Montgomery’s Reputation

Montgomery’s reputation was at its zenith on D-day. In October, after a rapid Allied advance to the Low Countries and the German frontier had ended in tough fighting and an almost static front, he had been eclipsed. By then Eisenhower had held supreme command for more than a month. He had intended that Bradley and Montgomery should manage operations jointly, under his own supervision. They had worked together after Patton and his Third Army took to the field in the last stages in Normandy and Bradley became commander of 12th Army Group. Eisenhower would have preferred a ground forces commander to manage operations but neither Montgomery nor Bradley was acceptable in that role and no one else was suitable. So the command arrangements were a compromise which might have worked had the three principals agreed over operational policy or had Eisenhower taken control of operations himself. Neither condition was fulfilled.

Although it was largely a media idea that attracted more attention after than before 1945, the perception that the Americans had pulled his chestnuts out of the fire in Normandy undermined Montgomery’s reputation. But his decline sprang from the natural feeling that the time had come for the Americans, who commanded larger armies, to take charge of operations. It followed that unless Eisenhower commanded operations, Montgomery would find himself marginalized or indirectly controlled by Bradley. In that event, Montgomery would not tolerate bad operational decisions at American hands. His unfavourable reaction to Eisenhower’s compromises with Bradley after the Seine was seen as an attempt to keep the direction of Allied strategy in his own hands. Finally, Montgomery’s failure at Arnhem at the end of September, an operation that diverted resources from Bradley’s army group, spoiled Montgomery’s standing with his allies beyond repair.

In coalition warfare it is important to reach agreement over operations without quarrelling. It is also important to conduct operations professionally, preserve lives and win battles. These aims may be mutually exclusive, although Montgomery managed to reconcile them.
in Normandy. Afterwards, when he was in a subordinate position, and he observed that no one was in control, they were not reconciled. Montgomery was an autocrat. He worked well with his colleagues provided he was boss and the policies followed were his own. The post-Normandy story is about the struggle of a didactic Montgomery, who was no longer the boss, to dictate what he was sure were correct operational decisions. His questionable behaviour in trying to get his way has overshadowed the argument over whether he was right or not. In turn that has led to his earlier conduct of operations in Normandy suffering the same treatment.

Montgomery was still widely admired although he stumbled when his status changed after Normandy. An explanation of his fall from grace starts and ends at the same point; his personality. Montgomery's 'lack of concern for truth in his make-up,' as Max Hastings described it, was one of his faults. Hastings offers as an example Montgomery's fishing expedition to the Spey before D-day which yielded him nothing. On his return he wrote to the Reynolds family, his son's guardians at school: "I have just got back from Scotland and I send you a salmon – a magnificent fish of some 18lb. I hope it will feed the whole school." The implication was as obvious as the intention to deceive,' Hastings commented.¹

An analogy between this incident and Montgomery's insistence that he applied his master plan in Normandy virtually without change as examples of his dishonesty, is unconvincing. His contemporaries were much to blame for suggesting that Montgomery intended to deceive over his plan and their historical case against him is unproven, at best. The RAF 'barons' as they were known, had only agreed to the D-day bombardment at the last minute.² They were obstructive throughout the campaign, during and after Normandy, for they were of a generation that had resolutely opposed army co-operation, except on their own terms, in the 1930s. They genuinely, if mistakenly, believed that the air force was the main instrument for the overthrow of the enemy. Tedder and Coningham felt that Montgomery had stolen the limelight in the Mediterranean and claimed more than he had achieved. Neither of them had troubled to master the concept, as opposed to the details of Montgomery's Normandy plan that affected them. So when the tactical plan miscarried, they chose not to understand that the simple strategic idea of holding on the left and striking on the right had not. Nor did they grasp that the Germans were bound to hold the eastern hinge of their position and that unless it was displaced southward in the first few days, British resources were not sufficient to force