

The Normandy invasion: the battle that created the Western alliance

by D. Stephen Pepper

In the very same month that the present leaders of the nations allied in the Second World War met at Normandy to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the invasion of Normandy, 41 Senate Democrats, led by Sam Nunn (Ga.)—a nonentity even among nonentities—spit upon the graves of the brave men who died in that action by proposing to withdraw 90,000 U.S. troops from Western Europe. Such an action, if carried out, would send the political signal sufficient to dissolve the Western Alliance as surely as the men who fought at Normandy brought it into being. Since reliable witnesses describe Senator Nunn as one who not so long ago could not spell Europe, he is assuredly not the author of this strategic disaster. Rather the proposal conforms so closely to the policies of Henry Kissinger as outlined in his infamous March 5 *Time* magazine article that no doubt remains that Kissinger is behind Nunn's treasonous initiative.

For the last 40 years, the Western Alliance has been considered an inviolable compact on which the future of Western civilization depended. When the Western leaders met at Normandy in June, they intended to rededicate their nations to the alliance. The omission of Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany, however, doomed the ceremonies to repeat the past instead of opening the alliance to a greater future. The decision tended to perpetuate the evil doctrine of collective guilt directed at the German people. It rests with the newly founded Schiller Institute to achieve the renewal of the compact, for the institute is founded on the deep current of republicanism shared by Europe and the United States, and in particular the shared outlook of Schiller's Germany and the young American republic in the closing years of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century.

Today the cross-Channel invasion and the victorious Normandy campaign stand out as the turning point in breaking the Nazi resistance. Even more importantly, they created the conditions for a Western Alliance eventually to include defeated Germany. In a recent bitter attack on the Normandy campaign, a Russian historian has called it, "an operation of local significance." The purpose of this attack is to destroy any effort to revive the alliance in the face of the Russians'

own onslaught on Western Europe. The fact is that the Russians demanded the launching of the invasion, the famous Second Front. The significance of Normandy today is to educate Americans to their unique stake in the survival of the U.S.-European alliance.

British opposition to the invasion

From the very beginning of the American entry into the war, the cross-Channel invasion was an American conception, vehemently opposed by the British. Already in the spring of 1942 the Americans had drawn up their plan for the invasion of northern France to take place in 1943. Codenamed Roundup, it was based on the plan to concentrate the buildup of American men and materiel in Great Britain during 1942. Already the American planners envisioned establishing a bridgehead in the Pas de Calais by September 1942. The author of the plan was Gen. Dwight ("Ike") Eisenhower, and Gen. George Marshall, U.S. Chief of Staff, presented these plans to President Roosevelt. On April 14, 1942, an Anglo-American strategy meeting took place, the first of many that would approve "in principle" the cross-Channel invasion, but with the British retaining the *caveat* that details would be resolved later. John Eisenhower, Ike's son, wrote in a recent book: "The interests of the two nations appeared ironically to be reversed. The British, whose island was located just off the continent of Europe, were more concerned by the war against Japan and the Indian Ocean. The Americans with their Philippine garrison about to surrender—and with public opinion railing against Japan—were urging a cross-Channel invasion through France and Germany."

In fact, this "irony" reflected totally different war aims and strategies. Although the British cloaked their objections to the cross-Channel invasion behind practical considerations of lack of men and materiel, some of which may have been valid in the 1941-42 period, their real object was to pursue a strategy of the periphery in which the brunt of the land fighting would be conducted by the Russians, while the British backed by American materiel would control the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East. That is, the British

war aim was to emerge from the war with a strengthened Empire, and only secondarily was it to defeat the Nazis.

The essence of British strategy was presented by Churchill in the very first meeting between the Allies in Washington in December 1941. The third point of the British grand strategy was, "closing and tightening the ring around Germany from Archangel to the Black Sea, Turkey, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic." Only after this strategy was completed would the direct attack through France be considered. In the same document the fourth point was "wearing down German resistance by bombardment, blockade and subversion." This policy led to the infamous and unnecessarily cruel strategic bombing of 1943-44. The American aim in such bombings was to hit vital war production capabilities as a support for the land invasion. The British viewed the bombings as an end in itself, since demoralizing the German people might render unnecessary a land invasion. As late as January 1943, Alan Brooke, the British Chief of Staff, "stressed the bombing of Germany and the encouragement of resistance in Nazi-dominated countries as a possible means of cracking enemy morale . . . he suggested that the Allies might need to launch only mopping-up operations on the Continent."

