Harold Macmillan had a good war. His appointment as Resident Minister to AFHQ, Algiers at the end of 1942 made his political career. Macmillan himself commented in later life, ‘my belief is, when you get a chance, take it. It was always my philosophy. Chance played such a role in my life – Winston, the war, Algiers, Housing... made me Prime Minister.’ With the exception of Housing the other three factors Macmillan identifies are, essentially, the same. His record as an anti- appeaser and relationship with Churchill meant nothing until he got his opportunity in Algiers. Churchill was ruthless with his junior ministers. Macmillan held two relatively unimportant junior ministerial posts at Supply and Colonies. In the autumn of 1942 he was effectively demoted and considered resignation. If he had done so there is little doubt that his political career would have been at an end.

The Algiers job became a godsend, but he was not first choice. His Guards contemporary, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Harry Crookshank, turned it down on grounds of ill-health. Neither was it an obvious route to the top. At the time he feared he was being sent to ‘political Siberia’. The great advantage of the post was that it brought Macmillan ‘into the loop’. Cabinet ministers in London who were not members of the War Cabinet or its Defence Committee were effectively excluded from policy formation. Macmillan’s contemporary and superior at the Colonial Office, Lord Cranborne, had complained unavailingly to Churchill, whilst Dominions Secretary, that: ‘I do not myself know what is going on... most of the important telegrams are exchanged by you personally, either with Heads of State or with Dominion Prime Ministers.’

Another Guards contemporary, ahead of Macmillan on the political ladder, Oliver Lyttelton, had already pioneered the Minister of State role in the Middle East. He later recalled that ‘no other
office... could present the same opportunities for usefulness, the same independence, the same authority. . . . I was far enough away from my colleagues to be able to make up my own mind on critical occasions. My powers were wide and unchallenged and I had to spend little time clearing subjects with other ministers.' Yet it was hard to disguise that the terms of Macmillan's appointment were less than ideal. Although he became a Cabinet minister, this gave him the same status as Duff Cooper, a slightly older politician whose career was already in decline, when he was sent to Singapore. Macmillan later wrote: 'His status would be roughly parallel to that of the Minister of State in Cairo.' Unlike him, however, the Minister of State in Cairo was a member of the War Cabinet. Nevertheless, Macmillan made a major success of his appointment. It turned him, in his mid-forties, into a glamorous figure in the Conservative party.

Although he carried out his wartime duties with skill and dedication there is no doubt that he arrived in Africa at the right time. Political gossip had it that Algiers presented a tricky situation. On 1 January 1943 Harold Nicolson recorded in his diary: 'Rothermere tells me... Harold MacMillan [sic] has been hurried out immediately by aeroplane. He will have a difficult job.' Macmillan, however, had the immeasurable advantage of acting within the context of military victory. From the victory at second Alamein and the successful launch of Operation Torch in November 1942, until D-Day reduced Italy to a secondary theatre in June 1944, Allied military operations had a large measure of success. Macmillan was associated with this success, most symbolically when he was invited onto the podium for the Algiers and Tunis victory parades by Eisenhower. Oliver Lyttelton, who had been the sole Minister of State in the Middle East between July 1941 and February 1942, was in position at a time of disenchancing stalemate and had left before a significant victory was achieved. He was also unable to make political capital from his appointment. Alan Moorehead, the Daily Express correspondent in Cairo, noted that he was hard-working and respected but, 'his press conferences were so appallingly dull, his words so banal and evasive that it was impossible to put him before the public as a leader.' During his tenure Lyttelton had to sort out the disorganized logistics system, an important but dull subject, and relations with the Egyptian government, whose pro-Nazi dealings had to be kept secret. In December 1943, when future command arrangements in the Mediterranean were being