A Deaf Ear to Clausewitz: Allied Operational Objectives in World War II

MARTIN BLUMENSON

© *1993 Martin Blumenson*

How did the Anglo-American Allies win over Italy and Germany in World War II? According to Clausewitz and common sense, an army in wartime succeeds by defeating the enemy army. Destroying the ability of the opponent's uniformed forces to function effectively eliminates what stands in the way of military victory. Gaining final triumph on the battlefield renders possible attainment of the political goals triggering and sustaining the conflict.[1] The firm resolve to grapple with and overcome the adversary, however the method, is at the heart of the formula. Is this the way the Allies sought victory in World War II? Or did they have other things in mind as they formulated and pursued their strategy?

The Allies seem to have devoted little or no concentrated thought and effort on how best to beat the enemy. The desire to get at and do in the Italians and Germans appears to have seldom been in the forefront of their endeavors. What the Allied ground elements tried to do, above all, was to generate movement. They were always going somewhere. In an offensive context and in Clausewitzian terms, if movement is related to the purpose of overcoming the enemy, it is justifiable. For example, to proceed from one hill or crossroads to another is tactically valid if the maneuver puts the enemy at a disadvantage and makes him vulnerable to defeat. The same can be said for such activity on the higher operational and strategic levels.

Surprisingly, the top Allied echelons only occasionally attempted to knock out the enemy. The basic Allied motive was, instead, geographical and territorial. The intention was to overrun land and to liberate towns. In which direction were the Allies going? Toward the enemy homelands, specifically,

the capitals. Seizing these cities, the Allies believed, was sure to win the war. Once the Allied forces reached and occupied Rome, Berlin, and Tokyo, the struggle would be over; the Allies would stand triumphant.

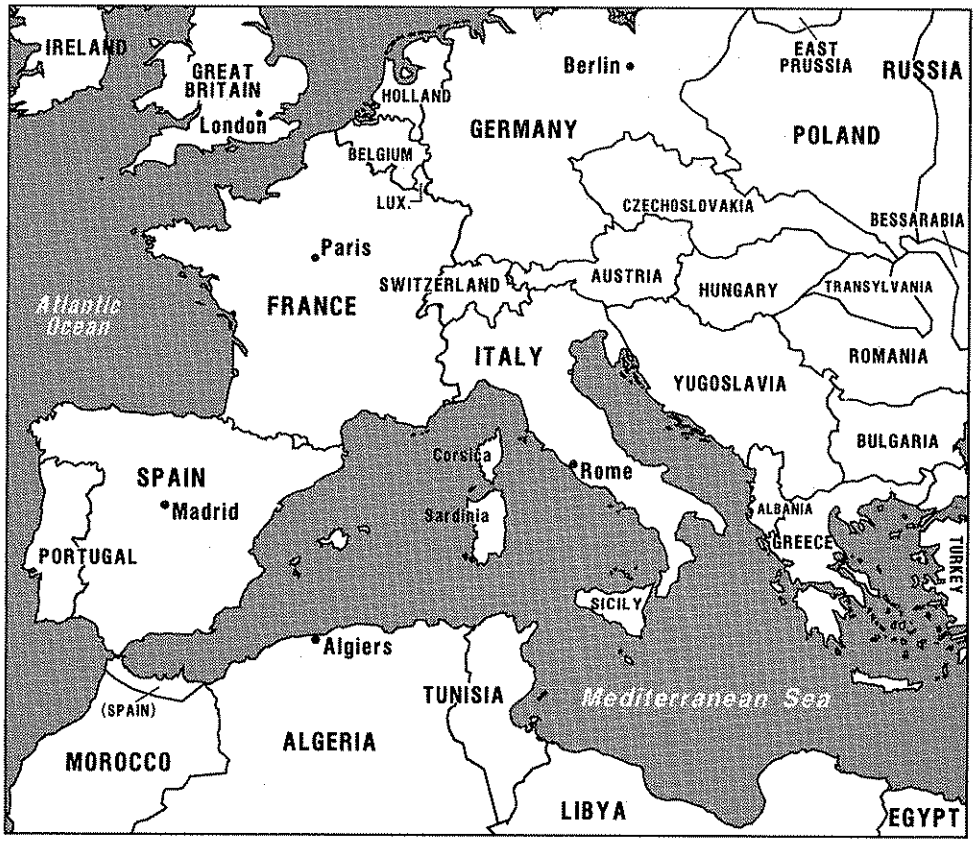
The people back home, the British and American publics, understood this vision of how to obtain victory. Reading their newspapers, listening to their radios, they followed the progress of the Allied fronts moving toward showdowns at the enemy centers in the Mediterranean area, western Europe, and the Pacific. Swift military advances promoted excitement and approval; setbacks and stalemate provoked pessimism and doubt. Going forward, then, was the name of the game. And eventually, the method produced victory. On the way to the Axis capitals, the Allies defeated the enemy.

