

Book Review: Nigel Hamilton, *The Mantle of Command*

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Nigel Hamilton's *The Mantle of Command* is the first book in a trilogy about Franklin D. Roosevelt's leadership in World War II.¹ The book demonstrates that Roosevelt was an active leader who made important strategic decisions, and also developed a vision for postwar world order even before America entered the war. Unfortunately, the author is not objective in his appraisal of Roosevelt and Churchill – the President is portrayed far too uncritically, and the Prime Minister far too critically.

The Mantle of Command covers the period between the August 1941 Argentia Summit and the Anglo-American landings in North Africa in November 1942. One could question this choice of periodization, and in particular, Hamilton's lack of attention to Roosevelt's decisions before Pearl Harbor other than those related to the Argentia Conference. FDR made many important strategic decisions before Pearl Harbor, especially in the critical period from June to December 1941, and often acted against the advice of the military chiefs and his civilian cabinet. Nevertheless, the major focus of this book is the first year after Pearl Harbor.

¹ Nigel Hamilton, *The Mantle of Command* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014).

Hamilton's discussion of the Argentinia Conference mainly focuses on the writing of the Atlantic Charter. He correctly perceives that the lofty principles of the Charter undercut the political and economic basis of the British Empire – colonial rule and Imperial Preference. At the time, Churchill chose to believe that the Atlantic Charter's principles would not be applied to the British Empire, but in the end, they were. More importantly, Hamilton completely ignores the discussion at Argentinia of the growing menace of Japan. The Japanese occupied southern French Indochina in July 1941. Churchill wanted Roosevelt to issue a stern warning to the Japanese to make no further moves. Moreover, at Argentinia, Roosevelt decided to expand the flow of B-17 bombers to the Philippines in order to deter Japan from moving into Southeast Asia or against Russia. A better analysis of these issues is available elsewhere.²

Hamilton's chapters on Pearl Harbor examine the three days in December 1941 between the attack itself and the German declaration of war on the United States. The author omits any discussion of the evolution of Japanese-American relations in the months before the attack, and quickly dismisses "conspiracy theories" about Pearl Harbor. He chooses instead to discuss what Roosevelt did on December 7 and the following days. This adds little to our understanding of Pearl Harbor, and merely echoes the standard interpretation that Washington was surprised by the Japanese offensive.

Hamilton devotes considerable attention to Hitler's decision to declare war on the United States. He does not grasp Hitler's intention to use the German declaration of war to induce

² Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 146-160.

Japan to cooperate militarily with Germany in 1942. He argues that Hitler's declaration was a huge mistake, without which Congress would not have authorized a declaration of war on Germany. This is doubtful, given the huge shift in US public opinion in favor of declaring war on Germany after Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt was preparing the public for just such a declaration in case Hitler did not declare war. For example, in a radio address on December 9, he said that Germany and Italy already "consider themselves at war with the United States at this moment." He argued that America could not afford to eliminate the Japanese danger and leave the rest of the world "dominated by Hitler."³

Hamilton challenges the "myth" that when Churchill came to Washington in December 1941, he persuaded FDR to support an American invasion of French North Africa. Hamilton considers this an invention of Churchill's postwar memoirs. In Hamilton's view, FDR's interest in a landing in Africa began in July 1941, when he ordered the War Department to create the so-called "Victory Plan." Hamilton calls "the President's Victory Plan" his "blueprint... for prosecuting a future global war [which] had borne the President's imprint and imprimatur on every page" (p. 109). He contends that the Plan emphasized "at the President's specific direction" an early American attack on French North Africa (p. 108).

This interpretation is problematic. The War Department wrote the Victory Program because Roosevelt directed it to determine the munitions requirements for defeating the Axis. Roosevelt did not order it to provide a blueprint for prosecuting the war. The officers who developed the program generated

³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, December 09, 1941, archived at The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fireside-chat-12>.

assumptions about how the war would progress, in order to guide their planning, but neither the Army official history nor the sources Hamilton cites indicate that Roosevelt personally intervened in the creation of the plan or provided any specific strategic direction such as to attack French North Africa.⁴ The document that Hamilton quotes at length is the “Joint Board Estimate of United States Over-All Production Requirements.” General Marshall and Admiral Stark submitted this to Roosevelt in September 1941. Thus, the plan reflected their thinking, not the President’s. Far from being a prescient blueprint, the “Army Requirements Study” appendix to the Victory Program assumed that by July 1942, Germany would have occupied Russia up to the Volga, and Japan would remain bogged down in China and thus would not attack America.

