

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



Reviewed Works:

**Mark Stoler.** *Allies in War: Britain and America against the Axis Powers, 1940-1945.* New York: Oxford University Press, February 2006. 318 pp. \$39.95. ISBN-13: 978-0-3407-2026-4 (hardcover); 978-0-3407-2027-1 (paperback).

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

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

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28 September 2007

Review by Theodore A. Wilson, University of Kansas

First a disclaimer. I have known Mark Stoler for some thirty years. He is both an old and dear friend, a colleague from whom I have learned much and with whom I have shared enjoyable, episodically fascinating, and occasionally enervating and/or frustrating adventures in such locales as Moscow, Minsk, Heathrow Airport, and Hyde Park, N.Y. On various occasions, we have shared the podium at conferences and contributed essays to commissioned works on aspects of World War II. And, currently, we are joined at the hip in an effort to complete and shepherd to publication a major study of the Combined Chiefs of Staff in World War II that our mutual friend, Alan Wilt, had undertaken for Cambridge University Press prior to his untimely death. I am persuaded, however, that neither the tug of loyalty owed an old friend nor the intellectual debts I willingly acknowledge rule out a “fair and balanced” assessment of this overview of Anglo-American diplomacy and strategy in World War II. Indeed, if Stoler has read this far, he will be prepared both for the positive comments and the nitpicks, having heard me voice them so often—even perhaps tediously—over the years.

In one sense, *Allies in War: Britain and America Against the Axis Powers, 1940-1945*, represents a culmination of Stoler’s distinguished career as a scholar of high politics in the era of World War II. His first major work, an expansion of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin and subsequently published as *The Politics of the Second Front: American Military Planning and Diplomacy in Coalition Warfare, 1941-1943* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977) boldly challenged the generally-held view, as the apt synopsis in *Choice* observed, that “American policy makers during World War II were naively and narrowly preoccupied with the purely military side of the conflict to the neglect of the long-range political implications of their

*Theodore Wilson is Professor and Assoc. Chair at the University of Kansas (Ph.D. Indiana, 1966). He specializes in 20th-century U.S. political, military, and diplomatic history. Having trained with Robert H. Ferrell at Indiana University, Wilson joined the Department of History faculty in 1965. For some years his research dealt primarily with the history of American foreign relations. That focus yielded such works as The First Summit: Roosevelt and Churchill at Placentia Bay 1941 (1969, 1991), for which he was awarded the Society of American Historians’ Parkman Prize; a co-edited volume, Makers of American Diplomacy (1974); and The Marshall Plan, 1947-1951 (1977). He also co-authored Three Generations in Twentieth Century America: Family, Community, and Nation (1976, 1981). Beginning in the 1980s, he shifted focus to the World War II Allied coalition and to military history more generally. That research program, supported by stays at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the U.S. Army Center for Military History, has yielded WW2: Critical Issues (1974, 1994, 1998); D-Day, June 6 1944 (1994); Victory in Europe 1945: From World War to Cold War (2000); assorted articles; and Building Warriors: Selection and Training of U.S. Ground Combat Troops in World War II (forthcoming). Wilson serves as General Editor of the University Press of Kansas series, Modern War Studies, which has published some 130 original titles on military history and related subjects. Wilson’s current research embraces Anglo-American cultural interaction during World War II, the U.S. Army and the early Cold War, and a long-gestating biography of Henry A. Wallace.*

military decisions.” Through a steady stream of books and articles crowned by his magisterial study, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Stoler has documented the pervasive interaction of military and civilian policymakers in shaping of America’s policies regarding the conduct of World War II and planning for the postwar world. *Allies in War* represents both a synthetic depiction of, in Stoler’s words, “a combined diplomatic-military history of the Anglo-American alliance and war against the Axis powers,” (xxii), and an ambitious effort to view the strategy and politics of the Pacific War through the lens of discussions and decisions taken among British and American civilian wartime leaders. Indeed, his succinct analysis of Anglo-American policymaking and prosecution of the war in the Pacific is a signal contribution to the literature.

Tackling a project such as a narrative history of the Anglo-American conduct of World War II demands that the author confront a multitude of difficult choices. In the instance of the work currently under review, *Allies in War*, certain of these decisions had been already made when Stoler undertook the project. As one volume in Hodder and Arnold’s series on the Second World War, the book was to be written for a general readership and with the particular goal of adoption as a supplementary text for undergraduate and graduate courses on 20<sup>th</sup> century political, diplomatic, and military history. The work certainly fulfills these requirements. Stoler offers the reader a masterful overview of wartime diplomacy and strategy in, remarkably, less than 300 pages—eleven chapters totaling 230 pages, exceptionally useful endnotes, and a “select” but comprehensive bibliography of American and British works. While packed with informative insights and well-chosen illustrative examples, the narrative reads smoothly. The prose style is confident, straightforward, and sometimes rises to a level more typical of historians who write for a general public. Stoler’s aim was to offer a synthesis of the conduct of World War II by Britain and the United States that is both comprehensive and readable. As noted, he has worked through most if not all the relevant secondary literature on aspects of the so-called “special relationship” between the United States and the United Kingdom. The book deserves a wide readership and serious consideration for adoption in university courses on 20<sup>th</sup> century international relations, advanced surveys of military history, and the history of World War II.

