The Defense of Berlin

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The Attlee Proposals on zonal boundaries within Germany were devised in mid-1943, presented to the European Advisory Commission at the beginning of 1944, accepted by the Soviets February 18, 1944, and approved by the United States three months later. The first protocol reflecting these agreements was signed in London on September 12, 1944. At Quebec shortly afterward, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed upon the location of the British and American zones and then at Yalta, with Stalin, reviewed and approved the entire zonal set-up in Germany.

Immediately following Yalta, however, the military situation in Europe changed considerably. The armies of General Eisenhower, so hard pressed in December and January, suddenly resumed the offensive and, as German resistance rapidly disintegrated, the offensive turned into a blitzkrieg. What had looked at Yalta like a prolonged campaign, soon showed promise of early victory. In this situation, the British government, and especially Winston Churchill, began to ques-
tion the wisdom of the Attlee proposals. Even at Yalta the Prime Minister had begun to grumble about the advance of Russia into Central Europe. With victory in the offing, the growling of the British Lion turned into a roar.

Originally, Allied military plans envisaged a final drive toward Berlin by the Western powers. Preinvasion plans prepared by the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) listed Berlin as the ultimate military goal of the American and British forces. Following the invasion, Berlin remained the number one objective. According to the late General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower’s able Chief of Staff at SHAEF:

From the day our invasion broke over the beaches of Normandy, the goal of every Allied soldier had been Berlin. The Supreme Commander, the Staff, and all the troops shared a driving ambition to seal the defeat of Nazi Germany by seizing the capital of the Reich itself. During our planning days in England, there seemed every reason to believe that after the Ruhr was encircled and its troops destroyed, we could end the war by taking the political heart—Berlin.

In September, 1944, after the fall of Paris, Field Marshal Montgomery suggested a lightning thrust toward Berlin, but General Eisenhower replied that he preferred to reduce the industrial areas of the Ruhr and Rhine before pushing on to the German capital. From a military standpoint, the Supreme Commander was on firm ground. Unquestionably, however, Eisenhower recognized the importance of Berlin. “Clearly Berlin is the main prize,” he wrote Montgomery, “and the prize in defense of which the enemy is likely to concentrate the bulk of his forces. There is no doubt whatsoever, in my mind,” that after the Ruhr has been conquered, “we should concentrate all our energies and resources on a rapid thrust to Berlin.”

The idea of a final drive on Berlin was based on sound strategic reasoning. The terrain separating Berlin from the Ruhr was ideal for offensive operations. Unlike the other regions of Germany where mountain barriers and forests tended to restrict armored activity, the area west of Berlin was generally open and rolling. Except for the Weser and Elbe rivers, it was devoid of natural obstacles.

At the end of January, 1945, General Eisenhower sent his Chief of Staff, General Walter Bedell Smith, to the Anglo-American conference
then underway at Malta. Smith's purpose was to brief the Western leaders on the course of future military operations. In so doing, he advised them that the Allied forces would very likely advance beyond the zonal boundary which the European Advisory Commission had established. As reported by General Eisenhower: "We felt that if our political superiors agreed with us they might decide to insist upon their right to occupy a greater portion of the German territory than then recommended. General Smith's presentation obviously changed no ideas; the advisory commission's plan, outlining boundaries as they now exist . . . was to stand."\(^5\)

Shortly after Smith's presentation, the Allied Expeditionary Force regained the initiative, and by the beginning of March, the German Army was reeling in retreat from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier. On March 3, General William H. Simpson's Ninth U.S. Army reached the Rhine near Düsseldorf, shortly thereafter American troops captured Cologne, and on March 5, General Patton's Third Army, driving down the Moselle, reached the Rhine at Coblenz.

Two days later, March 7, 1945, the 9th Armored Division pushed into the battered Rhineland town of Remagen. To their surprise, the Ludendorff railway bridge across the Rhine was still standing. This was a break for the West; in two days, five divisions of the First Army were pushed across and a bridgehead three miles deep on the other side was secured.

Two weeks after the capture of the bridge at Remagen, all organized resistance west of the Rhine was over.\(^6\) Simpson's Ninth Army and the First Army of General Courtney Hodges were now driving for a link-up in the Ruhr which would isolate an estimated force of twenty-one German divisions—an army greater than that which Field Marshal von Paulus had surrendered at Stalingrad.

The advance continued without respite. The bridges over the Main River and the powerful concrete fortifications at Aschaffenburg in Bavaria were captured intact by the 4th Armored Division on March 25. Other elements of the Third Army captured the vital rail terminus of Darmstadt. Frankfurt was cleared of enemy resistance on March 29, as were Giessen to the north, and Mannheim to the south.\(^7\)

The sudden collapse of German resistance in the West caused General Eisenhower and those near him at SHAEF to review the earlier tactical plans for a final push to Berlin. American intelligence estimates placed forward elements of the Red Army across the Oder
River and only twenty-eight miles from the outskirts of the German capital. With the occupation boundaries already agreed to, there was little inclination at SHAEF to engage the Soviets in a race for Berlin. It was not known, of course, that the Russians would be held on the Oder for the next six weeks as Hitler scraped together every remaining formation for a final desperate stand.

