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Miscalculated Risks: The German Declaration of War against the United States, 1917 and 1941

Holger H. Herwig

Twice in this century, Germany opted for war with the United States on the basis of what its leaders perceived to have been “calculated risks” designed to overcome a strategic impasse on the Continent. Twice the gambles failed. The first miscalculation ended in defeat and revolution; the second in near annihilation. This paper will attempt to address several questions. What strategic rationale lay behind both of these “calculated risks”? Were the political decisions in line with national interests as well as with force structure? What cultural factors came into play? What national stereotypes surfaced en route? And what were the ultimate consequences of what I have termed the “miscalculated risks”?

Strategic Rationale

In December 1916, Adm. Henning von Holtendorff, Chief of the Admiralty Staff, presented German civilian and military leaders with a strategic alternative to break the bloody deadlock in the land war. Assuming that Great Britain possessed or controlled about 11 million tons of merchant shipping, the admiral calculated that if German submarines could sink an average of 600,000 tons per month for 6 months and if about half of the available 3 million tons of neutral shipping could be frightened off the seas, Great Britain would lose about 40 percent of her shipping, a “final and irreplaceable loss.” London would have no alternative but to accept defeat within 6 months of such an unrestricted submarine campaign.¹ Admiral von Holtendorff brought Emperor Wilhelm II on board by assuring him that American “military developments” as a result of the U-boat initiative “will come either not at all or too late to have effect.”² The admiral informed Field

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Marshal Paul von Hindenburg at about the same time that unrestricted U-warfare would definitely bring the United States into the war—"a serious matter," to be sure—but that this would have to be taken into the bargain as the Reich could not choose to ignore the weapon "that will bring victory at the right moment." In fact, the admiral assured the general that the United States would not be able effectively to reinforce the entente because its shipping would be destroyed by the U-boats. Holtzendorff recommended that the campaign commence on 1 February 1917 in order to force peace by 1 August, "even if it brings America into the war, since we have no other choice."³ Hindenburg concurred, and early in January 1917 established the army's official position on the matter: "We fully expect war with America and have made all preparations for it. The situation cannot get any worse."⁴ His alter ego, Gen. Erich Ludendorff, went so far as to term the decision a purely military one, which did not involve the politicians. Privately, Ludendorff had already informed the industrialist Hugo Stinnes: "The United States does not bother me . . . in the least; I look upon a declaration of war by the United States with indifference."⁵ He was even more blunt to Hindenburg: "I do not give a damn about America."⁶

The navy was solid in its support of Holtzendorff. Capt. Magnus von Levetzow of the operations department of the High Sea Fleet paid a personal call upon Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg 24 hours before the final decision was to be reached on 9 January in order to assure him that the U-boats could destroy 500,000 tons of shipping per month. "This I could guarantee . . . with good conscience for the fleet, and thus I did so." Levetzow informed the chancellor that unrestricted submarine warfare was certain to bring the United States into the war. "It is of no importance to the *fleet* whether America enters into the war."⁷ Vice Adm. Franz Ritter von Hipper of the Scouting Forces and Vice Adm. Wilhelm Souchon of the Mediterranean Squadron basically seconded this stance. Grand Adm. Alfred von Tirpitz, recently retired, caustically commented: "The Yankee fleet is of no consequence to us."⁸

Given this high level of official support, it is hardly surprising that the decision to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare was reached at Pless on 9 January 1917 in less than an hour. Holtzendorff pledged the navy's word that "England would be defeated within six months, at the most, before a single American had set foot on the Continent. The American danger did not frighten him."⁹ Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg, while concerned with the political ramifications of the decision, nevertheless argued that it did not constitute a desperate gamble (*Desperadotaktik*) and made it perfectly clear that "it was necessary for us to anticipate . . . the entry of America into the war."¹⁰ The emperor cast the die for war. He approved the U-boat initiative and informed the Chief of the Navy Cabinet, Adm. Georg A. von Mueller, that he "fully expected America's entry into the war" as a result.¹¹

The Pless decision was an explicit rejection of the notion of a negotiated peace—as expressed in the Reichstag's Peace Resolution of 12 December 1916—in favor of a victor's peace. Annexations and indemnities, it was felt in Berlin, alone could shore up the monarchy after 3 years of sacrifice. Germany opted for a massive assault on Britain's maritime lifelines in the firm belief that it would succeed, and that the army would be able to crush Rumania and Russia in the course of the year—before the anticipated U.S. declaration of war could bring decisive results. Michael Stuermer recently has characterized the decision as the triumph of "hubris, arrogance, and an engineer's mentality."¹²

