Eisenhower's Generalship

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The centennial year of the birth of Dwight David Eisenhower (born 14 October 1890) provides an opportune occasion to review and assess his leadership and generalship. Ike came to command late in life. Although he graduated from West Point in 1915, until 1942 he had held only one command, and that a stateside training post for less than a year in 1918. Until December 1942, when he paid a visit to the front lines in Tunisia as Commander of the Allied Force Headquarters, he had never heard a shot fired in anger.

Yet on 8 November 1942, Eisenhower commanded the first Allied offensive of the war—Operation Torch. It was an extraordinarily complex operation. His forces, British and American, land, sea, and air, were attacking at three widely separated points—Casablanca, Algiers, and Oran—against a neutral force, the French colonial army, without a declaration of war. The Casablanca striking force, led by George S. Patton, Jr., combat-loaded in Virginia and sailed across the Atlantic to make its landing. The American and British forces that loaded in Great Britain for the attacks on Algiers and Oran had to sail through the Straits of Gibraltar. What the French would do, no one knew. Eisenhower hoped to persuade them, through diplomacy rather than force of arms, to join the Allied cause rather than resist.

In short, Eisenhower, in his first experience in either combat or command, faced problems that were serious in the extreme and as much political as military. His staff was at least as tense as he was and looked to him for leadership. But leadership was a subject he had studied for decades. It was not an art in his view, but a skill to be learned. "The one quality that can be developed by studious reflection and practice is the leadership of men," he had written to his son John at West Point.[1] Here was his chance to show that he had developed it.

In the event, Eisenhower not only exercised leadership, but learned new lessons. It was "during those anxious hours" in Gibraltar, he later wrote in a draft introduction to his memoirs that he finally decided to discard, "that I first realized how inexorably and inescapably strain and tension wear away at the leader's endurance, his judgment, and his confidence. The pressure becomes more acute because of the duty of a staff constantly to present to the commander the worst side of an eventuality." In this situation, Eisenhower realized, the commander had to "preserve optimism in himself and in his command. Without confidence, enthusiasm, and optimism in the command, victory is scarcely obtainable."

Eisenhower also realized that "optimism and pessimism are infectious and they spread more rapidly from the head downward than in any other direction." He saw two additional advantages to a cheerful and hopeful attitude by the commander: First, the "habit tends to minimize potentialities within the individual himself to become demoralized." Second, it

> has a most extraordinary effect upon all with whom he comes in contact. With this clear realization, I firmly determined that my mannerisms and speech in public would always reflect the cheerful certainty of victory—that any pessimism and discouragement I might ever feel would be reserved for my pillow. I adopted a policy of circulating through the whole force to the full limit imposed by physical considerations. I did my best to meet everyone from general to private with a smile, a pat on the back, and a definite interest in his problems.[2]

Eisenhower initially seemed to be a better diplomat than soldier. The deal he struck with Admiral Jean Darlan, Commander-in-Chief of the French armed forces in Africa, quickly brought French resistance to an end. Although the agreement was subject to harsh criticism, especially from liberals in the United States and the United Kingdom because of Darlan's fascist politics, it freed Ike's forces to strike east against the Germans in Tunisia. But Eisenhower's decisiveness and willingness to take risks on the political front contrasted sharply with his indecisiveness and caution on the military front. He failed to galvanize his troops; the Germans solidified their hold on Tunisia; a stalemated campaign resulted. In February, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel counterattacked at Kasserine

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Pass; the American forces there were ill-served by their seniors and suffered a humiliating defeat. Eisenhower later recognized that the fault was his because he had not been ruthless enough in dismissing incompetent commanders, especially II Corps Commander Lloyd Fredendall.

