TEHERAN: THE MARSHAL

Cairo West Airport, 6:35 a.m., Saturday, November 27, 1943. Mechanics and guards surrounded the “Sacred Cow,” standing bulky and dark on the apron. A limousine glided in through the fog; there was a bustle of activity as the President and his party—Hopkins, Harriman, Leahy, Watson, John Boettiger, and a half-dozen others—boarded the plane. Half an hour passed as the pilots waited for the fog to lift; then the “Sacred Cow” lumbered off the runway and roared up through the mist, finally bursting out into the brilliant sunshine. The plane turned east.

Eagerly the President watched the storied lands flow westward beneath him. The plane crossed the Suez Canal, flew over the brown Sinai desert, circled low around Jerusalem and Bethlehem, soared across the Dead Sea and then on to the green valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris. North of Baghdad the plane turned northeast, picking up the Abadan-Teheran highway as the pilot zigzagged through the mountain passes. The President could see trains and motor convoys loaded with Lend-Lease war supply bound for Russia. The plane flew through a jumble of mountain passes and then landed on a Red Army field a few miles outside Teheran. To the north lay the towering Elburz Mountains, which cut off the Persian capital from the Caspian Sea.

The President was driven to the American Legation, but he stayed there only one night. An assassination plot against the Big Three had been uncovered. Stalin sent word through Harriman that with Teheran infested by Nazi sympathizers and spies, he was concerned about the dangers of an “unhappy incident” while Roosevelt drove back and forth through the city. Would the President be Stalin’s guest at the Soviet Embassy? Under the urgings of Roosevelt, on the ground that he was the youngest present (and with the prior agreement of the other two), opened the proceedings by welcoming his elders to a family circle whose only object was to win the war. Churchill remarked that this was the greatest concentration of power the world had ever seen; history lay in their hands. Stalin offered a brief welcome, then said, “Let us get down to business.”

The President began with a general survey of the war, stressing first his nation’s commitment of most of its naval power and of one million men to the Pacific. He sketched out the military plans for China. Then he turned to the cross-channel invasion, which had been delayed, he said, mainly by lack of sea transport. The Channel was such a disagreeable body of water that the attack could not be launched before May 1, 1944.

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“I am glad to see you,” the President said. “I have tried for a long time to bring this about.” For half an hour the two men chatted. The President led the conversation, touching on the Soviet battle front (Stalin: the Red Army was barely holding the initiative with the Germans having brought up more divisions); Chiang Kai-shek (Stalin: the Chinese soldiers fought bravely but the leadership was poor); de Gaulle (Stalin: de Gaulle acted like the head of a great state but actually commanded little power); the need to prepare Indochina for independence (Stalin: agreed); the need for reform from the bottom in India, “somewhat on the Soviet line” (Stalin: reform from the bottom would mean revolution).

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The first plenary session got under way directly. Roosevelt had his full diplomatic and military staff with him, except that Marshall and Arnold had been misinformed about the schedule and were still sight-seeing. Churchill, flanked by Eden, Dill, Brooke, Cunningham, Portal, and Ismay sat to the left of the Americans. Stalin had only Molotov and Marshal Kliment Y. Voroshilov flanking him. The men sat around a ten-foot-oaken table specially created for the occasion by local carpenters and made round so that no one would sit at the head of the table. But Roosevelt, on the ground that he was the youngest present (and with the prior agreement of the other two), opened the proceedings by welcoming his elders to a family circle whose only object was to win the war. Churchill remarked that this was the greatest concentration of power the world had ever seen; history lay in their hands. Stalin offered a brief welcome, then said, “Let us get down to business.”

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The President was resting in his new bedroom when Reilly came in to say that the Marshal was on his way over. Roosevelt was quickly wheeled to his big sitting room. Stalin came in slowly, smiling, reached down, and shook hands. The President saw a short man, dignified, relaxed, dressed in a tightly buttoned, mustard-colored uniform with red facings, large gold epaulets on the shoulders, and one medal, a red-and-gold ribbon suspending a gold star. The two interpreters, V. N. Pavlov and Charles E. Bohlen, were the only others present.

