**Ultimate War Game: Bridge (Not Chess)**

**By MICHAEL LEDEEN May 17, 2015 Article in Walll Street Journal**  
On the night of Nov. 7, 1942, as allied forces in Operation Torch headed for the North African coast, commanding Gen. Dwight Eisenhower waited anxiously. It was foggy, and news of the invasion was slow to arrive. To pass the time, Ike and three associates played bridge.   
  
The game was an important part of Ike’s life—throughout the war, in the White House and in retirement. In those years many American leaders were passionate bridge players: One of the men at Eisenhower’s table that night was Gen. Alfred Gruenther, later NATO Commander and for many years president of the World Bridge Federation. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles bragged about his mastery of the game, and his department long conducted a world-wide bridge tournament in embassies and consulates.   
  
You’ll often hear that chess is the ultimate model for geopolitics, indeed for war itself. In the 1963 hit movie “From Russia With Love,” James Bond is menaced by the brilliant Soviet chess master Tov Kronsteen (clearly modeled on Boris Spassky).   
  
But Eisenhower knew better. No board game can replicate the conditions of the battlefield or the maneuvers of geostrategy, for one simple reason: All of the pieces are visible on the table. Card games are better models because vital information is always concealed by the “fog of war” and the deception of opponents. Most of the time a bridge player sees only one-quarter of the cards, and some of the information he might gather from them is false.   
  
Bridge is largely about communication, and every message a player sends—by bidding or playing a significant card—is broadcast to the player’s partner and his opponents. Frequently a player will have to decide whether he would rather tell the truth to his partner (thereby informing his opponents) or deceive the enemy (thus running the risk of seriously fooling his ally across the table).   
  
Nothing like this exists in even the greatest board games. They permit some feints, to be sure, but not outright lies. Great bridge players are great liars—as are brilliant military leaders and diplomats and politicians. To take the most celebrated recent example, Deng Xiaoping, the man who transformed modern China, was an avid bridge player who had a private railroad car for his games.   
  
The difficulty of weighing truth and lies is one reason that computers don’t win at bridge, whereas at the highest level of chess they do very well. IBM’s Deep Blue defeated grandmaster Garry Kasparov in a six-game match in 1997, but bridge is simply too tough for the machines.   
  
Bridge may also be too tough for contemporary Americans. The bridge-playing population is shrinking and aging. In Eisenhower’s time, close to half of American families had at least one active bridge player; as of 10 years ago, a mere three million played at least once a week, and their average age was 51. Kibitz at a national bridge championship or a local club game and you’ll be impressed by the white hair and the number of wheel chairs and oxygen tanks. 

Another measure: When Operation Torch landed, there were several bridge books on the best-seller list. Nowadays bridge books are printed in small numbers by specialized publishers. Poker books do some what better, but no writer’s celebrity approaches that of Ely Culbertson or Charles Goren, the high-profile bridge authors in the past century.   
  
The shrinking population of American bridge players goes hand in hand with other evidence of declining mental discipline, including shortening attention spans and decreases in book readership. You can’t be a winning card player unless you can concentrate for several hours, and mastery of the game takes years. Neither is bridge a solo activity; you need a partner with whom you must reach very detailed agreements about myriad situations. All this is good for the mind: Bridge provides stimulation that can help players retain their mental toughness and stave off dementia.   
  
Eisenhower and Gruenther would be disturbed by the declining popularity of bridge, knowing that it is a quintessential American game, developed in its modern form in the 1920s largely on board the Vagrant, Harold Vanderbilt’s yacht. American players continue to win in international competition, but they are mostly professionals. Insofar as they have day jobs, they are often stock or options traders, not business leaders, diplomats or military officers.   
  
It might be helpful to introduce bridge instruction and competition to high schools and colleges, as has been done with chess. Bridge lovers like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett would surely approve and could sponsor programs and tournaments for young players, with suitable rewards.   
  
It’s no accident that the greatest thinker of modern times, Niccolò Machiavelli, was a card player, nor that his masterpiece, “The Prince,” remains essential reading for our special forces officers. A prince, Machiavelli wrote, should be “faithful to his word, guileless” but “his disposition should be such that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how.” That’s a lesson you can only learn from kings and jacks, not kings and rooks.   
  
