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We Were Allies, Once

Lessons of D Day, 1944

Nigel Hamilton

The sixtieth anniversary of the D Day landings in Normandy prompts a historical review of their genesis and a comparison with the debacle of the American-led war in Iraq. An account of the discouraging defeats of European and British troops by the Nazis in the early days of World War II is followed by analysis of the role of the United States as an ally in Operation Overlord in 1944 and the ultimate Allied victory in Europe. This joint effort of nations continued for a time with such institutions as the UN and NATO and other international bodies. Recently, the histories of Stephen Ambrose and such films as Saving Private Ryan distorted this history of cooperation, stressed American efforts, and minimized the efforts of our Allies. In this atmosphere in the 1990s a spirit of American unilateralism arose, in which the lessons of history have been ignored with tragic result.

By nightfall on June 6, 1944, some 156,000 Allied troops were across: 73,000 Americans and 83,000 British and Canadians. With huge Allied air forces and a vast Allied fleet — the latter comprising seven battleships, two monitors, twenty-three cruisers, three gunboats, 105 destroyers, and over 1,000 smaller vessels shepherding 864 merchant ships and 4,000 landing craft — the Supreme Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, could announce that, in the largest invasion in human history, the Allies were ashore, on the mainland of France — to stay. The Second Front was, finally, a reality.

As Eisenhower released his official communiqué the concrete caissons of two huge floating harbors — “Mulberries” — were being towed across the Channel, designed to ensure that, even before the capture of a port, the Allied troops in Normandy would be assured delivery of heavy armor and resupply.

Knowing how many things could go wrong, General Eisenhower had kept a short, alternative communiqué in his pocket, ready to announce failure if the Allies were driven back by the Germans, who had fortified like a medieval castle the entire Atlantic coast with guns of every caliber, erecting concealed concrete pillboxes enfilading every shore, and mining tens of thousands of steel obstacles (Rommel’s “asparagus”) on every beach. They could also draw on some sixty armored and infantry Wehrmacht divisions to deal with the invasion, when it came.

Though Eisenhower’s alternative communiqué was happily discarded, it was not destroyed, for the Battle of Normandy had only just begun. Before it was over, some

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200,000 Allied casualties would have been suffered in what was, undoubtedly, the greatest Allied effort of World War II: the breaching of Hitler's Atlantic Wall, and the destruction of the German armies in the West, which led, inexorably, to the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich, eleven months after Allied troops landed.

How? How was it possible for the Allies — employing forces from more than a dozen nations — to mount such a successful attack, and to get so many things right?

Sixty years later, on the anniversary of that extraordinary achievement, we lament the gung-ho invasion of another country, Iraq, and are compelled to ask what went wrong.

How could the Western Allies have so misread Intelligence about Saddam Hussein; about Iraqi popular support for a foreign attack; about the existence of weapons of mass destruction; about the need to guard against civil disorder and looting in the aftermath of an offensive; about the number of Allied soldiers required to police the country; about the need to use the Iraqi military until internal order was reestablished; about the need to avoid any unethical behavior on the part of the occupying forces; and, above all, about the need to show the world that such a "liberation" was necessary and legitimate, in the court of world opinion?

What I would like to do here is to explore some of the reasons for the different invasion outcomes — noting not only the true story behind D Day 1944, but how, in recent years, there took place a gradual, potentially disastrous slide towards patriotic unilateralism in American popular culture: a slide that reached its nadir in the rise of a cabal of politico-military ideologues in Washington — men who, like Henry Ford, considered history to be "bunk," and demanded the unilateral invasion of Iraq, without UN support, or more than a reluctant, makepiece, quickly assembled "coalition of the willing."

Let us, therefore, take a fresh historical look at how the famous D Day landings were achieved and followed up, then, how and why they were increasingly, indeed fatally misrepresented in American historiography and filmography at the end of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the first thing to remind ourselves is that the D Day landings were not opportunistic or the product of whim or fancy. They were only enacted after *years* of Allied argument, study, preparation, and planning — and in the face of an enemy known to be exterminating large numbers of civilians in his own country and throughout the occupied countries; moreover, an enemy known also to be preparing a series of secret weapons of mass destruction, aimed initially at Britain, but with a capability, ultimately, of reaching the United States: the V1 and V2 missiles.

Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain from May 10, 1940, had made himself British Minister of Defence in addition to his prime ministerial office — but despite his reputation for courage and fieriness, it took four *years* before he felt the Western Allies were strong enough, unified enough, and experienced enough to mount a cross-Channel invasion and carry it through to the liberation of France and the conquest of the Third Reich. Moreover, Churchill had good reason to be skeptical. Democracies are at an intrinsic disadvantage in war against tyrannical or totalitarian regimes. Their strength and staying power resides in their alliances — and alliances take time to develop and harden.

A brief chronicle of the prehistory of the D Day landings will, I think, make clear the extent of disagreement, misfortune, reverse, and rehearsal before the Western Allies were confident enough, unified enough, and well enough prepared to invade Normandy and, ultimately, end the Nazi nightmare in Europe.

