

World War II

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Devising a Strategy: Why attack Germany first?

Background: In 1941/1942, the decision to make Germany the priority of American military efforts was not obvious to a substantial segment of the American population and even some key leaders in the military hierarchy. The American public harbored a substantial neutralist sentiment, generated in part by the disappointing outcome of the First World War and tied to a longer American tradition of steering clear of European military conflicts. Franklin Roosevelt was especially aware of the power of this sentiment on national politics.

While Roosevelt was a keen student of strategy with a deep understanding of the Allies critical needs and the importance of American participation in Europe, he was also a masterful domestic politician who understood that any efforts to counter this sentiment or convince a voting public to change its perspective had to be undertaken with great care. Roosevelt showed this finesse in his clever “Destroyers for Bases” program and its more far reaching “Lend-Lease” successor. Roosevelt’s challenge to keep the European war at the forefront was in many ways made much more difficult by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Even the most isolationist and pacifist Americans could understand the need to get into the war and fight Japan after Pearl Harbor, many still did not understand the need for European primacy of effort or even co-equality of support. The substantial losses the US Navy took at Pearl Harbor left it spoiling for a fight with a clear foe. The subsequent loss of the Philippines, added a chorus of influential Army voices to this position.

In spite of these grim developments and strong pressures to address them first, the calculated view best expressed by Admiral Stark, the CNO in 1940, prevailed: “If Britain

wins decisively against Germany, we could win everywhere, but if she loses, the problems confronting us would be very great; ... we might, possibly, not win anywhere.” (Stewart, 77-103; Millett & Maslowski, 424-416)

Reasons to Attack Japan First:

Revenge for Pearl Harbor: Over 2,500 Americans were killed at Pearl Harbor and key elements of the Pacific fleet destroyed, including over 200 aircraft, five battleships and three other vessels. Clearly this attack on American sovereignty needed to be answered militarily.

Naval Capabilities (Pacific): The “silver lining,” if there was one, was that other important elements of the Pacific fleet were not at Pearl Harbor when it was attacked. Other carriers were on the west coast preparing to escort more vessels to Hawaii. Also, the Japanese failed to hit key infrastructure in their attack and the fuel farm and maintenance facilities were unharmed. This left the Navy with an important capability far advanced in the Pacific from which to build, regenerate, and sustain combat power. The US Navy had a very good idea of what was needed to take on the Japanese Navy. All it needed was more ships and airplanes and a little more time to take delivery of the vessels that were under construction thanks to the ship building programs that were commenced in the late 1930’s and by the “Two Ocean Navy” act of 1940. (Millett & Maslowski, 419)

Japanese actions directly attacked other American Pacific interests: In addition to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese attacked and captured the Philippines and made advances against American allies and interests in China. The retreat of the American and Filipino forces on Bataan and Corregidor and the drama of General Wainwright’s humiliating surrender also left his persuasive former commander, MacArthur, arguing for prompt redress.

The Atlantic was very dangerous for the first three years of the war; finding the capability and methods to counter the threats there would take some time to solve: From 1940 through early 1943, the Germans were actively prosecuting a ruthless and highly effective campaign of submarine warfare against all shipping headed across the Atlantic to Britain. In the beginning, the only somewhat effective counter to the U-boat menace was to form convoys of merchant ships and escort them with destroyers or other vessels as available that could sail faster and depth charge the subs when they dove after attacking. The US Navy was right to be discouraged about its anti-submarine warfare capabilities until new technologies such as sonar, longer-range and carrier-based aircraft could be produced in sufficient quantities and employed in creative new ways to eliminate the submarine threat. While Japan had reasonable submarine capabilities, for a host of social and other reasons, she never chose to employ her submarines with same ferocious effectiveness against American logistical lines as did the Germans. Advocates of the “Japan first” strategy, thought that for these reasons, it was better to take on Japan first, while more and better anti-submarine capabilities were developed and built to address the Nazi menace. (Millett & Maslowski, 419, 435-439)

Reasons to Attack Germany First:

Germany had a greater industrial capacity, larger manpower reserve, and greater overall military capability.: Since 1938, Germany had also added to its considerable military capabilities through the annexation of Austria, and the occupation of Czechoslovakia between 1938 and 1939 (complete with a robust and highly capable modern arms production capacity), along with Poland, Hungary and the Baltic states.

