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The 2011 George C. Marshall Lecture in Military History

## Some Myths of World War II\*



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### Abstract

The talk engages some myths of the war that have been widely shared. The examination includes myths pertaining to the war as a whole as well as about individual leaders and groups of individuals. Included among the latter are Adolf Hitler and his generals, Winston Churchill, Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Yamamoto Isoroku. The text also touches on such issues as the Yalta Conference, the Morgenthau Plan for Germany, and the disappearance of the horses from people's image of the war.

As World War II recedes in memory and thousands of its veterans in all the participating countries pass away each day, some myths about that war continue to flourish in a few circles while others remain widely spread. In this talk I hope to engage some of these, concentrating first on two about the war in general, then taking up individual leaders and countries, and finally commenting on a widely held mistaken view of World War II combat.

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Gerhard Weinberg came to the United States from Germany at age twelve. After service in the army he took an M.A. (1949) and Ph.D. (1951) in history at the University of Chicago and subsequently spent a number of years classifying and microfilming German documents captured at the end of World War II. In 1959 Weinberg joined the history faculty at the University of Michigan and eventually became its chair. In 1974 he accepted an endowed chair at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, from which he retired in 1999. Author or editor of ten books and a hundred chapters and articles, Weinberg perhaps will be best known to this audience as author of *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (1994) and editor of *Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf* (2003), which he had discovered in 1958.

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One myth about the war that has been disseminated is that the victory of the Allies was the result of their overwhelming superiority in human and material resources. This view would have elicited bitter laughter from those actually engaged in the fighting at critical turning points in the conflict. It is true that Britain was producing more planes per month than Germany at the time of the Battle of Britain, but the notion that the victory of the Royal Air Force was the product of vastly greater numbers than the German air force's is preposterous since those vastly greater numbers did not exist.<sup>1</sup> When the Red Army halted the German advance in 1941 it did have greater numbers, but these had been nullified by the prior decimation of its leadership by Stalin's purges.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the fabrications in German military memoirs, a subject I shall return to, Stalin did not control the weather. It was invariably as cold and the snow was as deep on the Russian as on the German side of the front; temperatures and snow were not subject to the Soviet leader's control as the front lines shifted. Furthermore, there is a winter in Russia every year; it is not something that the government in Moscow or St. Petersburg arranges when there are Swedish, French, or German invaders in the country.

It is now time to turn to the Battle of Midway. Mathematics was never my strong point, but there cannot be any doubt that eight aircraft carriers are more numerous than three. I shall return to the alleged competence of Japanese commander Yamamoto Isoroku subsequently, but even the four carriers allotted by him to the critical engagement were more, not less, numerous than the three American ones, quite aside from the fact that one of the American ones, the *Yorktown*, had been damaged in the Battle of the Coral Sea and was still in the process of being repaired.<sup>3</sup>

The wider issue of resources also needs a more careful look. By the summer of 1942 the resources of the area under the military control of the Axis powers were in no way substantially inferior to those controlled by the Allies. One ought not to exclude the possibility that it was the mobilization and organization of resources, and not merely their availability, that made a substantial difference in the fielding of effective forces for combat.<sup>4</sup> In many ways the Allies proved vastly superior in drawing on the resources at their disposal than their enemies, who furthermore complicated their own utilization of the resource-rich lands they had conquered by the systematic mistreatment of the populations who lived there. It is certainly true that in the final stages of both the European and Pacific segments of the conflict, the Allies indeed utilized overwhelming air and sea force, but they had come from behind in their efforts against powers that earlier had held most of the tactical and some of the strategic advantages.

1. Richard Overy, *The Battle of Britain: The Myth and the Reality* (New York: Norton, 2000).

2. David Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

3. Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2005).

4. Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

A second myth, or perhaps it should be called a working assumption of most historians, is the separation of the war from the Holocaust, an assumption based on the erroneous belief that the two just happened to coincide in time. Hitler did not plan a war with France because the French would not allow him to visit the Eiffel Tower, and the Germans did not invade the Soviet Union because the Soviets would not permit Robert Ley, the leader of the German Labor Front, to put a cruise ship on the Caspian Sea. There was a purpose to the war that Germany initiated, and that purpose was a demographic revolution on the globe of which the killing of all Jews on earth was a central part.

Erwin Rommel was sent to North Africa in the first place to salvage Mussolini's hold on Libya, but he was not sent into Egypt so that the Giza pyramids could be dismantled and then reerected on the edge of Berlin the way the Germans had earlier done with the Pergamum Altar in the middle of the city. He was to supervise the killing of all Jews in Egypt, Palestine, and elsewhere in the Middle East under the control and with the participation of the murder commando attached to his headquarters.<sup>5</sup> Hitler did not trust the Italians, to whom the area was to be allotted, to carry out this critically important mission as thoroughly as he was confident his own people would before the land was turned over to his ally. German military leaders who complained in the winter of 1941–42 that their men were freezing, losing limbs and sometimes their lives, because of the absence of trains to bring warm clothing, when there were trains on the same lines to bring Jews to be killed in the newly occupied Soviet territory, learned the hard way what the objectives and priorities of the regime they served actually were.<sup>6</sup>

I should insert here a comment that the reverse of this erroneous perception of events is also true. Most of those who write about the Holocaust do not pay sufficient attention to the way that the military developments of the war impacted the subject they study. Thus, on the one hand, there is practically no recognition in the literature on the first stages of the systematic killing of Jews of the reality that the German army in June and July of 1941 was moving very rapidly through the area of densest Jewish settlement in Europe with resulting practical problems for those who had been instructed to kill them. On the other hand, there is equally little notice of the fact that the exertions of the Allies saved two-thirds of the world's Jews from the fate the Germans intended for them.

