

# The New Criterion

## Books

May 2009

### The armchair alliance

by [Victor Davis Hanson](#)

On *Masters & Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West*, by Andrew Roberts.

How did the British and the United States ever defeat the Axis in the West? Both countries were tied down in the Pacific fighting the imperial Japanese and supplying Stalin's Red Army, which they feared wanted more than just the defeat of Hitler.

The two allies could not agree on where and when to launch an initial assault on the Germans and Italians. The Americans themselves were divided over whether to focus primarily on Japan, which had attacked America on December 7, 1941—or Germany, which had not. They were also fearful that the United States would end up fighting for the continuance of the British Empire, while the British were more afraid that the greater global resources of the United States—soon to be manifested in the war—would inevitably supplant England after the defeat of the common enemy.

If the British believed their greater experience and familiarity with military affairs should have allowed them to play a refined Athens to America's muscular Rome, the Americans felt that, once again, the conniving Europeans had got themselves into a mess of destroying Western civilization and only the United States, with its well-supplied innumerable legions, could, for the second time in twenty-five years, bail them out. British generals believed that their sagacity and acumen should count far more than their less impressive manpower and resources, just as their brash American counterparts resented being lectured on what to do by those who, they felt, could not do it themselves.

Both Germany and Japan had a near-decade headstart in rearmament on the Western allies. And by 1940, the absorption of the European continent under Nazi rule gave Hitler and Mussolini even more geostrategic and material advantages. There was no guarantee in late 1941 that the Allies would defeat Hitler—or, during most of 1942, even the likelihood of it.

Andrew Roberts, the celebrated British diplomatic and military historian, starts with the premise that the partnership that should not have worked, in fact, worked surprisingly well—but only because of the fortuitous combination of four grand strategists: Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the chief of his combined military command General Alan Brooke (later created 1st Viscount Alanbrooke) and their American counterparts, President Franklin Roosevelt and his Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall. At first glance, *Masters and Commanders* should not be an interesting book. The text runs to nearly 600 pages. It is an account of the Second World War that has no descriptions of actual fighting on the battlefield. Much of the narrative deals with dozens of meetings, hurt feelings, misimpressions, and vanity; in some sense, it resembles the drawing-room dramas of a gossipy eighteenth-century British aristocratic novel.

But as it turns out, *Masters and Commanders* is a riveting read, in no small part because Roberts is a master storyteller who has real empathy for all four participants in the quartet and is able to show how their sometimes casual conversations and decisions changed the lives of tens of millions fighting across the globe. A careful critic, he does not demand that the four be perfect, but instead appreciates just how difficult it was for them to prove so successful at what they did. Certainly neither British nor American planners committed the sort of errors that Hitler made in ignoring what his Italian and Japanese allies were planning (he had no advance warning of either the Italian invasion of Greece or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), or invading the Soviet Union in 1941, and then, in unpredictable fashion, constantly redirecting the focus of his offensives. Nor was the Anglo-American leadership wasteful of human life in the fashion of Joseph Stalin, who, throughout much of 1941–2, was first unprepared for German attacks and then incapable of ordering strategic retreats that would have saved thousands of Russian lives.

The amount of research that went into this project is quite stunning. Roberts draws on thousands of pages from the corpus of British cabinet minutes, original handwritten notes from a variety of participants' letters and diaries, and contemporary news accounts. Andrew Roberts is a prominent conservative historian who is often identified with keen interests in contemporary politics. But, as is true of his past histories, Roberts's traditional outlook never affects his sound judgment, and the result is that he occasionally offers quite unexpected but convincing conclusions.

Franklin Roosevelt was a manipulator and, at times, a populist demagogue who kept his cards close to his vest—he ran the war in the same manner that got the New Deal passed over a deeply conservative Congress and populace. He certainly never quite understood the difference between well-intended socialism and the deeply sinister communism practiced by Stalin. Yet, as Roberts shows, much of the Allied success was due to Roosevelt's political savvy and innate brilliance. Without his politicking, America would not have committed to the North African campaign of 1942. And without such a visible commitment to fight the *Wehrmacht* on the ground less than a year after Pearl Harbor, American momentum would have, by default, shifted largely to the Pacific. Roosevelt eventually saw the logic of the British desire to wait on a cross-channel invasion in a manner that was far more prescient than his generals, who failed to grasp the political ramifications of an Americans defeat in their first head-to-head European encounter with the veteran panzers.

