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GRAND STRATEGY OF WORLD WAR II

The strategy adopted by the United States in World War II has been criticized on the grounds that it failed to look beyond the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to the problems of the postwar era. In this second article of a three-part series, Professor Stephen E. Ambrose examines the strategic decisions made by the United States in World War II. He concludes that, despite some mistakes, America emerged from the war with a greatly improved international position compared to 1941, and it was achieved at a minimum cost.

A lecture delivered at the Naval War College

by

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It is relatively easy to generalize on the strategic aims of nations involved in total war, while it is not so easy to generalize on the aims of nations involved in limited wars. In World War II Germany aimed at world conquest, although in a rather vague way; specifically, her immediate detailed goals were the complete domination of Eurasia and the Mediterranean. The British sought to prevent this and at the same time to hold on to their Empire, which, in practice, meant keeping the lid on anticolonial forces freed by the chaos of war. The Russians at first aimed only at survival; after Stalingrad their most important goal was the creation, through armed occupation, of a security zone around their borders.

The Japanese program aimed at making Japan the great power of the Pacific, which included establishing control of China, French Indochina, the Malayan Peninsula, and the Dutch East Indies. It was essential to the Japanese that they have these areas if Japan were to be a great power, for despite her human resources Japan was almost devoid of critical raw materials, especially oil. The place to get the oil was Southeast Asia. This fact dictated Japanese policy, which, it must be emphasized, was always limited. Even in their wildest fantasies the Japanese did not dream of world conquest.

Why, then, did the Japanese attack the United States? Strategically, because the American colony of the Philippines lay directly athwart the Japanese line of advance; emotionally, because the Japanese were convinced that the United States would never allow them to advance into Malaya or the Dutch East Indies without striking against the flanks of their lines of communications. More fundamentally, they realized that the United States did not wish to see them become a great power and would consistently oppose their advance southward. Thus, although the Japanese

realized that if they goaded the United States into war and America chose to fight it to a finish they were doomed, they felt even more that they were doomed without war. They were convinced that the United States was determined to reduce Japan to a position of secondary importance, which left Japan with no alternative but to go to war while she still had the power to do so.

What, then, of America? Our policy in the war has been viciously attacked in reference to grand strategy as well as tactical decision. The major complaints have been that America had no policy short of defeating the Nazis and the Japanese, that our leaders ignored the Soviet threat, and that they forgot that the purpose of the Armed Forces is to provide for the continuing security of the Nation, not just victory in war, and that as a result of the inadequate strategy pursued, the United States was in a worse position at the end of the war than it had been in 1939, despite enormous sacrifices.

I suspect that something like this view is the most popular image of America's World War II strategy in the country today. I assert that it is dead wrong. America made many mistakes in the war, some avoidable, some not, a few of which I shall discuss. But, on the balance, I do not see how we could have obtained a better return on investment than we did.

The first goal of American strategy was the defeat of Nazi Germany. This was achieved, perhaps not as quickly as it might have been, but sooner than anyone dared hope in the dark days of late 1941. It is easy to forget today who Hitler was and what the Nazis represented, but it seems to me that no reasonable person can believe that we would be better off today if we had helped Hitler defeat Stalin and allowed Germany to control Eurasia. One might make an argument that things would have turned out better in Asia if we had let the Japanese win, but it should be recalled that the Japanese wanted to exclude the white man from Asia altogether, shutting America out of a potentially rich trading market while denying to us the natural resources of the area. Mao could never have won in China if we had not driven the Japanese out for him, but if the Japanese had won, we would not today have access to the oil of Indonesia.

The great American strategic decision of the war was Europe first, code name "Rainbow 5." It was based on the conviction that Hitler was more of a threat than the Japanese, a conviction that was unquestionably correct. General MacArthur and a few senior naval officers grumbled about the decision, but Admiral King never wavered in his commitment to it. For all the Army jokes about King having his own private war in the Pacific, in fact the CNO saw the necessity for Europe-first as clearly as did Army Chief of Staff George Marshall.

