

Book Review: Nigel Hamilton, *Commander in Chief*

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The second volume of Nigel Hamilton's FDR trilogy, *Commander in Chief*, covers the year 1943.¹ The theme of the book is "FDR's Battle with Churchill" – the author argues that FDR forced Churchill to agree to a cross-Channel assault in 1944 despite Churchill's "impetuous, ever-evasive," and "dangerously naïve" efforts to change it. In Hamilton's view, Churchill's strategy "would arguably have lost the war" while Roosevelt's strategy "saved civilization" (pp. xi-xv).

This work contains numerous examples of poor scholarship. Hamilton repeatedly misrepresents his sources. He fails to quote sources fully, leaving out words that entirely change the meaning of the quoted sentence. He quotes selectively, including sentences from his sources that support his case but ignoring other important sentences that contradict his case. He brackets his own conjectures between quotes from his sources, leaving the false impression that the source supports his conjectures. He invents conversations and emotional reactions for the historical figures in the book. Finally, he fails to provide any source at all for some of his major arguments.

¹ Nigel Hamilton, *Commander in Chief* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2016).

Hamilton bases his discussion of FDR's strategy for 1943 on a conversation between Roosevelt and Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King that took place on December 4, 1942. Unfortunately, Hamilton's claims about what Roosevelt and King said are not sustained by his source. For example, he states that King was "skeptical of the chances of a cross-Channel attack succeeding in 1943" and was "alarmed" when Harry Hopkins advocated it during King's White House visit (p. 35). There is no evidence of this skepticism or alarm in King's diary, which is online.² Hamilton argues that Roosevelt did not want to liberate France in 1943 because he wanted U.S. forces to gain fighting experience in the Mediterranean before invading France in 1944:

"The Mediterranean thus offered [U.S. forces] a priceless opportunity: namely to rehearse and perfect the command and combat skills they would need in fighting ruthless, highly disciplined, strongly motivated German forces in Europe, *before* being expected to undertake anything as daunting as a cross-channel invasion... Battle experience, then, was the crux of the matter: the reason why the President so profoundly disagreed with [Hopkins, Stimson, Marshall] and with all the voices in Washington baying again for an immediate cross-Channel Second Front" (pp. 36-37).

Hamilton claims "the President's own words" show that he was determined to prevent a "suicidal" Second Front until U.S. forces had learned "how to defeat the Germans in battle" (p. 38).

² Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Library and Archives Canada <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/prime-ministers/william-lyon-mackenzie-king/Pages/diaries-william-lyon-mackenzie-king.aspx>. The December 1942 discussion with Roosevelt is Item 24809 through Item 24816.

However, the President's words show no such thing. Nowhere in King's diary for December 1942 does King state that he and the President discussed the need for Allied forces to gain combat experience.³ Hamilton intersperses actual quotes from the diary with his own conjectures about what the President believed. This creates the misleading impression that King's diary supports Hamilton's theory.

Hamilton, in praising Roosevelt's decision to avoid a "suicidal" Second Front in 1942 and 1943, and in pouring scorn on those who wanted a Second Front, neglects to mention that *Roosevelt himself* had advocated an early Second Front. As noted in my review of *The Mantle of Command*, in the first months of 1942, Roosevelt repeatedly urged Churchill to launch a Second Front in France later in 1942. In May 1942, Roosevelt told Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov to inform Stalin that Britain and America would create a Second Front in 1942. Hamilton did not mention any of this in his first book. Roosevelt's desire for a Second Front in 1942 creates problems for Hamilton's view that Roosevelt was wiser and more realistic than his subordinates. It also weakens Hamilton's argument that Roosevelt wanted Allied forces to gain more combat experience before liberating France. If Roosevelt, in December 1942, thought combat experience was important enough to require delaying the Second Front until 1944, why did he not think this when he advocated a Second Front in early 1942?