Despite the satisfying conclusion, the point is quite otherwise. Heading for the enemy capital cities with little regard for the main purpose of battle, the Allies lost time. Had their eyes been firmly fixed on the proper target—that is to say, the enemy forces—and had the resolve to destroy the enemy been in the forefront of their concerns, the Allies would no doubt have shortened the conflict and lessened its pain. Let us consider the evidence.

North Africa

The pattern emerges as early as the initial Anglo-American offensive operation. When the Allies invaded French Northwest Africa in November 1942, they entered a region where no German or Italian military units were stationed or located. Instead of tangling with the enemy, the Allies had quite a different program in mind. They were dubious of the combat effectiveness of the inexperienced American troops, and they preferred to introduce the Americans to battle against the obsoletely armed and equipped French instead of the tough Axis forces. They hoped to persuade the French in North Africa to come over to the Allied side. They looked to threaten and eventually to bottle up in Libya Erwin Rommel's Italo-German *panzerarmee* pinning down the British in Egypt. Ultimately and quite vaguely, they thought of expelling the Axis from all of North Africa.[2]

Educated at Bucknell and Harvard universities, Martin Blumenson served in Europe during World War II and in Korea during the Korean War and is a retired lieutenant colonel, USAR. He has held the Admiral Ernest J. King Chair at the Naval War College, the General Harold K. Johnson Chair at the Army War College, and the General Mark Clark Chair at The Citadel. He has been Visiting Professor of Military and Strategic Studies at Acadia University, Visiting Professor at Bucknell University, Professor at the National War College, and Professorial Lecturer in International Affairs at George Washington University. Professor Blumenson is the author of 15 books, including *The Patton Papers*; *Patton: The Man Behind the Legend*; and *Mark Clark*. His newest work, *Battle of the Generals: The Untold Story of the Falaise Pocket*, is forthcoming.



All worked out as the Allies wished. Two weeks before they landed in the western part of North Africa, the British in Egypt defeated the Italo-German *panzerarmee* and sent it withdrawing across Libya toward southern Tunisia. As the British pursued this foe, the Anglo-Americans invaded French Morocco and Algeria and quickly defeated the French, who soon joined the Allied side. The Americans, having won quite easily, became overconfident of their prowess in combat. All three national components—British, American, and French—then struck into Tunisia, specifically toward Bizerte, a principal port, and Tunis, the capital. They immediately encountered the enemy.

The Axis powers, anything but loath to engage the Allies in battle, had, after the invasion of North Africa, poured substantial numbers of troops into Tunisia's northeastern corner. Their purpose was not only to throw the Anglo-Americans out of French North Africa but also to support and safeguard Rommel's *panzerarmee* still in retrograde movement across Libya. The entry of Axis troops into northeastern Tunisia stalled the Allied drive, while bad weather compelled the Allies to suspend offensive operations in December. Early in 1943, after the arrival of Rommel's army in southern Tunisia, the two Axis commands joined hands and occupied the eastern part of the country.[3]

In February, the Axis initiated the battle of Kasserine Pass. They hit the poorly armed French and the overconfident Americans, surrounded and marooned sizable contingents, took numerous prisoners, hurt an American armored division badly by knocking out in two consecutive days 100 tanks and other weapons and equipment, and prompted the Americans to burn immense quantities of gasoline and supplies and to abandon an important airfield.[4] The Axis attack sent the Americans and French reeling back for 50 miles, from one mountain range to another, and threw an enormous scare into the Allied camp. Then, as Allied opposition strengthened, the Axis called off the effort and returned to its original positions.