The reasons were manifold. Distance was an important factor. It was approximately twice as far to American bases in the Pacific as it was to Europe, which meant it took two ships going to the Pacific to do the job that one could do in Europe. The worldwide shortage of shipping made this a crucial factor. In Europe we had two major allies with whom to fight, while in the Pacific (except in Burma) we, in effect, fought alone. This meant we could bring our power to bear against Hitler much more quickly and effectively than we could against the Japanese. On the higher level of national policy, Europe was obviously far more significant to the United States than Asia. The importance of our economic, historical, and cultural ties with the Continent cannot be overemphasized. If the United States were shut out of Asia, that would be bad; if we were shut out of Europe, that would be disastrous.

Once again there was the difference

in the capabilities and goals of the two major Axis Powers. As Adm. Harold R. Stark put it to Roosevelt in 1941, we could win in the Pacific and still lose in Europe, but if we won in Europe we would certainly win in the Pacific.

The second major American decision of the war, less discussed than Rainbow 5, could be called that of cutting costs. The United States was determined to win decisively, everywhere, but at the lowest possible cost. It is nicely summed up in Maurice Matloff's article, "The 90 Division Gamble" in the book *Command Decisions*. Matloff points out that Roosevelt rejected Army plans for 200 divisions and insisted on holding the line at 90, partly to make sure American casualties were low, partly to insure a continued high flow from America's factories not only of implements of war, but of civilian goods as well.

Most nations at war fight with what they have at hand, more particularly with what they have more of than their opponents or their allies. The great advantages enjoyed by Americans in the war were that they had more material and money than anyone else, and they were physically separated from the aggressors. Therefore, like Great Britain in the 19th century, it was obviously a wise American policy to send goods to others to do the bulk of the fighting that had to be done, especially since the United States did not have to devote an excessive share of her production to war goods to provide the tools necessary to defeat the Axis nor was her homeland threatened. Geography had played a great role in Britain's domination in the 19th century; geography was central to America's rise in the 20th century. All the nations involved in World War II wanted victory at the lowest possible cost, but America was the lucky one.

Roosevelt's policy of limited mobilization, which continued through the war, left the United States at the war's conclusion in by far the most powerful position of all the Allies. The American economy was intact and booming, the Pacific had become an American lake, with U.S. Navy bases scattered throughout the ocean and with U.S. Army troops in occupation of the leading industrial power of Asia. America was the leader of a rapidly emerging West European union. Whether these results came about because of a brilliant application of a policy of following national self-interest or simply because of geographical luck or a combination of both did not really matter. America did as much as was necessary and found herself in the happy position of either controlling or having a major influence in four of the five great industrial regions of the world—the Ruhr, England, Japan, and the United States itself. Only the Soviet Union stood outside the American sphere. All the European and most of the Asian nations had to face enormous problems of reconstruction, whether they were among the winners or losers in the war; in America, the major problems were how to absorb the returning veterans and avoid a depression.

But if America's overall record was excellent, she did make mistakes that can be criticized. Many of these were the result of the absence of any formal structure within the Government to set national policy. Roosevelt generally ignored the State Department, the Cabinet seldom met in full session, and there was little cooperation between the armed services and the civilian ministries, even the State Department. Roosevelt operated informally, checking here and there as the mood hit him. The resulting absence of structure led to a certain confusion and drift in policy. The Americans did not aim single-mindedly to prevent the rise of leftwing political forces in the world nor even to the quick defeat of Germany nor to the postwar position of America in Europe and the Pacific. There were operations that embraced one or another of these

goals, but there was no single guiding star.

What consistency there was came from the military. After 1942 military considerations dominated, and the generals and admirals enjoyed unprecedented power. This was increased because they did have an agency that could set common policies, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but the JCS did not get its power instantly. It did not even exist at the beginning of the war, and throughout 1942 Roosevelt ignored or went counter to much of its advice. It came into being in December 1941, when the British came to Washington for a conference on the conduct of the war. The British already had a formal military structure, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COS). To provide a parallel organization, the Americans established the JCS. Composed of Marshall, King, Gen. Henry Arnold of the AAF, and Adm. William Leahy, Roosevelt's personal Chief of Staff, the JCS had a wide range of committees and agencies under it, providing the Chiefs with information, position papers, and recommendations. The JCS was interested in and had influence over nearly every aspect of the American war effort. Its unity and prestige were such that it was the closest thing the United States had to the British War Cabinet. The two coequal bodies, JCS and COS, then merged into the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS), which became the agency responsible for the direction of the Anglo-American military effort.

