

Graham Farmelo. *Churchill's Bomb: How the United States Overtook Britain in the First Nuclear Arms Race.* New York: Basic Books, 2013. 554 pp. \$29.99, e-book, ISBN 978-0-465-06989-7.

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Published on H-War (July, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Graham Farmelo's combination of a significant subject, engaging writing style, and effective research makes *Churchill's Bomb* a strong book. An advocate of the idea of science, Winston Churchill short-circuited his country's scientific development by relying on too small a pool of scientific advice and mishandling a delicate wartime dynamic with the United States during World War II. Farmelo illuminates the complexity of Churchill's involvement with the United Kingdom's development into a nuclear power.

The book traces the origin of Churchill's awareness that a nuclear device might be possible to the work of his friend H. G. Wells. A socialist of the turn of the century, Wells expected nuclear weapons to drive humanity into a rejection of political ideas that he considered dangerous, and he included the concept of nuclear weapons in a novel appearing just before the outbreak of the First World War. According to Farmelo, Churchill's more dour ideas about human nature largely prevented him from embracing such utopianism. During the interwar period, Churchill's prolific historical writing and journalistic punditry included early predictions of nuclear bombs. More generally, Churchill proved an early clarion of the menace posed by Adolf Hitler, as well as an advocate of defense-related science. Out of power,

Churchill was seen as in search of "a new hobby horse to ride back into the spotlight" (p. 82).

With respect to science and technology, Churchill's years as prime minister during World War II displayed his shortcomings. In the words of British scientist Henry Tizard, Churchill "had neither a great influence on science and engineering, nor indeed has he displayed any real interest in science.... [He] was always pressing for the wrong developments against the advice of most scientists concerned," although he "was enthusiastic about everything that in his opinion could help to win the war" (p. 444). Churchill's major failing was that he was focused on the impact that science could have, and yet he botched his biggest opportunity—fostering a more equal collaboration with the United States on atomic research during World War II—to make a positive difference.

Farmelo attributes much of this mistake to Churchill's early hesitation to share scientific knowledge with the Americans "unless we can get something very definite in return" and to an inability to appreciate that the British lead in atomic research was more fleeting than he imagined (p. 152). Urgent wartime duties while the country faced Nazi bombing attacks also contributed to Churchill being "most of the time ... no more than a bystander" regarding atomic research (p. 222). Farmelo is careful to note the na-

ture of Churchill's other responsibilities, and provides context about significant events affecting the atomic issue and the perspectives of people making policy decisions. Nonetheless, once the US atomic project gathered steam, Farmelo notes, US decision makers consciously excluded the British from real partnership. Churchill, Farmelo states, seems to have deliberately culled references to strained wartime Anglo-American relations from his memoirs.

By necessity, the book traces nuclear activity in the United States and Britain, under Clement Atlee's government, from 1945 to 1951. Somewhat parallel to President Franklin Roosevelt's decision not to inform Vice President Harry Truman about the US atomic bomb project, Farmelo maintains, Atlee hid Britain's nuclear weapons program from Churchill, as well as from the country at large and from most of Parliament. Churchill, although angered at having been excluded from this knowledge, antagonized his second cabinet during the 1950s when he worked without their knowledge toward a far more powerful thermonuclear weapon.

An important factor, too, was Churchill's heavy reliance, throughout much of his political and journalistic career, on Frederick Lindemann for scientific advice. Farmelo aptly notes that "in science, authority comes from its communities, not from individuals," and "Churchill made a serious error in putting so much weight on the opinion of one scientist, whose weaknesses were well known to his peers" (p. 453). Farmelo adds that despite being a figure to early and publicly predict nuclear weapons, Churchill almost never referred to his early prognostications during the last fifteen years of his political career. Likewise, he rarely seemed to utilize the kind of awareness that these early statements might have foreshadowed.

One of several strengths of *Churchill's Bomb* is its accessibility. The confluence of policy and technology can be daunting, but Farmelo's writing

is crisp. In many places, as with one passage explaining the redesign of the American plutonium bomb, he tackles potentially obscure scientific or technological issues. He does this effectively, using the trail of new scientific discoveries to help illuminate the ways in which resulting technologies worked. The book subtly balances this with information that alerts the reader to the fact that history and science are not linear and that scientific discoveries did not form an obvious trail at the time. *Churchill's Bomb* is detailed and engaging, and the effect is to make the reader feel informed and interested rather than lost. Shortcomings in the work are few, although one is tempted to disagree with Farmelo's characterization that "Britain was well placed to fight" World War II (p. 111), in view of the country's hard-pressed position for much of the war and the serious strategic weaknesses that Farmelo shows contributed to its falling behind in nuclear development.

In sum, Farmelo's *Churchill's Bomb* is a fine work, well presented, cogent, and informative. It is accessible to broad audiences, and it deserves the attention of scholars of military history and the history of science and technology.

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Citation: Nicholas Sambaluk. Review of Farmelo, Graham. *Churchill's Bomb: How the United States Overtook Britain in the First Nuclear Arms Race*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2015.

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