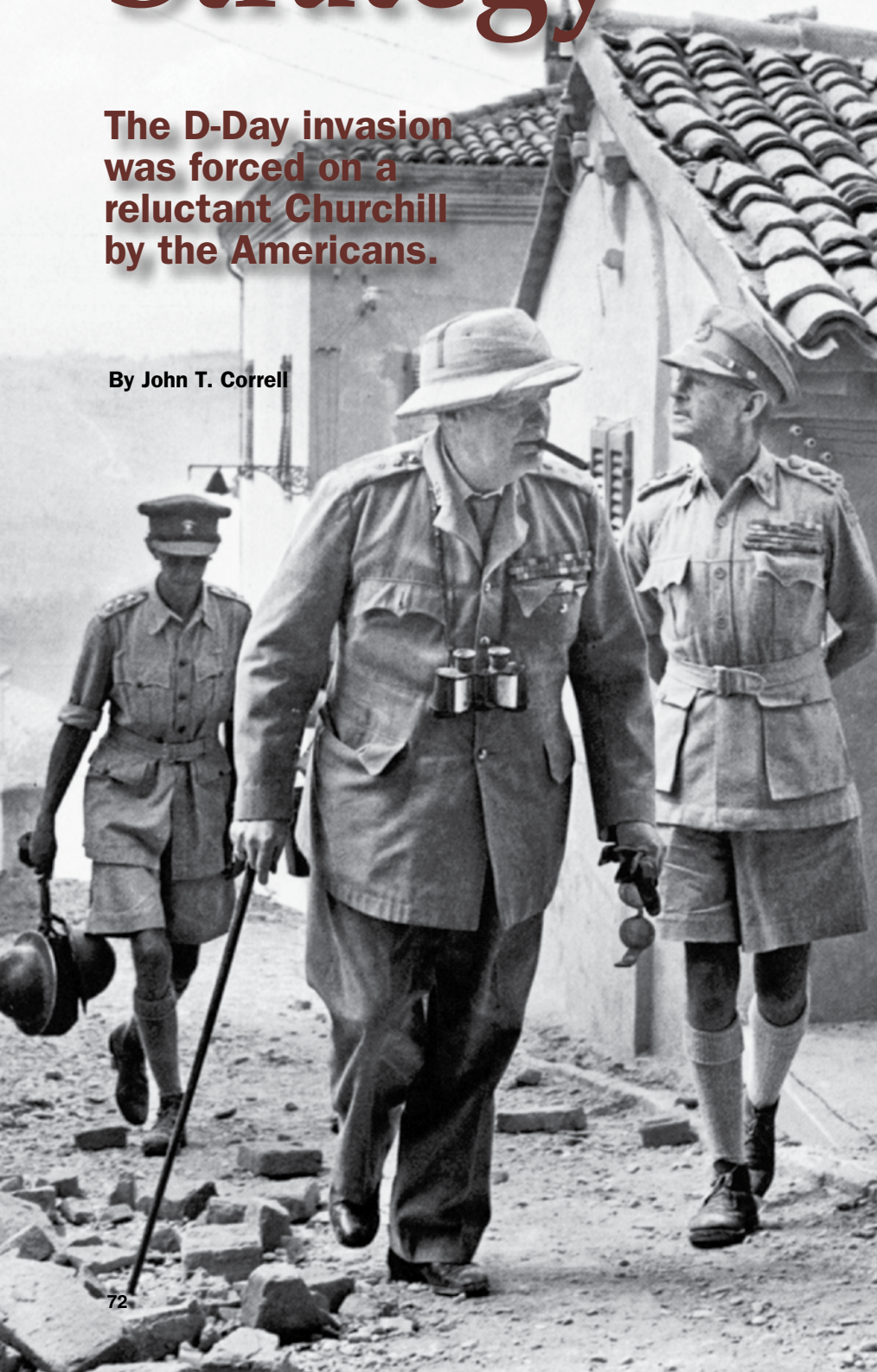


# Churchill's Southern Strategy

**The D-Day invasion was forced on a reluctant Churchill by the Americans.**

By John T. Correll



**A**fter the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in June 1940 and the subsequent fall of France, Nazi Germany held uncontested control of Western Europe.

