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Fighting with Allies

The Debate Fifty Years On

By RUSSELL F. WEIGLEY

How epoch-making an event was World War II? In particular, fifty years after the close of that conflict—and several years after the end of the Cold War—can we still comprehend the great wartime strategic and operational debates between the principal Western Allies, the United States and Great Britain, and the ponderous import imputed to them, both at the time and in controversies among historians in the intervening decades?

After all, from Chester Wilmot's formative analysis of inter-allied controversy in his 1952 *The Struggle for Europe* onward,¹ perceptions of the relative wisdom or unwisdom of American versus British strategic and operational designs hinged upon the question of which took better into account the post-war Soviet threat to the security of democratic interests in Europe, and which was better calculated to counter that threat. Yet now the peril from the East has largely evaporated, and the rapid collapse of the Soviet

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Union in 1991 suggests that the substance of the peril was never so great as the Kremlin's bristling facade led us to fear. So how much did it matter whether it was the Americans or the British who during the hot war of 1939–45 more accurately foresaw the Cold War?

Wilmot set the terms for historical analysis of the Anglo-American strategic and operational debates. According to his version of the war in Europe, the United States had to provide most of the muscle for the defeat of Germany, but the British provided most of the experienced judgment in international affairs that realized the desirability of tailoring the conduct of the war not to military expediency alone but to considerations of the post-war balance of power. Unfortunately for the interests of the West, the diplomatically and strategically sophisticated British—especially Prime Minister Winston Churchill—proved unable to overcome the naive insistence of the Americans—in particular, President Franklin Roosevelt—on military strategy and operations which aimed at head-on assault of the enemy's Fortress Europe. The dual unhappy consequences of this situation were that the absence of Allied military subtlety probably prolonged the war, and that the inflexible focus on northwest Europe led to the sacrifice of opportunities to thwart Soviet expansionism elsewhere on the continent. Therefore, the Iron Curtain clanked down deep in central Europe.

An American rebuttal soon took shape, especially in two volumes published in the official *United States Army in World War II* series, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1941–1942* by Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, and *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943–1944* by Maurice Matloff.² Primarily devoted to strategy as their titles indicate, but with consideration of operational decisions as well, both volumes argued that the American insistence on a direct strategy of the earliest possible cross-Channel assault



Sanctuary, Luxembourg
by Aaron Bohrod.

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against Germany was not merely an expression of an American military tradition based on large-scale wealth and power and therefore favoring head-on confrontation as the most expeditious way to swift victory. The rebuttal indicated also that U.S. strategists, including military leaders, were not politically naive, but rather were thoroughly aware of the political implications of military actions. For that reason the Americans regarded a prompt Allied return to northern Europe as the best way of curbing Soviet expansion in the most valuable area of Europe, the industrial, urban northwest. In contrast, the British preference for peripheral nibbling at the German empire, especially in the Mediterranean, would have taken Anglo-American forces into military and political dead ends.

The lines of historical controversy over American direct versus British peripheral strategy and operations having become set early in the post-war years, the terms of the controversy became altered subsequently only in detail. Another official historian, James M. Leighton, argued that the wartime divisions between the Western Allies were not so wide as the historians made them seem and that greater emphasis should be placed on the essential and remarkable unity

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*P-51 Fighter Strip
Control Tower
(Normandy, 1944) by
Ogden Pleissner.*



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of the Anglo-American alliance;³ but that view did not deter a continuing focus on wartime disputes rather than agreements, partly no doubt because disputes are more interesting, but mainly because the depths of the strategic and operational disagreements were profound in spite of all that bound the Allies together. The controversy did not always follow national alignments. A British historian, Michael Howard, was one of the first to argue that