In view of the reality that Allied fighting and bombing killed far more German soldiers and civilians out of a smaller population than Japan's, I shall not waste time to engage the silly notion that this was a racial war in which, presumably, therefore, the Americans and their allies were especially interested in killing as many whites and as few Orientals as possible. Instead, it is now time to turn to some of the key leaders in the war, and since he initiated it, Adolf Hitler needs to

5. The material in the relevant article and book by Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers is now available in English in *Nazi Palestine: The Plans for the Extermination of the Jews in Palestine* (New York: Enigma Books, 2010).

6. An example in Hans Rothfels, ed., "Ausgewählte Briefe von Generalmajor Helmuth Stieff," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 2 (1954): 291–305.

be reviewed first. I have earlier dealt in print with the myth that he was interested in an agreement with England.<sup>7</sup> It would be fair to say that there are more myths about Hitler's relations with his generals and admirals than about any other aspect of World War II. There is time here to engage only a small selection of them, but a high proportion are the product of the self-serving fabrications and omissions in German postwar military memoirs and the well-paid-for garbage German generals produced for the American army after the war under the direction of their former chief of staff, Franz Halder.<sup>8</sup>

I have already touched on the fact that the weather was identical on both sides of the Eastern Front. This was in general also true for the distances involved, for the state of the roads, and for the problem with the different width of railway tracks between the standard European and the Russian variety. If one believes what military memoirists wrote, a big problem was their authors' inability to secure permission from Hitler for major retreats when they believed them necessary. There may have been some real instances of this, but as a generalization that is endlessly repeated, it cannot hold up under scrutiny. A striking example: in the fall of 1944 three different German army groups were threatened with the danger of being cut off by the advances of Allied armies. The army group in southwest France faced this threat from a meeting of the Allied forces that had broken out of the Normandy beachhead with those that had landed on the French Mediterranean coast. Hitler authorized the army group's withdrawal. The army group in southeast Europe, primarily in Greece, Albania, and southern Yugoslavia, was about to be cut off by the advance of the Red Army meeting Tito's partisans. Hitler authorized their withdrawal. The army group at the northern end of the Eastern Front was threatened by a Red Army thrust to the Baltic Sea that was temporarily interrupted by a German counteroffensive but then made effective as the Red Army cut off major German forces in western Latvia. Hitler refused to authorize withdrawal of this army group in the same weeks that he allowed the other two to pull back. Why? Can this be attributed to a general policy of refusing withdrawal? The real explanation is neither a general opposition to withdrawals nor a special interest on Hitler's part in western Latvia. As a fine monograph by Howard D. Grier has shown, Hitler was responding to the urgent advice of Admiral Karl Dönitz. The head of the German navy stressed the need to hold the southern shore of the Baltic Sea to prevent incursions into the Baltic by the Red Navy so that Germany's new submarines and their crews could be prepared for operations that he expected would turn the tide back in

7. Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Hitler and England, 1933–1945: Pretense and Reality," in the author's *Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (New York: Cambridge, 1995), 85–94.

8. Bernd Wegner, "Erschriebene Siege: Franz Halder, die 'Historical Division' und die Rekonstruktion des Zweiten Weltkrieges im Geiste des deutschen Generalstabes," in *Politischer Wandel, organisierte Gewalt und nationale Sicherheit: Beiträge zur neueren Geschichte Deutschlands und Frankreichs*, ed. Ernst Willi Hansen (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995), 287–302; and James A. Wood, "Captive Historians, Captivated Audience: The German Military History Program, 1945–1961," *Journal of Military History* 69 (January 2005): 123–47.

Germany's favor in the Battle of the Atlantic.<sup>9</sup> Following the advice of Dönitz was a part of Hitler's looking for ways to win the war, not how best to lose it.<sup>10</sup>

A second area of difference in which Germany's World War II generals asserted their postwar claims to genius was their periodic insistence on pulling out of salients so that with a shorter front to hold they could build up reserves to meet future Red Army offensives or to launch their own. In all of their writings, there is never to the best of my knowledge a single reference to the likelihood that such abandonment of salients would NOT leave the Red Army units in their old positions but instead would produce a shorter Red Army front with analogous opportunities to create reserves. There is a dramatic example of this in the preparations for the German 1943 summer offensive on the Eastern Front. The generals had persuaded Hitler to allow the abandonment of the Demyansk and Rzhev salients, with the latter conducted under the code-name "Büffel Bewegung," Operation Buffalo. As might have been expected, this had two effects on Red Army dispositions, one strategic, and one tactical. The strategic effect was that there was now no expectation of a German offensive toward Moscow, something that Stalin had mistakenly expected in 1942; a subject I shall return to. There was accordingly no need to hold extra reserves before the capital. The tactical effect was that the Red Army also shortened its lines and gathered extra units for its own subsequent drive into the rear of the northern portion of Germany's 1943 summer offensive, "Operation Zitadelle," Operation Citadel. That operation would probably have failed anyway, and I am not suggesting that in all disputes between them, Hitler was always right and his military leaders wrong, but rather that the time is long past for a reassessment of the latter's frequently alleged high competence.

Germany's military leaders were certainly competent at the tactical level, but hardly beyond that. In about the same number of months of serious fighting, out of an only slightly larger population they got almost three times as many of their soldiers killed as in World War I, and they signed off on more than a hundred times the number of death sentences on their own officers and men. By their conduct of a war of annihilation in the East, they managed the extraordinary accomplishment of converting Stalin from a bloody and hated dictator into the benign defender of his people from a fate far worse than any they had experienced. According to the German military's own figures, they supervised the killing or deaths from hunger and disease on the average of 10,000 prisoners of war per day, seven days a week, for the first seven months of the war in the East, a record without parallel in history.<sup>11</sup> Please note that this figure of over 2 million deaths does not include the substantially over 1 million Soviet civilians killed in the same months.