As islanders, the British had always feared invasion themselves — fears based on a number of successful and unsuccessful amphibious attacks, from the time of the Romans, Vikings, and Normans to that of the Spanish Armada, and the threat of attack by Napoleon. The response had been to build up not a great land army, but a great navy — to defeat invaders before they reached British shores, rather than afterwards. Relations between the Royal Navy and British Army were therefore historically poor — and the British history of assault landings was not a proud one. At Gallipoli in 1915, under the aegis of Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the British suffered one of the most humiliating reverses in its military annals. In the early years of World War II in Europe the record was even worse. Once again under Winston Churchill's aegis as First Lord of the Admiralty, British forces were ordered to land with French units in Norway in April 1940, while the mountainous Scandinavian kingdom was still in Norwegian hands. The invasion did not stop the Germans from defeating the Anglo-French army in a matter of weeks, forcing the 25,000 Allied survivors to evacuate. For the rest of World War II, Norway remained a heavily occupied territory, under the political direction of Vidkun Quisling, who was executed after the war for treason.

Almost immediately, however, the same fate had befallen the British Expeditionary Force in Belgium and northern France in May 1940, when Hitler's forces swept through the French front line at Sedan, surrounded the BEF, and compelled the 338,226 British and French troops who had not been captured to evacuate at Bray Dunes and Dunkirk. Churchill, as the new Prime Minister, warned that "wars are not won by evacuation. We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attribute of a victory," yet most Britons had rejoiced at the nation's seeming delivery.

Two weeks later the Prime Minister was forced to announce another British evacuation, this time 163,000 men in Normandy, as the remainder of the French army collapsed and the German armies swept across the Loire, cutting off the Cherbourg and Brittany peninsulas as they did so. Thereafter, Britain itself faced possible invasion, thwarted only by the RAF and Hitler's ambitions to the East.

As the threat of Nazi invasion receded, Britain found itself almost powerless to strike back at Hitler. The French government had capitulated, reconstituting itself as quislings in Vichy, under Marshal Pétain, who was also condemned to death for treason after the war (but whose sentence, because of his infirmity, was subsequently commuted to life imprisonment). To the British minister of air production, Max Beaverbrook, Churchill meanwhile wrote that the "only sure path" to winning the war was to build more heavy bombers, who could operate above and behind the enemy lines, raining TNT "upon the Nazi homeland. We must be able to overwhelm them by this means without which I do not see a way through."¹

TNT, unfortunately, proved as ineffective for the Royal Air Force in overwhelming the Germans as it did for the Luftwaffe in overwhelming the British. With almost no Allies left, Churchill ordered British forces to Greece to help stem the Italian-German invasion in the spring of 1941. Cynical British war correspondents in Egypt toasted "the new Dunkirk at Salonika" even before they departed for mainland Greece.² Soon British forces were once again forced to evacuate — first, 50,000 from the mainland, then 17,000 in utter ignominy from Crete — a supposedly impregnable island successfully assaulted by German airborne divisions in May 1941.³ When Hitler then amassed three million German troops in one hundred forty divisions to attack the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Britain had no assistance to

offer the Russians save convoys, which were eventually stopped owing to U-boat ascendancy in northern Atlantic waters. Indeed, by the time Japanese imperial forces began overrunning Britain's territories and bases in the Far East and attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Britain was virtually powerless.

Hitler's declaration of war against the United States four days later, was, for Churchill, a godsend. Indeed, had Hitler remained neutral in Japan's quarrel with the United States (as Roosevelt had hoped, after the decimation of American forces in the Far East), the outcome of the war in Europe might have been very different. As it was, Churchill — whose mother was an American — was able to travel to Washington, address Congress, and in a three-week conference, optimistically titled Arcadia, was able to persuade President Roosevelt and his initially reluctant military chiefs to adopt a "Germany-first" strategy in Europe, despite Pearl Harbor and continuing Japanese aggression in the Pacific.

What the Arcadian agreement did not do, however, was resolve *how* to deal with Germany first.

Initial political and military opinion in America favored an invasion of France as soon as possible in 1942: Operation Sledgehammer, designated to take place between Le Havre and the Channel ports of Calais and Boulogne. Unfortunately, the name Sledgehammer was hyperbole, for the British had nowhere near enough forces to invade France, and the United States could not hold onto the Philippines let alone launch an attack in Europe. The British therefore paid lip service to the concept but remained profoundly skeptical, causing General Marshall, the U.S. Army's Chief of Staff, to note that a 1942 Channel crossing would be "a desperate operation to save Russia," by forcing the Nazis to fight on two fronts, but that "the British staff and cabinet were unalterable in refusal to touch SLEDGEHAMMER. . . . So we were at complete stalemate."⁴

In the months after Arcadia, Operation Sledgehammer was further explored in theory, but not in practice — indeed, General Marshall became so frustrated at its lack of concrete progress that he sent his chief war planner, Lt-General Dwight D. Eisenhower, from Washington to England to find out what was holding up preparations.

Eisenhower had never served in combat, and though a brilliant staff officer, had yet to learn how tough the Germans were in battle. In the meantime, he was highly impressed by the handsome new head of British Combined Operations, employing army, navy, and air force personnel in inter-service Commando raids on the German-occupied mainland of Europe: Vice-Admiral Lord Mountbatten, the son of a former German prince. Mountbatten was, Eisenhower had heard, "vigorous, intelligent, and courageous."⁵ He was also closely related to King George VI. Unfortunately, he was, as a recent destroyer captain, also wholly out of his depth in administering large inter-service fighting forces, as would become clear when he was charged with carrying out a mini-D Day that summer: a "raid in force" on the French seaport of Dieppe.