Turning to offense, the Americans and French, together with the British, regained the territory they had involuntarily given up. As before, they pushed for Bizerte and Tunis. The Americans finally took the former, the British and French the latter. The Allies then discovered a bonus awaiting them, a prize they had been unable to conceive of at the outset of the campaign. Der Führer and Il Duce had been unwilling to give up North Africa as the price for getting their soldiers back to defend Europe; as a consequence, 250,000 Axis troops found themselves penned up in Cape Bon. They could not escape because the British navy controlled the sea. Having hoped somewhat vaporously to expel the Axis from North Africa, the Allies were happy to do so by taking the surviving Germans and Italians prisoner.[5] What had started without definite Allied thought of how to eliminate substantial Axis resources ended, quite accidentally and hardly according to plans, in gratifying manner and in line with the precepts of Clausewitz.

Sicily

If the Allies anticipated capturing and destroying enemy forces in Sicily, their next target, they showed no such predisposition in their planning. They regarded the triangular island not as a place to get rid of Axis defenders but rather as a stepping stone to southern Europe. Sicily, after all, is close to North Africa and, at Messina in the northeastern corner, only two miles across the strait from the Italian mainland.

The island was attractive in and of itself. In Allied possession, its ports and airfields would be valuable assets to support operations after Sicily; its territory was large enough to hold sufficient troops to threaten further action in a variety of localities—Italy, Corsica, Sardinia, or southern France—thereby bewildering the enemy as to the Allies' next move. Moreover, the presence of Allied forces so close to the mainland might persuade the Italian government to quit the war.[6]

As for trapping and eliminating the Axis forces in Sicily, no one seemed interested. To block Axis escape from the island, the Allies had to reach and seize Messina before the Axis departed. Two sensible options

existed: (1) land as close to Messina as possible, or (2) land on the eastern and northern shores and drive on converging lines to Messina in the corner. Instead, the Allies elected to come ashore with British and American armies massed in adjacent zones around the southeastern tip, about as far from Messina as possible.

After some 30 days of bitter fighting, the Allies overran the island but failed to catch significant numbers of Axis troops. Three small amphibious operations on the northern coast and one on the eastern face, all designed to speed progress to Messina and incidentally to trap enemy forces, were ineffective. By the time the Allies reached Messina, the Axis had gone. Almost 100,000 Axis soldiers and most of their arms and equipment had slipped from the island to the mainland as the result of their brilliantly organized and executed ferrying operation across the strait of Messina. The Allies were unable or unwilling to interfere with the evacuation. Vaunted Allied seapower and airpower remained strangely distant, or even absent, from what might have been a decisive stroke, the destruction of enemy elements trying to cross the water.[7] No one to this day can explain why.

The most important consequence of the Sicilian operation was Benito Mussolini's fall from power. A new government in Rome quickly made contact with the Allies and surreptitiously offered to surrender, the necessary condition being an Allied entrance into the Italian mainland.[8] To permit Italy to withdraw from the war, almost any Allied landing would have sufficed. But in furtherance not only of Italian capitulation but also of hurting enemy forces, which were concentrated in southern Italy after evacuating Sicily, when and where should the Allies go? As for the timing, the Allies might have invaded Italy immediately after the Sicilian campaign or, even better, before its close. As for the place, a descent somewhere near Rome would have facilitated the Italian surrender and, most important, prevented the Germans from escaping to northern Italy. For a variety of reasons, the Allies could organize no such operation. An airborne drop on Rome was called off at the last moment.[9]

While considering the possibilities of their next offensive, the Allies refused to take advantage of the geographical positions of Sardinia and Corsica. Landings there would have outflanked southern Italy and probably have compelled the Germans to withdraw at once to the area north of Rome, perhaps to leave Italy altogether. For if the Allies possessed Sardinia and Corsica, they would thereby have threatened invasions of northern Italy and southern France. The Germans would have been unable to cover both regions adequately.