9. Howard D. Grier, *Hitler, Dönitz and the Baltic Sea: The Third Reich's Last Hope, 1944–1945* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2007).

10. Gerhard L. Weinberg, "German Plans for Victory, 1944–1945," in Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, 274–86.

11. Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1978).

All these horrors occurred in full view of the military and civilian survivors and were quickly known in general outline throughout the unoccupied parts of the Soviet Union. Is it any wonder that the people rallied to the regime, endured endless privations, and succeeded in crushing the army that brought only death with it? Under these circumstances it should not be surprising that the adoption by the United States of the man who had incompetently led German wartime intelligence on the Eastern Front from the winter of 1941–42 to 1945, General Reinhard Gehlen, should result in an intelligence organization financed from Washington and later from Bonn but largely run from Moscow as he recruited Soviet agents and others whose criminal backgrounds made them obvious candidates for blackmail.

It may be that the manufacture of fairy tales by Germany's military leaders designed to fool posterity was caused by three experiences they shared. Their predecessors in World War I had obscured their own responsibility for defeat by inventing the stab-in-the-back legend. This time their defeat would be blamed on the man at the top instead of imaginary back-stabbers at home.<sup>12</sup> A second element may have been their recognition of the embarrassing fact that they had all accepted huge secret bribes from their beloved leader. They needed to find other ways to explain their loyalty to Hitler, and their almost unanimous support of him on 20 July 1944, by pretending that their loyalty had really been to the men under their command and not to their paymaster. A third possible explanation may lie in widespread internal inversion of values. When what we today call the Holocaust was described by them to their soldiers as the "gerechte Sühne," just punishment, for the Jews, they might have had difficulty explaining what a one-, two-, or three-year-old could have done for which killing was the just punishment. When a special court was set up to kick out of the military those allegedly connected with the 20 July plot, two of the three judges, Field Marshal von Rundstedt and Army Chief of Staff General Guderian (not General Schroth), were accepting regular bribes from the prosecution while serving as judges, but the accused were not allowed either to appear in person or to be represented. This farce was officially called the "Ehrenhof der Deutschen Wehrmacht," the Court of Honor of the German Armed Forces. A concept of honor that, I would suggest, was closely related to these individuals' concept of justice.<sup>13</sup>

It is time to turn to Benito Mussolini. It can surely be said that his mouth was very much larger than his brain; he preached endlessly about the benefits that war brought to people but failed to recognize Italy's limited capacity and the likely cost of allying himself with Germany. Nevertheless, there is far too much denigration of

12. A striking example is Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 2d. ed. (Frankfurt/M: Athenäum, 1964); English language translation of the first edition, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958). A fine general analysis is Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

13. There are references to the court but there is as yet no study of this travesty of justice. On Hitler's systematic bribery of military and civilian leaders, see Gerd R. Ueberschär and Winfried Vogel, *Dienen und Verdienen: Hitlers Geschenke an seine Eliten* (Frankfurt/M: S. Fischer, 1999); and Norman J. W. Goda, "Black Marks: Hitler's Bribery of His Senior Officers during World War II," *Journal of Modern History* 79, no. 2 (June 2000): 413–52.

the performance of Italy's forces during the conflict. It was the Germans who insisted on the substitution of their enigma encoding machines that the British were reading for Italian ciphers that had not been cracked.<sup>14</sup> As James Sadkovich has shown, the performance of the Italian navy and army was not as poor as much of the contemporary joking and subsequent writings suggest.<sup>15</sup> Missing from most of the literature is the participation of Italian army units in the fighting on the Eastern Front, and the extent to which the heavy casualties those units suffered contributed to the rapid evaporation of support for the fascist system among the Italian public.<sup>16</sup>

We must now turn to Winston Churchill. From 10 May 1940 until the summer of 1945 he controlled the British war effort as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, and he subsequently wrote a widely read multivolume account of the war to make sure that contemporaries and future generations would see the conflict and his role in it the way he preferred.<sup>17</sup> In his account of the run-up to the war, he was careful not to mention that in the summer of 1938, while publicly chastising Neville Chamberlain for his policy toward Czechoslovakia, he was privately telling the Prague government that if in office he would most likely follow the same policy.<sup>18</sup> The Battle of Britain was won by the fighters Chamberlain had insisted on having built; perhaps that had some connection with this being the only important battle of the war after which the winning military leader, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, was canned.

In his influential memoir history, Churchill emphasized a point that has become one of the major myths of the war. He claimed that he had opposed major concessions to the Soviet Union against the policy on this issue of President Franklin Roosevelt. The myth deserves a careful scrutiny. Two important issues on which the contemporary well-documented positions of the two leaders differed may serve as examples of their contrasting views. In the summer of 1940, the Soviet Union annexed the three Baltic States, having earlier obliged them to allow Soviet forces to be stationed in them. While Churchill wanted to extend *de jure* recognition to this annexation, Roosevelt opposed any such move. By dint of heavy pressure, he prevented the British government from taking the step. In the summer of 1941, the issue arose once more in the negotiations for an alliance between Britain and

14. Alberto Santoni, *ULTRA Siegt im Mittelmeer: Die entscheidende Rolle der britischen Funkentzifferung beim Kampf um den Nachschub für Nordafrika* (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1985).

15. James J. Sadkovich, "Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1 (January 1989): 27–61; and Sadkovich, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994).

16. Gerhard Schreiber, "Italiens Teilnahme am Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion: Motive, Fakten und Folgen," in *Stalingrad: Ereignis—Wirkung—Symbol*, ed. Jürgen Förster (Munich: Piper, 1992), 250–92.