Churchill had a valid claim to originating the idea of a landing in French North Africa. He pushed for an American landing in Morocco in a telegram to Roosevelt in May 1941. During staff talks at the Argentia Conference, the British argued explicitly for the use of American troops in French North Africa.⁵ Hamilton’s weak discussion of Argentia, focused on the Atlantic Charter, fails to take note of these points.

The author’s refusal to give Churchill any credit for the idea of invading French North Africa is in keeping with the tone of all three books. Hamilton consistently portrays Roosevelt as

⁴ On the Victory Program, the Army official history is Mark S. Watson, *Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1950), 331-366. Hamilton cites Mark A. Stoler, *The Politics of the Second Front* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977) and *Allies and Adversaries* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁵ Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1941-1942* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1953), 55.

the only leader with good strategic sense and honest motives. Those who opposed Roosevelt – especially Churchill – are always represented as foolish, cowardly, selfish, or deceitful.

The discussion of the Washington Conference of December 1941 examines personal relations between Roosevelt and Churchill, the Declaration by United Nations, the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, and the decision to create supreme theater commanders in each combat theater. What Hamilton fails to note about the Declaration by United Nations is that it called for “complete victory” over the enemy and stated that the signatories would not make a separate peace or armistice with the enemy. This was, in effect, a call for “unconditional surrender” over a year before FDR uttered that phrase at Casablanca. Furthermore, it reflected the fear, which persisted through 1943, that the Soviets would make a separate peace with Germany. Hamilton correctly notes that the purpose of the Combined Chiefs of Staff was to ensure the war was run from Washington, not London. Hamilton does not appreciate that by creating the position of a single theater commander, FDR was clearly looking ahead to the day when British and American interests would diverge. An American theater commander could ensure that military campaigns unfolded in accordance with Roosevelt’s views.

The major omission in the chapters on the Washington Conference is any discussion of Churchill’s strategic proposals. Churchill called for an Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa in 1942 and for the liberation of Western Europe in 1943. As noted earlier, Hamilton considers that invading French North Africa was Roosevelt’s idea, and he argues in all three books in the trilogy that Churchill was reluctant to launch a Second Front.

His failure to address this evidence against both arguments is therefore a serious error.

Hamilton examines the fall of Singapore and the Philippines at length; and devotes considerable attention to Roosevelt's efforts in early 1942 to persuade Churchill to grant independence to India. This is generally well done, but leads to a questionable, poorly supported conclusion. He contends that on the advice of Harry Hopkins, Churchill decided to distract Roosevelt from the issue of India by accepting General Marshall's April proposal for a Second Front in late 1942 (p. 252). Hamilton characterizes this as deceitful, because the British were in fact totally opposed to a Second Front in 1942.

Hamilton entirely neglects the origin of the plan that Marshall took to London. The author does not understand that Roosevelt intended the Second Front proposal to dissuade Stalin from signing a separate peace with Germany and from demanding Anglo-American recognition of the USSR's 1941 frontiers. Hamilton mischaracterizes the nature of the proposal. Marshall proposed a major assault on France in April 1943, and suggested a possible limited attack in September 1942 if either Russia or Germany seemed on the verge of collapse. The British were "in entire agreement" with a 1943 attack. However, Hamilton misrepresents them as deceitfully saying they were "in entire agreement" with a 1942 attack to which they were totally opposed (p. 252). In fact, the British only agreed to a 1942 attack if certain conditions were met. These conditions were never met, so the British did not deceive Marshall or Roosevelt.

Hamilton then returns to the issue of British distress in the Indian Ocean. He correctly notes that the purpose of the Doolittle Raid was to draw Japanese attention away from the

Indian Ocean and return it to the Central Pacific. This resulted in the Japanese carrier force being destroyed at Midway. Hamilton states that after Midway, Roosevelt knew that America “must now turn its full attention to Europe” (p. 286). Hamilton is unaware that America did not do this, and instead, reinforced the Pacific and took the offensive in the Solomons.