Even as Lt-General Eisenhower returned to Washington in June 1942 to report on Allied planning for a Second Front, the British army was reeling from the latest German blow, this time in Libya, where General Erwin Rommel smashed through the British lines with his reinforced German-Italian Panzer Army and besieged the port of Tobruk, forcing its garrison of more than 30,000 troops to surrender.

Prime Minister Churchill, visiting Roosevelt in Washington, was dumbfounded — indeed was later minded to remark: "Defeat is one thing, disgrace is another."⁶

Meanwhile, embarrassed and ashamed, he felt compelled to fly in a converted bomber to Moscow on August 12, 1942, to reassure Marshal Stalin, whose southern armies were retreating from the river Don to the Volga at Stalingrad.

Stalin, fearing Soviet military collapse, had issued his famous Order No. 227 that “Panickmakers and cowards must be liquidated on the spot.”⁷ With the British preparing to retreat further, indeed, evacuate Egypt if Rommel broke through the last British defensive line at Alamein, and with the Germans striking south of Stalingrad to the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, Churchill felt it was crucial to make clear to the Russian dictator that the British were not throwing in the towel — indeed he boasted that they were about to mount a major inter-service rehearsal for the forthcoming Second Front by launching an attack on the French coast.

Several days later Mountbatten’s Combined Operations landing duly took place at Dieppe. It proved an utter catastrophe: three thousand brave Canadian troops mown down on beaches, under fire from German guns concealed in the nearby cliffs. Rehearsal had become suicide — as Operation Sledgehammer would have been.

Reluctantly, it was recognized by Allied politicians and war planners that landing troops on foreign shores was not the same thing as defeating a German army in battle — a lesson that was driven home some months later when Eisenhower, appointed Allied Commander in Chief in the Western Mediterranean, found himself unable to exploit the virtually uncontested Anglo-American landings in French-occupied Morocco and Algeria in November 1942. Hitler merely reinforced his troops in Tunisia, and Eisenhower’s forces, though managing to get within thirty miles of Tunis, were then stopped in their tracks, unable even to cut off Rommel’s 1,500-mile retreat from Alamein, in Egypt —where, for the first time in World War II, a German army had at last been completely defeated by a newly promoted British General, Bernard L. Montgomery.

“I am deeply concerned about the unfavorable turn in Tunisia,” Churchill cabled Eisenhower, “and our staffs take an even more unfavorable view.”⁸ Churchill was not joking. The British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, noted in his diary: “I am afraid that Eisenhower as a general is hopeless! He submerges himself in politics and neglects his military duties . . . he knows little if anything about military matters. I don’t like the situation in Tunisia at all!”⁹ Nor did Eisenhower, who had to deal with the complexities of the Vichy French and the Free French in North Africa, as well as watching over the fortunes of his Anglo-American army. As he confided to a friend in America: “I sometimes think I am a cross between a one-time soldier, a pseudo-statesman, a jack-legged politician, and a crooked diplomat.”¹⁰

Unable to close the last thirty miles to Tunis for five months, the Allied campaign in Tunisia was punctuated by disasters, most notably at Kasserine in February 1943, as Brooke and others had feared. The campaign has been vividly reconstructed in a recent Pulitzer-prizewinning work, *An Army At Dawn*, by Rick Atkinson.¹¹ Atkinson does not spare the shame of American as well as British contingents (who supplied three-quarters of the troops) on the field of battle — his perspective being that of a journalist-historian alive to the existential experience of the combatants, and the epic story of how green American boys became tough warriors, the equal of Hitler’s once-triumphant soldiers. Atkinson’s own failure to view the campaign from an Allied rather than American perspective, however, is a matter to which we shall return.

The long, hard slog in North Africa, meanwhile, proved two things: that Hitler’s

troops would not simply cave in, no matter how powerful the Allied navies and air forces marshaled to attack them; and that, consequent upon that fact, a Second Front on the Atlantic coast of France, where the Germans could swiftly reinforce their occupying troops by road and rail, would be a hazardous, indeed, possibly suicidal operation. This left the Allies, as Churchill put it, “with no plan for 1943.”¹² It was thus decided, at a summit meeting in Casablanca in mid-January 1943, that once Axis forces were driven from North Africa, Italy should next be “knocked out” of the war, beginning with an Allied invasion of Sicily: Operation Husky. This would force the Germans to station large forces in the northern Mediterranean to protect the southern flank of the Third Reich from Allied invasion from the South. The long-promised Second Front could meantime be launched from Britain.

