

Naval War College Review

Volume 51
Number 1 *Winter*

Article 7

1998

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Recommended Citation

Morison, Samuel Eliot (1998) "Thoughts on Naval Strategy, World War II," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 51 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol51/iss1/7>

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From Our March 1968 Issue . . .

Thoughts on Naval Strategy, World War II

Samuel Eliot Morison

THE INITIAL STRATEGIC DECISION WHICH dictated our course in this war was adopted by the secret conference at Washington in March 1941 between the British and American Joint Chiefs of Staff. Rear Admirals [R.L.] Ghormley and [Richmond] Kelly Turner, and Captains Alan Kirk and DeWitt Ramsey represented the U.S. Navy. The decision there made, incorporated in the ABC-1 Staff Agreement of 27 March 1941, was this: If and when America enters the war, she will exert "the principal United States military effort" in the European theater. America will try by diplomacy to prevent war with Japan, but even if that proves impossible, operations in the Pacific will be conducted in such a manner as "to facilitate" the effort against the European Axis.

Samuel Eliot Morison (1887–1976), historian and biographer, earned his bachelor's and doctoral degrees at Harvard University. A member of the Harvard faculty for forty years as the Jonathan Trumbull Professor of American History, at one time he also held the Harmsworth Chair of American History at Oxford University.

Professor Morison was known for attempting to revive the art of historical writing by supporting research with both experience and observation. He served in World War II aboard twelve ships as an officer in the U.S. Naval Reserve, retiring in 1951 as a rear admiral; he was also a member of the Harvard Columbus Expedition, which retraced the routes of the explorer.

He won numerous awards, among them the Bancroft Prize, two Pulitzer Prizes, the Emerson-Thoreau Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. His best-known books include *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (1942), *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II* (15 vols., 1947–1962), *Strategy and Compromise* (1958), *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography* (1959), *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (1963), *The Oxford History of the American People* (1965), *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* (1965), and *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* (1971).

This article reproduced a lecture delivered at the Naval War College on 6 December 1967.

Naval War College Review, Winter 1998, Vol. LI, No. 1

The reasons behind this decision, which the Americans initiated, were: Germany had a far greater military potential than Japan; Germany already controlled almost the entire Atlantic coast of Europe and threatened the Americas; England was already fighting Germany and could be assisted immediately, whilst Japan at that time was fighting only China, which foreign aid could not reach; Germany had a dangerously superior capability for the manufacture of munitions, and, if given time, might well invent a new and unbeatable weapon—as she did, with the guided missile.

This decision governed our combined action with the British during the war, although, as Air Marshal Sir John Slessor remarked, it became “at times a bit frayed at the edges.” The terms were so general as to admit a wide difference in interpretation. Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, for instance, took them to mean that American manpower, ships, planes, and overall production should be devoted almost exclusively to the European theater until Hitler was defeated, and a purely defensive strategy adopted toward Japan from Pearl Harbor on. Admiral [Ernest J.] King [the Chief of Naval Operations], who well expressed the American point of view, insisted that, despite giving priority to the European theater, it would be fatal merely to let Japan consolidate the enormous conquests she had made in the first six months after Pearl Harbor. Japan must be kept off balance, and keeping your enemy off balance is always good strategy and sound tactics.

Owing to Admiral King's stout insistence on this concept of the ABC-1 Staff Agreement, battleships and carriers were transferred from the Atlantic to the Pacific Fleet in 1942; Japan was thrown off balance at Midway and stayed off balance; and the Pacific Fleet got its proper share of new construction. In October 1942 when the Army and Atlantic Fleet were concentrating on the massive Operation TORCH, the invasion of North Africa, and it looked as if we would have to retire from Guadalcanal, it was President Franklin D. Roosevelt who insisted that we must reinforce “the Canal” with ships, planes, and men, at any cost. That decision helped us eject the enemy from Guadalcanal in February 1943 and to begin the long slog across the Pacific which ended on board the *Missouri* in September 1945. Japan was forced into a defensive strategy for which she was ill prepared and never really pulled herself together. Her only strategy, if it can be called such, after Guadalcanal was to play for time, sell every atoll and island dear, hoping the American public would get sick of the struggle.

