

NATIONAL POST

It is advisable to tread lightly when wandering around the minefields of today's cultural wars.

Nonetheless I felt on solid ground in mocking the attempt by Donald Trump's callow press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, to compare her boss to Winston Churchill.

She suggested that Trump's photo op on the steps of St. John's Episcopal Church, across from the White House, was a "leadership moment, that ranked with the British Prime Minister's visiting the East End of London during the Blitz in the Second World War."

A moment's reflection might have spotted the flaws in her logic.

Trump's trip to the church was only possible after Lafayette Square was cleared of peaceful protesters by security forces using rubber bullets and smoke canisters.

That "showed a message of resilience and determination", said McEnany. "Like Churchill, we saw him inspecting the bomb damage that sent a powerful message to the British people."

Proof, if any were required, Trump's self-image is 10 per cent vanity and 90 per cent delusion.

In thought and language, the two men are in different universes.

The president could only dream of a put-down as devastating as Churchill's description of obdurate U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles as "Dull, Duller, Dulles."

When Churchill visited the East End of London in September 1940, he was followed by large crowds - but they were adoring, not belligerent.

I suggested on social media that the comparison was ludicrous; that where Churchill brought encouragement and hope, Trump brings fear, mistrust and hate.

It seemed incontrovertible, like the flow rate of the Ottawa River or the irrelevance of the federal NDP.

But I had innocently roamed into an overlapping Venn diagram of political outrage, only to find my mild indignation at Trump surpassed by the fury of the Churchill-haters.

Journalist Murad Hemmadi said Churchill advocated gassing Indians rebelling against the British Raj in 1919. He was backed by a number of others, one of whom pointed out Churchill "signed off" on terms at Yalta that consigned tens of millions to Soviet rule.

We were quickly back into the debate that erupted three years ago when the Ontario elementary teachers' federation wanted to remove Sir John A. Macdonald's name from public schools.

The comparisons with Churchill are apt.

There are schools bearing his name in at least 10 Canadian cities, as well as dozens of statues. Are we on the brink of an anti-Churchill backlash and demands to see his name stripped from public places?

When the Macdonald controversy was in full swing, Hemmadi wrote an article for Maclean's that claimed challenges to the present version of the past were not attempts to erase it, but to make it more complete.

"The mission is not to exclude certain people but to more accurately remember them and to re-write peoples who have been purposely excluded from that story into it," he said.

He called Churchill a "lionized villain" and said marginalized groups are not intent on throwing "great men" down George Orwell's memory hole, but rather on pulling the "misdeeds and crimes" of those leaders up out of it.

But has any leader been more closely scrutinized, and found more wanting at various stages of his 55-year career in public life than Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill?

He has been roundly criticized for his views on racial hierarchies and eugenics. He did call for gas to be used against "uncivilized tribes", though it was closer to tear gas than mustard gas. He was prime minister at the time of the Bengal famine in 1943, when an estimated three million people died and the sub-continent was still exporting rice to the rest of the British Empire. His only possible defence was that he was pre-occupied by the war in Europe.

Churchill considered Gandhi "a bad man and an enemy of the Empire" and was unperturbed by the prospect of his death. He was widely blamed for the Dardanelles disaster in the First World War, which saw him demoted as First Lord of the Admiralty and consigned to the trenches on the Western Front.

It doesn't need marginalized groups to dig up Churchill's misdeeds and mistakes - generations of historians have already done their work.

His idiosyncrasies mean he is hard to pin down. As a Conservative, he has been demonized by the left but as biographer Roy Jenkins, the former British Labour minister, noted, he held "a lively sympathy for the underdog particularly against the middle dog, provided, and it was a big proviso, that his own position as top dog was unchallenged." He came from the aristocracy but as a Liberal Minister, he had a substantial record as a social reformer, particularly on penal reform.

Society's values are changing, in many ways for the better. So does this mean those who are commemorated should change too?

A committee at Yale University created a framework to examine calls to rename public buildings and landmarks, after an outcry at a college named after an architect of Southern secession.

The committee concluded re-naming depended on the name-sake's legacy and whether his or her views were exceptional for the era.

Churchill's legacy is apparent.

As the plaque on his likeness at Toronto City Hall proclaims: "His faith and leadership inspired free men to fight in every quarter of the globe for the triumph of justice and liberty". My father recalled sitting around the radio with his family in Scotland listening to Churchill's wireless addresses, and well remembered for their power.

As for Churchill's views, he was born a Victorian aristocrat and his attitudes on race, class and Empire were entirely typical of the era.

The times are changing and some people would like to promote an alternative version of history that portrays the values and events they hold dear.

But the historical record should not be re-written to suit political ends.

We have not always been at war with Eastasia.

Churchill was the necessary hero at the most troubled moment in modern history.

And Donald Trump is no Winston Churchill.