Prime Minister Churchill subscribed to this pincer-policy in theory, but in practice, still fearing (especially after the Dieppe catastrophe) an English Channel “running with blood” if the Allies attempted to mount a Second Front late in 1943, he successfully persuaded Roosevelt to support, in the late summer of 1943, after the presumed seizure of Sicily, a “large-scale offensive” attack on the mainland of Italy: the “underbelly of the Axis” in Europe.¹³

Sicily was duly invaded on July 11, 1943, in what was until then the largest contested assault landing in history. The island was conquered in thirty-eight days, the campaign ending on August 20, 1943, but as Carlo D’Este has shown in his classic campaign history, *Bitter Victory*,¹⁴ fighting the Germans in defensive country was never a simple affair. And in the end a force of half a million Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen were required to vanquish approximately 62,000 Germans abetted by 230,000 ill-equipped Italians — a bitter victory that was followed, after another Allied summit meeting in Quebec in August, by further Allied landings in September 1943 at Reggio, in the foot of Italy, and Salerno, south of Naples. Once again, however, although the landings themselves were successful, the Allied land campaign in Italy was stymied by brilliant German defensive warfare, this time on the mainland of Europe, where German forces could quickly be reinforced by road, rail, and air. After no less than five major landings and eleven months of bitter fighting in Southern Europe, the Western Allies had not even reached Rome. A year later, they had not even reached the Alps.

I re-sketch such slow Allied progress and misfortunes not to cast aspersions on the politicians and generals who were responsible for Allied progress in the Mediterranean and in mounting the long-awaited Second Front, but to illustrate the difference between winning a battle and a war, against a stoic, well-disciplined, and indoctrinated enemy. It also reminds us, today, of the endless yet *necessary* summits, meetings, debates, and arguments between Allies in the prosecution of war. A number of historical works have been devoted to what William Breuer has called *Feuding Allies: The Private Wars of the High Command*.¹⁵ But such snickering misses the democratic point. Hitler’s forces, so ideologically inspired, well-trained, and so professionally commanded, *could* only be beaten by a coalition of Allies — more-over a coalition so dedicated, at the end of the day, that they were able to absorb the inevitable upsets and failures that wars involve, and yet win out. Napoleon had once remarked that he preferred to fight a coalition rather than serve in one — but Napoleon ultimately lost his wars, thanks to coalitions rather than greater generalship. With allies, Churchill knew, Britain would not lose the long struggle against Hitler — indeed Churchill had telegraphed to his Foreign Secretary the day after Hitler’s declaration of war against America, “The accession of the United States makes

amends for all, and with time and patience will give certain victory.”¹⁶ Two and a half years later, his optimism was vindicated — the Allied D Day landings of 1944 representing, both in their planning and execution, by far and away the supreme example of Allied dedication.

As preparations for the Second Front continued at Norfolk House, in London’s St. James’s Square, there were a number of generals who began to covet the role of Supreme Commander for the operation, which had been given the cover name “Overlord.” The most notable contenders for this historic role were the respective heads of the United States and British armies, General George C. Marshall and Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke. Neither Roosevelt nor Churchill, however, could decide. When Stalin himself asked “Who will command Overlord?”¹⁷ at another summit meeting, this time in Tehran in late November 1943, both Roosevelt and Churchill were shamed into admitting they had *still* not made the crucial decision — an admission that caused Stalin to question yet again whether the Western Allies were serious about fighting in Europe, or were simply waiting for Soviet forces to suffer the brunt of casualties in the fight against Hitler.¹⁸

In the end, Generals Marshall and Brooke were turned down in favor of the man who possessed ample experience of *Allied* overall command: General Dwight D. Eisenhower. As Roosevelt sagely noted on his way back from Teheran, Eisenhower might not be the best fighting general the Allies possessed, but he “is our best politician among the military men. He is a natural leader who can convince other men to follow him, and this is what we need in his position more than any other quality.”¹⁹

The appointment of Eisenhower as Supreme Commander on the second anniversary of Pearl Harbor was an inspired choice. So was that of the Commander of the Allied Field Armies for the invasion, General Montgomery. “Monty” was a pro — a difficult, peremptory commander who demanded the very highest standards of battlefield leadership on the part of his officers, and was almost worshipped by his men for his refusal to undertake operations that risked their lives without real prospect of success. Arriving in London in mid-January 1944, Eisenhower backed Montgomery’s latest plans for D Day one hundred per cent — throwing out the existing project for a narrow-fronted attack in Normandy aimed at Paris, and replacing it with a sixty-mile wide assault landing on five main beaches. Montgomery’s new strategy aimed at quickly seizing the Norman capital of Caen and threatening to strike north toward the Somme, while landing two million men behind that shield. While British and Canadian forces held the left flank, American forces would strike inland to create a southern flank, meantime sending further forces westward from the Utah beachhead to capture the vital deep-water port of Cherbourg. Finally, as the battle progressed and more troops were landed, two American armies would strike down to the Loire and then wheel north toward Paris, forming a huge Allied steamroller, stretching from the Channel coast at Le Havre to Orleans.²⁰ The Normandy campaign, Montgomery confidently predicted, would take ninety days.

