



*Stilwell and Mountbatten in Burma: Allies at War, 1943–44* by Jonathan Templin Ritter.

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Wartime alliances make for strange bedfellows. It is hard to think of a more awkward professional relationship than that of Adm. Louis Mountbatten, the personification of British royal privilege unrelated to experience or demonstrated ability, and US Gen. Joseph Stilwell, an accomplished professional soldier whose famously caustic tongue earned him the nickname “Vinegar Joe.” The general liked America’s British allies only slightly more than he did their Japanese enemy. Historian and archivist Jonathan Ritter (Archbishop Riordan HS, San Francisco) has written a study of these leaders’ relationship in a secondary theater of the World War II that posed the extraordinary challenges of terrain, climate, communications, and logistics typical of irregular warfare.

Based on extensive research in the Stilwell Papers at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution and the Mountbatten Archives at the University of Southampton, *Stilwell and Mountbatten in Burma* comprises fifteen chapters enhanced by eleven maps and photographs, endnotes, an annotated bibliography, and an index. Its author aims to provide the first integrated study of his two subjects during the twelve months when their careers overlapped; in so doing, he bridges a gap in the historical literature between Mountbatten’s early naval career and his time as Viceroy of India. He also explains Stilwell’s Anglophobia and refutes the charge that he squandered the lives of his men in Burma in 1944 as a result of it.

The jarring differences of personality between the two men were compounded both by the conflicting perspectives of their respective service branches and the divergent British and American strategic objectives in Southeast Asia. The United States wanted to support Nationalist China, which it hoped could sap Japanese strength by attrition. Britain sought to restore its empire in the region, a goal opposed to American interests and impossible in the long term, as Mountbatten understood better than most of his countrymen. But, in the short term, the imperial logic was integral to defeating Japan:

What many Americans forgot was that most of the soldiers who were fighting in Southeast Asia against the Japanese were neither American nor British: they were Chinese and Indian, African and Burmese .... The Karens and Kachins in North Burma strongly supported the British. The Karens inflicted very heavy casualties on the Japanese, while the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) trained and equipped the Kachin Rangers. Paradoxically, it was the much-maligned British Empire that provided most of the manpower to defeat the Japanese in Burma. The Indian Army was the largest single source of manpower for the British 14th Army. (39)

Ritter's point is well taken. It has been noted that Winston Churchill's obsessive prejudice against Indian troops was utterly refuted by their performance: twenty (of twenty-seven) Victoria Crosses awarded in Burma went to Indian soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

None of this diminishes China's importance to defeating the Japanese. Stilwell's principal mission—to bring Chinese manpower to bear against the Japanese—was often more difficult than Mountbatten's overall command responsibilities. His relations with Chiang Kai-shek, Generalissimo of the Nationalist Chinese forces, were often more stressed than with Mountbatten; these tensions led to his recall by President Franklin Roosevelt (Oct. 1944). Stilwell's reflexive contempt for all things British had complicated his dealings with Mountbatten, whose breezy charm grated on him. As Ritter points out, whatever generous sentiments they occasionally felt obliged to articulate, the two men were never friends. An inherently awkward command structure inevitably led to acrimony.

As Supreme Commander of all Allied forces in Southeast Asia, Mountbatten was most directly responsible for British operations in Arakan and Bengal-Assam. Stilwell, as US Commanding General in China-Burma-India (CBI), was, like Eisenhower in Europe or MacArthur in the South West Pacific, in principle responsible for a broad geographic area. But CBI, as an unofficial administrative entity, did not include an overall American command structure: Chiang Kai-shek headed Chinese Nationalist forces, while Burma and India fell under Mountbatten's jurisdiction. Moreover, Britain, fighting for its national survival in Europe, devoted the lion's share of its resources to defeating Germany, not Japan. Nor could China overcome Imperial Japan's army or navy, or threaten its home islands; that would require American carrier-born air power and amphibious operations. In short, the frustrated Mountbatten and Stilwell were left to imagine operations against the Japanese for which the troops and equipment at their disposal would never suffice.

