On the morning of Friday, 24 January 1941 the newest, largest and fastest battleship in the Royal Navy, the 35,000-ton *King George V* steamed unannounced into Chesapeake Bay at the end of a transatlantic dash. The purpose of this voyage was to deliver an important cargo: the new British Ambassador to the United States, Lord Halifax. He came reluctantly to a country which still clung to its neutrality, but whose resources offered the only route for Britain’s survival. President Roosevelt underlined the importance of his arrival by waiving diplomatic precedent and sailing out on his yacht, *Potomac*, to personally greet the Ambassador. He proceeded to entertain Halifax and his wife, Dorothy, to tea on board. This was the dramatic beginning of a legendary tenure on Massachusetts Avenue, which would earn Halifax an Earldom at mid-term and the Order of Merit on his return. Halifax successfully presided over the expansion of the British mission to the United States into what amounted to a Whitehall in miniature. He oversaw relations with Britain’s indispensable ally from the delicate days of their neutrality through the transition, first to war and then to a new kind of peace in which that ally assumed a global leadership role. Finally, and most against his own aloof and formal nature, he learned to play a public role, reaching out to an American public which was often fickle in its affections for Britain.

Halifax’s success was by no means a foregone conclusion. The story that emerges from the archive, the diaries of Halifax and his closest advisers, and from the recollections of his staff is of – as the Duke of Wellington said of the Battle of Waterloo – ‘the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life.’ Part of the value of the reexamining Halifax’s tenure in the United States is to see the process by which he survived
early missteps to become a diplomatic asset for the Crown. That story throws light on Britain’s delicate approach to the United States in the months before Pearl Harbor. More than this, it also speaks to the wider learning process by which British diplomats came to understand that diplomacy had to be more than contact between one government and another, and in the emerging democratic era would rest on what would eventually be called Public Diplomacy: the advancement of policy through the engagement between governments and the people of a foreign country.2

The reluctant envoy

Edward Frederick Lindley Wood, Third Viscount and First Earl of Halifax, was born on 16 April 1881 into an aristocratic Yorkshire family with a tradition of public service. His great-grandfather, Earl Grey, authored the Reform Bill and his grandfather, Charles Wood (the First Viscount Halifax), had served as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Secretary of State for India. Edward Wood entered public life himself in 1910 as MP for Ripon. In the early 1920s he served in a range of government offices – Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, President of the Board of Education, British representative to the League of Nations Council, and Minister of Agriculture – until, in 1925, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin elevated him to the peerage and appointed him Viceroy of India. As Viceroy he successfully negotiated an accommodation with nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi in the 1931 Delhi Pact and developed the concept of India’s Dominion status. Back in Britain he succeeded to the family title and served as Baldwin’s Secretary of State for War and Lord Privy Seal, and as Lord President of the Council in the Chamberlain government. In this capacity Halifax travelled to Germany in 1937 to begin talks with Hitler.3 In the spring of 1938 Halifax succeeded Anthony Eden as Foreign Secretary and played a prominent role in the decision to appease Germany over the question of Czechoslovakia. The Munich Conference cast a long shadow over Halifax’s later career. By 1941 he had made his own peace with the decision, recording in his diary:

The more I reflect on Munich the more certain I am feel that a war then would have meant for Czechoslovakia at the best an additional six months of martyrdom and at worst a martyrdom with no resurrection, for we should have been defeated by a better-prepared Germany.4