As matters turned out, that deadline would be beaten by three days, with the Allies crossing the Seine and seizing Paris in only eighty-seven days. Many things went wrong in the course of the D-Day landings, and then in the subsequent Battle of Normandy. It had been hoped that the British could reach Caen on D Day itself, before the Germans could organize its defense; in the event, the city was only captured by Canadian forces on D plus 33 days. The same was true of St. Lo, which was taken by American forces not on D plus 9, as intended, but on D plus 45. Falaise only fell on D plus 71, not D plus 17. Thanks to the thick, double hedgerows

and ditches of the *bocage*, new army-air tactics had to be developed whereby heavy bombers pulverized specific points of enemy resistance to make way for American armor. As one historian later sniffed, it was a savage and unnecessary use of “Brute Force”²¹ — but it worked. Several hundred American soldiers, even an American general, were killed by “friendly fire” — in this case, friendly bombs — but after continuous cancellations owing to bad July weather, they did the job magnificently. General “Lightning Joe” Collins burst through the gap to Coutances, and Operation Cobra, the plan to launch General Patton’s Third U.S. Army around the German flank, was under way. Churchill had said, before D Day, that he would be satisfied if the Allies reached Paris by the time of the first snows;²² they were there in glorious August sunshine.

Eight months later, in May 1945, the new German Fuhrer, Hitler’s successor Admiral Doenitz, capitulated to the Allies. As the war in Europe ended, the victors could look back on an extraordinary cooperative achievement in the West and in the East. Moreover, its long-term results were equally extraordinary. Although an Iron Curtain soon divided Europe in two, the United States assumed the leadership of NATO in 1951, ensuring by an absolute Allied solidarity of purpose that there was no war in Europe for another half century.

Winning World War II, though long, complicated, and arduous, actually proved simpler than winning it in retrospect. The longer peace in Europe lasted, the more the history of World War II — which had won it — was fought over in words and film. On the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, Soviet historians and documentary filmmakers portrayed World War II as an almost exclusively Russian struggle to defeat Hitler (symbolized, like the raising of the Stars and Stripes on the atoll in Iwo Jima, in a brilliantly staged photograph: in the Russian case, the famous picture of a red Soviet flag being hoisted above the ruins of the Reichstag, Berlin, which the Russians, not the Western Allies, had captured). Meanwhile, on the western side of the curtain, armies of historians, broadcasters, filmmakers, and documentarists largely ignored the Soviet contribution to victory in World War II, and concentrated their pens and lenses on the contributions of the Western Allies.

Almost from the start there were differences in national perspective — as there had been during the war. Although American and British forces had landed on D Day in parity, with almost 80 percent preponderance of British naval forces, the ratio of American effort had increased dramatically thereafter, as divisions were shipped to Normandy directly from the United States. By the end of the Battle of Normandy, in August 1944, American ground troops — and armor — outweighed that of the British, Canadian, Polish, and Free French by a considerable margin, and the more nationalistic of American officers urged Eisenhower to take a more robustly American line in his decisions, especially when, on September 1, 1944, he took over the role of Commander in Chief in the field, as well as Supreme Commander.

The Battle of Normandy had taken the time allotted by General Montgomery almost to the day, and with almost exactly the anticipated Allied casualties: 200,000 killed, wounded, and missing. Yet the three-month slugging match, though it produced the greatest combat victory of World War II for the Western Allies (inflicting almost 500,000 casualties on the Wehrmacht, indeed destroying their armies in the West), had imposed a tremendous strain on Allied patience, public opinion, and confidence. Generals Bradley and Patton had favored an American thrust via Metz to bounce the Siegfried Line and enter Germany south of the Ruhr, in the area of

Frankfurt, while the German armed forces were in disarray — gambling on General Patton’s genius for exploitation. General Montgomery, shorn of the two American armies he had had under command since the planning for D Day, had by contrast favored their reintegration in a strike northward, straight to the Ruhr, with some forty Allied divisions. The “single thrust” / “broad front” debate had thus begun, kept largely *sub rosa* during the hostilities, but made very public in the postwar years. From Winston Churchill himself to Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton, Montgomery, and others,²³ thousands of combatants, writers, and historians on both sides of the Atlantic were free to give their personal accounts and versions, each contesting the validity of others’ opinions on D Day and its aftermath, the campaign to defeat Germany. Should the Falaise Gap have been closed earlier, bottling up the fleeing German formations in Normandy in another Stalingrad, in August 1944? Should Montgomery not first have concentrated on securing both sides of the Scheldt estuary in September 1944, in order to provide shipping access to the great port of Antwerp, instead of mounting his “crazy” coup de main airborne assault on Arnhem — the “Bridge Too Far”? Was the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 and January 1945 — a battle in which American forces suffered almost 100,00 casualties — avoidable? Should the Allies have seized Berlin from the West, in April 1945, when German troops were desperate to surrender to American troops rather than Russian. . . ?²⁴

The arguments flared, keeping the correspondence columns of national newspapers filled for several decades, both in Britain and America. For example Ralph Ingersoll, one of General Bradley’s Intelligence officers, had been a journalist before World War II. He had expressed nothing but praise for the way Montgomery had transformed a “defeatist” plan for D Day landings into an operation in which every officer, man, and woman on the Allied side came to believe (even Winston Churchill who, at one of Montgomery’s great Presentations of Plans at his London headquarters in March, 1944, declared that he was, at last, “hardening” to the enterprise, an admission that had shocked Eisenhower, who realized how little faith Churchill had had in the venture until then²⁵). But as the campaign in Normandy had taken its toll, and the Allied race towards Germany in September had become bogged down in worsening weather and stiffer German resistance, the great Allied achievement of D Day and the Battle of Normandy had been lost sight of. The German counteroffensive in the Ardennes — during which Montgomery had had, once again, to be given command of two U.S. armies in the field — rankled at the time among certain American participants and reporters; after the war American chroniclers such as Ingersoll²⁶ relished the opportunity to belittle Montgomery and his contribution, especially as stories of Montgomery’s insubordination began to leak out in memoirs and interviews.