Before the war, air power entered into strategic plans in the Pacific comparatively little. It is true that we had already adopted the modern tactical doctrine of employing carriers. Formerly, the role of carrier-based air had been conceived of as providing an “air umbrella” for battleships. But two or three years before Pearl Harbor both we and the Japanese had discarded this concept in favor of using carrier-borne air to project striking power deep into enemy-held waters

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and territory. The battleships, instead of being the protected, became the anti-aircraft protectors to the carriers. During the first half of 1942 we used carrier groups for hit and run raids on Wake, Marcus, Tarawa, the Bismarcks, and even Tokyo. These were of slight military value, like the British raids on St. Nazaire and Dieppe, but were a welcome booster to American morale. Then, beginning in 1943, we used the carrier groups to cover amphibious operations, and to pound enemy bases like Rabaul and Truk into impotence. In the great amphibious operations of the latter part of the war, like Saipan, Leyte, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and Luzon, the fast carrier forces "ran interference" for the amphibious forces, and when the Japanese fleet came out to challenge, as it did only twice, they inflicted a smashing defeat.

Airpower also entered into the strategy of amphibious operations. It was assumed that no amphibious landing could succeed against an enemy who had air power, unless covered by land-based air. The Japanese, for instance, admitted that they had made a mistake in occupying Guadalcanal, because it lay beyond the range of their land-based bombers, and they hastened to offset the fault by constructing the Munda airfield. Similarly, in the Mediterranean, we might have done far better to have taken Sardinia rather than Sicily and landed troops around the mouth of the Tiber instead of at Salerno, but both Sardinia and Ostia lay beyond the range of our land-based air in 1943. This strategic concept could be and was discarded through escort carriers bringing air strikes right up with the landing force. Escort carriers were used in the Pacific as early as 1943, but there were just not enough to be used in the Mediterranean.

Naval gunfire support to amphibious operations was first used to good advantage in the Pacific, although the Tarawa experience showed us that we were not giving enough of it. In Europe, where the Army called the tune, naval gunfire support was limited to the hours immediately before a landing, because the Army felt that earlier bombardments of the landing area would lose tactical surprise; also, the Army distrusted the accuracy of naval gunfire and feared it would kill many of our own troops. After the Sicilian campaign the Army was converted, and it both wanted and obtained more and more of it in later operations.

Admiral King was the strategic genius of World War II. More than any other commander, British or American, he carried the entire strategic picture of the war in his head and never made any decision in one theater before considering its effect on the other theaters.

Admiral King especially showed his strategic savvy in antisubmarine warfare. At the Casablanca Conference of January 1943, owing to his insistence and that of the Royal Navy, antisubmarine warfare was given priority. For it was no use to pour men and landing craft across the Atlantic in preparation for an invasion of the Continent which could not possibly take place before mid-1943 (and

actually did not take place until June 1944) until we had subdued the U-boat and the Italian submersible. The Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy had made a good start at this; their antisubmarine tactics, which we adopted, were at first superior to ours and their escort vessels more effective; but we provided the sockdologer of antisubmarine war—the hunter-killer group built around escort carriers. It was a terribly long, difficult, exhausting struggle, but by the end of 1943 the U-boat was definitely on the defensive, and the enormous transatlantic troop lift and materiel lift in the first half of 1944 was carried out with minimal losses from enemy subs.

“Admiral King was the strategic genius of World War II. More than any other commander, British or American, he carried the entire strategic picture of the war in his head. . . .”