The British strategy was a replay of Pitt's strategy against Napoleon. In those wars, the British used their Navy to blockade the continent, directed subversion of their enemy through such agents as Talleyrand, and left the land fighting to others, namely the Russians and the Prussians. The one campaign in which the British engaged their own command was the Peninsula campaign in Spain, which was costly of lives, horrific in its butchery, and, in the end, peripheral. That strategy extended warfare in the continent of Europe for more than 15 years. But the result was the Congress of Vienna and the strengthening of the British Empire.

Not accidentally, General Marshall received for leisure reading on one of his return trips from England the first volume of Arthur Bryant's history of the Napoleonic wars in which Pitt's strategy was outlined from British General Hull. The Briton meant to impress upon the American British superiority in the game of grand strategy and to draw the analogies to the current period. Hence the British stressed the importance of the Mediterranean, the invasion of Rhodes, and the involvement of Turkey in the war. The campaign corresponding to Wellington's Peninsula invasion was, of course, the Italian campaign. As late as November 1943, when materiel and manpower were no longer the issue, Maj. Gen. John Kennedy, Brooke's aide, wrote in preparation of the Cairo-Teheran conference, "We have now crystalized our ideas as to the strategy to be advocated in the coming conference. The main points are to continue the offensive in Italy, to increase the flow of supplies to partisans in the Balkans, to bring about the upheaval by inducing the Balkan powers to break away from Germany, to induce Turkey to enter the war, and to postpone Overlord [code name for the cross-

Channel invasion]." He added after the conference, "Had we had our way I think there can be little doubt the invasion of France would not have been done in 1944." Brooke himself wrote, "I despair of getting our American friends to have any strategic vision. Their drag on us has seriously affected our Mediterranean strategy and the whole conduct of the war." It should be noted that the Italian campaign cost 300,000 allied casualties, by far the most expensive campaign of the war.

Clash of two strategies

The fact is that the issue was not the lack of American strategic vision, but the clash of two differing strategies. This Brooke would never concede. Another Briton, Sir John Dill wrote, "The American chiefs of staff have given way to our views a thousand times more than we have given way to theirs." The Americans were willing to make concessions to obtain an ironclad guarantee from the British for Overlord because they were convinced the war would be won in a direct attack across the Channel through France to the German homeland and that everything else was peripheral. This reflected the central strategic doctrine of the American military. Put succinctly it was, "History shows that the surest way to take the fighting spirit out of a country is to defeat its main army!" This theme was repeated over and over again. Thus an American instructor at the War College wrote, "When war comes, there should be only one question that will ever be asked a commander as to a battle . . . Did he fight?"

Almost a year before Pearl Harbor, the Americans and British held a conversation in Washington on strategy. The Americans held that to defeat the Axis the main armed strength of the main enemy army would have to be assailed and destroyed. At the time Eisenhower wrote, "We've got to go to Europe and to fight."

This doctrine reflected the history of American arms, just as the war of the periphery reflected British tradition. U.S. Army doctrine was based on the methods employed by Grant and Sherman in defeating the Confederacy. In the campaigns of 1864-65 what distinguished the Union forces under these commanders was their resolute determination to engage the enemy and to keep him engaged until he was defeated. Therefore Grant in the campaigns of the wilderness through to Appomattox maintained constant pressure on Lee for 118 days. Sherman, although he suffered several defeats during his drive to the sea, never stopped attacking.

This strategy of continuous engagement distinguished the Americans in Normandy from the British. Patton's Third Army from its activation on Aug. 1 to the surrender of German forces on May 8, 1945 was in constant contact with the enemy. The same was true of the U.S. First Army under Gen. "Fighting Joe" Collins and General Hodges. This was in marked contrast to the British Second Army under the command of Field Marshal Montgomery and Gen. Miles "Bimbo" Dempsey. They chose set-piece engagements from fixed

positions at well-defined targets, preceded by easily spotted concentrations of attacking forces. The result was a series of attacks each of which stalled far short of its objective.

Overlord was finally confirmed at the Teheran conference held in December 1943. There Stalin supported the American position and insisted that all other actions be subordinated to it. It was finally set for May 1944. Immediately afterward, back in Cairo, Churchill once more tried a diversion operation to insist on an invasion of Rhodes, hence robbing the main effort of much needed landing craft. It was then that Marshall made his famous retort, "You can do what you please but I promise you that not one goddamned American soldier will die on that goddamned beach." That was the end of the matter.