17. David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

18. See the report on Churchill's comments in Vaclav Kral, ed., *Das Abkommen von München: Tschechoslovakische diplomatische Dokumente 1937–1939* (Prague: Academia, 1968), no. 94.

the Soviet Union after the Germans invaded the latter. Churchill again wanted to concede the Soviet demand for formal recognition of the annexation, and Roosevelt again by massive pressure obliged the British government to abstain from ceding the point.<sup>19</sup> From Churchill's perspective, this looked like an inexpensive way, first to try to wean the Soviets away from their alignment with Germany, and later to satisfy a new and highly important ally. From Roosevelt's point of view, the forced disappearance of independent countries was no more acceptable when carried out by the Soviets than when implemented by the Germans.

A second example involves the proposed zones of occupation in Germany after that country's defeat. Greatly worried about the possibility that Stalin might order the Red Army to stop when it reached the country's June 1941 border and tell the Western Powers that it was their turn to do the rest of the fighting, Churchill had his government prepare a zonal division that placed Berlin, to be jointly ruled in any case, deep inside the Soviet zone.<sup>20</sup> This would provide the Soviets with an incentive to push forward until they met their allies in central Europe. With clues that this was not what the Americans wanted, he had the British delegation present the proposed line in the European Advisory Commission. It was immediately accepted by the Soviets, who presumably thought it the only good idea Churchill ever had. Roosevelt had wanted a division into zones that met in Berlin. The professional Roosevelt-haters may interpret this as his plan to deprive the people of Berlin of the joys of watching the airlift in 1948–49. Since the president was very concerned about direct access to the American zone of occupation, originally wanted the United States to have the northwest zone, and agreed after a year of negotiations to the southern zone only after the British yielded an enclave at the port of Bremen, one should not exclude the possibility that the president knew what he was about.<sup>21</sup> Anyone interested can today see the contrasting British and American zonal maps in Earl Ziemke's book on the American army in postwar Germany.<sup>22</sup>

If one asks for an explanation of the policies of the two men at the time and Churchill's reversal of them in his memoir-history, it would be best to consider both their relative positions in 1943–44 and also Churchill's postwar career. At the time, Churchill was leading a country that had exhausted its human and

19. The issue of the Baltic States as seen by Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin is reviewed in the chapters on them in Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (New York: Cambridge, 2005).

20. Lord Strang, *Home and Abroad* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1956), 213–15. The author was the British representative on the European Advisory Commission where the zonal borders were agreed upon.

21. See Daniel J. Nelson, *Wartime Origins of the Berlin Dilemma* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1978); William M. Franklin, "Zonal Boundaries and Access to Berlin," *World Politics* 16 (October 1963): 1–31; and Gretchen M. Skidmore, "The American Occupation of the Bremen Enclave, 1945–1947" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1989).

22. The maps can be compared in Earl F. Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944–1946* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), 115–22.

financial resources, was practically certain to be weaker in the future, and hence might best make whatever concessions were needed early rather than be obliged to make greater ones from an even weaker position later. Roosevelt, on the other hand, headed a country that was still mobilizing its resources, was likely to become stronger over time, and hence would do well to postpone concessions if possible and make them later when the country's position was stronger. He certainly recognized the essential role of the Soviet Union in the war, and like Churchill was equally worried that it might either be defeated or arrive at a compromise peace with Germany. He accordingly worked hard to develop and maintain decent relations with a difficult ally, but there were limits to the concessions he would make.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Roosevelt, who died before the war ended, Churchill continued to be active in British politics after his electoral defeat in July 1945. In memoirs written partly when leader of the opposition and partly when back in power, therefore, he could refashion the past in accordance with what would have been his preferences. It is ironic that on the zonal issue he shifted to something closer to Roosevelt's concept in the spring of 1945, but by then it had all been settled in signed agreements.

It might be useful to devote a moment to the implications of any extension of Churchill's preferred strategy of continuing to emphasize the Mediterranean theater. Stalin was a consummate liar, but when he told Churchill at Teheran that the Allied armies in Italy would eventually run into high mountains, he was for once speaking the truth. An invasion of the Balkans would have obviated the cross-Channel invasion; the same units could not be employed in northwest and southeast Europe at the same time. Fighting their way over the mountains of that region, they might well have reached Romania and Hungary by the time the Red Army had occupied all of Germany and "liberated" Denmark, the Low Countries, and France.<sup>24</sup> It has never been clear to me why an iron curtain running east-west along the Pyrenees, Alps, and Carpathian mountains would have been better for Britain and the United States in the postwar era than one running north-south from the Baltic to the Adriatic.

The reality of the situation was that the insistence of this country on an invasion across the Channel meant that although the Soviets did most of the fighting, the Western Allies gathered in the economically most advanced portions of the continent. In either case, whether the major effort of the United States and Britain was in northwest or southeast Europe, Poland was going to end up under German control if the Germans won or under Soviet control if the Allies won. Contrary to another postwar myth, neither the British nor the Americans had placed Poland in Eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union. By the time of the Yalta Conference, the Red Army was in control of Poland, and neither Churchill nor Roosevelt was in any position to change that fact. This was indeed terribly unfortunate for the Poles, but the blame for this must rest with neither of the two

23. Mary E. Glantz, *FDR and the Soviet Union: The President's Battles over Foreign Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

24. Gerhard L. Weinberg, "D-Day: Analysis of Costs and Benefits," in *D-Day 1944*, ed. Theodore A. Wilson (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 318–37, 389–90.