The Allies in Europe were struggling (Britain just hanging on; Soviets may crumble) Even before formal American entry into the war, Britain had been valiantly putting all her national resources into defending herself in the aerial Battle of Britain, stopping German and Italian advances in Africa and preventing French military resources from being placed at German disposal. After Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, and the Soviets retreated to interior of Russia, they too clamored for direct relief from the German onslaught in the form of a “second front.”

Coalition partners wanted Germany weakened as soon as possible: Since Britain and the Soviet Union were both feeling the effects of Hitler’s military might leveled at them, their national leaders understandably in the interest of self-preservation, pressed for any assistance that would minimize the military assaults from Germany as soon as possible. The Allies though had different visions on how this might best be done.

The British preferred a peripheral approach through the mounting of campaigns at the margins of German expansion. This was in keeping with their strong desire to avoid a costly stalemate on the continent of Europe that had caused them so much grief in the First World War.

The Russians, on the other hand, wanted a “second front” on Germany opened as directly and as soon as possible. They preferred one that caused a serious direct threat to the German heartland and would force them to withdraw forces from the brutal onslaught into Russia. Reconciling these two at-odds approaches and keeping the coalition together became the task of Franklin Roosevelt. In any case, his most pressing task was to keep American interests and planners agreeable to a “Germany first” approach, despite more parochial American interests and strong pressures to divert resources to the Pacific. His other challenge was to keep the coalition with its divergent priorities together long enough to achieve a decisive victory over the Axis powers and the formulation of a post-war order conducive of a lasting peace.

Deciding What Needs to Be Done: Wartime Coalition Planning

Background: Forging a coalition of multiple nations to wage modern warfare on a global scale required a tremendous amount of planning and detailed coordination. Allied political and senior military leadership met repeatedly and frequently over the course of the conflict and continuously adapted their objectives as the war progressed. On average they met every four to six months, but periods of as long as a year did elapse between the meetings of the senior leaders.

In this regard, this planning and coordination process, while not without its share of conflicts, frustrations, and diverging priorities, worked pretty well and got the job done. It certainly worked better than anything that the Axis powers attempted, and was one of the clear Allied advantages that contributed to victory. Shortly after the first meetings, various missions and coordinating elements were sent to respective allied capitals to continue working on the details of issues raised during the meetings and to address smaller issues as they arose in periods between the major diplomatic/military conferences.

An examination of the conference outcomes over the course of the war shows that initially the British drove the agenda based on their earlier active entry into the war and their greater maturity in planning. But as the war progressed and American contributions in materiel and manpower became more significant, American military preferences and priorities became more pronounced. Throughout the political leaders' major challenge was to keep the essential premises of the coalition's strategy intact (Germany first), a task that substantially fell to Roosevelt as he had to balance domestic pressures for a greater allocation of resources to the Pacific while honoring earlier commitments to the alliance to finish off the Nazis first.

Despite the tremendous increase in output of materiel by the "Arsenal of Democracy," sequencing the priorities for raw materials and production capabilities remained a point of negotiation and an important factor affecting many conference decisions. Particularly significant was the timetable for production and the availability of landing craft for different campaigns as well as the production of anti-submarine vessels and equipment.

The Allied Military / Diplomatic Conference Program

Note: The following outline of the various major Allied planning conferences is based upon the work by Monro MacClosky, *Planning for Victory - World War II*.

