The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 442
"Make Peace, You Fools"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Western Allies were still caught in a tough slog in Normandy, while Franklin Roosevelt made it official: he was running for a fourth term.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 442. Make Peace, You Fools.

In the past three episodes, I talked about events that took place in the European Theater between mid-June and mid-July 1944. Most of the time I talked about the sweeping Soviet offensive in the East and the plot to assassinate Hitler. I said little about events on the Normandy front in France, because the Normandy front barely moved during this time, which might seem rather dull, juxtaposed with the dramatic events in the East.

But saying that the front didn't move much isn't the same as saying nothing happened. The fighting in France was fierce and bloody. Casualties on the Western Front were higher than casualties on the Eastern Front, proportionally speaking. The Germans knew well that they could not afford to allow the Western Allies to break out of the Normandy beachhead, lest they lose control of the whole of France.

Just a few days before the Red Army began its offensive in the East, Adolf Hitler ordered the transfer of two SS panzer divisions from the Eastern Front to Normandy, to bolster German forces there, and he sent them to the eastern, that is, the British, part of the line. British forces in the eastern part of Normandy were barely 200 kilometers from Paris, and from there a relatively short distance to the border of the Reich. The British (and Canadians) were facing roughly seven panzer divisions, four of which were elite SS panzer divisions. In contrast, Army Group Center had only three panzer divisions when Operation Bagration began.

A week after the initial invasion, on June 13, British forces made another attempt to take the city of Caen, a prerequisite to any breakout from the Normandy beachhead. That attack was

unsuccessful, so the British commander, Bernard Montgomery, began rebuilding his forces and supplies for another attempt.

This buildup took nearly two weeks, much to the consternation of Dwight Eisenhower. The Allies knew from their Enigma intercepts that those two SS panzer divisions were on the way and Eisenhower was impatient with Montgomery's delays. He wanted the British offensive to begin before those reinforcements arrived.

Already in North Africa and then in Italy, Montgomery demonstrated a command style that has been called "combining very bold speech and very cautious action." But to be fair to Montgomery, remember that a bad storm in the Channel struck on June 19, destroying one of the Mulberry harbors and damaging the other, which surely slowed Montgomery's preparations. You can't lay the blame for that on him.

Montgomery's offensive began on June 26. His plan was to circle around the west side of Caen and surround the city. In three days of fighting, the British managed to circle around as far as the seven o'clock position before the new SS panzer divisions arrived. The Germans well understood what Monty was up to and threw everything they had against the advanced British positions in a counteroffensive on June 29.

The next day, June 30, with British casualties exceeding 4,000 for the operation, Montgomery called an end to the offensive and ordered his most advanced units to pull back to a more defensible line. What Montgomery did not know was that the German counteroffensive had cost them some 3,000 casualties and more than a hundred tanks, including 41 Panthers and 25 expensive and precious Tiger tanks, which Rommel had intended to use in an offensive farther west toward Bayeaux, but had had to divert to halt the British offensive.

Some of Germany's finest tanks had been destroyed by naval gunfire from battleships thirty kilometers away. When Rommel realized this, he recommended pulling the German front line back, away from the coast and out of range of the Allied navies. The River Seine seemed like a good spot to him.

On June 30, Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the German commander-in-chief in the West, approved a request for the German panzers to withdraw out of range of the Allied naval guns. On July 1, the OKW, the Wehrmacht High Command, countermanded his order. Rundstedt telephoned Keitel and insisted Keitel go to Hitler and persuade him to permit the withdrawal. As I described two episodes ago, Keitel told him that was impossible and asked "What shall we do?" Here is where Rundstedt replied, *"Macht Schluss mit dem Krieg, ihr Idioten!"* that is, "Make peace, you fools!" though a more faithful translation might be "Put an end to the war, you idiots!" Well, it's the thought that counts.

Keitel told Hitler that Rundstedt couldn't handle the strain of commanding the Western Front any longer, and so Hitler relieved him of his command and replaced him with Marshal Günther

von Kluge. Kluge went to France and conferred with Rommel in the latter's chateau-headquarters, where Kluge made disparaging remarks about the competence of the German defense at Normandy. Rommel told him to visit the front lines and observe the situation for himself before he passed judgment. Kluge visited the front a few days later and quickly concluded Rommel's picture of conditions at the front was much more accurate than the one he'd heard from the OKW.

