The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 376
"Two Hammers, One Anvil"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

I would rather be the hammer than the anvil.

Erwin Rommel.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 376. Two Hammers, One Anvil.

We're going to look at North Africa today, and we'll begin where we left off the last time we looked at North Africa, in episode 367. In that episode, I told you about the Battle of Gazala, in which Rommel's Italian and German units routed the British Eighth Army near Tobruk and sent it reeling back to the east, toward Alexandria. The Eighth Army managed to reorganize and establish a new defensive line at El Alamein, which was essentially the last place they could have made a stand before Alexandria, just 80 kilometers farther east.

El Alamein was uncomfortably close to Alexandria, but it had a lot going for it as a defensive position. As I explained before, the new front line was at the point where the Qattara Depression comes closest to the Mediterranean shore, just 65 kilometers, or 40 miles. The Qattara Depression was impassable to motor vehicles, meaning Rommel would not be able to use his favorite tactic, of sending his armor to his right flank, in the south, and circling them behind the British line.

Since that would not be possible at El Alamein, the only remaining option for Rommel was a direct attack on the British front line. If that worked, Alexandria, here we come.

It didn't work. Then the British went on the offensive, hoping to break the Axis line. That didn't work, either. This fighting went on for most of the month of July 1942, and by the end of the month, both sides had exhausted their offensive capability and were digging in where they stood.

The July combat is known to history as the First Battle of El Alamein, and you can guess from that designation there is going to be a Second Battle of El Alamein, sooner or later.

The commanders of these forces, General Claude Auchinleck and newly minted Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, both understood there was going to be a Second Battle of El Alamein as well. Both were busy planning how to win it.

On the face of it, Auchinleck had the easier assignment. Now the British side enjoyed the ever-shifting advantage of short supply lines. They were near Alexandria, where Lend-Lease aid from the United States was pouring in. Lots and lots of trucks, which were exactly what was needed to overcome the supply problems that had plagued this entire campaign, and also lots and lots of the latest American tank: the M4 Medium Tank, popularly known as the Sherman tank, a name coined by the British and referencing the US Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman. The Sherman tank would enter combat for the first time at El Alamein.

The Sherman was not the best tank of the Second World War, although in the summer of 1942, when it began to arrive in Egypt, it was superior to most of the lighter tanks the Italians and Germans were using in North Africa. The Sherman's strengths were American strengths. It was designed to be easily mass produced, reliable, and easily maintained. Over the next three years, the Americans would positively flood Europe with tens of thousands of them.

The British also had the advantage of ULTRA; they were able to decode German transmissions and get a good feel for their enemies' numbers, deployment, and supply situation. They were also getting good information about the Italian supply convoys that were crucial to keeping Rommel and his army in the fight.

As the two sides faced off at El Alamein and built up their resources for the next battle, Rommel was, as usual, carping at the Italians and the OKW, stressing the urgency of increasing the flow of supplies. Rommel and other German commanders tended to blame this on Italian incompetence; they would never know that the real problem was that the British were getting advance information on every Italian convoy.

The Axis disadvantage in intelligence information was offset to a degree by their own super-secret intelligence source: US Army Colonel Bonner Fellers, the American military attaché in Cairo, who was reporting on the British military in Egypt to the US State Department, using a diplomatic code the Italians and Germans knew how to read. This information Rommel found very useful, at least until June 1942. From reading decrypted German intercepts, the British had picked up on the fact that the Germans were getting information from someone in Egypt. They began considering possible sources, including Fellers. On June 10, an Enigma intercept included language criticizing British combat tactics as inferior to US Army tactics.

The British had already learned that the American had a low opinion of their army, and these comments struck them as pure Fellers. They showed the message to the Americans, who

confirmed that the Germans were quoting from one of Fellers' reports. On June 29, even as German tanks were rolling into Mersa Matruh and the British falling back to El Alamein, Fellers switched to an American military code the Germans and Italians couldn't read, and that was the end of that. The British intelligence advantage had just grown bigger still.