Italy

Instead of trying to trap or otherwise destroy the enemy, the Allies moved into Italy proper two weeks after taking Messina. Units of Sir Bernard L. Montgomery's Eighth British Army crossed the strait of Messina into the Italian toe, the southernmost end of the Italian peninsula and the farthest point from Rome. In terrain difficult for offensive action, they tried to push the Germans to the north. One week later, forces of Mark W. Clark's Fifth US Army came ashore around Salerno in the main effort.[10] As agreed, Italy surrendered. The Germans remained where they were.

The two Allied armies in southern Italy spread across the bottom of the Italian peninsula. They struggled northward and took their initial objectives. The Fifth Army seized Naples, a major port on the west coast. The Eighth Army gained the airfields around Foggia on the eastern side. Both fell into Allied hands on 1 October.[11] With these important supporting adjuncts to ground operations functioning, what did the Allies choose to do? They set out to climb methodically up the Italian boot. Their major objective was Rome.

Did this make sense? According to the Allied formula, the Italian surrender had stripped Rome of its relevance for concluding the war against Italy. But where else could the Allies go? They were trapped by circumstances, committed to fight in terrain overwhelmingly favoring the defense. And so they

assigned Rome a significance it no longer really had. The city became the geographical magnet drawing the Allies northward. In that quest, against skillful German opposition, the Allies made painfully slow and costly progress.[12]

By November 1943, the future could be clearly discerned. It was bleak. The Allies could reach a still-distant Rome only by continuing to exert bitter, grinding pressure. Was there a better method to get ahead? If Allied seapower transported ground troops around the opposition and deposited them in the enemy rear, say at Anzio, the Allies would be that much closer to Rome. Unfortunately, the Allies lacked the means to launch an amphibious operation at Anzio. Technically, the endeavor was too risky. And so the campaign continued as before, the frontal pressure resuming, the pain mounting. In January 1944, complete and irreversible stalemate seemed about to descend over the Italian campaign. The Allies were up against the German Gustav Line, an apparently impenetrable defensive barrier. Anzio lay more than 50 miles beyond. It was then that Prime Minister Winston Churchill obtained additional resources that made it possible to stage the Anzio landing, the attempt to go around the enemy by sea.[13]

To help the troops storm ashore at Anzio, Allied units prepared to cross the Garigliano and Rapido rivers. By thus threatening the Gustav Line defenses, the Allies hoped to prompt the Germans to send reserve forces from the Rome-Anzio area to the Gustav Line, thereby uncovering Anzio for the landing. Once across the rivers, the Allied troops were to race forward to link up with the soldiers at Anzio. Some troops crossed the Garigliano River, and that implicit threat was enough to get the Germans to shift their reserves from the Rome-Anzio area to the Gustav Line. This enabled the Allied invaders to land easily at Anzio. The other troops, however, failed to traverse the Rapido River. That deprived the Allies of a bridgehead from which to hasten contact with the soldiers at Anzio.[14]

Behind the Gustav Line defenses at Anzio, the Allied troops were in the best possible place to turn on the German rear and destroy the units defending the Gustav Line. But the Anzio operation was hardly designed to go after the enemy. It was supposed to get the Allies quickly to Rome. So they built up their forces at Anzio and waited for the Germans to panic and withdraw. The Germans, however, refused to panic. Reacting smartly, they sealed off and penned in the Allies at Anzio, then attacked them ferociously. They found it unnecessary to budge from their Gustav Line defenses. There were now two fronts in Italy, the main one at the Gustav Line, the other at Anzio where the Allies hung on grimly to survive. As the shadows of stalemate lengthened, the war maps showed no changes for several months. Allied progress to Rome had bogged down. [15]

In May 1944, after rest, reinforcement, and the receipt of new divisions in the theater, and after concentrating the bulk of their troops in the western

coastal zone, the Allies launched a massive effort against the Gustav Line. The French broke through, and the Allies on the main front began to move toward Anzio. Eventual overland contact with the Anzio troops brought to an end four months of cruel punishment in the Anzio beachhead.[16] At this critical moment, with the Germans backing away from the Gustav Line northward up the Liri Valley, where should the Allies go, and what should they do?