With the fall of Berlin believed imminent, however, other objectives loomed into view. The possibility of continuing Nazi resistance in a so-called "National Redoubt," reports of which had disturbed SHAEF for over a month, caused American strategists at General Eisenhower's headquarters to turn their attention toward the Bavarian Alps. An American intelligence summary received on March 11 specifically warned that the Nazis would make a last stand in Bavaria. The report itself read like science fiction:

Here [in the Bavarian mountains], defended by nature and by the most efficient secret weapons yet invented, the powers that have hitherto guided Germany will survive to reorganize her resurrection; here armaments will be manufactured in bomb-proof factories, food and equipment will be stored in vast underground caverns and a specially selected corps of young men will be trained in guerilla warfare, so that a whole underground army can be fitted and directed to liberate Germany from the occupying forces.

The subsequent capture of several general officers of the German Army who denied any knowledge of a defensive position in the Alps was simply interpreted by military intelligence as a further verification. According to the intelligence appraisal, it would be the SS elite troops and not the German Army who would hold these positions, and their construction therefore was being kept secret from the Army.

Belief in the National Redoubt dominated American military thinking until well into April. At a background briefing to a press conference in Paris on the twenty-first of April, 1945, General Bedell Smith emphasized the importance of the National Redoubt in Allied strategy. Admitting that precise information about the region was sketchy, Smith stated:

Just what we will find down there we do not know. We are beginning to think a lot more than we expect. You have seen the underground installations around Mosbach and Schweinfurt, where we have been just bombing the hell out of the ball bearing plants
up there and doing a marvelous job of hitting buildings, and finding eighty-five percent were underground, beautifully underground. We may find when we get down there a great deal more underground than anticipated; I am thinking we will.

Our target now, [Smith continued,] if we are going to bring this war to an end and bring it to an end in a hell of a hurry, is this National Redoubt, and we are organizing our strength in that direction. . . . From a purely military standpoint . . . Berlin . . . doesn’t have much significance any more—not anything comparable to that of the so-called National Redoubt.*

General Eisenhower himself was also disturbed over the reports regarding the National Redoubt. In recalling his reasons for deciding not to push on to Berlin the Supreme Commander has written,

For many weeks we had been receiving reports that the Nazi intention . . . was to withdraw the cream of the SS, Gestapo, and other organizations fanatically devoted to Hitler, into the mountains of southern Bavaria, Western Austria, and northern Italy. There they expected to hold out indefinitely against the Allies. . . . The evidence was clear that the Nazi intended to make the attempt and I decided to give no opportunity to carry it out.13

In reality, the National Redoubt existed only in the propaganda blasts of Dr. Goebbels. Postwar studies by the Allied Military Government clearly indicate that the Berchtesgaden area was being turned into a refuge, not a stronghold.14 But it was not until the war was over that the phantom of the National Redoubt was exposed. According to General Omar Bradley, “the Redoubt existed largely in the imagination of a few fanatic Nazis. It grew into so exaggerated a scheme that I am astonished we could have believed it as innocently as we did.”15

In addition to the National Redoubt, other factors intervened in

* In his subsequent book on the war in Europe, General Smith, who undoubtedly was closer than anyone else to the decision-making process at Eisenhower’s headquarters, cites the concern with the “National Redoubt” as the reason, “above all,” in determining to push south toward Dresden rather than on to Berlin. Although he admits that the extent of the so-called National Redoubt “remained something of an unknown quantity” at SHAEF during March and April (the British never accepted it as genuine), Smith recalls having received reconnaissance photographs which showed that the Germans were constructing extensive bunkers in the Berchtesgaden area. The fact that many government bureaus were quitting Berlin and setting up in Berchtesgaden and the reports of feverish activity by the Germans along the Danube and in Munich added further to this belief. See Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower’s Six Great Decisions (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1956), pp. 186–89.
March to cause SHAEF to reconsider the possibility of a drive on Berlin. Since much of Germany’s arms production had been moved from the Ruhr to Saxony and Thuringia, these areas became attractive targets. Also, an attack on Berlin, if it were made, would fall under the direct command of Field Marshal Montgomery whose Twenty-first Army Group held that section of the Allied front. South of Montgomery, command was vested in General Omar Bradley. Intoxicated by the rapid advance to the Rhine, United States public opinion at this time was crying out for further American victories. A thrust by Montgomery to Berlin would mean that the Ninth American Army, located in the center of the front, could not be given to Bradley but would remain under British control. Such an event would fly directly in the face of popular sentiment. The individualistic personality of Field Marshal Montgomery, compared with the somewhat closer relationship which existed between Eisenhower’s and Bradley’s headquarters, may also have influenced a decision at SHAEF in favor of Bradley.

