

***Allies in War:
Britain and America against the Axis Powers, 1940-1945***
Roundtable Review



Reviewed Works:

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Reviewers: Kathleen Burk, Alex Danchev, Theodore Wilson, Jonathan Winkler

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Author's Response by Mark Stoler, Professor Emeritus, University of Vermont

First, many thanks to Thomas Maddux for organizing this roundtable, and to Kathleen Burk, Alex Danchev, Theodore Wilson, and Jonathan Winkler for participating in it.

Let me also add my own disclaimer to the one Ted Wilson provided: in addition to knowing and working with Ted for more than three decades now, I have also known Alex Danchev for many years, participated in numerous conferences with him, and relied extensively upon his excellent scholarship and criticisms as well as Ted's for my own work. More recently I have come to know Jonathan Winkler and to value him as an excellent younger scholar in the field.

Luckily I do not know Kathleen Burk or Thomas Maddux, lest I be accused of manipulating the membership of this roundtable in order to receive such rave reviews! In truth, I had no idea the reviewers would be so positive, and I find it difficult to respond to their praise. Indeed, what can one say given the words they use to describe and assess my work? I am tempted to limit my comments to sincere thanks to all of them and, as a humorous aside, to repeat one of my late father's favorite quips: "flattery will get you everywhere!"

Seriously, I am deeply grateful to the reviewers—and not simply for their praise. I am also grateful to them for seeing so clearly what I was trying to do in this volume—and for pointing out so accurately my weaknesses. Yes, I concur in their criticisms. The volume is weak on "flesh and blood" characterization, as Alex Danchev correctly notes; on logistics, resources, finances and domestic politics as Jonathan Winkler notes; and on the lower levels of the Anglo-American alliance as well as the end of the war and the British perspective as Ted Wilson correctly notes. And the primary reason for such weaknesses is indeed a factor that was largely beyond my control: the limited number of pages within which I had to work by the terms of my contract with the publisher.

There is always choice involved in organizing and writing a brief volume, however, and I very consciously chose to organize and emphasize grand strategy at the highest levels—primarily because it is what I am most interested in studying and what I concluded would

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work best as an organizing principle for such a volume. I also decided not to emphasize the end of the war (only one of my eleven chapters deals exclusively with 1945, followed by one more on its aftermath and consequences) so as to make sure my focus remained on the war itself, not the origins of the ensuing Cold War as with so many volumes that deal with this time period. Furthermore, my American bias is, as Ted Wilson correctly notes, at least partially the result of greater immersion in the American than the British records. I have indeed spent much more time in the U.S. National Archives than the British Public Records Office—though that is a result more of time and funding constraints than of any preference for Washington and its viewpoint over Kew!

So what then is left to say in this response? First, let me credit the success my reviewers emphasize in distilling so much into so few pages to a previous experience: my 200-page 1989 biography of George C. Marshall. Graduate comprehensive exams aside, it was the Marshall project that first taught me how to synthesize large quantities of information into a brief volume. And in this learning process, I owed and still owe an enormous debt of gratitude to three historians: John Milton Cooper, the series editor who asked me to write the volume and guided me through the process; Edward “Mac” Coffman, who first taught me military history at the University of Wisconsin and who recommended me for this project; and the late Forrest C. Pogue, who wrote the 2,000 page, four volume official biography of Marshall without which my much briefer volume would not have been possible and who served as a constant source of inspiration, advice and encouragement.

Secondly, let me state here, as I did in my preface, that the idea for such a unique Anglo-American volume on World War II came from Hugh Strachan, the academic editor of the Hodder Arnold series in which this volume appears, and that I agreed to write it because I was intrigued with this novel approach to the war and because it provided me with another opportunity to fuse diplomatic with military history—a fusion I believe to be of critical importance and one I have emphasized throughout my academic career.¹ Equally important, as I also noted in my preface, was Warren Kimball’s comment to me that no one had previously written such a volume because it could not be done—a comment I interpreted more as a dare from one New York City kid to another than as a statement of fact!

Thirdly, let me try to expand on a question Jonathan Winkler asked in his review: “what is there that we do not still understand?” After all the document releases and thousands upon thousands of volumes on World War II, what still remains to study and explain?

In a word, plenty. For me, the most notable gap in our knowledge of Allied grand strategy remains the Soviet Union. Despite all that has been released and written in the last two

¹ See in this regard my presidential address to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, “War and Diplomacy: Or, Clausewitz for Diplomatic Historians,” *Diplomatic History* 29 (January 2005): 1-26. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00457.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00457.x>.

decades about Stalin and Soviet wartime strategies and policies, I often feel that there is more about Moscow's behavior that we do not know than what we do know. How serious, for example, were the Russo-German contacts and separate peace rumors of 1943? Did Stalin ever realize the difficulties involved in crossing the English Channel and that it was not similar, as Marshal Voroshilov once asserted, to crossing a river? Did he really view the refusal to cross in 1942 or in 1943 as deliberate, or did he and Molotov say so simply to score bargaining points? And why did Stalin react so moderately, and indeed positively, to the British push at the fall 1943 Moscow Foreign Ministers' Conference for more Mediterranean operations and a consequent delay in launching OVERLORD, only to reverse his position very forcefully and decisively less than a month later at the Teheran summit conference?

Soviet policies and strategies are of course not our only gaps. Indeed, additional gaps have previously emerged and will continue to emerge as the issues that concern us and the questions we ask about the war evolve over time, for much of history is a search for the roots to contemporary problems. Furthermore, and related, we do not yet know the full consequences of the war. They are still spilling out and will continue to do so for many years. Sixty years may appear a long period of time within a single lifetime; but it is not in terms of the historical consequences of an event. I am reminded in this regard of a crack my University of Vermont colleague in Medieval History made to me many years ago: there is no U.S. history he maintained--or indeed any "real" history after 1500—just "current events" whose full consequences will remain incomplete for centuries.

That may be true. Nevertheless, World War II already has had enormous consequences that historians can and should analyze. As James Stokesbury has noted, "The years 1939-1945 may well have seen the most profound and concentrated upheaval of humanity since the Black Death. Not since the 14th century had so many people been killed or displaced, disturbed, uprooted, or had their lives completely transformed in such a short period of time."² In the final chapter of *Allies in War*, I attempted to summarize briefly some of the most important consequences of this enormous upheaval as we see them today. Let me conclude here with a brief description of a vitally important consequence that I did not mention within that chapter, but that has long been a major concern of mine.

One of the most notable, durable and unfortunate consequences of the war has been a tendency since 1945 to view and justify U.S. foreign and military policies via analogies to the World War II era and its supposed "lessons." I say "supposed" because these "lessons" and the ensuing analogies are usually simplistic, based more upon World War II mythology than fact, and dead-wrong. Obviously I am influenced by contemporary events in making such a statement. But I have been making that statement for decades now, and the rationalizations for invading and staying in Iraq constitute merely the most recent examples of such unfortunate behavior. Indeed, a few years ago I added a new essay study question to the list I give my U.S. foreign relations students every year before their final

² James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II* (New York: Morrow, 1980), 377.

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exam: discuss the uses and misuses every president since Harry Truman has made of World War II analogies to justify his behavior and defend it against critics.

More than thirty years ago Ernest May pointed out the dangerous consequences of such faulty analogies and misuse of history in the context of another tragic war.³ Unfortunately his warnings have not halted the process. But as an historian I continue to hope that an emphasis on exploding World War II myths will eventually do so—if not for contemporary policymakers then at least for future ones who are presently in our classes.

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³ Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).