And at this same moment, Winston Churchill was in Washington for another meeting with Franklin Roosevelt. It was at this meeting that Churchill convinced Roosevelt to abandon Operation Sledgehammer, the plan to invade Western Europe in 1942, or at least by 1943, and persuaded him to go along with Churchill's ideas for action in the Mediterranean Theater, beginning with an invasion of French North Africa. You may recall I told you this story in episode 369.

Convincing Roosevelt was one thing; convincing America's top military leaders, Army chief George Marshall and Navy chief Ernest King, that was a different thing. They met with their British counterparts in London in July, and when the British refused to go along with an invasion of the Continent, Admiral King suggested in that case, if the British weren't interested in taking on the Germans, the US would redirect its efforts to focus on fighting Japan in the Pacific, and after they returned to Washington, they made that recommendation to the President. Roosevelt refused. He told his chiefs that sending the US military island hopping in the Pacific would do nothing to assist the Soviet Union and was exactly what Hitler was hoping America would do. He ordered them to proceed with Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa, and to prioritize it above any other American military operation.

It is said that this was one of only two occasions when Roosevelt directly ordered the American military to take an action against their recommendation. The other would come in 1943, when Roosevelt would order anti-submarine aircraft redeployed from the Pacific to the Atlantic to aid in the U-boat hunt.

After his conference with Roosevelt, Churchill had to hurry back to London to deal with another motion of no confidence in the House of Commons, the second this year. The first had been triggered by the fall of Singapore; this one by the British retreat into Egypt. In the Commons, Churchill blamed the embarrassing retreat on General Auchinleck, which wasn't entirely fair, but he beat back the motion of no confidence handily.

Marshall and King met with Churchill at Chequers later that month and made one final pitch for an invasion of Europe, but Churchill and his commanders would not budge. Finally bowing to the inevitable, Marshall assigned Dwight Eisenhower to begin the planning for Operation Torch.

In August, Churchill was off to Moscow to explain to Stalin not to expect a second front in Europe for a while, and to try to convince him that Operation Torch was a satisfactory alternative. Accompanying him was the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Alan Brooke. Along the way, the two stopped first in Egypt to relieve Auchinleck from the Middle East Command. Churchill proposed splitting off a separate Persia and Iraq Command and assigning Auchinleck

there, but the general declined and returned to India, where, you'll recall, he had been commander of the Indian Army until Churchill swapped him out for Archibald Wavell, Auchinleck's predecessor at Middle East Command. Auchinleck would have no command for the next year, until in 1943, when Churchill chose Wavell to be the new Viceroy of India, then gave Wavell's previous post, commander of the Indian Army, back to Auchinleck, who had held it before Churchill swapped him out for Wavell.

This is getting really confusing.

I said it wasn't entirely fair to blame the setback in Egypt on Auchinleck. Like his predecessor, Wavell, Auchinleck had had to deal with a barrage of demands from the prime minister that he go on the offensive against Rommel. Churchill keenly desired a smashing British offensive for political reasons. Not because he was afraid of a motion of no confidence in the Commons, though of course he was afraid of that as well, but because he wanted the whole world to see Britain taking on the Axis powers on its own, independent of any operations by the Soviets or the Americans. After the war was over, and the time came to devise a newer and better postwar world, Churchill wanted a seat at the table as an equal to Stalin or Roosevelt, and to achieve that level of prestige and influence, Britain had to fight as an equal. Above all, it was vital that Britain not be seen as a France or a China, a nation that could not withstand the Axis onslaught and needed to be bailed out by its allies.

Churchill's political assessment was entirely correct; where he went wrong was in assuming you can order up a British offensive in the North African desert as you will, as if you were ordering up a packet of fish and chips at the local shop.

If Auchinleck had a weakness, it was exercising poor judgment in his choice of subordinates. The British Army's officer corps in the Second World War included senior commanders of variable quality. Some historians see this as a consequence of the heavy losses of junior officers the British Army suffered in the First World War.

To replace Auchinleck, Churchill and Brooke turned to the fifty-year-old General Harold Alexander, who had made a name for himself during the fighting in Burma earlier in the year. Since Auchinleck had also assumed direct command of the Eighth Army, someone was needed to fill that role, too. Churchill chose Lieutenant General William Gott, who had worked his way up the ranks of the Seventh Armored Division, one of the Eighth Army's key units. Brooke and Auchinleck had reservations about Gott, who had been fighting in North Africa from the beginning. Brooke felt a better choice would be someone from the outside, someone who could come to Egypt with a fresh perspective.

