the war years, and Arthur Schlesinger's huge three-volume history of the New Deal as well as William Leuchtenburg's one-volume study of the same subject. I have read the memoirs/biographies by Frances Perkins, Grace Tully, Joseph Lash, and Robert Sherwood (the latter a gargantuan joint bio of FDR and Hopkins during WW II). I've read books by two different Brinkley's, Alan's brief and lackluster book for Oxford University Press and Douglas's huge book on FDR's influence on our park system. And there have been bios or memoirs by or on people like Eleanor, Louis Howe, Arthur Schlesinger, John Kenneth Galbraith, and others, all associated with FDR's administrations, and a variety of books from the dull (Jonathan Alter's THE DEFINING MOMENT) to the fascinating (Hugh Gregory Gallagher's fascinating FDR'S SPLENDID DECEPTION, about how FDR and his team managed the public perception of him after the loss of the use of his legs due to polio - which was enhanced by a visit a year ago to Warm Springs, where a member of the staff generously escorted me and my friend around the grounds and buildings of the rehabilitation center, and later that day to the Little White House, where visitors can stand only a couple of feet from the chair in which he was sitting when he suffered a brain aneurysm and the bedroom only a few feet away where he died shortly afterwards - if you have any interest in FDR, visiting Warm Springs is a MUST). Plus FDR had popped up in book after book that I had read on any of a number of subjects, from histories of WW II to historical surveys such as Kennedy's great book in the Oxford History of the United States series, FREEDOM FROM FEAR, covering 1918-1945. In other words, I really didn't think Hamilton was going to teach me anything. Man, was I wrong! I knew the overall story and while he has as his central goal revealing precisely how gifted FDR was as a military leader, I had gleaned that many in fact did regard him very highly. In fact, both Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, neither known for their humility, each said that FDR was the person most responsible for the allies winning WW II. Of course, that isn't quite an endorsement of him as a military leader, but it is cutting rather a fine line in saying that it doesn't to a large degree acknowledge his skills as a military leader. But Hamilton did make me aware, to a degree that I had never grasped before, the extent to which FDR "managed" his generals and admirals, fragmenting each one's authority and area of command, withholding information to each of the plans of another, so that no one could truly challenge his preeminence in handling the War. In episode after episode -

and the book really is arranged in what one could call episodes or segments, in which one very precise portion of the overall narrative was dealt with in detail - Hamilton is able to show FDR's extraordinary skill in managing those under his command, without them in most cases even being aware that he was doing it. Other writers on FDR have revealed to a greater degree other aspects of FDR, such as his compassion for everyday people or his passion for a truly democratic and egalitarian society (despite being a card-carrying member of the upper crust), and others have detailed some of his faults in more detail. But Hamilton revealed something that I had never grasped before and that is FDR's genius at listening to people. Some biographers have considered it a flaw in FDR that someone would talk to him and explain passionately their position, FDR smiling and nodding his head the whole while so that they thought he was committing himself to their point of view. But Hamilton helped me understand that in reality what he was doing at such time was not misleading them, but instead listening intently. The first volume in this set is *THE MANTLE OF COMMAND* and does a splendid job of covering the first year of the war. This is a review of the second volume, but let me just say that Hamilton could have begun that book earlier than he did. To me, some of FDR's greatest moments came when he, seemingly alone in the US government, understood the gravity of what was happening in Europe in 1939 and 1940, namely, that the destiny of the human race was at stake, but was limited both by the constitution and by the opinion both of others in government and of the American people as to what he could do. Yet, he was able to do an amazing number of things to help Great Britain. For example, while the British were able to avert a war-ending disaster at Dunkirk, they nonetheless had to leave behind nearly all of their munitions. Had Hitler chosen to invade right at that moment, the British simply had no bullets. But in a matter of a few weeks FDR had managed to provide the British with millions of rounds of surplus WW I ammo. It wasn't the finest ammunition in the world, but the miracle was that the British got it at all. It is extraordinary how many ships, vehicles, bullets, rifles, machine guns, and airplanes FDR was able to procure for Great Britain when many in Congress, including most in the Republican party following the lead of Sen. Robert Taft, one of the nation's leading isolationists (not that there weren't many in the Democratic party of a similar frame of mind). FDR was able to do an unbelievable amount of things when on paper he should have been able to do virtually nothing. The second volume takes us into the second year of the US's involvement in the war and focuses on FDR managing the differing goals and expectations of Churchill, Stalin, and his own staff. In virtually every incident, Hamilton is able to shed new light on FDR's strategy as a leader and his goals as commander in chief. My other great presidential passion is Lincoln, and in comparing the two, FDR emerges as perhaps the most gifted of the two as a purely military leader. Of course, FDR had an

