



STEPHEN E. AMBROSE

D DAY FAILS

Atomic Alternatives in Europe

Often, in military history, the dominoes fall where the wind blows them. We have seen that happen with the influence of weather in the preternatural wetness of 1529, the breezes that disrupted the Spanish Armada, and George Washington's fog-aided escape after the Battle of Long Island. But rarely have the whims of weather produced more far-reaching consequences than they did at D Day. June 6, 1944 witnessed not just a genuinely decisive military event, but, in a sense, a political one that determined which ideological path Western Europe would follow in the next half century. What if the Allied invasion of Normandy had been called off or had failed? What if the famous window—a brief break in the storm battering the continent—had not opened, and Dwight D. Eisenhower had withheld the go-ahead or had gone through with the invasion anyway? Would the storm have become for the Germans a force multiplier, giving them the edge that Allied deceptions—which caused Hitler and his generals to divert divisions to other possible invasion sites—had taken away? In this speculation by Stephen E. Ambrose, failure would have resulted in alternatives that ranged from unpleasant to frightening.

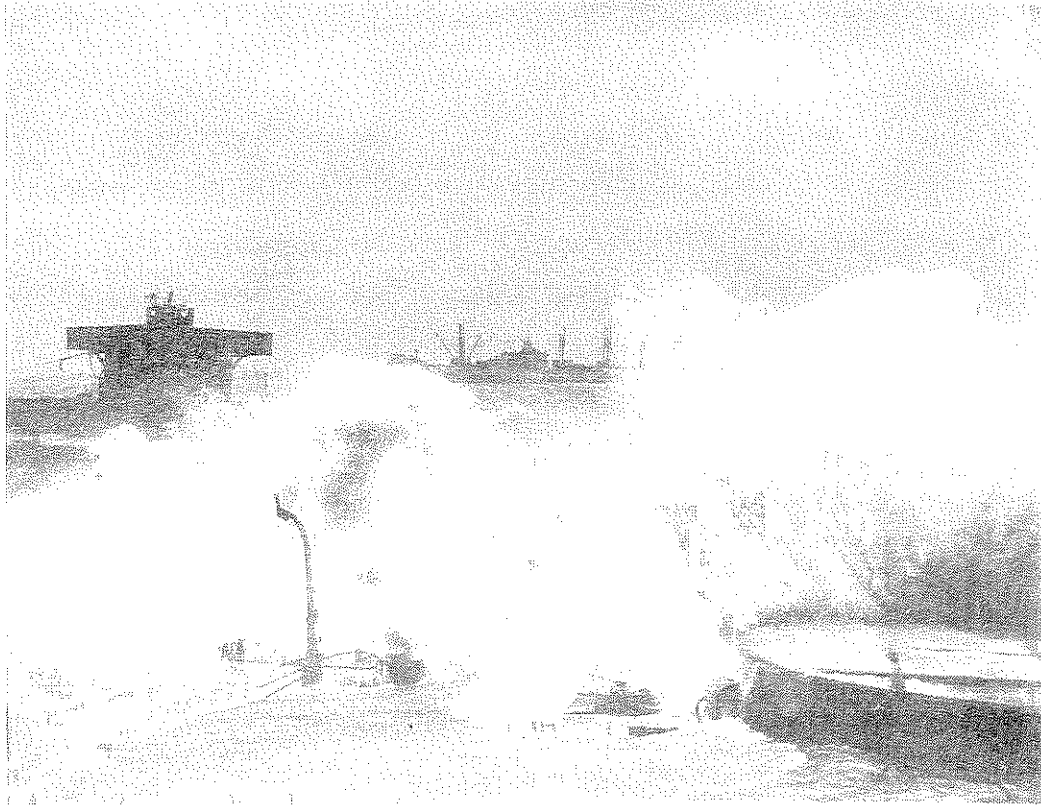
◆ If history is enjoying a resurgence of popularity, one of those chiefly responsible is Professor Ambrose. He has written (at the latest count) twenty books, including multivolume biographies of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon, as well as his three most recent bestsellers, *UNDAUNTED COURAGE*, the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition, his two accounts of the end of World War II in *WESTERN EUROPE*, *D DAY* and *CITIZEN SOLDIERS*, and most recently, *COMRADES*.

For what if history to work, there has to be a real chance that things could have turned out differently because of forces beyond human control—meaning, in most cases, weather. Some parts of weather can be predicted with certainty long in advance—tides and moon conditions—but others, such as wind, waves, and cloud cover can scarcely be guessed much more than twenty-four hours in advance, especially in an area of notoriously volatile weather such as the English Channel.

Overlord—the code name for the Allied invasion of Western Europe—was the most tightly planned offensive of the war. From the beginning, SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) counted on reasonable weather—moderate seas, low winds, scattered cloud cover. Heavy seas, high winds, a zero ceiling would make the assault impossible.