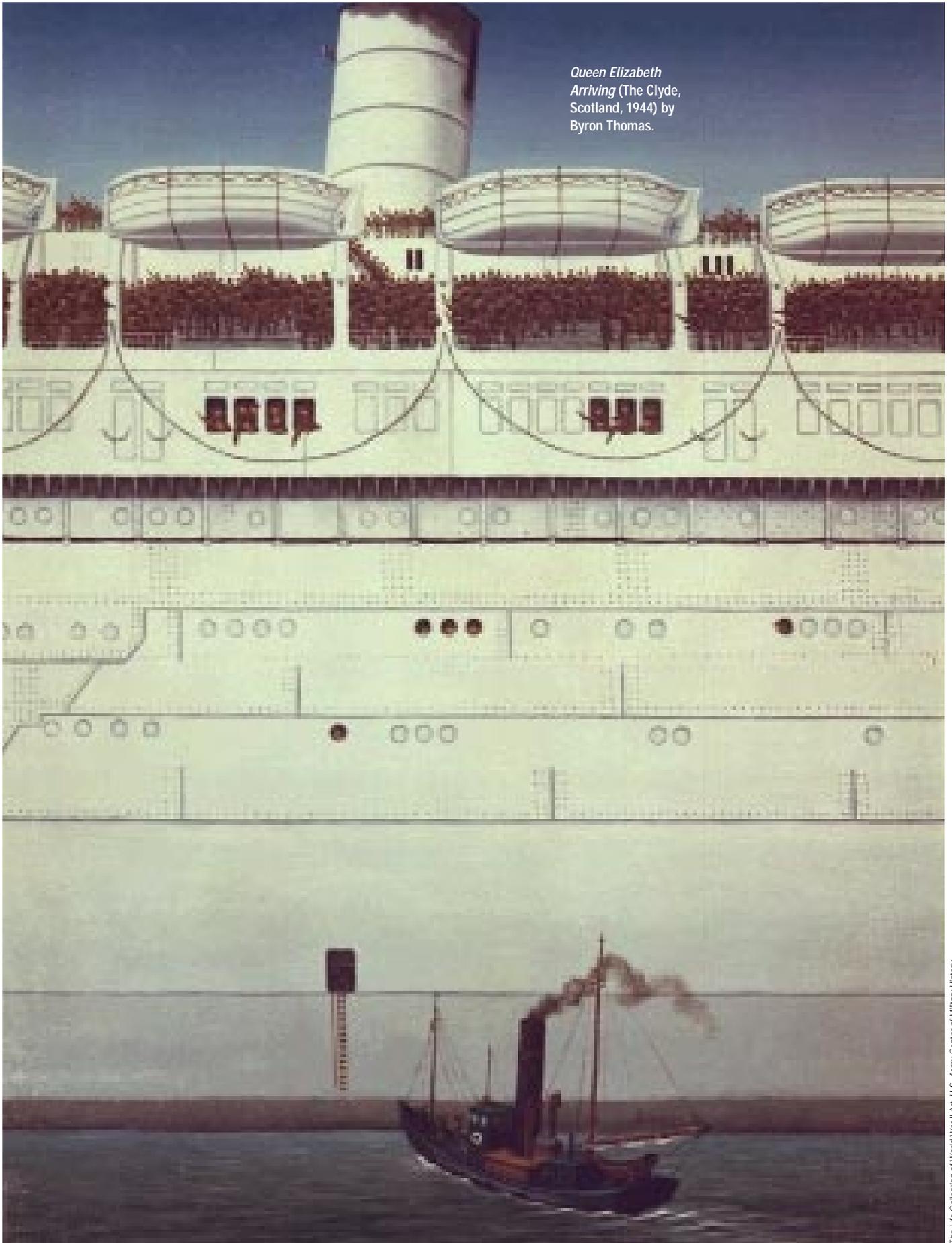
the strategies of both allies had to be forced by wartime pressures into pursuit of what was expedient and possible, an argument that undermined the idea of a consistent Churchillian world view as the foundation of British strategy.⁴ Such vicissitudes aside, however, the commemorations of D-Day last year found the lines of historical controversy remarkably unchanged.⁵

