

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 383

“Casablanca”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

After securing French North Africa, the Western Allies once again fell into disagreement over the next move. Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to another conference to discuss the matter, and chose a provocative venue: Casablanca, in French Morocco, the city George Patton’s Western Task Force had attacked barely two months ago. A conference in French North Africa would be something like a victory lap for the Western Allies.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 383. Casablanca.

As we’ve worked our way through the first 28 months of the Second World War, from September 1939 to January 1943, you may have come to notice how many times I’ve talked about conferences among leaders or military commanders of the Allied powers, especially the UK and the US. These two countries began holding joint strategy meetings even before the United States entered the war, most notably the Atlantic Conference, when Winston Churchill met with President Franklin Roosevelt face to face for the first time in Newfoundland in August 1941. This is the conference from which emerged the Atlantic Charter; thus, it is sometimes called the Atlantic Conference.

Wikipedia actually has a page titled “List of Allied World War II Conferences.” There are 31 entries on the list, and I’ve mentioned most of the ones that have taken place so far. Today I’m going to skip over conferences that mostly involved foreign ministers and military commanders or minor allies and consider only the conferences attended by two of the Big Three: Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin. Next after the Atlantic Conference came the Washington Conference, when Churchill came to Washington shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack to discuss joint strategy. Churchill came to Washington again in June 1942, mostly to dissuade the Americans from their plan to invade Continental Europe in 1942 or 1943. In August 1942, Churchill

traveled to Moscow to meet with Stalin, explain to him that a second front in Europe wasn't going to happen for a while yet, and persuade him that Operation Torch would be just as helpful.

A through-line of these meetings is Winston Churchill persuading either Stalin, or more frequently Roosevelt, to do things his way. Churchill persuaded the American President to prioritize the European Theater over the Pacific Theater; then he persuaded him to adopt the plan to invade North Africa rather than Europe. Perhaps this was a bit presumptuous of him, but the fact is that Churchill was right every time. Germany truly was a greater threat than Japan, and Operation Sledgehammer, the US proposal to invade the Continent, had it been attempted, would have been disastrous.

Now that it was January 1943 and French North Africa was secured, the UK and US were once again at loggerheads over the next step. Predictably, the Americans wanted to go back to Operation Roundup, their proposed 1943 invasion of the Continent, while the British side wanted first to finish the job in the Mediterranean. That would mean, at a minimum, ousting the Axis from North Africa and neutralizing the Italian Navy and the German and Italian air forces operating in the region, particularly from Sicily.

So what to do? Another conference, obviously. Up to now, Churchill has done all of the traveling to these conferences, which is understandable, given President Roosevelt's disability, which would complicate any long trip. Stalin was afraid to travel by air. This time, however, Roosevelt expressed a desire to do some traveling himself. He was tired of conducting the war entirely from Washington.

The two leaders chose Casablanca as the site of their meeting. It was a good location from which they could settle the problem of who was going to govern French North Africa after the murder of François Darlan put an emphatic end to the Darlan Deal. Roosevelt still didn't trust de Gaulle, whom he saw both as a potential tyrant and a British puppet. He wanted Henri Giraud put in charge, while Churchill stood foursquare behind de Gaulle.

Giraud was happy to attend the conference and was looking forward to being appointed the new governor of French North Africa. The Moroccan sultan, Muhammad V, was also invited to meet with the Allied leaders to discuss the future of the region. On the other hand, Charles de Gaulle complicated things greatly for Churchill by refusing his invitation. To de Gaulle, it was insufferable to be summoned to a meeting of Allied leaders as if he were another of their subordinates. And on French territory, no less. *Sacré bleu!*

Roosevelt and Churchill also invited Stalin to the Casablanca Conference, but Stalin declined. The official explanation was that Stalin needed to remain in the Soviet Union to oversee the Battle of Stalingrad, which was still raging as the Conference met.