Conference CODE NAME or Known by Name (Location) - Date

ABC (Washington D.C.) - January – March 1941

Key Participants: American and British staffers

Notes: The "American British Conversations" (ABC or sometimes called ABC-1) were a series of fourteen tentative planning sessions and meetings held by high level military staffers from Britain and the US, that tentatively floated ideas about what an allied British-US strategy might look like, should the US become decisively engaged in the war. As the British were already experiencing all the unpleasantness of conflict with

Hitler, they came to the meetings well prepared with a series of positions, including the major two that were essentially adopted (see below). The planners made it clear that this was a tentative agreement designed to facilitate complicated military planning, from which adaptations as required could be made. It was not a political commitment requiring formal government approvals. To keep the planning work progressing after the conferences, an American mission under a MG Chaney was set up in London to continue facilitating the exchange of information. This proved to be very important work because when the US finally entered the war, the ABC documents formed the basis of the strategy that was eventually followed.

Consensus: Defeating Germany first was the priority. Immediate contest of German power through the use of naval blockades, air power, raids, subversive plots, encouragement of insurrections and support to resistance movements. Build-up and plan for an invasion of continental Europe at a future date, still to be determined.

Mid-Atlantic Meeting/Atlantic Conference (at sea off the coast of Argentina, Newfoundland) – August 1941

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill, high level military staffs

Notes: British reiterate their positions presented at ABC, and add emphasis on holding positions in Middle East; first time request for use of American troops in a campaign in northwest Africa and reinforcement of British Middle East; also propose a “Parallel Communication to the Japanese Government” to be sent jointly warning that further Japanese encroachment on either nation’s interests would be tantamount to war. US did not formally respond to any of these strategic proposals during the conference.

Decision: The “Four Freedoms” declaration about the unacceptability of fascist ideology is released as a political manifesto for domestic consumption and rallying of eventual war aims.

ARCADIA (Washington, D.C.) – December 1941-January 1942

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill. Other Major US Reps: Harry Hopkins, Lord Beaverbrook, the US Secretaries of War and Navy, and Generals Marshall, Eisenhower, H. H. Arnold

Notes: Detail work was done by groups of American and British military planners formed into subcommittees working in the Federal Reserve Building. Plenary Sessions held at the White House, and decisions made after staff work was reviewed by respective Chiefs of Staff. Coming as shortly as it did after Pearly Harbor, the meeting had a huge role in determining what changes if any were required from those priorities previously agreed to. During the conference British planners seem especially concerned with preserving /restoring the integrity of the empire. This ran up against the skeptical Admiral King, who strongly advocated that “Germany first” policy not defer the prosecution of a vigorous campaign against Japan.

Decisions: Confirmed that the allied priority of effort was “Germany first” and the defense of the North Atlantic; Stabilization of the Pacific, hold Hawaii, reinforce Philippines/Dutch East Indies; Established an Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS); Agreed to continue discussions at a later date on Mediterranean campaign vs. a cross-Channel invasion.

Casablanca (Casablanca, Morocco) – January 1943

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill, Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff

Notes: FDR's attendance at this ten-day conference was the first time in US history that the President left the country during wartime or rode in an airplane. Casablanca was selected so that the political leaders could easily consult with the field commanders then engaged in the North African campaign about the prospects for various follow-on campaigns. Again, the British staff arrived very prepared with detailed plans and proposals while the American staff arrived with only the sketchiest of possible plan outlines.

Decisions: Recognized that a "Germany first" campaign was dependent upon securing sea LOCs between the US and Britain. Priority became a vigorous prosecution and resolution of the Battle of the Atlantic.; Agreed to prepare a invasion of Sicily sometime later in 1943; Increased the Combined Bomber Offensive against Germany; Appoint a Chief of Staff for the a future cross-Channel invasion, date still TBD; Agree to continue the American advance in the Pacific without compromising the "Europe first" strategy; Agree to strengthen American air forces in China.