Perhaps not surprisingly, the navy's position on war with the United States was much the same in 1941, with the important caveat that it hardly dictated policy and strategy or originated the declaration of war but merely pushed it along. Like Tirpitz and his generation of naval officers, Adm. Erich Raeder viewed Great Britain and the United States as one ethnic and economic bloc, as a sort of Anglo-Saxon consortium, wherein Great Britain this time around was the "junior" partner. As a result, the admiral and his Naval War Staff (Seekriegsleitung) from the start anticipated that any conflict between Berlin and London would once more bring Washington in on the side of "perfidious Albion." In a top secret appraisal of Adolf Hitler's overall "program" in the summer of 1938, Fleet Chief Adm. Rolf Carls envisaged German hegemony over the Continent, the reestablishment of a colonial empire in Africa, and the securing of the major Atlantic sealanes. Specifically, Carls argued, such a national policy would entail war with France and Russia as well as with "a large number of overseas states; in other words, perhaps with 1/2 or 2/3 of the entire world."¹³ The navy's blueprint for maritime power, the so-called "Z" plan of January 1939, called for the construction by about 1947-1948 of a balanced Mahanian fleet of 10 battleships, 15 pocket battleships, 4 aircraft carriers, 5 heavy and 41 light cruisers, 68 destroyers, and nearly 300 U-boats, of which 27 were to be oceangoing, that is, fit for service off the U.S. eastern seaboard.¹⁴ There can be little doubt, I would argue, that such a fleet, and the strategic thoughts that underpinned it, revolved around a hemispheric strategy that anticipated the United States as a potential adversary.¹⁵

The fall of France in 1940 accorded the navy's future planning even greater urgency. On 6 July, Vice Adm. Otto Schniewind, head of the Naval War Staff, argued that the two Anglo-Saxon maritime powers would soon combine forces against the Third Reich. "The USA will by force of necessity become Germany's enemy."¹⁶ Admiral Raeder agreed. Especially the Anglo-American "destroyers-for-bases" deal of 2 September 1940 proved to him beyond the shadow of a doubt the "creation of a corporation USA/England."¹⁷ And America's occupation of Greenland and Iceland on 7 July 1941 prompted Raeder 48 hours later to push Hitler—albeit, unsuccessfully—for a formal declaration of war on the United States.¹⁸

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor brought Raeder within reach of his goal. As he hastened to inform Hitler, "The situation in the Atlantic will be eased due to the successful intervention of Japan." Although it was painful to the admiral that Japan rather than Germany had taught "the decisive meaning of the terms maritime trade and maritime power" to his land-oriented army colleagues, Raeder nevertheless stressed "the significant easing of the burden that the Pacific brings with it."¹⁹ Even the customarily cautious Ernst von Weizsaecker at the Foreign Office agreed with Raeder's strategic analysis.²⁰

The crucial strategic decisions, of course, rested with Hitler. Perhaps remembering the course of events in 1917 and having vowed on several occasions not to repeat the mistake of a two-front war again, the Fuehrer initially had sought to avoid incidents on the high seas involving American interests. Specifically, in February 1940 he vetoed Admiral Raeder's proposal to dispatch submarines to Halifax, Canada, "due to psychological effect on America."²¹ Three months later, he likewise refused the navy permission to shell the Dutch island of Aruba in the Lesser Antilles because "oil centers belong to Standard Oil, the American corporation."²² And when the navy in August 1940 established a "war zone" around the British Isles in which it would destroy all shipping without warning, it corresponded precisely to that into which Washington had forbidden its citizens and ships to sail.²³ Hitler's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine for the second Roosevelt in the White House was straightforward: "America for Americans; Europe for Europeans."²⁴ On the other hand, by November 1940 Hitler was willing for tactical reasons to contemplate "aerial attacks against the United States" from the Azores "in order to force it to build up a large anti-aircraft defense . . . instead of helping England in this matter."²⁵ Although he returned to this stance in May 1941, Hitler eventually had to face the reality that the four-engined Me 264 bomber—appropriately dubbed the "Amerika-Bomber"—would not be on line for several years.²⁶

Only for one brief moment in July 1941, when it seemed that the Red Army might be crushed as planned under Barbarossa within 4 months, did Hitler abandon his cautious stance with regard to the United States. On 14 July, he informed the Japanese Ambassador, Hiroshi Oshima, that "he is of the opinion that we must jointly annihilate" the Americans. "The Russian war has been won."²⁷ But the euphoria dissipated in the Russian defense around Moscow, and by August the Fuehrer had returned to his original program, namely, that a future generation "will line up against America . . . I will not live to see it."²⁸ And 2 months later, he restated this theme to the Italian foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano: "A future generation will have to occupy itself with the problem Europe-America."²⁹ Returning to his erstwhile caution on the Atlantic front, the Fuehrer informed Admiral Raeder that for the time being, he "would only like to avoid that the United States declare war during the eastern campaign." After successful completion of Barbarossa,

