



One Last Crusade

The US-British Alliance and the End of the War in the Pacific

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On 20 September 2001, a week after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, US President George W. Bush gave one of the most important speeches of his young administration. In his address to a joint session of Congress, and in a larger sense a horrified world, he paid tribute to a special guest sitting in the chamber, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair: 'America has no truer friend than Great Britain. Once again, we are joined together in a great cause.'¹

There was a time, not that long ago, when the relationship between these two countries was not so close. Despite fighting together in the First World War, the two Atlantic powers parted ways after the conflict ended. The close ties between the United States and the United Kingdom date only as far back as the Second World War. How then did American and British leaders get it right a second time, and keep their relationship going after the war?

Looking at how this successful working partnership brought the Second World War to an end can tell us a lot about the nature of a well-functioning coalition. We must remember that while the conflict might have had its start in Europe, it ended in the Pacific for both countries. The current and future significance of understanding how a competent league of military powers fights together is obvious.

Disagreement on British Strategy in the Pacific

At the beginning of 1944 the British Chiefs of Staff Committee began considering what strategic role the United Kingdom should play in the

defeat of Imperial Japan. The Chiefs believed it was 'vital' that British strategy service both Dominion and alliance interests. 'First of all, from a Commonwealth point of view, to prove to Australia our willingness and desire to fight with them for the defence of Australia as soon as the defeat of Germany rendered such action possible', Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, explained summarizing the feelings of the committee. 'Secondly, I felt it was important that we should cooperate with all three services alongside of the Americans in the Pacific against Japan in the final stages of this war.'²

The problem, though, was that the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had different ideas about the United Kingdom's future in the Pacific. His strategic ideas remained primarily colonial in nature: 'Rangoon and Singapore are great names in the British eastern world, and it will be an ill day for Britain if the War ends without our having made a stroke to regain these places and having let the whole Malay Peninsula down until it is eventually evacuated as the result of an American-dictated peace at Tokio, even though there is a very small British force in the American Armies.'³ The problem he had with the Chiefs' proposal was 'the great diminution of the forces engaged with the enemy which results from lengthening the communications. A gush has to be poured into the pipeline at one end to produce only a trickle at the other, so great is the leakage as the route lengthens.' The United Kingdom could make the greatest contribution to the defeat of Japan by engaging the largest number of Japanese soldiers possible

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and that would only come in Southeast Asia where it could project the most force.⁴

The views of those involved in this dispute were so strong that on two separate occasions the Chiefs considered a mass resignation or some other type of 'showdown' with the Prime Minister. Passions were intense because both Churchill and the Chiefs thought the future of the United Kingdom as a world power was at stake. For the Prime Minister, the empire was and would continue to be the most important element in British power. For the Chiefs, the most significant asset Great Britain had was its alliance with the United States, and that relationship had to be maintained into the future. It was only as the Second Quebec Conference approached that the Chiefs and Churchill worked out a compromise. The British had a surplus of air and naval units, and would offer to send them to participate in the final assault on Japan. Churchill saw air and naval power as a solution to his dispute with the Chiefs of Staff. He would have the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy make small but significant contributions to the forces attacking the home islands. The British and Indian Armies, though, would be deployed in Southeast Asia. Ground operations were going to be most important in this area, so His Majesty's Government could spare some ships and eventually some planes to strike the enemy homeland. What role the British Army might play in the invasion of Japan, if they were to have one at all, was a matter that the Chiefs and Churchill would determine later.⁵

The Prime Minister forcefully advocated this compromise solution at



British and American combined Chiefs of Staff with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill (conferring, first row). Second Quebec Conference, September, 1944

the first plenary meeting of the conference. After a good deal of conversation on other matters, Churchill explicitly offered the services of the Royal Navy to the ongoing crusade against Japan, noting that there were factions in the United States hostile to Great Britain and that the British wanted to take part in the defeat of their Japanese enemy just as much as the Americans. President Franklin D. Roosevelt quickly said yes. The US minutes of this meeting state, 'The President said that the offer was accepted on the largest scale.' The British version comes closer to capturing the actual words the two used. Churchill said his Empire was 'ardent to play the greatest possible part.' In response, Roosevelt said 'the

British fleet was no sooner offered than accepted.'⁶

Churchill detected ambiguity in the discussion that followed with Admiral Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations of the US Navy and Commander-in-Chief of the US Fleet, and asked Roosevelt point blank, if his offer had been accepted. The language of both documents is identical: 'The President replied in the affirmative.'