Ike learned from his mistakes, however. Kasserine, he told Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, was a blessing in disguise, because American troops had profited from the experience. The men, he reported, "are now mad and ready to fight. All our people, from the very highest to the very lowest, have learned that this is not a child's game and are ready and eager to get down to business."[3] He brought Patton over from Casablanca to take command in Tunisia, and told Patton (in advice that might better have been self-directed), "You must not retain for one instant any man in a responsible position where you have become doubtful of his ability to do the job. This matter frequently calls for more courage than any other thing you will have to do, but I expect you to be perfectly cold-blooded about it."[4] To an old friend, Leonard Gerow, then training an infantry division in Scotland, Ike expanded on the theme. "Officers that fail," he wrote, "must be ruthlessly weeded out. Considerations of friendship, family, kindliness, and nice personality have nothing whatsoever to do with the problem. You must be tough." He told Gerow to get rid of the "lazy, the slothful, the indifferent, or the complacent," even if he had to spend the rest of his life writing letters explaining his actions.[5]

In short, North Africa hardened Eisenhower. But he still had much to learn. After the victory in North Africa, he launched the invasion of Sicily (July 1943). The decision to go into Sicily showed the strategic caution of the Allies, and of Eisenhower—Sicily was defended by Italian troops of dubious quality and only two German divisions. It was a long way from Rome, much less the heart of Germany. He allowed Bernard L. Montgomery, commanding the British forces, and Patton to conduct risk-free campaigns that moved at a slow place and failed to bag many German prisoners. In September, he launched his third amphibious attack, on the Italian mainland at Salerno, once again a cautious strategic decision as Salerno was well south of Rome. He called off at the last minute an airborne operation designed to capture Rome, judging the risk to be too high. The result was another stalemate; not until nine months later would Allied troops finally get to Rome.

The year 1943 had been marked by great gains on the map. The forces under Eisenhower's command had conquered Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sicily, and southern Italy. The strategic gains, however, had been small at best. Germany had not lost any territory critical to her defense. She had not been forced to reduce her forces in France or in Russia. Taken as a whole, Eisenhower's campaigns from November 1942 to December 1943 must be judged a strategic failure.

By no means was that altogether his fault. In the summer of 1942 he had warned his political bosses about what was going to happen if they turned

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A cheerful Ike aboard a jeep for a tour of the front, 16 November 1944. "Without confidence, enthusiasm, and optimism in the command, victory is scarcely obtainable."

down Operation Roundup, a proposed invasion of France, in favor of Torch, the invasion of North Africa. Still, some of the blame did fall to Eisenhower. The excessive caution with which he opened the campaign, his refusal to run risks to get to Tunis before the Germans, his refusal to take a chance and rush troops into Sardinia, his refusal to relieve Fredendall, his refusal to take a grip on the battle in Sicily, his refusal to seize the opportunity to take Rome with the 82d Airborne—all contributed to the unhappy situation he left behind in Italy. The Allied armies were well south of Rome as winter set in, with little hope of any rapid advance. They had spent great resources for small gain.

On the political side, the legacy of the campaign was one of profound mistrust of the Americans and the British by the French and the Russians, each of whom wanted a second front in northwest France, and each of whom was deeply suspicious of the Darlan deal. In sum, the campaign brought minimal military rewards at the cost of diplomatic disaster.

Yet there was at least one clear gain from 1943 for the Allies—the year had given the high command in general, and Eisenhower particularly, along with his troops, badly needed experience. Further, Eisenhower had learned which of his subordinates could stand up to the strain of battle, and which could not. Had it not been for Torch, had Roundup been launched in 1943 instead of Overlord in 1944, the Allies would have gone ashore with an

insecure Eisenhower in command of inexperienced troops led by Lloyd Fredendall. The idea of Fredendall in charge at Omaha Beach is by itself enough to justify the Mediterranean campaign.

In his first combat experience, Eisenhower had been unsure of himself, hesitant, often depressed, irritable, liable to make snap judgments on insufficient information, defensive in both his mood and his tactics. But he had learned how critical it was for him to be always cheery and optimistic in the presence of his subordinates, how costly caution can be in combat, and whom he could rely upon in critical moments.