Hitler reserved for himself "the right to take severe action against the United States."³⁰ In fact, "we cannot get around the reckoning with America." U.S. forces would have to abandon especially Iceland, "even if he [Hitler] would have to fight for years to bring this about."³¹ Then, on 7 December, Hitler heard via BBC Radio of the Japanese action at Hawaii; 4 days later, he rushed to Berlin and declared war on the United States.

The basic rationale was once again that of the calculated risk. As early as December 1940, Hitler had confided his grand strategy to Gen. Alfred Jodl: "We must solve all continental European problems by 1941, since the USA would be in position to intervene beginning in 1942."³² In other words, when a year later Hitler opted for war with the United States he did so in the hope that this would force the Republic from the start to divide its forces between an Atlantic and a Pacific theater, thereby denying it the ability to intervene decisively in either theater.³³ Given the Fuehrer's low opinion of Japanese military power, he undoubtedly feared that without an immediate German threat, the United States would be able to dispatch the Japanese quickly and then turn with full force to Europe. Put another way, Hitler wanted to buy time, to avoid the World War One nightmare of a two-front struggle throughout 1942. In fact, the Fuehrer assumed personal command of the High Command of the Army shortly after declaring war on the United States and planned a massive offensive against the Soviet Union for 1942, one that had to decide the outcome of the European conflagration since a continued war of attrition was one that Germany could not win. Success in the East in 1942 was all-decisive: Hitler referred to this campaign as his "last chance to alter destiny."³⁴ Success would enable him to create a blockade-safe "Fortress Europe" stretching from the Pyrenees to the Urals; defeat would only mean that the United States could eventually partake in the inevitable destruction of the Third Reich. And lest one think that this rationale sounds too logical, too much the calculated risk, it should be remembered that when Hitler's generals at the start of the Polish campaign had urged restraint upon him, the Fuehrer had cut them short with a brusque reminder that he had always played for high stakes throughout his career.

Political Parameters

The decision for war in 1917 was taken with precious little assessment of the economic and military potential of the probable adversary. To be sure, there were sage counsels to the contrary. Germany was, after all, a land based on law (*Rechtsstaat*), with a fairly elected parliament. It is also interesting to note that a number of Prussian conservatives stood in the forefront of those who questioned the wisdom of the U-boat offensive. Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff, the Reich's Ambassador to Washington, strongly opposed the undersea initiative, warning Berlin that it was certain to bring the United

States into the war.³⁵ His caution was deftly deflected by Wilhelm II: "In case a break with America is unavoidable, it cannot be changed! We will proceed."³⁶ The chancellor fully concurred: "I am well aware that with this step we are running in danger of . . . war with the United States. We are decided to accept this risk."³⁷ Bethmann's intimus, Kurt Riezler, however, was not as optimistic. Throughout 1917, he was nagged by the "terrible fate" that lay in store for Germany "despite all vows by the navy" for success. It remained, in the end, a "leap into the dark." Moreover, Germany faced an unsolvable dilemma: "One cannot believe the navy, but one can also not deny it faith."³⁸ Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, an army group commander, sarcastically noted: "The gentlemen of the navy are dangerous optimists."³⁹ And even Bethmann's son-in-law, Julius von Zech von Burckersroda, was beset by doubts: "May God grant that the 9th of January will not have marked the death of the German Empire."⁴⁰ Yet, in the final analysis, who could deny the navy a chance to end the war victoriously on the basis of its new technology and the impressive array of economic tables that it marshaled to guarantee triumph within 6 months? With the accuracy of historical hindsight, it is readily clear that the decision revealed hubris and the naiveté of a continental mentality that proved unable to assess accurately the industrial world power across the ocean and its potential power projection.