The invasion had originally been scheduled for June 5, 1944. The weather, which had been beautiful for the first three days of June, began to deteriorate. In the channel, a drizzle began to turn into a cold, penetrating rain. The final weather conference was scheduled for 4:00 A.M., June 4. Group Captain J. M. Stagg, whom Dwight D. Eisenhower described as a “dour but canny Scot,” made the weather predictions, as he had every day for a month, spending half an hour or more with the SHAEF commander. Stagg had bad news. A low-pressure system was moving in. June 5 would be overcast and stormy. Eisenhower decided to postpone it for at least one day.

In the early hours of June 5, with the wind and rain rattling the windowpanes of the SHAEF headquarters, Stagg made the most famous weather prediction in military history. He thought the storm would ease off later that day, and that by Tuesday, June 6, the weather would be



D DAY: THE WEATHER FACTOR

Twice, weather might have caused an Allied disaster on the beaches of Normandy. A fierce gale let up just in time for the D Day invasion to go forward on June 6, 1944. The next possible day, June 19, brought an even more turbulent tempest, shown here battering the artificial harbor code-named Mulberry.

(Corbis/Bettmann)

acceptable. The rain that was then pouring down would stop before day-break. There would be thirty-six hours of more or less clear weather. Eisenhower asked for a guarantee; Stagg laughed and said the general knew that was impossible. Then Ike made his decision: "Okay, let's go."

Stagg's prediction was as much hunch as scientific. Though he was only twenty-eight, he had spent several years as a weather forecaster. Other weathermen, from the Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy, for example, disagreed with him—they thought the storm would continue. Stagg wrote in his memoir, *Forecast Overlord*, that even had he had access to modern satellite imagery, he still would have been guessing as much as

predicting. A half-century after Overlord, when the BBC has satellites and reporting stations such as Stagg could not imagine, the weather predictions in May or June for twenty-four hours in advance are dead wrong about half the time.

So, what if the storm had continued into June 6? Eisenhower could have called the invasion back, although not easily. Had he done so, he would not only have given away the landing site, but June 19, the next date in which the combination of full moon and low tides was suitable, would witness the worst storm of the year to hit Normandy.

If, on the other hand, he had gone ahead with the invasion, the consequences may have proved disastrous. The landing craft would have been tossed about like toy boats in a bathtub. Men trying to go ashore from any craft that made it to land would have been vomiting, exhausted, suffering all the agonies of seasickness, incapable of fighting. There would have been no air cover and no paratrooper support, as the air drops would have been scattered to hell and gone), no supporting bombardment from the two- and four-engine bombers. The Navy might have been able to fire its big guns, but because of the rolling of the vessels in the waves, accuracy would have been limited. The German defenders, protected from the elements in their bunkers, would have delivered a deadly fire on the hapless Allied infantry.

Eisenhower would have had no choice but to order the follow-up landings canceled. He almost certainly would not have been able to withdraw the men from the initial waves: They would have been killed or captured, as had happened to the raiders at Dieppe in 1942, the war's first major amphibious landing in Europe. At nightfall on June 6, he would have issued his prepared-in-advance statement to the press: "The landings have failed . . ." The Allied fleet would have pulled back to England in disarray, its tail between its legs.

Then what? Eisenhower would have certainly lost his job, and this was something he knew, which was why he had prepared his statement accepting full responsibility for the failure. There was no sense bringing the entire high command down with him. But who could have taken his

place? Bernard Montgomery was unacceptable to the Americans, who were making the major contribution. Omar Bradley would have been as tarred by the brush of failure as Eisenhower. George S. Patton, perhaps—he was being readied to take a field command after the landing was established and would not have been implicated in the failure. But Monty would have tried to exercise a veto over Patton's appointment. George C. Marshall, the U.S. Army chief of staff was a possible choice: He had originally hoped to lead the invasion but President Roosevelt felt that he was too valuable in Washington.

The Allied planners, meanwhile, would have been in despair. Despite failure, they still would have had an enormous force at their disposal of land, air, and sea forces. But it had taken more than a year to put the Overlord plan together. There was no alternative plan available. In retrospect, Normandy was the perfect choice; but the planners could not have tried there a second time. Where, then? The Pas de Calais beaches were far better defended than those in Normandy. Le Havre bristled with German guns. Reinforcing the South of France landings (Operation Dragoon) in mid-August would have been the most appealing option, perhaps the only way was to get the forces gathered in Britain into the battle in France. But such a diversion would have created immense logistical problems while leaving the bulk of the Allied army far short of the Rhine, not to mention Berlin. The liberation of southern France was not going to end the war, or even seriously threaten Hitler's empire in north-west Europe. Moreover, with his channel flank secure for the moment, Hitler would risk little in sending reinforcements south—not the case when Operation Dragoon actually took place. Something akin to the stalemate in Italy would have ensued in the Rhone Valley. Still, the south of France seems the most likely alternative.

Failure would have brought immediate political as well as military problems. I would guess that the Churchill government could not have survived—after all, it had bet the kingdom on Overlord. The successor government would have had a mandate—to do what? Prosecute the war

more vigorously? Hardly possible. Negotiate with Hitler? Unthinkable. Muddle on and hope for the best? Most likely.