Western leaders but with the unwillingness of the Germans to accept the concept of an independent Poland until after a Russian army came to Berlin for a second time.<sup>25</sup> One can argue about the efforts both Churchill and Roosevelt made to assist Poland in their dealings with the Polish Government-in-Exile and by arguing with Stalin about the country's borders, but neither should be held responsible for the country's sad fate.

It is now Stalin's turn. Since the evidence of his real views of Czechoslovakia became apparent in part during the war, one needs to go back to a myth about his policy before the war. It is often argued that the Soviet Union should not have been excluded from the settlement of the crisis over Czechoslovakia arrived at in Munich in 1938. There is the myth that the Soviet Union was interested in the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia and was prepared to fight to defend it. How does this square with subsequent Soviet policy? When Germany ended the country's independence in March 1939, and created the puppet state of Slovakia, the Soviet Union was the only country on earth outside the Axis that extended legal recognition to this unit and hence to the disappearance of Czechoslovakia. Was that just because Stalin was so fond of its nominal leader, Monsignor Tiso? May I express doubts on this score? When as a result of the annexation of the eastern part of Poland, the Soviet Union attained a common border with what had been Czechoslovakia, Stalin insisted on annexing the eastern part of that country—a curious way of demonstrating interest in its territorial integrity. One should note that the nominal basis for this annexation of a wartime ally's territory was the same one applied in Munich, namely that the ethnic affinity of the majority of the local population should govern its inclusion in the adjacent state. Here is another myth that deserves further thought.

We must now turn to the war itself. There is a widespread belief that Stalin was extremely shrewd. That might have been so when it came to the internal situation where he not only wangled his way into power but also managed to have any and all conceivable and imaginary opponents killed, sent to the gulag, or banished to insignificant positions. In foreign affairs, however, he was as handicapped as Hitler by his belief in the nonsense he spouted. Because he seriously believed that Germany wanted colonies, markets, and investments from the Western Powers, it never occurred to him that Hitler's primary interest was in the seizure of lands for agricultural settlement from the Soviet Union. In spite of Roosevelt's strong advice to the contrary, Stalin opted for an agreement with Germany in 1939 and proceeded to help that country drive the Allies off the continent in the north, then the west, and then the south. He never ceased to blame others rather than himself for the subsequent situation of facing Germany alone on the continent in the east. We now

25. The Russian army had entered Berlin in the Seven-Years War of 1756–63. Thereafter, in the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Frederick II, King in Prussia and Elector of Brandenburg, had created an east-west corridor to join the two main territories he had inherited, separating Poland from its port of Danzig. Prussians and later Germans thought so highly of the inventor of the corridor idea that they referred to him as Frederick the Great. When the peacemakers at Versailles followed this concept by returning to Poland lands long inhabited by Poles, the Germans were outraged.

know that Soviet intelligence provided him with a copy of the German basic order for the invasion of the Soviet Union a few days after it was initially distributed in December 1940.<sup>26</sup> When a bit later the United States acquired a summary of this order through a German opponent of Hitler, and Roosevelt had Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles provide it to the Soviet Ambassador in Washington in February 1941, Stalin did not see this as a confirmation of what his own intelligence had acquired.<sup>27</sup> Instead, as the late General Dmitri Volkogonov assured me in 1991, he tossed it into the waste basket as a provocation.

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, all intelligence available to Stalin pointed to the weight of the German thrust being on the central part of the front. He insisted that the Red Army concentrate most heavily on the southern segment of the front with disastrous results. In 1942, all evidence pointed to a German major offensive on the southern portion of the front, so Stalin concentrated reserves on the central part of the front, again with predictable results. He did slowly begin to trust his military advisors, but the cost to the country of Stalin's errors had been tremendous. In 1945, after the division of Germany into occupation zones had been agreed upon, did it really make sense for Stalin to push Marshals Zhukov and Konev into a race for Berlin, thereby assuring far heavier casualties in the Red Army than a different approach to the final weeks of the war would have cost? It may be that he suspected that the Western Allies would break their agreements as readily as he was prepared to break his, but there were at the time no signs that this was a likely development. The cost of the war to the Soviet Union was indeed enormous, but a substantial portion of that has to be attributed to a leader who would not believe what his intelligence services and his allies told him, who had decimated his country's trained officer corps, and who had insisted during major segments of the fighting on strategic priorities that were seriously erroneous.<sup>28</sup>

It is now Roosevelt's turn. I have already dealt with one of the myths about the president. There is time for a few more. There is extensive literature about Roosevelt's policy toward war in 1940–41. Unfortunately most of it ignores the long available evidence. On the basis of decrypted Axis messages declassified in the mid-1970s, the noted German naval historian Jürgen Rohwer in 1984 published a careful analysis that showed how intelligence on German submarine dispositions was carefully utilized to divert individual ships and convoys so that they would cross the North Atlantic safely.<sup>29</sup> Far from seeking incidents, the United States was

26. A copy of the 18 December 1940 order was in Soviet hands on 29 December, see Manfred Messerschmidt, "Präventivkrieg? Zur Kontroverse um die deutsche Außen- und Militärpolitik vor dem Angriff auf die Sowjetunion," in *Präventivkrieg? Der deutsche Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, ed. Bianka Petrow-Ennker (Frankfurt/M: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), 28.

27. A recent account in David E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 145–46.

28. The numerous books on the Eastern Front by David Glantz offer the best insight into Stalin's management—and mismanagement—of the war currently available.