The political parameters in 1941 were much clearer and simpler. Once again, the entry of the United States into the European war gave it global characteristics. Once again, the decision was taken without critical and realistic appraisal of the potential adversary's economic and military capabilities. And once more, the advice of several sober diplomats and soldiers—in this case Ambassador Hans Dieckhoff in Washington as well as Generals Ludwig Beck and Georg Thomas in Berlin—was dismissed with the magical wave of the hand.⁴¹ Hitler reached the decision for war and had it rubber-stamped by the Reichstag—the world's largest male glee club, as some Berlin wags termed it. His foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, lamely sought to suggest that the diplomatic initiative still rested in Berlin: "A great power does not allow itself to be declared war on; it declares war itself."⁴² Army leaders were deeply preoccupied with the all-decisive offensive planned for 1942 in the East; air force planners had not yet recovered from the catastrophic losses during the Battle of Britain and in Russia. And who was left to contest Hitler's political and strategical rationale, namely, that victory in the East in 1942 would resolve the present impasse in the West? "If Russia drops out of the picture, America too is lost for Britain."⁴³ In any case, as Hitler had assured Benito Mussolini earlier that same year, "From America, even if it enters into the war, I do not see any great danger."⁴⁴ After all, had the Fuehrer not experienced America's "inept military" at firsthand in France in 1917-1918?

Cultural Factors

It must be stated openly that the declarations of war both in 1917 and in 1941 were taken relatively lightheartedly, in part because of varying degrees of a feeling of cultural and racial superiority over the United States. Ever since Germany and the United States had first clashed at sea over the Samoan Islands in 1889, Berlin had viewed Washington both as an upstart, a parvenu, and as a rival for the expected "liquidation" of the British Empire. Like "perfidious Albion," America was seen as a land of *Haendler* (merchants) as opposed to *Helden* (heroes), with Germans naturally constituting the latter category. Wilhelm II by and large viewed the United States as fit only for Social Democrats, and he reserved the marginal note "Americanism" for all that smacked of confusion, inefficiency, and disorder.⁴⁵ Adm. Eduard von Capelle, Tirpitz's successor as secretary of the Navy Office, assured the Reichstag on 1 February 1917 that the "example that the Americans gave us in 1898 in the Spanish-American War, where they suffered wretched fiascoes . . . gives us a sense of calm" about the unrestricted U-boat warfare.⁴⁶ For Capelle, the critical reality was that the United States could never get its troop transports past the U-boats. As late as March 1917, Capt. Karl Boy-Ed of the Admiralty Staff, a former naval attaché in Washington, reassured the Emperor's brother, Admiral Prince Heinrich, "that the Americans will never declare war" for fear of losing profits already garnered. The strong pacifist following of William Jennings Bryan, the American feminist movement, the "lack of military preparedness" that was endemic to America, and the possible domestic unrest that a declaration of war might unleash especially among German and Irish groups in the United States—all these factors seemed to suggest to Boy-Ed that Washington would stay out of the war.⁴⁷

The U.S. envoy in Berlin reported this mood accurately. James W. Gerard informed his government early in 1917 that official Germany thought Americans "a fat, rich race without sense of humor and ready to stand for anything in order to keep out of the war." In conclusion, the Ambassador opined, Imperial Germany had nothing but "contempt and hatred for America."⁴⁸ In all fairness, however, it should be pointed out that when the Admiralty Staff in late 1916 had attempted to gauge public opinion concerning a possible war with the United States, the proverbial man on the street seemed to be firmly against it.⁴⁹

Adolf Hitler, of course, added his own brand of crude racism to the stereotyped Imperial German image of the United States. His experiences on the Western front in the First World War had convinced him that American forces were of inferior quality, hardly up to the high standards of the Wehrmacht. "In any case, how could troops who had the dollar as their God be expected to fight to the utmost of their ability?"⁵⁰ Overall, the Fuehrer viewed America as a nation "half Judaized, the other half Negrified." He

described his feelings toward "Americanism" as being "feelings of hatred and deep repugnance."⁵¹ Surely, the European racial stock would not succumb to the crass materialism of the New World. "The future will not belong to the ridiculous, half-cultivated America, but to the resurrected Europe." History and race militated against American victory. "The older culture and the superior intellectual level of Europe would, in the end, emerge victorious."⁵² And on 11 December 1941, Hitler poured out a full measure of the venom that he had reserved for Franklin D. Roosevelt: "mentally insane and paralytic like Wilson," "an old Free Mason," "a man filled with Christian hypocrisy," "the tool of American Jews."⁵³