advantage in having served as assistant head of the Navy in WW I (the head of the Navy was actually a figurehead, and it was FDR who did most of the work of running the ships of state (pun intended)). Lincoln was a very fast learner, but he lacked confidence in the early years of the Civil War in fighting with his generals. Lincoln came to understand that he had ceded them too much control, while FDR from the outset of the war kept the reins firmly in his own hands. The first two volumes in this series are essential reading for anyone wanting to understand either FDR's role in WW II or, in fact, WW II in itself. Much is made in books on WW II or on the Nazis or on Hitler about Hitler's ineptitude in conducting the war. FDR exercised a similar degree of control on the Allied side, but luckily for us, FDR turned out to be something of a genius at least not just our nation, but all nations, in fighting the Axis powers. This completely supersedes other books on FDR's role in WW II such as Thomas Fleming's THE NEW DEALER'S WAR. I would, in fact, place this on a small list of the most crucial books for understanding the presidency of FDR.

This is the second volume of Nigel Hamilton's series on "FDR at War" and it is a gem. In this series of volumes the author has embarked on a mission to present Franklin Roosevelt as Commander-in-Chief and to tell the story of how he directed when and where the war would be fought. This is an important story because Roosevelt's direction of the Western Allies has not really been told before. This sequel to "Mantel of Command" covers the conferences of 1943 that decided what would happen after Nazi forces were defeated in North Africa. Hamilton has written a very lively and entertaining story that demonstrates that FDR was the senior partner of the Western Allies. The author exquisitely shows that Roosevelt had the clearest vision of how the war should progress, that he understood that this war must end with unconditional surrender, and that, of the Big Three leaders, only Roosevelt understood that an international organization would be necessary to ensure the peace in the post war world. What I really appreciated was Hamilton's efforts to inform and remind the reader that the war could not have been won without full US participation and the war with Hitler would most probably have been lost if Churchill had been allowed to direct it. It should be noted that even though this book is titled "Commander in Chief: FDR's Battle with Churchill, 1943" it does not cover all of 1943. The narrative begins with the opening of 1943 and ends in September of that year; just after the QUADRANT Conference in Quebec. FDR's battle with Churchill was all about the cross-channel invasion. Winston did not want to do it under any circumstances other than a collapse of the Nazi war effort. It took three separate conferences to settle the matter. Roosevelt and his Joint Chiefs thought the matter settled after each conference only to later have Churchill insist that

he had not committed to a cross-channel invasion. This duplicity on the part of Churchill did the most damage to the Anglo-American partnership and only Roosevelt's determination, scolding and threats kept the partnership together. Thanks to FDR's efforts he finally did force Churchill to accept that the invasion of Northern France would take place in the spring of 1944. I do find fault in the author's assertion that Roosevelt blackmailed Churchill into accepting a firm commitment to the invasion. Hamilton says, "If Churchill would not adhere to the American Overlord strategy, as per the Trident agreement reached in May [1943], the President thus quietly indicated to the Prime Minister that the United States would have to withhold an agreement to share development of the atomic weapon." (p. 313) No citation is given for this assertion so I assume no such ultimatum can be verified. I am willing to believe the author's conclusion but it would have been wonderful for him to elaborate on what evidence persuades him. All-in-all this is a very good, very entertaining and very fast read and I am hoping the author does continue his story with a final third volume.

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