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The Autumn of 1944: Boldness is Not Enough

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When the Western Allies planned the campaign that would liberate France from the Nazis, they envisioned a steady, methodical advance from Normandy to the German frontier. Instead, the campaign developed into two distinctly different types of fighting. From 6 June until 25 July 1944, the Western Front was a virtual stalemate in which each Allied offensive gained little ground at great cost in men and equipment. But the campaign thereafter became a war of movement which quickly caught up with and then exceeded the pre-invasion timetable.

On 25 July the Americans launched Operation Cobra, the offensive that would end the stalemate in Normandy. Previous British offensives had been largely unsuccessful. However, whether by design or circumstance, these British efforts had caused the Germans to concentrate the bulk of their armored strength on their right flank. Thus, when the Americans attacked against the German left, they were finally able to achieve the decisive breakthrough that had eluded their British allies.

The initial success of Operation Cobra was exploited by simultaneous advances west into Brittany and east into the heart of France. The effort in Brittany was intended to secure ports through which supplies could be transported to the combat divisions. The eastward advance was aimed at enveloping the German Seventh Army and Fifth Panzer Army, which included most of the German mechanized units in France. Adolf Hitler inadvertently aided Allied strategy by ordering a counterattack at Mortain on 7 August. This had the effect of driving German forces deeper into the pocket that the Allied envelopment was creating. Once the counterattack had been blunted, the Germans began a frantic retreat to avoid encirclement. Most German divisions were able to escape before the pocket was closed at Falaise on 21 August, but these divisions were hollow formations nearly devoid of their combat elements.

The envelopment that culminated at Falaise resulted in the collapse of German resistance in northern and central France. Because of the magnitude of the German collapse, General Eisenhower chose to abandon plans to halt and consolidate at the Seine, and instead continued the pursuit without pause. Eisenhower's subordinates welcomed this opportunity to destroy the German army before it could catch its breath. However, there soon developed among them distinctly different views as to how the pursuit should be conducted.

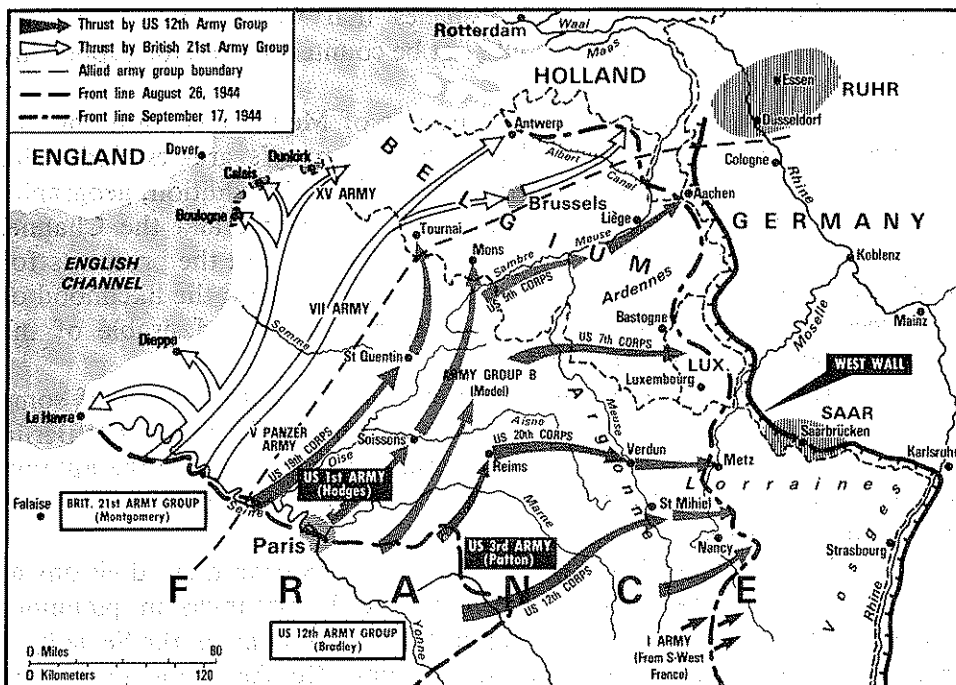
The original plan called for entrance into Germany on two complementary, self-supporting axes, one north of the Ardennes, one to its south. This has since become known as the "broad front." To guarantee mutual supportability, a continuous front had to be maintained between the two axes. However, the strategy did not require an equal dispersal of forces along the entire front.