The war in Europe, in retrospect and in historiography, thus became increasingly a battle of competing strategies and competing personalities, with Patton and Montgomery the most colorful and conceited of the Normandy commanders, Eisenhower the most forbearing, Bradley the most dogged and serious. As historians dug up more and more private diaries and correspondence, so the Allied achievement seemed less and less Allied and, by the 1980s, more and more a miracle of Allied perseverance — which is probably as close to the facts as we will ever get. Yet it was also a tribute to the struggle for the survival of democracy that so many writers, broadcasters, and filmmakers could hold so many different opinions. World War II had not only resulted in the winning of the fight for democracy, but had, in JFK’s

memorable phrase, made the world safe for diversity — including diversity of opinion.

It was that very diversity, however, that became, in the late 1980s, a new problem, at least in the United States. Following the shameful years of the Vietnam War and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States became the undisputed sole surviving global superpower, and a number of American historians, writers, and broadcasters felt a growing need not only to present a less diverse picture of recent American history, but a more patriotic one. The very disputatiousness of World War II military historiography offended such people, who yearned for a simpler accounting. Outraged, for example, by the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the New World, in which the much anticipated traditional anniversary celebration turned into a contentious worldwide grandstand for protest and conflicting ethnic views in 1992, they organized a backlash battle to stop the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum's special exhibit in 1994 of the *Enola Gay* on the fiftieth anniversary of the first combat use of an atomic bomb, at Hiroshima. Indeed, before the 1995 fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the ending of World War II, they managed to involve Congress on the issue, obtaining a Senate Resolution condemning the Smithsonian Museum, forcing withdrawal of the planned exhibition, and the ultimate dismissal of the museum director, the distinguished former-Czech astrophysicist, Martin Harwit.²⁷

The *Enola Gay* saga became, in fact, symbolic of what American sociologist James Hunter had already called (in 1991) the new "Culture Wars" polarizing American society: a phenomenon taking place across a broad spectrum of Western education, art, history, literature, social relations, religion — and politics. In the field of military history the new Culture War certainly saw an increasing divide between "the commemorative voice" of an ancien régime of American superpatriots, on the one hand, and liberal new internationalists, on the other. "Embedded in such fear of the power of historians' words to shake the confidence of Americans was a sense that the whole nation was now in need of a dose of therapy," wrote one outraged historian²⁸; "that history's purpose must be to bolster the self-esteem of a country of increasingly needy and vulnerable citizens." And to provide that therapy stepped forward a once respected professional military historian of World War II, Stephen Ambrose.

Ambrose had not served in World War II, but had become obsessed with the valor of those who did. Like the patriots who stopped the *Enola Gay* exhibit that year, Ambrose produced in 1994 an anniversary account of the Normandy invasion, *D Day*,²⁹ designed to restore American pride in its military past — just as Desert Storm, the 1991 invasion of Iraq, had recently done in real time, expunging memories of Vietnam. Ambrose's *D Day* was a new account of the 1944 invasion of Normandy conducted by a United States almost without the need for Allies. By peppering the account with the blood and guts of real war, moreover, there was simply no need for historical reflection, let alone inclusion of other nations' contingents, save as supernumeraries.

Those of us who knew Steve Ambrose (and had enjoyed disputing battles and World War II personalities with him) were more amused by his late-life myopia than offended. Patriotism — especially in a postmodern democratic environment — is not necessarily an easy virtue to inculcate. A vividly written reminder of the privations and suffering endured by emblematic, ordinary Americans in the great struggle for liberty in Europe was in itself a worthwhile cause. Moreover, any

extolling of the American contribution to victory in Europe in World War II, in a post-Soviet world in which East European countries — who had been occupied by Russian forces for decades and who now wished to join NATO and thereby secure American protection against Russian wolves in sheep's clothing — was considered in Europe to be better than a return to American isolationism.

Nonetheless, the deliberate downplaying of *Allied* effort in mounting D Day and the Northwest European campaign was disturbing, in an educational sense: jingoistic, and tub-thumping rather than an attempt to help introduce American schoolchildren to the continuing need for Allied unity in the successful defense of Western freedom and democracy — despite the inevitable difficulties that Allied warfare involves, compared with that conducted by dictators.

What made us doubly anxious, however, was the way in which Ambrose's patriotic therapy was soon seized upon by Hollywood and television broadcasters. Ambrose became a millionaire from his D Day book royalties; the films that followed made him a multi-millionaire — and his filmmaking partners multi-multi millionaires. Modeling his film *Saving Private Ryan* on Ambrose's account, and using Ambrose as Historical Consultant, Steven Spielberg was soon able to burn the image of D Day as an all-American enterprise on the imagination of a new generation of Americans. The film became the top-grossing American movie of 1998, grossed \$460 million worldwide, and won five Academy awards. World War II history was clearly becoming mega-entertainment, with Ambrose as its guru. Ambrose even founded and helped fund what was essentially his own D Day Museum in New Orleans, where he was Professor of History, devoted similarly to American patriotism — indeed the contribution of other nations to the planning, rehearsal, Intelligence, conveying, air covering, and sheer success of D Day was virtually relegated to a footnote in the building, so that museum visitors would have no idea that the majority of troops landing were British, or that the American invasion armies and those fighting in the great Battle of Normandy were commanded by a British general — something that did not sit well with Ambrose's agenda.