In the Mediterranean campaign, Eisenhower and his team had improved dramatically. As they prepared for the climax of the war, the invasion of France, they were vastly superior to the team that had invaded North Africa in November 1942. In that respect, the payoff for Torch was worth the price.

Eisenhower's role in the invasion of France is so well known that it needs only the briefest reference here. Indeed, it is so well known that it can be said that his place in history was fixed as night fell on the Normandy beaches on 6 June 1944. Hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of men and women contributed to the success of Operation Overlord, and 200,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen participated directly on D-Day itself, but the operation will forever be linked to one name, Dwight Eisenhower. From inception to completion, it bore his personal stamp. He was the central figure in the preparation, the planning, the training, the deception, the organization, and the execution of the greatest invasion in history. At the decisive moment he was the commanding general who ordered the American airborne to carry out the planned mission, despite last-minute predictions from his Air Commander, Trafford Leigh-Mallory, that the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions would suffer 70 percent casualties and be incapable of carrying out their assigned tasks. Eisenhower was the general who, standing alone, weighed all the factors in light of the adverse weather, considered all the alternatives, listened to the views of his senior subordinates (split right down the middle), and made the decision he was born to make.

In the campaign that followed D-Day, Eisenhower's biggest problem sometimes seemed to be more British Field Marshal Montgomery, less the Germans. Monty's hesitancy before Caen, through June and most of July 1944, infuriated Ike's staff and the American generals in the field. Monty's failure to close the gap at the Falaise pocket in August all but drove Patton to turn on the British and, as he said, "drive them into the sea for another Dunkirk." Patton and his immediate superior, General Omar Bradley, blamed Ike as much as Monty, because in their view Ike should have either fired Montgomery or forced him to attack.

Their anger grew that fall, when Monty failed to take the port of Antwerp and failed to marshal his forces to get to Arnhem. Montgomery then made the situation worse by demanding that he be made single ground

commander (meaning that he be put in charge of the American operations as Bradley's superior) and that the British 21st Army Group be given all incoming supplies for a single thrust to Berlin. Patton meanwhile demanded that Ike stop Monty where he was, give US Third Army all the supplies, and let Third Army launch a single thrust south of the Ardennes to Berlin.

Eisenhower insisted on advancing both south and north of the Ardennes, with the British and Americans more or less abreast—the so-called broad-front strategy. Bradley, Montgomery, and Patton were all furious. Each general charged that Ike was a compromiser, a commander who was afraid to make the tough decision. Each charged that Ike always seemed to agree with the last man he talked to, to accept his plan, only to reverse himself when he talked to the next guy.

It was a most serious charge, and a bit off the mark. Montgomery tended to hear what he wanted to hear, read what he wanted to read; Eisenhower tended to seek out words and phrases that would appease. There was, consequently, a consistent misunderstanding between the two men. Nevertheless, Eisenhower never yielded on the two main points, command and single thrust—not in August and September 1944, nor again when they were raised in January and March 1945. He took and kept control of the land battle just as he said he would. And he never wavered, from the moment he first saw the SHAEF plans for a two-front advance into Germany to the last month of the war, on the question of the so-called broad front.

Ike did waver, sometimes badly, on some important issues—primarily the relative importance of Arnhem and Antwerp, and the meaning of the word priority. But he never told Montgomery anything that a reasonable man could have construed as a promise that Patton would be stopped in Paris and 21st Army Group be sent on to Berlin. Nor did he ever encourage Patton to believe that he would be sent to Berlin alone. He always insisted on invading Germany from both north and south of the Ardennes.