Stalin's fear of airplanes was not irrational. Airplanes of the time were slow, uncomfortable, and far more prone to mechanical failure than they are in our time, and Allied leaders had to travel long and circuitous routes to keep outside the reach of the Luftwaffe and the U-boats.

For the safety of the Allied leaders, the Conference was planned in strict secrecy. On January 9, 1943, President Roosevelt boarded his train in Washington and headed north. This was wartime, so the White House had suspended the practice of publicizing the President's itinerary in advance, though most reporters assumed he was taking a routine trip to his home in Hyde Park.

When they reached Baltimore, the President and his entourage slipped off that train and boarded a different one, headed south, and rode it all the way to Miami. At dawn they boarded Pan American Airlines' *Dixie Clipper* flying boat, which took them on a ten-hour flight to Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad, where they spent that night in a local hotel.

This flight, by the way, represented the first time a sitting President of the United States rode in an airplane.

They took off before dawn the following morning for a nine-hour flight to Belém, Brazil, where the *Dixie Clipper* stopped to refuel, then they began the grueling 19-hour flight across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. There the plane landed at the mouth of the Gambia River, where the light cruiser USS *Memphis* was waiting. This marked the first occasion a US President visited Africa.

The President and his party planned to stay overnight aboard *Memphis*, but first, the President asked to visit the nearby town of Bathurst, the capital of British Gambia. Reportedly Roosevelt was appalled by the poverty and squalor in the town. He had already stated his intention that the United States would not go to war merely to preserve European colonial empires; the sight of Bathurst convinced him there was no place for imperialism in the post-war world.

The following morning, the Presidential party boarded two US Army C-54 transport planes for the final leg of their journey, across the Sahara to Casablanca, where they landed just before dinnertime, five and a half days after the President left the White House. The British and American delegations ate dinner together; afterward Roosevelt and Churchill stayed up past midnight, discussing some of the key topics of the coming conference over more than a few martinis.

On January 18, President Roosevelt reviewed the US Third Infantry Division at Rabat, much to the shock of its soldiers, who had not known the President was in Morocco. Roosevelt, Harry Hopkins, and General George Patton ate lunch together, in the field with the soldiers, *al fresco* as it were. The President and his luncheon companions ate the same rations the soldiers were getting: canned ham, sweet potatoes, and string beans, while an Army band played music, including one of the President's favorite songs, "Chattanooga Choo Choo" popularized in 1941 by Glenn Miller and His Orchestra.

On January 22, Roosevelt and Churchill were dinner guests of the 33-year-old Sultan of Morocco, Muhammad V and his son, Crown Prince Hassan. The Sultan presented gifts to each of the two Allied leaders: a jeweled tiara and a ceremonial sword. Morocco had a significant Jewish population at the time, about 250,000, and during the period of rule by the French government in Vichy, the Sultan had staunchly opposed the implementation of Vichy's anti-Semitic decrees, telling French officials, "There are no Jews in Morocco. There are only Moroccan subjects," and his first duty as Sultan was to protect his subjects.

Unfortunately, the Sultan was little more than a figurehead and the French imposed many of the Vichy decrees in Morocco anyway, albeit over the Sultan's objections. Nevertheless, the Sultan expressed his resistance by refusing to meet with any representatives of the Nazi government in Germany. At his 1941 Feast of the Throne, a ceremony celebrating the anniversary of the Sultan's coronation, his invited guests of honor were Morocco's most prominent rabbis and other important figures in the Moroccan Jewish community. The Sultan's resistance successfully delayed any attempt to deport Jewish Moroccans until the Operation Torch landings overthrew Vichy rule.

Between these public events, the British and American delegations discussed war strategy. General Eisenhower appeared before them to report on Operation Torch, including the failure of the Rush to Tunis. He was extremely nervous about making this appearance, and it didn't help his presentation any that he was suffering from influenza on the big day. He proposed a plan to deal with the German force in Tunisia by circling south of the Axis line and driving straight across Tunisia to the sea. That was when Alan Brooke, the Imperial Chief of Staff, pointed out that Eisenhower's plan would send the Allied units at the tip of the spear directly into Erwin Rommel's force, which was withdrawing into Tunisia to link up with the forces at Tunis. Eisenhower could only mutter something about giving the plan a further review.