As things turned out, Brooke got his way. As he was flying from the front lines to Cairo to take up his new assignment, Gott's plane was intercepted and shot up by a squadron of German Me-109s. Despite both engines being out, the pilot of the British plane was able to land safely in the

desert, but the Germans continued to strafe the plane on the ground, killing several aboard, including Gott. He was 45 years old.

When the unwitting German pilots returned to base, they were told, “Congratulations, gentlemen. You have just killed the new commander of Eighth Army.” Was this luck, or did the Germans acquire some bit of intelligence that alerted them Gott would be on that plane? The answer is unclear.

With the job of commanding Eighth Army suddenly vacant again, they had to come up with a new candidate. Alan Brooke recommended the 54-year-old General Bernard Montgomery, or Bernard Montgomery, as our British friends would say. Brooke had just nominated Montgomery to fill the job Alexander had left in order to take the Middle East Command. Are you following all this?

Montgomery took command of Eighth Army on August 13 and began an immediate reorganization. Montgomery somewhat resembled Douglas MacArthur, in that he was ambitious, confident, knew how to play to the press, and had figured out that the secret was a distinctive wardrobe. Montgomery’s chosen look involved a black beret, and in Egypt, short pants that exposed his knobby knees.

Montgomery put all the Eighth Army’s armored units into a new X Corps, and all the infantry into XXX Corps. He made it a point to be seen by as many of his soldiers as possible as often as possible. He announced to the troops that he had burned all the contingency plans for a further retreat and told them, “If we cannot stay here alive, then we will stay here dead.” In fact, there were no contingency plans for a further retreat; that was just a bit of theatre.

For all his eccentricities of style, his planning was cautious and orthodox. Auchinleck had wanted to wait and rebuild and resupply until September, and that had gotten him sacked. Montgomery planned his offensive for October, but he got away with it by convincing Churchill that the longer wait would allow for a bigger and more dramatic victory, big enough to make it all worthwhile.

On the opposite side of the line, Erwin Rommel was also under pressure. He’d been sent additional German units, soldiers previously designated for the assault on Malta before it had been called off, and his own superiors, up to and including Benito Mussolini, were demanding the one final attack that would pop the British cork, open the El Alamein bottleneck, and clear the way for an advance on Alexandria.

Rommel tried to launch it on August 30, relying on his usual trick of diversionary attacks up and down the line while the main assault went for the British left flank. But the front was too narrow, the terrain difficult, and Montgomery had anticipated exactly this move and had heavily reinforced his southern flank. This close to Alexandria, the RAF, reinforced with American

Lend-Lease aircraft, had control of the skies and pounded the Germans on the ground. After a few days of fighting, Rommel called off the attack as hopeless.

The stress of eighteen months of this back-and-forth along the coast of Africa finally got to him. His health deteriorating, Rommel was given leave to return to Germany in September for rest and recuperation. General Georg Stumme, a veteran of the Eastern Front, was sent to take over command of Panzerarmee Afrika.

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that while Rommel was in Berlin, Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring spoke with him and dismissed US-built airplanes, repeating his line that Americans were only good for making razor blades. Rommel is said to have replied, "*Herr Reichsmarschall*, I wish we had such razor blades."

Rommel had left Stumme with a carefully devised plan for dealing with the inevitable British offensive. The wait for resupply had been fruitless. The German side had only a few days' reserve of ammunition and fuel. A battle between tanks maneuvering in the open desert was therefore out of the question. The German tanks would run out of fuel long before the British tanks did. Headquarters back in Germany believed the British would not attempt an offensive in Egypt before 1943, but neither Rommel nor Stumme were that optimistic.