Farther west, the Americans faced their own problems. Once they'd secured the Cotentin Peninsula, their next objective was the city of St. Lô, to the south. But between Carentan and St. Lô lay difficult terrain. Much of it was a marshy river valley, and what was not marshy was bocage, a checkerboard of small agricultural fields divided by borders of trees and shrubs several feet high.

The Germans here were fewer in number, had less ammunition, and were bereft of tanks, but they made up for it in their skillful use of the bocage. They dug trenches just behind the walls of shrubbery and set up machine gun nests, so that Americans entering the next field over would be stuck in clear terrain and subjected to a hail of bullets. Farther back, the Germans would site one of their dreaded 88s, ready to fire on any Sherman tank that had the temerity to try to bust through the wall.

And the Germans were downright fiendish when it came to the use of mines. A favorite German trick was to plant mines at the bottom of a shell crater, so that if an advancing American soldier was fired on, he would throw himself into the crater for cover and right onto the mine. The Germans learned to fire tank shells into the crowns of trees, to create an explosion of flying splinters that would lacerate soldiers below. Individual German soldiers would sometimes raise their arms and surrender, but when Allied soldiers approached, they would drop to the ground an instant before a machine gun behind them opened fire. Such deceptions led to an Allied policy of taking no prisoners.

One of the most feared German antipersonnel weapons was the *Schrapnellmine,* known to Red Army soldiers as the "Frog Mine" and to American soldiers as the "Bouncing Betty." When one of these mines was triggered, a small charge would blow it out of the ground and into the air to a height of about a meter, then the main charge would go off, shooting shrapnel in every direction. The flying shrapnel was lethal within a distance of 20 meters and likely to cause serious wounds as far away as 100 meters.

This mine was designed to pop out of the ground before exploding in order to maximize the injuries it would inflict on nearby soldiers, especially in the soft tissue of the abdomen. What really makes this mine famous, though, is the prospect of the shrapnel wounding a soldier's genitalia, which understandably caused soldiers to dread these mines in particular.

When you try to imagine living and fighting in these conditions, you begin to wonder how anyone could survive the stress of what amounts to playing a first-person shooter videogame

24/7, with the added twist that if you die, you actually die. The answer is, they couldn't; not for long, anyway. Soldiers had to be rotated on and off the front lines at regular intervals for rest and recuperation, and even then, the British, Canadian, and American armies found that about 10% of their front-line soldiers became casualties of what they called battle fatigue, or what we today would call PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

Allied army psychiatrists puzzled over the question of why they saw so few cases of battle fatigue among enemy soldiers, even though they had been fighting under even more difficult conditions. This was perhaps because years of Nazi indoctrination trained young German men to accept sacrifice, even death, as something they owed to the Fatherland. Something similar could be said about Red Army soldiers. You also have to consider that Red Army soldiers were fighting to protect their homes and families; German soldiers were too, at least in the latter part of the war. British, Canadian, and American soldiers, on the other hand, came from societies that exalted the individual and encouraged every person to seek their own personal growth and fulfillment. Western Allied soldiers just wanted to finish the war and go back home to where they could continue to work on their self-actualization.

Also, the German and Soviet armies did not recognize battle fatigue; they regarded it as mere cowardice. Failure to follow orders for whatever reason was very likely to get you shot dead by your own commander.

Bernard Montgomery attempted another offensive to take Caen beginning July 18. When devising the plan, he promised his superiors, General Eisenhower and Field Marshal Brooke, this would be the decisive breakthrough that would finally allow the Allies to escape the Normandy beachheads and advance into France, but when it came time to settle on the details of the plan, Montgomery characteristically opted for more modest goals.

The offensive began with US and RAF bombers pounding the German front lines, but Montgomery and his commanders did not realize that the Germans had learned from previous heavy bombardments the need to set up multiple defensive lines several miles deep. In order not to tip off the Germans that an offensive was coming, Montgomery waited until the last minute to clear only a few narrow passageways through his own minefields, but in fact the Germans already knew all about it. German observers perched on the tops of factory chimneys just outside Caen had observed British preparations.