The CCS reported to and took its direction from the two heads of government. When the military chiefs agreed, the tendency was to inform Churchill and Roosevelt about what would be done; often, however, the CCS could not agree, at which point the political leaders had to break the deadlock and make the decision. In practice, much to Marshall's chagrin, this meant that Churchill had a large influence on the development of American policy, for he was proficient at swinging Roosevelt around to his point of view.

Basic strategic and political differences between the Allies were apparent from the initial meeting of the CCS. Churchill presented the British view, which called for closing and tightening the ring against Germany then stabbing in the knife when the enemy was exhausted. He advocated a series of operations around the periphery of Hitler's European fortress, combined with bombing raids against Germany itself and encouragement to resistance forces in the occupied countries. This represented traditional British policy, abandoned only once, from 1914 to 1918—an aberration Churchill was determined not to repeat. He would let the continentals do their own fighting, just as the great British statesmen of the past had done.

The American military opposed Churchill's policy. Marshall felt that the closing and tightening the ring concept was risky rather than safe, that it would waste lives and material rather than save them, and that it was politically unwise rather than shrewd. To leave the Red army to face the overwhelming majority of the Wehrmacht, Marshall believed, was to court disaster. He was not at all sure that the Russians could survive unaided, and he thought it would be the greatest military blunder of all history to allow an army of 8,000,000 men to go down to defeat without doing anything to prevent it. For the Allies to avoid a confrontation with the Germans on the Continent in 1942 or 1943 might save Anglo-American lives in the short run, but it might also lead to a complete victory for Hitler in the end. Even if Churchill was right in supposing that the Red army would hold out and eventually take care of the primary job—breaking the Wehrmacht's back—Marshall believed that the effect would be to let the war drag on into 1944 or even 1945. The end result would be higher, not lower, Anglo-American

casualties. Finally, Marshall feared that he would not be able to hold the President and the American people to the Germany-first commitment, with its implication of a passive defense in the Pacific, if nothing decisive were being done in Europe. The Asia-firsters, with their already impressive political base in the United States, would be able to switch priorities and force the administration to concentrate on the Japanese.

Marshall therefore proposed that the CCS set as a goal for 1942 a buildup of American ground, air, and naval forces in the United Kingdom, with the aim of launching a massive cross-Channel invasion in the spring of 1943. He argued that only thus could the Americans bring their strength to bear in a decisive manner; only thus could the Allies give significant help to the Russians; only thus could the final aim of victory be quickly achieved.

There were two specific problems with Marshall's program of a 1942 buildup and a 1943 invasion. First, it would be of no help to the Russians in 1942, and second, it would mean that the United States would spend a year without engaging in any ground fighting with the Germans. The second point worried Roosevelt for he wanted to get the American people to feel a sense of commitment in the struggle for Europe (well into 1942, public opinion polls revealed that Americans remained passive about the German threat, eager to strike back at the Japanese). The fastest way to do it was to get involved in European fighting. The President therefore insisted that Americans engage Germans somewhere in 1942, preferably before the congressional elections in November. But Roosevelt was also drawn to Churchill's concept of closing the ring, with its implication that the Russians would take the bulk of the casualties, and he was determined that the first American offensive be successful, all of which made the periphery more tempting as a target than northwest Europe.

Marshall proposed, as an addition to his program for a 1943 invasion, an emergency landing on the French coast in September 1942. The operation, code name "Sledgehammer," would be in the nature of a suicide mission designed to take pressure off the Russians. It would go only if an immediate Russian collapse seemed inevitable. But although Marshall had no intention of starting Sledgehammer except as a last resort, he could and did hold it out to Roosevelt as an operation that would satisfy the President's demand for action in 1942. The obvious difficulty was the risk, and Churchill countered with a proposal to invade French North Africa, code name "Torch," as a beginning in the program of closing the ring. This was certainly much safer than a cross-Channel attack in either 1942 or 1943, especially since it would be a surprise assault on the territory of a neutral nation (the French armistice government at Vichy controlled the French colonies). Torch dovetailed nicely with British political aims, since it would help the British reestablish their position in the Mediterranean, currently reduced to Gibraltar, Malta, and Egypt.