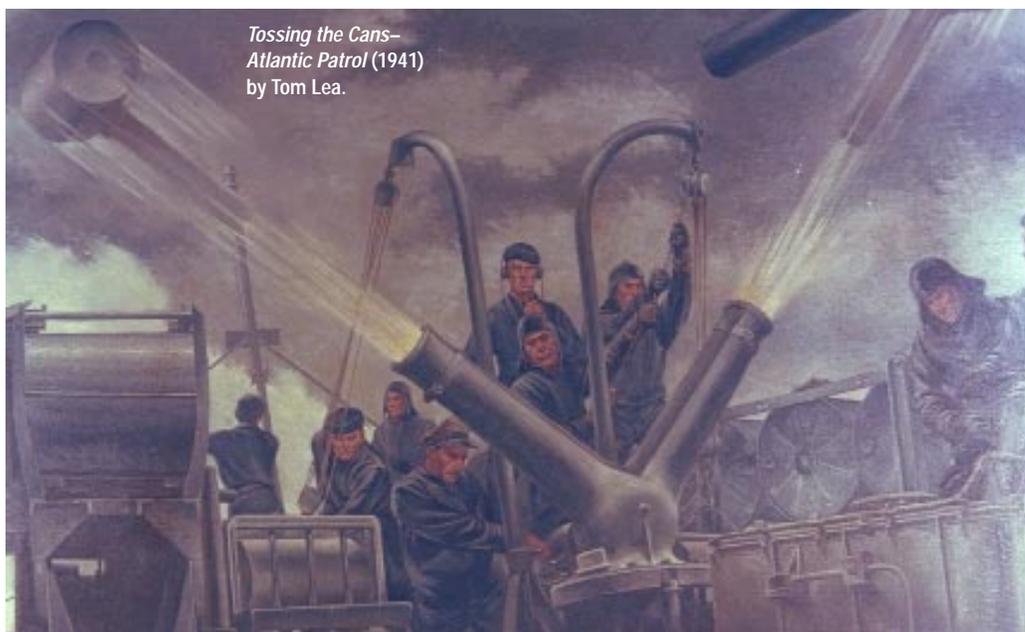
A corollary to the disputes over the strategy of the cross-Channel invasion has boiled up over the operational issues of the campaign in northwest Europe following June 6, 1944. Here the British contention has been that the Americans' unsubtle,

head-on assault approach to warmaking persisted after the Overlord invasion at the insistence of the American Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force, General Dwight Eisenhower on a broad-front offensive from France into the Low Countries and Germany. The British alternative, a narrow thrust into Germany proposed by General Sir Bernard Montgomery, would allegedly not only have ended the war earlier, but by doing so would have limited the westward extension of Soviet power and thereby strengthened the post-war geopolitical position of the West. Thus Chester Wilmot argued on behalf of superior British operational wisdom in his early post-war book, and again he set the terms of an enduring controversy.⁶ (Of course there is an internal contradiction in the British arguments. If it was so vital to conduct the European campaign after the cross-Channel invasion with the utmost dispatch, why was it not similarly important to launch the invasion with dispatch in the first place?)

Once again the American rebuttal has taken the form of arguments that, in spite of British experience, it was British soldiers at

*Queen Elizabeth
Arriving (The Clyde,
Scotland, 1944)* by
Byron Thomas.





*Tossing the Cans—
Atlantic Patrol (1941)*
by Tom Lea.

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understand a sound operational plan bespoke an extreme of ingratitude that was unhappily all too characteristic of the British commander. To permit Montgomery to attempt Operation Market Garden, the airborne-plus-overland drive to the Rhine bridges at Arnhem in the Netherlands launched on September 17, Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force allotted to Montgomery's 21 Army Group the lion's share of Allied logistical support and the theater's only reserve force, the First Allied Airborne Army. The only support that

the time and British historians later who have been unrealistic in both military and policy assessments. Montgomery's proposals for a narrow-thrust invasion of Germany in the autumn of 1944 have been subjected to logistical analysis and found impractical in terms of Allied capabilities to support them.⁷ The narrow thrust, moreover, would not have been all that narrow, or it would have had no chance of wielding enough force to win. Montgomery had contemplated an offensive by some forty divisions, employing the U.S. First and Ninth Armies as well as the British Second and the Canadian First.⁸ With the great Belgian port of Antwerp not open

to Allied shipping until November 28—because of Montgomery's neglect in clearing passage to it from the North Sea after troops of British 30 Corps had entered it on September 4—

supplies still had to reach the front largely from Normandy, and the ability to sustain a forty-division punch into Germany much beyond the Rhine was simply nonexistent until Antwerp had been in full utility at least for several weeks.⁹