The narrow passageways meant a slow beginning to the offensive, particularly for the armored units, while the Germans were well prepared with their Tiger tanks and 88mm guns. The British lost more than 200 tanks on the first day of the offensive.

A heavy rainstorm gave Montgomery the excuse he needed to call of the attack on July 20. The British managed to cross the river and take the southern half of Caen, 44 days after D-Day. (Earlier I said fifty days; okay, I exaggerated a little.) But they got no farther, and it certainly was nothing like the dramatic breakthrough he'd promised. Montgomery tried to put the best face he

could on his fizzled operation by claiming he'd distracted the Germans from the upcoming American offensive.

He happened to be right about that, but before we get into the next phase of operations in Normandy, I'll just remind you that the assassination attempt against Hitler that I described last week took place during this offensive. Also taking place during this offensive in Chicago was the 1944 Democratic National Convention.

[music: Sousa, "Washington Post March."]

Roosevelt had been playing it cagey again, as he had in 1940, but he fully intended to run for a fourth term. Back in June, he'd invited the boss of the Democratic Party organization in the Bronx, Ed Flynn, to a weekend at the White House to discuss strategy. Flynn had always been an important political advisor and supporter to Roosevelt, second only to James Farley, also a key leader in the New York Democratic Party, but as you recall, Farley broke with Roosevelt in 1940, when he opposed Roosevelt's quest for a third term and sought the Democratic Party nomination for himself.

Flynn was shocked by the President's appearance. Roosevelt had lost twenty pounds and was looking weak and pale. Flynn suggested Roosevelt not seek a fourth term for the sake of his own health, but the President refused to consider it. Flynn even tried talking to Mrs. Roosevelt, but she told him her husband's re-election was crucial for the future of the nation.

The 1944 US Presidential election would be only the second time in US history that such an election was held in the middle of a war, the first time being Abraham Lincoln's re-election in 1864, eighty years earlier. Lincoln and his supporters had warned against the inherent risks involved in changing leadership during a national emergency with the pithy slogan, "Don't swap horses in the middle of the stream," which became a well-known American political metaphor. The Democrats had used it in 1940 to bolster their case for Roosevelt's third term; now they would use it again.

It was beyond doubt that the Democratic nomination was Roosevelt's for the taking, if he wanted it. He'd had opposition in 1940, but that was different. Now the country was in the middle of the biggest war in its history. Support for Henry Wallace, Roosevelt's Vice President, on the other hand, was not so certain. Roosevelt had given Wallace an important role in his Administration, more than most Vice Presidents get, but Wallace, who'd previously been Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture for eight years, was dissatisfied.

Wallace remained loyal to Roosevelt and an ardent New Dealer, perhaps too ardent during a time when the public mood was shifting to the right. He spoke out against racial violence in wartime America, a topic you can be sure I'll get to soon. He pointed out the, shall we say inconsistency, of going to war against Nazis in Europe while condoning violence against African Americans at

home. Wallace toured the Soviet Union and afterward naively compared Stalin's labor camps to Roosevelt's New Deal programs.

And then there were Wallace's exotic religious views. He'd been raised Presbyterian, but as an adult had taken an interest in mysticism and dabbled in Buddhism. None of this would seem too strange in our time, but in 1940's America, it was downright weird.

When Roosevelt asked Flynn about Wallace, Flynn told him Wallace was very popular among the labor unions, but disliked by many Party officials and his views resented in the South. Worst of all, in Flynn's view, Wallace was likely to alienate swing voters.

Roosevelt suggested his longtime supporter and friend, James Byrnes, formerly a Senator from South Carolina, now director of Roosevelt's Office of War Mobilization. Incidentally, Roosevelt had appointed Byrnes to the Supreme Court in 1941, but he resigned in 1942 to become director of the Office of Economic Stabilization. Byrnes's 15 months on the Supreme Court is the record for shortest term on that court. If the South was put off by Wallace, wouldn't Byrnes help offset that?

