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Eisenhower and Montgomery: Strategy, Leadership, and Tension at the End of World War II

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Abstract

In late 1944, two legendary generals stood at the helm of the Allied Expeditionary Force as it plunged into Nazi Germany in an effort to end the Second World War. While the relationship between the United States and Britain, and more specifically the relationship between Generals Dwight Eisenhower and Bernard Montgomery are portrayed as cooperative, smooth, and friendly, personal memoirs of the two men and their close confidants reveal that these myths could not be further from the truth. A debate between the two men, which began as one regarding military strategy, escalated into a full blown feud; this tension was a reflection of the overlaying tensions of a changing Western world.

Keywords

World War II, Eisenhower, Montgomery, SHAEF, Nazi

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Comments

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Eisenhower and Montgomery: Strategy, Leadership, and Tension at the End of World War II

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

The Allied victory over the Axis powers in the Second World War is arguably the most significant triumph of the free world over regimes of oppression and fascism in modern world history. At the nucleus of the Allied forces stood two esteemed generals: Dwight D. Eisenhower of the United States, and Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, affectionately called “Monty”, of Great Britain. Both men had established significant, arguably legendary, military reputations within the global sphere. To the common public, they stood as figureheads of Western superpowers joining forces to defeat a common evil. The narrative of the Eastern theatre’s end is today practically common knowledge: with the Americans, Canadians, and British approaching across France from the west and the Russians pressuring the Germans from the east, the Nazi forces eventually crumpled and surrendered by May of 1945. While the Allied powers did indeed join forces, fought, and died together to defeat Adolf Hitler, the strategic journey to the point of victory was anything but smooth. What began as a fundamental strategic disagreement between Eisenhower and Montgomery after the Normandy campaign evolved into a bitter war of words between the two men, with the British and American press as well as other generals chiming in and taking sides in the feud. The two men entered the war as allies and emerged as victors, but the disagreement and controversy between the two men left behind a strained and bitter legacy despite their victory, and revealed a broader thematic tension between the two nations the men fought for. With the United States emerging as the premier power of the Western capitalist world and the British empire in an unprecedented decline, the clash between Eisenhower and Montgomery represented the subconscious power struggle between the two nations that epitomized a changing world in the mid-20th century.

By the end of August 1944, the Normandy campaign was effectively finished, with

Allied forces sweeping across northeastern France and into Belgium. The German army was thinning and swiftly retreating. To many, it seemed as if the war would effectively be over by Christmas of that year.¹ While the offensive appeared to be running smoothly, the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF), halted in the face of a difficult decision to be made. The farther and farther the Allies pushed into the heart of Nazi territory, the longer their supply lines extended. By September, AEF supply lines had stretched to nearly 300 miles, and it became clear that the Allied offensive could not continue until Eisenhower, Montgomery, and the rest the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) determined a plan for the invasion of Germany and defeat of the Nazi army.²

A full month before the first Allied soldier landed on the beaches of Normandy, Eisenhower had crafted a strategy for ending the war. His ‘broad front’ strategy directed the 21st Army Group, consisting of British and Canadian armies, under Montgomery, to travel north of the Ardennes across Belgium and the Netherlands. Meanwhile, American General Omar Bradley’s 12th Army Group would advance south of the Ardennes, through southern Belgium and Luxembourg. Once both armies had broken through the German defenses in the Ruhr valley, Montgomery and Bradley would turn their armies to face each other, creating a double envelopment that every military commander dreamed of, with the surviving German forces helplessly sitting in the center. Eisenhower envisioned that this pincer movement would swiftly destroy the German army and bring an end to the war.³

To many, Eisenhower’s strategy seemed to be a more than adequate plan to defeat Hitler.

¹ Carlo D’Este, “A Lingering Controversy: Eisenhower’s ‘Broad Front’ Strategy,” *Armchair General*, last modified October 7th, 2009, <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/a-lingering-controversy-eisenhowers-broad-front-strategy.htm>.

² John Buckley, *Monty’s Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013), 203.

³ Jonathan W. Jordan, *Brothers, Rivals, Victors: Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, and the Partnership that Drove the Allied Conquest in Europe* (London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2011), 391.