In any event, in early March, 1945, Bradley returned to Supreme Headquarters at Rheims for a final review of Western strategy. Asked by Eisenhower for his opinion of a drive on Berlin, Bradley replied that it might cost 100,000 lives. “A pretty stiff price to pay for a prestige objective, especially when we’ve got to fall back and let the other fellow take over.”

In his account of the meeting at Rheims, the scholarly Bradley describes how he and Eisenhower, bending over a map together, selected the Elbe near Dresden as the final objective for the Allied forces. “I could see no political advantage accruing from the capture of Berlin,” Bradley writes, “that would offset the need for quick destruction of the German army on our front. As soldiers we looked naively on the British inclination to complicate the war with political foresight and nonmilitary objectives.”

Following Bradley’s visit to Rheims, the Allied staff at Supreme

* Considering that Bradley’s Twelfth Army Group was to lead the thrust toward Dresden, the official historian of the Department of the Army has pointedly remarked that “it is not surprising that General Bradley’s advice stressed the difficulties of the advance on Berlin and the value of striking toward Dresden.” See Forrest C. Pogue, Command Decisions (Kent R. Greenfield, ed.) Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 483.
Headquarters prepared plans to shift the major Anglo-American effort south of Berlin, driving instead toward a link-up with the Russians near Dresden. In the words of General Smith, "Berlin was officially abandoned as an objective." 

At about the same time as the meeting in Rheims, Prime Minister Churchill began to inquire about the final phases of Allied strategy. Churchill alone among the Western leaders recognized the danger latent in the continued advance of the Red Army. The impending destruction of German military power was bringing with it fundamental changes in the face of Europe. As the common enemy disappeared, so too did the bond of union which had cemented the Grand Alliance together. The final political settlement in Germany loomed greater than ever on the horizon. Churchill expressed his concern in the following homily: "When wolves are about the shepherd must guard his flock, even if he himself does not care for mutton."

On March 17, the Prime Minister asked the British Chiefs of Staff what the nature of the final German resistance was likely to be. "All kinds of rumors, only slightly sustained by our reports," Mr. Churchill states, "were rife about Hitler's future plans. I had thought it prudent to have them searchingly examined, because I heard that they were counting for much at Eisenhower's headquarters."

Several days later the British Chiefs reported back to the Prime Minister that a prolonged German campaign, "or even guerilla" warfare, in the Bavarian mountains was highly unlikely. Having received this information and thus verified for himself that in all probability there would be no final stand in the so-called "Bavarian Redoubt," Churchill asked Eisenhower what direction the final Allied advance would take.

On March 30, the Supreme Commander replied that he was planning to launch his major attack to the south of Berlin toward Dresden.

*In explaining his decision of that March to strike toward Dresden rather than Berlin, Eisenhower wrote in 1948 that while the German capital may have been important as a political and psychological objective, "... it was not the logical or the most desirable objective for the forces of the Western Allies." "Military plans," as he phrased it, "should be devised with the single aim of speeding victory." The proximity of the Russians to Berlin, combined with what he considered the resulting Allied logistical problems, made an attack on Berlin in his words, "more than unwise, it was stupid." Dwight D. Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1948), p. 396.
Following the encirclement of the Ruhr, Eisenhower said, the First, Third, and Ninth American Armies would drive eastward along the line Kassel-Leipzig-Dresden toward the Elbe and attempt a link-up with Soviet forces in that area. The entire operation would be controlled by Bradley's Twelfth Army Group, while Montgomery would support the left flank, and the Seventh Army of General Jacob Devers, the right flank. The purpose of Bradley's drive, as Eisenhower explained it, would be to cut the German military strength in half as soon as possible and, "will not involve us in crossing the Elbe." Berlin, as a result, would be left to the Russians.\(^\text{22}\)

Two days previously, on March 28, 1945, Eisenhower announced his new tactical plan in a direct telegram to Marshal Stalin. This was the first time that SHAEF had dealt directly with the head of the Soviet government and it would soon have its consequences. In his reply, Stalin advised Eisenhower that he wholly agreed with SHAEF's latest proposal. According to Stalin, Eisenhower's plan to avoid Berlin "entirely coincides with the plan of the Soviet High Command. Berlin has lost its former strategic importance. The Soviet High Command therefore plans to allot secondary forces in the direction of Berlin."\(^\text{23}\)

When SHAEF's plan was received in London, British reaction was immediate. Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff were concerned not only that its major concept was to by-pass Berlin, but also that it had been communicated directly to Marshal Stalin. Eisenhower's cable to Stalin, it should be noted, was dispatched two days prior to his message informing Churchill that he had decided to drive south toward Dresden.\(^*\)