Flynn didn't like that idea. Byrnes was a staunch Southern segregationist who'd defended lynchings. Labor didn't like him, either. Flynn suggested either Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who was from Texas, or Alben Barkley, Senator from Kentucky.

Roosevelt nixed both of those choices. If it couldn't be Byrnes, then he didn't want any other Southerner. Together, Roosevelt and Flynn considered every other Democrat in the United States Senate, and found objections to each one of them, until they got to the Senator from Missouri, Harry Truman. Truman had first been elected to the Senate in the Democratic wave of 1934. Initially, he was perceived as a little more than a good soldier in the service of the Democratic Party political machine in Missouri, but his reputation grew considerably after the US military buildup began in 1940. Truman, with Roosevelt's support, persuaded the Senate to create a special committee to investigate corruption and abuse in government contracts during the war. As he established himself as the bane of wartime profiteers, he became increasingly popular and sufficiently prominent to earn a place on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1943.

Aside from that, Truman had always been a strong supporter of labor unions, and they supported him. He came from a border state, which made him kinda, sorta a Southerner, but had never defended segregation, let alone lynchings, like Brynes.

In short, Flynn and Roosevelt agreed that out of all the potential candidates, Truman was the one who would do the least damage to the President's chances of re-election.

At the 1940 Democratic National Convention, Roosevelt had had to twist arms to get his personal choice, Henry Wallace, the Vice Presidential nomination. Roosevelt did not want to go through that again, so he made no public announcement of his preference, although the Party

leaders were well aware and were working for Truman, in no small part due to their dislike of Wallace.

Roosevelt used this to his advantage. In private meetings with both Byrnes and Wallace, he told both of them he wanted them to run for the Vice Presidential nomination, while warning them that he did not think it wise for him to publicize his own choice. This encouraged both to believe they were the President's choice and were all but certain to win the nomination.

It wasn't until the night before the convention opened and after both Wallace and Byrnes arrived in Chicago that they were told Roosevelt had settled on Truman as his choice. Byrnes felt betrayed, but eventually withdrew his name, while Wallace chose to fight.

Roosevelt himself had no serious opposition within the Party to his renomination, although the delegates from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Virginia, and a portion of the Texas delegation,`voted for Virginia Senator Harry Byrd as a protest against Roosevelt's acts in the previous four years to open more positions in the military and in wartime manufacturing to African Americans. That added up to 89 votes in all. One sole delegate voted for James Farley. The other 1,086 delegates voted for Roosevelt.

Roosevelt did not attend the convention, but he sent a statement to be read to the delegates. The strangely ambiguous statement said that if he were a delegate at the convention, he would vote for Henry Wallace for Vice President, but he did not wish to dictate his choice. Truman supporters called the letter Roosevelt's kiss of death.

Democratic Party leaders were keenly aware that the convention was not only about to choose a Vice Presidential nominee, but was likely choosing the next President of the United States. Truman was at the convention and learned on Monday, the first day, that he was under consideration. The story goes that Truman had in his pocket at the time a speech he had written endorsing Byrnes, whom he believed was the President's first choice. It wasn't until Wednesday that Truman learned he was Roosevelt's first choice.

The voting for the Vice Presidential nomination took place on Friday. On the first ballot, Wallace came in first with 429 votes to Truman's 319, but Wallace fell short of a majority, with a variety of favorite son candidates racking up a collective total of 428. On the second ballot, the supporters of the favorite sons began to switch to Truman. It was a well-known tactic: create the appearance that the convention was moving in Truman's direction.

The tactic succeeding in stampeding the delegates toward Truman, who won 1,031 votes on the second ballot to Wallace's 105. Truman's acceptance speech ran less than sixty seconds. This has to be some kind of record for a candidate winning an important public office without making the slightest effort. Truman was clearly chosen for the sake of some balance between the Party's liberal and conservative wings; the newspapers began calling his nomination "the Missouri compromise."

When his nomination to an unprecedented fourth term as President was announced, Roosevelt was in San Diego, preparing to depart for Honolulu for a meeting with Chester Nimitz and Douglas MacArthur. I already described that meeting in episode 437. Roosevelt took his pet Scottish terrier Fala along on the trip, aboard the cruiser USS *Baltimore*. A member of Roosevelt's entourage had to be assigned to protect Fala's fur from the many sailors who wanted to snip off a lock as a souvenir.

