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# APPLIED STRATEGY OF WORLD WAR II

*During the last months of World War II, several important strategic decisions were made which were of major significance not only for the remaining course of the war, but for the future. In his third article in the "Naval War College Review," Professor Stephen E. Ambrose examines these decisions and their significance for the postwar world.*

A lecture delivered at the Naval War College  
by  
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Most popular accounts of World War II contain, in one form or another, this analysis: While Stalin and Churchill centered their attention on the postwar world, the United States concentrated exclusively on the defeat of the Axis. This is simply not so. In the first place, until the last few months of the war, all of the Big Three, not just Roosevelt, geared their operations to the defeat of Hitler. Stalin, for instance, was advised by Molotov, among others, to urge the Anglo-Americans to invade the Balkans. The old-line Communists reasoned that if Eisenhower's armies invaded in the Adriatic or Aegean, they would get bogged down in the mountains. The Red army could then sweep through Germany and on to the Channel coast, giving it control of all of Western Europe. Stalin rejected the advice. He did not want to take on the Wehrmacht alone, partly because he was not willing to pay the cost in lives, mainly because he was not at all sure the Red army could do the job alone.

In April of 1945, after Hitler's fate was sealed, both Churchill and Stalin shifted their view. Both wished to ignore the remnants of the Wehrmacht in order to take Berlin, hoping to hold it for postwar political purposes. Eisenhower, Marshall, Roosevelt, and Truman rejected Churchill's pleas for a Berlin offensive, not because they were simpletons who thought the only job was to defeat Germany, but because they had a different postwar policy. Churchill was prepared to take a hard line with Stalin; the Americans still hoped for cooperation. To race Stalin to Berlin would hardly improve Soviet-American relations. What I am saying is that the Americans did have a postwar political goal, which they did pursue intelligently. It may be that the goal was wrong, but that is a much different criticism than saying that they had no goals.

Within this broad context of the politics of war, I would like to take up the major events of 1945 in order to

suggest some of the ways in which political objectives and requirements dictated military moves. In Europe, two issues were especially important.

The two major issues at stake in 1945 were what form the nature of the advance into Germany should take, and in the final weeks of the war whether the objective should be the political center of Berlin or the remaining military might of the German Army. On both issues the Americans had their way. American preponderance in the Allied camp became so great that, if necessary, the JCS could insist upon their judgment, while the British simply had to accept the decision in the best grace possible, for their contribution to Anglo-American resources was down to 25 percent of the whole. The American domination of the alliance reflected, in turn, a new era in the world's history. The United States had replaced Great Britain as the dominant power bordering on the Atlantic Ocean. By 1945 American production had reached levels that were scarcely believable. The United States was producing 45 percent of the world's armaments and nearly 50 percent of the world's goods. Some two-thirds of all the ships afloat were American built.

The first great issue, fought out in September 1944, was the nature of the advance into Germany. Eisenhower and his planners at Supreme Headquarters directed an offensive on a broad front, with the British and Canadian Armies on the left (21st Army Group) and the American Armies on the right (12th Army Group), moving forward more or less abreast. General Montgomery, commanding the British forces, argued for a single thrust as an alternative to Eisenhower's broad front. Montgomery wanted Eisenhower to give the 21st Army Group all available supplies, stop the American Armies where they were (near Paris), and allow the British and Canadian soldiers to thrust straight on through to Berlin. Montgomery realized

that there was a certain amount of risk involved in the single thrust, not the least of which was that while the 21st Army Group shot forward along the north German coast it would have had no protection for its right (south) flank. But he insisted that his plan was the only one that promised a quick end to the war. Churchill supported Montgomery, partly because he wanted the British to have the glory of capturing Berlin, mainly because he wanted the Anglo-Americans as far east as possible when they linked up with the Red army.

Eisenhower insisted upon his own plan. Domestic politics played a large role in his decision. On a number of occasions he informed the British that under no circumstances could he afford to leave three American Armies sitting in defensive positions while the British swept on to Berlin. Beyond the political factor, Eisenhower was absolutely convinced that the broad front was militarily correct. Whether he was right or wrong depended upon the priority one set. If the main goal, now that the Allies were fighting on the plains of northwest Europe, was to insure a German defeat, Eisenhower's cautious approach was correct. But if the goal was to get the war over with as quickly as possible and in the process to forestall a Russian advance into central Europe by liberating Berlin, Prague, and the other important cities of the area, then Montgomery's audacious program was correct. The roles had been reversed. Eisenhower and Marshall, who in 1942 had been willing to accept any risk to go across the Channel, now adopted a dull, unimaginative, but thoroughly safe campaign. The British, who earlier had shuddered at the thought of confronting the Wehrmacht on the Continent, were now ready to take any chance to get the war over with and occupy Berlin.