London considered Eisenhower's telegram to Stalin as a transgression of an earlier authorization that had been given to him by the Combined Chiefs of Staff to deal directly with Russian military authorities on military matters. Churchill felt that the information communicated by Eisenhower to Stalin went far beyond the military sphere. Although ostensibly concerned with the juncture of the two

\(^*\) Dr. Herbert Feis, noted authority on the diplomatic history of World War II, has suggested that Eisenhower may have dispatched his message to Stalin on March 28, "in order to end all chance of further argument" with the Prime Minister about taking Berlin. The cable to Stalin was sent on the Supreme Commander's own initiative on March 28 without informing either his deputy, British Air Marshal Tedder, or the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Herbert Feis, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 603. The complete text of Eisenhower's cable to Stalin is printed in John Ehrman, \textit{Grand Strategy}, Vol. VI (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1956), p. 132.
armies, the Supreme Commander, as Churchill saw it, was settling major strategic problems which had decided political implications.24

However disturbed the Prime Minister may have been over what he considered Eisenhower’s intrusion into the political sphere, his greatest fire was directed at the substance of the plan itself. Writing to General Lord Ismay, his personal Chief of Staff, on March 31, the Prime Minister stated: “It seems to me that the chief criterion of the new Eisenhower plan is that it shifts the axis of the main advance upon Berlin to the direction through Leipzig to Dresden. . . . It also seems that General Eisenhower may be wrong in supposing Berlin to be largely devoid of military and political importance. Even though German Government departments have to a great extent moved to the south, the dominating fact on German minds of the fall of Berlin should not be overlooked. The idea of neglecting Berlin and leaving it to the Russians to take at a later stage does not appear to me correct.” 25

The British Chiefs of Staff had previously notified Washington of their disagreements with SHAEF’s new strategy. On March 29, General Marshall cabled the British concerns to Eisenhower. The following day, Eisenhower replied that since he was the responsible commander on the spot, he felt authorized in pursuing his present course. After disclaiming any change in plans, General Eisenhower pointed out that he felt Berlin was “. . . no longer a particularly important objective. Its usefulness to the German has been largely destroyed and even his government is preparing to move to another area. What is now important is to gather up our forces for a single drive. . . .” Concluding his cable in the time honored method of successful field commanders who feel they are being interfered with at home, Eisenhower said that “naturally” his plans were flexible and that as the tactical commander, it was essential for him to retain the freedom of action necessary to meet changing situations. By implication, the shift south from Berlin to Dresden was one of these situations.26

In Washington, General Eisenhower’s position received immediate support. Replying to the British Chiefs of Staff on behalf of the United States, General Marshall not only upheld the right of Eisenhower to communicate directly with Stalin but also approved, in substance, Eisenhower’s latest plan. In what could, according to the Army’s official history, “easily be interpreted as a dig at the strategic views
Decision to Halt at the Elbe

of the British Chiefs of Staff,” Marshall pointed to the successful conclusion of the battle on the Rhine as a vindication of Eisenhower’s military judgment. According to Marshall: “The battle of Germany is now at a point where it is up to the Field Commander to judge the measures which should be taken. To deliberately turn away from the exploitation of the enemy’s weakness does not appear sound. The single objective should be quick and complete victory. While recognizing there are factors not of direct concern to SHAEF, the U.S. Chiefs consider his strategic concept is sound and should receive full support. He should continue to communicate freely with the Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Army [Marshal Stalin].”

The American Joint Chiefs of Staff were products of the same military tradition as General Eisenhower and shared his sentiments on strategic planning. To them, SHAEF’s plan of driving toward a juncture with the Red Army was infinitely more realistic than the somewhat politically tainted British desire to capture Berlin. Perhaps they also did not look adversely on concentrating the last big push under Bradley’s American command rather than under the Twenty-first Army Group of Field Marshal Montgomery.

In spite of Marshall’s reply, however, opposition to SHAEF’s plan continued in London. Berlin, the British felt, should remain the principal Allied objective, and on March 31, 1945, Churchill wrote to Eisenhower at Rheims and announced once more his preference for:

... the plan on which we crossed the Rhine, namely, that the Ninth U. S. Army should march with the Twenty-first Army Group [Montgomery] to the Elbe and beyond Berlin.

I do not know why it would be an advantage not to cross the Elbe. If the enemy resistance should weaken, as you evidently expect and which may well be fulfilled, why should we not cross the Elbe and advance as far eastward as possible? This has an important political bearing. ... Further, I do not consider myself that Berlin has yet lost its military and certainly not its political significance. The fall of Berlin would have a profound psychological effect on German resistance in every part of the Reich. While Berlin holds out great masses of Germans will feel it their duty to go down fighting. The idea that the capture of Dresden and the junction with the Russians there would be a superior gain does not commend itself to me. The parts of the German government departments which have moved south can very quickly move southward again. But while Berlin remains under the German flag
it cannot, in my opinion, fail to be the most decisive point in Germany.\textsuperscript{28}

The following day, April 1, 1945, the Prime Minister carried his appeal to President Roosevelt. After disclaiming any desire to detract or discredit the military ability of SHAEF and reaffirming “the complete confidence felt by His Majesty’s Government in General Eisenhower,” Churchill launched into a direct attack on the strategy which Eisenhower proposed.

