

LESSON 8

WORLD WAR II: WHY THE ALLIES WON

*“Our greatest triumph lies in the fact that we achieved the impossible,
Allied military unity of action.”*

—General George C. Marshall, 1945

Lesson Introduction

The essential facts regarding World War II are well known, but interpretations differ and will continue to differ as each generation of historians considers the war through its own particular lens. Nevertheless, to paraphrase Kent Greenfield, it is generally agreed upon that a common strategy emerged on the part of the Allied coalition, based on the assumption that their individual political objectives would be best served by subordinating them to an overarching military goal: the utter defeat of the Axis enemy. Given the aim of total victory (unconditional surrender), a primarily military strategy was probably the only ground on which a coalition of such disparate political interests (American, British, and Soviet) could be managed. By mid-1944, however, post-war political concerns became more potent, but, even then, the coalition did not dissolve, and it was not until very late in the war that any serious disagreements emerged.

Nevertheless, as Richard Overy ably reminds us, the final victory of the Allies was not a foregone conclusion. The possibility of defeat at the hands of the Axis powers was real, and the outcome of the war was in doubt for several years. Overy provides an insightful analysis of the factors that turned things around—from important military victories to industrial production and political leadership.

Student Requirements by Educational Objective

Requirement 1

Objective 1. Evaluate the Allied powers’ grand strategy during World War II, as it evolved. [JPME Areas 1(a)(c), 2(b), 3(d)(e), 5(b)]

Objective 2. Analyze the major causes for the Allied powers’ successes and the Axis powers’ failures during World War II. [JPME Areas 1(a)(c), 2(b), 3(b)(d)(e)]

Objective 3. Determine the linkages between Allied strategic objectives and military objectives during World War II. [JPME Areas 2(b), 3(d)(e)]

Read:

- Kent Greenfield, *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration*, (1963; repr., Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1982), Ch. 1, “Elements of Coalition Strategy,” pages 3-23 (21 pages)
- Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), Ch. 1, pp. 1-24 (24 pages)
- Donald M. Snow and Dennis M. Drew, *From Lexington to Desert Storm and Beyond: War and Politics in the American Experience*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), Ch. 5, “World War II,” pp. 116-148 (33 pages)

The Allied coalition’s objective of unconditional surrender was at once an asset and a liability. As an asset, the decision provided for unity of purpose and, as Greenfield points out, enabled the coalition partners to subordinate their political aims and other interests to the task of militarily defeating Germany, Italy, and Japan. However, as the war drew to a close, the Soviets abandoned the idea of subordination of political ends to military means. Likewise, Churchill recognized that the post-war order of Europe would largely be determined by where the respective Allied armies had stopped. Roosevelt, on the other hand, had ceded policy to military necessity, and when, Eisenhower decided to stop at the Elbe River and Marshall backed him on the decision, FDR acquiesced. As Greenfield points out, the most striking thing about Anglo-American strategy and how it was directed is that “military considerations consistently prevailed.”

Roosevelt’s pre-war strategy of aerial bombardment, naval blockade, and support to the Soviet Union, Britain, and China was a modified version of traditional maritime strategy. This is not surprising when one considers that Roosevelt was a former assistant secretary of the Navy and that his principal military advisor, Admiral Ernest J. King, strongly argued that American strategy, in the event of war, should be to support America’s allies but not to send ground forces overseas. This maritime emphasis was at the heart of the military strategy ultimately pursued by the United States during World War II, except that the objective of unconditional surrender demanded a land component—that is, unconditional surrender required subjugation and occupation of Germany and Japan. Control of the sea became the centerpiece of American military strategy in World War II. The immediate objective was to keep Germany and Japan tied to their existing continental strategies while the United States mobilized for war on two fronts. It was the classic strategy of a maritime power engaged in a war against a continental opponent: support one’s allies who are doing the hard fighting on land, prepare for invasion, and then do so at the time and place of one’s own choosing.

The American military strategy was cumulative and sequential: the U.S. would prolong the land war by supporting Britain, the U.S.S.R., and China until U.S. forces were ready to fight at an advantage. Great Britain and Russia could be reached by sea, which, along with the decision to defeat Germany first, explains the emphasis on the Battle of the Atlantic at the outset of American involvement. China could not be reached by sea without considerable difficulty, so the U.S. and its allies concentrated on the land route through Burma and aerial re-supply over the “Hump,” the Himalaya Mountains. However, logistical support to China was intended solely to keep the Chinese in the war in order to pin down the Japanese; the main effort to knock out Japan would come by way of American military power in the Pacific following the defeat of Germany. Sea control was the first and most important step in the wartime strategy. The

Atlantic fleet sought local sea control, that is, defeating the U-Boat threat (as opposed to destroying the German and Italian high seas fleets) in order to protect supply convoys and prepare for the invasion of the continent of Europe, whereas the Pacific fleet sought to achieve general sea control by destroying the Japanese fleet itself. The second step was to invade Europe while a limited offensive was underway in the Pacific. Finally, once Germany was subdued, the Allies would turn to defeating Japan.