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Stalin went straight to the point. The Soviets welcomed American successes in the Pacific. He regretted that the Soviet Union had not
been able to help, but its forces were fighting Germany. His strength in the east was enough for defense but would have to be trebled for attack. Once Germany was finally defeated, “we shall be able by our common front to win.” Stalin said this casually, without raising his voice; then he abruptly turned to Europe. There, he said, he had over three hundred divisions and the Axis had 260. The Germans at the moment were trying to recapture Kiev with some thirty motorized and tank divisions. As for Italy, that was no place from which to attack Germany proper, for the Alps were an insuperable barrier, as the famous Russian General Suvorov had discovered a century and a half before. The best way to get to the heart of Germany was through northern and southern France. But he warned that the Germans would fight like devils.

Roosevelt and Stalin had now put Churchill on the defensive, but the old warrior rose to the occasion. There was no question, he said, about the cross-channel operation, which would take place in the late spring or early summer. But that was six months away. What could be done in the meantime, after the capture of Rome—which he hoped would take place in January 1944—that would help relieve the Soviet front and not delay OVERLORD by more than a month or two? Could Turkey be persuaded to enter the war? Could help be given to the Yugoslavs? Churchill himself denied any plan to send a large army to the Balkans; it was Roosevelt who, to the surprise of his aides, raised the possibility of an Allied drive at the head of the Adriatic to join with the Yugoslavs and push northeast in conjunction with the Soviet advance west.

So within an hour the positions had been taken: Stalin for an advance into the German heartland, Churchill for wider Mediterranean operations, and Roosevelt—as Churchill later complained—drifting to and fro. The Marshal bluntly opposed Churchill’s strategy as undue dispersion and his specific proposals as undesirable. He doubted that Turkey would enter the war except by the scruff of the neck. When Churchill kept arguing for making use of Mediterranean troops after the capture of Rome, Stalin coolly proposed again that the Anglo-Americans invade southern France in advance of OVERLORD. France, he said, was the weakest of all German-occupied areas. The meeting broke up inconclusively.

That evening Roosevelt had Stalin and Churchill and their top aides to dinner at his headquarters. The White House messmen, having moved into a strange kitchen only a few hours before, somehow came up with a dinner for eleven. Postwar Europe was the focus of talk. Stalin coldly wrote off Russia’s old enemies. The French ruling class was rotten to the core. Roosevelt said he agreed in part; it would be well to eliminate in any future government of France anyone over forty. Stalin said the Reich must be dismem-bered and rendered impotent ever again to plunge the world into war. Roosevelt proposed an international trusteeship over the approaches to the Baltic; Stalin misunderstood at first, thought Roosevelt was proposing a trusteeship for the Baltic nations, and absolutely ruled this out.

The President felt ill after dinner and retired early. The atmosphere there became even cooler after he left. Stalin was obviously dissatisfied with Churchill’s and Roosevelt’s proposals for Germany. He had no faith in the notion of reforming the German people. He did not share the President’s view, he told Churchill, that the Fuhrer was mentally unbalanced. He was an able man but not basically intelligent, lacking in culture and with a primitive approach to politics. And the Marshal questioned the unconditional-surrender doctrine, which served merely to unite the German people. Much better to draw up harsh terms and simply tell the Germans to accept them. That would hasten the day of German surrender.

Afterward, back at the British Legation, Churchill was in a black depression. “Stupendous issues are unfolding before our eyes, and we are only specks of dust that have settled in the night on the map of the world.” The President had remarked to him, he went on, “You may go at the election, but I shan’t.” Had the President said much in the conference? someone asked. Churchill hesitated. “Harry Hopkins said that the President was inept. He was asked a lot of questions and gave the wrong answers.”

Next day Roosevelt seemed fully recovered. Churchill sent word proposing that they lunch together; to Churchill’s dismay Roosevelt declined because he feared Stalin would suspect they were hatching some scheme if they met privately. But after lunch he met privately with Stalin and Molotov. The President wanted to sound out the Russians on postwar organization. He proposed his plan for the Four Policemen with power to deal quickly with threats to peace; a ten-nation executive committee to consider nonmilitary questions; an assembly representing all the United Nations. Stalin doubted that the small nations of Europe would like an organization of the Four Policemen. He doubted that China would be very powerful at the end of the war. He doubted that the United States Congress would agree to American participation in an exclusively European committee which might be able to force the dispatch of American troops to Europe. On the last point Roosevelt agreed; it would take a terrible crisis, he said, for Congress to agree to that. He had envisaged sending only American planes and ships to Europe; Britain and Russia would handle the land armies against a threat to peace. On China, Roosevelt disagreed with the Russian. “After all,” he said, “China is a nation of 400 million people, and
it is better to have them as friends than as a potential source of trouble."