Hitherto the axis [of advance] has been upon Berlin. General Eisenhower . . . now wishes to shift the axis somewhat to the southward and strike through Leipzig, even perhaps as far south as Dresden. He withdraws the Ninth United States Army from the northern group of Armies [Montgomery] and in consequence stretches its front southward. . . . I say quite frankly that Berlin remains of high strategic importance. Nothing will exert a psychological effect of despair upon all German forces of resistance equal to the fall of Berlin. It will be the supreme signal for the German people. On the other hand, if left to itself to maintain a siege by the Russians among its ruins, and as long as the German flag flies there, it will animate the resistance of all Germans under arms.\textsuperscript{29}

Turning to the political considerations involved, the British head of government stated: “There is moreover another aspect which it is proper for you and me to consider. The Russian armies will no doubt overrun all Austria and enter Vienna. If they also take Berlin will not their impression that they have been the overwhelming contributor to our common victory be unduly imprinted in their minds, and may this not lead them into a mood which will raise grave and formidable difficulties in the future? I therefore consider that from a political standpoint we should march as far east into Germany as possible, and that should Berlin be in our grasp we should certainly take it.”\textsuperscript{30}

Churchill concluded his message to the President with a statement that although this was a personal message and not “a staff communication,” he had no objection to Roosevelt’s showing it to General Marshall. The Prime Minister was later to learn, although he was not aware of it at the time, that the President’s health had failed to such an extent that it was General Marshall and not Mr. Roosevelt who answered his message.\textsuperscript{31}

Marshall’s reply stressed only the immediate military considerations
involved in striking toward Dresden. According to the notes of the War Department, it was dispatched by the White House exactly as Marshall had written it.\textsuperscript{32}

On the same date that Churchill was writing to President Roosevelt, General Eisenhower attempted to refute the Prime Minister’s charges. The Supreme Commander insisted he had not changed plans but was simply taking advantage of the recent changes in the military situation. Although Eisenhower said he recognized the political considerations which had been mentioned by Mr. Churchill, he still preferred to exploit the idea of a central thrust under Bradley’s control along the axis Kassel-Leipzig-Dresden.\textsuperscript{33}

The following day Churchill conceded. British military forces in Europe at this time were outnumbered three to one by the Americans and, as Churchill said, “I felt it my duty to end this correspondence between friends.” \textsuperscript{34} On April 5, as the Allied attack toward Dresden began, the Prime Minister cabled President Roosevelt that he considered the matter closed. “To prove my sincerity,” Churchill stated, “I will use one of my very few Latin quotations: \textit{Amantium irae amoris integratio est}.” \textsuperscript{35} This was translated by the War Department as “Lovers’ quarrels are a part of love.” \textsuperscript{36}

Mr. Churchill’s avowals did not end the matter, however. Likewise suspicious at the alacrity with which Marshal Stalin had agreed to Eisenhower’s proposal, the British Chiefs of Staff began to urge a reconsideration of SHAEF’s new strategy on military grounds. Their pleas, as it turned out, were in vain. The American Chiefs of Staff refused to intervene.\textsuperscript{37} In their reply to the British,\textsuperscript{\textbullet\textbullet} the U.S. military chiefs stated that “only Eisenhower is in a position to know how to

\textbullet In his message to Eisenhower, however, the Prime Minister left little doubt as to his own opinion. Referring to Stalin’s earlier cable to SHAEF, Churchill stated, “I am however all the more impressed with the importance of entering Berlin, which may well be open to us, by the reply from Moscow to you, which in paragraph 3 says, ‘Berlin has lost its former strategic importance.’ \textit{This should be read in the light of what I mentioned of the political aspects. I deem it highly important that we should shake hands with the Russians as far to the east as possible.” Winston Churchill, \textit{Triumph and Tragedy}, p. 467. [Italics added.]

\textbullet\textbullet The official history of the U.S. Army in World War II presents the position of the American Joint Chiefs clearly: “On the broader political question of getting to Berlin before the Russians,” it states, “the U.S. Chiefs of Staff reacted as they had done formerly in regard to proposals of Balkan operations. Their view was that the business of the armed forces was to get the war ended as soon as possible and not to worry about the matter of prestige which would come from entering a particular capital.” Forrest Pogue, \textit{Command Decisions}, p. 444.
fight his battle,” and Eisenhower, on April 7, with the Allied advance moving at high speed, once more stuck to his position: “I regard it as militarily unsound at this stage of the proceedings to make Berlin a major objective, particularly in view of the fact that it is only 35 miles from the Russian lines.”