Alan Brooke and George Marshall voluntarily gave up more glamorous field marshalships and thus willingly ceded glory and fame to Montgomery and Eisenhower. Yet from Roberts' careful scholarship, we learn that most may have underestimated the eccentric Brooke (an accomplished bird-watcher)—and overestimated the sober and sterling George Marshall. The latter's three great contributions to the war effort were: first, the insistence that the allies land on the French coast no later than late Spring 1944; second, his creation of the Joint Chiefs and success in harmonizing the diverse views of Admiral King and Gen. Hap Arnold; and, finally, his constant advice to and principled support for Eisenhower's delicate balancing act among egos like those of Bradley, Montgomery, and Patton. Otherwise, Marshall was wrong to insist on an invasion of France in 1942–3. He never understood the critical nexus between Sicily and Italy and so had no plan to prevent the Germans' easy escape up the Italian peninsula.

Brooke, in professional fashion, reasoned with the Americans until they accepted a gradualist approach that gave them the experience in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy they needed before going into France. He sought to nip in the bud most of Churchill's various hare-brained ideas for an amphibious assault on Norway, advances to Vienna, invasions of Rhodes and Crete, and "soft underbelly" fantasies in the Balkans, but in a prudent manner that protected the reputation of British strategic thinking. He knew better than Churchill the limitations of British forces and how critical weight on the battlefield must eventually translate into American dominance in allied discussions. Brooke also seems to have known that Americans would dominate shared strategic thinking, but

understood they could thereby do themselves a great deal of harm, unless someone gently apprised them of the complexities and challenges of conducting war on the familiar European continent—particularly the challenge of trying to fight, as he already had, undefeated German soldiers. The American idea of deploying 400,000 men on an invasion through southern France, 500 miles from Paris, was not a wise use of scarce manpower when General Montgomery’s straight-shot invasion into the Ruhr was undermanned and in desperate need of reinforcement.

Roberts has a masterful portrait of Churchill, who comes off as a Renaissance genius—yet wrong in almost all of his strategic advice, not so astute about the dangers of the evils of Stalin as he later claimed, and romantic in his naiveté about the postwar survival of an empire that an exhausted Britain could never maintain—one a newly aggressive United States and Soviet Union, in their own ways, would never tolerate. Yet, of the four, it was Churchill whose broad vision and deep historical knowledge could also place particular victories and setbacks in their proper perspectives—and alone offer the necessary rhetoric to rally the depressed after setbacks and modulate undue exuberance during successes. World War II, he kept repeating, would be Britain’s finest hour, comparable to its defeat of the Spanish Armada and the British victories in the Napoleonic Wars. If his critics (including Roosevelt) claimed that he was wrong about much and right about little, the little he got correct was what mattered, especially when married to his elegant prose and oratory.

The grand theme of Roberts’s narrative is that, somehow, the four huge egos worked well with each other—but most importantly at just the appropriate times. The more experienced Churchill and Alanbrooke were absolutely right to resist the impulsive American generals up until 1944, when something like a Normandy invasion finally became feasible. But in the last two years of the war, it was fortunate for the allies that Marshall and Roosevelt prevailed in most of the decision-making. They had a far more accurate assessment of the huge advantage that American manpower and industry brought to the cause, coupled with dozens of brilliant generals whose corps were now larger than entire British armies. By spring 1945, Patton’s Third Army alone was nearing a million men, almost entirely mechanized, guided by superior intelligence and logistics, and led by some of the most capable division commanders in military history—it needed no lectures about restraint or fears of another Somme or Verdun.

*Masters and Commanders* is an intellectual achievement of the first order that offers a much needed revisionist and positive portrait of the odd-duck Brooke and new appreciation of how Roosevelt’s political skills translated into strategic insight. Only a historian of Andrew Roberts’s talents and judiciousness could have had such command of imperial archives and private British documents—and would have been so evenhanded and so astute in traversing this minefield of wartime Anglo-American relations.

**Victor Davis Hanson** is the author of *A War Like No Other* (Random House).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 May 2009, on page 63

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-armchair-alliance-4087>