A brilliant ceremony now intervened. Between rows of towering British and Soviet soldiers in the big conference room Churchill presented Stalin with the Sword of Stalingrad, forged by English craftsmen and given by King George to the "steel-hearted citizens of Stalingrad." His eyes glistening, Stalin raised the sparkling blade to his lips and kissed it, then walked over and showed the weapon to the President, who drew the long blade from the scabbard and held it aloft. His big hands barely covered the hilt. Then he returned the sword to the scabbard with a clang, and it was carried off by an escort.

But no sword of honor could cut through the knotted differences among the three leaders. At the second plenary session, after a report from the CCS reflecting little progress at its morning session, Stalin opened the discussion with an abrupt question:

"Who will command Overlord?"

"It has not been decided," Roosevelt said.

"Then nothing will come out of these operations," Stalin said. Somebody had to be in charge. Once again Churchill launched into a long defense of Mediterranean possibilities; once again the Marshal insisted that they were only diversionsary; once again the President referred favorably to Mediterranean alternatives but worried that they might delay Overlord unduly—here again was the old suction pump that Marshall had long feared. The President proposed that Overlord take place not later than mid-May; Churchill said he could not agree. Roosevelt proposed an ad-hoc committee to consider the matter. Stalin balked. What could a committee do that they could not?

"Do the British really believe in Overlord," he asked, "or are they only saying so to reassure the Soviet Union?"

The meeting broke up in disagreement. That evening Stalin was host at a small dinner. He taunted and twitted Churchill, while just because the Russians were a simple people they were also affection for Germany. He wanted a soft peace. He thought that fifty thousand must be liquidated. Elliott Roosevelt protested that all this was academic; the soldiers on the field would take care of more than 50,000. At this Churchill rose from the table and stalked out of the room, only to be followed by a grinning Stalin, who clapped his hand on Churchill's shoulder and persuaded him to return.

The conferences went on the next day, Stalin doodling, smoking, scratching words on square-crossed pieces of paper, speaking quietly, arguing bluntly; Churchill glowering behind his glasses, gesticulating with his cigar, lofting into flights of oratory; Roosevelt listening, measuring, interposing, placating. The discussions flowed on, but at some point on November 30, the third day of discussions, the balance swung slowly but inexorably against Churchill and peripheralism. It was partly because the CCS had met in the morning and hammered out a recommendation for Overlord, combined with a landing in southern France; partly because Stalin, in a tête-à-tête, had warned Churchill sharply that an Allied failure to invade in May would cause a bad reaction and "feeling of isolation" in the Red Army; partly because Churchill was increasingly hopeful that if the Mediterranean effort had to be subordinated to Overlord, Bay of Bengal plans could be subordinated to the Mediterranean. "Overlord in May" was confirmed at a "Three Only" (plus interpreters) luncheon shortly thereafter, and at the third plenary session in the afternoon. Stalin promised to launch a major attack from the east at the same time.

That evening Churchill celebrated his sixty-ninth birthday at a dinner for thirty-three at his legation. Roosevelt sat directly on his right. Stalin on his left. Spirits ran high. Roosevelt had learned how to make a small glass last for a dozen toasts. He saluted George VI; Churchill toasted Roosevelt as defender of democracy and Stalin as Stalin the Great; the Marshal saluted the Russian people and American production—especially of 10,000 planes a month. "Without these planes from America the war would have been lost." He ended with a toast to the President. At two in the morning Roosevelt asked for the privilege of the last word.

"There has been discussion here tonight," he said, "of our varying colors of political complexion. I like to think of this in terms of the rainbow. In our country the rainbow is a symbol of good fortune and of hope. It has many varying colors, each individualistic, but blending into one glorious whole.

"Thus with our nations. We have differing customs and philosophies and ways of life. Each of us works out our scheme of things according to the desires and ideas of our own peoples.