Privately, US Army Chief of Staff George Marshall berated Eisenhower over the tangled logistics that had hampered Operation Torch and the poor discipline of the American soldiers, with the notable exception of the troops under the command of General Patton, there at Casablanca. Patton knew how to get his soldiers to put on a good show for visitors.

Roosevelt promised to outfit the French military in North Africa with American equipment, so they could fight alongside their British and American allies. Churchill wanted the Americans to recognize Charles de Gaulle and his Free French movement as the French government in exile, but de Gaulle's refusal even to attend the conference wasn't exactly helping matters. It took a private message from Churchill to de Gaulle, threatening to cut off British support for the Free French movement, to get the general to come to Casablanca at last.

Giraud and eventually de Gaulle both attended the conference, but they were not invited to participate in the military strategy sessions with Roosevelt and Churchill. The two French leaders did make a joint public appearance with Churchill and Roosevelt at a press conference on the

final day of the conference, but the tensions between de Gaulle and the Anglo-Americans were palpable, the tensions between de Gaulle and Giraud even more so. Roosevelt prodded the French generals to shake hands for the cameras; the handshake was so quick some of the photographers couldn't get the shot in time, and you can actually see their discomfort in the pictures that were taken.

Franklin Roosevelt hoped to set up Giraud as an equal partner with de Gaulle in leading the Free French movement. He believed that Giraud, who seemed much more willing to work with Americans, would serve as a useful counterweight to the haughty de Gaulle.

Roosevelt's plan never worked out. Charles de Gaulle had enormous credibility as the first French leader to publicly reject the armistice with Germany and urge the French to fight on. The anti-Nazi resistance in the French colonies, the French underground in metropolitan France, even the French forces in North Africa respected de Gaulle too much to accept his being sidelined. In the end, de Gaulle and Giraud did work out a *modus vivendi*, in which de Gaulle accepted Giraud as commander of French forces in North Africa and Giraud accepted de Gaulle as the overall leader of the Free French movement.

As for Franklin Roosevelt, it wouldn't be until after de Gaulle was back in Paris that the American President was willing to acknowledge him as leader of the French.

Also at the Casablanca conference, the British and Americans discussed the U-boat problem in the Atlantic, further aid to the Soviet Union, and the proper disposition of British and American forces between the European and Pacific theaters. They agreed to share a summary of what was discussed and agreed to at the conference with Joseph Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek.

But the biggest issue of the conference, and the one that most divided the two allies was the strategic question of where to strike next. The Americans had wanted to strike directly into France. The British had persuaded them to execute Operation Torch instead. Okay, fine. Been there; done that. Now let's get back to the main event, okay? Admiral King reverted to his position that if the British didn't feel ready to invade Europe, then America should devote its attention to the Pacific.

General Brooke couldn't have disagreed more. US Army operations clearly still had some kinks that needed to be worked out. An invasion of France would face the now 44 German divisions garrisoning the country, and the odds of success were slim. The British side also had a quantitative argument: the Allies simply did not yet have enough landing craft to execute a sea invasion of France on the necessary scale, and neither did they have the shipping capacity to keep such a large force in supply as it battled the German defenders.

And they had the numbers to prove it. The British buried the Americans under a blizzard of papers and statistics until the Americans cried "Uncle!" One American general later described the Casablanca Conference this way: "We came, we listened, and we were conquered."

Eisenhower was one of the few Americans who agreed with the British reasoning, moving George Patton to grumble that “Ike is more British than the British...”

