Having won an unprecedented series of victories and acquired huge new territories in 1942, Germany and Japan seemed poised to dominate most of the world. A year later both empires were reeling back in the face of Allied assaults. The rapid turnaround, Kings College history professor Richard Overy writes, came about largely as a result of technological innovation and structural responsiveness. The Allies were able to convert their economies to a war footing with few institutional fetters, while the Axis powers imposed layers of bureaucracy that often competed internally. In fact, Overy writes, at one point during the war, the Luftwaffe had more than 425 different aircraft models in production, the result of different state agencies and manufacturers vying to push their models into the order of battle. The defeated Axis powers conversion to their foes economic model enabled them, according to Overy, to become technological leaders in the postwar years. His study is full of detail, and it makes for very good reading.

My Personal Review:
Historian Richard Overy sets out to answer what is one of the most important questions of the Twentieth Centuries, why the Allied Powers, and not the Axis, won the greatest conflict of all time. Overy emphasizes that the outcome was not a foregone conclusion, as Western Liberal societies have argued since 1945. Rather, the conflict was extremely close, and in the years from 1942-44, the war could have gone either way. Overy divides his analysis into two types of factors: the actual combat, including campaigns and tactics, and underlying factors, such as economics, resources, and leadership. Overy does more than simply rehash other historians arguments while synthesizing them into one coherent work. For example, he maintains that the Eastern Front was the most important single front in determining the outcome of the war. At Stalingrad the Soviets won not only by sheer numbers, but by tactical superiority as well. But Stalingrad did not decide the outcome of the campaign. The German lines stabilized in 1943, and had Hitler not wasted all his heavy armor at Kursk, stalemate may have ensued. Overy also
discussed the Anglo-American air war, which had little impact in 1942-43, but when the allied forces targeted the German industrial areas, they pulverized the German munitions manufacturing, so that in early 1945 Albert Speer conceded the war was over from his point of view. The sea war in the Atlantic is also examined. Germanys U-Boats nearly strangled England in the early stages, striking American and British ships at will. But American technology and ingenuity changed the tide, forcing the U-Boats to retreat after taking massive losses. All of these campaigns were close affairs, in which the allied forces made better choices than their Axis counterparts. The second main area of Overy's analysis are the underlying, macro-level factors. Overy discusses the internal problems in the Axis nations in terms of economics and resource mobilization. He argues that Germany in fact had logistical problems it did not solve, despite their reputation for engineering genuis. Furthermore, Hitlers super weapons like the V-1 and V-2, wasted valuable German resources which were better used on conventional arms. Japan was hobbled by the rift between the army and navy, which did not coordinate as well as they should have. Both Axis nations were also affected by easy victory in the early stages of the war, which prevented them from developing both new tactics and new weapons. Germanys qualitative advantage in arms was reversed by 1944, when even Soviet weaponry was more advanced. Leadership mattered as well. Overy is not a great admirer of Winston Churchill, but views him as the right man in a time of war. Hitler on the other hand, embodied poor leadership and hurt the German war effort through his stubborness and inept decision-making. Finally, Overy makes the stunning assertion that morality is a major factor in determining the outcomes of war. While the Axis populations were unsure of their cause, the Allies were certain of theirs, and because of it, fought harder and better. It is an original and powerful assertion which I hope will be examine elsewhere as well. The book focuses on the war with Germany, and the war with Japan is relegated to a minor role. One hopes that perhaps Overy will update his book to include more about Japan. Perhaps the only unsatisfactory section is the prologue, in which Overy gives his own interpretation of the origins of the war. His explanation focuses on the depression and the Axis powers quest for economic security, which they believed could only be accomplished through violence. His explanation leaves out power explanations favored by Realist thinkers. But this is really not the focus of the book. For what it deals with it is not only a definitive answer, but also well-written and engrossing to read.