In his assessment of Churchill’s June 1942 visit to Washington, Hamilton repeats the falsehood that Churchill had promised an invasion of France in late 1942 and came to Washington to break his promise. The British only agreed to land in France in 1942 if German morale collapsed, which it had not, but remained committed to a landing in 1943. Hamilton correctly notes that an invasion of France in 1942, using mostly British troops under British generals, was a recipe for another disaster like Singapore and Tobruk. Hamilton properly ridicules the suggestion of General Marshall and Admiral King that the US should turn to the Pacific if the British refused to land in France in 1942. Roosevelt, of course, rejected this suggestion, and ordered Marshall and King to London with instructions that if they could not convince the British to land in France in 1942, then the Allies would have to invade North Africa instead.

Hamilton shows that Roosevelt overrode continued objections from his advisors to Operation Torch, and even intervened to insist that the operation should consist of three landings rather than two. Hamilton does not, however, analyze the effects on Torch of operations in the Pacific—they may have prevented an early capture of Tunis—or assess the question of whether or not Torch actually prevented a landing in France in 1943 as most historians have since insisted.

Hamilton correctly credits Roosevelt with forcing Stimson and Marshall to find a viable alternative for military action after Churchill rejected the disastrous idea of a Second Front in 1942. However, Hamilton is insufficiently critical of Roosevelt for originating and pushing the idea of a 1942 Second Front in the first place. Nowhere does Hamilton note that in March, April, and May 1942, Roosevelt personally urged Churchill to approve a Second Front in France later in 1942.⁶ In the single page devoted to Marshall's visit to London in April 1942, Hamilton alludes to "General Marshall's top priority plan" for a Second Front in 1942 (p. 252). Hamilton does not note that before this visit, Roosevelt informed Churchill that Hopkins and Marshall were his personal emissaries and that the plan "has my heart and mind in it."⁷ The Second Front plan was thus not Marshall's plan, but *Roosevelt's* plan. Obviously, Marshall could not propose a major military operation to a foreign leader without Presidential approval. Further, in May 1942, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov met Roosevelt in Washington. Hamilton briefly mentions that Molotov came to plead for a Second Front (p. 281). But Hamilton does not discuss the important meeting between Roosevelt, Molotov, Hopkins, General Marshall, and Admiral King. At this meeting, the President "authorized Mr. Molotov to inform Mr. Stalin that we expect the formation of a second front this year."⁸ Roosevelt had

⁶ See Warren F. Kimball, ed., *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 399, 421, 503.

⁷ Kimball, p. 437, 441.

⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1942, Europe, Volume III*, ed. G. Bernard Noble and E.R. Perkins (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1961), Document 471:577.

thus personally proposed a 1942 Second Front to both the British and the Soviets, as well as through emissaries.

Most importantly, Hamilton does not even attempt to explain *why* Roosevelt proposed a Second Front – i.e., it was an element of his effort to forge a cooperative relationship with Stalin, and to dissuade the Soviets from signing a separate peace with Germany. Hamilton praises Roosevelt for his far-sighted thinking about the postwar world even before America was in the war – for example, with respect to the Atlantic Charter and decolonization. It is therefore regrettable that Hamilton does not perceive that Roosevelt was thinking about post-war US-Soviet relations even in 1941 and 1942.

Numerous minor errors mar *The Mantle of Command*. For example, the *Lusitania* is described as a “neutral American liner” (it was British), General Tojo is called “Admiral” and Admiral Darlan is called “General”, Port Moresby is said to be in Borneo (it is in New Guinea), the Ural Mountains are repeatedly confused with the Caucasus Mountains, Lord Halifax is called “Edmund” (his name was Edward), Secretary Stimson is misnamed “Simpson”, Sumner Welles is titled “Assistant Secretary of State” (he was Undersecretary), and the Nazis are described as planting the flag on “Mount Erebus” (which is in Antarctica) rather than Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus. Most of these errors were corrected in the paperback edition.

Overall, Hamilton shows that Roosevelt controlled American strategy and directed military operations in 1942. He did not hesitate to override his military and civilian advisors. Of course, this is not an entirely new interpretation. The chief failings of the book are firstly, excessive focus on the relationship between Roosevelt and Churchill at the expense of consideration

of Roosevelt's pursuit of a relationship with Stalin. Secondly, the author is insufficiently critical of Roosevelt and excessively critical of Churchill. As we shall see, Hamilton's determination to build up Roosevelt as a military genius and tear down Churchill as a strategic incompetent is carried to further extremes in the subsequent books.