This leads me to the strategic concept of the “three Cs”—*convoy*, *contain*, and *conjunct*. This comes from Sir Julian Corbett’s *England in the Seven Years’ War*—a favorite book of the late Admiral Forrest Sherman, one of the great brains of our navy. Corbett said that England won the world war of 1756–1763 by naval power, as expressed by *convoy*, *contain*, and *conjunct*; and those three branches of naval activity have prevailed into our own day. First, the convoying of merchant fleets, revived in 1917 when almost too late, became a fine art in the last war and is certain to be much more highly developed in the next, when escorts will have to protect convoys from nuclear-powered submarines. *Contain* meant keeping the enemy fleet in port by close blockade, or boldly breaking in to sink it in port, as Admiral [Edward] Hawke did at Quiberon Bay [1759] and the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. The Royal Navy did just about that to the German surface fleet in both world wars. *Conjunct* was the old name for combined or joint amphibious operations. England pulled off several successful ones in the Seven Years’ War, against Havana and Guadeloupe; and so did we in the Mexican War, against Vera Cruz, and in the Civil War, against Fort Fisher. The amphibious assault, or *conjunct*, the oldest form of naval warfare, got a black eye at Gallipoli in World War I because tactics had not been revised to meet modern coast-defense cannon, but the U.S. Marine Corps revived it in the 1930s. General [John] Russell observed that in the next war we would be unable to land troops on a friendly wharf and send them to the front in boxcars marked “40 hommes, 8 chevaux.” We would have to fight our way ashore. The amphibious tactics and techniques which were developed by the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps at Culebra [Island, near Puerto Rico] and later at the San Diego and Chesapeake Bay training centers, and by the Royal Navy in England under Lord [Louis] Mountbatten, were a highly important factor in victory. Our amphibious tactics

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became so irresistible that by 1944 the Japanese defenders no longer attempted to defeat us at the beachhead but holed up and sold their lives dear. The Germans, unfortunately, didn't get the word and made the landings in Normandy a very near thing.

For our successful advance across the Pacific and in the Mediterranean, in a series of amphibious operations from Guadalcanal to Okinawa, we are indebted to the tactics, craft, and weapons worked out by Admirals Alan Kirk, Kent Hewitt, Kelly Turner, Ted Wilkinson, and Dan Barbey.

The really big strategic question of the Pacific war planners was, what route should we take to Japan? Four were possible:

- Through the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca, led by the British fleet. This became impossible because the British command in the Far East never obtained enough force to eject the Japanese from Burma.

- The short route by the Aleutians. This was ruled out by the constant foul weather in those latitudes.

- A creep up on Japan by what General [Douglas] MacArthur called the "New Guinea–Mindanao axis." This plan, which General MacArthur consistently urged the Joint Chiefs of Staff to adopt, meant concentrating the entire weight of the Pacific Fleet, Army, and amphibious forces under his command and liberating the Philippine archipelago before going on to Japan.

- The Navy's plan for an advance through the Central Pacific, taking key points in the Gilbert, Marshall, and Caroline islands en route; then to the Marianas; then to Formosa; and creating a base on the coast of China for the final onslaught on Japan.

If you will look at a map you can see that the Marianas, the Carolines, the Marshalls, and Gilberts make a series of great spider webs—"made to order for Japan," as one Japanese admiral said—to catch any unwary flies that might try to cross the Pacific. These islands and atolls had been well provided with airfields, advanced naval bases, and strong garrisons. The distances between them are so short that Japan could fleet up aircraft and naval forces at will. General MacArthur believed that it would take too long to slice through this series of spider webs; we must work around them. Hence his "New Guinea–Mindanao axis" plan, which required only one big corridor, through the Solomons and Bismarcks.

Admirals King and Nimitz, on the other hand, argued against the MacArthur plan as the sole route of advance, for four reasons: it was too roundabout; it would be subject to devastating flank attacks by aircraft and warships as long as the spider webs remained in Japanese hands; to concentrate on the southwestern route would leave the enemy free to maneuver over the greater part of the

Pacific; and if the Allies adopted a single line of advance, the enemy would naturally concentrate against it, whilst parallel offensives would force him to divide his forces and leave him guessing as to our ultimate intentions. Thus, the Navy favored a simultaneous advance over both routes, Central Pacific and the New Guinea–Mindanao axis, mopping up the spider webs as we proceeded. And that is what we did. The plan finally adopted for the defeat of Japan was a combination of numbers 3 and 4 of the MacArthur and Navy plans.

“Here is an instance where political considerations influenced strategy, and rightly so. General MacArthur’s [political] arguments were irrefutable. Happily, his strategic plan, too, was sound.”