Both General Patton, commanding the American Third Army, and General Montgomery, commanding the British ground forces, soon concocted their own alternative approaches. Each would forsake the other's advance and throw all available resources into his own "single thrust" into Germany and on to early victory. Patton's thrust in the south would proceed through Lorraine, penetrate the West Wall fortifications (Siegfried Line) and capture the Saar. Montgomery's northern thrust would advance through Holland, flank the West Wall, cross the Rhine and seize the Ruhr. Each would eventually move on to Berlin.

Eisenhower chose to stay with the broad front, although in a modified form, which placed greater emphasis on the axis north of the Ardennes. The wisdom of this decision is still a subject of some controversy. However, an examination of the options available in the autumn of 1944 shows that the single thrust was a product of self-delusion, with more prospects for disaster than for success. Its proponents attributed too much value to boldness.

The strongest factor supporting the southern thrust by Patton was his position in the vanguard of the Allied advance. When the British were just beginning to cross the Seine with infantry units, Patton had armored spearheads advancing 90 miles beyond the river. But the Saar was only a secondary objective. The Ruhr was the main prize and had already been designated as the focal point for the initial Allied advance into Germany.¹

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Patton was not geographically situated to effect its early capture. Geography opposed the southern thrust in other ways. The Lorraine plateau was not good tank country and lacked adequate airfields. The terrain of central Germany was not conducive to further advances out of the Saar.

It may be argued that Patton's abilities as commander best suited him to lead any lightning stroke into Germany. More than any other general, Patton had put his personal stamp on the Allies' whirlwind advance through France. However, Patton's abilities as commander could not inflate the relatively low importance of the Saar. The value of the Ruhr alone would have swung the balance to the northern approach.

Further, the circumstances which had highlighted Patton's abilities over the previous weeks were rapidly changing. Patton's success in France had been based on maneuver, not hard fighting. His victories were measured in captured territory rather than destroyed enemy forces.² Soon, the terrain over which his troops would advance would be more restrictive. The Third Army would be confronted with the fortress complex at Metz and the forts of the West Wall. Although the West Wall was not fully manned, its existence was still an impediment to mobile operations. Metz would prove to be an even greater impediment. Too large to be ignored and requiring too many troops to be satisfactorily contained, Metz would have to be taken before any major attempt could be made to pierce the West Wall. This required direct assault and was not actually accomplished until November. Patton's genius, while brilliantly matched to mobile pursuit, added nothing

to his ability to overcome the obstacles that would soon face him. Therefore, even his generalship could not be counted as a factor supporting his proposed offensive.

The strongest argument in support of Montgomery was the importance of his objective. The Ruhr was Germany's greatest industrial region and was essential to the German war effort. In addition, geography supported Montgomery's plan. Proximity to England and the Channel ports, the abundant airfields of the Low Countries, and the prospects for exploitation across the North German Plain all enhanced the likelihood of its success. The northern thrust was clearly the more desirable of the proposed alternatives to the broad front.

Montgomery originally intended to send "a solid mass of some forty divisions" into the Ruhr. He later clarified his destination as "Berlin via the Ruhr."³ This was quite simply impossible, however, in the autumn of 1944. The reason is found in that unglamorous but essential component of warfare: logistics.

