

## Book Review: David P. Colley, *The Folly of the Generals* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2021)

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This book suffers from a lack of an overall thesis. The author examines a number of battles in Europe in 1943 and 1944 in which Allied commanders failed to achieve the encirclement of enemy forces, or made a breakthrough but failed to reinforce and exploit it. However, the author does not advance any kind of unifying explanation for these failures. He blames many of the “missed opportunities” on Eisenhower’s broad front approach, which Colley believes lengthened the war because it did not permit the concentration of forces needed to create and exploit breakthroughs. Furthermore, Colley considers Eisenhower too tactically ignorant, inflexible, and timid to take advantage of breakthrough opportunities when they arose. This explanation does not cover every battle he examines, however. Some of the battles were not in France, some were not conducted under Eisenhower’s command, and some he blames on subordinate commanders rather than Eisenhower himself.

The book is also poorly organized. It begins with an examination of Operation Market-Garden in September 1944;

then studies the Siegfried Line campaign in September 1944; then returns to Market-Garden; then examines the campaign in Alsace in September 1944; then jumps back to the Battle of Falaise in August 1944; then examines the failure to cross the Rhine near Strasbourg in November 1944; then jumps to the Battle for Rome in June 1944; then discusses the campaign in Sicily in July 1943. Other chapters are largely unconnected “odds and ends” such as discussion of the possible invasion of Switzerland and the argument that the liberation of Paris was ill-advised.

Due to the lack of an overall thesis and the poor organization, the book reads like a collection of magazine articles rather than a coherent narrative. The author jumps from one episode to another without knitting everything together. The editors at Casemate should not have published the book without correcting these defects.

Colley notes the major reasons that Market-Garden failed. The airborne force was dropped over many days rather than all at once, and was dropped too far from its objectives. British XXX Corps had to advance on a narrow front that the Germans could block with relatively limited forces. Colley leaves out many flaws in planning and execution that other, more detailed studies of Market-Garden have identified. He argues that Eisenhower approved the operation because US Army Chief of Staff, George Marshall, repeatedly urged the use of the Allied airborne forces in Britain. This is an unsatisfying explanation for why Eisenhower approved Market-Garden as well as for where the operation took place and how the operation was conducted.

The author states that the American V Corps faced thin opposition at Wallendorf in September 1944. A breakthrough

would have allowed exploitation into the Rhineland, but the V Corps commander, General Gerow, suspended the offensive. Colley claims that Gerow made this decision on his own, and that Bradley and Eisenhower may not even have known that a breakthrough was possible at Wallendorf. The US Army official history states that Gerow ordered the halt in agreement with First Army commander General Hodges and as the result of a previous meeting between “Eisenhower and his top commanders” to reduce supplies to V Corps.<sup>1</sup> As the author elsewhere blames Eisenhower for failing to reinforce potentially decisive breakthroughs, it is odd that the author missed the opportunity to blame Eisenhower for this one.

V Corps also faced weak opposition in the Schnee Eifel, where the 28th Infantry Division broke through the Siegfried Line on September 15. However, Gerow again suspended further attacks despite the pleas of the division commander to push on. Nearby, the 4th Infantry Division penetrated a weakly defended sector of the Siegfried Line near St. Vith. The Germans counterattacked, but probably could have been defeated if the 4th ID had received reinforcements. Nonetheless, Gerow suspended further attacks here as well.

The author rejects the official history’s claim that insufficient reserves and supplies were available to support further V Corps attacks. He contends that troops in Brittany or those guarding the Loire could have been trucked to the Schnee Eifel or Wallendorf. Some of the supplies used for Market-Garden could, in his view, have been used to support V Corps. Colley blames Gerow’s order to stand down on the general’s

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<sup>1</sup> Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1963), 62.

psychological state. Gerow had been recalled to Washington to testify about the Pearl Harbor attack, and the author believes Gerow did not want to take any risks before relinquishing command. Colley also criticizes Hodges for lack of aggressive spirit or interest in exploiting any potential breakthroughs. Finally, the author thinks Eisenhower was averse to risking any disaster that could cost him his command when the war seemed almost won. This is not a very plausible explanation. Eisenhower was not relieved when Market-Garden failed to succeed, nor was he relieved for the disaster in the Ardennes in December.

Colley contends that in early September, VII Corps could have pushed through the Stolberg Corridor between Aachen and the Hürtgen Forest to reach the city of Düren. VII Corps had breached the Siegfried Line, but needed reinforcements to exploit further. Instead, the corps commander, General Collins, halted the advance. He then focused on clearing his flanks in the city of Aachen and in the Hürtgen Forest, which were costly and time-consuming battles because conditions greatly favored the defenders. The author rejects lack of supplies as a rationale for this decision, again noting that the Allies had plenty of supplies for Market-Garden, and could have used them in a more promising place like the Stolberg Corridor. He blames the broad front approach, which did not envision concentrating on weak points in the enemy line. However, the author does not state that Eisenhower specifically ordered Collins to halt.

The author then argues that General Truscott's VI Corps could have trapped the German 19th Army in Alsace. Truscott had a plan to seize the Belfort Gap, cut off the German retreat, and pin the Germans against the western slopes of the Vosges mountains. On September 15, however, General Devers' 6th Army Group, which controlled VI Corps, came under

Eisenhower's command, and Truscott's plan was shelved. Colley does not specify who gave the order, though he believes it came from Eisenhower's headquarters, not from Devers. Instead, Eisenhower's headquarters directed Seventh Army, including VI Corps, to move northwest and attack eastwards *through the Vosges Mountains in the winter*. This inept approach resulted in a "slugfest resembling the fighting in the Italian campaign."