Montgomery, however, had other ideas. In his eyes, the best strategy to finish the war lay in a ‘narrow front’ approach. Monty wanted to take a group of 40 divisions in a compact and concentrated thrust across the Rhine, with the intent of overpowering the German army in one quick strike, capturing Berlin, and hopefully ending the war by the end of 1944.⁴ Montgomery voiced his evident disagreement with Eisenhower’s plan, and outlined in a note to the Supreme Commander his justifications of the narrow front strategy:

1. The quickest way to win this war is for the great mass of Allied armies to advance northwards, clear the coast as far as Antwerp, establish a powerful air force in Belgium, and advance towards the Ruhr.
2. The force must operate as a whole, with great cohesion, and be so strong that it can do the job quickly.
3. Single control and direction of the land operations is vital for success. This is a whole time job for one man.
4. The great victory in N.W. France has been won by personal command. Only in this way will future victories be won. If staff control of operations is allowed to creep in, then quick success becomes endangered.
5. To change the system of command now, after having won a great victory, would prolong the war.⁵

Montgomery argued that a full-fledged, forty-division plunge into the heart of Germany “would be so strong that it need fear nothing.”⁶ Montgomery’s note to Eisenhower reveals three principle desires by the British general: a swift and efficient victory, a concentration of power, and above all, Montgomery at the helm of the offensive. In his memoirs written after the war, Montgomery defended his strategy by tying together the urgency of bringing the war to a swift end with the general welfare of the British people. He juxtaposed the current situation in his home country with that of the United States, saying,

The more I considered [the broad front strategy], the more certain I was that it was wrong. The British economy and man-power situation demanded victory in

⁴ Buckley, 204.

⁵ Bernard L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.* (London, Collins Clear-Type Press, 1958), 267-8.

⁶ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2002), 596.

1944: no later. Also, the war was bearing hardly on the mass of the people in Britain; it must be brought to a close quickly. Our “must” was different from the American must: a difference in urgency, as well as a difference in doctrine. This the American generals did not understand; the war had never been brought to their home country. Why should we throw everything away for reasons of American public opinion...Indeed my plan offered the only possibility of bringing the war to a quick end.⁷

Montgomery was adamant about his disapproval for the broad front plan, and indeed he was not alone in his opinion. In an August 28th, 1944 entry in his personal diary, British Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke voiced his concerns with Eisenhower’s plan as well:

[Eisenhower’s plan] is likely to add another three to six months on to the war. He straight away wants to split his force, sending an American contingent towards Nancy whilst the British Army Group moves along the coast. If the Germans were not as beat as they are this would be a fatal move; as it is, it may not do too much harm. In any case I am off to France to-morrow to see Monty and to discuss the situation with him.⁸

With their opposition loudly voiced, a strategic clash between British and American leadership appeared to be inevitable. Montgomery’s passionate advocacy for a strategy that would bring the swiftest end to the war possible for the sake of his British people reflects a broader and more alarming tension arising within the SHAEF: while Eisenhower, Montgomery, and the rest of Allied leadership were fighting a common enemy, their allegiance and pride to their homelands remained paramount. Indeed, the defeat of the Nazis remained the principle objective, but the question of which general would lead the charge in defeating the Germans, how, and in what way would begin to arise as a polarizing controversy within the Allied headquarters.

On September 1, 1944, another controversial decision was made that would bring the friction between Eisenhower and Montgomery to new levels. Prior to August 1st of 1944, Montgomery had exercised operational command of both British and American forces, and

⁷ Ibid, 270-1.

⁸ Arthur Bryant, *Triumph in the West: 1943-1946* (London, Collins Clear-Type Press, 1959), 262-3.

navigated the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF) to a decisive victory during the Normandy breakout. However, on 1 September Eisenhower assumed command of all AEF ground forces from Montgomery. In one swift leadership change, Eisenhower had deflated the prestige of Montgomery, the hero of El Alamein, commander at Normandy, and Britain's most revered commander. There was certainly fair reasoning regarding Eisenhower's decision to change SHAEF leadership. In his book, *Eisenhower Versus Montgomery: The Continuing Debate*, G.E. Patrick Murray explains the political framework behind the change in leadership:

In a military alliance between nations, command takes on political ramifications. By prior agreement between Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the position of supreme commander went to an American because the United States would eventually provide the bulk of troops and supplies.⁹

Despite the seemingly necessary political motivators behind the command change, Montgomery was far from reserved with his comments and opinion regarding this new development. It was of Montgomery's opinion that Eisenhower should stick to handling the political and logistical aspects of the campaign, and that in terms of a change in command, it would be "inefficient and dangerous to swap horses midstream."¹⁰ Confiding privately to BBC reporter Chester Wilmot after the war, Montgomery was much less civil with his words for Eisenhower, claiming that Eisenhower:

Had not the experience, the knowledge, the organization, or the time. He should have been devoting himself to questions of overall strategy, to political problems, and to problems of inter-Allied relations and military government.... Instead he insisted on trying to run the land battle himself. Here he was out of his depth and in trying to do this he neglected his real job at the highest level.¹¹

Alan Brooke chimed in with his own commentary, writing in his memoirs that Eisenhower was

⁹ G.E. Patrick Murray, *Eisenhower Versus Montgomery: The Continuing Debate* (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1996), 1-11.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

¹¹ D'Este, 596.