One reason for the reversal was that the British had become aware of the price they were going to have to pay for

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victory. Every day that the war continued there was a further drain on their limited resources. Next to Russia, and possibly Japan, Britain was the most thoroughly mobilized nation in World War II. She was using up irreplaceable natural and human resources at an alarming rate. If she were to recover from victory she had to have something left to recover with. As Montgomery put it, "Our 'must' was different from the American must; a difference in urgency." The Americans never felt this. Their economy had not been strained nor their manpower resources depleted. They saw no reason to forestall the Russians in central Europe, for Roosevelt's policy remained one of trying to get along with Stalin after the war.

The Allied armies overcame the crisis of the Battle of the Bulge, and in the early spring of 1945 they moved across the Rhine into Germany on a broad front. Eisenhower set as the immediate objectives the encirclement of the industrial Ruhr and a drive to Dresden to link up with the Red army in central Germany, thus cutting Germany into two parts. Montgomery and Churchill objected. They wanted Eisenhower to give priority in supplies and air support to the 21st Army Group for a drive to Berlin, which they wished to take before the Russians got there. During the opening stages of the controversy, in late March, the British advocated an offensive toward Berlin as a proper military move. Churchill later broadened his reasons, however, to include political factors.

There has been much confusion about Churchill's advocacy of Berlin as a target. It is commonly felt that he wanted to keep the Russians out of Eastern Germany, to retain a united Germany, and to maintain Berlin's status as the capital. There is an assumption that if the Allies had captured the city there would be no Berlin problem today. This is patent nonsense. Aside from the military factors it does not

remotely reflect the policies Churchill was actually advocating. He never thought in terms of denying to the Russians their position in Eastern Europe generally or East Germany specifically, a position that had been agreed to much earlier and one that, in view of the relative contribution to the Nazi defeat made by the East and West, was much to the benefit of the Western democracies. Once the 1943 cross-Channel attack had been scuttled, there never was the slightest chance that the Russians could be kept out of East Europe. Churchill realized this; his agreement with Stalin during their Moscow meetings in the fall of 1944 signified his recognition of the inevitable. At that time Churchill gave Russia a 90 percent influence in East Europe in return for British predominance in Greece. The Prime Minister also recognized that Roosevelt was not willing to join him in an anti-Soviet crusade.

What Churchill did want from Berlin was much less grandiose than a forestalling of Communist influence in East and Central Europe. His major concern was prestige, not so much for Britain as for the West. He told Roosevelt that the Russians were going to liberate Vienna. "If they also take Berlin, will not their impression that they have been the overwhelming contributor to our common victory be unduly imprinted in their minds?" The idea that the Russian feeling that they had done the most to defeat Hitler could be eradicated by an Allied capture of Berlin was really rather absurd, but it had great appeal to Churchill.

The Prime Minister had something more in mind. His country would be occupying the Ruhr seemingly an ideal arrangement for the British since the Ruhr was the main prize, the industrial heart of Germany, and control of it would allow the British to shape the development of their chief European competitor. But there were problems,

the most important of which was food. The Ruhr could not feed itself. Neither could Britain. Churchill did not want to be stuck with the responsibility of nourishing the Germans in the Ruhr, and he proposed to hold Berlin until the Russians, who would be occupying agricultural Eastern Germany, made firm agreements on exchanging manufactured goods for food. He never proposed keeping the Russians out of Berlin altogether, but he did want to force them to trade before letting them in.

Roosevelt would have none of it. His own major concerns, in the weeks before his death on 12 April, were creating the United Nations, insuring the participation of the U.S.S.R. in the United Nations, and maintaining cordial relations with Stalin. He refused to take a hard line with Stalin on the Russian occupation of Poland or on Stalin's suspicions about the surrender of the German forces in Italy to the Western Allies. The President was not an experienced diplomat, and to the end he had no clear goals for the postwar world. His sponsorship of the U.N. indicated that he had adopted Woodrow Wilson's belief in collective security, but the nature of the U.N. Roosevelt wanted, dominated as it was by the Security Council, indicated that he retained a belief in spheres of influence for the Great Powers. So did his frequent remarks about the "Four Policemen." He was a convinced opponent of colonialism, but without being very specific about what would happen when independence came in Asia and Africa. Certainly he favored an orderly transfer of power, which came to mean a transfer to local elite groups that allowed the West to retain its economic concessions.