The Prime Minister also worked at Quebec to make room for the Royal Air Force in operations directly against the Japanese home islands. On the issue of airpower, it might seem at first glance that Churchill had no cards to play. The large ocean area in the Pacific required the use of very long range bombers, of which the RAF had none,



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and which the United States had only in the B-29. The British, however, told the Americans that they could improve the range of Lancaster bombers with in-flight refueling. One plane with a little modification could serve as a tanker and the other as a bomber. These aircraft would be available for service in the early summer of 1945. The British Chiefs of Staff told their American counterparts that they wanted to use forty squadrons – half of which would be tankers.⁸ Getting the RAF in the fight was important to the Prime Minister. Towards the end of the Quebec conference, Churchill even suggested that a strategic bombing campaign in and of itself could force the Japanese to surrender. The RAF had less surplus of forces than the navy and finalizing an agreement would wait until the conference in Potsdam, Germany.⁹

Explaining US Acceptance

Coalitions are an interactive process and another issue that requires some explanation is why the US delegation accepted these detachments. It is clear that diplomatic considerations rather than an enhancement of operational performance were the main factors that made the Americans interested in having the British join the effort against Japan. Even before the summit meeting in Canada, US diplomats were warning Roosevelt and his advisors that the administration needed to include the British in the Pacific theatre. 'The really gallant people of Great Britain are as anxious to join us in the fight against Japan as we are ourselves to defeat Japan,' John Winant, the US ambassador in London, argued in a letter he sent to presidential advisor Harry Hopkins. The

ambassador worried that the US military might do severe damage to bilateral relations if it prevented an allied contribution to this last great effort. 'If we allow the British to limit their active participation to recapture areas that are to their selfish interests alone and not participate in smashing the war machine of Japan, if British soldiers don't cross the Atlantic to our ports and entrain for our Pacific ports, and if we shuck the British air force in order to prove our own dominance in the air, we will create in the United States a hatred for Great Britain that will make for schisms in the postwar years that will defeat everything that men have died for in this war.'¹⁰

The US Joint Chiefs of Staff also understood that political and diplomatic issues were at work rather than a simple augmentation of resources. Churchill's presentation had made that point quite clear. Admiral William D. Leahy, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted, 'Mr. Churchill expressed strongly his desire that British ships and troops take part in the war against Japan in order to do Britain's part and to share in the credit.' General Henry H. Arnold observed 'there was no doubt as to the Prime Minister desiring for political reasons to be there with his main Fleet.'¹¹

Roosevelt had little choice but to accept Churchill's offer once it was made. If he answered in the negative, it would be easy for his many political enemies to argue that he was responsible for the needless deaths of many more Americans than would have otherwise have been the case if he had accepted the British proposal. The American people would also wonder why they were battling the Japanese

alone. The most likely result would be hostile public sentiment towards a continuation of the trans-Atlantic alliance. If the public discovered that US officials had turned down a British offer, they would be infuriated, and in domestic politics this anger would lead to political attacks on Roosevelt.¹²

The only mar to this meeting of coalition leaders came on the fourth day of the gathering during a Combined Chiefs of Staff meeting. The session on 14 September started out with the British Chiefs trying to clarify matters about the role the Royal Navy would play in the war against Japan. 'Everything normal,' Arnold observed, 'until British participation in the Pacific came up. Then Hell broke loose.'¹³

King, angry at what he saw as unnecessary concessions made to the British insisted that the Royal Navy had to be 'self-supporting' logistically. He then rejected any significant role for the British in the final defeat of Japan, saying deployment was an issue for another day. The British Chiefs all disagreed, reminding the Admiral that Churchill and Roosevelt had reached agreement on this matter. King fought them single handedly, denying that the President and Prime Minister had agreed to anything specific.¹⁴

As all his American colleagues sided against him, the Admiral overplayed his hand when he lashed out at General George C. Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff. 'I don't think we should wash our linen in public,' Leahy remarked. Recalling the actions of the Chief of Naval Operations in his retirement, Marshall said, 'He made it quite embarrassing.' Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, the First Sea Lord, was more blunt: 'King made an