More than that, Eisenhower offered Montgomery every reasonable opportunity to execute his narrow-thrust design, and Montgomery's carping that Eisenhower did not and that the Supreme Commander failed to

Eisenhower did not proffer was a complete curtailment of fuel to the armies on the Allies' southern flank, the Third U.S. and, as Sixth Army Group arrived from southern France, the Seventh U.S. and First French. Montgomery proposed that to fully support a narrow-thrust offensive, the southern armies should be grounded, at least as far as support other than from southern French ports was concerned. To have done so would have virtually paralyzed the Third Army under Lieutenant General George Patton just as the enemy was about to launch a new concentration of Panzer forces to precipitate the largest-scale tank battles in the West thus far, the counterattacks in Lorraine on September 19–29. The Germans initiated these counterstrokes because they believed that the aggressive Patton, not Montgomery, posed the most severe threat. If Patton had been unable to maneuver in riposte, the level of the ensuing disaster would have been incalculable. Eisenhower had provided the single-thrust design all the support it was safe to give. To have followed Montgomery's complete prescription would have been folly.¹⁰

In any event it is hard to imagine how a more rapid Western push into Germany in the autumn of 1944 could have substantially altered the post-war balance between East and West. The boundaries of the occupation zones in Germany had been drawn in early 1944,

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when the Western armies had yet to land in northern Europe. The zonal boundaries had therefore anticipated that the Red Army would march deep into central Europe before the war ended. Even with the lateness of the cross-Channel invasion, and in spite of the failure to defeat Germany in autumn 1944 with a narrow thrust or by other means, the American forces eventually penetrated far into the prospective Soviet occupation zone. U.S. troops withdrew from much of Saxony and Thuringe after the war (two-fifths of what was to be the Soviet zone) to the zonal boundaries. A yet deeper penetration of the Soviet zone would have led to the same result.

The zonal boundaries drawn in February 1944 had placed Berlin inside the Soviet zone, although the German capital was to be occupied by the Allied powers, each with its miniature zone corresponding to a larger zone within the country. Roosevelt drew up his own occupation plan in 1943, proposing a large American zone in the northwest, the most strategically and economically important part of Germany, rather than in the southwest, to which the Americans were eventually relegated largely because their forces entered Germany on the right flank, south of the British. But in Roosevelt's plan, the American sector of Germany would have met the Soviet sector at Berlin, reaching the city directly. The final zonal boundaries were drawn principally by the British and the Soviets with American acquiescence when Roosevelt had grown sick and distracted. After these boundaries placed Berlin inside the Soviet zone, even the prospect of a Western capture of Berlin became relatively unimportant.¹¹

The British would have liked to have entered the German capital first as a final stimulus to their waning prestige, although they had had much to do with placing the city outside the Western zonal boundaries. The Ninth U.S. Army would have enjoyed the distinction of taking Berlin since it nearly came within its grasp. But such visions assumed that the Germans would go on fighting the Red Army much more seriously than they resisted the Western Allies in the last days of the war even with their capital as the prize, which was not necessarily so. Eisenhower decided instead that Berlin was not

worth the risk of high casualties if it could not be permanently retained. He thought it was worth more to placate the evident misconceptions and distrust of the Soviets and thus to do his part to head off a cold war following the hot war. The futility of such a hope as demonstrated by subsequent developments does not make his decision a bad one under the circumstances.¹²

Altogether, then, there is no good reason to believe that the conduct of the campaign from Normandy to the Elbe made any significant difference in the post-war balance of power between the Soviet Union and the West. No variants on Eisenhower's strategy and operations could have made the post-war Western position appreciably stronger or the Soviet position much weaker. In any event, Eisenhower gave the British and particularly Montgomery every reasonable opportunity to test their prescriptions for a more rapid Western advance.