But if much of Roosevelt's policy was cloudy, mystifying even to his closest advisers, one thing was clear. To the exasperation of some members of the State Department, not to mention the Ambassador to Russia, W. Averell

Harriman, the President refused to become a staunch anti-Soviet. Harriman, Churchill, and later Truman assumed that Russia would be unreasonable, grasping, probing, power hungry, and impossible to deal with except from a position of great strength and unrelenting firmness. Roosevelt rejected such assumptions. Furthermore, he seems to have felt that it was only reasonable for the Russians to be uneasy about the nature of the governments on Russia's western frontier—millions of the troops that attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 came from the semi-Fascist and Fascist societies in the area. He thus was willing to go a long way toward meeting Stalin's demands in Eastern Europe. There was also an assumption, shared even by Churchill, that Stalin was stating the obvious when he remarked in early 1945, "whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system." Churchill, who had taken the lead in establishing this principle in Italy and Greece, later denounced Stalin for practicing it in East Europe, but the evidence indicates that Roosevelt was realistic enough to accept the *quid pro quo*.

The question of the nature of the alliance with Russia was a vexing one. In the public press the Red army was heroic, and Stalin was a wise and generous leader. Whether this had a deep or lasting effect on a people who mistrusted and feared communism at least as much as they did fascism is doubtful. Behind the scenes, meanwhile, and especially in the State Department, anti-Soviet feeling continually surfaced. George Kennan, though a rather minor functionary in the Department, expressed the mood best. Two days after the Nazis invaded Russia, Kennan wrote the Deputy Chief of the Department's Division of European Affairs "that we should do nothing at home to make it appear that we are following the course Churchill seems to have entered upon in extending moral support to the Russian

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cause . . . It seems to me that to welcome Russia as an associate in the defense of democracy would invite misunderstanding." Kennan felt that throughout Europe "Russia is generally more feared than Germany . . ." and implied that he agreed with this estimate of the relative dangers of communism and fascism.

In the War Department, too, there was great fear of the Soviets. In the summer of 1944 an agency of the JCS warned the Secretary of State, "While the war with Germany is well advanced towards final conclusion, the defeat of Germany will leave Russia in a position of assured military dominance in eastern Europe and in the Middle East." The JCS agency believed that the end of the war would

. . . find a world profoundly changed in respect of relative national military strengths, a change more comparable indeed with that occasioned by the fall of Rome than with any other change occurring during the succeeding fifteen hundred years. This is a fact of fundamental importance in its bearing upon future international political settlements and all discussions leading thereto.

After Japan was defeated, "the United States and the Soviet Union will be the only military powers of the first magnitude."

What would the Soviets do with all of their new-found power? In August of 1943 a colonel in the War Department prepared a position paper on the subject. "The real objective of Russia is the Sovietization not only of Europe but of the world," he declared. His recommendation was to try to get what we could from the Russians through agreement. "As for Germany," he continued, "the mere threat of our alliance with her will suffice to give pause to Russia."

Higher ranking officers, while

agreeing with the assumption that the Soviets aimed to take over the world, could not accept the idea of making an alliance with Hitler to stop Stalin. Marshall's chief assistant in the War Department made a different recommendation:

Victory in the war will be meaningless unless we also win the peace. We must be strong enough militarily at the peace table to cause our demands to be respected. With this in view, we should give only such equipment to our Allies that they can put to better and quicker use than we can.

In short, cut down on lend-lease to the Russians.

From 1943 on, Roosevelt received numerous recommendations to cut back on lend-lease, but he always refused, and the aid continued to flow. The reason was that the West needed the Red army. Kennan and the War Department officers failed to see this, but Marshall and Roosevelt were clear enough about who needed whom the most. Their greatest fear was precisely Kennan's greatest hope—that once the Red army reached the Russian borders it would stop. The Germans, in those circumstances, could have marched west and turned the full fury of the Wehrmacht against the Allies. England and America had not mobilized anywhere near enough ground troops to batter their way into central Germany against such opposition. Further, there was the frightening possibility of new secret weapons. Germany had made rapid strides in military technology during the war, and German propaganda continued to urge the people to hold on just a little longer until the new weapons were ready. The Allies knew that the Germans were working on an atomic bomb. The V-weapons, jet-propelled airplanes, and snorkel submarines presaged even

more dangerous developments. To halt lend-lease to the Russians would slow the Red army advance, giving the Germans more time to perfect their weapons. In addition, Marshall thought Russian aid in the war against Japan absolutely essential, for without it the Americans alone would have to take on the still intact Japanese Army, with frightfully high casualties. Better by far, he reasoned, to remain friends with the Russians so that after Germany surrendered the Red army could be turned against the Japanese, thereby saving hundreds of thousands of American lives.