In addition, as Ritter astutely observes, both commanders harbored romantic foreign policy illusions. British attachment to Empire in the region had its counterpart in Americans' fond hopes for the potentials of China:

Churchill also expressed dismay that the Americans were focusing so much on China when the British focus was on Malaya and Singapore. He believed that the American focus on the land route to China was a diversion. Churchill and the British never had the same feelings for China as did FDR, Stilwell, and the American public in the 1930s and throughout World War II. Veneration of China had become almost a religion among many Americans, fueled by the novels of Pearl Buck, two of which were made into popular films; magazines such as *Time* and *Life*; Protestant and Catholic missionary societies; the China Lobby; and the "China Clipper" flying boats across the Pacific from San Francisco to Hong Kong after 1935, which recalled the historic trading link so dear to FDR. (56)

For their part, the Japanese grossly overestimated what they might accomplish in South Asia; their major offensive in Assam in 1944 brought out the finest in the responding Allied forces. The battles of Kohima and Imphal ended Japanese efforts to stop the British from recovering Burma. Though Mountbatten sent in the British 2nd Division to relieve Kohima at a critical moment in April 1944, as Ritter points out, the British owed the successes at Imphal and Kohima not to the admiral but to Gen. William Slim. It was Slim, moreover, who most fully appreciated Stilwell's contribution to the Allied effort. Stilwell had worked tirelessly to build the Ledo Road to Assam to link with the Burma Road at Lungling on the Chinese side. Slim saw in him a fighting general like himself; he later observed that "no one else could have made his Chinese do what they did, ... [Stilwell] kept a close hand on the Chi-

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1. Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign: Disaster into Triumph, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2011) 249-50, with review at *MiWSR* 2012-021. See, further, Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia* (NY: Basic Books, 2016), on the traditional scholarly neglect of British India's importance to the overall military struggle in World War II.

nese troops, steadying them when they faltered, prodding them when they hesitated, even finding battalions for them when they lost them” (126–27). This assessment, by the man some consider the greatest British general of World War II,<sup>2</sup> is high praise indeed, even allowing for Slim’s generosity of spirit.

Ritter argues that, although the Southeast Asia theater was scarcely big enough to contain the egos of two such self-regarding leaders as Mountbatten and Stilwell, their joint and separate accomplishments against Japanese forces qualify them as great leaders. Besides their mutual personal animosities, they had to contend with the subordinate status Britain and the United States assigned to their theater. Stilwell, always managing to keep China in the struggle, conducted a land war against Japan in the face of overwhelming odds. Mountbatten, a naval officer lacking the landing craft and ships he needed to launch a seaborne offensive against Japanese-occupied territory, was able in the end to lead British forces back to Burma, Malaya, and Singapore. Despite their nations’ discrete strategic goals (183–86) and the strains placed on the Anglo-American fraternal spirit, there remained sufficient will to make the best of things; even as they fought separate campaigns, these allies’ efforts were at least parallel—and ultimately converged.

Ritter concludes that his two protagonists, while fighting Japanese imperialism, oversaw the inexorable decline of British imperialism in Southeast Asia. That said, “many Americans (and by inference more liberal Britons like Mountbatten), both during and after the war, often assumed that Asian independence movements were more liberal and democratic than they were” (187). For all his proprietary interest in Indian independence and his postwar exertions to negotiate its terms, Mountbatten could not avoid the bloodbath it entailed; consequently “those who had initially deplored the grant of independence had been fortified in their convictions,” and many in Britain “abused him as an impetuous blunderer and others as an outright traitor.”<sup>3</sup> For its part, the China Stilwell left behind appreciated US aid, yet disliked American democracy as much as Japanese occupation. “Even the Yellow River Road that Stilwell built in 1921 had disappeared twelve years later, ... [and] in the end China went her own way as if the Americans had never come.”<sup>4</sup> It seems neither their compatriots nor their allies were long grateful for the leadership of General Stilwell and Admiral Mountbatten.

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2. McLynn, *ibid.* 432–33.

3. Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (NY: Knopf, 1985) 478.

4. Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–45* (NY: Macmillan, 1970) 531.