TRIDENT (Washington, D.C.) – May 1943

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill, Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff

Notes: American planners were much better prepared at TRIDENT than they had been at Casablanca. They came with prepared plans and proposals backed by specifics. Roosevelt backed their proposals more forcefully. Finally the Americans were in a position to get the British to agree to more long-range planning, particularly with regard to the timing of a cross-Channel invasion.

Decisions: May 1944 set as the target date for a cross-Channel invasion; Agreed to mount a large scale air offensive prior to any invasion of Europe; Agreed to defeat Italy immediately after Sicily but not at the expense of draining resources from a cross-Channel invasion; Agreed to mount a bombing campaign against the Romanian oil fields from newly acquired bases in the Mediterranean.

QUADRANT (Quebec City) – August 1943

Key Participants: FDR, Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff

Notes: Conference held in Châteaux Frontenac. By the end of the conference, progress was finally being made in developing plans for a final campaign against Japan, but the final method, bombardment or invasion was not yet determined. Additionally, the plans for the invasion of Europe were proceeding, though the relationship of the European invasion to other proposed Mediterranean operations still was not satisfactorily resolved.

Decisions: Allies reconfirm May 1944 as the target date for a cross-Channel invasion; Agree upon the "POINTBLANK" bombing campaign that will precede any invasion of Europe; Agree to a dual drive approach to the war in the Pacific, along "Central" and "Southwestern" approaches to Japan; Establish Lord Mountbatten as the supreme commander in Southeast Asia (SEAC)

SEXTANT (Cairo) – August and December 1943

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill, Chang Kai-shek

Notes: This conference was mostly concerned with developing plans for the China-Burma-India theater.

Decisions: Allies agreed to open a supply road from India, through northern Burma, into China so that they could meet the supply requirements for conducting a bombing campaign against Japan from China.; Agreed and amphibious invasion of southern Burma was not feasible and that landing craft production need to be reserved to the invasion of Europe.

EUREKA (Teheran) – November 1943

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill, Stalin, Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff

Notes: In the meantime, the Italian government capitulated.

Decisions: The Allies reconfirm that Europe is still the priority and the cross-Channel invasion of Europe the top priority in that theater; Invading France from the south becomes the top Mediterranean priority with any other efforts in the Balkans or elsewhere secondary; The Italian naval fleet is distributed among the Allies.

OCTAGON (Quebec) – September 1944

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill, Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff

Decisions: The Allies agree to form a combined military committee in Moscow for better strategic and operational coordination; Mediterranean forces shifted to Eisenhower's command; Strategic bombing campaign placed under the Combined Chiefs; October 1944 established as the target date for the invasion of the Philippines; British plan to invade Burma.

(Yalta) – February 1945

Key Participants: FDR, Churchill, Stalin

Decisions: The Allies agree to establish direct communications between Soviet and Anglo-American theater commanders to better coordinate the timing of ground offensives against Germany; Allies agree to occupation zones for Germany; American plan an invasion of Okinawa for use for sea and air bases against the main islands of Japan; Russia agrees to declare war on Japan three months after Victory-Europe Day.

(Potsdam) – July 1945

Key Participants: Truman, Churchill, Stalin

Decisions: Laid out the post-war conditions for Europe

Military Leadership Analysis:

Background: The best made plans and co-ordinations at the highest levels were only as good as the men who were selected to carry them out and their skills as leaders and in many cases, their skills as diplomats functioning in a coalition environment. In this last capacity the talents of otherwise competent military men varied widely as the sketches of the individuals below demonstrate.

Eisenhower Dwight D. Eisenhower was a middle of the class of 1915 graduate from West Point. By 1926, he improved his prospects for higher command as the top graduate from the Command and General Staff College that year at Fort Leavenworth. His selection to head the Operations Division on the War Department's General Staff (WDGS) in 1941 marked the start of his meteoric rise at the recommendation of such Army notables as Gerow, Clark, Krueger, MacArthur and Marshall. His tenure on the WDGS put him under the tutelage of Marshall and schooled him in his way of handling a wide variety of problems, many of them politically and diplomatically charged.