Hamilton examines a January 1943 meeting between FDR and the Joint Chiefs. The participants discussed the British preference for a landing in Sicily versus Marshall's proposal for a landing in Brittany. Hamilton considers that FDR was "shocked"

³ Hamilton repeats the claim that FDR said this to King on pp. 50 and 84.

at the idea of using “inexperienced” troops in France instead of gaining “successful battle experience in the Mediterranean” (p. 57). His source, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, shows that the participants did not mention battle experience at all.⁴ Hamilton puts his theory that FDR thought Mediterranean operations were “a good opportunity to gain tough, amphibious battle experience” (p. 59) between quotes from this source, which says nothing about battle experience, leaving the disingenuous impression that the source supports his theory.

Hamilton contends that in preparing for Casablanca, the British decided to “pretend to be agreeable” to suspending Mediterranean operations in June in order to launch a cross-Channel attack in August. However, the British expected that in due course, Roosevelt would agree that a 1943 Second Front was impossible, and thus Mediterranean operations would continue (p. 73). The source shows that before Casablanca, Churchill fully supported ceasing Mediterranean operations in June in order to land in France in August. The British chiefs correctly suspected, however, that the Americans did not intend to take the offensive in France in 1943 and had diverted large forces to the Pacific.⁵

Hamilton observes that in the many documents the Joint Chiefs sent to the White House, Roosevelt “had never seen a single mention of the need for battle experience” (p. 82). The author takes this as a sign that the Joint Chiefs lacked common

⁴ “Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting at the White House, January 7, 1943,” *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS): The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, ed. Fredrick Aandahl et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1958), Document 329:505–514.

⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Road to Victory, 1941–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 269-272.

sense. Inasmuch as Roosevelt himself never mentioned the need for battle experience either – notwithstanding the author’s false claims to that effect – the proper conclusion is that this was not a major consideration in American strategic planning. The author contends that General Mark Clark, who was Eisenhower’s deputy during Torch, informed General Marshall that there was “no chance whatever” of a 1943 Second Front succeeding, and U.S. troops would need “a long period of training” before they landed in France (p. 85). Hamilton’s source does not state that Clark said “no chance whatever.”⁶ That aside, Clark’s call for “a long period of training” does not support Hamilton’s argument about combat experience. Training is not combat experience. Most of the troops that fought in Normandy had extensive training but no battle experience.

The author asserts that Churchill argued, at the May 1943 Washington Conference, that the Allies should abandon Overlord until 1945, and instead wage war in Italy and the Balkans in 1943 and 1944. He cites Admiral Leahy’s diary to this effect. The author also cites the *Foreign Relations* volume, which does not show that Churchill opposed a Second Front in 1944. The author ignores Churchill’s assertion that he “earnestly desired to undertake a full-scale invasion of the Continent from the United Kingdom as soon as possible” (i.e., 1944).⁷ He also ignores Churchill’s statement that military planners should study

⁶ “Joint Chiefs of Staff Minutes, January 15, 1941,” *FRUS*, The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943, Document 340:559.

⁷ “Combined Chiefs of Staff Minutes, May 12, 1943,” *FRUS*, The Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, ed. William Slany and Richardson Dougall (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1970), Document 29:27.

how to wage war against Japan in 1945 under the assumption Germany was defeated in 1944.⁸ If Churchill wanted to postpone Overlord until 1945, as Hamilton claims, then saying that planners should assume German defeat in 1944 made no sense.

Hamilton writes that Roosevelt contradicted Churchill's strategic concept and "categorically" disagreed "with any Italian adventure beyond the seizure of Sicily and Sardinia" (p. 210). *Foreign Relations* does not support this statement. Roosevelt agreed with Churchill that the large Allied armies in the Mediterranean "must be kept employed" after the conquest of Sicily. Rather than forbidding any forays into Italy, Roosevelt indicated that he wanted planners to study *how much* of Italy the Allies should occupy, and what this would cost.⁹ Hamilton previously argued that Roosevelt wanted his troops to gain battle experience in the Mediterranean before Overlord. If so, then logically Roosevelt would support invading Italy. Where else could battle experience be gained?