In a startling reversal of the Allies' standard unimaginative practice, Sir Harold Alexander, the senior Allied officer in Italy, ordered Mark Clark, the Fifth US Army commander, to strike eastward from Anzio to Valmontone, a town at the head of the Liri Valley. By crossing the Liri Valley to Valmontone and erecting a barrier as they went, the troops would block the Germans withdrawing from the Gustav Line. Pushed by the British up the Liri Valley into American arms and prisoner of war cages, the enemy in southern Italy would be eliminated.[17]

Mark Clark complied with Alexander's order but only partially. He sent light forces toward Valmontone. He turned the bulk of his men toward Rome. Why? Whether he truly believed what he said later or was merely rationalizing his decision, Clark doubted his ability to trap the Germans at Valmontone. The ground between Anzio and Valmontone, he stated, was too rough for an American advance in strength and in speed. Furthermore, the existence of many roads leading out of the Liri Valley, he explained, made it impossible to keep the Germans from escaping.[18]

But an even stronger reason for Clark's behavior came from President Franklin D. Roosevelt and George C. Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff. When they visited the theater some time earlier, they invoked the geographical frame of reference. Both instructed Clark to take Rome as soon as possible, and, in any event, before the cross-Channel invasion of western Europe scheduled for June 1944.[19] Obeying Roosevelt and Marshall, Clark disregarded Alexander. The opportunity, whether good or slim, to destroy the Germans in the Liri Valley around Valmontone was never put to the test. The Germans escaped.[20] As for Roosevelt and Marshall's desire to have Rome before the Normandy invasion, Clark's men entered Rome two days before the Allies crossed the English Channel and came ashore in Normandy on 6 June 1944.

The capture of Rome had little significance on the course of the war. The act was newsworthy and provided great excitement. It was a wonderful public relations feat showing off Allied combat power. It allowed the Italian government, which had become an Allied co-belligerent, to establish itself in the capital. It secured several nearby airfields. It probably gave the Allies some emotional and psychological advantages. The Allied divisions poured through and around the city, pursued the withdrawing Germans, and gobbled up a large area of Italy.

The rest of the Italian campaign was anti-climactic. The Allies followed the Germans to the Arno River, then to the northern Apennines. Trying to reach the Po River valley, the Allies battered against the formidable Gothic Line defenses. They battled desperately and in vain to take Bologna. Not until the spring of 1945 did they finally overrun the northern part of Italy. Early in May, several days before the general surrender signed in Reims and Berlin, the Germans in Italy capitulated.[21]

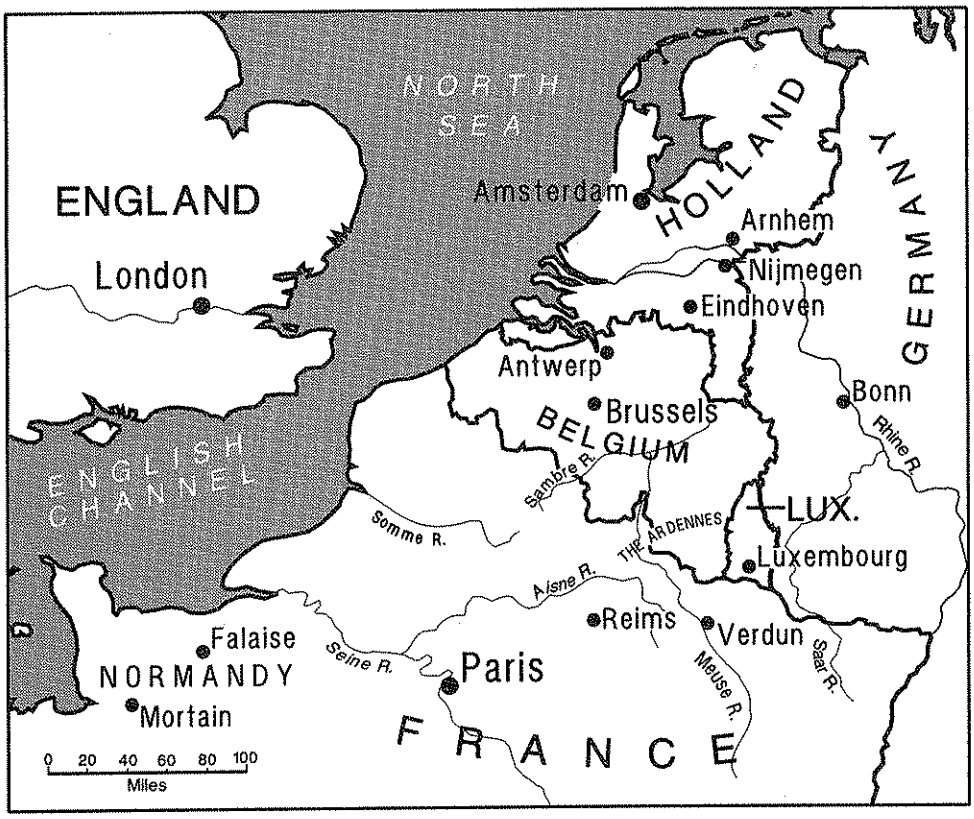
The Allies had won the war in Italy by attrition. They gradually pushed the Germans to the top of the boot and thus liberated territory. But they permitted the German military organization to remain intact and functioning effectively to the end. Alexander's order to Clark was the only attempt during the long campaign to try specifically to destroy a substantial segment of the enemy's combat power.