His reasons were manifold. His analysis of German morale and geography played a large role. Even after the Allies got through the West Wall, a significant barrier would remain between them and the German heartland, the Rhine River. A single thrust, especially beyond the Rhine, would be subject to counterattacks on the flanks. Eisenhower believed that the counterattacks might be powerful enough to sever the supply lines and then destroy the leading armies. With the Allies' limited port capacity, they could not bring forward adequate supplies to sustain an army beyond the Rhine. Every mile that the advancing troops moved away from the Normandy ports added to the problems. For example, forward airfields had to be constructed to provide fighter support for the troops. But to construct them it was necessary to move engineers and building materials forward, at the expense of weapons and gasoline. One senior engineer involved pointed out that if Patton had gone

across the Rhine in September he would have done so without any logistical or air support at all. "A good task force of *Panzerfaust*, manned by Hitler Youth, could have finished them off before they reached Kassel."[6] As for Monty's 21st Army Group, his own chief of staff Freddie de Guingand pointed out that when (and if) it reached the Rhine, bridging material would have to be brought forward at the expense of other supplies. Like Eisenhower, de Guingand doubted that there would be a collapse of German morale; he expected the enemy to fight to the bitter end.

As, of course, the Germans did; it took the combined efforts of 160 Russian divisions *and* the entire AEF *and* an Italian offensive *and* eight additional months of devastating air attack to force a German capitulation. After the war, de Guingand remarked, a bit dryly, that he had to doubt that Montgomery could have brought about the same result with 21st Army Group alone. "My conclusion, is, therefore," de Guingand wrote, "that Eisenhower was right."[7]

The personality and political factors in Eisenhower's decision are obvious. Patton pulling one way, Montgomery the other—each man insistent, each certain of his own military genius, each accustomed to having his own way. Behind them were adulating publics, who had made Patton and Montgomery into symbols of their respective nation's military prowess. In Eisenhower's view, to give one or the other the glory would have serious repercussions, not just in the howls of agony from the press and public of the nation left behind, but in the very fabric of the Alliance itself. Eisenhower feared it could not survive the resulting uproar. It was too big a chance to take, especially on such a risky operation. Eisenhower never considered taking it.

Montgomery and Patton showed no appreciation of the pressures on Eisenhower when they argued so persistently for their plans, but then Eisenhower's worries were not their responsibility. Montgomery wanted a quick end to the war, he wanted the British to bring it about, and he wanted to lead the charge into Berlin personally. Patton would have given anything to beat him to it. Had Eisenhower been in their positions, he almost surely would have felt as they did, and he wanted his subordinates to be aggressive and to believe in themselves and their troops.

Eisenhower's great weakness in this situation was not that he wavered on the broad-front question, but that he was too eager to be well liked and too interested in keeping everyone happy. Because of these characteristics, he would not end a meeting until at least verbal agreement had been found. Thus he did appear to be always shifting, "inclining first one way, then the other," according to the views and wishes of the last man with whom he had talked. Eisenhower, as British Field Marshal Alan Brooke put it, seemed to be "an arbiter balancing the requirements of competing allies and subordinates rather than a master of the field making a decisive choice."[8] Everyone who talked to him left the meeting feeling that Eisenhower had agreed with

him, only to find out later that he had not. Thus Montgomery, Bradley, and Patton filled their diaries and letters and conversations with denunciations of Eisenhower (Bradley less so than the others).

The real price that had to be paid for Eisenhower's desire to be well liked was not, however, animosity toward him from Montgomery and Patton. It came, rather, on the battlefield. In his attempts to appease Montgomery and Patton, Eisenhower gave them great tactical leeway, to the point of allowing them to choose their own objectives. The result was one of the great mistakes of the war, the failure to take and open Antwerp promptly, which represented the only real chance the Allies had to end the war in 1944. The man both immediately and ultimately responsible for that failure was Eisenhower.

Through November and on into December of 1944, Ike's armies kept pounding at the Germans, all across the front that now stretched from the Swiss border to the North Sea. On 16 December the Germans launched a completely unexpected and astonishingly strong counteroffensive in the Ardennes. The Germans managed to achieve an eight-to-one advantage in infantrymen and a four-to-one advantage in tanks. The ensuing Battle of the Bulge was by far the largest ever fought by the US Army, and the costliest, with more than 40,000 casualties in one month.

