



## *The Folly of Generals: How Eisenhower's Broad Front Strategy Lengthened World War II* by David P. Colley.

Philadelphia: Casemate, 2021. Pp. xvi, 222. ISBN 978-1-61200-974-2.

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Critiques of Dwight Eisenhower's decision-making in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) began before Nazi Germany's May 1945 surrender. Following the Allied invasion of Europe in 1944, Eisenhower's subordinates, chiefly FM Bernard Montgomery and Gen. George Patton, excoriated the Supreme Commander's "broad front" strategy to force Germany's surrender. Freelance military historian David Colley<sup>1</sup> agrees with them. He maintains that Eisenhower's steadfast adherence to his strategy in the late summer and fall of 1944 was flawed by poor decision-making, aversion to risk, inability to prioritize military advantage over personal favoritism, and failure to concentrate his combat power against a weakened enemy. Colley also contends that Eisenhower's inability to adjust his plan according to the enemy's situation hamstrung subordinate commanders in a position to exploit their successes and end the war before May 1945. *The Folly of Generals* defies the received wisdom about Allied operations in the ETO in two ways.

First, Colley argues that Patton and Montgomery were not Eisenhower's only generals able to conduct decisive thrusts into Nazi Germany. "At least four other chances for the Americans to crack the German defenses from the Netherlands to the Swiss Frontier, seven or eight months before the war ended in May 1945" (x): Leonard Gerow's V Corps at Wallendorf, Lawton Collins's VII Corps at Aachen, Lucian Truscott's VI Corps near Belfort, and Jacob Devers's Sixth Army Group near Strasbourg.

Second, he disputes the traditional argument that lack of fuel and reserve forces reduced the Supreme Commander's options, all but forcing him to maintain a broad front. Eisenhower, commanding three Army Groups and seven Armies during the months of 1944 on which Colley focuses, could not support logistically more than one primary advance at a time. The author supports this assessment, but uses specific examples, such as Patton hoarding fuel, to add new arguments to the theater's historiography.

Colley claims his critiques in no way suggest any one of Eisenhower's identified breakthroughs "would have succeeded. But the potential was there for success. All too often they are dismissed as irrelevant because of the purported lack of supplies" (xiii-xiv). The author draws heavily on post-war interviews with German Army officers in which they noted their forces' inability to stop a breakthrough in areas Colley identifies due to a paucity of German troops in the specific region.

We learn, too, of the "mistakes" Colley considers "most serious," before moving to still critical but "lesser" errors (xv) and their effects on the war's duration. Most of these are attributed to Eisenhower's inflexible devotion to the "broad front" strategy.

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1. His previous books include *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express* (Washington: Brassey's, 2000) and *Decision at Strasbourg: Ike's Strategic Mistake to Halt the Sixth Army Group at the Rhine in 1944* (Annapolis: Naval Inst. Pr, 2008).

Colley assesses Operation Market Garden's planning efforts and strategic objectives. He then shifts to command errors associated with V and VII Corps at Wallendorf and Aachen and explores failures during Market Garden before turning to VI Corps at Belfort.

The author backtracks a bit to highlight the Allied failure to destroy remnants of two German Armies in the Falaise Pocket (July 1944). He then details Sixth Army Group's plan to cross the Rhine (Nov. 1944), which Eisenhower canceled owing (Colley believes) to his personal dislike of Devers and need to secure the southern flank of Patton's Third Army.

We then move to the Mediterranean Theater, concentrating on Valmontone on the Italian mainland and the aftermath of Operation Husky prior to June 1944. The author blames Gen. Mark Clark for the failures at Valmontone, but attributes the Allies' failure to prevent the evacuation of German forces from Sicily to Italy to Eisenhower's poor decision-making. The "folly of generals" in these operations required the Allies to keep forces in Italy that might otherwise have been sent to France, thereby protracting combat operations in the ETO.

Colley closes with discussions of the effects of the liberation of Paris, poor use of Allied reserve units, operations in the Brittany peninsula, Patton's purported supply struggles, British XXX Corps operational failures, and French military politics vis-à-vis the war's duration. In each case, he detects yet another reason why Eisenhower's obstinacy extended the war in Europe.

Colley alerts his readers against taking away incorrect, inaccurate, or incomplete lessons for future conflicts, noting that the German defeat

secured America's place as the most powerful nation on earth and left a legacy of national invincibility and military astuteness.... Because of that overwhelming victory we seldom cast a critical eye on the errors by our military leaders that lengthened the war and led to many more casualties. (221)

Students of the ETO will find the argument of *Folly of Generals* to be lucid and well written. Short biographical sketches of various generals broaden the book's purview beyond Eisenhower. And the included maps clarify the author's arguments, though one wishes more of them were devoted to unit dispositions.

Readers conversant with the "broad front" strategy will not be convinced by Colley's analysis of Eisenhower's tactical skill as Supreme Commander, specifically that he and his subordinates lacked the "sophistication, experience, and knowledge" to employ Napoleon's maxim of concentration (xi), whereby commanders strengthen forces in one location while accepting risk against their flanks. Colley considers three Corps and one Army Group as headquarters postured to break through German defenses and end the war sooner, given the German lack of forces. Planning considerations differed substantially between Army Groups and Corps. Devers, who commanded several corps, enjoyed more flexibility than did Gens. Leonard Gerow, Lawton Collins, and Lucian Truscott. The author does not elaborate on this or suggest follow-on actions if any unit achieved initial success.

Opportunities for V, VI, and VII Corps arose during Market Garden. Montgomery's planned decisive thrust was critical because it affected the potential breakthrough areas Colley identifies in terms of resources and command attention. The three Corps-level opportunities occurred almost simultaneously with Market Garden in Sept. 1944. Colley blames senior Allied commanders for missing those chances. Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group was to secure Montgomery's southern flank during Market Garden. Given the critical importance of the operation, Montgomery rightly received priority of resources. This had the added advantage of avoiding the appearance of favoritism for an American general. Readers are left to wonder how a better resourced Hodges or Devers would have exploited a breakthrough with the Corps at their disposal.

The well documented Allied failures to prevent a German withdrawal from Sicily or destroy enemy forces in the Falaise Pocket did not affect the execution of the “broad front strategy.” Colley offers neither missions nor operating areas for the Allied troops he proposes for movement from Italy to France. Liberating Paris at first opportunity, despite its high cost in casualties, was an absolute political necessity. Left unsaid is George Marshall’s enduring support for Eisenhower’s strategy.

The examples of VI Corps and 6th Army Group support Colley’s argument. Other than Patton, Truscott and Devers were the American generals most able to breach German defenses and, more importantly, exploit success. The author’s detailed review of Devers’s plan at Strasbourg shows its potential for success; Devers and Truscott still faced the longest Allied route to Berlin. Discussion of this Corps and Army Group supports Colley’s critique of Eisenhower and his generals, but does not account for the German ability to “stubbornly ... hold a strong position” in defensive operations.<sup>2</sup>

*The Folly of Generals*, regardless of its shortcomings, challenges critical thinking and raises key points for political and military leaders regarding the lessons of history and the value of strategic-level flexibility and risk assumption.

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2. See Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1997) 332.