When the Germans failed in their attempt to capture the British Isles, they turned their attention toward the east and drove to the outskirts of Moscow before the Red Army counteroffensive began in December 1941. The Soviets pushed the Germans back relentlessly on the Eastern Front with staggering casualties on both sides, but in the west, the only challenge to the occupation of Europe was aerial bombing by US and British air forces. The Anglo-American armies concentrated on North Africa and Italy.

There was no front on the ground in Western Europe until Operation Overlord, the D-Day landings in Normandy in June 1944. D-Day was a huge success, the pivotal event of World War II in Europe. In September 1944, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the House of

*Left: Prime Minister Winston Churchill inspects an Italian village with Field Marshal Harold Alexander (r).*



Commons the battle of Normandy was “the greatest and most decisive single battle of the entire war.”

However, if Churchill and the British had their way, D-Day might not have happened. They did everything they could to head off the American plan to attack across the English Channel. They pressed instead for a strategy focused on the Mediterranean, pushing through the “soft underbelly” of southern Europe, over the Alps and through the Balkans.

The Americans prevailed because they provided an increasingly larger share of the forces and funding. The British opposition to Overlord has dimmed in memory and today is largely forgotten. Churchill played it down as best he could in his memoirs, but there was already too much on record to leave any doubt about the effort to delay, divert, or avoid the D-Day invasion.

### The Americans Enter

Churchill’s greatest achievement was in 1940 when he stood against not only the Germans but also widespread defeatist sentiment in Britain, including Foreign Secretary Edward F. L. Wood,

Bettmann/Corbis/AP Images



USAF photo

**President Franklin Roosevelt (l) and Churchill meet in Casablanca, Morocco, where Churchill was shocked—shocked!—that Roosevelt insisted on a commitment to a cross-channel attack. Behind Roosevelt is US Army Gen. George Marshall; behind Churchill is RAF Gen. Alan Brooke.**

Lord Halifax, who wanted to seek terms with Hitler. The expectation was that the Germans would win—and they might have done so except that Churchill, almost single-handedly, inspired Britain to continue the fight.

When the threat of a German invasion passed, it was not feasible politically to keep British forces at home, doing nothing. Furthermore, British leftists pressed Churchill to open a second front to support the Russians.

British forces were not strong enough for an offensive on the continent. The only available enemy they could beat was the Italian force in North Africa, where operations began in December 1940. The British were successful there until the German Afrika Korps arrived in April 1941 to augment the Italians.

It was clear from the beginning Britain alone had no chance of defeating

***B-17s fly over Antwerp, Belgium. The US wanted to face Germany head-on, and the shortest route was through France. Churchill had other plans.***



Photo via Library of Congress

**US troops at the beachhead in Normandy, France, on D-Day, June 6, 1944. D-Day was a huge success and changed the tide of the war, despite Churchill's misgivings.**

Germany. In May 1940, a week after he became Prime Minister, Churchill disclosed to his son Randolph his plan to win the war. "I shall drag the United States in," he said. American sentiment for staying out of the war was strong, though, enhanced by a dislike for the arrogance of the British Empire and its refusal of self-determination for its colonies. What brought the United States in was not Churchill's persuasion but the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor followed by a declaration of war on the US by Germany and Italy.

The British were of the opinion that the Americans had an obligation to help defeat Hitler, had been remiss in waiting so long to enter the war, and should now fall in line with British leadership.

When Churchill and a British delegation came to Washington, D.C., in December 1941, they made "the assumption that they could draw on United States manpower and weapons as if these had been swept into a common pool for campaigns tailored to suit the interests and convenience of Great Britain," said US Army historian Forrest C. Pogue. "From the British standpoint, it was easy to conclude that a course of action favorable to their national interests was simply good strategic sense and that failure of the Americans to agree showed inexperience, immaturity, and bad manners."

The United States concurred that winning the war in Europe would take

precedence over defeating the Japanese in the Pacific and joined the British in forming the Combined Chiefs of Staff to plan strategy and direct Anglo-American operations.