Churchill appointed Harold MacMillan to a Cabinet-level post as British Minister at Algiers, representing the British government in the region and working closely with Eisenhower. MacMillan saw the relationship this way: “We...are the Greeks in the American Empire. You will find the Americans much as the Greeks found the Romans—great big, vulgar, bustling people, more vigorous than we are and also more idle, with more unspoiled virtues, but also more corrupt. We must run [Allied Command] as the Greek slaves ran the operations of the Emperor Claudius.”

In exchange for agreeing to British strategy, the Americans extracted from the British pledges to do more in the Pacific Theater; specifically, to send more military aid to China, Australia, and New Zealand, and further build up British forces on the Indian border, with the goal of taking back Burma and advancing east into Thailand and Indochina.

And what exactly was the British strategy that the Americans conceded to? It was first, to complete the sweep across North Africa, wresting the region from the Axis, to be followed by Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. American commanders had difficulty seeing what would be gained by taking Sicily, but again, the British came armed with statistics. Clearing the Luftwaffe and the Italian Navy out of the central Mediterranean would reduce Axis attacks on Allied shipping and re-open more direct shipping lanes to Egypt and India, both of which would result in a savings in merchant shipping, which would bring nearer the day that the invasion of the Continent that you chaps are so keen on can finally take place. May 1944 was the tentative date.

In lieu of a ground invasion of Europe, the Americans committed to joining the British in their aerial bombing campaign over Germany. As we’ve seen, the RAF preferred to bomb at night, despite the problems of accuracy that entailed. The Americans preferred to fly in daylight, relying on their big, heavy bombers like the B-17 Flying Fortress and the newer B-24 Liberator, flying at high altitude, where they would be difficult to reach, armed with multiple machine gun turrets so they could defend themselves, and using the Norden bombsight, which allowed for a high degree of accuracy even at such altitudes.

Very well then, the British said, you do you. The RAF would bomb Germany by night, the US Army Air Forces by day, coordinating their targets so a German city might find itself getting pummeled around the clock which would have to be highly disruptive to production and devastating to morale.

Operation Husky was a secret, but Churchill could and did announce the new bombing plan at that press conference Allied leaders held at the end of the conference, on January 24, 1943. This was the same press conference at which de Gaulle and Giraud were forced to make nice—a “shotgun wedding,” as Franklin Roosevelt put it.

But when Roosevelt spoke at that press conference, he gave the press the biggest news story at Casablanca. Roosevelt cited the great American Civil War general, Ulysses S. Grant, and noted that the press of the time, playing off Grant's initials, dubbed him "Unconditional Surrender Grant." In that tradition, Roosevelt announced, the Allies had agreed they would accept nothing less than unconditional surrender from Germany, Italy, and Japan.

The press reported that Churchill appeared shocked when Roosevelt made his announcement, which has led to speculation that Roosevelt had made it off the cuff, without having first discussed it with Churchill. That was not the case. They had agreed to it during the conference, but Churchill was not expecting Roosevelt to announce the decision so quickly. It seems probable Roosevelt wanted to make this public pledge as part of the effort to placate Joseph Stalin and dissuade him from thoughts of a separate peace with Germany.

Three weeks later, after he'd returned to the United States, Roosevelt broadcast a fireside chat, in which he clarified the meaning of "unconditional surrender." He told the American public that "we mean no harm to the common people of the Axis nations. But we do mean to impose punishment and retribution upon their guilty, barbaric leaders."

On his way back to the United States, during his stopover in Brazil, Roosevelt met with the Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas. Vargas was a right-wing dictator, but the Roosevelt Administration had worked hard to cultivate relations with Brazil as part of its larger "Good Neighbor" policy. Brazil had signed on to the Atlantic Charter, after which German and Italian submarines began preying on Brazilian merchant shipping. As had happened in the last war, these U-boat attacks prompted Brazil to declare war on Germany and Italy on August 22, 1942.