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## D-Day Memories of the Bridge Player in Chief

## http://home.comcast.net/~dist8adv/jun09/ike.htm

(June, 2009)   As this newsletter is being published, millions in the U.S. and Europe are reflecting on the 65th anniversary of D-Day, the Allied invasion of Normandy that marked the beginning of the end of World War II. Among the many heroes of June 6, 1944 was Dwight David Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force and the future 34th President of the United States.

The main architect of Operation Overlord, Eisenhower was under incredible stress in the weeks leading up to D-Day. He was drinking 24 cups of coffee and smoking six packs of cigarettes a day and rarely had more than two hours of uninterrupted sleep each night. He was also squeezing in bridge games at every opportunity. His lifelong devotion to the game has given him unofficial status as the "patron President" of bridge players.

Ike learned to play in 1913 at West Point and indulged his passion as he moved up the military ranks. He was dubbed the "bridge wizard of Manila" while he was stationed in the Philippines, where he played regularly with President Manuel Quezon. During WWII, an unwritten qualification for service on Eisenhower's staff was an officer's ability to play a decent game of bridge. His favorite partner was General Alfred Gruenther, regarded as the best bridge player in the U.S. Army, and they both took the game seriously. After one particularly disastrous result, they discussed the play of the hand in an exchange of letters that went on for two years.

**After the war**

Ike's bridge partnership with Gruenther had an impact on world history. After WWII, Eisenhower became president of Columbia University, an undemanding job that allowed him to spend every afternoon at his Manhattan bridge club. One day in 1948, he was called from the table to take a telephone call from President Harry Truman, who asked him to take the position as head of NATO in Paris. When he returned to the game, he told his bridge companions about the offer.

"Who will you take as your Number 2 man?" they asked. ''Well, I ought to take Bedell Smith," replied Ike. "But I think I'll take Gruenther because he's the better bridge player.'' Gruenther later became the head of NATO when Eisenhower returned to the U.S. to run for president.

During his years as President, Eisenhower held regular Saturday-night games at the White House. The games were serious competitions, as Ike considered it a "sacrilege" to play bridge with anything less than total concentration. He was calm and thoughtful during the auction, but could become quite animated during the play of the hand. An old bridge friend described Ike's gusto when taking the setting trick: "The card rises vertically in the President's hand, then describes a 90-degree arc. It hits the table with a thump, upsetting ash trays and opponents."

Mamie Eisenhower loved the game, too. She and Ike rarely played together because he yelled at her when she made mistakes, but bridge was always the featured entertainment at her parties. When someone suggested that she invite Vice-President Nixon and his wife Pat to one of the weekend parties at the Eisenhowers' Gettysburg farm, Mamie rejected the idea. "What on earth would we talk about?" said Mamie. "She doesn't play bridge!"

**How good a player was Ike?**

Eisenhower wasn't an expert by today's standards, but bridge great Ely Culbertson described his game as classic and sound with "flashes of brilliance." Said Culbertson: "You can always judge a man's character by the way he plays cards. Eisenhower is a calm and collected player and never whines at his losses. He is brilliant in victory but never commits the bridge player's worst crime of gloating when he wins."

**Oswald Jacoby, Ike's frequent partner in the White House games, said, "The President plays better bridge than golf. He tries to break 90 at golf. At bridge, you would say he plays in the 70s."**

Eisenhower showed his knowledge of bridge odds as declarer on this deal, which was the first bridge hand ever published in *Time* magazine:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dealer: N  Vul: Both | ♠ K98 ♥ AKJ53             ♦ QJ10 ♣ 83 |  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **North**    Jacoby | **East**  Vinson | **South**    Ike | **West**   Talbott | | 1♥ | Pass | 2♠ | Pass | | 3♠ | Pass | 4NT | Pass | | 5♦ | Pass | 6♠ | ***All Pass*** | |
| ♠ 52 ♥ 82 ♦ 9873 ♣ K7542 |  | ♠ 64 ♥ Q1094          ♦ A62 ♣ J1096 |
|  | ♠ AQJ1073       ♥ 76 ♦ K54 ♣ AQ |  |

The hand was played in 1953 in a White House game. Eisenhower's partner was bridge expert Oswald Jacoby and their opponents were U.S. Chief Justice Fred Vinson and Air Force Secretary Harold Talbott.