Ambrose's patriotic mono-view was unilateralism rather than internationalism — and the stories of theft of materials and plagiarism³⁰ that began to surface in Steve Ambrose's final years only served, like the hubris and fate of his fellow former history teacher Newt Gingrich, to mirror his increasingly cavalier approach to history — as if love of his country somehow excused everything else, including jingoism, distortion, and stealing of copyright.

I narrate this with sadness, because I rather liked Steve's brash, gung-ho, independent, and feisty character. "Typical lawyer. Go to hell!" he wrote to one aggrieved Normandy veteran who had dared complain at Steve's theft of the former lieutenant's World War II manuscript.³¹

Certainly Ambrose's patriotic gore contrasted well when viewed against the brash, independent and feisty behavior of my fellow Briton, the military historian David Irving, who lauded the leaders of Nazi Germany, while penning a sneering account of the private disagreements between the leaders of his own country and its allies in World War II that he mischievously titled *The War Between the Generals*. Irving's feistiness, however, led him into even deeper water than plagiarism and theft of copyright, however — it led him into deliberate lies. For years he had questioned whether Hitler knew of, let alone personally ordered the extermination of the Jews in Europe — then prosecuted an American university professor, Deborah Lipstadt, for libel in Britain for calling him a "holocaust denier"! His case went before a

London judge, without a jury, at the end of the twentieth century, and for a moment it seemed as if Irving might actually win under Britain's draconian libel laws, until his own history of deceit and distortion were finally exposed. Eventually, in April 2000, the judge found against him, in words that merited the *Guardian* newspaper's headline "History on Trial": "The charges which I have found to be substantially true include the charges that Irving has for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence; that for the same reasons he has portrayed Hitler in an unwarrantedly favourable light, principally in relation to his attitude towards and responsibility for the treatment of the Jews; that he is an active Holocaust denier; that he is anti-Semitic and racist and that he associates with right-wing extremists who promote neo-Nazism."³²

Irving, however, was battling for his literary and commercial life (he was, in fact, forced into bankruptcy), since a succession of European governments had already banned him from their archives, lest he stir neo-Nazi sentiment. Ambrose, though battling for his medical life two years later (he was a chain smoker, and contracted irreversible lung cancer), had become by contrast a rich author, and by virtue of his position as Director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans had been given so much access to historical materials that he had simply begun to take it for granted he could use anything he wished without even seeking the consent of the copyright owner: an arrogance that was not only reflected in his more and more patriotic writing, but in the rise of a worrying clique of largely Republican ideologues, bursting with resentment at the Clinton Administration's belief in first obtaining full international backing before undertaking any major allied military hostilities abroad.

For such ideologues the term "Allied" became, increasingly, a pejorative word, while American "patriotism" was raised to dangerously new heights. Such men began, indeed, to believe, along with Henry Ford, that history as practiced by thoughtful historians was "bunk," and that the United States could, as the world's sole surviving superpower, simply go in anywhere with its professional hi-tech forces and by the use of smart bombs and modern communications, impose its will and political notions wherever it pleased — especially, such ideologues hoped, among the "backward" Islamic nations of the Middle East.

Tragically, we are now seeing the result of such myopia — the resultant fiasco in Iraq bearing out, tragically, our very worst fears.

What Stephen Ambrose, a man who almost literally worshipped the soldiers who fought in World War II, would have thought had he lived to see the débâcle in Iraq today — the manipulation of Intelligence, the reliance on ignorant exiles, the deliberate sweeping aside of the UN, the lack of a real Allied alliance, the absence of weapons of mass destruction, the disbandment of the Iraqi army, the lack of cheering crowds, the permitted looting, the lack of sufficient troops to keep order, the endless kidnapping, the interreligious (and intrareligious) turmoil, the incitement to terrorism, the hatred against American "occupiers," the scandals at Abu Ghraib prison — can only be imagined.

Who knows? Steve's first impulse would probably be to stand up for the soldiers, doing a difficult job, in a hostile environment. But his second would be, I believe, to look back on the sixtieth anniversary of D Day and to reflect on the things that — despite many local setbacks — "we," as Western Allies, did right in 1944 and 1945.

