U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY IN EUROPE AND THE DELAY OF THE "SECOND FRONT"

More than anything else, Roosevelt sought to limit U.S. casualties in the war. In 1942, he well knew the U.S. army was in no condition to confront the Nazis head on in France – if such a strategy was pursued, it would be a bloodbath, and an unnecessary one. He hoped to delay that direct conflict until such point as the U.S. could realistically expect victory.

Stalin, however, insisted that the U.S. open a "Second Front" in France as soon as possible. From his perspective, this demand made perfect sense. If the German forces faced attacks on two fronts (in the east from the Soviet army and in the west from the armies of the United States and the British), they would have to reposition some of their soldiers – drawing them from the eastern front where they were fighting Soviet forces, to the western front where they would face American and British forces.

Implying that his new ally was engaging in treachery, Stalin suggested to U.S. diplomats that by delaying the opening of a second front in France, the Americans seemed to be deliberately pursuing a strategy that would bleed out the Soviets and save their own forces. The fact that Senator Harry Truman suggested in public that the US should pursue a strategy that would encourage the Germans and the Soviets to fight each other to the death so that the US would be rid of two enemies only made Stalin even more suspicious.

But Stalin also understood that the U.S. wasn't prepared for war in France and so he privately acknowledged to his top aides that the Americans were simply exercising caution. Nonetheless, he instructed Soviet officials to keep insisting that the U.S. open the second front since, once the war was over, the Americans, feeling guilty that they had delayed action and cost the Soviets lives, might be willing to make concessions that would be useful to Stalin.

As it happened, the first U.S. offensive occurred in North Africa where American troops, in league with the British, fought to keep the Germans from securing the Suez Canal in Egypt. Had the Germans seized the canal, the most efficient sea route to India, the chief British colony, would have been blocked. In short, by fighting in Africa, the U.S. was doing more to save the British Empire than it was doing to defeat the Germans – thus explaining why Churchill had insisted on the strategy in the first place.

By 1944, the plans for opening a second front in France were complete. The invasion would be launched from the south coast of England. American and British forces would travel across the channel and land in Normandy – the largest and most complicated amphibious (i.e. from sea to land) invasion in the history of the world. The invasion, under the command of General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, commenced on June 6, 1944 (D-Day). In the face of fierce German resistance, it

succeeded. From this point, Germany's defeat was only a matter of time, though there was a slight hiccup at the Battle of the Bulge in which the German army achieved some of its last battlefield victories.

Within a year, Soviet and American/British forces met in Berlin, Hitler committed suicide in his underground bunker, and the Third Reich, proclaimed to last for a thousand years, fell abruptly in its 12th year.

THE PACIFIC WAR…IN BRIEF

After Pearl Harbor, the U.S. suffered a series of defeats and, most notably, had to abandon its bases on the Philippine Islands. After the Battle of Midway, however, the tide began to turn. The U.S. economy, far more powerful than the Japanese economy, was now fully mobilized. In a war of attrition, then, the Japanese were doomed (just as their own civilian leadership had tried to tell the army officers years before.)

In a strategy of "island hopping" U.S. forces slowly advanced toward the Japanese home islands, suffering horrific casualties all the while (as did the retreating Japanese). The long term plan was to land on the main islands in a massive invasion which promised hundreds of thousands more U.S. deaths (not to mention even more Japanese deaths.)

The dropping of the two atomic bombs, however, brought the war to a close without the need for such a full-scale invasion. At the time, most Americans did not pause to consider the ramifications of the atomic bomb. They were simply glad the war was over. Many saw the atomic bombings as "revenge" or "pay back" for Pearl Harbor – not taking into account that the Japanese suffered disproportionately more deaths.

The U.S. government declared the bombings had saved American lives (one might add that despite the devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the bombs likely saved just as many Japanese lives since most Japanese were ready to fight to the death to repel an American invasion). Moreover, more Japanese had died in the fire-bombing of Tokyo than died (at least immediately) in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

One commentator explained the lack of horror or revulsion in Americans' reactions to the dropping of the atomic bombs as the result of a "moral numbing" that the Second World War had produced. There was simply so much death and destruction and so many atrocities on all sides that any "moral accounting" seemed absurd.

The bombings, then, seemed only part of a larger orgy of violence and not qualitatively different than more convention bombings. This view would change in the coming years as people became more familiar with the destructive potential that had been unleashed and the effects of radiation and fallout.

It seems, however, that the Japanese surrendered in August 1945 not only because of the atomic bombs, but because they so feared a postwar occupation by the Soviet

Union. Much preferring to surrender to the Americans, the Japanese government asked only that the nation be able to retain its emperor, the symbol of the Japanese people and culture. When the Americans agreed, the Japanese surrendered and avoided prolonging the war.

Had they not surrendered when they did, the Soviets might have been able to make a more compelling case that they deserved to be included in the postwar occupation of Japan. As it was, the new U.S. President, Harry Truman (Roosevelt had died in April 1945), excluded the Soviets from any role in the postwar reconstruction of Japan. In the years to come, Japan would become the U.S.'s most reliable Cold War ally in Asia.

In fact, shortly after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, early signs were emerging that in the years to come the Soviets, and not a reconstructed Japan or Germany, would be the primary threat to U.S. interests.