The central dilemma of the war was embodied in these considerations. Until the very end almost no one in power in the West wanted Russia to stop advancing, but few Americans wanted them to dominate the political and economic structure of east Europe. It had to be one way or the other. Roosevelt decided the greater danger lay in an end to Russian offensives, and he continued to give Stalin what aid and encouragement he could in the Russian drive to the west.

In any case, the entire thrust of Roosevelt's posture on the shape of the world, whether it involved spheres of influence or collective security, universal principles of democracy and capitalism or the establishment of one's "own social system," precluded any attempt on his part to race the Russians to Berlin or other critical places in central Europe. Roosevelt, knowing in advance Eisenhower's position on Berlin, agreed with Marshall that the Supreme Commander should have a free hand. Truman might have followed a different line, but by the time he was settled in the White House it was too late.

Eisenhower made his decision on military grounds. He thought it madness to send his forces towards Berlin when there was little, if any chance that they would get there before the Red army, at a time when the bulk of the remaining

German Army was far to the south. He also needed a clearly recognizable stop line, so that when his forces linked up with the Russians there would be no unfortunate incidents of the two allies shooting at each other by mistake. He therefore informed Stalin that he was going to halt when he reached the Elbe River and send his forces south. Churchill kept pestering him to push on eastward; finally Eisenhower wired the CCS,

I am the first to admit that a war is waged in pursuance of political aims, and if the Combined Chiefs of Staff should decide that the Allied effort to take Berlin outweighs purely military considerations in this theater, I would cheerfully readjust my plans and my thinking so as to carry out such an operation.

He was not, in other words, willing to risk the lives of 100,000 or more men for no military gain, but if his superiors were prepared to make Russia instead of Germany the enemy, he would change his plans, for then the military considerations would be much different. The CCS made no reply, and for Eisenhower, Nazi Germany remained the enemy.

While Eisenhower's forces occupied southern Germany, the Russians battered their way into Berlin, suffering heavy casualties, probably in excess of 100,000 men. They gained "the first somber sense of triumph, the first awesome sight of the ruins, the first parades under the pall of smoke." Two months later they gave up to the West over half the city they had captured at such an enormous price. At the cost of not a single life, Great Britain and the United States had their sectors in Berlin. They have been there ever since.

Let us now turn to the end of the war in Asia. Once again, we are working in an area in which the popular history

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emphasizes the absence of careful thought or planning. Supposedly, the Americans just blundered ahead. As I have indicated, my own feeling is that this was not the case in Europe; neither was it the case in Asia.

The most important decision of the war—to build and then to use an atomic bomb—was thoroughly examined and discussed in the higher levels of the Government. So many important personages participated, in fact, and their motives were so divergent, that it is impossible to say that there was one key factor making the result inevitable.

The Manhattan Project, the best-kept secret of the war, began in 1939 with the sole purpose of harnessing the energy of the atom to produce a bomb that could be carried by aircraft and to do it before the Germans succeeded in building one. J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the eminent scientists on the project, later recalled, "We always assumed if they were needed they would be used." The tendency was to regard the bomb as simply another military weapon. As the work on the bomb drew near completion, Secretary Stimson asked Truman to appoint the Interim Committee to decide on how the bomb should be used. Truman put Stimson, businessman George L. Harrison, politician James Byrnes, scientists Vannevar Bush and James B. Conant, General Marshall, and others on the committee. It recommended that the bomb be used against the Japanese as soon as possible, against a military target, and without prior warning of the nature of the weapon.

The Interim Committee's recommendation was straightforward enough, but complications ensued. The Manhattan Project scientists began to get balky. They realized better than anyone else that the bomb was not just another military weapon, and they insisted that its use had to be regarded not as a simple military matter but as a foreign policy decision of the first magnitude.