Rommel figured the best hope for an Axis victory was to set up a cunning defense, wait for the British to attack, and hope to catch them off guard. To that end, Rommel had huge minefields laid along the front line, with hundreds of thousands of mines, in two parallel lines five kilometers apart. The ground between them was mined in some places but not others. The idea here was to channel the British offensive into these un-mined pathways, which would limit the British armor's room to maneuver, then prepare his units' guns to lay down heavy fire along those same pathways, which Rommel called "Devil's gardens."

[music: Wagner, *Lohengrin*.]

As the British and Germans were preparing for their showdown at El Alamein, a whole other set of preparations were underway at the opposite end of the Mediterranean. Eisenhower had moved his command from London to Gibraltar to prepare for Operation Torch and became the first foreign officer to take command of the Rock since the British took possession of it over two centuries earlier. Tiny Gibraltar was crammed full of ships and airplanes; British and Canadian engineers cut nearly 50 kilometers of tunnels under the Rock, which served as temporary quarters for tens of thousands of soldiers.

The German military dismissed the prospects of an Allied invasion of French North Africa. The Italians took the threat more seriously and prepared plans to occupy Tunisia should such an invasion materialize.

Operation Torch was meant to involve multiple amphibious landings across North Africa. Allied commanders argued among themselves over where to make the landings. Oran and Algiers, the two principal ports in French Algeria would be essential. They recognized the importance of Tunisia, the point where Africa comes closest to Italy, and considered Tunis as a possible invasion site. The capture of that city would seriously complicate Axis efforts to supply their units in North Africa.

On the other hand, Tunis was close enough to Sicily that Allied forces could expect to be hammered by the Luftwaffe and the Italian Regia Aeronautica, so Allied planners turned their attention farther west, to the port of Bône in eastern Algeria, close enough that after Allied forces arrived, they could make a mad dash toward Tunis overland and hopefully capture it before the Axis had time to react.

But the Combined Chiefs of Staff of the UK and US feared that invading forces landing inside the Mediterranean would be vulnerable to a sudden Spanish move to interdict their supply lines through the Strait of Gibraltar. Francisco Franco's approach to the war was not so much neutrality as non-belligerence. Franco's government clearly favored the Axis and was occasionally willing to offer assistance, such as allowing German U-boats to resupply in Spanish ports. On the other hand, Spain needed imports only the Allies could provide, petroleum being the most important. This forced Franco's government to stay in the Allies' good graces.

But the Chiefs worried that Spain might see an Allied invasion of North Africa as a threat to Spanish territories in Africa. It might be enough to push Spain fully into the Axis camp; therefore, they felt it would be much safer and wiser to send one of the three invasion forces to take Casablanca, which is a port city on the Atlantic coast of French Morocco. That way, even if Axis forces were able to close the Strait of Gibraltar to Allied shipping, Allied units in North Africa would have a supply line from an Atlantic port.

So Casablanca was in and Bône was out as an invasion target. This made the invasion forces safer and therefore more likely to succeed in their mission, but at the cost of abandoning any thought of a rapid advance east to seize Tunis before the Axis could react.

Diplomatically, the Allies kept trying to reassure Madrid that they had no designs on Spanish territory: not metropolitan Spain, nor Spanish Morocco, nor the Canary Islands, while Axis diplomats warned the Spanish that the opposite was true. In September 1942, Franco replaced his foreign minister/brother-in-law, Ramón Serrano Suñer. Replaced him as foreign minister that is, not as his brother-in-law. Serrano was staunchly pro-Axis, while his replacement was more neutralist. The Allies took that as a hopeful sign.

But keeping the Spanish placated was nothing compared to the diplomatic balancing act with the French government in Vichy. Per the terms of the armistice with Germany, the French government had about 110,000 military personnel in North Africa. They were armed with hundreds of pre-war French tanks, which weren't much by 1942 standards, and hundreds of

French Air Force aircraft, some of which were up to 1942 standards. The Allies were perfectly prepared to fight these French forces for control of North Africa if necessary, but wouldn't it be great if they didn't have to? The Allies hoped to convince French government and military officials in North Africa that they were coming not as conquerors but as liberators.