The Normandy campaign

After the war, Field Marshal Montgomery wrote the following self-serving statement: "The outstanding point about the battle of Normandy is that it was fought exactly as planned before the invasion. This plan had been relentlessly followed in spite of the inevitable delays and minor setbacks which the changing course of battle had imposed upon us, and had brought us to overwhelming victory." One immediately suspects that this remarkable statement was meant to answer critics. Indeed, Montgomery's statement is demonstrably at variance with the known facts.

The battle of Normandy was planned with the British attacking to the east, and the Americans to the west. The U.S. forces' responsibility was to take as quickly as possible the Contentin peninsula, the jut of land ending in the port of Cherbourg. They were then to turn south and west along the Atlantic coast to take the Breton port of Brest. The British were to strike south and east, taking the key town of Caen on D-Day + 1 and to continue to press the attack so that the allies would be at the Seine by D-Day + 90 with control of sufficient port facilities to supply the thrust to the east.

The American historian Carlo D'Este has demonstrated that everything Montgomery said and wrote before the invasion indicated that this was the master plan. He even quotes Montgomery's order of battle to his commanders: "The best way to interfere with the enemy concentrations and counter-measures will be to push forward fairly powerful armored force thrusts on the afternoon of D-Day. . . . I am prepared to accept almost any risk in order to carry out these tactics." As it happened, however, despite relatively easy landings on the British sector, the deep thrusts by British armor to prevent enemy buildups never took place, and, instead, the campaign on the British front settled down rather quickly into stalemate. Caen, the key town, was not taken until August, something like D-Day + 70 rather than D-Day + 1.

The breakout, when it came, took place on the American front, not at all where it was expected. Therefore, after the campaign, Montgomery justified his generalship with the following claims: "I have made it clear that in planning to

break out from the bridgehead on the western flank [i.e., the American sector], a prerequisite was the retention of the main enemy strength in the eastern flank." The main reason why the German concentrated forces against the British was that they were operating in the flat Falaise plain, ideal for offensive operations, whereas the Americans were operating in the hedgerow country which favored the German defenders.

Normandy was won by an extraordinary effort on the part of the American infantry. Unlike the great battles of the Eastern front where tanks carried the assaults to clear way for the infantry, the "bocage" (hedgerows) denied the offensive use of tanks. From the start, the Americans were confronted by situations that favored the defense.

The entire operation was nearly lost at Omaha Beach, one of the two American assault sectors. The situation was so perilous that Gen. Omar Bradley, commander of U.S. forces, almost ordered a pullback. The situation can be summed up by a famous order of Col. George Taylor to the men pinned down on the beach, "Two kinds of people are staying on this beach, the dead and those who are going to die—now let's get the hell out of here." The battle of Omaha was won by a handful of men who inspired others. It was these leaders who by their bravery, initiative, and tactical skill secured the cliffs overlooking the beach. Exemplary of this attack was the achievement of the second Ranger battalion that scaled the sheer cliffs at Pointe du Hoc under enemy fire.

When it finally came, the breakout took place on the American front in the attack codenamed Cobra that jumped off on July 25. It was spearheaded by General Collins's VII Corps. Within six days, it was clear that the attack was not simply a breakthrough but a full-scale breakout that was taking place. This was the moment for Gen. George Patton to move in and fulfill his destiny. Patton realized that operations in Brittany could be minimized in favor of trapping the entire German army deployed west of the Seine in a giant pincer. In two weeks of continuous fighting he pushed his newly activated Third Army to close what is now known as the Falaise with the Canadian First Army to the North. Despite the fact that the pocket was never closed, due to Montgomery's deliberate sabotage, it was the single most brilliant maneuver of the campaign, captured 100,000 men, and closed the Normandy campaign in complete victory.

The cross-Channel attack and the Normandy campaign was possibly a new start for Europe. But just as the First World War ended with the disaster of Versailles, so the victory in the West was betrayed at Yalta. John J. McCloy, Harvey Bundy, and W. Averell Harriman saw to it that the military victory ended in political defeat. However, the founding of the Schiller Institute provides the basis of hope. Today, only new institutions dedicated to the establishment of a genuine moral order can save civilization. To the memory of the men, both Allies and Germans, who died at Normandy we owe its dedication to these tasks.