Hamilton states that the British Chiefs of Staff wished to defer Overlord to 1945 or 1946. He discusses the British and American memoranda presented at the Combined Chiefs of Staff meeting on May 13.¹⁰ He claims that the British Chief, General Brooke, had "lost faith in the essential feasibility of a Second

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰ "Memorandum by the United States Chiefs of Staff, Washington, Undated," *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 85:222-223; and "Memorandum by the British Chiefs of Staff, 12 May, 1943," *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 86:223-227.

Front in 1944” (p. 212). Brooke’s strategy paper, he writes, urged an amphibious assault on Italy:

“This ‘continuance of Mediterranean operations’ would ‘of course have repercussions elsewhere and will affect BOLERO,’ the cross-Channel assault, as well as operations in the Pacific, the document allowed. However, the fruits of Italian collapse would, the British chiefs argued, be worth the cost of delaying the cross-Channel invasion for several years...” (p. 214)

This is a false interpretation of the British position. Brooke’s paper proceeded from the assumption that the Allies would conduct a “full scale assault against the Continent in 1944 as early as possible.”¹¹ The question was what to do between the fall of Italy and the assault on France. Brooke proposed invading Italy as the *prerequisite*, not the *substitute*, for invading France in 1944. In particular, Brooke considered that eliminating Italy would allow the Allies to “mount a threat... against the south of France in the spring of 1944, which would greatly increase the chances of success of cross-Channel operations,” and would “ease the task confronting an army landing in Europe from the United Kingdom.”¹² Hamilton dismisses Brooke’s argument about threatening southern France as “irrelevant” by omitting Brooke’s statement that this would facilitate a cross-Channel attack (p. 215). This leaves the false impression that Brooke proposed *only* invading southern France and not attacking across the Channel as well. In an honest reading of Brooke’s paper, he very clearly accepted that Overlord would occur in 1944. Nowhere does the paper support Hamilton’s claim that Brooke

¹¹ Ibid., 224. Hamilton does not cite this sentence.

¹² Ibid., 225-226. See also “Combined Chiefs of Staff Minutes, May 13, 1943,” *FRUS*, The Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 31:42.

wanted “several years” delay in Overlord. The paper only referred to “some” delay, not years.¹³

The author approvingly cites Marshall’s statement that invading Italy in late 1943 would preclude a successful cross-Channel assault in 1944 without making the obvious point that subsequent history proved this argument utterly wrong.¹⁴ The Allies did invade Italy in late 1943, and were nevertheless able to liberate France in 1944.

Hamilton misrepresents Brooke’s rejoinder. He contends that Brooke did not want to conduct a cross-Channel invasion in 1944 because Britain lacked manpower, and therefore major operations would not be possible “until 1945 or 1946” (p. 216). Brooke was not arguing that Mediterranean operations should replace Overlord in 1944. Brooke argued that eliminating Italy in 1943 would complement and facilitate Overlord in 1944. If the Allies did not continue operations in Italy in 1943, Brooke stated, then only an indecisive seizure of a lodgment in France would be possible in 1944 against an undistracted Germany.¹⁵ The validity of this argument is not relevant here; the point is that Hamilton misrepresented it.

The author says nothing about the statement of the British Chiefs the following day:

“It was their firm intention to carry out ROUNDUP at the first moment when the conditions were such that the operations would

¹³ “Memorandum by the British Chiefs of Staff, 12 May 1943,” *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 86:225.

¹⁴ To the contrary, Hamilton insists Marshall was correct (p. 241).

¹⁵ “Combined Chiefs of Staff Minutes, May 13, 1943,” *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 31:43-44. See also “Combined Chiefs of Staff Minutes, May 15, 1943, *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 37:82.

contribute decisively to the defeat of Germany. These conditions might arise this year, but in any case, it was the firm belief of the British Chiefs of Staff that they would arise next year.”¹⁶

Nor does he discuss the paper the British prepared during the conference that showed how the elimination of Italy in 1943 would facilitate a cross-Channel attack in April 1944.¹⁷ Overall, the British were not being intransigent, disingenuous, or deceitful, and were clearly *not* advocating delaying the cross-Channel attack until 1945 or 1946 as Hamilton claims (p. 217).