MacArthur generally preferred to make his fight with US units only. Marshall believed allied participation in an invasion would have important psychological and political importance in the United States. It would help reduce the number of US casualties, but it would also bolster the resolve of the American public to see the war through to the end knowing that they were not alone

ass of himself.' Cunningham noted that King 'gave way' at that point, 'but with such bad grace.'¹⁵

Explaining King's poor behavior has usually focused either on his Anglophobia or the contention that the historical rivalry between the US and the Royal Navies still remained strong to him. While there is some truth to these views, it obscures the fact that logistics was a legitimate issue of concern. In the previous century, a British fleet had never had to operate at sea for more than a few days at a time, and had no quartermaster system designed to keep flotillas afloat for a month or more. Before the summit, Leahy admitted in meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that supply problems were legitimate issues, but those concerns were details that could be worked out later. It was important to get a British commitment to fight the Japanese. King offered an explanation to a historian writing an official history of the Joint Chiefs of Staff about his views. 'I was not reluctant to use the British Fleet in the Pacific. I was, however, opposed to combining the two fleets operationally because the British had plenty of use for their own fleet in Southeast Asia recovering their losses to the Japanese. When the President accepted Churchill's offer of British fleet units for the US Pacific Fleet I told Nimitz to set up the British units as a separate Task Force and assign them their own jobs.'¹⁶

Despite Admiral King, the six-day conference in Canada was a good example of a well functioning alliance. 'On the whole we have been very successful in getting the agreement which we have achieved, and the

Americans have shown a wonderful spirit of co-operation,' Brooke noted.¹⁷

Deciding the UK's Role

An unresolved issue remained the role, if any, that the British Army would play in operations against the Japanese home islands. No effort was made in London to resolve this issue until the war in Europe ended, and then the pace of events required a fairly immediate decision. 'We want if possible, to participate with all three services in the attacks against Japan,' Brooke explained shortly after V-E Day.¹⁸

Pressure had been growing for a greater allied role in the Pacific war for some time. The American public was demanding that their allies make a more significant contribution to the fight against the Japanese,¹⁹ and this was sentiment that neither the US military nor the British could afford to ignore. Editorials in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the *San Francisco Examiner* and *The Washington Post* faulted the British for making little contribution to combat operations against the Japanese.¹⁹ Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, the head of the British Joint Staff Mission in Washington, wrote to Brooke in late April, 'The belittling of what our forces are doing, as compared to the US Forces, is on the increase, and, in addition, there is continual sniping at our policy, intentions and administration in every theatre. This will, I fear, have a tendency to increase when the war changes completely to the Pacific.'²⁰ In the chambers of the House of Representatives, Leon H. Gavin of Pennsylvania, declared, 'When the European war ends all the manpower of the Allies and total resources and

equipment should go into the South Pacific for a speedy and total victory.' Other members of Congress were making similar comments in private, but in much harsher language.²¹

The British Chiefs were quite willing to send ground troops to participate in the invasion of Japan and in June had their staff prepare studies on what contribution Great Britain could make. They then took the issue to Churchill on 4 July. The conversation, in the words of Brooke, 'rambled' for half an hour before they addressed the Far East. Churchill admitted he had not had a chance to read the paper the Chiefs had submitted. He had been busy with the General Election. Brooke was a little perturbed, 'And yet if the proposed strategy in the long run turns out successful, it will have originated in his futile brain!' Brooke decided to explain the proposal with a map, which Churchill liked. He told the Prime Minister that the Chiefs wanted to send five divisions (one New Zealand, one Australian, one British, one British-Indian, and one Canadian or another British-Indian unit) and that they thought US plans for the amphibious assault on Japan were extremely optimistic. Churchill remarked that success in the Far East had come at a much faster tempo than expected, but that a campaign through the four main islands of Japan would be long, extensive, and bloody. The United Kingdom should be prepared to stand with their American allies for as long as it took to subdue the Japanese. He then agreed to make the proposal. When Brooke returned home that evening, he wondered about the meeting. 'How much he understood



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and really understood in his exhausted state is hard to tell. However I got him to accept the plan in principle, to authorize our sending the paper to the Americans, and to pass the telegram on to the Dominion P.M.s for their co-operation! A great triumph.²²