Since then, Brazilian air and naval units were assisting in the Battle of the Atlantic, and with American support, Brazil would organize a Brazilian Expeditionary Force the size of a division, which in 1944 would fight in Europe as part of the US Fifth Army. Brazil then became the only South American nation to contribute ground forces to the war against the Axis.

[music: Quadrado, "Wisdom of the Mountains."]

On January 23, 1943, the penultimate day of the Casablanca Conference, General Bernard Montgomery's Eighth Army captured Tripoli.

A year ago, that would have constituted a huge victory, but Operation Torch changed everything in North Africa. Erwin Rommel's defenders had simply retreated into Tunisia, making sure to destroy Tripoli's port facilities before they left. Now Rommel's troops would be drawing supply from the safer and more reliable route through Tunis, while Montgomery's supply line was hopelessly overextended. It would take two weeks before the first British ships would be able to begin offloading supplies at Tripoli, and weeks more before the port was back to its full capacity.

Relocating to Tunisia offered Rommel another advantage: the Mareth Line. This was a defensive line the French had built back in the Thirties to defend against a potential Italian invasion from Libya. The Mareth Line was built some 200 kilometers behind the frontier, at a point where a line of hills created a bottleneck in the coastal plain. The Line consisted of a set of bunkers atop a ridge overlooking a valley to the east, where the invaders would have to cross. Behind the bunkers were a series of artillery emplacements.

Rommel thought the French constructions barely acceptable, but the Mareth Line would serve as a sort of El Alamein in reverse. Montgomery would find it difficult to outflank the line with armor, given the hills to his left. Add to that his supply issues, and Rommel felt confident it would be March before the Eighth Army would pose any serious challenge.

This freed Rommel to consider the Allied force pressing into Tunisia from the west, the one that had participated in the too-little-too-late Race to Tunis.

If you looked at a map of Tunisia, the superficial impression you would get was that the Allies held most of the country. That was true, but Montgomery was stuck at the Mareth Line in southeastern Tunisia, while the Allied force moving east from Algeria had succeeded in capturing the Atlas Mountains and the highlands of central Tunisia, but what really mattered was the coast, where Tunis lay, where the best roads were, leading west and south from Tunis to the front lines, providing quick and easy routes for trucks and tanks, while Allied forces had to haul their soldiers and supplies across the mountains.

Eisenhower polished his plan for Tunisia; it still involved striking east to the Mediterranean coast, cutting Rommel's supply line to Tunis, which would make it easy for Montgomery to overwhelm him from the south.

But the Germans were wise to this plan. The Luftwaffe had air superiority in Tunisia, thanks to its much closer bases, and did regular reconnaissance flights over American positions. They had detected the Americans building up stockpiles of equipment and supply in the highlands and deduced what was coming.

Rommel was never one to miss an opportunity, and experience had taught him that when he was short on supply, the British were his best friends. We've seen Rommel capture British supply dumps on multiple occasions, and put those supplies, especially food and fuel, to use in his own offensives. He wore those British goggles as a token of his ability to take anything from the enemy and put it to his own use. He felt confident that American supply dumps would be just as bountiful.

The first move came from the German Fifth Army—that's the one that Hitler had recently deployed to Tunisia in response to Operation Torch. They advanced to the Faïd Pass, the gateway into the mountains and the Allied front line. The pass was garrisoned by French troops with old equipment; the German 21st Panzer Division easily forced them back.

The US Army's First Armored Division rushed to the scene to block the advancing German tanks. After an exchange of fire, the German tanks began to withdraw. The Americans pursued, not realizing they were advancing into a trap. German 88s had been repositioned along the line of the German withdrawal, and they opened up on the American tanks, which were blown to bits. The panzers advanced once again, in many cases crushing American soldiers under their treads.

The First Armored Division was using the M3 Stuart light tank, which was easy prey for the 88s. German panzer formations were using the larger and more heavily armed Panzer IV medium tank, along with the latest in German tank design, the Tiger heavy tank. The Tiger had thicker armor than any other tank of the day, and its main weapon was one of those 88mm guns that were serving the Germans so well as anti-tank weapons.

