Welcome to the October session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Our speaker tonight is Philip Padgett, author of *Advocating Overlord: The D-Day Strategy and the Atomic Bomb*. He will lecture on the different interests and resulting conflicts between the United States and Great Britain over the D-Day invasion and the implications of the atomic bomb.

What seems superficially to have been a seamless and highly successful alliance between the United States and the United Kingdom in World War II conceals a very problematic relationship. In a nutshell, the United Kingdom entered the war in 1939 as a weakened but still potent global empire. After the fall of France, when Great Britain stood alone against the Nazi juggernaut for a year and a half, the actual fragility of the empire became apparent. The UK was extremely hard pressed to sustain itself, let alone roll back Germany in 1940 and 1941. Were it not for its triumph in the Battle of Britain, when “so much was owed by so many to so few,” the British war effort might have been directed from Canada as the British Isles might well have been captured. Hence, America’s entry into the war was a godsend to the Churchill government. He immediately traveled to the United States in December 1941 to begin coordination with the President Roosevelt; the US represented virtually inexhaustible men and materiel for the fight.

British dependency on US food, fuel, equipment, naval convoys, and the 8th Air Force, was apparent to both sides in the partnership. England’s strategic pretensions made their relationship contentious. As the Iron Chancellor Otto von Bismarck said: “Every alliance has a horse and a rider.” No one doubted that America provided the muscle for the horse, the problem was both the English Prime Minister and the US President wanted to be the jockey.

As early as 1942, different strategic visions divided the Allies as they planned the joint British–American invasion of Europe. Churchill advocated a series of invasions in the Mediterranean (“the soft underbelly of Europe”) in places like Italy and Greece. These would be attacks set to a much earlier timetable than the Americans were comfortable with. The British believed that these strikes would throw Germany off balance and would address Stalin’s demands for a Second Front as soon as possible. American strategists favored making the invasion a decisive and concentrated effort aiming to defeat Nazi Germany outright. For this reason the Americans favored a cross-Channel invasion into northern France and a direct drive to Berlin. This would require the build up of resources and forces over a much longer period of time than the “sideshow” invasions the British contemplated.

In the interest of Allied harmony (and testimony to the spectacular productive capacity of the United States) the Allies pursued both strategies with OPERATION TORCH (North Africa, 1942) and OPERATIONS HUSKY and AVALANCHE (Sicily and Italy, 1943), while also building up forces in the UK for OPERATION OVERLORD. Once Eisenhower was named Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, the tensions between Allies publicly were muted but behind the scenes there were many sharp disagreements especially over strategic goals and the allocation of resources. General Eisenhower had to herd two groups of cats that mutually disliked each other: American Generals versus His Majesty’s Imperial Staff. The rivalry between commanders such as George S. Patton and Sir Bernard Law Montgomery are well known: at a higher level, Churchill, the arch-British imperialist, discovered that his position was increasingly that of junior partner to Roosevelt. At the Tehran Conference in 1943 Churchill was often the odd man out in the discussions between FDR and Marshal Stalin. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union (albeit for different reasons) saw the health of the British Empire as a high priority in their visions of the future.

As the war progressed the relative weakness of the UK to either the US or the USSR was a never-ending source of frustration for Churchill. The American development of the first atomic bomb so far exceeded Britain’s technical capacity as to breathtakingly demonstrate the power differential between the two allies. Nevertheless, Churchill was acutely
aware of America’s lack of experience in global geopolitics. Thus, Churchill attempted to insert a British role into America’s planning for the use of nuclear weapons. Churchill believed the Americans underestimated the danger to the world posed by the might of the Soviet Union. This was obvious in the summer of 1945 at Potsdam when the fate of Nazi Germany had been decided, and the Big Three were focused on Japan and the post-war world. During the MANHATTAN PROJECT, Churchill had canvassed British scientists over the possibility of the UK developing its own bomb. He knew that, in the post-war world, only membership in the atomic club would maintain Great Power status for Great Britain. Churchill’s strategic vision was sound, but the resources in Britain were not equal to the tasks he had in mind. As events shortly after the war would clearly demonstrate, the age of the Great European Empires was over. Two Pacific powers, traditionally disconnected from Western Europe, the USA and the USSR, would dominate the world.

The story of British-American relations and conflicting strategic visions is a study in contrasts. For the UK, its role was like that of an aging Lion: its great victories and global reach were receding into the past, its great empire was unsustainable. The United States, in contrast, a once-inferior power, found itself an ever-expanding global power, and with it came the hubris and arrogance of youth. The overall situation, put in terms that 2019 can understand, is the United Kingdom is Mustafa, but unwilling to give up his crown, and the United States is the young somewhat uncertain Simba stepping up to take the leadership role. The Soviet Union was Scar, looking to knock the old imperialist down and fearful of the young King.

Further Readings:

Announcements:
Vietnam War Roundtable - 21 Oct. 2019, Medevac Pilots - rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org
St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 28 Oct. 2019 - Chickamauga - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net
Civil War Symposium - 4 Apr. 2020 - info@tczewrt.com
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org
8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomingston, Wednesdays at 1130 - https://www.8thmn.org
Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org
Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - 25 Sept. 2019 - Hornfisher, Neptune’s Inferno: the US Navy at Guadalcanal - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com
Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com
Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afrmn.org
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2019-2020

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“The Big Three” at Yalta” Churchill, FDR, Stalin
Eisenhower and SHAEF command staff

See our programs on YouTube at http://youtube.com/ww2hrt.