When Roosevelt was confronted with selecting an Allied commander to oversee the campaign into Europe, Marshall hoped he would get the nod. Roosevelt though found him indispensable in his capacity as Army Chief and asked him for a recommendation instead. Eisenhower's knowledge of operational planning and his natural tact and diplomatic acumen made him the obvious choice for this position requiring ample amounts of all those talents and a strong belief in need for utmost Allied unity. His abilities at developing a workable campaign with seasoned British and green American troops learning the ways of modern war in North Africa, showed that the choice was well taken. His skill in effectively working with the prickly, individualistic, and demanding British General Montgomery bound the latter effectively into the Allied effort, even when Montgomery exasperated many other senior American commanders. So great was Eisenhower's skill at extracting military results from the coalition forces that he was even able to give Montgomery temporary control of the 9th US Army and all but one corps of 1st US Army during the reduction of "the Bulge" with good effect, despite Montgomery's talent for dysfunctional theatrics. (Puryear, 153-232; Millett & Maslowski, 451, 469-473, 480)

Patton After graduating from West Point in 1909, one of George S. Patton, Jr.'s first assignments was as an aid to General Leonard Wood. In this capacity, he was assigned to Washington and found himself horseback riding in the same social circles as Secretary of War, Henry Simpson, as both men were avid horsemen.

After a chance to show his ardor for military campaigning in Mexico, General Pershing selected Patton to command his headquarters troops for the American Expeditionary Force in France. In this capacity he developed his expertise in the emerging tank and developed a program for training American soldiers in its use in France. After the war, Patton met up with Eisenhower at the Tank Center at Camp Meade, Maryland and they developed a close working relationship and friendship that could endure serious professional disagreements, and lasted until Patton's death.

When Eisenhower was searching for a knowledgeable tank commander to head one of the first US armored divisions in North Africa, he immediately thought of Patton,

even though he knew that he has some odd mannerisms and could act rashly. As his friend, both Stimson and Eisenhower were well acquainted with Patton's personal flaws, yet both believed in his natural capacity for greatness in combat, whipping up fighting spirit in soldiers, and the nation's need for his special skills.

In this regard, Patton's special brand of folksy eloquence connected well with and inspired his troops through the speeches and messages he routinely gave them, even though he often included profane language. Like MacArthur, Patton had a keen understanding of the value of a good theatrical appearance. He carefully cultivated his signature appearance in highly polished riding boots, whipcord riding breeches and tailored battle jacket, and displayed it frequently from his highly polished open jeep with its distinctive multi-tone horn announcing his arrival as he traveled throughout his command.

An exacting trainer and a stern disciplinarian, Patton firmly believed that these attributes won battles and saved lives. Like MacArthur, he refused to ask of his soldiers that which he would not do himself and he routinely made a point of pushing himself longer and harder to make the point. Patton's leadership corollary to these stern practices was that soldiers had to be taken care of. To Patton, this meant everything from getting them ample quantities of ammunition because he believed it saved lives, to insuring their socks were changed frequently so they did not get trench foot, an effectiveness indicator he personally watched closely.

All of these talents and leadership attributes enabled Patton to elicit from his commands, that elusive multi-faceted characteristic of "drive" that enabled his forces above all to advance steadily across Europe. Drive was extracted by creatively reorganizing his personnel and supplies for maximum effect, when none were forthcoming from regular channels. In this regard Patton was exceptional in his ability to blend all these elements for decisive military results and those who knew him best were right to admire these capabilities and acknowledge and work with his eccentricities. (Puryear, 233-288)

The Pacific: A War all its Own

Background: At the QUADRANT conference in May 1943, the Allies agreed that the campaign across the Pacific should take the form of a “dual drive” or a two-pronged thrust across the vast reaches of the Ocean. There were several reasons for establishing this geographically based division of effort.