### Sidestep

The Americans wanted to engage the Germans as directly as possible, defeat them expeditiously, and turn to the Pacific. The shortest route to Germany was through France.

The proposal of the US military chiefs, worked up by Maj. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, head of the Army War Plans Division, arrived on Roosevelt's desk in April 1942 via Gen. George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff.

It called for Operation Bolero, which would ferry US troops and materiel to Britain, followed in April 1943 by Operation Roundup, an invasion of Europe across the English Channel. In case the Russian front collapsed and faster action was required, a contingency operation, Sledgehammer, would secure an early beachhead in France.

Roosevelt dispatched Marshall and presidential envoy Harry Hopkins to London to sell the idea to the British. On April 12, 1942, Churchill telegraphed Roosevelt he was "in entire agreement with all that you propose and so are the Chiefs of Staff." In actuality, the British did not have the slightest intention of going along with the plan, but Churchill

and Gen. Alan F. Brooke, chief of the British Imperial General Staff, did not want to tell the Americans so early in the partnership.

Churchill's Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Hastings L. Ismay, said later, "Our American friends went happily homewards under the mistaken impression that we had committed ourselves to both Roundup and Sledgehammer." In his memoirs, Ismay added that "perhaps it would have obviated future misunderstandings if the British had expressed their views more frankly. ... I think we should have come clean, much cleaner than we did."

"It was essential to carry on the defense of India and the Middle East," Churchill said after the war. "We could not entirely lay aside everything in furtherance of the main object proposed by General Marshall."

Still purporting to support the American plan, Churchill visited the United States again in June and persuaded Roosevelt to commit US forces to North Africa, against the advice of the US military chiefs. Marshall warned the Mediterranean was a "blind alley" and this diversion of forces made a cross-channel invasion in 1943 practically impossible.

Sledgehammer was canceled outright.

### The "Soft Underbelly"

US and British objectives were not the same. The British wanted to restore and protect the prewar empire, including the routes through Gibraltar and Suez to their colonies and possessions in Africa and Asia. The Americans regarded the Mediterranean and Middle East as a distraction from the main task of taking on the Germans. They were not interested in preservation of the British Empire.

The British experience in war on the continent had made them fearful of going there again. They had sustained 744,000 battle deaths, mostly in France, in World War I and would not tolerate such casualties another time. They had been lucky to escape from Dunkirk without devastating losses. They preferred to nibble around the edges and sap German strength before attempting a head-on confrontation.

British doctrine—unlike that of the Americans, Germans, and Russians—did not emphasize direct concentration of force. From the Victorian era onward, the British had favored limited engagements on the periphery of the empire, conflicts that were frequently protracted but which minimized risks and losses.

The situation was further complicated by Churchill's personality. He was unsurpassed as the leader of a nation at

war but the popular impression that he was also a gifted military strategist was mistaken. To the distress of his generals and admirals, he followed his instincts and impulses rather than reasoned advice and deliberation. Brooke noted in his diary that Churchill “talks absurdities.”

Brooke arrived one morning to discover the first item on the War Cabinet agenda was the Prime Minister’s new proposal to land in Portugal, cut through northern Spain, and advance across the Pyrenees. Brooke managed to scuttle that particular brainstorm, but Churchill’s strategic notions came so often that Brooke had to be selective in which ones he challenged.

Ironically, the Mediterranean strategy seems to have originated with Brooke rather than Churchill, but nobody pursued it longer or harder than the Prime Minister himself.

In a speech to the House of Commons in November 1942, Churchill described a “wide encircling movement in the Mediterranean, having for its primary object the recovery of that vital sea,” but also to expose the *underbelly of the Axis*, especially Italy, to heavy attack. That seemed “from the beginning of this year to be the correct strategy,” he said.

Whether Churchill ever called it the “*soft underbelly*” is open to question, but others—including Brooke—certainly phrased it that way and it has become firmly entrenched in history.

### Suction Pump

The Anglo-American Operation Torch in North Africa had not yet ended when the Allied leaders met at Casablanca, Morocco, in January 1943, but the British were already looking to extend their southern strategy. The immediate objective, they said, should be to knock Italy out of the war, with Sicily as the next target.