Although military strategy garners more attention in the literature on World War II than economic output, a persuasive argument can be made that Allied victory was, if not directly attributable to industrial output, greatly bolstered by that output. However, if we regard strategy as the mobilization of every means at a nation's disposal to achieve specific ends, then economic factors are part of the strategic equation and are no more nor any less important than military operations.

In retrospect, the pattern of economic mobilization for war in the United States has passed through three major stages. The first was a pre-industrial stage, from the colonial period to 1815 when economic mobilization for war meant increasing production and diverting civilian products to military use. The second stage was a transitional period, from 1816-1865, when the economy in the North (the South remained largely pre-industrial) developed enormous productive capacity. However, diversion of civilian production remained the norm as opposed to conversion. During World War I, as a result of the technological revolution that was taking place, economic mobilization meant conversion. Fortunately, the United States was a mature industrial state and the government, industry, and the military developed complex and professional structures to manage the rapid economic expansion that was necessary for war. However, it was a fitful start that, through trial and error, only fully matured toward the end of the war. Nevertheless, the U.S. government learned a valuable lesson from the experience, one that would play a major role in Allied victory during World War II.

Resources for the war effort were not the problem once World War II began, but the need to balance near-term and long-term requirements remained. For example, the need to produce sufficient numbers of aircraft for the front had to be balanced with the need to develop new and superior machines and to provide for production of these weapons as the war progressed. Nevertheless, after the United States entered the war, the latent power inherent in the American economy was fully mobilized. One need only look at the air war alone to appreciate the role economic factors played in World War II. The Germans and the Japanese focused on the "short war." By contrast, the United States recognized and had planned for a long war of attrition and the enormous logistical requirements that would entail. It was only in 1943 that the Germans and Japanese began to fully mobilize their aviation resources, and by then, it was arguably too late. American output of aircraft dwarfed German production between 1943-45. One American aircraft plant alone, the Ford Willow Run Plant, produced more than one-half as much airframe weight as the whole German aircraft industry in 1944 and an amount roughly equal to the entire Japanese aircraft industry. Equally important, the United States was able to graduate far more pilots than aircraft produced. Thus, the Germans and the Japanese were subjected to a crushing weight of airplanes and crews that the Axis powers could not hope to match.

American industrial output sustained not only American forces but allied forces as well. In 1944, American industry produced over four times the munitions output of Great Britain with

fewer than twice the number of workers. Approximately \$48 billion of American production went to lend-lease. The Soviets received over 430,000 vehicles through lend-lease, especially the trucks that made Soviet military operations possible, and American production accounted for half of all British tanks, a fifth of Royal Air Force combat aircraft, three-fifths of RAF transport aircraft, and two-fifths of Royal Navy ships and landing craft.

All the above evidence is not to say that the U.S. could have defeated Germany and Japan single-handedly or to insinuate that military strategy accounted for little in terms of Allied victory, but it is mentioned rather to point out that economic factors are as much a part of strategy and strategic thinking as is diplomatic maneuvering and the movement and operations of military forces. In short, the United States did not blindly stumble into a full-blown military-industrial complex during World II: the U.S. government had planned for wartime mobilization as a consequence of the American experience in World War I. Not surprisingly, given American ideology, the military-industrial complex that was created and continues to the present is a matter of some concern in that, for the first time in its history, the United States has a large military establishment and a standing military industrial sector. But this is not surprising, given the changed role of the United States in world politics after World War II and the demands of the Cold War in terms of military production.

Regarding inevitable Allied victory, Richard Overy points out that there is a strong element of **determinism** in explanations of Allied success. Overy, however, is suspect, claiming that up to 1942 the numbers favored the aggressors and “might well have allowed them to win before American economic power could be placed on the scales.” (*Why the Allies Won*, p. 4) Other scholars have made similar assertions. Ultimately, strategic policy decisions energetically championed by the Allies’ political leadership were the key factors in mobilizing their populations and industrial might. In turn, this mobilization provided the Allied military leaders with the resources needed to achieve a common cause, the total defeat of the Axis threat.

Lesson Summary

This lesson provides you with an opportunity to assess the strategic thinking and planning during World War II by analyzing the strategic context and evaluating the strategic thinking of the time in terms of the creation of national policy and military planning. In that regard, this lesson illustrates the challenges of translating grand strategy into military planning. Objectives of this lesson are applicable in courses 8803A Operational Level of War, 8806A Joint, Multinational, and Interagency Operations, and 8809/8809A Operations Other than War.

JPME Summary

AREA 1					AREA 2				AREA 3					AREA 4					AREA 5				
A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	
X		X				X				X		X	X							X			