It would be tedious to continue any further in this vein. Suffice it to say that the German admirals were not immune to racial stereotypes, be they of the recent National Socialist or of the older Wilhelmian genre. In November 1941, they lamented that with the U.S. decision to withdraw its gunboats from China, "the last ships of the white race disappear from the Yangtze" River.⁵⁴ And when the Japanese on 17 December 1941 proposed dividing the world at a line running north to south from the Kara Sea through Omsk and Tashkent on down to Bombay (70 degrees longitude), Vice Adm. Kurt Fricke, the new head of the Naval War Staff, bitterly complained that this would extend "the yellow sphere of influence" far beyond all reasonable limits.⁵⁵ Adm. Karl Doenitz's sycophantic National Socialist rantings of the years 1943 to 1945 need hardly be repeated in lurid detail to make the point. Last but not least, it is interesting to note that public opinion in 1941, as in 1917, was not as optimistic about war with the United States as were Germany's leaders.⁵⁶

Force Structure and Policy

Germany's leaders gambled the Reich's future upon an incredibly small force in January 1917. The High Sea Fleet throughout the war remained primarily a classic fleet-in-being, bottled up in the North Sea by the Grand Fleet, the Dover Patrol, and, in 1918, the Scotland-Norway mine barrage. The submarine force on 1 February consisted of about 100 units, of which 38 were at station.⁵⁷ In addition, Germany possessed only six merchant submarines—the *Deutschland* class—capable of operating in American waters; two long-range U-cruisers would augment that force the following year. The Admiralty Staff conceded that, at best, it could maintain one U-cruiser and two armed merchant submarines in the waters off Boston, New York, and Chesapeake Bay in 1918! And since Berlin throughout 1917 clung to the fiction that it was not officially at war with the United States, it is hardly surprising that Emperor, chancellor, and foreign secretary were united in their opposition against operations off the eastern seaboard of the United States.⁵⁸ Nor did the U-boat forces increase appreciably over the years—partly due to labor and raw materials shortages, lack of building yards, and

Admiral von Capelle's fears that this "war of lieutenants" would compromise future promotion and service in the fleet. In fact, twice in 1917 Tirpitz's successor considered creating a special "U-boat cemetery" after the war in order to get rid of these nasty craft.⁵⁹ In the final analysis, Germany undertook but seven raids into American waters between June and November 1918, bagging a meagre 110,000 tons of shipping. Above all, not a single troop transport bound for Europe was ever destroyed by the U-boats.

The naval picture was equally bleak in 1941. With regard to the surface fleet, it was decided in the same month that Hitler declared war on the United States that the *Tirpitz* would be relocated in Norway; the *Gneisenau*, *Scharnhorst* and *Prinz Eugen* would not be fit for sea duty until late March 1942, at the earliest. Alone the *Scheer* was ready for service in the Atlantic or Indian Ocean. No aircraft carrier had been completed; nor had a four-engined bomber for deployment against America come on line. As a result, any actions to be undertaken against the United States after 11 December would have to rest with the U-boats once more. On 27 December 1941, the navy estimated that it possessed 98 submarines overall, of which 38 were at station. Three were dispatched at once to "US coast," with an equal number to follow in the near future.⁶⁰ Hitler ordered immediate assaults upon American shipping under the code name *Paukenschlag* (drum roll)—a "somewhat histrionic name," according to Stephen Roskill—and success was at hand from the start: 470,000 tons of shipping were destroyed in American waters in February 1942, with an additional 1 million tons in March and April. Appalling American lack of preparedness and downright negligence—there existed no coastal blackout; lighted channel markers guided the U-boats into U.S. ports; merchant ships continued unrestricted use of wireless; and convoy was only partially undertaken—more than German brilliance accounted for this "merry massacre," as Samuel Eliot Morison rightly termed it.⁶¹

Neither in 1917 nor in 1941 did Germany possess anywhere near sufficient forces, even in submarines, to be able to take the war to America. And in neither case was a surface fleet—nor, for that matter, airpower—strong enough to challenge for control of the Atlantic arteries. In both cases, "miscalculated risks" were accepted for the short-term solution of a strategic impasse on land, without thinking through the long-term implications of such actions.

Consequences

The immediate consequence of Germany's decision for unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 was fatal: America declared war on the Reich on 6 April and thereby assured eventual Allied victory. Undoubtedly encouraged by the Navy's initiative, Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann was emboldened in January 1917 to make his ill-timed and ill-advised offer to

Mexico for return of its former territories in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in return for a Mexican (and Japanese!) declaration of war on the United States.⁶² And when the admirals' "guaranteed" victory did not materialize in the fall of 1917, General Ludendorff opted for yet another "calculated risk"—a desperate gamble to snatch victory on the Western front before U.S. forces could arrive in large numbers. It was too late. The million men under Gen. John J. Pershing in March and April 1918 effectively plugged the gaps in the Allied lines created during Operation Michael. At sea, the U.S. Navy supplied 27 percent of convoy escort as well as 12 percent of the battleship strength of the Grand Fleet, and maintained 368 ships on 23 stations in Europe.⁶³ It was a creditable effort for a power so easily dismissed as being of no consequence by German planners just the previous year. Above all, the moral impact of America's entry into the war—coming right about the time when Germany was on the verge of victory in the East—cannot be overestimated.