Marshall stressed “every diversion or side issue from the main plot acts as a suction pump,” but the Americans agreed anyway Sicily would be next, after Torch. The cross-channel invasion was delayed.

In April 1943, the British pressed for more. Churchill proposed to Roosevelt that once Sicily was in hand, the campaign should proceed to the Italian mainland with the invasion of Europe sliding further forward. This time, Roosevelt backed his advisors and insisted on a commitment to a cross-channel attack.

The Trident Conference in May reached a compromise—continuation of the southern offensive into Italy, coupled with a target date of May 1, 1944, for the invasion of France. Operation Roundup



USA photo

**A US Army patrol enters Cervaro, Italy, in January 1944. The Italian campaign had military value. It knocked Italy out of the war and tied down more than 20 German divisions that could have been used elsewhere.**

was redesignated Overlord. By summer, Churchill was expressing doubts about the feasibility of Overlord and suggesting new initiatives in Greece and Yugoslavia.

The British complained constantly of American obstinacy, but Field Marshal John G. Dill, head of the British military mission in Washington, said, “The American Chiefs of Staff have given way to our views a thousand more times than we have given way to theirs.” Brooke wrote in his diary that “I despair of getting our American friends to have any strategic vision. Their drag on us has seriously affected our Mediterranean strategy and the whole conduct of the war.”

The North Africa campaign, concluded successfully in May 1943. The Allies took Sicily in August and invaded Italy in September, but bogged down. When Eisenhower went to England in December to take command of Overlord, British Field Marshal H. Maitland Wilson replaced him as supreme allied commander in the Mediterranean. One of Churchill’s favorites, Field Marshal Harold Alexander, became commander of Allied armies in Italy.

### In the Shadow of Overlord

The British accepted Overlord in principle, but refused to declare it an “over-riding priority.” Instead, it was termed the

“main object.” The British also agreed with some reluctance to the possibility of Operation Anvil (later Dragoon), a landing in the Marseille-Toulon area of southern France to support Overlord.

Meanwhile, Churchill had become enamored of seizing some Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, just off the coast of Turkey. If the German occupiers could be ousted, it might draw Turkey into the war on the Allied side. Brooke regarded the scheme as “sheer madness,” but he did not challenge Churchill on it.

“Postwar politics rather than the expeditious defeat of Hitler seemed the Prime Minister’s motive,” said historian Warren F. Kimball. “The Aegean was a backwater, Turkey’s entry into the war was too little and too late, and any diversion of resources threatened Overlord.” British commandos captured several of the smaller islands in the archipelago but could not hold them unless they also captured the large island of Rhodes. This action became the inspiration for *The Guns of Navarone*, but unlike the book and film, was a disaster for the British, who were repulsed with substantial casualties.

Unwilling to give up, Churchill made a zealous pitch at the Cairo Conference in November 1943 for the Americans to join in an assault on Rhodes. To the

horror of British onlookers, the exasperated Marshall responded, “Not one American soldier is going to die on that goddamned beach.”

The cross-channel attack was pushed forward for another month to avoid weakening the effort to take Rome. When two British divisions were pulled out of the Mediterranean to prepare for D-Day, Churchill complained operations in the south were being short-changed in “the shadow of Overlord.”

In May 1944, Churchill told a conference of dominion Prime Ministers he would have “preferred to roll up Europe from the southeast, joining hands with the Russians” but that “it had proved impossible to persuade the United States to this view.”

British Lt. Gen. Frederick E. Morgan, appointed chief planner of Overlord, said, “Apart from a mere dislike of the project, the British authorities proceeded to make every possible step impede progress in northwest Europe by diverting their forces, as unobtrusively as possible, to other theaters of war.”

Pogue noted, “So long as Churchill, with the aid of American forces, was winning a peripheral victory in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, or the Middle East, he was gaining victories for the British Empire.” Churchill was not necessarily hastening the final victory in Europe and he “was definitely delaying the comeback fight in the Pacific for which the American public was clamoring.”

### **Pride of the Empire**

“Up to July 1944 England had considerable say in things,” Churchill said. “After that I was conscious that it was America who made the big decisions.” By June, the United States, with almost three times as many troops committed, was paying less attention to British attempts to curtail Overlord.