By September 1944, the Allies were supporting more divisions at greater distances than had been anticipated in pre-invasion planning. American planning called for the support of 12 divisions on the Seine by 4 September, and no action beyond the river until October. In actuality, the US Army was attempting to sustain an eastward advance of 16 divisions with some elements operating 150 miles beyond the Seine. This had to be done without the use of Brittany's ports which, contrary to pre-invasion projections, were not yet discharging supplies.⁴

The major problem confronting Allied logisticians was not the transportation of supplies to the Continent, but rather their delivery to the battlefield. This resulted not so much from the number of divisions or their location as it did from the circumstances of their advance. The rapid pace of the advance in July and August had given the Allies insufficient time to develop the depot system that was necessary to leapfrog supplies to the front. Furthermore, resources that were needed to establish the depot system were instead diverted directly to the divisions to sustain their advance. Thus, on 1 September over 90 percent of all supplies in France were in base depots near the invasion beaches.⁵ These supplies had to be delivered directly to the divisions at the front. This meant a one-way trip of 300 miles for the British and an even longer one for the Americans. The French railway system was no help, owing largely to the skill of the Allied airmen who had destroyed it. This left truck transport as the principal means of supply, supplemented somewhat by airlift. This was not satisfactory; the truck companies had never been intended to deliver so much cargo over such long distances.

Under these circumstances, Allied planners calculated they had the ability to support three British and two American corps into the Ruhr, and two British and one American corps all the way to Berlin. To accomplish even this, the Allies had to maintain an airlift of 2000 tons per day and the

Americans had to remove truck transport from their remaining divisions. The diversion of transport would effectively result in immobilizing the American Third Army as well as replacement divisions which had landed in Normandy but had not yet reached the front.⁶

These calculations were based on a division's average daily supply consumption of 650 tons. Yet Allied divisions had actually been consuming 300 to 350 tons per day during their advance through France.⁷ It might seem that the planners' estimates were too pessimistic and constituted an unwarranted impediment to sending a much larger force into Germany. However, the 350-ton figure had resulted from a *pursuit* through a *friendly* country in the *summer* months. An advance into Germany would be a *battle* on *hostile* soil in the *fall and winter*. Each difference would aggravate the supply situation.

Further, the reduced consumption during the pursuit through France was more a matter of necessity than one of choice. It had been achieved by cheating on non-essential supplies and deferring required maintenance on vehicles. This policy had been stretched to its limit by September. The situation with regard to medium tanks is indicative of the problem. Although most armored units were near their authorized strength, many of their machines were on the verge of breakdown. For example, by mid-September the 3rd Armored Division was averaging less than 75 medium tanks in front-line condition out of an authorized strength of 232.⁸

Finally, it is necessary to consider the increased amounts of food, fuel, and clothing which would be needed to sustain each soldier in colder weather. The logisticians thus showed good judgment by adhering to their "pessimistic" estimate.

An army corps normally contained three divisions at that time, so logistical planners projected a northern thrust of 15 divisions. Montgomery, now a field marshal, also realized that logistical constraints would severely dilute the composition of his proposed offensive into Germany. Accordingly, he reduced its size to the 18 divisions constituting the British Second Army and the American First Army. An examination of Allied truck assets and an assumption that projections for air supply were correct shows that it was just barely possible to support 18 divisions into the Ruhr.⁹ This left no margin for error and still required the immobilization of the Third Army and the newly arrived American divisions. Thus, even Montgomery's more optimistic logistical assessment yielded him only three additional divisions. Of course, not all of these 18 divisions could be supported all the way to Berlin. This situation was profoundly different from the "forty division mass" Montgomery had initially envisioned. Originally, the northern thrust would have employed all the Allied divisions then available in northern and central France. Now, by his own admission, the Field Marshal's offensive could employ less than half of this force.

Yet, Montgomery continued to champion the reduced northern thrust with undiminished expectations. It seems the height of optimism to believe that a force of between 15 and 18 divisions could force the Rhine, take the Ruhr and Berlin, and in the process end all German resistance. But optimism had reached euphoric proportions in the Allied camp, bolstered by an almost universal belief that German morale was ready to crack.