But did the end of the Cold War not impose on all these grand old controversies about American versus British strategic and operational designs the stale flavor of antiquarianism, of irrelevance to the world of the 1990s? What did it matter how much of Europe the Soviet Union came to dominate by 1945 when the Soviet system of Eastern European satellites was to collapse in 1989 and the Soviet Union itself was to perish two years later?

It mattered a great deal for almost half a century, and it created a dangerous world in which the outcome now so gratifying to the West was not assured. Whatever circumstances aggravated bad feeling between the communist bloc and the West from 1945 to 1991 enhanced the possibility of nuclear war. That such a war did not occur by no means signifies that the peril was never real. The delay of two-and-a-half years between the U.S. entry into World War II in December 1941 and the ultimate execution of the central design of American strategy, the cross-Channel invasion, as late as June 1944 did more than any other aspect of the war to exacerbate Soviet suspicions of the West and thus assured there would be a cold war with its corollary danger of nuclear conflict. If a more prompt cross-Channel invasion could merely have mitigated Soviet distrust of the West, rather than allaying it altogether, such



Four Allied Soldiers
by Savo Radulovic.

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diluting the arrogance with which the Soviets came to regard themselves as the main actors in the defeat of Germany. That result should have also diluted the Soviet denigration of Western military prowess that consistently tempted Moscow toward adventurism during the Cold War years.

Our understanding of the truth about the respective merits of American and British policy, strategy, and military operations during the war matters because the architects of the British version of history persuaded many American soldiers and policymakers to accept their interpretation which injured the self-confidence of U.S. leaders during the Cold War and later. Americans struggled during the Cold War under the burden of believing that lack of wisdom in their hot war strategy and operations had much to do with creating Cold War predicaments. Of course they carried their Cold War campaigns to a successful conclusion. But a surer confidence that American decisions had rested on a foundation of sound and wise policy, strategy, and operational art during the war might have generated an assertiveness and optimism that could have made U.S. post-war policies even more successful and conceivably have brought the Cold War to an earlier end.

The truth about policy, strategy, and operations in World War II is that U.S. military and political leaders conducted the war with a soundness and maturity of judgment that were enviable, admirable, and in light of the genuine limitations of American experience, extraordinary. Rarely in history have a nation's military chiefs who began a war been so numerous in remaining in charge until the conclusion, with so few setbacks and so consistent a pattern of success along the way. Rarely have a nation's policymakers kept their eyes so firmly fixed on the appropriate objects of warfare and so ably adjusted military strategy to serve all policy objectives: the correct intention to defeat the Axis powers so completely and leave them so utterly malleable in Allied hands that there could be a virtual guarantee that neither Germany nor Japan could threaten the security of the world again; the persistent pursuit of partnerships and agreements that would lead to a post-war era conducive to U.S. and

a more likely scenario would still have reduced peril in the post-1945 world in proportion to the degree to which suspicion was mitigated.

And if nothing at all the West could have done during the war could have substantially affected post-war

understanding the merits of American and British policy, strategy, and operations during the war matters

Soviet attitudes because paranoia was too deeply engrained in both Russian and Soviet history, then it yet remains true that an earlier cross-Channel invasion

should have carried the Western armies deeper into Europe by V-E Day. They most likely would have reached Berlin, thus strengthening the West in the post-war political balance and, perhaps most important,

global economic prosperity and to reasonable safety for political democracy; the rejection whenever America's allies permitted of military strategies of mere short-run expedience that would not contribute to the Nation's long-term interest.

Fifty years on it is long past time for us to recognize the wisdom of American policy-making, strategic planning, and operational direction during World War II, and to draw from that acknowledgment a self-confident assertiveness to fit U.S. leadership responsibilities in the post-Cold War world. 