In 1941, the German declaration of war sealed its fate. Massive American aid continued to Britain and was extended immediately to the Soviet Union. Ironically, Hitler had been proved quite accurate in his assessment of the situation to General Oshima just after the declaration of war, namely, that he did "not know yet" how "one defeats the USA."⁶⁴ The failure of the summer offensive in the East in 1942, which Hitler had termed his "last chance to alter destiny," made it fully clear, as he confided to General Jodl, that "victory could no longer be realized."⁶⁵ Only the final *Goetterdaemmerung* remained. Too late, the Fuehrer had to admit: "The war with America is a tragedy, illogical, devoid of fundamental reality."⁶⁶ Closer examination of the consequences of that decision reached so easily on 11 December 1941 might have suggested this before the die were cast.

Finally, there are broader lessons of strategic thought to be gleaned from this brief overview of Germany's two "miscalculated risks" in the 20th century. More than two thousand years ago, Thucydides warned that a nation needed to avoid hubris in its strategic calculations. This the Germans failed to do. They neither knew their enemies well nor judged them rationally and intelligently. In 1917 and 1941, German planners underestimated first the American "parvenus" and then the Slavic "*Untermenschen*" with regard to their adeptness at modern industrial warfare where their vital interests were concerned. In war and diplomacy, all available options must be weighed carefully and cultural stereotypes avoided. The decisions for war in 1917 and 1941 were made in haste and without thorough airing. Nor was Wilhelm's disdain of what he termed "Americanism" or Hitler's disgust of America's "degenerate mixed race" pertinent to the issue at hand. The hubris of German policy and the accompanying failures could have been avoided had the consequences of major actions been thought through the initial stages, and plans formulated upon Clausewitzian postulates such as interaction and

escalation; it never seems to have been recognized in Berlin that in almost all cases, the potential adversary will not remain a lifeless body, but will react.

The cardinal principle of listening to intelligent counsel from knowledgeable observers familiar with the potential adversary was ignored. Neither Ambassador von Bernstorff in 1917 nor Ambassador Dieckhoff in 1941 were given fair hearings. Had their observations been taken into account, the simplistic use of short-term historical parallels could have been avoided. The U.S. forces of 1917 were not those of the Spanish-American War, and the U.S. ground, air, and naval forces of 1941-45 were not those of the Great War. In 1917, the Germans sought "guaranteed" victory through a new technology—without having ascertained whether sufficient U-boats were available to meet high expectations; furthermore, a 6-month time frame for certain victory was potentially counterproductive as it carried with it the seeds of calamity once that period expired without the predicted result. Strategy and force structure were simply not coordinated in the initial phase, nor reassessed thereafter. Neither in 1917 nor in 1941 did success in Europe on land lie with submarine warfare in the Atlantic. Nor had the mood of the nation been included in either instance. In 1917 and again in 1941, German popular opinion, as measured by the government, seemed more acutely aware of the potential danger inherent in a declaration of war on the United States than did government leaders, who flippantly threw caution to the wind.

Last but not least, the strategic axiom of tackling that which is possible first was never used to define the parameters of policy and strategy. In June 1942, Gen. Franz Halder noted with regard to Germany's admirals: "These people dream in continents."⁶⁷ His prescient observation could well stand as an epitaph for most German planners of the 20th century. More than a hundred years ago, Otto von Bismarck showed that with regard to war and diplomacy, it is best to let *Realpolitik* rather than *Idealpolitik* guide the nation. It was a lesson that later German planners failed to heed.

Notes

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2. Karl E. Birnbaum, *Peace Moves and U-Boat Warfare: A Study of Imperial Germany's Policy Toward the United States April 18, 1916—January 9, 1917* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1958), pp. 317-318.

3. Germany, Foreign Office, *Der Weltkrieg* No. 18 *geheim*, Krieg, 1914. "Unterseebooten Krieg gegen England und andere feindliche Staaten." Records of the German Foreign Office received by the Department of State from St. Antony's College, reel 8, frame 52/2. Holtzendorff to Hindenburg, 22 December 1916. Hereafter, St. Antony's Papers.

4. Holger H. Herwig, *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889-1941* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 120.

5. Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter BA-MA), Nachlass Vanselow, F 7162. Ludendorff to Stinnes, 15 September 1916; see also, Erich Ludendorff, *Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung ueber ihre Tuetigkeit, 1916/18* (Berlin: Mittler, 1922), p. 21.