A great portion of the Allied leadership and their staffs did not believe that the German army could recover its ability to offer cohesive resistance on a broad scale. Even the loyalty of the German military leadership was in question, as evidenced by the 20 July attempt on Hitler's life. The intelligence section of the American First Army went so far as to predict civil uprisings within Germany itself.¹⁰ Dissenters, such as Patton's G-2 Colonel Koch, were admonished not to worry about "imaginary dangers."¹¹ This view, though understandably appealing, was entirely incorrect. The German army had emerged from Falaise with emaciated combat elements, but with its corps and divisional headquarters largely intact. These headquarters were able to organize a very effective resistance once they were fleshed out with replacements. The pool of German manpower was far from expended. Eighty "fortress" infantry battalions were moved from the German interior to the Western Front. More troops were garnered by reducing the number of civil administrators, transferring trainees from the navy and air force, calling up soldiers on leave, and utilizing convalescents. The German people responded to the emergency with determination and sacrifice, not revolt and insurrection. Their will to resist was only strengthened by Allied bombing and demands for unconditional surrender.¹²

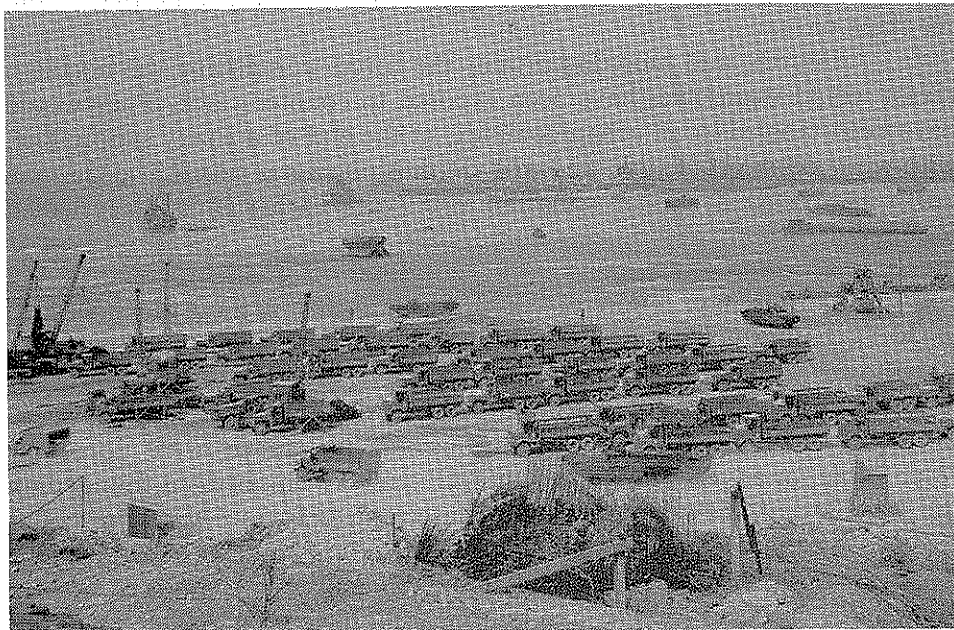
An invading force would meet this toughening resistance with its own declining ability to fight. Vehicle attrition and the necessity to allocate forces to secure the invasion's flanks and supply lines would dilute its combat power. Its air support would be diminished because forward airfields would be preoccupied with the airlift of supplies.

The experience of Operation Market-Garden, Montgomery's less-ambitious offensive launched on 17 September, is illustrative of the Allies' inability to advance in the face of increasing German resistance. The British Second Army, with priority of supply and the use of three airborne divisions, was able to advance only 60 miles in six days. The flanks of the salient that it carved out were subject to heavy counterattack even as its spearhead moved forward. The offensive was not able to achieve its objective of a Rhine crossing at Arnhem, which was merely the first step of any advance into Germany. This force contained three of the six corps which were supposed to take the Ruhr and Berlin and end the war. It is hard to imagine how the additional US divisions would have so drastically increased the capabilities of this force, especially since German resistance was bound to be even tougher within Germany itself.

Also, the power of Montgomery's northern thrust would not even amount to "Market-Garden plus the American First Army." Since his larger operation required a portion of air transport just to supply the ground forces, it could not have employed the airborne divisions and the entire First Army simultaneously.