Eisenhower accepted the blame for the surprise, and he was right to do so, as he had failed to read correctly the mind of the enemy. He failed to see that Hitler would take desperate chances, and Eisenhower was the man responsible for the weakness of the American line in the Ardennes because he was the one who had insisted on maintaining a general offensive.

But despite his mistakes, Ike was the first to grasp the full import of the offensive (Bradley had dismissed it as a spoiling attack; Eisenhower insisted that it was a genuine counteroffensive). Ike was the first to be able to readjust his thinking and the first to realize that—although the surprise and the initial Allied losses were painful—in fact Hitler had given the Allies a great opportunity by bringing his armies out from the shelter of the West Wall. On the morning of 17 December, only hours after the German attack began, Ike wrote the War Department, "If things go well we should not only stop the thrust but should be able to profit from it."[9] It was Ike who decided that Bastogne was the critical point, and who insisted on holding the Belgian town. It was Ike who, very much against Patton's initial wishes, ordered the Third Army to break off its offensive to the east and attack to the north, to relieve the encircled 101st Airborne in Bastogne. It was Ike who decided to put in motion a counterattack designed to destroy the German panzer armies in the Ardennes, not just hold them. In all these decisions, the event proved him right.

In January and February 1945, Ike insisted on attacking all along the line. He wanted to destroy as much of the German army as he could west of

the Rhine River. Monty again—and Patton, too—urged that the other guy be stopped where he was, to allow a single thrust. Eisenhower refused. He rightly believed that killing Germans west of the Rhine was a whole lot easier than killing them east of the Rhine was going to be, and so long as Hitler was willing to fight west of the Rhine, Ike was going to take advantage of his opportunity.

In March, the Allies got a great break when they captured intact the Ludendorf Bridge at Remagen. The plan had called for crossing the Rhine north and south of Remagen, but Ike instantly decided to make a major crossing in the center, with US First Army. He was able to do so because his armies had closed to the Rhine all along its length, which gave him great flexibility. It proved to be the correct decision—American troops poured over the bridge and quickly encircled the German armies to the north. Within weeks, Allied forces were overrunning Germany.

On 7 May 1945 at SHAEF headquarters in Reims, France, the Germans signed the unconditional surrender. After the signing, which took place at 2:30 a.m., Eisenhower opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate. It was flat. So was Ike, who was dead tired. Instead of celebrating, he went to bed.

Eisenhower's lack of fizz in those wee hours notwithstanding, it is proper that we raise our glasses now to what he had accomplished and what he had cause to celebrate. The problem is that one searches in vain for fitting accolades to acknowledge the accomplishments of Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Second World War. How does one satisfactorily remark on what he endured, on what he contributed to the final victory, on his place in military history?

Fortunately George C. Marshall, next to Eisenhower himself the man most responsible for Ike's success, spoke for the nation and its allies, as well as the US Army, when he replied to Eisenhower's last wartime message. "You have completed your mission with the greatest victory in the history of warfare," Marshall began. "You have commanded with outstanding success the most powerful military force that had ever been assembled. You have met and successfully disposed of every conceivable difficulty incident to varied national interests and international political problems of unprecedented complications." Eisenhower, Marshall said, had triumphed over inconceivable logistical problems and military obstacles. "Through all of this, since the day of your arrival in England three years ago, you have been selfless in your actions, always sound and tolerant in your judgments, and altogether admirable in the courage and wisdom of your military decisions.

"You have made history, great history for the good of mankind, and you have stood for all we hope for and admire in an officer of the United States Army. These are my tributes and my personal thanks."[10] It was the highest possible praise from the best possible source. It had been earned.