6. Karl-Heinz Janssen, *Die graue Exzellenz. Zwischen Staatsraeson und Vasallentreue. Aus den Papieren des kaiserlichen Gesandten Karl Georg von Treutler* (Frankfurt, Berlin: Propyläen, 1971), p. 210.

7. BA-MA, Nachlass Levetzow, N 239, box 15, v. 2. Notes on his conversation with Bethmann on 8 January 1917.
8. BA-MA, Nachlass Tirpitz, N 253, v. 221. Tirpitz to the Prussian Ambassador at Karlsruhe (Eisendecker), 13 July 1916.
9. For an account of the Pless conference, see Rudolf von Valentini, *Kaiser und Kabinettschef. Nach eigenen Aufzeichnungen und dem Briefwechsel des Wirklichen Geheimen Rats Rudolf v. Valentini* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1931), p. 145.
10. Arno Spindler, *Wie es zu dem Entschluss zum uneingeschraenkten U-Boots-Krieg 1917 gekommen ist* (Goettingen: Mittler, n.d.), pp. 37-43; and Adolphe Laurens, *Histoire de la guerre sous-marine allemande (1914-1918)* (Paris: Soc. d'editions geographiques, maritimes, et coloniales, 1930), p. 244.
11. See Walter Goerlitz, ed., *Regierte der Kaiser? Kriegstagebuecher, Aufzeichnungen und Briefe des Chefs des Marine-Kabinetts Admiral Georg Alexander von Mueller 1914-1918* (Goettingen: Musterschmidt, 1959), pp. 249, 251.
12. Michael Stuermer, *Das ruhelose Reich. Deutschland 1866-1918* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1983), pp. 387-388.
13. Michael Salewski, *Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung 1935-1945* (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe, 1970), v. 1, p. 55; Hermann von Lindenheim, "Wie Hitler versuchte, den Eintritt der USA in den Zweiten Weltkrieg zu verhindern," *Wehrforschung*, March 1972, p. 87; and International Military Tribunal, *Trial of Major War Criminals*, v. 34 (Nuernberg: 1949), p. 190.
14. Salewski, p. 58; Friedrich Ruge, *Der Seekrieg 1939-1945* (Stuttgart: Koehler, 1956), p. 29.
15. See Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie. Politik und Kriegfuehrung 1940-1941* (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe, 1965), pp. 35, 147; Just Duffler, *Weimar, Hitler und die Marine. Reichspolitik und Flottenbau 1920-1939* (Duesseldorf: Droste, 1973), p. 497.
16. Gerhard Wagner, ed., *Lagevortraege des Oberbefehlshabers der Kriegsmarine vor Hitler 1939-1945* (Munich: J.F. Lehmanns, 1972), p. 113. Schniewind proudly spoke of a "rebirth of the battleship" for the future fleet.
17. BA-MA, PG 32184 Case GE 239. I. SKL. Teil C VII, "Ueberlegungen des Chefs der SKL und Niederschriften ueber Vortraege und Besprechungen beim Fuehrer, September 1939—Dezember 1940," pp. 207-209.
18. Salewski, p. 494.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 511.
20. Leonidas E. Hill, ed., *Die Weizsaecker Papiere 1933-1950* (Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna: Propyläen, 1974), p. 280. Entry for 13 December 1941, suggesting that the action at Hawaii "will relieve us and perhaps later on even open up new perspectives."
21. BA-MA, PG 32184 Case GE 239. I. SKL. Teil C. VII, 99. Decision of 23 February 1940.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147. Decision of 21 May 1940.
23. J. Rohwer and G. Huemmelchen, *Chronik des Seekrieges 1939-1945* (Oldenburg, Hamburg: Stalling, 1968), p. 66.
24. Andreas Hillgruber, "Der Faktor Amerika in Hitlers Strategie 1938-1941," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Beilage zur Wochenzeitung "Das Parlament"*, 11 May 1966, p. 10.
25. BA-MA, PG 31748 Case GE 277. I. SKL. Teil Ca, "Grundlegende Fragen der Kriegfuehrung, Mai 1939—November 1943," p. 370.
26. BA-MA, PG 32185 Case GE 240. I. SKL. Teil C VII, "Niederschriften . . . beim Fuehrer, Januar 1941—Dezember 1941," p. 103. Dated 22 May 1941.
27. Andreas Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmaenner und Diplomaten bei Hitler. Vertrauliche Aufzeichnungen ueber Unterredungen mit Vertretern des Auslandes 1939-1941* (Munich: Bernard & Graefe, 1969), pp. 301-302; see also, Olaf Groehler, *Geschichte des Luftkrieges 1910 bis 1970* (East Berlin: Militaerverlag der DDR, 1975).
28. Werner Jochmann, ed., *Adolf Hitler. Monologe im Fuehrer-hauptquartier 1941-1944* (Hamburg: A. Knaus, 1980), p. 56.
29. Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmaenner und Diplomaten*, pp. 319-320. Dated 25 October 1941.
30. BA-MA, PG 32185 Case GE 240. I. SKL. Teil C VII, pp. 205-209.
31. Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmaenner und Diplomaten*, pp. 299, 303.
32. Hillgruber, "Der Faktor Amerika," p. 5; and Lindenheim, p. 91. Statement 12 December 1940.
33. See especially Hillgruber, "Der Faktor Amerika," pp. 1-21; Holger H. Herwig, "Prelude to *Wehrblitzkrieg*: Germany's Naval Policy toward the United States of America, 1939-41," *Journal of Modern History*, December 1971, pp. 649-668; and, at a different level, Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Germany's Declaration of War on the United States: A New Look," in Weinberg, ed., *World in the Balance: Behind the Scenes of World War II* (Hannover, London: University Press of New England, 1981), pp. 75-95.
34. Hillgruber, "Der Faktor Amerika," p. 21.
35. St. Antony's Papers, reel 8, frame 104. Bernstorff to Bethmann Hollweg, 14 January 1917.
36. *Ibid.*, frames 206-208. Bethmann to Bernstorff, 16 January 1917.
37. *Ibid.*, frame 189. The Emperor's notes on Lersner to Foreign Office, 16 January 1917.
38. Karl Dietrich Erdmann, ed., *Kurt Riezler. Tagebuecher, Aufsaeetze, Dokumente* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), pp. 395, 402, 422.

39. Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, *Mein Kriegstagebuch* (Munich: Deutscher Nationalverlag, 1929), v. 2, p. 248. Dated 20 August 1917.
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41. See Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, R 43 II. Reichskanzlei 1468. Dieckhoff to Foreign Office, 2 February and 22 March 1938; Lindenheim, p. 87.
42. Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Hitler's Image of the United States," *American Historical Review*, July 1964, p. 1017. Ernst von Weizsäcker detected the same sense of purpose at the Foreign Office; Hill, ed., p. 280. Entry for 10 December 1941.
43. Weinberg, "Hitler's Image," p. 1014.
44. Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, 1939-1945: *Der Zweite Weltkrieg in Chronik und Dokumenten* (Darmstadt: Wehr und Wissen Verlagsgesellschaft, 1959), p. 190.
45. See Herwig, *Politics of Frustration*, pp. 33-34, 64-65, 68, 256, 258.
46. St. Antony's Papers, reel 14, frame 162. Capelle before the Reichstag's Budget Commission, 1 February 1917.
47. BA-MA, F 1139 Befehlshaber der Ostseestreitkräfte, Heft 1, Politisches, 83-90. Boy-Ed to Prince Heinrich, 17 March 1917. See also BA-MA, Nachlass Levetzow, N 239, box 3, v. 6, for similar sentiments.
48. David F. Trask, *Captains & Cabinets: Anglo-American Naval Relations, 1917-1918* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972), p. 44. Dated 31 January 1917.
49. BA-MA, Nachlass Levetzow, N 239, box 3, v. 4. Boy-Ed to Holtzendorff, 26 June 1916.
50. Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten*, pp. 337-339; on the other hand, Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance 1939-1945* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1982), might agree!
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53. Max Domarus, ed., *Hitlers Reden und Proklamationen* (Wuerzburg: Verlagsdruckerei Schmidt, 1963), v. 4, pp. 1794-1811.
54. BA-MA, PG 32047 Case 127. Kriegstagebuch Seekriegsleitung, I. Abteilung, Teil A., pp. 373, 442. Entries for 21 and 25 November 1941.
55. BA-MA, PG 32220-21 Case 272. I. SKL. Teil C XV. Fricke's memorandum of 17 December 1941.
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58. St. Antony's Papers, reel 12, frames 35d-35g, memorandum on U-war off the U.S. coast, 14 July 1917; *ibid.*, reel 14, frame 129, Grnenu to Foreign Office, 18 July 1918, frames 214-224, discussion of a possible blockade, 29 July 1918, and frame 1, Hertling to Foreign Office, 1 August 1918.
59. See Herwig, "Luxury" Fleet, p. 224.
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