The auction was straightforward, with Ike choosing a strong jump-shift response, then using Blackwood. The opening lead was the ♦3 to East's ♦A. Eisenhower saw that he could avoid the club finesse if he could set up an extra heart trick, but that there could be problems with dummy entries if the trumps broke poorly. He thoughtfully unblocked his ♦K under East's ♦A.

East shifted to the ♣J, but Ike knew that setting up three heart tricks was a better bet than the club finesse, so he won his ♣A. After drawing trumps, he used dummy’s diamond honors as entries to trump two hearts in his hand and then discard his ♣Q on the established ♥J.

One of Ike's favorite hands was an 8-5 freak dealt in 1946 at an Alpine retreat with U.S. generals. As reported in *Sports Illustrated*, he opened 6D holding ♦KQ1098732 and ♠AKQ63. Gruenther, his LHO, doubled and Ike's partner, General Mark Clark, raised to 7D with the ♦A6 and a small doubleton spade. Gruenther's partner, General Raymond Moses, doubled 7D and when this was passed back to Clark, he redoubled, convinced that his ♦A had to be the 13th trick. Spades broke 4-2 and diamonds 3-0 (Gruenther held ♠82 and ♦J54 in front of dummy), so the only way to make was to ruff a spade in dummy before drawing trumps. Ike found it and scored up 1610 points plus the value of the game.

**Ike's biggest score**

Eisenhower's aggressive nature took center stage in this sensational deal, reported by Dorothy Hayden Truscott in the *New York Times Bridge Book*. It was played in Palm Springs CA after Ike left the White House. His partner was Gruenther and their opponents were two noted industrialists who had far more money than bidding sense.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dealer: S  Vul: Both | ♠ 9 ♥ KJ82 ♦ KQ532         ♣ A108 |  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **South** | **West**    Ike | **North** | **East**   Gruenther | | Pass | 1♦ | DBL | RDBL | | 1NT | DBL | RDBL | ***All Pass*** | |
| ♠  AJ ♥ 1075 ♦  AJ76 ♣ Q965 |  | ♠ KQ7653         ♥ AQ9          ♦ 104 ♣ K4 |
|  | ♠ 10842       ♥ 643 ♦ 98 ♣ J732 |  |

1♠ is probably the "correct" bid with the East hand, but the style in the 1960s was to redouble with any 10+ points, and it worked spectacularly here. Ike was always looking for opportunities to act as the "ax holder over an injudicious bidder", as one partner described him, and he took full advantage of this penalty situation, despite his bare-minimum opener. South, who had obviously seen his partner's off-shape takeout doubles before, was afraid to bid any suit and did not understand the foolish redouble, which was intended as SOS.

Ike led the ♦6, which should have allowed declarer to escape for down four. However, the desperate South played low from dummy in the hope the lead was from ♦J10xx. Gruenther won his ♦10 and shifted to a low spade. Ike cashed his two spades and exited with a club, ducked in dummy.

Gruenther won his ♣K and cashed four spade tricks, which squeezed dummy down to  ♥KJ  ♦KQ  ♣A. He then led a diamond to Ike's ♦A, and now a heart through dummy's unguarded ♥KJ gave Gruenther three tricks in that suit. Declarer finally scored dummy's ♣A at the end for down six, redoubled and vulnerable.

It was the biggest thrill of Ike's long bridge career, which he pursued until his death a few years later in 1969. Collecting 3400 points on a bridge deal isn't in the same league as launching a successful military invasion, but for a man who loved our game almost as much as he loved our country, that bridge hand was surely a memory that rivaled those of his D-Day victory.

***-- Karen Walker***

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* Bridge game in the White House Treaty Room at Ike's 70th birthday celebration (October 14, 1960). Eisenhower (left) is playing with William Robinson, Bernard Montgomery and an unidentified fourth.
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  Eisenhower, right, at his Gettysburg PA farm with his favorite bridge partner, General Alfred Gruenther (1961).