Even more so than before, Churchill was drawn to actions in which Britain could have a leading role and a claim to the credit. He focused on the Mediterranean theater, where the top commanders were British. He listened with great interest to Alexander, who assured him he could break through the Ljubljana Gap between Italy and northern Yugoslavia and advance from there to Vienna, and that “neither the Apennines nor even the Alps should prove a serious obstacle.”

The British resented the transfer of resources from the Mediterranean to Overlord and the reallocation of forces to the supplementary Anvil/Dragoon landing in southern France (the Mediter-

anean operation was postponed and finally conducted on a reduced scale 10 weeks after D-Day).

Churchill’s persistence on the southern flank did not end with D-Day. In a note to his military chiefs in July 1944, Churchill said with some petulance, “Let them take their seven divisions—three American and four French. Let them monopolize all the landing craft they can reach. But at least let us have a chance to launch a decisive strategic stroke with what is entirely British and under British command. I am not going to give way about this for anybody. Alexander is to have his campaign.”

In his memoirs, Churchill put a less parochial face on the position he had taken during the war, saying, “The mounting of Overlord was the greatest event and duty in the world. But must we sabotage everything we could have in Italy, where the great strength of our country was involved? ... As I saw the problem, the campaign in Italy, in which a million or more of our British, British-controlled, and Allied armies were engaged, was the faithful and indispensable comrade and counterpart to the cross-channel operation.”

One of the few Americans to agree with Churchill and Alexander was Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark, commander of US Fifth Army in Italy, who said in his 1951 autobiography that “the weakening of the campaign in Italy in order to invade southern France, instead of pushing on into the Balkans, was one of the outstanding political mistakes of the war.”

The Italian campaign did have military value. It knocked Italy out of the war and it tied down more than 20 German divisions, denying their use elsewhere. However, the prevailing opinion is that Churchill pushed the southern strategy too hard for too long, and sometimes for the wrong reasons. An argument can also be made that an invasion of the continent in 1943 would have been premature and that British reluctance saved the Allies from making a mistake.

Unfortunately, Churchill and the British stuck to their reluctance long after the situation changed.

### **A Glorious Fiction**

“In his speeches between 1940 and 1945, Churchill created a glorious fiction of shared British and American purposes,” said Churchill biographer

Max Hastings. “He never hinted to his own public, much less the trans-Atlantic one, his frustrations and disappointments about Roosevelt and his policies.”

After the war, Churchill and the British chiefs insisted vigorously that they had not opposed the cross-channel operation. Indeed, they did not do so outright. It was always a matter of delaying, rethinking, or deferring to some other requirement that for the moment took precedence.

“There have been many misleading accounts of the line I took,” Churchill said in *Closing the Ring*, the fifth volume of his wartime memoirs. “It has become legend in America that I strove to prevent the cross-channel enterprise called Overlord and that I tried vainly to lure the Allies into some mass invasion of the Balkans, or a large-scale campaign in the Eastern Mediterranean, which would effectively kill it.”

As British historian Andrew Roberts points out, “It is next to impossible for any reader of *Closing the Ring* to spot the slightest Churchillian doubt about the success of Overlord six weeks before it was launched.”

Hastings noted, “It was American resolution alone that ensured the operational timetable for D-Day was maintained, while the Prime Minister expended political capital in a struggle with Washington that he was not only bound to lose, but which he deserved to lose.” Planning for Overlord went on despite him, Hastings said.

“Churchill’s single-minded pursuit of the Mediterranean option, and his obsession with Turkey and the Balkans—again a hangover from the First World War—might well have inflicted serious damage on Western strategy if he had won his way,” said British military historian Richard J. Overy. “Hemmed in by the Alps and the Balkan ranges, at the end of long supply lines, the Western Allies would have inflicted much less damage on Hitler than they did in France, while the Soviet advance in the east would have been slowed up.”

Looking back, Maj. Gen. John Noble Kennedy, director of military operations at the War Office and assistant chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1943 to 1945, acknowledged that “had we had our way, I think there can be little doubt that the invasion of France would not have been done in 1944.” ■

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