

Second Front, 1942 Version

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There is going to be a second front—a land front—against Germany in western Europe. Barring a slip, that fact became certain last week. The only question was: When? Last week the answer to that question, too, became more definite.

Promises that the British Government would heed the voice of its people—and of the Russians—had been piling up for weeks past. But, wrapped in the rhetoric of Winston Churchill and the cautious legal phrases of Sir Stafford Cripps, they had somehow lacked the impact of a pledge. Last week the assurance came, not flat, not unequivocal, but clear.

It did not come from the British Government. It came from two U.S. soldiers. One of them was the U.S. Army's terse, capable Chief of the Services of Supply, Lieut. General Brehon Burke Somervell, who needs a hundred hands for the task in front of him, and seems to have them.

Said he pointedly in London: "The U.S. can now supply men and materials on a large scale to a European battlefield." The other was honest General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and no showy talker. At West Point's graduation exercises he departed from pleasantries and the usual sermon on the honor of the Cadet Corps to hammer a few global-war tacks. Said he: "Today we find American soldiers throughout the Pacific, in Burma, China and India. They have wintered in Greenland and Iceland.

They are landing in Northern Ireland and England, and they will land in France." There were more signs. General Somervell did not arrive alone in England. He arrived with an imposing accompaniment of special U.S. talent: Rear Admiral Jack Towers, head of the Naval Air Service; Lieut. General Hap Arnold, Chief of Army Air Forces; Major General Dwight D. Eisenhower, operations chief of the Army General Staff; Brigadier General William C. Lee, hard-bitten boss of the Army's parachutists and airborne troops.

Looking at their titles, it took no military expert to see that they were the heads of the departments that would do the U.S. fighting when a second front was opened. It took no public-relations expert to conclude that the U.S. Army believes that a second front is a good military venture, is trying to convince the British Government that soon is the time to take it.

When? Between that decision and the launching of the blow still stands a gulf of months. Never, even in the great operations on the Western Front in World War I. have British and U.S. soldiers talked over a project that will require such an enormous complexity of planning.

The supply problem alone is prodigious. Yet General Somervell went to London expressly to tell the British that it could be solved. The problem of picking the attack area is staggering. On the Channel coast, the Germans will be thickest but the supply lines shortest. On the Norwegian coast the landing would be easier, the supply problem (across more than 400 miles of sea) far more difficult. The problem of coordinating Empire and U.S. troops, of hooking two armies, two navies and two air forces (with further subdivisions) into a single, smoothly functioning tactical weapon was one to chill the heart of the toughest and most diplomatic officer that ever lived.

Yet war's developments called for the second front. Russia needed it badly, but the establishment of a western European front also needed Russia badly: if Russia were first allowed to fall, the problem of landing in Europe would be colossal. Beyond that, the growing strength of the U.S. in war's materiel and men called for a second front in Europe.

After days of rotten weather, Britain's R.A.F. had smashed German targets with more than 1,200 planes. The R.A.F. had done more than launch the biggest raid in air history. It had started the great test of the striking force of air power. R.A.F. men and other military pilots were confident that if the raids were continued (and Britain meant to continue them), Germany could be brought to her knees by air power alone before winter. This may be a partisan judgment. But one thing is certain: unless something goes bitterly wrong, Germany will be a much-chastened nation by late summer. Then the second front may be a great opportunity for the United Nations.

How? British officialdom tends to think of a second front in terms of an all-out, huge-scale offensive requiring forces comparable to those of the main German armies. But the immediate purpose of the second front—diversion from the Russian front—could be accomplished with a lesser effort, involving no more than 500,000 men. A bridgehead diversion, provided Britain can hold control of the air, might be enough to compel a major Nazi effort to head it off. Once established, the bridgehead could be used by more massive forces. Even if there were defeat—even another Dunkirk—the effort might or might not be worth while. But the U.S. Army does not think in terms of defeat. With overwhelming air power on the Allied side, it thinks the second front will work.

From their seats in Washington, offensive-minded officers of the Army detect on Europe's battlefield something more than the chance to help Russia. Ever so faintly they sniff the smell of victory, perhaps in 1942, more likely in 1943.

They still have the job of convincing oft-burned, defensive-minded Britain that now is the time to go after it.

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