“essentially a staff officer with little knowledge of the realities of the battlefield...obsessed with the logistical problems.”¹² Coupling these comments with the nature of his strategy, it is evident that Montgomery desired to be in supreme command of Allied forces in the defeat of Nazi Germany. What had begun as a disagreement on strategy was beginning to spiral into a battle within the SHAEF for whose nation would ultimately spearhead the defeat of Nazism and emerge as the savior of the free world.

Montgomery had made clear his thoughts regarding both the command change and his preferred strategy. While he tried to emphasize the importance to him and Great Britain a strategy and leader that would end the war before the end of 1944, other Allied leaders suspected ulterior motives. In an act of stubborn protest, Montgomery refused to attend Allied meetings and ceremonies in Paris in wake of the change in leadership, to the irritation of much of the SHAEF leadership. Monty’s bitterness towards the decision was a staunch dismissal of the importance of Anglo-American cooperation, as well as the idea that the AEF was a joint force that relied on compromise, a principle that Eisenhower constantly preached.¹³ Montgomery’s selfishness and desire for control was met with criticism from the American press, who were under the impression that Monty was trying to take credit for winning the war on the backs of American troops. In his book *Brothers, Rivals, Victors: Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, and the Partnership That Drove the Allied Conquest in Europe*, Jonathan Jordan writes of his suspicion of Montgomery’s motives, stating, “Montgomery didn’t need the title of ground commander to accomplish his objectives, and the only obvious use for an enlarged authority would be to shut down his allies while his own army group raced for Berlin.”¹⁴

¹² Bryant, 262.

¹³ D’Este, 601.

¹⁴ Jordan, 394.

Eisenhower's decision-making process was not purely militaristic, as many political factors influenced the creation of the broad front strategy. Principally, Eisenhower, being the affable compromiser he was, wanted to ensure that each SHAEF commander would play a role in the final push for victory. In explaining Eisenhower's thinking, Stephen Ambrose writes:

No matter how brilliant or logical Montgomery's plan for an advance to the Ruhr was (and a good case can be made that it was both), and no matter what Montgomery's personality was, under no circumstances would Eisenhower agree to give all the glory to the British, any more than he would agree to give it to the American forces. But as things stood Eisenhower could not make his decisions solely on military grounds. He could not halt [American General George Patton] in his tracks, relegate [Omar Bradley] to a minor administrative role, and in effect tell [US Army Chief of Staff George Marshall] that the great army he had raised in the United States was not needed in Europe.¹⁵

Moreover, Jonathan Jordan writes that it would be unacceptable and a disrespect to American forces and leadership to let Montgomery romp through Germany with his British armies, while over a million American soldiers watched from the sidelines.¹⁶

Eisenhower's patience in dealing with Montgomery's stubborn and notoriously conceited personality, as well as his awareness of the political implications of how victory would be achieved should be commended and appreciated. Indeed, he found himself in a difficult position in which he couldn't fully please anyone. On one end, Eisenhower had to withstand Montgomery's fervent criticism of his leadership, character, and strategy. On the other hand, despite holding his ground against the protests of Brooke and Montgomery and sticking to his broad front strategy, Eisenhower still drew flak from the American press, who tabbed him as overtly pro-British for compromising and still giving Montgomery a significant role in the offensive.¹⁷ As is evident from the attacks by the American press, the United States was just as

¹⁵ D'Este, 603.

¹⁶ Jordan, 395.

¹⁷ Murray, 14.

guilty as Montgomery and Great Britain for wanting to have a larger than equal slice of the victory pie.

History tells us what happened next. With Eisenhower sticking to his guns and establishing his broad front, the AEF forces eventually overpowered the Nazi forces in Western Germany while the Russian army captured Berlin in the east. Despite the heated gridlock between SHAEF leadership that often cast a dark cloud over the Allied advance, the ability of Montgomery, Eisenhower, and the hundreds of other commanders to eventually come together and defeat the fascist powers of Europe will forever stand as a lasting testament of freedom and democracy trumping regimes built on hate and oppression.

It goes without saying that both Eisenhower and Montgomery shared the same military objectives with regards to ending the war. What the feud between the two men truly reflects is the political implications of victory that both rarely admitted yet subconsciously prioritized. The overwhelming American military superiority compared to that of Great Britain, which the American press repeatedly noted, served as a constant reminder of the United States' rising presence as a premier global superpower. Contrarily, the Second World War is commonly acknowledged as a watershed moment for Great Britain: while its contributions to the war effort were both critical and immense, Britain would emerge from the war impoverished, destroyed, and a shell of its former self. Montgomery's passionate resistance of Eisenhower's strategies and decisions serves as evidence of his awareness of Britain's diminishing global status. It is easy to criticize Montgomery and dismiss him as arrogant, ignorant, and unlikeable, but it is clear that in the end he was simply a man who wanted to bring immortal glory to his withering home.