NOTES

¹ Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952). His influence is critiqued in Maurice Matloff, "Wilmot Revisited: Myth and Reality in Anglo-American Strategy for the Second Front," in Theodore A. Wilson, editor, *D-Day 1944* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 3–23, 340–41. Also bringing the historiography up to date in the same volume are Alex Danchev, "Biffing: The Saga of the Second Front," pp. 24–41, 341–45, and Gerhard L. Weinberg, "D-Day: Analysis of Costs and Benefits," pp. 317–18, 389–90.

² Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1941–1942. United States in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953); and Maurice Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943–1944, United States Army in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1959).

³ This view is offered by Kent Roberts Greenfield in *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), especially "Elements of Coalition Strategy," pp. 3–23, 122–24; and "American and British Strategy: How Much Did They Differ?" pp. 24–48, 124–26. Also James M. Leighton, "Overlord Revisited: An Interpretation of American Strategy in the European War, 1942–1944," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 67, no. 4 (July 1963), pp. 919–37. Leighton also helps inform Richard M. Leighton and Robert W. Coakley, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1940–1943, United States in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1955), and Richard M. Leighton and Robert W. Coakley, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1943–1945, United States Army in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1968).

⁴ Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* (New York, Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968).

⁵ In addition to the works cited in note 2, see the overviews of the historiography of the war's strategy (though not written specifically for the 50th anniversary observances) in David Reynolds et al., editors, *Allies at War: The Soviet, American, and British Experience, 1939–1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), particularly Alex Danchev, "Great Britain: The Indirect Strategy," pp. 1–26, and Mark A. Stoler, "The United States: The Global Strategy," pp. 55–78.

⁶ See note 1. On the impact of operational decisions on the post-war world, many of the same arguments advanced by Wilmot are put forth by Hubert Essame in *The Battle for Germany* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969).

⁷ The best succinct analysis is found in Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 216–30. See also Roland G. Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support of the Armies. vol. 2, Logistical Limitations as the Arbiter of Tactical Planning, United States Army in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953–59), pp. 3–21.

⁸ Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 239–42; Wilmot, *Struggle for Europe*, pp. 489–90, 528–31, 533–36; Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign. The European Theater of Operations. United States Army in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1963), pp. 8–10.

⁹ For the entry into Antwerp by the 11th Armoured Division, see Wilmot, *Struggle for Europe*, p. 474; the date is confirmed by Ruppenthal in *Logistical Support*, vol. 2, p. 48, and MacDonald in *Siegfried Line Campaign*, p. 207. For the opening of the port, see *ibid.*, p. 229; Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support*, vol. 2, p. 110. For its importance, *ibid.*, pp. 13–14, 109–16.

¹⁰ For Eisenhower's support to Montgomery and Market Garden, see Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support*, vol. 2, pp. 8–15, and MacDonald, *Siegfried Line Campaign*, pp. 8–10, 119–23, 127–29. For the battles in Lorraine, see Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign. The European Theater of Operations. United States Army in World War II* (Washington: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1950), "The German Counterattack in the XII Corps Sector (19 September–1 October)," pp. 209–55.

¹¹ On occupation zones see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at War: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 793–95, 804, 829–30; Cornelius Ryan, *The Last Battle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), pp. 141–61; and on Roosevelt's plan, Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, pp. 794, 829–30; Ryan, *Last Battle*, pp. 141, 145–50, 154–61. For the withdrawal from the Soviet zone, see Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, p. 830.

¹² On Montgomery's hopes and plans to take Berlin, see Ryan, *Last Battle*, pp. 135–36, 139–40, 165, 199–202, 206–07; Charles B. MacDonald, *The Last Offensive. The European Theater of Operations. United States Army in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1973), pp. 341–42, 480; on Eisenhower's attitude toward Berlin, *ibid.*, pp. 339–42, 379, 384, 387, 395, 399, 405–06, 480, and Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, pp. 813–14.