Eisenhower had earned the praise through a total commitment of his time, energy, and emotion, of course, but even more through his brains, talents, and leadership. He had also been lucky—in his assignments, in his aides and subordinates and superiors, in his opponents, in the weather on D-Day. He had received so many good breaks, in fact, that "Eisenhower luck" became a byword. But much more than luck was involved in his success.

One leadership attribute was his attention to detail, complemented by his intuitive knowledge of *which* detail to pay attention to. His decision on the weather on D-Day, for example, was not just pure dumb luck. For a month before the sixth of June, he had made time in his overcrowded schedule to spend 15 minutes every day with his weatherman, Group Captain Stagg. He would hear Stagg's prediction for the next couple of days, then query him on the basis of the judgment. He wanted to know how good Stagg was, so he would be able to make his own evaluation when the time came.

As a soldier, Eisenhower's chief characteristic was his flexibility. He often said that in preparing for battle, plans were essential, but that once the battle was joined, plans were useless. Nowhere did this characteristic show more clearly or effectively than in his response to the capture of the bridge at Remagen.

Eisenhower was outstanding at the art of mentally leaping over the front lines to get into the mind of the enemy. He alone understood, in

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General Eisenhower speaks to men of the 29th Infantry Division at the front in Europe, 10 November 1944. He "adopted a policy of circulating through the whole force to the full limit," determined to "reflect the cheerful certainty of victory."

September 1944, that the Germans would fight furiously until they had no bullets left, just as he understood on 17 December that the Germans were launching a counteroffensive in the Ardennes, not just a counterattack.

In the Mediterranean, he had been excessively cautious in his generalship, but in the campaign in northwest Europe, he showed boldness and a willingness to take risks. The best example was his decision to go ahead with the D-Day drops of the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions in the face of Air Commander Trafford Leigh-Mallory's strongly worded recommendation that they be called off. In view of the indispensable contributions of the paratroopers to the success of D-Day, for that decision alone Eisenhower earned his fame.

Ike made mistakes in Europe, although fewer than he had in the Mediterranean. Some came about because of greater goals, for example, maintaining a united front with America's British allies. Appeasing Montgomery meant the failure to take Caen in mid-June 1944; it meant failure to totally destroy the German army at Falaise in mid-August; it meant failure to take Antwerp in mid-September. It also cost the Allies dearly in early January 1945, when Monty failed to bag the Germans in the Bulge. That led to the heaviest losses of the war for the American Army.

To Eisenhower's critics, his biggest mistake was his failure to take Berlin (this author would hotly dispute that judgment). On an even larger scale, he was certainly wrong in 1945 to have such faith (or hope) in the future of US-Soviet relations. He should have recognized that the issues that divided the reluctant allies were too great to be overcome.

But as a strategist, the highest art of a commander, he was far more often right than wrong. He was right in his selection of Normandy as the invasion site, right in his selection of Bradley rather than Patton as First Army commander, right in his insistence on using bombers against the French railway system, right to insist on a broad-front approach to Germany, right to see the Bulge as opportunity rather than disaster, right to fight the major battle west of the Rhine. Eisenhower was right on the big decisions.

He was the most successful general of the greatest war ever fought.

NOTES

1. Dwight Eisenhower to John Eisenhower, 19 June 1943, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.
2. The draft manuscript of *Crusade in Europe* is in the Eisenhower Library.
3. Quoted in Martin Blumenson, *Kasserine Pass* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 297, 306.
4. Eisenhower to Patton, 6 March 1943, Eisenhower Library.
5. Eisenhower to Gerow, 24 February 1943, Eisenhower Library.
6. Quoted in Forrest Pogue, *The Supreme Command* (Washington, US Dept. of the Army, 1954), p. 259.
7. Sir Francis de Guingand, *Operation Victory* (New York: Scribner's, 1947), pp. 329-30.
8. Sir Arthur Bryant, *Triumph in the West* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 213.
9. Eisenhower to Marshall, 17 December 1944, Eisenhower Library.
10. Marshall to Eisenhower, 7 May 1945, Eisenhower Library.