When the British proposal arrived in Washington, there was strong sentiment favouring acceptance, but the problem was that the commander in the field needed to be consulted. General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, however, generally preferred to make his fight with US units only. Marshall believed allied participation in an invasion would have important psychological and political importance in the United States. It would help reduce the number of US casualties, but it would also bolster the resolve of the American public to see the war through to the end knowing that they were not alone. He made all these points clearly, but subtly in the cable he sent requesting the theatre commander's views on the British proposal. At the end of the message, he explained: 'It is evident that the use of these British Divisions should replace US Divisions to the same number. Such a course would meet with wide public approval from the viewpoint of lessening the requirements for US soldiers, especially on the part of the articulate who assail British and attack administration for non-participation of Allies in conquest of Japan, etc.'²³

MacArthur got the message. He stipulated that he wanted just one corps composed of three divisions coming from the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. He wanted these units supplied with US equipment to avoid complicating

logistics. They also had to receive training in US amphibious doctrine and had to be made available by 1 December. The General explained that the British corps would fight within a US field army and that he would use them as a follow up force once a beachhead had been established.²⁴

The US and British Chiefs of Staff completely resolved the question of what role Great Britain would play in the final defeat of Japan on the second day of the Potsdam Conference. 'The United States Chiefs of Staff agree in principle to the participation in the final phase of the war against Japan of a British Commonwealth land force, subject to satisfactory resolution of operational problems by Commander in Chief, US Army Forces, Pacific, and Commander in Chief, US Pacific Fleet.' They also included MacArthur's qualifications. Brooke observed, 'The reply was far better than we had hoped for, and the offer is accepted in principle.'²⁵

The Combined Chiefs of Staff formally confirmed these understandings in their final report to the President and Prime Minister. 'The invasion of Japan and operations directly connected therewith are the supreme operations in the war against Japan; forces and resources will be allocated on the required scale to assure that invasion can be accomplished at the earliest practicable date. No other operations will be undertaken which hazard the success of, or delay, these main operations.' The British Pacific Fleet, which had actually seen combat along side US ships at Okinawa and in raids against the main islands, would continue to operate with the US Navy. The Royal

Air Force would contribute ten squadrons to the strategic bombing of Japan. This force would increase to twenty squadrons when airfields became available sometime after 1 December. There was also agreement in 'principle' that a land force composed of British and Commonwealth units would take part in the invasion of Japan, dependent on the resolution of operational issues. A small tactical air force might also take part in the invasion. The US Joint Chiefs of staff would remain in control of operational strategy, but promised in the bureaucratic language of the report to give 'full and timely information as to their future plans and intentions' to their British opposites.²⁶

As things turned out, the war ended before another campaign required another bloodletting, but these events can offer a number of lessons to individuals in both Washington and London today. There was no way in 1944 and in the first half of 1945 that the leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom could have known that the war would end the way it did. The negotiations that transpired for the placement of British forces in the final assault against Japan were real. Perhaps the most important thing we can learn is that a healthy alliance, a coalition in which the value of the whole exceeds the sum of the individual parts, is an association in which each individual member realizes that it is in their own interest to make sure that the partnership serves the interests of their allies as well as their own.