29. Jürgen Rohwer, "Die USA und die Schlacht im Atlantik," in *Kriegswende Dezember 1941*, ed. Jürgen Rohwer and Eberhard Jäckel (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1984), 81–103.

trying to avert them. Roosevelt did utilize the minute number that occurred to try to awaken the American people to the dangers ahead, but it would, of course, have been possible to utilize the available information to insure an incident every few days. Unfortunately the linguistic isolationists who predominate among American diplomatic historians have neither utilized Rohwer's findings nor checked the records available in College Park themselves. Even without this information, there was the discovery by Robert Butow of tapes of the president's confidential conversations when a recording machine was accidentally not turned off.<sup>30</sup> This text, published in 1982—and in English—similarly shows the president's interest in keeping the country out of formal participation in the war.

When one turns to the Pacific, there is equally solid evidence that has been equally generally ignored. Presidents, like all others, are limited to twenty-four hours per day. The demands on their time are fierce. It raises the question of why the president devoted such an enormous amount of time to the negotiations with the Japanese both in direct personal conversations and in discussions with Secretary of State Cordell Hull when the latter was to meet with the Japanese Ambassador. Was this merely because Roosevelt had nothing else to do? Is it not more likely that he was trying to stall off any attack by Japan until its leaders could see for themselves that Germany might well lose, not win the war? Had they waited another two weeks they might have recognized in the German defeats on the Eastern Front and the British offensive in North Africa clear signs that a victory for Germany was by no means as certain as they believed. Interestingly enough, Hitler had the opposite concern: he pushed the German army forward in its desperate effort before Moscow in December 1941 in part precisely because he feared that the Japanese might not take the plunge into war but make an agreement with the Americans instead.<sup>31</sup>

The issue of the embargo on oil sales to Japan also deserves another look. When the Japanese occupied the northern part of French Indo-China in September 1940, one might see this as a means of their cutting off a possible route of supplies to Nationalist China over the Haiphong-Hanoi railway, and that therefore this move was connected with the Japanese conflict with China. But the occupation of the southern part of French Indo-China in July 1941 obviously pointed *away* from their war with China and toward war with the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands. Unlike the allegedly smart Stalin, who provided the Germans with oil and other war materials until minutes before they invaded his country, Roosevelt did not believe it wise to provide the Japanese navy with the oil it wanted to stockpile for war with the United States. Also, unlike too many historians, he knew that the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek did not have a navy for the Japanese to engage. In the final stage of the negotiations, the suggestion

30. Robert J. C. Butow, "The FDR Tapes," *American Heritage* 33 (February–March 1982): 16–17.

31. The relevant document is published in Marianne Feuersenger, *Im Vorzimmer der Macht: Aufzeichnungen aus dem Wehrmachtführungsstab und Führerhauptquartier 1940–1945* (Munich: Herbig, 1999), 110.

was made that if the Japanese would return to the situation of the summer by evacuating southern Indo-China, the United States would sell them all the oil they wanted. The Japanese diplomats in Washington were promptly directed that they were under no circumstances to discuss such an idea.<sup>32</sup> From Tokyo's perspective, war with the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands was clearly preferable. The single-minded determination on this may help explain why it never occurred to anyone in the Japanese government that if they conquered the lands for which they were already printing the occupation currency, there was no way to move the oil wells, rubber plantations, and tin mines from Southeast Asia to the Japanese home islands, but that is another story.

A final myth about Roosevelt for which there is time here concerns his and Churchill's approval of the plan advanced by Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau for transforming Germany into a country rather like Holland and Denmark with a high standard of living but no heavy industry. As Churchill repeatedly put it, "fat but impotent." Those who write about this have generally been careful to refrain from looking at the original document, published over half a century ago.<sup>33</sup> Its four pages and map illustrate the obvious: if such a change were to be made, Germany would have to keep the bulk of its agricultural land in the east. One could not take that away, push the Germans living there into the remainder, and expect the country to survive without vast export industries. The project was abandoned because of Stalin's insistence on the Oder-Neisse line; the proposal Roosevelt and Churchill preferred was too soft, not too hard on the Germans. The detailed analysis of the issue by Bernd Greiner is invariably missing from accounts published in this country.<sup>34</sup> I have sometimes wondered whether the additional 5 to 6 million Germans who lost their homes because of the abandonment of the project share the general enthusiasm over its fate.

One further myth about the American general conduct of war during Roosevelt's presidency deserves a word. It is often asserted, especially in books published in Europe, that the Americans generally acted only when they had overwhelming force available to bring to bear on the planned operation. This is as silly an assertion as the one I dealt with earlier about Allied human and material superiority as the key element of their victory. Certainly the first significant offensive in the Pacific theater, the landing on Guadalcanal in August 1942, was carried out on a shoestring, and the minimal reinforcements that were available for it contributed to making this the longest battle in American history.<sup>35</sup> The landing in Normandy in June 1944 was

32. The relevant documents have been published by the Department of Defense in the set entitled *The "Magic" Background of Pearl Harbor* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1978).

33. Henry Morgenthau, Jr., *Germany is Our Problem* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945). The text is in the front, and the map faces p. 160.

34. Bernd Greiner, *Die Morgenthau-Legende: zur Geschichte eines umstrittenen Plans* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995).

35. Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

ordered by General Eisenhower when there was, after a month's delay, sea-lift for five divisions and airlift for three divisions for an assault against an area held by at least fifty-eight German divisions. A curious way of acting only with vastly superior forces.<sup>36</sup> There were occasions when operations were launched, especially in surprise landing, with superiority in force, but this was by no means the rule.

