

# H-Net Reviews

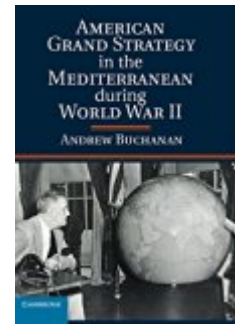
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew Buchanan. *American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean during World War II*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 324 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-04414-2.

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach



Library and bookstore shelves groan under the weight of volumes related to the Second World War. These books engage a wide range of topics from a variety of perspectives and include official histories, campaign, diplomatic, home front, and political narratives, and first-hand accounts written by soldiers, sailors, pilots, government officials, and civilians, among others. Authors publish nuanced narratives chronicling the roles of the major players—i.e., nations—in the conflict. Because World War II historiography is quite extensive, scholars might legitimately ask if historians can contribute anything else to the existing scholarship. With his newly published book—*American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean during World War II*—Andrew Buchanan, by proposing that scholars entertain a new interpretation of American decision making with regard to campaign in the Mediterranean, demonstrates that scholars still have much work to do.

Scholars who focus on the military alliance forged by the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the United States identify the complex negotiations of the Big Three—Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Premier Joseph Stalin, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt—and their military advisors as they crafted a unified strategy to defeat the Third Reich. A crucial issue in those negotiations was the debate over the establishment of a second front in western Europe. Scholars agree that very early on Stalin demanded that the western Allies launch the second front campaign and that for the Soviet leader the only location for that assault was in northwest France. They also identify the different UK and US positions regarding that second front. While the Americans advocated a 1942 Allied offensive across the English Channel into France, the British argued for an operation in the

Mediterranean—in North Africa.

As historians demonstrate, British and American political and military leaders hotly debated the proper, as well as the feasible, strategy for taking the war to the Germans. The prevailing thesis is that, because of their desire to exert influence in the Balkans after the war, the British strenuously pushed for a North African campaign as the first joint military effort after America's entry into the conflict. In addition, as both Churchill and his military advisors correctly argued, the possibility of a successful amphibious assault against northwest France in 1942 was slim. At the end of the day, because he wanted US forces to launch a military operation in 1942, Roosevelt agreed to the North African campaign—Operation Torch. According to the accepted narrative, Roosevelt and his advisors reluctantly bowed to pressure from the British and acquiesced on the campaign front. As a result, Allied forces landed in North Africa in November 1942.

In *American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean during World War II*, Buchanan challenges the prevailing narrative. He argues that the American decision to support the British proposal for Operation Torch was not a reluctant one—at least not for Roosevelt—and that America was not a reluctant Allied partner. According to Buchanan, Roosevelt saw the big picture—that US involvement in the Mediterranean could extend beyond the war. With Operation Torch, the United States gained a foothold in the Mediterranean that propelled the nation into a new global role in the postwar period, and the United States has never looked back. Buchanan concludes that Roosevelt was forward-thinking. While historians have criticized Churchill for maneuvering to preserve Britain's

empire after the war, they have failed to notice that, with every strategic position he took, Roosevelt was positioning the United States to step to the forefront and to supersede the United Kingdom by becoming the pre-eminent global leader after the war. Churchill did not have to pressure Roosevelt to deepen US involvement in the Mediterranean. The president understood “how initial military success in North Africa created new military and political opportunities in the Mediterranean, and at Casablanca he kept pushing toward those prospects” (p. 113). In other words, the United States’ grand strategic interests in the Mediterranean were substantial and were not the result of bowing to pressure to follow the British lead.

After identifying his thesis, Buchanan then sets out to prove it. He painstakingly details the US military and political engagement throughout the Mediterranean. For example, he chronicles the United States’ efforts to guarantee Spain’s neutrality by negotiating a trade agreement. As Buchanan demonstrates, because Spain was in need of certain goods, the United States used the trade deal as leverage to shape Spain’s behavior. When necessary, the United States slowed down the flow of goods until Spain complied with US demands. Buchanan pays equal attention to US efforts—political and military—in Italy, southern France, and the Balkans.

Scholars have noted that the nature of the Allied relationship evolved during the war. That evolution played out in a number of ways—through campaign decisions and the nature of wartime occupation—and indicated that the Americans and the British did not always agree on strategy. The Big Three meeting at Teheran highlighted the split in the goals of the western Allies moving forward. Roosevelt and Churchill would increasingly find themselves at odds. Scholars agree that the Yalta Conference further demonstrated the changing relationship dynamic. In the course of negotiations about future campaigns and plans for postwar Europe, Roosevelt and Stalin were so often on the same page that Churchill became the odd man out.

Buchanan chronicles the reversal of western Allied

leadership roles by weaving the political and military stories together in his discussion of the Italian campaign and Operation Anvil/Dragoon—the Allied landing in southern France. In doing so, he demonstrates that the United States moved from being the secondary to being the primary partner in the western Alliance. The United States increasingly became less likely to make decisions based upon what the British wanted. The litmus test for decisions was what the United States wanted or what was politically or militarily expedient for achieving America’s end goal. Buchanan demonstrates that shift by focusing on Italy, France, and the Balkans. In each case, the United States took steps to insure a postwar world in which it would be able to influence the emerging government. In addition, the situation on the battlefield occasionally forced the United States to adapt its policy to the political situation on the ground. By integrating the political situation into the military narrative, Buchanan presents a more complete picture of actions taken by the United States as part of its Mediterranean grand strategy.

In order to explore this strategy thoroughly, Buchanan relies upon an extensive amount of source material, archival and secondary. Although he draws from documents utilized by his peers, Buchanan reaches different conclusions. He presents an interesting, plausible account of US engagement in the Mediterranean and makes a good case, supported by exhaustive evidence, that the United States used the Mediterranean campaigns as a springboard to the postwar role of superpower.

*American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean during the Second World War* makes an important contribution to the existing historiography of the war. Buchanan advocates for a new interpretation of the events. Suggesting that the Mediterranean was not a “peripheral” theater for the United States, he argues convincingly that America was an active participant in the region; gradually assumed the lead role, forcing the British to take a back seat; and had substantive grand strategic interests in the Mediterranean. Buchanan’s book should appeal to a wide audience, including both interested lay readers and World War II scholars.

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