In Washington there was no disagreement with General Eisenhower’s analysis, and certainly, no inclination on the part of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to overrule him. But the British continued to persist, and the following day, in a message to General Eisenhower, Field Marshal Montgomery took up the attack where Churchill left off. He rephrased the question in purely military terms. Could he have ten divisions for a lightning dash to Berlin? Eisenhower was unsympathetic and replied as follows: “You must not lose sight of the fact that during the advance on Leipzig you have the role of protecting Bradley’s northern flank. It is not his role to protect your southern flank.” As for Berlin, “I am quite ready to admit,” Eisenhower said, “that it has political and psychological significance but of far greater importance will be the location of the remaining German forces in relation to Berlin. It is on them that I am going to concentrate my attention.”

When Eisenhower replied to Montgomery, German resistance had virtually collapsed. The closing of the Ruhr pocket on April 2, tore a gap of over 200 miles in the German front. Field Marshal Model and 325,000 men had been surrounded, and for all practical purposes, six German corps of seventeen divisions ceased to exist as a military force. Into this gap in the German lines had poured the First and Ninth American armies under Bradley’s unified control.

As the British predicted, only scattered resistance remained. The enemy fell apart and waited to be overrun. The German High Command no longer retained operational control and even regimental headquarters had difficulty knowing the exact locations of their troops. As General Jodl later explained, with the surrender of Army Group B, the OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) in Berlin was no longer able to contain the Allied forces.

On April 6, the Ninth American Army crossed the Weser River below Hanover in force, and by April 11, Magdeburg had been reached. The following day as the American First Army, which was supposedly spearheading the Allied attack, drove into Leipzig, Simpson’s Ninth Army crossed the Elbe River in three places. One week
after the offensive had begun, American forces were fifty-three miles from Berlin.\textsuperscript{43}

It was at this point that SHAEF issued a second order not to push onward to the German capital. Russian forces were still no closer to Berlin than they had been two months before. The city now lay equidistant between both armies and since Hitler had withdrawn everything to the East, there was little opposition in the West. But when General Simpson asked permission to continue the advance, the Supreme Commander was again resolute. Simpson was ordered to hold on the Elbe, and instead of advancing on Berlin to turn his forces toward Lübeck in the north and the National Redoubt in the south.\textsuperscript{44}

On April 15, 1945, General Eisenhower told the War Department that he thought both of these targets to be “vastly more important than Berlin.” In his words, to plan an immediate push toward Berlin “would be foolish in view of the relative situation of the Russians and ourselves. . . . While it is true that we have seized a small bridgehead over the Elbe, it must be remembered that only our spearheads are up to the river; our center of gravity is well back.”\textsuperscript{45}

“At that time,” General Bradley wrote later, “we could probably have pushed on to Berlin had we been willing to take the casualties Berlin would have cost us.”\textsuperscript{46}

Indicative of the attitude of SHAEF at this time is Bradley’s account of the following conversation which took place during a visit of his to Simpson’s command post near Magdeburg. According to Bradley, the telephone rang.

Big Simp listened for a moment and clamped his hand across the mouthpiece. “It looks as though we might get the bridge in Magdeburg. What’ll we do if we get it Brad?”

\textsuperscript{*} When asked during a briefing shortly afterwards—and before Berlin had fallen to the Russians—whether the Allies intended a full scale march on Berlin, General Bedell Smith responded:

\ldots. At the moment, except politically and psychologically, Berlin has lost a great deal of its significance. \ldots. The center, that is, the so-called “thrust on Berlin,” from a purely military standpoint has ceased to be of any great importance to us. \ldots. There isn’t any place along this front that we are going to rush to at the cost of lives and material in order to get there before the Russians do, unless our masters tell us differently. \ldots. We are handling it as a strictly military campaign. I think that’s all we can do, don’t you? After all, General Eisenhower has these lives entrusted to him and he will fight this campaign as economically as he can.
“Hell’s Bells,” I answered, “we don’t want anymore bridgeheads on the Elbe. If you get it you’ll have to throw a battalion across it, I guess. But let’s hope the other fellow blows it up before you find you’re stuck with it.”

Thirty minutes later as I was putting on my helmet to leave, the phone rang again. Simpson’s bony face split into a broad smile. “No need to worry, Brad,” he laughed as he hung up the receiver, “the Krauts just blew it up.”

As a result of General Eisenhower’s decision not to push on to Berlin, the American Ninth Army waited for the Russians on the banks of the Elbe for almost two weeks. The juncture was finally accomplished at 4:40 P.M. on April 25, at Torgau, an Elbian city some seventy-five miles south of Berlin, when patrols of the American 67th Division met advance units of the Russian 58th Guards Division.

Significantly, the Red Army did not begin its long awaited offensive until April 17, six days after the Ninth Army had crossed the Elbe. In the early morning hours of April 17, over one million men swarmed to the attack on a front 200 miles long in the last great Soviet offensive of the war. The very size of this attack belied Stalin’s earlier disclaimer that the Russians considered Berlin no longer important.

