



## **“Masters & Commanders; Allied Decision-Making 1941-45”**

**Andrew Roberts**

**Speaker’s Address at the 2010 AGM of the BCMH**

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### **Report by Andy Grainger**

The speaker explained that he would be talking primarily about the decisions made by the two leaders of the western allies, Churchill and Roosevelt between Pearl Harbour and the death of Roosevelt in April 1945.<sup>1 2</sup>

The traditional picture of the relationship between these two great men and their colleagues, particularly at the time, was one of warmth and friendship. In reality, whilst these aspects were present from time to time, the meetings were also characterised by intense disagreements, aggression and real unpleasantness.

There were a total of ten Big Power meetings when either two or all three of the Great Powers met. The lives of hundreds of thousands of service people were affected by the decisions that were taken. None of the meetings was easy; all were characterised by intense debate. Sometimes aggression took almost physical form – Alanbrooke broke pencils in front of Churchill; there were head to head shouting matches.

One factor behind the strength of feeling may have been that the participants all dominated their particular spheres. Marshall may have had an ill-tempered relationship with Ernie King but he dominated the Combined Chiefs. Brooke dominated his British counterparts with his intellectual ability and sheer hard work.

Churchill dominated the British War Cabinet. He may have been outvoted on minor issues such as the value of the rupee but was not seriously challenged on the major aspects of the war. In the same way Roosevelt dominated his area.

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1 *Masters and Commanders, the Military Geniuses who led the West to Victory in World War Two*, Andrew Roberts, Allen Lane 2008  
2 *The Storm of War, A New History of the Second World War*, Andrew Roberts, Allen Lane 2009



Churchill does seem to have had an ability to defuse difficult situations or open up arguments that were stagnating. For example, in November 1943 a lot of effort was being made to get Turkey into the war. His quip *'Tell Turkey that Christmas is coming'* broke the ice on what was becoming a glacial stand-off.

The tension could be aggravated by the surroundings. At Quebec the six key players were surrounded by 60 or 70 staff officers and attendants. For one particularly tense episode Marshall and Brooke agreed that all the staff officers should leave so that they could argue in private – so we now have no record of this discussion apart from Alan Brooke's diary.

On another occasions Mountbatten brought in two blocks of ice, one treated with woodchips and the other not. To demonstrate their efficacy as aircraft carriers he shot at them with a revolver causing one staff officer waiting outside to report that *'They've started shooting at each other now'*.

All this information is available despite an instruction by Churchill in May 1940 that no-one should keep a diary. The result appears to have been to encourage a rash of these documents – The King, Eden, Churchill's Private Secretary, Brooke and many others all kept diaries.

The diaries do reveal the major clashes between soldiers and politicians, British and Americans, commanders and chiefs of staff but they also show that these were on great matters of state rather than on minor issues and were often due to incomplete information and intelligence.

They show that Marshall had a very different approach to strategy than Brooke. Marshall believed in an invasion of France at the earliest possible moment. Brooke, on the other hand, with his personal experiences of both Dunkirk and Cherbourg in 1940 and observing the largely disastrous battles in the Mediterranean in 1941 had a very different view of the capabilities of the Wehrmacht than Marshall.

Looking back now, it is very hard to sustain the American idea of a cross-channel invasion in 1942 or 1943. Even in 1944 it was put back for a month to obtain another month's production of landing craft. The idea of mounting an invasion direct from the United States before the Battle of the Atlantic had been clearly won or without air cover was inconceivable both to British politicians and soldiers who had presided over a series of maritime evacuations under devastating Luftwaffe attack. Both Churchill and Brooke regarded control of the air as a *sine qua non* of a successful invasion. On D-Day 13,688 US and RAF sorties were opposed by only 319 German. In a battle where an armoured division needed 1,300 tons of supply per day a significant U-boat or air threat could not be countenanced.

For most of 1942 we could not decode the relevant Enigma ciphers and the U-boat was not finally mastered until the second half of 1943.

Failure would have been disastrous. Had no cross-channel invasion taken place then the Soviets would have largely overrun Europe as the cossacks did in 1814.



British and US methods of reaching decisions were different. All the protagonists except Roosevelt had some military background and even he had read his Alfred Thayer Mahan and felt that he knew the best way to win a war! Marshall tended to discuss his ideas with Roosevelt face to face whereas Churchill and Brooke tended to correspond as, by necessity, so did Churchill and Roosevelt.

