

The Casablanca conference that saved the world could be the model for saving America

American and British conflict flared, but cooperation prevailed.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt meets with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in Quebec, Canada, on Sept. 12, 1944. The Anglo-American partnership in WWII was often strained, especially during a separate conference in Morocco, but never broken. (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library / MCT)

For 10 days in January 1943, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and their divided high command met in secret at a commandeered Moroccan resort hotel two weeks after the Germans bombed the neighborhood. Surrounded by anti-aircraft guns, British marines, elite American troops and a mile of barbed wire, they were deeply at odds on strategy at the tipping point of World War II, with nothing less at stake than the fate of the world. In 31 temperate meetings that sometimes turned hot but seldom rude, they challenged each other's vision and questioned each other's judgment, never doubting the other side's patriotism, and found in civil dialogue and responsible give-and-take a middle course to victory.

Eighty years on, in our own fraught time, left-wing purists punish free speech that challenges their own, hard-right zealots in the House of Representatives shut it down when they lose a vote, compromise is sin, open minds are weak, and a lapse from tribal orthodoxy is bigotry or treason. The legendary leaders of the Casablanca Conference have left us a better model.

In today's heated rhetoric "existential threats" are often nothing of the sort. The Casablanca conferees faced an actual existential threat. A deadlock or poor decisions would have crippled their fight to save the world from darkness.

The Allies had begun to turn the tide of their war against Hitler but were still far from winning it, having hung on by their eyelids for more than three years, and had checked Japan's aggression but had not yet rolled it back. With Stalin and his generals deep in the Battle of Stalingrad, the British and American leaders flew into an active war zone and stayed at the risk of their lives to plan the next stage of their war.

Churchill the conservative imperialist and Roosevelt the liberal anti-colonialist, friends as well as rivals, informed, cajoled and entertained each other while their military chiefs gathered separately

two or three times a day. A British general watched the military talks begin in “an atmosphere of veiled antipathy and mistrust.”

The brilliant Gen. Sir Alan Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff, was not called Colonel Shrapnel for nothing. “I flatly disagree” was his standard declaration of conference room dissent, typically made while snapping a pencil in half. Brooke and his troops had been driven from France in 1940 by the most powerful evil forces in the history of the world. Now the British were sure those forces were too strong to attack from the English Channel but vulnerable in the Mediterranean where the Allies could take Sicily or Sardinia, open vital shipping, and pull German forces from the hard-pressed Russian front. If the Channel were crossed instead, a British general said, the Germans “could turn on us at their leisure and wipe us out.”

In sharp contrast, Gen. George C. Marshall, the U.S. Army’s chief of staff, arrived at Casablanca convinced that the Allies must cross the Channel soon, overmatched or not, or the Russians would collapse and leave Nazi Germany the permanent master of continental Europe.

The Americans were also keen to attack the Japanese relentlessly, but the British insisted on a minimal Pacific war until the Germans were crushed by the heaviest possible weight of Allied resources. Brooke put it simply at the conference table: “If we try to defeat Japan first, we shall lose the war.”

Then as now, conflicting core beliefs undercut the search for common ground. The Anglo-American alliance of 1943 was not as strained as what remains of the red and blue alliance of 2023, sadly and remarkably enough, but a culture clash left both sides hearing impaired. Before the United States entered the war, Churchill had given his countrymen hope of rescue by “the most powerful state and community in the world.” They spoke the same language, he said, “and very largely think the same thoughts, or anyhow think a lot of the same thoughts.” Very largely was too much to say.

Among other ideological splits, Americans as a rule, FDR chief among them, despised colonial empires. Britain’s was the core of its wealth and power and a hobgoblin of American lore. Tongue only half in cheek, an aide who accompanied Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to Casablanca had discovered that the British were “really not red-coated devils,” but a persistent American suspicion that their Mediterranean strategy was designed to protect their empire at the cost of prolonging the war was not entirely baseless. Over dinner at Casablanca with FDR and Churchill, the prime minister’s son, Randolph, an insufferable member of Parliament, said the Allies should do just that. The American chiefs of staff would send their young men to die to save the British but not to save the British Empire.

The British, in turn, were inclined to find the Americans likable, well-meaning bumpkins dressed up like soldiers, all but ignorant of modern European war. Occasional whiffs of imperial condescension did not advance the British cause. "We were more suspicious of them than they were of us," Marshall said later. "They didn't think we were smart enough or knew enough to be treacherous."

Bluster, barbs, and bluff were part of the negotiation. Shutting it down was not. Marshall threatened to go all-out against Japan and leave the Germans to the Brits. Eisenhower presented a novice Tunisian battle plan that Brooke simply took apart. The combative American Adm. Ernest J. King threw elbows every day. A break was quickly called when a sharp-edged British remark produced an American profanity. None of it blew up a meeting or produced a snarling match. With national survival at stake, tempers were sometimes lost but dialogue was never at risk and the conferees began to know and understand each other. Having squabbled through the days, they chatted over dinner at night, relaxed in each other's hotel rooms, and toasted one another at Le Bar Américain. A "general mixing of the clans" a British staff officer wrote, let friendships form and suspicions fade, and "a genial warmth spread over our souls."

No one had surer convictions than Marshall and Brooke, but they both moved toward the middle for lack of responsible alternatives. Marshall opened his mind to the sheer impracticability of a near term Channel crossing, knowing its defeat could lose the war. It never occurred to Brooke that he might be wrong, and no one was more inflexible than he, but he flexed when rigidity meant failure.

In the end, the Americans agreed that in 1943, the Allies would invade Sicily, not France, and open the Mediterranean. In return, the British committed to cross the Channel in the spring of 1944 with a vast Allied invasion force to be built in the interim and gave the Yanks free rein in the Pacific with the assets already there.

"This bridge for our difficulties," Brooke called it, a tolerable balance of British and American goals leaving differences too great for closure to be settled later as events improved their vision. Brooke told his diary that the bargaining had been tough, but "our relations were never strained." Neither side got what it wanted. Both sides filled their needs. The ultimate result was victory and a culture of dialogue and compromise preserved for their descendants to elevate or squander.

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