First, the division would keep the Japanese guessing which thrust was the main effort. Second it neatly divided the responsibilities between the Navy and the Army (even though both commands included substantial subordinate elements from the other service), as the northern advance was more littoral in character and better suited to Marine Corps and Naval direction while the more southerly advance across the major land mass islands was more suited to Army campaigning. Finally there was the question of the personalities of the military leaders involved, McArthur and Nimitz, both of whom had egos which were as outsized as the ocean they were tasked with covering. Setting the two commanders up in a virtual race against each other provided a new impetus for the hasty conclusion of the war.

While the dual drive ended up achieving the desired results, the risk was that the Japanese might find the “seam” between the two commands and find some way to exploit it. In reality though, by the time they understood the nature of the onslaught against them, they were so resource constrained that they had no means to exploit this division of command.

Military Leadership Analysis:

MacArthur Douglas MacArthur was born the son of Arthur MacArthur, a Civil War hero who received the Congressional Medal of Honor at age 18 on Missionary Ridge. In 1899, Douglas was appointed to the West Point, from where he was the top graduate in the Class of 1903. His first assignment was to the Philippines for a year, suppressing the insurgency. His experience there and his appreciation of his father’s assignment as the Commanding General and Military Governor of the Philippines left him with a life-long attachment to the islands and an unmatched knowledge of the political currents therein. In 1906, Douglas and his father were sent as American observers to the Russo-Japanese War. He returned to a stint as President Theodore Roosevelt’s military aid and a brief excursion to Vera Cruz, Mexico with BG Funston, an old associate of his father’s from Philippine War days. In October 1917, as a Lieutenant Colonel, he became the Chief of Staff for the 42d Rainbow Division in France and a year later he was a brigadier general and the unit’s commander.

In the 1930’s, young MacArthur was selected over many more senior officers to become the Army Chief of Staff. In that capacity, he had the unenviable task of dispersing the “Bonus Marchers,” veterans of WWI who were seeking early payment of a promised bonus because of the economic hardships caused by the Depression. He took this onerous task upon himself because he would not give orders for tasks that he would not do himself, and this was a particularly emotional and delicate assignment. His assistant in this mission was Major Dwight D. Eisenhower. During the Depression with the severe budget crisis, he also pushed as hard as he could for the modernization of the

Army, including its motorization and mechanization, and strenuously opposed decimating cuts to the officer corps.

After his retirement as the Army Chief of Staff, MacArthur went to the Philippines as the Field Marshall of the Philippine Army, tasked with building an army there and designing the islands' defense. He was firmly committed to this task and believed that "the world's future depended on success [there]." After he was ordered to evacuate Bataan and assume other duties for the prosecution of the war in the Pacific, the island's redemption became his personal point of honor and his obsession. He went so far as to order his headquarters staff in Australia to answer the phone with "Bataan, speaking" and named his headquarters and personal aircraft, "Bataan" as well. Having never known failure until this point, his desire to decisively defeat the Japanese became all-consuming. All plans he advanced for the Pacific campaign included the occupation of the Philippines before any assault on Japan. When Admiral Nimitz, another forceful personality in his own right, advanced a different plan for the defeat of Japan, President Roosevelt skillfully crafted a role for both plans resulting in the "dual drive" strategy. MacArthur got to keep his beloved Philippines as a major intermediate objective as he advanced through the southwest Pacific, and Nimitz retained control of all of the precious aircraft carrier groups as he punched through the small islands of the central Pacific seeking the Japanese Navy.

While MacArthur was seemingly born to his role in the Pacific and played it to near perfection, his ego made him at times seem arrogant and tactless and perhaps even unsupportive of greater team efforts that might have required him to accept or advance other persons or positions. By the end of the war his successes were clear, though not without some questions about the personality and drama associated with the man. (Puryear, 103-151)