"We" had a noble, realistic cause. The Allies liberated a France that did, genuinely, greet us with open arms. The Allies created not a coalition of the gung-ho

willing, but a true alliance, in which the political considerations were first argued, over several years, and ultimately settled between Allied governments, after which a Combined Allied Chiefs of Staff committee was then empowered to carry out the Allied governments' instructions. An Allied Supreme Commander was appointed with enormous *political* prowess in keeping his Allied commanders and contingents facing in the same direction (he would fire anyone at his headquarters guilty of bigotry). A professional field general was then appointed whose second name was Law, and whose word among his men was law. Looting was not tolerated, and Civil Affairs units followed his formations into battle, immediately ensuring civil order, nutrition, and essential services, not only in war-torn France and the occupied countries, but in the Third Reich itself, once German territory was overrun. Each part of Germany was pre-designated for Allied occupation, with allotted ports and logistical supply centers and routes. The German army was not disbanded, but was used, initially, as the means for ensuring a swift and coordinated collection of hostile weaponry and adjustment by the population to postwar life. A Four-Power arrangement was made for control of Berlin, the capital — and under the Marshall Plan, postwar reconstruction of Europe was funded.

That is what, six decades later, “we” honor when we think of D Day. Those of us who are historians of the period will go on arguing over the planning — political and military — of D Day, as well as its execution, especially the subsequent “broad front” campaign, with its many setbacks. But the mess in Iraq today makes us more than ever aware of what went right, and why.

We were Allies once, at a time when there was no United Nations. Perhaps, when the *débâcle* in Iraq is over, we shall remember that — and be more Allied in the future. ❀

Notes

1. Quoted in J. R. Colville, *The Fringes of Power*, diary entry of June 19, 1940 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 166–67.
2. Alan Moorehead, *The March to Tunis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1943), 144.
3. See Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 156–173.
4. “George C. Marshall Interviews and Reminiscences for Forrest C. Pogue,” George C. Marshall Foundation, Virginia Military History Institute, Lexington, Virginia, 545.
5. Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten* (New York: Knopf, 1985) 180.
6. Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War: A Complete History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 335.
7. *Ibid*, 346.
8. Signal of December 31, 1942, in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, The Road to Victory: 1941–1945* (London: Heinemann, 1986), 286.
9. Alan Brooke diary entry of December 28, 1942, in David Fraser, *Alanbrooke* (London: Collins, 1982), 305.
10. Letter, Dwight David Eisenhower to P. A. Hodgson, December 4, 1942, Hodgson file, United States Military Academy Archives, West Point.
11. Rick Atkinson, *An Army At Dawn, The War in North Africa, 1942–1943* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).
12. Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower, A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002) 381.
13. Quoted in Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, The Road to Victory*, 253.
14. Carlo D’Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily 1943* (London: Collins, 1988).
15. William B. Breuer, *Feuding Allies: The Private Wars of the High Command* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995).

16. Quoted in Gilbert, *The Second World War*, 278.
17. Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, (New York: Enigma Books, 2001), 788.
18. The Soviet Union continued to bear the greatest burden of the Allies in World War II, in casualties — see David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995). In paralleling D Day 1994 and Iraq 2003–4 this essay has necessarily focused upon the Western Allies — but it should be noted that, then as now, the importance of allied agreement between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union/Russia was and remains crucial to success in prosecuting the war and reconstruction.
19. James Roosevelt, *My Parents: A Differing View* (Chicago, 1976), 176.
20. Nigel Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield: Monty's War Years, 1942–1944* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1983), 582–89.
21. John Ellis, *Brute Force* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990).
22. Dwight David Eisenhower, "Churchill and Marshall" (unpublished manuscript), quoted in D'Este, *Eisenhower*, 778.
23. These included Field Marshal Alan Brooke, General David Belchem, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, Field Marshal Harold Alexander, General Lewis H. Brereton, General Mark Clark, General Lawton J. Collins, General Francis de Guingand, General Richard Gale, General James M. Gavin, P.J. Grigg, General Ernest N. Harmon, General Brian Horrocks, Hastings Ismay, General John Kennedy, Harold Macmillan, General Nigel Poett, General Charles Richardson, General Matthew Ridgway, General Walter Bedell Smith, Henry Stimson, Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, General Lucien Truscott, and General Albert C. Wedemeyer.
24. For an overview see, inter alia, Colin F. Baxter, *The Normandy Campaign: A Selected [and annotated] Bibliography*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, and Colin F. Baxter, *Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, 1887-1976: A Selected Bibliography*, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999.
25. Dwight David Eisenhower interview with S. L. A. Marshall, June 3, 1946, Marshall Papers, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, quoted in D'Este, *Eisenhower*, 502.
26. Ralph Ingersoll, *Top Secret* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946).
27. See Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).
28. Edward T. Linenthal, "Anatomy of a Controversy," in Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, *History Wars*, 62.
29. Stephen Ambrose, *D Day* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
30. E.g., portions of Ambrose's story about B-24 bomber operations during World War II, *The Wild Blue*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), were shown to have been copied directly from *The Wings of Morning* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1995) by Thomas Childers, who teaches history at the University of Pennsylvania. For an account of the attribution/theft/plagiarism scandal, see "How The Ambrose Story Developed," History News Network website, hnn.us.
31. This was Robert Weiss, a Normandy veteran who had sent Ambrose his manuscript North, East, South, West, in the hope that Ambrose would help in getting it published. See Steve Duin, Metro columnist, "Book News: Ambrose to Local War Hero: 'Go to Hell,'" *The Oregonian*, January 27, 2002.
32. "The ruling against David Irving, Excerpts from High Court Judge Charles Gray's ruling in the David Irving libel suit, *The Guardian* (London), Tuesday, April 11, 2000. See also Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler: History, the Holocaust, and the Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books).