The decision of General Eisenhower to halt the advance of the Ninth Army on the Elbe was made on purely tactical grounds. While it is true that the faulty interpretation of intelligence estimates at SHAEF may have encouraged this decision, the desire of the Supreme Commander to close with what remained of the German forces south of Berlin and complete a juncture with the Russians was sound military strategy. The mission which had been assigned to him by the Combined Chiefs of Staff was to “undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.” It was not, nor had it ever been, to maintain or restore the balance of power in central Europe.

The messages which General Eisenhower received from Washington at this time emphasized that purely tactical decisions were to be preferred. He received no political directives regarding Berlin either from Washington or the Combined Chiefs of Staff.* The agreements

* In a letter to Forrest C. Pogue, dated February 20, 1952, General Eisenhower stated that no political directive was given him to stop at the Elbe or to go on to Berlin (or Prague). See Forrest C. Pogue, Command Decisions, p. 490n.
on occupation boundaries also carried no provision about the capture of Berlin. It was there for whomever got there first. In his book, *Eisenhower’s Six Great Decisions*, General Walter Bedell Smith has remarked:

> It has been suggested on a great many occasions and from a great many sources that we deliberately avoided Berlin because of a political agreement that the Russians rather than the Western Allies, were to capture the Nazi capital. Nothing could be further from the truth. There was no political consideration involved and there was no agreement on this score with the Russians. General Eisenhower’s decision to destroy the remaining enemy forces throughout Germany and, above all, to seal off the National Re-doubt, was based on a realistic estimate of the military situation.  

Later in April, when the British Chiefs of Staff once more sought to push beyond the line determined by the Supreme Commander for what they considered political advantages vis-a-vis the Russians, General Marshall in Washington strongly objected. In transmitting the British proposal to Eisenhower, the Army Chief of Staff stated: “Personally and aside from all logistics, tactical or strategical implications I would be loath to hazard American lives for purely political purposes.” Marshall’s statement was in full accord with the policy

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* The implications of General Eisenhower’s decision of April, 1945, not to push onwards to Berlin has recently been raised in connection with the publication by the State Department on August 18, 1961, of a background pamphlet entitled *Berlin-1961*. The pamphlet describes the event in this way:

> The Western Armies could have captured Berlin or at least joined in capturing it. But the Supreme Allied Commandér, General Eisenhower, believed that they could be more usefully employed against the major German forces elsewhere. As a result the Soviets captured Berlin. . . .

> When asked about this analysis on September 11, 1961, General Eisenhower, according to the *New York Times*, “betrayed no irritation” over the implication that this decision “had proved to be a primary cause” of the present difficulties over Berlin. Acknowledging his responsibility for the tactical military decision, the former Supreme Commander stated that the final determination of the zones of occupation had been made by the political leaders of the Allied powers. “We were soldiers, not politicians. And to say that this was a military decision is a rewriting of history.”

> As for the arrangements for the subsequent occupation of Berlin, General Eisenhower was on firm ground. While the tactical military decision to halt was Eisenhower’s, the final occupation agreement certainly was not. The State Department announced the passage would be rewritten. (*New York Times*, September 12, 1961.)
which had been followed by the American Joint Chiefs of Staff throughout the war.\(^{49}\)

In retrospect, the decision of General Eisenhower to halt at the Elbe was one of the great decisions—possibly even the greatest single decision of the war in Europe. It is certainly not true, however, that had it been made otherwise, today's situation in Berlin would not exist. What the effects of his decision may have been cannot be accurately determined. The fact that the decision was made, and made on tactical military grounds, should not be surprising. To an extent, it was an outgrowth of the American policy which had been followed throughout the war. The entire United States war effort had been based on the premise that the fighting must be ended—and ended in victory—as soon as possible.

In a sense, the decision not to drive on to Berlin was even more an outgrowth of America's peacetime military tradition. The Supreme Commander, his military superiors in Washington, his American associates at SHAEF, all, in fact, of the professional Army officers of that generation had been meticulously trained in a tradition which confined the problems of the military exclusively to the field of battle. To the senior American generals of that period (MacArthur was the exception to prove the rule), war was fought by professional military officers seeking specific military goals in a clearly defined sphere free from political intrusions. When political issues arose, they were to be settled by the proper political authorities. Conversely, within the tactical theater of the battle, "military" reasoning was to prevail. "Battles," as Bedell Smith phrased it, were "fought to defeat armies, to destroy the enemy's ability to go on fighting. With the German Government evacuated, Berlin became a terrain objective empty of meaning. To send armies crashing into its Western suburbs could have no tactical significance."