After eight chapters about events in September 1944, Colley reverts to the battle of Falaise in August 1944. In this battle, the Allies failed to encircle the Germans completely, and numerous German troops escaped. There was a long-running historical controversy over responsibility for this failure. Many authors blame the British. Others blame General Bradley, who commanded the American 12th Army Group, for restraining Patton even though the British were moving south too slowly to cut off the Germans. The author does not really take a stand on this issue. Instead, he bemoans the lack of command experience, willpower, and courage in the Allied high command, and contends that the war would have ended sooner if the Allies had shown more "speed and determination" at Falaise.

Next, the author shifts to the Seventh Army's missed opportunity to cross the Rhine in November 1944. The author wrote a previous book on this subject, and devotes about twenty percent of this book to a reprise of his earlier arguments.<sup>2</sup> The plan was to cross the Rhine near Rastatt, then drive north to unhinge the German defenses of the Saar and thereby assist Patton's Third Army. On November 24, however, Eisenhower

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<sup>2</sup> David P. Colley, *Decision at Strasbourg: Ike's Strategic Mistake to Halt the Sixth Army Group at the Rhine in 1944* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008).

countermanded the order to cross the Rhine. Colley attributes this decision to Ike's rigid, inflexible adherence to the broad front advance, as well as his timidity, lack of combat experience, and personal hatred of Devers.

The next chapter concerns the Battle for Rome in May 1944. In this battle, General Truscott planned to cut off the German retreat and destroy the German 10th Army. After the attack began, the Fifth Army commander, General Clark, ordered Truscott to capture Rome instead, which allowed the Germans to escape. Colley observes that many authors attribute this to Clark's vanity and Anglophobia—he wanted his troops to capture Rome, not British troops. Colley considers that the destruction of the German 10th Army would have crippled the German defense of Italy, forced the Germans to retreat to the Alps, and released Allied forces to fight elsewhere.

The author then examines the July 1943 Battle of Sicily, where the Germans fought a delaying action until finally evacuating their forces to fight again in Italy. The author believes the Allies could have used their amphibious power to trap the Germans on Sicily, and argues less plausibly that doing so would have prevented the Germans from defending southern Italy effectively. Colley blames this failure on the uncoordinated Allied command structure and Eisenhower's refusal to take a firm grip on his subordinate commanders.

Aside from being chronologically out of order, the chapters on Italy and Sicily do not fit with the overall theme of the book. The rest of the book examines the campaign in France in late 1944, and critiques Eisenhower's failure to capitalize on breakthrough opportunities. The Battle for Rome was not under Eisenhower's control at all, and the failures in Sicily and Italy

cannot be explained as resulting from Eisenhower's broad front approach. Sicily and Italy have to be explained in terms of a larger problem with American strategy or generalship, but the author does not make any such argument.

The remaining short chapters address a variety of points. Colley claims that the liberation of Paris was unwise, because supplying the city diverted fuel that should have been used to enable Allied forces to breach the Siegfried Line and capture the Ruhr. Liberating Paris may thus have prolonged the war three to six months. For the Allies to bypass Paris and leave it under German control, however, does not seem like a realistic alternative. Colley grumbles that while the Germans scraped up reserves to oppose Allied advances, the Americans failed to use available troops in Europe to reinforce success and exploit breakthroughs. He criticizes the campaign in Brittany for tying down troops and supplies that should have been used against the Siegfried Line. He argues that Patton's drive on the Saar was hindered more by lack of reserves than by lack of supplies. He notes other lost opportunities in Holland, Belgium, and Alsace.

The book fails to consider some other missed opportunities of World War II. For example, the Allies did not attempt to encircle German forces after the failed Ardennes offensive, instead pushing the "bulge" back frontally. Eisenhower did not attempt to capture Berlin in 1945, and instead diverted his forces towards Leipzig. The Allies broke through the Gothic Line in northern Italy in late 1944, but failed to exploit, and the Italian campaign dragged on into early 1945.

Colley's two-page conclusion does not summarize the book well. He concludes that Eisenhower made "major tactical and strategic mistakes" and lacked "insight, flexibility, and

boldness.” Eisenhower also restrained or thwarted more imaginative and aggressive commanders like Devers and Truscott. If the author had written a more tightly argued book organized around a central thesis, he could have written a more effective conclusion.

Overall, the book draws attention to some forgotten episodes of World War II. The book is poorly organized, and has significant content that probably should have been omitted. Most importantly, there is no overall thesis that ties the individual events together. The author blames Eisenhower for much, but does not demonstrate that each missed opportunity was Eisenhower’s fault. The author personalizes many of the operational failures as resulting from Eisenhower’s character flaws, such as his supposed timidity or his dislike of Devers. A better approach would have been to proceed from the assumption that the overall strategy for World War II was conceived in Washington, and that Eisenhower’s decisions in Europe reflected that strategy. Once it is understood that American strategy in World War II was not simply to defeat Germany and Japan as rapidly as possible, Eisenhower’s decisions become much more comprehensible.