

John Gilbert Winant, Brief life of an exemplary public servant: 1889-1947

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Now almost forgotten, John Gilbert Winant was widely admired during his lifetime, especially for his exemplary service as governor of New Hampshire. Comparisons of his character to that of Lincoln were frequent and sincere. In 1936 he was prominently mentioned as a candidate for president. During World War II, he served with distinction as ambassador to Britain and returned home to Concord in 1946 with a glowing toast from his wartime friend and admirer Winston Churchill still ringing in his memory. At 58, he seemed to have many years of public service before him. But that was not to be.

Raised in Concord and educated at nearby St. Paul's School, Winant attended Princeton, but did not graduate. Instead he returned to teach history at St. Paul's, where the rector recognized in him "a great and rare gift of influencing boys along the very highest paths." His political career began with his election to the state legislature in 1916. After serving in the American Air Service during World War I, he became assistant rector at St. Paul's. But public life again beckoned, and Winant went on to serve three terms as governor of New Hampshire—from 1925 to 1927 (when he was the youngest governor in the nation) and from 1931 to 1935.

Winant was a lifelong Republican whose humanitarian principles transcended party lines. Influenced by the writings of Charles Dickens and John Ruskin and inspired by the examples of Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, he was as governor a forceful advocate of progressive reform initiatives, including a 48-hour work week for women and children, a minimum wage, and the abolition of capital punishment. In 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him the first chairman of the Social Security Board. When Social Security became a major issue during the 1936 presidential campaign, Winant resigned so that he could better defend the new program, alongside Roosevelt, from criticisms by the Republican party. His decision to resign in order to support a program in which he believed unreservedly—even though it meant repudiating his own political party—offers a model of principled action virtually unknown in contemporary politics. He found another outlet for his idealism in 1939, when Roosevelt chose him as director of

the International Labor Organization in Geneva. As an impartial international civil servant, Winant worked for social and economic reform even as the world collapsed in war.

In February 1941, Roosevelt appointed him ambassador to Great Britain. During the Battle of Britain, Winant walked the streets of London, ablaze from the aerial bombardments, offering assistance to the injured amid the rubble of their homes and stores. His shy sincerity and quiet fearlessness endeared him to the British people and helped buoy that beleaguered nation.

Winant was rare among public figures in being a very private person. And the temper of the private man created and influenced the actions of the public man. To read his speeches is to sense the same greatness of soul, magnanimity of purpose, and simplicity of language that appear in Lincoln's addresses. In June 1942, he told striking coal miners in Durham, England, "This is the people's democracy. We must keep it wide and vigorous, alive to need, of whatever kind, and ready to meet it, whether it be danger from without or well-being from within, always remembering that it is the things of the spirit that in the end prevail—that...daring to live dangerously we are learning to live generously...." His speech was a resounding success: by joining the life-or-death struggle to preserve democracy with the concrete social purpose of improving the economic circumstances of working people, Winant had deepened the war's meaning for the common man. The miners went back to their crucial work.

Throughout the war, Winant drove himself relentlessly, day and night. He was already utterly exhausted when Roosevelt's death in April 1945 robbed him of his close friend and mentor. He now reported to a president who neither knew him well nor appreciated the extent of his wartime efforts. Then, three months later, a landslide victory by the Labor Party swept Churchill out of office. Everywhere Winant turned, he saw the drama in which he had participated so significantly drawing to a close. In March 1946, President Truman appointed a new ambassador to London.

Back in New Hampshire, Winant's frustrations grew. After three decades of public life, he had to accommodate himself to the quieter pace of a private citizen. He was in debt, under pressure to complete a series of books on his experiences, estranged

from his socially ambitious wife, and troubled by a darkening personal depression. On November 3, 1947, the very day that his only book, *Letter from Grosvenor Square*,¹ was published, he committed suicide at his home in Concord. His publisher had rushed a copy of the book to him, but he never saw it.

Reportedly Winant had been despondent for some time. His public achievements and his great capacities for service gave no protection against the melancholia and hopelessness that ultimately overwhelmed him. And yet, by drawing upon an elevated spirit and an unswerving idealism, this quiet man from a small state contributed greatly to the nation's coral reef of character.

¹ The link in the original article was broken. This book was published in 1947/1948. It is available from many booksellers.