That wasn't as easy as it sounds. To begin with, the French and British governments weren't exactly on the best of terms. As we've seen since the early days of this podcast, France remained a country divided between the secular Republican left and the Catholic traditionalist right. If you think back to the political machinations that led to the French capitulation in 1940, which I talked about in episode 324, they bear some of the markings of a right-wing coup, conducted by military officers and their civilian political allies who apparently believed that the domestic French left was a greater threat than were the Nazi German invaders.

The new French government in Vichy, led by the self-styled Chief of the French State, Marshal Philippe Pétain, remembered well the British attack on the French Navy at Mers al Kébir. The French had almost declared war on Britain over that one, but there were also the seizures by British forces and their so-called "Free French" allies of Dakar and French Equatorial Africa and Lebanon and Syria; these could easily be read as British moves to enlarge their colonial empire at the expense of France, with political cover provided by the traitor Charles de Gaulle, the British puppet who'd been sentenced to death in France for his treason. And some French, particularly on the political right, bought into the Nazi claim that the British provoked the war with Germany and then roped in France to do the fighting for them.

The French had fought the British and their Free French allies at Dakar and in Lebanon and Syria; there was no reason to think that it would be any different in North Africa.

The United States was a whole other story. The US had recognized Pétain's government and maintained diplomatic relations with Vichy. The Roosevelt Administration had steered clear of Charles de Gaulle. President Roosevelt did not trust de Gaulle; he saw the man as a wanna-be dictator, a Napoleon in waiting.

In sum, the USA had good relations with Vichy and had given de Gaulle the cold shoulder. It was therefore far more likely that the French in North Africa could be persuaded to see the Americans as liberators and join their fight, then that they would do the same with the British.

The Allies had some good information on the state of affairs in French North Africa. A Polish Army intelligence officer named Mieczysław Słowikowski, who had been in France when it fell, had made his way to Algiers in 1941, and for the past year had been passing information along to the Allies through the Polish government in exile.

Then there was the American diplomat Robert Murphy, who had served as the US *chargé d'affaires* in Vichy. In that capacity he had negotiated a trade agreement that allowed US imports into North Africa. As Operation Torch was being prepared, Franklin Roosevelt appointed

Murphy US Minister to French North Africa. As soon as he settled into his new office in Algiers, he began sounding out French Army officers, in search of those sympathetic to the Allied cause. There were French in North Africa who were firmly loyal to Vichy; there were others who dreamed of ousting the Germans from the French homeland.

There was one prominent military figure in France who was clearly unhappy with the occupation. That was the 63-year-old General Henri Giraud. We haven't yet met Giraud in person on this podcast, but we did encounter his army, the 7th French Army. This was the army which, you'll recall from episode 322, was the one General Gamelin sent up the coast toward the Netherlands in the early days of the German Western offensive of 1940, hoping to link up with the Dutch Army. Giraud had been commander of this army; sending it up the coast rather than holding it in reserve proved to be a catastrophic miscalculation on Gamelin's part, once it was revealed that the main German offensive was actually advancing much farther south, through the Ardennes, but that was hardly General Giraud's fault.

Henri Giraud was born in Paris in 1879. His parents were Alsatian refugees who fled the region when France was forced to cede it to Germany in 1871. This makes Giraud yet another on our list of sons of Alsatian refugees living in Paris who became military officers, including most famously Alfred Dreyfus.

Giraud was wounded and captured in August 1914, during the opening weeks of the First World War and the German offensive into France. He was held in a POW camp in Belgium, but managed to escape with the assistance of Edith Cavell. Cavell was a British nurse working in Belgium who was also helping to sneak Allied soldiers out of Belgium; soldiers like Henri Giraud. Cavell, you'll recall, was caught and executed by the Germans in 1915. Giraud returned to the French Army. He finished out the war, served in Istanbul as part of the Allied occupation, then fought with the French Army in the Rif War in Morocco.

At the time of the 1940 German offensive against France, Giraud was commander of the French Seventh Army. He was taken prisoner by the Germans for a second time and held at Königstein Castle, which the Germans were using as a high-security prison. Even so, Giraud escaped once again after making himself a 50-meter rope and using it to climb down the castle wall. British intelligence helped smuggle him into Switzerland, and from there he returned to unoccupied France.