NOTES

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- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> on 30 April 2004.
2. Viscount Alanbrooke of Brookeborough (*Sir Alan Brooke*), *War Diaries, 1939-1945* Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, editors. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), p. 526.
 3. Churchill to Ismay, June 24, 1944, PREM 3/160/5, British National Archives, Richmond, Surrey [Hereafter cited as BNA].
 4. Churchill to Ismay for C. O. S. Committee, September 12, 1944, PREM 3/160/6, BNA.
 5. For the possibility of a mass resignation, see the diaries of Brooke and Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, the First Sea Lord: Alanbrooke, *War Diaries*, 528 and *Diary of Sir Andrew Cunningham*, August 11, 1944, ADD 52577, Papers of Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, British Library, London [Hereafter cited as BLL].
 6. Meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff with Roosevelt and Churchill, September 13, 1944, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference at Quebec* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1972), 312-319 [Hereafter cited as FRUS: Quebec]; John Ehrman, *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy*, volume v, August 1943-September 1944 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956), pp. 518-519.
 7. Meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff with Roosevelt and Churchill, September 13, 1944, FRUS: Quebec, pp. 312-319; Ehrman, *Ibid.*, pp. 518-519; Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope (*Sir Andrew Cunningham*). *A Sailor's Odyssey: The Autobiography of Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope* K.T. G.C.B. O.M. D.S.O. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1951), p. 611.
 8. Memorandum by the British Chiefs of Staff, September 18, 1944, Folder CCS 373.11 Japan (9-18-44) Sec. 1, Box 114, Geographic File, 1942-1945, Records of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Record Group 218, US National Archives, College Park, Maryland [Hereafter cited as USNA].
 9. Meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff with Roosevelt and Churchill, September 16, 1944, FRUS: Quebec, p. 379.
 10. Winant to Hopkins, September 1, 1944, FRUS: Quebec, pp. 255-256.
 11. *Diary of William D. Leahy*, September 13, 1944, Box 4, Papers of William D. Leahy; *Diary of H. H. Arnold*, September 14, 1944, Folder 3, Box 3, Papers of H. H. Arnold, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [Hereafter cited as LOC].
 12. Memorandum of Conference with the President, 18 August 1944, FRUS: Quebec, pp. 160-161.
 13. Ehrman, *Op. cit.*, pp. 520-523; *Diary of H. H. Arnold*, September 14, 1944, Folder 3, Box 3, Papers of H. H. Arnold, LOC; Marshall to MacArthur, September 12, 1944, Folder: Octagon, Box 31, ABC Files, Office of Director of Plans and Operations, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, Record Group 165, USNA.
 14. Ehrman, *Op. cit.*, pp. 520-523; Ernest J. King and Walter Muir Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1952), pp. 569-570; Alanbrooke, *War Diaries*, p. 592.
 15. Ehrman, *Ibid.*, pp. 520-523; John Winton, *Cunningham* (London: John Murray, 1998), p. 359; *Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey*, pp. 612-613; Alanbrooke, *War Diaries*, p. 592; George C. Marshall Interview, November 21, 1956, Larry I. Bland, editor, *George C. Marshall Interviews and Reminiscences for Forrest C. Pogue Revised edition*. (Lexington: George C. Marshall Research Foundation, 1991), p. 376; *Diary of Sir Andrew Cunningham*, September 14, 1944, ADD 52577, Papers of Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, BLL.
 16. Michael Coles, 'Ernest King and the British Pacific Fleet: The Conference at Quebec, 1944 ('Octagon')' *The Journal of Military History* 65 (January 2001), pp. 105-129; Richard Hough, *The Longest Battle: The War at Sea, 1939-45* (New York: Morrow, 1986), p. 337; Minutes of Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, September 8, 1944; Minutes of Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, September 13, 1944, Folder: CCS 334 Joint Chiefs of Staff (7-4-44) Meetings 168th thru 185th, Box 198, Central Decimal File, Records of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Record Group 218, USNA; *Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey*, 612; *Diary of Sir Andrew Cunningham*, September 15, 1944, ADD 52577, Papers of Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, BLL; King to Hayes, November 20, 1951, Folder: Comments by King Re: Official History of the J.C.S. 1950-1951, Box 35, Papers of Ernest J. King, LOC.
 17. Alanbrooke, *Op. cit.*, p. 593.
 18. *Diary of Sir Alan Brooke*, May 24, 1945, 5/1/11 Papers of the 1st Viscount Alanbrooke of Brookeborough, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London, London [Hereafter cited as LHC].
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 20. David Fraser, *Alanbrooke* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), p. 465.
 21. Remarks of Leon H. Gavin, April 23, 1945, *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 1st Session, A1847. Also see the remarks of other members of the lower house in the *Congressional Record*, 2501, A2246, 7485-7486; Memorandum for General Persons, June 23, 1945; Memo for Record, June 27, 1945, Folder: OPD 336.2 GR Brit (Section II) (Cases 29-), Box 973, Office of the Director of Plans and Operations, General Records—Correspondence, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, Record Group 165, USNA.
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 25. Alanbrooke, *Op. cit.*, p. 706.
 26. Report to the President and Prime Minister of the Agreed Summary of the Conclusions Reached by the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the 'Terminal' Conference, July 24, 1945, FRUS: Potsdam, vol. ii, 1462-1464.