By 1944 the Americans (and the Soviet Union) dominated the allied war effort.

Whilst the UK produced 28,000 aircraft in this year, the Germans and Soviets each produced around 40,000 and the US 98,000. 4 out of 5 German soldiers killed met their end on the Eastern front.

Allied decision making was far more effective than German. Western decision-making was nothing if not open and even Stalin changed his mind as the war went on, consulting extensively with officers such as Zhukov and Rokossovsky. Hitler tended to surround himself with people who would agree with him and, if they did not, sacked them.

It is also important to remember that the actors in these events did not know what was going to happen. Their diaries reveal their inner thoughts in contrast to the confidence of press summaries proclaiming a route to final victory.

## **Questions**

Q. Away from the key participants at the Big Power Conferences would you agree that Ismay in London and Dill in Washington played key roles in pouring oil into the machine at key moments?

A. Yes. Brooke was culturally anti-American. Dill played a delicate and important role in the early stages of the alliance in leaking documents to Marshall so that he could be entirely clear as to the real British position rather than the material he might pick up from attachés or ambassadors.

Q. Did the British get their way more frequently during the 1943 Conferences because they were better prepared?

A. This was a major learning point for the Americans. At Casablanca the British had literally an entire shipload of aides and advisers. There were 84 British staff officers to only 16 US. There is much discussion about this in internal US memos and by Yalta the position was reversed.

Q. Would it be true to say that the British saw problems and the US saw solutions?

A. It might be truer to say that the Americans saw problems and then threw resources at them. The Americans also learnt very quickly. Many British officers comment on how quickly they learnt lessons after the Kasserine Pass battle in February 1943. In particular they improved inter-service co-operation very quickly.



Brooke said that you could only learn lessons in the hard school of fighting the Germans and no theatre was harder than the mountains of Italy.

Q. How did they deal with self-doubt?

A. There are a lot of myths here such as Churchill the brandy-soaked alcoholic. 95% of the drink was soda. He had massive emotional and constitutional robustness as demonstrated in a lifetime of military service and politics. Both Brooke and Marshall had very happy second marriages following the untimely deaths of their first wives. Churchill's marriage was famously happy. The diaries also offered an opportunity to let their ideas out and the pleasure that Brooke took in bird-watching and Churchill in painting are well-known.

To conclude:

For all the anguish of decision making in democracy, it was far more efficient than under a dictatorship. Under Roosevelt and Churchill none was fearful if he spoke his mind and Brooke, Pound and Marshall certainly did.

International rivalries certainly existed. Eisenhower's greatest characteristic lay in rising above this and encouraging – and obliging – others to do the same in mingling officers in British and American staffs.

### **Editor's Note**

Having just finished *Masters & Commanders* which I found to be a tremendously readable synthesis of the personal and international relationships behind Allied Grand Strategy I learned the following:

1. Until Stalingrad the western allies could not assume that Russia would be victorious and so had to bear in mind the possibility of an invasion of the UK.
2. Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed on a Germany First strategy prior to American entry into the war because Germany posed the greater threat to the UK (ie invasion) whereas Japan could not.
3. We might regard German – Japanese operations in 1942 to take the Caucasus, the Iranian oilfields and overrun the Delta as fantastical. The allied staffs did not – they could only be aware of the, to date, unstoppable march of the Axis powers. Post-war theories are all very well – at the time it was much harder to estimate German and Japanese capabilities.
4. We regard Torch as a walkover but it was not so seen at the time – many, including Dill, thought it could be a disaster.

The war effort of the western allies was a massive amphibious operation. Amphibious operations differ from purely land offensives in terms of the:

- enormous logistical and technical efforts requirements required to mount them
- additional risks offered by weather and tides to the usual military ones,
- massive penalties if they fail – if the attackers cannot hold their bridgehead then they run the risk of total annihilation eg Singapore, Tunisia (Axis) or Dieppe. This has far greater impacts on the war effort, civilian morale and political consequences than say, the Soviet failure at Kharkov in May 1942 and especially for a democracy. If Op Sledgehammer (a 1942 invasion of France) had gone ahead



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Britain would have sustained a greater defeat than Dunkirk. The Russians or Americans might have shrugged off the loss of 200,000 men and all their commanders, staffs, equipment and stores – Britain could not.