We appear to have reached that point in our observation of the merry-go-round of scholarly writing about World War II in general and the Anglo-American conduct of the war in particular when the momentum generated by release of new documentation about the war has slowed sufficiently to permit the sort of confident general syntheses of previously-fraught subjects represented by studies such as this one. Immediately after the war, there occurred a flood of biographies, autobiographies and memoirs of which several, such as Winston Churchill’s six-volume “history,” served to define scholarly assessments for a generation. Also appearing in the first two decades after war’s end were assorted interpretive works, speculative in nature, though based on close reading of the war memoirs and the official histories being published on both sides of the Atlantic. Next came a surge of carefully-drawn monographs when U.S. and then British records became widely available, making possible both filling of gaps and direct challenge to the Churchillian

paradigm. Those studies were mined to produce assorted general works, many reflecting post-Vietnam interpretive perspectives. In the 1990s, a significant if smaller second wave of monographs based upon what approximates the totality of the historical record as seen from London and Washington and limited access to Russian sources hit the bookstores. Stoler's welcome synthesis of the Anglo-American conduct of the World War II is thus timely and most welcome.

Inevitably, a synthesis generates quibbles about point of view and depth of analysis. The author's approach is avowedly top-down; that is, he is concerned chiefly with decision-making within the Grand Alliance at the level of President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and their principal advisers. Focusing on what was decided (or not decided) in the rarefied atmosphere of summit conferences makes possible a clearly-developed exposition, one that yields an easily comprehended narrative and sustains focus on the tensions and limits of Anglo-American wartime cooperation. However, it scants to some degree the enormous effort to sustain the alliance done at second and third levels—by, for example, the assorted individuals and groups of Americans associated with OLLA (the Lend-Lease organization), the U.S. Embassy, OWI, FEA, the Army Service Forces, and other acronymic organizations operating in Britain. Even less attention is given their less numerous but still very important British counterparts in Washington (for example, the British Military Mission) and elsewhere in the U.S. Thus, we get less attention to economic relations, the daily round of intelligence sharing, Anglo-American discussions about differing approaches to governing, than one might expect. Some attention to their views of the nation in which they were residing and of working with their counterparts would have reinforced Stoler's argument regarding the constraints within which the so-called "special relationship" operated. I would also have liked to have seen something more than acknowledgement of the experiences (and possible short and longer term effects) of the presence of all those American soldiers in Britain from 1942-1945. This is a fascinating story, one that has been skillfully told by David Reynolds in *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945*, as Stoler notes, and the policy implications (such questions, for example, as the unique status of forces agreement extorted by the Americans from Churchill's government) merit some discussion in any narrative of wartime Anglo-American relations.

More serious in terms of criticism is what I perceived as an imbalance between American and British perspectives on the relationship. By and large, we get Washington's perspective on issues and, in general, the vantage from which the story is told is the United States, Washington, and the White House. For a work of this sort, ideally, there should be more fully developed discussion of the British perspectives on wartime policies, of the context of British politics for understanding Britain's and Churchill's strategic concerns (for example, the string of military disasters in spring, 1942 that culminated with the fall of Tobruk are discussed chiefly from an American perspective), and of the organizational mechanisms by which British policymaking was accomplished. Stoler has demonstrably reviewed extant British secondary sources, but—as I have often observed to him—immersion in FO and WO records and comparing what one finds in those elaborately minuted files against the inchoate documentation one finds when opening any box at NARA

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offers invaluable insights for the deep differences between British and American systems of governing. But, then, we are considering a work of 300 pages!

My final quibble relates to what appear to be the somewhat hurried concluding chapters. The reader confronts a thicket of postwar questions, and, indeed, perhaps too many topics and issues. Stoler gives emphasis appropriately to the theme of the transfer of power from Britain to the United States over the course of the war and culminating in the rapid British withdrawal from global leadership and its postwar financial crisis. Again, the story is told chiefly from the American perspective, and we obtain only limited understanding of the frantic efforts by British officials to keep in place such manifestations of equality as the Combined Boards and the Hyde Park Agreement. London's fallback position was, of course, soliciting acknowledgment of Britain as elder statesman or wise uncle, using the callow Americans to achieve London's longterm aims. But that is, in fact, another story and one properly beyond the scope of this remarkable work of historical synthesis.

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