This made him a serious embarrassment to the French government in Vichy. The Germans were demanding he be returned to their custody. Giraud met with Marshal Pétain, and tried to convince the old man to do more to oppose the Germans. Pétain was unmoved by Giraud's arguments, though he did refuse to return Giraud to German custody, over the objections of his own prime minister, Pierre Laval. Instead, the Vichy government merely kept him under house arrest in France.

The Nazis were sufficiently annoyed by Giraud to order the Gestapo to arrest every one of his relatives they could get their hands on in occupied France. That amounted to 17 people in all.

So you can understand why Giraud looked like a good bet to the Americans. There was no other military figure in unoccupied France who was so obviously hostile to the Germans and unhappy with the status quo and getting away with it.

Allied intelligence made contact with Giraud and sounded him out. He liked the idea of an Allied invasion of French North Africa, but he had conditions. Like most French military officers, he held a grudge against the British and insisted that the invasion be a fully American operation. He also wanted himself or some other French officer to be in command in North Africa after the invasion; if foreigners took control of North Africa, France might never get it back.

The Allies indicated they were willing to work with Giraud, but since direct communication would be difficult and dangerous, he referred them to Charles Mast, a French general who commanded the 3rd North African Infantry Division, stationed in Algiers, the same city where Robert Murphy was stationed. Mast was yet another of the generation of Alsatians in exile who became military officers. Giraud and Mast had both been prisoners at Königstein; Mast had been released by the Germans.

This was useful information. Mast was a closet Nazi-hater who commanded a sizeable French infantry unit in North Africa and presumably had insight into which of his colleagues could be persuaded to join the fight and which should be carefully avoided.

On October 16, 1942, in London, General Eisenhower met with his deputy, Major General Mark Clark, and the other senior US Army and Navy commanders for Operation Torch and revealed this information to them. Murphy had cabled Washington to recommend a meeting between himself, Mast, and a high-level delegation of American military figures. And so, Eisenhower sent this group, led by General Clark, to meet with Mast in Algiers.

The six commanders flew to Gibraltar, then boarded the British submarine HMS *Seraph. Seraph* took them to the coast of Algeria, some 90 kilometers west of Algiers. There, on the night of October 21, the party boarded boats that rowed them to the shore for their meeting.

The talks went well. The Americans learned that though the French Navy were opposed to the idea, French Army and Air Force commanders in North Africa were willing to cooperate with an American invasion.

The night of October 24, the group were picked up on the coast and transported back to *Seraph*, and then on to Gibraltar and London to deliver the good news to Eisenhower.

But even as the Americans were preparing to slip out of French North Africa and report back to Eisenhower, 2,500 kilometers to the east, a whole other battle was beginning. Bernard Montgomery had finally begun his campaign to drive the Axis out of Egypt.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Morgan and John for their kind donations, and thank you to Tyler for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Morgan and John and Tyler help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the Battle of Stalingrad. There's quite a lot of war going on just now in late 1942, isn't there? In Stalingrad, the Germans are about to discover that this battle is not the kind they were used to fighting. In fact, it was more like the battles of the last war. Verdun on the Volga, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Here's an obligatory reminder that in North Africa, when I say "British," I really mean "British and Commonwealth forces under British command, and sometimes a few Polish and Free French units as well." And when I say "Commonwealth," I mean "Indian, South African, Australian, and New Zealander units."

The fighting in North Africa is an important part of the military history of all these countries, but none more so than New Zealand. The New Zealand Second Division played a crucial role at El Alamein, and especially notable was the New Zealand 28th Battalion, a unit composed of Maori volunteers in response to calls from prominent Maori in New Zealand.

The 28th was originally led by white officer, but Maori officers gradually replaced them. They saw combat in Greece and Crete, and later in North Africa and Italy. The 28th was one of the most decorated battalions in the New Zealand Army, including one of its officers, Lieutenant Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa Ngarimu, who was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, and thus became the first Maori to be so recognized.

There is another Erwin Rommel quote, which may also be apocryphal, in which he is supposed to have said, "If I had to take Hell, I would use the Australians to take it and the New Zealanders to hold it."

[music: Closing War Theme]

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