



General Dwight D. Eisenhower: D-Day and Responsibility

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

In 1939, the world watched in horror as Nazi Germany leader Adolf Hitler invaded Poland. Within days, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Germany, Italy, and Japan allied together and were known as the Axis Powers, while France, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, and others formed the Allied Powers. The United States entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

One of the major turning points in the war for the Allies was Operation Overlord, also known as D-Day, which was launched on June 6, 1944, in Normandy, France. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, orchestrated the operation.

Eisenhower was born in 1890 in Texas and raised in Abilene, Kansas. He attended West Point—the U.S. Military Academy—where he graduated in 1915 with a second lieutenant commission.

Soon after the United States entered World War II, Eisenhower was a commanding general in both the European and North African theaters. In 1943, he became Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. In this role, Eisenhower was in charge of planning and executing Operation Overlord, the plan to liberate Europe from Nazi rule. Following the success of the D-Day invasion and the Allied Powers' victory, Eisenhower became the military governor of Germany, then returned to the United States, where he became Army Chief of Staff. In 1952, Eisenhower was elected as thirty-fourth president of the United States.

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At 4:15 a.m. on June 5, 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower faced the most significant decision of his life. As the wind and rain pounded against the windows of his headquarters, he had to decide whether to send 156,000 Allied troops to invade northern France in order to begin to retake Europe from German occupation. After learning that the weather would briefly improve over the next thirty-six hours to coincide with favorable tides and moonlight to provide a narrow window of opportunity to launch the attack, Eisenhower silently paced the room with a grave responsibility on his shoulders. Finally, he ordered that the largest amphibious invasion in history begin that night. They would attack German General Irwin Rommel's formidable defensive network, the Western Wall.

As preparations for the launch began, Eisenhower scribbled a message on a piece of paper that he would send in case the invasion failed. His words demonstrated his character and willingness to accept personal responsibility for the momentous decision. "Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre

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area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air, and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone," he wrote.

Back in September, 1943, Eisenhower told British Admiral Louis Mountbatten that a leader must be "self-effacing, quick to give credit, ready to meet the other fellow more than half-way, must seek to absorb advice...When the time comes that he feels he must make a decision, he must make it in a clean-cut fashion and on his own responsibility and take full blame for anything that goes wrong whether or not it results from his mistake." It was a character and leadership code that Eisenhower exhibited throughout his career.

Countless details would influence the attack's outcome, all of which Eisenhower was responsible for.

- He had to choose the commanders and ensure cooperation not only between the Allied nations, but also between each branch of the military.
- Conflicts between the leading Allied statesmen and generals such as President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, George Patton, and Bernard Montgomery were common, and Eisenhower needed to use his diplomatic skills to mediate.
- The moonlight, tides, and weather had to be just right.
- A massive Allied campaign of deception—Operation Fortitude—had to trick the Germans into thinking the invasion would come at Pas de Calais, the closest part of the coast to southern England and most obvious point of landing. Fictitious American and British Army groups had to fool enemy observers.
- In a mission called the Transportation Plan, Allied air forces had to cripple the French railway and road system to prevent German reinforcements from being rushed to the front.
- There were not enough Landing Ship, Tank, or "LST" landing craft to carry out the invasion, forcing a month-long delay.

This stress affected Eisenhower's health, and he smoked four packs of cigarettes a day. He was haunted by the anticipation of the deaths of the young men involved in the invasion. Eisenhower visited 26 divisions that spring and sent a message to all of the Allied forces to encourage them right before they attacked German defenses, stating, "Soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force! You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade... The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you... You will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world." While Eisenhower planned to take responsibility in case of failure, his message showed that he would give full credit to the troops on the ground in case of success.

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The invasion established a beachhead, and, over the course of the following months, the Allies drove the Germans out of France. Eisenhower did not have to publish his message of failure, but still felt the weight of the men who were killed under his command. More than 2,500 Allied troops died and 7,500 were wounded or went missing on D-Day.

His assistant, Lt. Gen. Bedell Smith, recognized the responsibility of command, saying, "I never realized before the loneliness and isolation of a commander at a time when such a momentous decision has to be taken, with the full knowledge that failure or success rests on his judgment alone." Dwight Eisenhower rose to that occasion with character and greatness.