Unlike their European counterparts who had been trained in the tradition of the great soldier-statesmen of the nineteenth century, the professional American officer of the Second World War tended to look on everything beyond the tactical military sphere as alien domain. Prewar training had been limited to the most esoteric of military studies.\(^{50}\) Garrison life during the twenties and thirties had been isolated from civilian contact; many Army officers declined even to
vote in national elections. A narrow military society had, in fact, grown up in America during the prewar years; a society which was insulated completely from all contact with public and international affairs. *

Field Marshal Montgomery was later to comment: "The Americans could not understand that it was of little avail to win the war strategically if we lost it politically. . . . War is a political instrument; once it is clear that you are going to win, political considerations must influence its further course." 51

To General Eisenhower, as to Marshall, Bradley, and Smith, however, there was no worse opprobrium which could be applied than that of being a "political general." In 1945, the ghost of McClellan still stalked the American officer corps. Ten years later, in an epilogue to his earlier work on Eisenhower, General Smith summarized Eisenhower's views in this regard. The Supreme Commander, according to Smith:

. . . was, and always considered himself, strictly a military commander. . . . I make this point because I have occasionally heard the question raised as to why the Americans did not rush for Berlin and seize it before the Russians could take the German capital. The reason, as has been pointed out in an earlier chapter [of the 1946 edition] was purely "military." And, a purely military operation meant "finding, engaging and destroying the enemy armies wherever they could be encountered." 52

Politically, when Washington had been informed of General Eisenhower's decision in 1945, there was no question but that the Supreme Commander should be supported. Admiral Leahy, the personal Chief of Staff to the President, wrote that, "he [Eisenhower] made a military decision in the field to rest on the Elbe. . . . My notes do not show that the matter ever came before the Combined Chiefs of Staff." 53

Later in April when the question of continuing beyond the Elbe once more arose, Washington again indicated that it preferred a

* Walter Bedell Smith was later to write of the effect which had been made on him by a lecture delivered at the War College by one of the military greats of the First World War. According to Smith, this "senior American general" concluded his address by saying, "I devoutly hope that our country may never again be involved in a great war, but if this should be our fate, I pray that we may meet it without the incumbrance of Allies." Smith, op. cit., p. 227.
"military solution," rather than a "political" one, in the deployment of American troops. Much to Churchill’s discomfiture, President Truman (who had succeeded Mr. Roosevelt on April 12) denied the request of the Prime Minister that the Allied forces continue to advance as far as possible into what was to be the Soviet zone in order to make the Russians more willing to share the anticipated food surplus of their zone with the rest of Germany. In reviewing this incident in his Memoirs, President Truman stated that after examining the Prime Minister’s proposal, he could not “see any useful purpose in interfering with successful operations.” Since Mr. Truman had been in office only one week when Churchill’s message arrived, it is probable, just as the Prime Minister later contended, that “the purely military view received an emphasis beyond its proper proportion.”

On the last day of April when Mr. Churchill suggested penetrating as far as possible into Czechoslovakia to keep that country from going “the way of Yugoslavia,” President Truman referred the suggestion to the military for their opinion. Prague especially was sought by Churchill for its future political value, but again the military declined to expand the scope of operations for political purposes. General Eisenhower, who had been asked for his opinion, stated that it was the Russian General Staff who anticipated operations in the Prague area and that he planned to continue to destroy any remaining enemy forces in Germany. “If a move into Czechoslovakia is then desirable, and if conditions here permit, our logical initial move would be on Pilsen and Karlsbad [not Prague]. I shall not attempt any move which I deem militarily unwise merely to gain a political advantage unless I receive specific orders from the Combined Chiefs of Staff.” Needless to say, no such orders were forthcoming.

The failure of the American military to recognize the political implications of the actions they took, or failed to take, in the spring of 1945, no doubt has played a part in the subsequent history of central Europe and Berlin. Whether a different course by the military at that time would have materially altered the situation in Berlin today is, at best, problematical. The conference of the heads of government at Yalta already had given the final stamp of approval to the zones of occupation which had been hammered out by the European Advisory Commission in London. In that case, as in this, the blame, if blame there was, lies not only in the misconceived notions of Soviet intent
then prevalent at all levels of the American government, but also in
the failure to understand the close connection between political and
military decisions which was prevalent as well.

Even had the Allied forces moved beyond the Elbe, even had they
liberated Berlin or assisted in its liberation, the present Allied position
there would hardly be altered. In the light of the earlier diplomatic
agreements on Germany, these moves would have proved valuable
only as bargaining instruments. The previously concluded occupation
agreements made it abundantly clear which power would occupy
which area. Berlin patently was to be under joint four-power occupa-
tion and was to be located 110 miles within the Soviet zone. Public
feeling in the United States at the time would not have permitted
these agreements to have been breached.

Commenting on this subject, General Bedell Smith has stated, "In
the atmosphere of friendship which was supposed to exist at that
period [April, 1945] between the Eastern and Western cobelligerents,
the violation on our part of an agreement already reached would have
been interpreted by our own people, as well as by the Russians, as
gross ill faith. In the ensuing outcry, I personally feel sure we could
not have stood our ground."