It can be argued that Montgomery did not get all he had asked for in Market-Garden and did not launch it as soon as he would have liked. But that misses the point completely. The relevant fact is that the whole conception of the single thrust was based on a faulty premise. The German nation had no intention of surrendering merely because an Allied army made an appearance on its soil. German resistance would have coalesced somewhere within Germany. The logical place for this was the Ruhr. Essential to Germany, it was also an ideal defensive position. The Ruhr contained 20 major cities and a maze of industrial complexes. Furthermore, it was traversed by three canal systems. Realistically, the Allied effort could not have been expected to accomplish more than the capture of the Ruhr. Yet, if the Ruhr was such a crucial asset, wouldn't its prospective capture justify the northern thrust? It would not, for the following reasons.

First, in light of the increasing German ability and disposition to fight, the speedy capture of the Ruhr was not a foregone conclusion. An envelopment would have been the preferred approach. But the lack of Allied activity elsewhere would have allowed the Germans to concentrate all



Courtesy USAMHI

Montgomery wanted to send 40 divisions into the Ruhr, but found it impossible. The reason: insufficient logistics. Shown is a transfer point on the Normandy beach in July 1944 from which cargo was sent to supply and ammo dumps in France.

available resources against the perimeter of the encirclement. Troops still inside the Ruhr could attack outward against the same perimeter. Any attempt to clear the Ruhr of these troops would likely develop into an urban slugging match in which the Allied trump cards of artillery and air power could not be employed to their maximum effectiveness.

Second, in order to undertake the effort, the Allies would have had to forsake other valid objectives. These included cutting off the German troops who were retreating from southern France and clearing German troops from the approaches to Antwerp. The latter was necessary before the port could be used to break the logistical logjam. Canadian troops were poised to open Antwerp simultaneously with the thrust into Germany; however, their initial attempts failed and they were unable to accomplish their task until they received the support of an American division and an entire British corps. This support would not have been available if the northern thrust had been launched, since the British would have been in Germany and the American division would have been grounded for lack of fuel and transport.

Third, the lack of logistical support would have exposed Patton to possible counterattack. This counterattack did come later in September, with disastrous results for the Germans. The outcome might have been different had the Third Army been rendered immobile. The ability to maneuver was especially crucial to American tanks because their inadequate armament usually forced them to engage their German counterparts from the flank or rear.

Fourth, and most important, the forces comprising the northern thrust would themselves have been exposed to counterattack. They would have been tangled in an urban complex, at the end of a shaky supply line, with weak flank protection, and with diminishing air support. The German army had faced a similar situation two years earlier in a place called Stalingrad.

A major German counteroffensive was launched in the Ardennes on 16 December 1944. A British historian called this the "penalty" Eisenhower paid for his broad-front strategy.¹³ This is perhaps the cruelest myth that has arisen from the broad front versus single thrust controversy. It implies that Eisenhower's decisions in September were somehow responsible for adverse consequences in December. This myth is founded on the fallacy that there were adverse consequences to the Ardennes counteroffensive that were avoidable. The Battle of the Bulge did result in heavy American casualties. But these were avoidable only in the minds of wishful thinkers who believe the German nation could have been defeated without additional heavy fighting. Its other consequences were hardly adverse to the Allies. The Americans were able to shift forces from both north and south of the threatened area in order to contain, blunt, and destroy the coun-

terthrust. German spearheads ran out of fuel at Stoumont and Celles. The counteroffensive failed completely, resulting in the destruction of German mobile reserves on the Western Front.

The Allied victory can be traced to two factors: the mutually supporting Allied disposition of forces, and the German inability to support their counteroffensive logistically. Both of these factors are directly attributable to Eisenhower's decision to retain the broad front as the means of advancing into Germany. Mutual supportability was one of the broad front's foundations. After the failure of Market-Garden, the desire to preserve this condition required a halt west of the Rhine. This positioning limited German options to either passive defense or offensive operations west of the Rhine, with their accompanying logistical difficulties. Hitler followed his custom of opting for bold offensive initiatives and chose to attack despite those difficulties.