Marshall's and Churchill's proposals were mutually exclusive. In July 1942 Roosevelt sent Marshall, Harry Hopkins, and Admiral King to London to reach agreement with the British. But the CCS could not agree. The British refused to commit themselves to Sledgehammer, said they were willing to study a 1943 cross-Channel invasion further, and insisted that something be done in 1942. Marshall and King refused to be sucked into North Africa, which they feared would tie down the Allies for a year or more, thus making a 1943 invasion impossible and leaving the Red army to its own devices. When they could not move the British, Marshall and King reported a deadlock to Roosevelt.

Roosevelt had to decide. The

pressures on him, from all sides, were enormous. Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov had visited him in the spring, and in a burst of enthusiasm Roosevelt had promised a second front in 1942. Although the President had tried to be nonspecific about where the front would be opened, Molotov, like all the rest of the world, thought of a second front only in terms of the plains of northwest Europe. Roosevelt also knew that the Russians were hard pressed, facing nearly 200 Nazi divisions on a front that extended from Leningrad to the Caucasus. Huge areas, including Russia's prime industrial and agricultural lands, were under occupation. With millions of casualties already incurred and a desperate need for time in which to rebuild his industry and army, Stalin regarded a second front as absolutely essential and as a clear test of the Western democracies' good faith. If the Anglo-Americans did nothing to draw off some German divisions, the Russians could only believe that the Allies were willing to see Hitler win, in the east at least.

Roosevelt was never foolish enough to believe that anyone but the Nazis would benefit from a German victory over Russia nor did he want Stalin to think that he hoped that would happen, but he did have other concerns and pressures. America was nowhere near full mobilization. Whatever Marshall's plans, the U.S. Army could not by itself invade France. Even in combination with the British, the United States would have taken heavy casualties. Churchill and the COS were insistent about not going back onto the Continent in 1942 or, indeed, until everything had been well prepared, and they made north Africa sound attractive to the President. Churchill was willing to go himself to Moscow to explain Torch to Stalin and said he could convince the Soviets that Torch did constitute a second front. Given British intransigence, it seemed to Roosevelt that for 1942 it was Torch or nothing. He picked Torch.

On 22 July Roosevelt gave his orders to Marshall, still in London. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, commander of the American forces in Britain, commented that 22 July could well go down as the "blackest day in History." Eisenhower and Marshall were convinced that the decision to launch a major invasion of French north Africa in November 1942 would have repercussions that would shape the whole course of the war, with implications that would stretch out far into the postwar period. They were right. Once Torch was successful, the temptation to build up the already existing base in Algeria and Tunisia and use it as a springboard for further operations was overwhelming. By far the greater part of the Anglo-American effort in 1942-43 went into the Mediterranean, first in North Africa, then Sicily (July 1943), and finally Italy (September 1943). Impressive gains were made on the map, but there was no decisive destruction of German power.

The Russians stemmed the Nazi tide and then began to roll it back. Victory was coming, and the Anglo-American casualty lists were short, but, nevertheless, the price was high. Because the end in Europe was delayed, the switchover to the full offensive in the Pacific had to be delayed too. Russian suspicions of the Western democracies, already great, increased. The Anglo-Americans, because they refused to participate in the liberation of the area, forfeited all right to influence the postwar situation in East Europe. They had already done so at Munich, leaving the organization, politics, social structure, and loyalties of the area in Hitler's hands. They did so again in 1942-43 by agreeing, in effect, that whoever won the Russo-German war could control the area, since they would not involve themselves in the fighting.

It was not a conscious decision, certainly not in the terms outlined

above. The practical problems involved in launching a 1942 or even a 1943 invasion were enormous, perhaps insurmountable. It is quite possible that the British were right in arguing that a cross-Channel attack begun before everything was ready would simply result in a blood bath, leaving the Anglo-Americans in an even worse position. And, in any case, the policy did work for the United States, for it meant no defeats and control of Western Europe. But the point was that the political considerations taken into account did not include the postwar organization of East Europe. Political motives were paramount in the Torch decision, but they had nothing to do with control of the Eurasian heartland. Churchill wanted a strong British presence in the Mediterranean, while Roosevelt wanted a quick and relatively safe American involvement to boost morale at home. Both got what they needed from Torch.