  
**Gruenther** (standing, center), garnered worldwide fame as chief referee in the "Battle of the Century", the 1931-32 grudge match between Ely Culbertson and Sidney Lenz. Seated at the table are Culbertson <http://www.bridgeguys.com/CGlossary/CulbertsonLenzMatch.html>

Excerpts below:

The principal leader of the various groups in opposition to the Culbertson methods was Lenz, a veteran of Auction Bridge. In his camp were other great luminaries of the game who also felt that their methods were superior to the Culbertson System. The name by which the Lenz forces' system was called was the Official System. A book on this system, which acknowledged its debt to Culbertson in that much of it was derived from his concepts, was later to be written by Work. Thc actual match was the result of a challenge made earlier in 1931 by Culbertson to the Lenz faction. There were many complications to be ironed out before agreement as to conditions could actually be achieved, but essentially the match was finally played on a pair-against-pair basis, with Culbertson wagering $5,000 against Lenz’s $1,000 on the outcome, with the money going to charity no matter who won. Culbertson promoted the match as the struggle of a young loving married couple against the forces of adversity with 12 jealous authorities, the establishment, combined against them. Of course it was also billed as a grudge fight and a battle of systems. As a result the match was a topic of conversation at every bridge table and at many dinner tables long before it began. In all, 150 rubbers were played, and during 88 of them Culbertson played with his wife, Josephine. His partners for the balance of the encounter were Theodore A. Lightner, Waldemar Von Zedtwitz, Howard Schenken, and Michael Gottlieb.

Lenz played the first 103 rubbers with Oswald Jacoby, who then resigned because of a difference of opinion on the play of a defensive situation. Lenz's partner for the remainder of the session was Commander Winfield Liggett Jr. Alfred Gruenther, then a lieutenant instructor at West Point, was chief referee of the match.

The Culbertson team won by 8,980 points. Careful and accurate records of cards held for each deal were kept, and at the conclusion it was determined that each side had held fairly much the same number of high cards as the other. The first half of the match was held at New York's Chatham Hotel, and the second part at the newly opened Waldorf-Astoria. The conditions of play and of protocol in general were governed by an agreement to which both Culbertson and Lenz were signatory, and the bridge laws under which the match was conducted were those published by the Whist Club of New York.

Coverage by the press of the nation was stupendous. Stories about the match were on the front pages of newspapers all over America. Regular correspondents were dispatched to the scenes of play, and some of the great newspaper personalities of the time wrote articles for their papers and for syndicates. The Associated Press laid heavy cables right into the Culbertson apartment at the Chatham Hotel, assigned reporters to the match and gave play-by-play coverage while Western Union and Postal Telegraph established branches in a spare room.

A continuous line of the rich and famous moved into the drawing room and out of it, viewing the action through cracks in a large leather screen, and trying to catch a glimpse of the players' faces or the flash of a card being played. Culbertson called it the greatest peep show in history. A 438-page book, Famous Hands of The Culbertson-Lenz Match, was published in three sections with bidding and play analyzed by Culbertson and his partners, Jacoby, and Lt. Gruenther. Complete statistics were collated, and records of every phase of the match carefully kept. However, the single most significant feature of the entire proceedings was the enormous impetus it gave bridge when the game's popularity was already great.

# GEN. ALFRED M. GREUNTHER

[](http://www.acbl.org/acbl-content/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2006p01234.jpg)

General Alfred M. Greunther (1899-1983) of Washington DC, a recognized authority on duplicate contract bridge and the outstanding director of bridge tournaments in America in the Thirties. He was the chief referee in the Culbertson-Lenz Match 1931-1932. He authored Duplicate Bridge Simplified, Duplicate Bridge Guide and Famous Hands of the Culbertson-Lenz Match. Gruenther was named honorary president of the World Bridge Federation from its inception in 1958 until he resigned from all bridge activities in 1978. Awarded the Wetzlar Trophy in 1938, he was also named ACBL Honorary Member in 1944. Gruenther was a charter member of the ACBL Laws Commission and its Honorary Member from 1948-1978 He was also chairman of the ACBL Charity Foundation from 1964-1965 and a former member of the Editorial Advisory Board of Bridge Encyclopedia. Gruenther served 38 years in the U.S. Army. His final military assignment was Supreme Commander, Allied Powers, Europe, 1953-1956. In this capacity he came into contact with General Dwight D. Eisenhower. On occasion they played bridge. He retired December 31, 1956 and from 1957 to 1964 was president of the American Red Cross, serving with particular devotion and special interest in its youth program. He received nine awards from Red Cross Societies from other countries for International Red Cross league activities. He was decorated by 14 governments other than the United States. He was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal with two Oak Leaf clusters and the Legion of Merit from this country. He had honorary degrees from 31 American colleges and universities.