Two myths about President Truman relate to his wartime role and deserve a look. The emphasis on his unpreparedness to assume the presidency is generally exaggerated. He not only had served in the American army in France in World War I but had maintained an interest in military affairs in subsequent years. Obviously he had to be briefed on many critical matters when he succeeded to the presidency, including details on the atomic bomb and on Soviet espionage into its development, but he was not the ignoramus that he is often pictured as. Like his predecessor, he developed a close working relationship with Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and relied heavily on his advice. Unlike the civilian side of the government, where Truman made substantial changes relatively early, he kept the team of military leaders Roosevelt had appointed. In the only significant change in command necessitated by the death of General Buckner in the fighting on Okinawa, he promptly appointed Joseph W. Stilwell on Marshall's recommendation, a choice Roosevelt would presumably have welcomed in view of his earlier reluctance to remove Stilwell from the China-Burma-India Command.

The other myth in need of another look is the controversy over the anticipated American and Allied casualties in the two planned invasions of the home islands of Japan of which Truman authorized the first in mid-June 1945. Invariably the likely casualties of the Chinese, Russians, British, and others are omitted from this discussion. Similarly the planned Japanese killing of all the prisoners of war they held is ignored. Perhaps into the discussion one should also enter the anticipated casualties on the Japanese side about which there was no controversy within the Japanese leadership. It was accepted that there would be 20 million such casualties. This figure those in charge in Tokyo unanimously deemed acceptable until the second atomic bomb suggested to some of them that the Americans could drop an indefinite number and hence not have to invade at all.<sup>37</sup> In this connection, it may be worth noting that both the British government and Stalin had agreed to the use of the atomic bomb *before* Washington had asked them.

Now that the focus has turned to Japan, this may be an appropriate point to touch on Japanese war aims. These are all too often described as limited to resource-rich parts of Southeast Asia. The Japanese certainly wanted them, but the inclusion of India, Alaska, New Zealand, and Cuba in Japanese planning—to mention merely a few—hardly points to a modest program of annexations.<sup>38</sup> One cannot help wondering what Fidel Castro would think of the inclusion of Cuba

36. See the book cited in n. 24.

37. D. M. Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation DOWNFALL and the Invasion of Japan, 1945–1947* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2009), p. 122.

38. See the chapter on Tojo in the book cited in n. 19.

in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere—and of being rescued from this prospect by the Yankees.

A Japanese leader who has received more favorable attention than he deserves is Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku. First there is his insistence on the attack on Pearl Harbor as a substitute for the prior plan of the Japanese naval high command, an insistence that carried the day in mid-October 1941 because of his threat to resign as Commander of the Combined Fleet unless his scheme were approved. Quite apart from the reality that an attack on the Americans in peacetime was practically guaranteed to destroy the Japanese strategic concept of conquering lots and then making a settlement in which they would keep many of their gains, there were two practical defects to Yamamoto's plan. Both were easily predictable and neither could be remedied since they were inherent to the project.

In the first place, as the Japanese well knew, the places where the American warships were anchored were quite shallow. It was for this reason that special torpedoes that ran rather shallow had to be utilized and were loaded on board just before the fleet sailed for the attack. In practice that would mean that ships torpedoed at their moorings would sink into the mud; they could in reality not be sunk. We know that in the event the *Arizona* exploded, but the other battleships settled onto the shallow harbor floor. From there, all except the *Oklahoma* were raised, repaired, and returned to action.<sup>39</sup> It may have been just as well for Yamamoto's peace of mind that he was dead by the time of the battle in the Surigao Strait in October 1944 when a substantial portion of the Japanese navy was demolished by six American battleships of which two had been allegedly sunk and three had been badly damaged in the Pearl Harbor raid.

A second equally predictable result of the Pearl Harbor raid was the survival of most of the crew members of the ships attacked. This is not to ignore the heavy loss of life on the *Arizona* and the substantial casualties from other ships, but attacking warships at anchor in port on a Sunday in effect guarantees that many crew members will be on shore leave and most of those on board at the time of attack will survive. One cannot understand the revival and effective fighting of the American navy in subsequent years without paying attention to the trained and experienced crew members of the warships who survived the attack and took their skills to other ships or their repaired old ones. This is an issue ignored in the bulk of the relevant literature. The difference between a major warship hit at anchor and one sunk on the open ocean had been demonstrated earlier that year in May in the North Atlantic. When the British battle-cruiser *Hood* went down, of the crew of over 1,500, only 3 survived. When the *Bismarck* was sunk a few days later, of the 2,200 men aboard, 115 survived.<sup>40</sup> No one will ever know if the Japanese navy's

39. Homer N. Wallin, *Pearl Harbor: Why, How, Fleet Salvage and Final Appraisal* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1968).

40. David J. Bercuson and Holger H. Herwig, *The Destruction of the Bismarck* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2001), 159, 297–99. Of course, many men had been killed on both ships in the combat that preceded their sinking.

original hopes for an engagement on the open Pacific would have worked out as its designers planned—this student of the war has considerable doubt—but nothing could have been worse for Japan than Yamamoto's scheme.

That raises the question: why was he so absolutely insistent on a project with defects that were so readily foreseeable? Could it be that he was so personally invested in the idea that he was simply unwilling and unable to analyze the matter objectively? There is an intriguing aspect of the last paper exercise of the plan that he conducted in September 1941, about a month before the naval staff in Tokyo finally agreed to his demand that his plan replace theirs. In that exercise, it was determined that among other American ships sunk at their moorings would be the aircraft carriers including the *Yorktown*. Not a single officer in the room had the moral courage to say, "But your Excellency, how can we sink the 'Yorktown' in Pearl Harbor when we know that it is with the American fleet in the Atlantic?" None of these officers lacked physical courage: they were all prepared to die for the Emperor, and many of them did. But none had the backbone to challenge a commander whose mind was so firmly made up that none dared prize it open with a touch of reality.<sup>41</sup>