On May 20, the Combined Chiefs resolved to establish the men and equipment in Britain needed to land in France in May 1944. Meanwhile, the Allies would mount operations to eliminate Italy from the war.¹⁸ Hamilton explains this seemingly miraculous British retreat as the product of the Combined Chiefs convivial holiday weekend at Williamsburg (p. 232) as well as “Marshall’s tact and adroitness” (p. 233). A better explanation is that the British did not, as Hamilton argues, oppose a 1944 Second Front in the first place. The author fails to mention that the Americans also retreated from their position of terminating Mediterranean operations after Sicily.

The author alleges that at this point, the British Chiefs were at odds with Churchill, who still opposed a Second Front in 1944. He cites the Mackenzie King diary, but again selectively

¹⁶ “Combined Chiefs of Staff Minutes, May 14, 1943,” *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 35:53. See also “Combined Chiefs of Staff Minutes, May 15, 1943, *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 37:80.

¹⁷ “Memorandum by the British Joint Planning Staff, 17 May 1943,” *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 95: 261-272.

¹⁸ “Resolutions by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, 20 May 1943,” *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 97:281-282.

quotes it to distort its effect. For example, Hamilton states that the Canadian Ambassador to the U.S., Leighton McCarthy, said that the American plan was for “invasion from the North” and the British opposed this (p. 236). The full quote is “the so-called American plan was for invasion from the North *this year*” (i.e., 1943).¹⁹ As Hamilton previously argued that Roosevelt was correct to oppose a suicidal 1943 landing, he should have argued that the British were also correct to oppose it. Instead, he misrepresents the nature of their opposition.

Next, Hamilton describes a conversation between Mackenzie King and Churchill, in which Churchill expressed opposition to a Second Front on the grounds it would repeat the 1942 Dieppe fiasco. Hamilton claims this indicates that Churchill opposed a Second Front in 1944. Actually, Churchill told King that he opposed a Second Front *in the summer or autumn of 1943*. This is clear from his statement, which Hamilton even quotes, that at the time of the conversation (May 1943), only one American and sixteen Commonwealth divisions were in Britain (p. 237). Churchill was quite correct to state that this force was inadequate for a landing in France. Far from being “gobsmacked” or “alarmed” at Churchill’s alcohol-inspired words, as the author claims (p. 238), King actually wrote, “I said I was glad to hear him say he would not take unwarranted risks of invasion from Britain. That I thought that was sound.”²⁰

Similarly, Hamilton misrepresents Churchill’s question and answer session with Congressmen on May 19. He considers that Churchill publicly opposed a Second Front in 1944, when in fact Churchill opposed a Second Front in 1943. Churchill said he opposed an “immature attack” with 18 divisions, including just one U.S. division. This could only have referred to 1943, not the

¹⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, Item 25366, 18 May 1943. Emphasis added.

²⁰ Mackenzie King Diary, Item 25369, 20 May 1943. The author’s persistent habit, in all three books, of inventing emotional reactions for various characters, is extremely irritating.

spring of 1944 (p. 239). Hamilton's claim that Churchill was imprudently and shamelessly "opposing the President's strategy... behind the President's back" (p. 240) and playing a "dangerous double game" (p. 240, 246) is therefore false.

Hamilton cites the Mackenzie King diary in reference to a May 20 meeting, and wrongly argues that Churchill spoke against a 1944 Second Front (p. 246). Again, Churchill was opposing a 1943 Second Front with the insufficient strength then available.²¹ The author scoffs that "if bombing was Churchill's only plan to defeat Germany, it did not sound very convincing to King" (p. 247). King did not actually express this skepticism, because Churchill did not say that bombing was his only plan to defeat Germany. Hamilton omits Churchill's statement that bombing might demoralize the German people, but to defeat Germany, "it was the army, however, that would have to be defeated."²² In other words, Churchill recognized the need for a decisive ground campaign in Europe.