"But we have proved here at Teheran that the varying ideals of our nations can come together in a harmonious whole, moving unitedly for the common good of ourselves and of the world . . . ."

The conference might well have ended on this note of harmony, but political questions lay always in the background. At a series of
meetings the next day Stalin agreed to help persuade the Turks to enter the war, though he still doubted that they would. He argued for the dismemberment and crushing of Germany. He would demand heavy reparations from Finland and the restoration of the treaty of 1930, with the possible exchange of Petsamo for Hangö. Roosevelt and Churchill jostled with him innocuously on these questions. But Poland, as always, was the pinch, and Roosevelt knew that he would have to come back to it.

With the second front settled, the President decided on a personal plea to Stalin about Poland, but despite his efforts to keep some distance from Churchill, he felt that he had not established personal rapport with Stalin. The Marshal still seemed stiff and unsmiling; there seemed nothing human to get hold of. Roosevelt told Frances Perkins later, doubtless with some embellishment, that he decided to do something desperate.

"On my way to the conference room that morning we caught up with Winston and I just had a moment to say to him, 'Winston, I hope you won't be sore at me for what I am going to do.'

"Winston just shifted his cigar and grunted. I must say he behaved very decently afterward.

"I began almost as soon as we got into the conference room. I talked privately with Stalin. I didn't say anything that I hadn't said before, but it appeared quite chummy and confidential, enough so that the other Russians joined us to listen. Still no smile.

"Then I said, lifting my hand to cover a whisper (which of course had to be interpreted), 'Winston is cranky this morning, he got up on the wrong side of the bed.'

"A vague smile passed over Stalin's eyes, and I decided I was on the right track. As soon as I sat down at the conference table, I began to tease Churchill about his Britishness, about John Bull, about his cigars, about his habits. It began to register with Stalin. Roosevelt got red and scowled, and the more he did so, the more Stalin smiled. Finally Stalin broke out into a deep, heavy guffaw, and for the first time in three days I saw light. I kept it up until Stalin was laughing with me, and it was then that I called him 'Uncle Joe.' He would have thought me fresh the day before, but that day he laughed and came over and shook my hand.

"From that time on our relations were personal, and Stalin himself indulged in an occasional witticism. The ice was broken and we talked like men and brothers.'"

Less than three hours later Stalin visited the President privately. He had asked the Marshal to come, Roosevelt said, because he wanted to discuss a matter briefly and frankly. It referred to internal American politics. While personally he did not wish to run again in 1944, if the war was still in progress he might have to.
flew back to Cairo to meet with Churchill and the Combined Chiefs for the final decisions on grand strategy for 1944.

The most pressing question was Turkey’s entrance into the war. The President dispatched John Boettiger to escort President Ismet Inönü to Cairo for final discussions. Over the next three days Roosevelt and Churchill mobilized their combined persuasiveness—along with clear hints about postwar arrangements—to talk Inönü and his colleagues into the war. The Turks were polite, cooperative, concerned, and stubborn. They wanted a commitment of military aid that the straitened Anglo-Americans could not make. So anguished was Inönü as he faced his dilemma that Roosevelt had to admit that if he were a Turk he would need more assurances than were being offered; naturally, he conceded to Inönü, the Turks did not want to be caught with their pants down. Inönü would not make the pledge. Roosevelt seemed unperturbed by the outcome: Churchill gamely swallowed one more setback to his military ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean.

On a far more important matter, however, the Prime Minister won a crucial victory. In Cairo he immediately set himself to induce Roosevelt to renge on his promise to Chiang of a big operation in the Andamans. Churchill had powerful arguments on his side. Stalin’s promise to fight Japan after Germany posed the likelihood of a better continental land route into Japan. Operations in the central and Southwest Pacific were opening up other avenues to the enemy homeland. The decision for OVERLORD and ANVIL was now he must favor Churchill over Chiang. And there were deepening fears on the part of almost all at Cairo about China’s staying power, with or without the Andaman operation.