Germany was already defeated, which to many of the scientists took all the urgency out of the Manhattan Project, and the proposed Russian entry into the war against Japan sealed the Japanese fate. Why risk world condemnation for using a bomb when its use was unnecessary? Some questioned the wisdom of dropping the bomb on the Japanese, a nonwhite people, since this would seem to the nonwhite majority of the world's people as another evidence of America's racist policies (the British military commentator B. H. Liddell Hart later charged that the United States would never have used the bomb against the white people in Berlin).

Most of all, the scientists were concerned with America's image. Sixty-four of the men working on the project signed a note saying,

It may be very difficult to persuade the world that a nation which was capable of secretly preparing and suddenly releasing a new weapon, as indiscriminate as the rocket bomb and a thousand times more destructive, is to be trusted in its proclaimed desire of having such weapons abolished by international agreement.

They urged that the bomb be demonstrated on a barren island before Japanese observers; if the Japanese still refused to surrender, then the United States should turn the bomb over to the United Nations and let it assume the onus of making the decision to use it. "This may sound fantastic," they admitted, "but in nuclear weapons we have something entirely new in order of magnitude of destructive power, and if we want to capitalize fully on the advantage their possession gives us, we must use new and imaginative methods."

Despite the scientists, the military situation dominated the thinking about the bomb. Japan was clearly defeated,



but not crushed. She had lost most of her Pacific Empire and fleet, but she still retained much of China and the Asian coast, her army was more or less intact, and her air force—based on the frightening kamikazes—was a major threat. Japan had an army estimated at up to 2,000,000 men in Manchuria available for the defense of the home islands, with some 5,350 kamikaze planes ready for use and some 7,000 under repair or in storage, with more than 5,000 young men training for the Kamikaze Corps. Most of the planes were dispersed on small grass strips or in underground hangars and caves, where they were being conserved for use against the American amphibious invaders. An American invasion of the home islands would be a bloody affair. Stimson wished to avoid it not only because he feared the casualties, but also because he did not wish to inaugurate a race war in the Pacific, where the white man was so badly outnumbered.

A key factor was the Red army. If Stalin would turn it around, bring it to Asia, and declare war on Japan, the Japanese Army in Manchuria would be tied down on the continent and would therefore be unavailable for the defense of the home islands. Under those circumstances, Japan might quit without a last-ditch fight. Contemplating the possibility of the Red army taking care of the bulk of the Japanese Army, on 18 June 1945 General Marshall noted, "The impact of Russian entry on the already hopeless Japanese may well be the decisive action levering them into capitulation . . ." The U.S. Navy believed the Japanese could be starved into submission through a blockade and offshore bombardment, and the Air Force argued that even without the atomic bomb the enemy could be forced through bombing to surrender, but neither of these optimistic forecasts was accepted. The bomb offered the possibility of obtaining the desired

the Government seriously thought about not using it. To drop it as soon as it was ready seemed natural enough. As Truman later put it, "The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me. Let there be no mistake about it. I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used." Still, he was aware of the indirect dividends. On 9 August the Russians declared war on Japan; Truman records that "this move did not surprise us. Our dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan had forced Russia to reconsider her position in the Far East."

Unfortunately, the first bomb on Hiroshima did not bring an immediate Japanese response. The Russians, meanwhile, rolled forward in Manchuria and Southern Sakhalin. The Japanese Manchurian Army surrendered. In order to prod the Japanese, the United States dropped a second bomb, on Nagasaki, which insured that the Japanese Government would surrender to the Americans. Even after the second bomb, however, the Japanese insisted on some guarantee about the Emperor. The Americans

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### 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.

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decided they would have to take what they could get, made the required promises, and got the surrender.

American troops occupied Japan, excluding the Russians, not to mention the Australians and British. Even though MacArthur, who headed the occupation, was supposed to be a Supreme Allied Commander, responsible to all the governments which had been at war with Japan, in fact he ran affairs as he saw fit, checking his decisions only with the U.S. Government. The conclusion of the war therefore found the United

States either occupying, controlling, or exerting the major influence in four of the five major industrial areas of the world—Western Europe, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States itself. Only the Soviet Union was outside the American orbit.

Thus the strategic decisions made by the United States in the closing days of the Pacific war were not the result of haphazard, unconsidered action. They were carefully thought out and adopted on the basis of our generally conceived needs at the time.



The true aim is not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this.

*B.H. Liddell Hart: Strategy, 1954*