Hamilton states that at a private meeting between King and Roosevelt, the President asked how Churchill would react to being excluded from a Roosevelt-Stalin meeting "given Churchill's erratic position over a Second Front" (pp. 247-248). Roosevelt did ask King how Churchill would react to a Roosevelt-Stalin meeting, but did not say he wanted to exclude Churchill due to his position on the Second Front.²³ This is another instance of the author misleading the reader about what the source said. He repeats this on page 267. He quotes a source that stated FDR wanted to meet Stalin alone; then inserts his own theory that this was because FDR didn't want "Churchill embarrassing him by his opposition to a cross-Channel assault" (which the source did not mention at all); then quotes the source again, giving the false

²¹ Mackenzie King Diary, Item 25406, 20 May 1943.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mackenzie King Diary, Item 25412, 21 May 1943.

impression that the source supports his claim.²⁴ Hamilton is oblivious to the real reason that FDR wanted to meet Stalin without Churchill. Namely, FDR wanted to discuss a postwar world order based on U.S.-Soviet cooperation, Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, decolonization, and other principles that Churchill opposed.

The author mischaracterizes the argument on the final day of the conference. He contends that Churchill urged an invasion of Yugoslavia, Greece, and the Aegean (p. 251). In fact, the principal thrust of Churchill's remarks was to oppose an invasion of Sardinia after Sicily, as some Americans preferred, in favor of an invasion of southern Italy.²⁵ When Churchill met Eisenhower in North Africa in late May, Churchill advised Eisenhower to invade Italy – not the Balkans or Greece – after conquering Sicily.

The author criticizes a paper that the War Department prepared for Roosevelt. This paper argued that the Allies should have concentrated a million men in Britain for a 1943 Second Front instead of invading Africa and Sicily. Hamilton contends the authors of this paper “egregiously” ignored the issue of combat experience, and pretends that Roosevelt “shook his head” at the paper's naïveté (p. 294). The President's actual reaction is unknown. Hamilton fails to note that the paper then argued strongly for denying any further Mediterranean operations in order to concentrate in Britain for a Second Front in 1944.

Hamilton contends that prior to the Quebec conference, Roosevelt informed Marshall that he wanted the Allies to invade Italy up to a line north of Rome. His source, a memorandum from

²⁴ His source was Geoffrey C. Ward, *Closest Companion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 227.

²⁵ “Combined Chiefs of Staff Minutes, May 24, 1943,” *FRUS*, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, Document 75:193-195.

Marshall, supports this claim.²⁶ The source does not, however, support Hamilton's view of the President's reasoning – namely, that the Allies could not simply do nothing for nine months after capturing Sicily, and should instead maintain the offensive initiative in Italy (pp. 294 – 296). Hamilton does not acknowledge that this was *precisely the argument of Churchill and the British Chiefs*, which Hamilton disparaged for the previous 300 pages and would later disparage again.

Hamilton argues that at Quebec in 1943, Roosevelt demanded that Churchill “adhere to the Overlord strategy” or Britain would not receive the fruits of American atomic research (p. 313). The author insists Churchill was “shocked” at this deal, and adhering to Overlord was an embarrassing “climbdown.” But he was forced to comply (p. 313). The author cites no source for this conversation or Churchill's supposed emotional reaction. Such a quid pro quo may be plausible, but should be clearly presented as hypothetical not factual, and not accompanied with an entirely invented dramatic conversation.²⁷

If such a quid pro quo existed, it was if anything highly favorable to the British. They received enormously valuable atomic secrets in exchange for merely reaffirming the commitment to Overlord that they already made. As Hamilton

²⁶ Hamilton again uses the technique of putting his interpretation between quotes from a source that does not support it. The source is online at <https://www.marshallfoundation.org/library/digital-archive/memorandum-for-general-handly-9/>

²⁷ Philip Padgett devotes an entire book to the thesis that British agreement to Overlord was the price of access to American atomic secrets. Yet even this author cites no source for a pre-Quebec “personal discussion” that supposedly resulted in a quid pro quo. Philip Padgett, *Advocating Overlord* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books), 228-229.

himself notes, the Overlord “decision had already been taken in May 1943, at the Trident Conference, and in writing” (p. 319).