Keeping the Japanese off balance worked; and doing it that way meant no impairment of operations in Europe, despite the squawks of Alan Brooke and others about shortages of beaching craft. Once the Bismarcks barrier was broken, we gave the enemy no rest. MacArthur’s forces pushed on to the conquest of the Admiralties, where Seeadler Harbor, Manus, became a great forward fleet base; to Hollandia, where an important airdrome was built; and along the northwest coast of New Guinea. At the same time, Admiral Nimitz’s forces drove into the Marianas—Saipan, Tinian, and Guam.

En route, as a substitute for slow, deliberate, island-to-island hopping, a new strategy of “leapfrogging” was adopted. It is still a matter of debate whether leapfrogging was thought up by General MacArthur or by Admiral Wilkinson, Admiral [William F.] Halsey’s amphibious force commander. Ted Wilkinson described this method of “hitting ’em where they ain’t”—a baseball term invented by “Wee Willie” Keeler of the Baltimore Orioles, who hung up a batting average close to .400 in 1895. In terms of oceanic warfare it meant that instead of invading every island which held a Japanese garrison, we bypassed the strongest concentrations, such as Rabaul, Truk, and Wewak; landed amphibious forces on beaches comparatively free of the enemy; built an airfield; and, using our sea supremacy to seal off the bypassed enemy garrisons, left them to “wither on the vine.” General [Hideki] Tojo, after the war was over, told General MacArthur that leapfrogging was one of the three principal factors that defeated Japan, the other two being the attrition of Japanese shipping by American submarines and the ability of our *Essex*-class carriers to operate for weeks and months without entering harbor for replenishment.

Prior to these operations in the spring and early summer of 1944, General MacArthur made a last attempt to have the entire Pacific Fleet committed to his New Guinea–Mindanao axis, and he “kicked like a steer” against our wasting time, as he thought, in the Marianas. But his pleas did not prevail, for three very

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good reasons: Admiral [Marc] Mitscher's fast carrier forces, far running and hard hitting, were not suitable for employment in the narrow waters south of the Philippines, with Japanese air bases on each side; the B-29 long-range bombers, about to come into operation, could bomb Japan itself if based at Saipan; and Saipan would make an ideal advanced base for Pacific Fleet submarines.

The disagreement between General MacArthur and Admiral King as to whether the liberation of the Philippines should precede or follow the defeat of Japan was not wholly resolved until nearly the end of 1944. The Navy wished to go directly into Formosa from Saipan, bypassing all Philippine islands north of Mindanao, and then seek a base near the mouth of the Yangtze for the final assault on Japan. Okinawa was finally substituted for the Yangtze base. Concurrently, the Navy planned to strike Japan repeatedly by sending B-29s "up the ladder of the Bonins." General MacArthur, however, insisted on prior liberation of the Philippines and using Luzon for the final, or semifinal, springboard to Japan. He made the strong emotional argument that the United States was honor-bound to liberate the Philippines, where he had been nourishing resistance forces, at the earliest possible date, and that if we failed the Filipinos no Asiatic would ever trust us. He also made the sound strategic argument that loyal Luzon, sealed off by our seapower, would be a more suitable base to gather forces for the final assault on Japan than hostile Formosa, which the Japanese could easily reinforce from the mainland. To General MacArthur it appeared as monstrous to defeat Japan before liberating the Philippines as it would have to General de Gaulle to defeat Germany before liberating France.

Here is an instance where political considerations influenced strategy, and rightly so. General MacArthur's arguments were irrefutable. Happily, his strategic plan, too, was sound. From what we learned of the defenses of Formosa after the war, it would have been a very difficult island upon which to obtain a lodgment, much less a complete conquest.

On the implementation of this strategy I need hardly dwell: the landings on Leyte, the battle for Leyte Gulf, the greatest sea battle in history; the invasion of Luzon, the capture of Iwo Jima and Okinawa; and the explosion of the two atomic bombs, which forced Japan to surrender months earlier than any of the experts expected.

