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There are pivotal events that loom large in American historical memory. For many of the fast-disappearing “greatest generation,” renowned naval historian Craig Symonds observes, D-Day, June 6, 1944, was a “moment … etched in our national memory.” However, prior to Overlord there was Neptune, the essential build-up phase of the cross-Channel expedition. “D-Day,” Symonds explains, was “a moment with a long backstory, one that has been told only in fragments and which is too often overlooked” (p. xiii). In *Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-Day Landings*, Symonds argues that Operation Overlord—the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe—depended upon the success of Operation Neptune, and “could not have taken place without it” (p. xiv).

Perhaps Symonds’s most significant contribution to D-Day scholarship is his incisive examination of the often contentious relationship between the American and British invasion organizers that emerged during the planning for Operation Neptune. Even before Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt saw Hitler’s Germany as an existential threat to Western civilization. From the first, the Americans forcefully argued for an invasion of Europe as early as 1942, while the often disingenuous British quietly opposed any premature landing. Seldom-expressed mutual distrust quickly pervaded the relationship between American and British planners throughout the two years prior to D-Day.

Prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, the United States had reoriented its war planning from a singular focus on Japan and the Pacific to include the possibility of a two-front war against both Germany and Japan. The emergent Germany First consensus began to take shape on November 12, 1940, when Admiral Harold Stark composed a memorandum arguing that American policy should materially reflect the existential threat that a Nazi-dominated Europe posed to national security. The Stark memorandum set the stage for joint American British conversations in January 1941, known historically as the ABC conference, which
Symonds argues “formalized the emerging Anglo-American partnership” (p. 13).

The Allies next met in Washington in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Heartened by the entry of the Americans into the European war, Winston Churchill took ship for Washington a week later. Having secured American acceptance of a Germany First strategy, Churchill’s primary goal for what became known as the Arcadia Conference was to advocate for an Allied campaign in North Africa. It was at Arcadia that Roosevelt gave voice to the “central conundrum” of Anglo-American war planning in late 1941. The politically astute president understood that if an invasion was impossible before 1943, it was “essential to do something in the Atlantic theater in 1942” (p. 35). However, a lack of cargo shipping to mount an invasion of North Africa made American insistence on a cross-Channel invasion “little more than a chimera in early 1942” (p. 41).

Arcadia marked a turning point in the Anglo-American relationship. The trauma of the Somme, and the narrow escape of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in 1940, heightened British fears of a cross-Channel invasion. Short of war matériel and battered by nearly two years of unrelenting war, the British saw the logistical realities facing the Allies in early 1942 as insurmountable. British skepticism and disingenuousness created a “feigned agreement” that ultimately “damaged the mutual trust within the Anglo-American partnership” (pp. 55-56). As Symonds observes, this animosity “was the product of a fundamentally different understanding of the very purpose of a cross-Channel invasion” (pp. 101-102). While the British saw a cross-Channel invasion as a finishing blow to be applied to a faltering enemy, for the Americans, “the invasion was not to ratify a victory already won; it was to seize that victory by brute force” (p. 102).

Once Neptune-Overlord was adopted at the Trident Conference in May 1943, American soldiers and matériel flooded into Britain. The quickening pace of invasion preparations in Britain served to worsen tensions between “Brits and Yanks.” Fortunately, as Symonds skillfully recounts, a “cultural collision … threatened but never quite broke the partnership” (p. 142). What held the alliance together was mutual need. The novice Americans needed British military experience and insight, while the British needed American matériel, financial, and manpower support. Cultural differences were embedded in the institutional assumptions that shaped how the American and British militaries were organized and structured. The impatient Americans pushed against what they perceived to be a paralyzing “old-fogeyism” that afflicted the British military establishment. Despite occasional squabbling, by the end of 1943 these reluctant, often quarrelsome allies were “poised on the brink of history” (p. 145).

For more than two-and-a-half years, British and American military planners surmounted often bitter debates to successfully organize and implement the largest amphibious operation in history. In the final analysis, the success of Neptune was largely a product of the “commitment and the dedication” of the men involved, from Churchill and Roosevelt to thousands of troops and factory workers (pp. 351-352). At the end of the battle for the beaches, Symonds concludes, “the factor that produced the Allied victory was human judgment applied at a crisis moment (p. 352).
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