The major Anglo-American military operations in 1943, as Marshall had feared would be the case, were directed against Italy. They began with the invasion of Sicily, where it took over a month to drive two German divisions from the island, and were followed by the assault on Salerno. Even though Italy quit the war, it was not until mid-1944 that the Allies reached Rome and not until the spring of 1945 that they controlled the whole of Italy. Heavy military commitments were made for results that were slim. The Allies tied down some 20 German divisions in Italy, and they had obtained some additional airfields from which to send bombers against Germany, but that was all.

In the Far East, meanwhile, limitations on available weaponry and manpower was the major factor in American strategy. The United States devoted nearly 40 percent of its total effort in World War II to the Pacific, but much of that effort was eaten up in shipping, and the amount of force the Nation could bring to bear was much less in Asia than in Europe. As a result, the American strategy in the Pacific was to avoid the Japanese strongpoints and initiate operations that would conserve men and material. In practice, this meant no heavy American involvement on mainland Asia, which, in turn, meant the war was primarily the Navy's show. Insofar as the United States never came to grips with the main forces of the Japanese Army, America pursued a peripheral strategy in the Pacific. The island-hopping campaign the Americans pursued worked, in the sense that it brought the Army and Navy ever closer to the home islands of Japan and gave the Navy important bases in the Pacific for the postwar period, but there was a political price. In Europe, the process of closing in on the Germans carried with it the dividends of putting American troops in Antwerp, Paris, and Rome. In Asia, the process of closing in on the Japanese gave the United States control of islands in the Pacific, but not of China.

The strategy that put Americans on the key islands grew out of military necessity, personality conflict, and political motivation. After falling back from the Philippines in the early spring of 1942, the Americans began building a base of operations in Australia. They already had one in the Central Pacific on Hawaii. Top Army and Navy officials did not get on well with one another, and each service had a different idea as to the proper manner of conducting the war; the disagreements were so sharp that, unlike the situation in Europe, Navy admirals refused to subordinate themselves to Army generals, and vice versa. The result was a division of the area into two theaters, the Southwest Pacific and the Central Pacific, with the Army under MacArthur responsible for the Southwest and the Navy under Adm. Chester Nimitz in charge of the Central Pacific. MacArthur's base was Australia; his strategy was to move

northwards through the East Indies, and the Philippines to get at Japan. Nimitz, in Hawaii, wanted to advance westward through the Central Pacific. In the end, both approaches were used.

When MacArthur got to Australia after his flight from Bataan, he announced grandiloquently, "I shall return" to the Philippines. The War Department liked the phrase but thought the statement should read, "We shall return," since presumably MacArthur would need help. MacArthur refused to change it, and "I shall return" it remained. Senior officers in the Navy objected; they felt that making the effort to get back into the Philippines was not worth the men and material required. Better, the Navy reasoned, to bypass the Philippines and go straight to Formosa or even to concentrate exclusively on the Central Pacific. MacArthur's critics, and their number was legion, believed that the only reason the United States returned to the Philippines was to enhance MacArthur's personal prestige.

MacArthur's egotism was great, but his desire to go back to the Philippines involved something more than personal satisfaction. He had spent much of his life in the Far East, considered himself an expert on orientals, and believed that the future lay with Asia. Europe was old and decrepit, Asia young and vibrant. MacArthur thought it would be madness for the United States to ever get involved in a land war in Asia, but this military judgment only reinforced his parallel belief that it was imperative for the United States to control the offshore islands, particularly the Philippines and Japan. The general knew that if the United States bypassed the Philippines, leaving the Japanese garrison intact, it would be difficult for America to reassert herself when the Japanese surrendered. The people who would pick up the arms the Japanese laid down would be the Huks, a Communist-led guerrilla organization that already controlled vast sections of the colony. If the Huks once gained power, it might be impossible to root them out, and the Huks were nnfriendly toward native landlords, American investors, and the idea of America retaining military bases in the Philippines. MacArthur's insistence on returning to the Philippines, therefore, went beyond egotism and even beyond the need to defeat Japan. He was interested in forestalling the Communists in an area that was crucial to America's postwar Asian policy, and he was successful.