In the United States, meanwhile, Roosevelt—who had also bet the house on Overlord—would have been secure from a no-confidence vote. But he had a presidential election coming up in five months. Without a vigorous display of American military might—and where would that have come from?—he would have lost the election. The Tom Dewey Administration would have had a mandate—to do what? Prosecute the war in the Pacific with more vigor, that's what.

Failure on D Day would not have spared Hitler the problems of a two-front war, because of the Allied forces still intact in Britain, always posing a threat. Still, he would have been free to transfer at least some of his army in France to his Eastern front. Perhaps more important, he could have used the D Day failure to split the strange alliance of West and East. How hard would it have been for Goebbels and the Nazi propaganda machine to convince Stalin that the capitalists were ready to fight to the last Russian? It is not inconceivable that Hitler and Stalin would have groped their way back to 1939, when they were partners, and reinstated the Nazi-Soviet pact. It is also possible that Stalin might have overrun Germany, then France, and the war in Europe would have ended with the Communists in control of the continent. The Red Army would have been on the English Channel. It is hard to imagine a worse outcome.

With the mounting Soviet threat and Operation Dragoon stalled in the South of France, Britain and the United States would have increased the severity of the bombing raids over Germany. A climax would have come late in the summer of 1945, with atomic bombs exploding over German cities. What a finish *that* would have been.

After that, things get extremely murky, as they always do in what if history the farther one goes away from a single event. The vacuum in a Central Europe devastated by atomic bombs would have sucked in armies from the outside—the Red Army from the east and the Allied armies from Britain. Would they have clashed? If so, would the United

States have used a bomb or two against the Soviets? Or would they have cooperated (as they in fact did in 1945), drawing a line through Central Europe?

In the Pacific in the summer of 1945, with the United States expending her atomic arsenal against Germany and Stalin free to transfer some part of his armies from the German to the Japanese front, the Red Army would have invaded the northern Japanese home islands. In this scenario, Japan would have been spared the atomic bombs but subjected to a Communist dictatorship in the northern half of a divided country. This was exactly what Stalin was planning and would have done if the Japanese had not surrendered to the Americans first. Had Stalin gotten into Japan, who knows when, and if, the Russians ever would have left.

That the consequences of a failure on D Day would have been catastrophic is obvious; what they would have been is anyone's guess; what stands out for me is that one of the consequences would *not* have been a Nazi victory. Almost surely, however, one of the consequences would have been a Communist victory in Europe. A Communist Germany, France, Low Countries, and Italy would have meant no NATO and a possibility of a Communist Great Britain. Relations with the Soviet Union would have been impossibly difficult and dangerous. That is a terrible prospect—but it might have happened if the Germans had beaten us on the beaches of Normandy.

✦ ROBERT COWLEY ✦

THE SOVIET INVASION OF JAPAN

We now know that the Soviet Union, whose armies had raced across Manchuria and down Sakhalin Island in August 1945, intended to invade Hokkaido, the northernmost of the Japanese home islands. That invasion would have taken place two months before Operation Olympic, our invasion of the south island, Kyushu. While Emperor Hirohito's surrender declaration awaited the official signing in Tokyo Bay on September 2, the Soviets continued to gobble up territory and were poised to make a leap to Hokkaido. That amphibious landing would have been an improvised affair, but no matter: Of Cold War confrontations that almost happened but didn't, none is more frightening in its potential for fatal mischief.

It's not just that the Soviets would, in just over two weeks and at minimal cost, have picked up a large share of the Japanese marbles that had taken the Allies almost four years and thousands of lives to gather. If their landing force had established so much as a beach hold on Hokkaido—and American raiders had apparently gone ashore there with little resistance that summer—the Soviets would have had a legitimate claim to the island, a significant (and no doubt troublemaking) role in the formal surrender preparations, and a zone of a partitioned Tokyo. Just think of the Cold War implications of a Berlin in the Pacific. (Looking on the positive side, we could have blockaded the Soviet zone of Tokyo in response to Stalin's blockade of Berlin in 1948, which might have ended that crisis—or created a more general one.) Consider, too, the deadening effect of a Soviet Hokkaido on Japan's reconstruction—or the inhibiting effect that a hostile occupying force on a home island would have had on our decision to intervene in

Korea, using Japan as a base. The chances for future regional and international conflict seem infinite.

We are lucky that the Pacific war ended when it did. If the war had gone on for even a week or two longer, the entire East-West geopolitical situation might have changed irrevocably. In retrospect, it begins to seem that when Harry S Truman warned Stalin to keep away from the Japanese home islands—and the Soviet dictator reluctantly called off the Hokkaido operation at the eleventh hour—our accidental president made one of his most important decisions, one that ranks with his decision to drop the bomb.

If he hadn't, I might not be writing these words today.

✦ *Robert Cowley is the founding editor of MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History.*