“I’ve been as stubborn as a mule for four days but we can’t get anywhere,” Roosevelt told Stilwell, “and it won’t do for a conference to end that way. The British just won’t do the operation and I can’t get them to agree to it.” When Stilwell asked for political guidance on China, the President told anecdotes and mentioned postwar plans. To Chiang, Roosevelt sent a terse wire canceling the Andamans and proposing lesser alternatives. The Generalissimo’s answer was as gloomy as feared. The results of the first Cairo Conference had electrified the Chinese people, he cabled. Now this decision at Cairo would dishearten the nation to the point that it might not hold out much longer. The Japanese would deduce that under the Europe First policy the United Nations were now abandoning China to the mercies of Japan’s mechanized air and land forces. Yet Chiang seemed to acquiesce in the decision and seemed, indeed, more concerned about his economic than his military problems. He asked simply in his reply for more planes—and for a billion dollars in gold.

One other matter remained to be resolved at Cairo: the command of OVERLORD. This was Roosevelt’s decision alone. It had long been expected that Marshall would command the climactic invasion he had so long argued for, and that Eisenhower would return to Washington and take over his post. But Roosevelt could not quite bring himself to make the appointment, even though most of his advisors favored it and Marshall clearly, though diffidently, wanted it. “I feel I could not sleep at night with you out of the country,” Roosevelt told his Chief of Staff. It was one of the hardest decisions Roosevelt ever made, Sherwood felt.

Churchill insisted toward the end of the second Cairo Conference that he and Roosevelt motor out and see the Sphinx. For once silent, the two men stared at the brooding features as the evening shadows fell. It was symbolic that Roosevelt thus ended in the company of Churchill alone this year of conferences, just as they
had started it together. The two men had had their differences, but in the end they had stood together, even on OVERLORD. Churchill had spent week after week in America, day after day with the President. He had addressed Congress again, attended Cabinet meetings, presided alone—with the permission of the President, who had been in Hyde Park at the time—over a meeting of American and British military and diplomatic chiefs in the White House. He had made no secret—even to Stalin—of his satisfaction at being "half American." He was more papal than the Pope; driving with Roosevelt and his party through Frederick, Maryland, one day he had noticed a sign advertising Barbara Fritchie candy, and while Roosevelt and Hopkins listened in astonishment, he recited a score or so of lines from Whittier's famous poem—"Shoot, if you must, this old gray head...."

Someday there would be a price to pay for the exuberant friendship of the two men. Churchill turned a myopic eye to the teeming masses in Asia; among intimates he could even worry about the Russians breeding like flies and overwhelming the white population of Britain and the United States. His attitude toward China was deeply affected by racial feeling. But in this moment Anglo-American cooperation was at a peak.

Roosevelt left Cairo for home on December 7. He stopped in Tunis, where he greeted Eisenhower with a cheery "Well, Ike, you'd better start packing." He touched down in Malta, where he presented a scroll to the islanders for their heroism. He reviewed troops in Sicily. Then the long return trip on the Iowa and a greeting at the south entrance to the White House by the assembled Cabinet. Rosenman had never seen the President look so satisfied and pleased. He also looked tired, but robust and confident. To Stimson, the President said: "I have...brought Overlord back to you safe and sound on the ways for accomplishment."

It was Christmastime. The President wanted to be in his own home; for the first time since he became President he celebrated Christmas at Hyde Park. On Christmas Eve he broadcast a report to the people from his own fireside. Mainly it was a long, general, and optimistic survey of the fighting fronts and of his conferences abroad. He announced his selection of Eisenhower to lead an attack from "other points of the compass" along with the stern Russian offensive in the east and the relentless Allied pressure in the south. As for Stalin: "...I may say that I 'got along fine' with Marshal Stalin. He is a man who combines a tremendous relentless determination with a stalwart good humor. I believe he is truly representative of the heart and soul of Russia; and I believe that we are going to get along very well with him and the Russian people—very well indeed."

The next day he presided over a family reunion in the old mansion. Seven of his fourteen grandchildren were there, with their mothers. The President watched as gifts were unwrapped, carved the family turkey, and, as always, read Dickens's Christmas Carol, skillfully condensing it to hold the attention of the young.

The President was not, however, in a wholly festive mood. Shortly before Christmas he wrote Frankfurter: "...I realized on the trip what a dreadful lack of civilization is shown in the countries I visited—but on returning I am not wholly certain of the degree of civilization in terra Americana."