I would like to take up one additional major strategic decision of the war, that is, the unconditional surrender policy.

Armchair strategists have had hours of fun with unconditional surrender, usually for the wrong reasons. To be understood, it has to be seen in the context in which it was issued, and like any major policy the pluses have to be balanced against the minuses. First, contrary to the popular belief, it was not a sudden inspiration of Franklin Roosevelt's, casually announced in January 1943 in the romantic atmosphere of Casablanca. It was, rather, a calculated decision, agreed to by Churchill, which amounted to an announcement to the world on Allied policy. The key factor was the Darlan deal. Two months earlier, in November 1942, Eisenhower had made a deal with Adm. Jean Darlan, Vichy's Commander in Chief, which gave Darlan administrative control of French North Africa in return for an end to hostilities between the Vichy French and the Anglo-Americans. Eisenhower conceived of the deal as a straight military operation, but it had widespread repercussions. Darlan was a Fascist, and his administration of north Africa was highly repressive (Jews could not own property, practice professions, attend school, and so on).

Liberals in the Allied world were shocked. In her first contact with the enemy, America had completely ignored

the principles announced in the Atlantic Charter and dealt with a Fascist. Edward R. Murrow, the radio announcer, demanded to know what the hell was going on. He asked if this meant we would also deal on the basis of military expediency with Mussolini and Hitler. Stalin wondered too, and his curiosity was more dangerous, for if he concluded that the Anglo-Americans would make a deal with Hitler, he might very well try to beat them to the punch.

In the first instance, therefore, unconditional surrender was, in effect, a proclamation to the world that there would be no more Darlan deals.

Second, unconditional surrender was a brilliant diplomatic stroke. It was purposely vague. No one knew what it really meant, and Roosevelt gave out no details. Presumably unconditional surrender meant the Allies would fight until such time as the Axis governments put themselves unconditionally into the hands of the Allies, but beyond that nothing was known. What kind of governments would replace those of Mussolini, Tojo, and Hitler? Obviously there would be a period of military occupation, with control invested in an Allied military government, but then what? Roosevelt did not say, which was brilliant, for it kept the Big Three from fighting over war aims. Given the different needs and aspirations of the Big Three, it might have been disastrous for them to discuss war aims in any detail (as it, in fact, nearly was at Yalta and Potsdam, when the discussion could no longer be postponed). They could all agree, however, on eliminating Hitler. Unconditional surrender kept their eyes riveted on the area of agreement. The policy was also a nice way of avoiding the problem of what to do with Hitler and the Nazis when the end came. In the 19th century, and earlier, governments could survive defeat and continue to rule; World War I showed that governments that lost a war also lost their power at home. Unconditional surrender merely recognized that fact.

The major criticism of the policy, that it gave fuel to German propaganda and kept the Germans fighting longer, is undoubtedly correct, but it must be balanced. It also gave the Allied fighting men something tangible to fight for, as it made the issue of the war clear. No laborious explanations about the war were necessary; no one had to explain to the troops about balance of power and economic investments and dominoes and living up to our commitments and so on. The purpose of the war was to eliminate Hitler and the Nazis. Surely that was a good cause—I myself cannot think of a better one—and unconditional surrender underlined it.

If there has been a theme to what I have said, I suppose it is that America did better in World War II than she is generally given credit for, especially by Americans. The overall record was a good one; we emerged from the war as by far the most powerful nation in the world. It was not Roosevelt's fault that we did not do more with the victory.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Professor Stephen E. Ambrose received his bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin and his master's degree from Louisiana State University in 1958. He completed his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin in 1963. Professor Ambrose has taught at both Louisiana State University and Johns Hopkins University. He has written or edited six books, including *Eisenhower and Berlin, 1945* (Norton, 1967), numerous articles, and a variety of book reviews. He is presently occupying the Ernest J. King Chair of Maritime History at the Naval War College, as well as serving as the Associate Editor of the projected 15-volume edition of the Eisenhower papers.