After the Pearl Harbor meeting, Roosevelt traveled next to the Aleutian Islands, and then on to Bremerton, Washington, where he gave a speech before the workers at the Navy Yard there, which was also broadcast nationwide on the radio.

This was Roosevelt's first broadcast speech since his nomination and it went very badly. It was meant to serve as a report on his meeting in Honolulu and an assurance to the American people that the war in the Pacific was going well for the United States.

He wrote the speech hastily and spoke from a lectern set up on the aft deck of a destroyer, facing into a brisk wind. The heaving ship forced him to hold onto the lectern with both hands, making it difficult for him to read the speech. Then, ten minutes into the speech, Roosevelt suffered what was apparently an attack of angina, which gave him severe chest pains. He pushed through with the speech anyway, then collapsed into a chair in the captain's cabin. His doctor gave him an EKG, but found nothing worrying.

Because of all this, the speech as heard over the radio came across not as reassuring, but the opposite. It sounded weak and uncertain. Anyone who looked at Roosevelt's photograph or saw him in a newsreel could see he was losing weight; to anyone who heard the speech, he sounded weak and feeble. It must have been the worst speech of his political career.

The *Washington Post* opined, "It looks like the old master has lost his touch," and wondered how he would fare in the coming campaign against Thomas Dewey, twenty years his junior and a skilled orator.

Dewey began his campaign immediately after the traditional Labor Day starting point. Yes, there was a time when Presidential campaigns were only two months long. He toured the country, giving speeches in which he complained of the "tired old men" running the country, a clever phrasing that reminded audiences both that mostly the same people had been leading America for twelve years now, while also obliquely referencing the President's increasing age and declining health. He also accused the Roosevelt Administration of including a number of Communists who were pushing the US toward a closer relationship with Stalin.

Republicans also circulated a story that claimed when Roosevelt returned to Bremerton from his tour of the Pacific, he'd discovered that he'd left Fala behind in the Aleutian Islands and sent a US Navy destroyer to Alaska to retrieve the dog at a cost to the American taxpayer in the millions of dollars. As much as $20 million, by some accounts, which seems excessive when you

consider that the biggest and newest destroyer the Navy deployed during the war, the *Fletcher*-class, cost only about $6 million apiece to build.

Roosevelt did not make his first overt campaign speech until September 23, before a friendly gathering of leaders of the Teamsters Union at the Statler Hotel in Washington. (The Teamsters supported Democrats back then.) This could be Roosevelt's first speech since Bremerton to be broadcast nationwide. Democratic Party leaders, even members of Roosevelt's family, wondered if he was up to it.

Stung by the problems he encountered with the Bremerton speech, he polished the text of the speech several times, and on this occasion he would be speaking seated and indoors, in front of a friendly and enthusiastic audience.

He began by joking about his age.

[audio clip: Roosevelt speech.]

He then mocked the Republican Party platform, which promised to defend and uphold Social Security and the other major New Deal programs.

[audio clip: Roosevelt speech.]

He praised labor's role in American production, which was winning the war.

[audio clip: Roosevelt speech.]

He accused the Republicans of trying to rewrite history.

[audio clip: Roosevelt speech.]

But this is the part that everyone remembered, when he addressed the accusation that he wasted taxpayer money on his dog.

[audio clip: Roosevelt speech.]

That was probably the best speech of his career. The old master still had his touch, and the Dewey campaign never recovered.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Sheril for her kind donation, and thank you to Rachel for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Sheril and Rachel 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 we return to Normandy just in time to see the Americans begin to break out from the beachheads. Shoot the Works, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The joke about Fala was written for Roosevelt by Orson Welles, who campaigned actively for the President in 1944. But it wasn't just that speech that revived his campaign. Roosevelt followed it with a grueling campaign schedule that included a day-long tour of the five boroughs of New York City in pouring rain, and visits to Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston, where he spoke to huge crowds with wit and vigor. His doctors were startled to discover that heavy campaigning agreed with him. His blood pressure went down and he was eating and sleeping better.

[music: Closing War Theme]