The author returns to his scathing attacks on the Italian campaign, which he calls, “the most ill-conceived offensive of the war... it would drag on for two years... incur almost a third of a million Allied casualties... Churchill and his military team completely underestimated the German will to fight” (p. 320). This not even thirty pages after he praised Roosevelt for wanting to maintain the initiative and to force the Germans to fight in Italy!²⁸ If the Italian campaign was ill-conceived, then the Americans, and especially Roosevelt, must share the blame. The British could not invade Italy without American assistance. Roosevelt could have vetoed an Italian campaign but decided it would proceed. Yet the author is too enamored of his subject to consider this.

Hamilton concludes that although the Germans suffered substantially more casualties than the Allies in Italy, the campaign was still a mistake. He scoffs at the notion the Italian campaign contributed to the success of Overlord (pp. 328 – 329). One certainly imagines that German commanders in France and Russia could have used the 434,000 men killed, wounded, or captured in Italy to good effect. More importantly, Hamilton’s criticism of this campaign contradicts his previous praise for Roosevelt’s desire to “gain battle experience” in 1943, and his

²⁸ In the next book, Hamilton referred approvingly to “Eisenhower’s strategy of fighting in Italy to tie down German forces so that Overlord would face less opposition.” The author apparently forgot that he had previously attributed this strategy to Churchill and Brooke, and poured great scorn on them for devising it. Nigel Hamilton, *War and Peace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2019), 70.

praise of Roosevelt for ordering the campaign. His contempt for Churchill and Brooke alone (p. 329) is unwarranted.

Like many authors who consider the British deceitful and eager to abandon their commitment to Overlord, Hamilton entirely ignores the essential British role in logistical preparations for Overlord. The movement of hundreds of thousands of troops and millions of tons of supplies into Britain, the construction of camps and airfields, the improvement of port facilities – all this required total British cooperation, employed scarce British labor, and demonstrated British commitment to the operation. If the British had wanted to prevent an Overlord in 1944, they could simply have slowed the pace of this work.

In all three works, one of the weakest elements is the discussion of the Roosevelt-Stalin relationship and the Roosevelt-Stalin-Churchill strategic triangle. Hamilton contends that a surly telegram from Stalin to Roosevelt in August 1943 “served to bring the leaders of the Western alliance closer to each other than Stalin could ever have imagined,” and argues that “in terms of Soviet intentions, the President was very much on the same page as the Prime Minister” (p. 344). Nothing could be further from the truth. Roosevelt and Churchill had entirely different views on the proper policy towards Stalin, and Roosevelt consistently refused to form a united front with Churchill to oppose Stalin. Hamilton’s erroneous views on the relationship between the Big Three are even more apparent in the final book in the trilogy.

Overall, the book is a disappointment. The author fails to make a convincing case that the need for “battle experience” caused Roosevelt to postpone the liberation of France until 1944. His portrayal of the battle between Roosevelt and Churchill is marred by shoddy scholarship and misrepresentation of the

British case. Roosevelt and Churchill certainly disagreed over the political objectives of the war and the military strategy needed to secure them. However, Hamilton does not properly understand the political objectives of Roosevelt and Churchill, and this would prevent him from giving a truly effective account of their proposed military strategies even if he did present Churchill's case honestly. A further source of confusion for Hamilton is Roosevelt and Churchill's attitude towards Stalin, and how this affected their proposed military strategies. In this book, as in the first book, Stalin is largely a secondary, off-stage presence. The central importance of Roosevelt's vision of the postwar U.S.-Soviet relationship is therefore neglected in favor of the author's obsessive desire to heap scorn upon Churchill.