Soon the Axis held the passes out of the mountains and had retaken most of Tunisia. On February 19, Rommel began an attack westward through the American lines in hopes of reaching their supply stores. He directed two German panzer divisions and an Italian armored division through the Kasserine Pass and into the US II Corps, which was busy preparing for the planned Allied offensive. Besides disrupting American preparations and seizing supplies, this move would threaten to outflank the main Allied Army on the coastal roads to the north.

The American positions in the pass and on the hills to either side were quickly overrun. II Corps commander, General Lloyd Fredendall, had dispersed his defending units into small groups that were easily picked off by German armor and air attacks.

Rommel's forces advanced almost to the Algerian border, but despite their shaky start, the Allies were able to summon large numbers of British and American reinforcements, backed by heavy artillery that forced the Germans to a halt. With his supply line strained once again, Rommel decided he had done all he could and it was time to withdraw.

The Axis forces captured from the Americans 45 tons of ammunition and over 50,000 gallons of fuel. (That's 200,000 liters, for the metric folks.)

The Axis side lost 1,000 soldiers killed and wounded, 600 captured. The Americans lost 3,300 killed and wounded and 3,000 captured. The Americans lost 183 tanks to the Axis' 20 and 208 artillery pieces to the Axis' 14.

Rommel had taken on a numerically superior American force and, despite the American soldiers' brash cries of "Bring on the panzers," he had humbled it, just as the Wehrmacht had humbled the Polish Army, the French Army, the British Army, the Greek Army, and the Red Army, among others. The Americans were stunned by Rommel's success. Fortunately for them, there was no direct land route from the Kasserine Pass to Washington, DC.

Rommel's verdict was that the Americans were inexperienced, but learned quickly. The Germans were quite keen to study the American vehicles and equipment they had captured. On the Allied

side, Dwight Eisenhower relieved General Fredendall and gave command of II Corps to George Patton. The Americans had also learned to respect the Luftwaffe's Stuka dive bombers and began equipping their ground units with more anti-aircraft guns, particularly their artillery units, which had been the Stukas' favorite target.

After the Battle of the Kasserine Pass, the German and Italian commands consolidated Axis forces in Tunisia into one unified Army Group Africa, to be commanded by Erwin Rommel.

This defeat stymied the Allies and cost them their last chance to seize Tunis and put a quick end to the campaign in North Africa. They would have to find another way.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Andrew and Uri for their kind donations, and thank you to Lorraine for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Andrew and Uri and Lorraine help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, 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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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as Stalingrad falls and the Germans ponder what's next. Do You Want Total War? Find out next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Allies' demand for unconditional surrender is familiar to us today and easy to take for granted, but it was in truth an extraordinary development. Wars seldom end in unconditional surrender. Wars unusually end when one side determines there is no longer any hope of victory and offers terms, and then the other side determines that the cost of continuing the war in the hope of securing better terms is too great and that accepting the offered terms now is the better bargain.

This war was different. From the Allied point of view, the governments of the three main Axis powers were so reprehensible that any peace agreement that allowed them to remain in power was unacceptable, and the Allies had very good reasons to feel that way.

There was also the fact of the last war. The Allies had offered Germany more lenient terms in that war, and for that they got another war twenty years later. This time they were determined to

eliminate Germany's ability to wage war. There was even talk of forcibly de-industrializing Germany after the war and returning it to an agrarian society.

In our time, there are some who argue that it was a mistake to make such a strong demand right up front, that it only encouraged the Axis to fight to the bitter end and therefore prolonged the war and cost more lives. The problem with this argument is that we know Hitler always intended to fight to the bitter end. So did the Japanese. Even with the demand for unconditional surrender in place, members of the German military attempted to overthrow Hitler in the hope that they might be able to negotiate better terms. They failed, but that too is a story for another episode.

[music: Closing War Theme]