But there are several controversial moves in this victorious advance which will always be discussed, such as: Was the expensive Peleliu operation necessary? After the liberation of Luzon, could not the Japanese garrisons in the Visayas and Mindanao have been left to "wither on the vine" like many other Japanese garrisons in the Pacific, instead of employing large military and naval forces to root out every one? Would it not have been better to have secured a base at the mouth of the Yangtze instead of Okinawa? Admiral [Raymond] Spruance has always thought that we should have done just that.

In discussing these points I should like to warn you against what I call the Strategic Fallacy. By the Strategic Fallacy I mean just this: the assumption that if we had done something different, the enemy would have done the same [as he actually did], and not met us with something different and possibly devastating on his part. For instance, British writers on World War II strategy have been moaning and groaning over Operation DRAGOON, the invasion of southern France, as against landing near Trieste and marching to the Danube to preempt Russia. They ignore the remarkable mobility of the German army under Marshal [Albert von] Kesselring and what he could have done to a long, thin column of troops marching along a two-lane highway through the Lubljana Gap, dominated by mountains. Another is the contention of Admiral J. J. ("Jocko") Clark, in his recent book *Carrier Admiral*, that Admiral Spruance missed the "chance of a lifetime" in the Battle of the Philippine Sea (June 1944) by not thrusting westward to engage Admiral [Jisaburo] Ozawa's carrier force at relatively close range, instead of "playing the cards close to his chest," keeping the carriers within sighting distance of Guam, and awaiting attack by the enemy aircraft. Admiral Clark believes that if Spruance had followed Mitscher's wishes and closed, our carrier-based air could have sunk the Japanese carriers instead of merely (!) wiping out their air groups in "the great Marianas turkey shoot." But how do we know that Ozawa, a very canny carrier operator, would not in that event have altered his tactics, broken through our combat air patrol and anti-aircraft fire, and badly damaged some of our carriers?

Again, suppose we had not dropped the atomic bomb, would not Japan have been strangled by the naval blockade which, thanks to our submarines, had been extended into the Sea of Japan? But the Japanese were capable, in a pinch, of producing their own food; they had some 5,000 kamikaze planes and pilots left in August 1945; and had the war gone on another six months or a year, Russia would certainly have invaded Hokkaido, and we would have had a partitioned Japan as well as a partitioned Germany.

As for the Yangtze, it is a tempting thought that if we had established a base there we would have had a million troops in China at the war's end, who might have prevented the Red [Chinese] takeover—but would the Japanese have let us dig in at the mouth of the Yangtze?

Again, could we not have brought the European war to an end a year earlier by concentrating on invading northern France in 1943, instead of allowing ourselves to be bled almost to death in Italy? Before answering that question you have to remember how difficult it was to land troops at Omaha Beach even after the German air force had been beaten almost senseless; how can we assume that an amphibious operation, opposed by a powerful Luftwaffe, would have succeeded in 1943?

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These might-have-beens are more numerous over long-past than over recent times, because it is open to any Joe College with a Ph.D. to question the wisdom of great captains from Alexander to Robert E. Lee, who are not in a position to answer back. Our Civil War histories are full of “iffy” discussions about every campaign, and numerous Joes have demonstrated how, if Jefferson Davis had had the benefit of their advice, the Confederacy would have won.

Going back even further: Commodore Perry in the Japan expedition of 1853–1854 obtained land for coaling stations in the Bonin Islands and Okinawa and intimated he could easily occupy the Ryukyus if the Okinawans objected. Several writers have pointed out how foolish the Franklin Pierce administration was to pass up that opportunity—look at the thousands of lives we lost at Iwo Jima and Okinawa! That is a good example of the Strategic Fallacy. Suppose Perry had annexed the Bonins and Okinawa. Is it conceivable that the Japanese Empire, after building a navy and defeating China and Russia, would not have fought us to get them back?

Personally, I can find no serious fault with our naval strategy in World War II in either ocean. Faults in preparation, yes: too few of everything except battleships. But the mighty efforts in training, invention, and production, and the high intelligence with which these “ministers and instruments of cruel war” were applied, make me very proud of our navy and confident that, with God’s help, it can cope with any future danger to the United States of America and the free world.



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