The invasion of southern France in August 1944 turned out to be relatively easy. The Americans came ashore along the Riviera. The French besieged and took Marseilles. While some Americans chased the Germans up the Rhone River valley, others tried to head the enemy off at the pass. At Montelimar, where the valley narrows dramatically, Task Force Butler and other elements arrived in time but with too few forces to block the withdrawing Germans. Harassing the enemy, interfering with his movement, destroying much equipment, the Americans were unable to stop the German columns from escaping.[22]

Normandy

The objective of Overlord, the invasion of Normandy, was to get ashore and then to secure a lodgment area, a vast region containing ports, airfield sites, space, and maneuver room, all prerequisites for the subsequent Allied advance toward Germany. Overlord thus sought to meet preliminary supporting and logistical needs for the eventual march to the enemy homeland.[23] But so intent were the Allies on spreading out over the lodgment area that they were unable to take full advantage of an inviting opportunity to encircle and destroy two German field armies. By counterattacking at Mortain in August, the Germans placed their head into a noose. The Allies closed around the Germans and fashioned the Falaise pocket. Just when the Allies were about to pull the noose tight, they lost interest in the maneuver and allowed the bulk of the Germans to escape. The Allies then muffed another chance to block the German withdrawal at the Seine River. A quarter of a million Germans traversed the stream in the last ten days of August and fled, only to turn and erect a defensive barrier barring entrance into Germany.

Although these early battles destroyed a great deal of German materiel and drove the Germans out of most of France, the Allies were unable to surround and eliminate the German field armies. The Allies preferred instead,



prematurely as it turned out, to strike toward Germany.[24] Had they concentrated on destroying the enemy, they might have won the war in the west in the fall of 1944.

The goal of Operation Market Garden in September was geographical and territorial. The object was to get Allied forces across the Rhine River at Arnhem in Holland. Three airborne divisions dropped along a corridor from Eindhoven to Nijmegen to Arnhem in order to form a protected passageway for an armored advance to and across the Rhine. Although German survivors of the battle of Normandy offered strong resistance, the Allies took all objectives save the final one, the bridge too far at Arnhem.[25]

When the Germans launched their Ardennes counteroffensive in December and created the huge salient in the American line—the Bulge—they became vulnerable to counterthrusts all along their enlarged front. The best place for the Allies to strike was at the base of the Bulge, where they could have cut off and trapped the enemy inside. Their failure to do so is beyond belief.[26]

In summary, Allied operational practices betrayed a primary concern with gaining ground. Instead of going after the enemy's throat, the Allies went after his territory. Rather than implementing a daring strategy aimed at eliminating the enemy, the Allies preferred to push him back. As a result, at

least as seen from this remove in time, 50 years afterward, the Allies unnecessarily prolonged the war.

Conclusions

How does one explain the Allied behavior? Four speculative reasons come to mind.

First, planning any military action brings a host of complications into play. These factors divert attention from the fundamental problem of how to do away with the enemy; they inhibit forthright activity to this end. Terrain and logistics impose their tyrannies. Security and intelligence pose their cautions. The estimate of the situation takes into account all manner of worst-case scenarios. These tend to obstruct and to cloud the basic task of discovering how best to liquidate the enemy in any battlefield situation.