If the Allies had pursued the strategy of the single thrust, Hitler would have had the opportunity to launch his counterattack against an exposed salient east of the Rhine. Neither of the Allied conditions of victory in the Ardennes would have been present under these circumstances. The force in the Ruhr could have expected little support from the grounded American divisions. The Third Army would have been over 100 miles away, with empty fuel tanks. The Germans could have further insured against a relief effort by using the Rhine as a buffer for their left flank.

Also, the logistical shoe would have been on the other foot, easing the German burdens and increasing those of the Allies. Finally, Allied airpower, which was instrumental in the Ardennes victory once the weather allowed its employment, would have been less effective over the Ruhr. Conversely, the *Luftwaffe* would have been more active over its own territory. Considering all of these factors, the "penalty" for use of the northern thrust could have been much greater than that incurred in the Ardennes. It could have yielded even greater losses of men and material; it could have yielded disaster rather than victory.

Eisenhower was, on his part, overly optimistic in early September, but not to the point of relinquishing his hold on a realistic perception of German strength within the *Reich*. He supported Montgomery's attempt to gain a quick bridgehead across the Rhine. However, Eisenhower intended no further advance into Germany until the Rhine also had been crossed on a wide front and the Allied armies had paused for what he considered inevitable regrouping and refitting.¹⁴ The failure of Market-Garden determined that the preparations would take place west of the Rhine.

None of this is meant to imply that Eisenhower retained the broad front because of any precognition about the Ardennes. He certainly did not anticipate Hitler's winter counteroffensive. But Eisenhower's choice of strategies, made in part to avoid a debacle inside Germany, helped to avoid

a similar debacle in Belgium. It mitigated the adverse effects of the German counteroffensive and enhanced the ability of the Allies to turn the counteroffensive to their own advantage.

The events of the last four months of 1944 thus reveal that boldness is not always a virtue in warfare. Military decisions, as those of other disciplines, should be based on a balancing of an objective's value, its likelihood of attainment, and the severity of the penalty that would accompany failure. Boldness is an asset when used to implement decisions founded on this process. It is pure folly when cited as justification for pursuing illusory prospects for success while ignoring more concrete prospects for disaster.

It is not surprising that the illusion of the single bold thrust has found proponents among postwar historians. The seductive lure of the audacious masterstroke is especially potent in Western democracies. Nations grown accustomed to instant gratification have little tolerance for a long struggle, military or otherwise. The tendency to embrace the idea of a single thrust, with its speedy shortcut to victory, is probably stronger today than ever before.

A close examination of the facts surrounding this particular controversy, however, reveals the almost nonexistent foundation upon which the strategy of the single thrust was constructed. It shows that a determined enemy is not defeated until his material ability to wage war is eliminated. Such an examination also reaffirms that logistics is the mistress of all military operations. The commander who forgets this runs the risk of finding himself in a position similar to that of Montgomery, professing 40-division aspirations, but possessing 18-division resources.

NOTES

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3. Weigley, pp. 261, 277-78.
4. Ellis, II, 2. For an interesting insider's account of US logistical problems, see Harold L. Mack, *The Critical Error of World War II*, National Security Affairs Issue Paper 81-1 (Washington: National Defense University, 1981).
5. Roland G. Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support of the Armies* (Washington: Dept. of the Army, 1953), I, 491. For a compressed treatment by Ruppenthal of the concerns of the present article, see his chapter titled "Logistics and the Broad-Front Strategy," in *Command Decisions*, ed. Kent R. Greenfield (Washington: Dept. of the Army, 1960).
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9. Van Creveld, pp. 225-27; Weigley, pp. 280-83.
10. Forrest C. Pogue, *The Supreme Command* (Washington: Dept. of the Army, 1954), p. 244.
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13. Alexander McKee, *The Race for the Rhine Bridges* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), p. 314.
14. Alfred D. Chandler, ed., *The Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), pp. 2120, 2143-44.