In this extraordinary rigidity of Yamamoto's we may also see one of the roots of his preference for exceedingly complicated battle plans, a tendency that he passed on to his successors. As I mentioned earlier, of the eight carriers at his disposal, he allocated four to the central portion of the Midway operation with two sent off to support the landing on the Aleutians and two held back with the main battle fleet. These four survived the battle, but what would have happened if at the critical point the Americans had faced not four but eight carriers? And if the Japanese had, like the Americans, made some fast repairs on the carrier damaged in the Coral Sea engagement and thus had made it nine against three? This is not the time to review the similarly very complicated Japanese plan for the biggest naval battle of the war, the one generally referred to as the Battle of Leyte Gulf, but it was not just the participation of American battleships Yamamoto imagined sunk at Pearl Harbor as mentioned earlier that shows his influence on Japanese naval planning concepts even after he had been killed by an American air interception. Perhaps the discussion of Yamamoto should conclude with the suggestion that if he had found a way to sink in the Pacific an American carrier operating in the Atlantic, he would indeed be entitled to the praise so often lavished on him.

Something should also be said about the Chinese war effort under Chiang Kai-shek. While there is no doubt about the corruption and other internal problems of his regime, the time may have come for another look at a leader who managed to hold much of his country together against a better armed foe for so many years. The insistence of the Japanese on fighting the Chinese all those years, and doing so in the most horrendous way they could think of, paved the way for the

41. The most recent serious study of the Pearl Harbor attack is John H. Lambert and Norman Polmar, *Defenseless: Command Failure at Pearl Harbor* (St. Paul, Minn.: MBI Publishing Co., 2003).

triumph of Mao. Few would be inclined to suggest that the people of the country are better off as a result.<sup>42</sup>

A final myth in need of review is one that applies to an important aspect of the way the two sides actually fought the war on the field of battle. There is an inclination to think of World War II as one fought by men, women, and machines. That is simply wrong. The United States utilized a great variety of animals from dogs in the Pacific to mules in Europe with the British adding elephants in the Burma theater. It is hence only appropriate that the National World War II Museum in New Orleans last year had a special exhibit and series of lectures on "Loyal Forces: The Animals of World War II." The Japanese and Italian armies utilized horse transport extensively. The German army was extremely heavily dependent on horses, employing a total of over 3 million during the war.<sup>43</sup> Here was another source of friction between Hitler and his generals on a subject where he was closer to the reality at the front than the latter. In the winter, bringing up fodder for the horses is difficult at the very time when they cannot graze through deep snow. Since this is also precisely the time when pulling equipment over poor snowed-in roads is especially difficult, double-harnessing frequently had to be resorted to. When a force is advancing, the equipment and vehicles without motors left behind can be retrieved by leading the horses back subsequently, but when a force is retreating, whatever could not be pulled back first is likely to be lost. The enormous, practically certain losses of valuable and scarce equipment under these circumstances was simply not fully understood by higher German commanders, most of whom had received their experience of combat on the Western Front of World War I with its relatively short distances over which movements occurred.

Ironically, it was their own dependence on horses that contributed to the confidence of many German military leaders that they could most likely crush any Allied landing in the West. They correctly estimated that because of the weather in the Channel, such a landing would occur in the summer months. There would then be plenty of grass in France and Belgium for their horses to graze on, but they assumed correctly that the Americans and British could not have trained their tanks and trucks to eat grass. The essentially total dependence of the invading Western Allies on motorized equipment and transport would thus provide a major advantage for the German army with its vast number of horses. It never occurred to the self-anointed geniuses on the German side that this was a problem known to the Allies who had decided to cope with it by the development of Pluto, the pipeline under the ocean, to pump fuel under the Channel for vehicles that they too knew could not eat grass. The rapid pursuit across France by the Allies in August–September 1944 did indeed eventually come to be slowed down and even halted at

42. There is a start in Jonathan Fenby, *Chiang Kai-shek: China's Generalissimo and the Nation He Lost* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003).

43. One of the few scholars who have examined this issue is Richard L. DiNardo, *Mechanized Juggernaut or Military Anachronism?: Horses and the German Army of World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1991).

points because of the fuel problem, but by that time there could be no question of throwing the Allied armies back into the Channel.

The Red Army was also very heavily dependent on horses throughout the fighting on the Eastern Front. It is true that the American provision of tens of thousands of trucks under Lend-Lease greatly assisted the Soviets in this regard. Nevertheless, German civilians in Berlin in April 1945 noted with some surprise that the Red Army brought into the city enormous numbers of horses and small but substantial numbers of camels.<sup>44</sup>

If one asks, how did this aspect of the reality of World War II come to be overlooked so widely, it may be helpful to consider the source of much of the film footage that has influenced popular images of the fighting. American and British films very rarely show the relatively small numbers of animals they employed. It is the films produced by the Germans and by the Soviet Union that have been misleading, in my opinion at least in part quite deliberately. It was not that the horses of the two contesting armies were camera shy, but rather that both governments preferred to offer viewers of newsreels and other movie footage an image of modern motorized warfare. Horses might accordingly appear when Germans paraded through Paris in 1940 or in Red Square in the Soviet victory parade of 1945, but their exceedingly numerous employment at and behind the front during the fighting was generally considered a possible indicator of backwardness best not exhibited on the screen. Whatever the reason, neither of the huge armies fighting on the main front of World War II could have operated effectively without the enormous number of horses that have largely disappeared from popular memory in this country.

In the memory held by a wider public as well as substantial segments of the scholarly community, a considerable number of myths have come to influence perceptions of the greatest war of which we know. A talk named for one of the most carefully objective military leaders of the conflict may well be a good occasion to subject a few of these myths to the cold look that he tended to accord dubious proposals.

Thank You.

44. Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City: A Diary* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005). The movie made from the book replicates the general omission of horses.

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