Second, World War I experience shaped the Allied outlook. Once the western front in France stabilized along a line from Switzerland to the sea, there was no way of prying the enemy out of the trenches. Gas, tanks, and huge artillery expenditures failed to breach the defense; great battles of attrition, as at the Somme and Verdun, were no solution to static warfare. It took the infusion of fresh American blood, together with German weariness, to propel the front in 1918 inexorably toward the enemy homeland. When the Germans realized their inability to stop the Allied onrush into Germany, they capitulated and ended the slaughter. In the Second World War, wishing to avoid the frightful losses of the first war, the Allies tiptoed toward the capitals rather than plowing relentlessly after the enemy.

Third, the Allies wished to liberate the inhabitants from the horrors and indignities of the German occupation. Before the invasion of Normandy, the directive issued to Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, instructed him to enter the continent in order to fulfill three objectives: (1) to gain "the liberation of Europe from the Germans," (2) to "undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany," and (3) to provoke "the destruction of her armed forces."[27] The series must have appeared to list the missions in order of declining importance.

And fourth, a lack of confidence in their own capacities infected the Allied camp. Not only the capabilities of the soldiers, but also the competence of the troop leaders, including the generals, were matters of great concern. Compared to those of the enemy, the Allied armies were composed of amateurs, civilians in uniform. It seemed the better part of valor to refrain from challenging the enemy directly, to avoid attempting those great bold strokes which, if successful, could be decisive, but which if unsuccessful could be painful and humiliating.

Ultimately, the drive toward the enemy capitals was empty. As in 1940, when the Germans entered Paris with the French army already beaten,

the Russians in 1945 fought into Berlin only after the war against Germany had already been won elsewhere—that is, on the battlefield. So too in the Pacific, where, with the help of our naval and air force achievements, the island-hopping technique bypassed the enemy defenders. This technique was aimed not at conquering territory, but rather at neutralizing enemy defenders, leaving them to wither on the vine, eliminated from the contest. There was no need to enter Tokyo to win the war against Japan. Nor was it necessary to seize Rome to obtain the surrender of Italy.

What decided the outcome of the conflict in each theater was the destruction of the enemy forces. Had the Allies concentrated on fulfilling that task, had they bent their energies to that end from the beginning, chances are that they would have gained final victory in Europe before 1945.

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), Book One, chap. 1; see also Gunter Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder, His Importance Then and Now," *Army History*, No. 23 (Summer 1992), 1-2.
2. George F. Howe, *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1957), chap. 1.
3. Ibid., passim.
4. Martin Blumenson, *Kasserine Pass* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), passim.
5. Howe, chap. 34.
6. Albert N. Garland and Howard McGaw Smythe, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1965), part one.
7. Ibid., chap. 21; see also Martin Blumenson, *Sicily: Whose Victory?* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), passim.
8. Garland and Smythe, part three.
9. See Ibid., chap. 26.
10. Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1969), part two.
11. Ibid., chap. 10.
12. Ibid., part three.
13. Ibid., part four.
14. Ibid.; see also Martin Blumenson, *Bloody River* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), passim.
15. *Salerno to Cassino*, part four; see Martin Blumenson, *Anzio: The Gamble That Failed* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), passim.
16. Ibid.; Ernest F. Fisher, Jr., *Cassino to the Alps* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1977), parts one, two, and three.
17. Ibid., chap. 9.
18. Martin Blumenson, *Mark Clark* (New York: Congdon & Weed, 1984), pp. 200-13.
19. Ibid., pp. 154, 174.
20. Fisher, chaps. 9 and 10.
21. Ibid., chap. 30; *Mark Clark*, pp. 244 ff.
22. Jeffrey Clark and Robert Ross Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine* (Washington: Center of Military History, forthcoming).
23. Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1951), chap. 5.
24. Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1961), part 4; Martin Blumenson, *The Battle of the Generals: The Untold Story of the Falaise Pocket* (New York: William Morrow, forthcoming), passim.
25. Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1963), chaps. 6, 7, and 8.
26. Charles B. MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Morrow, 1985), chap. 29.
27. Harrison, p. 457.