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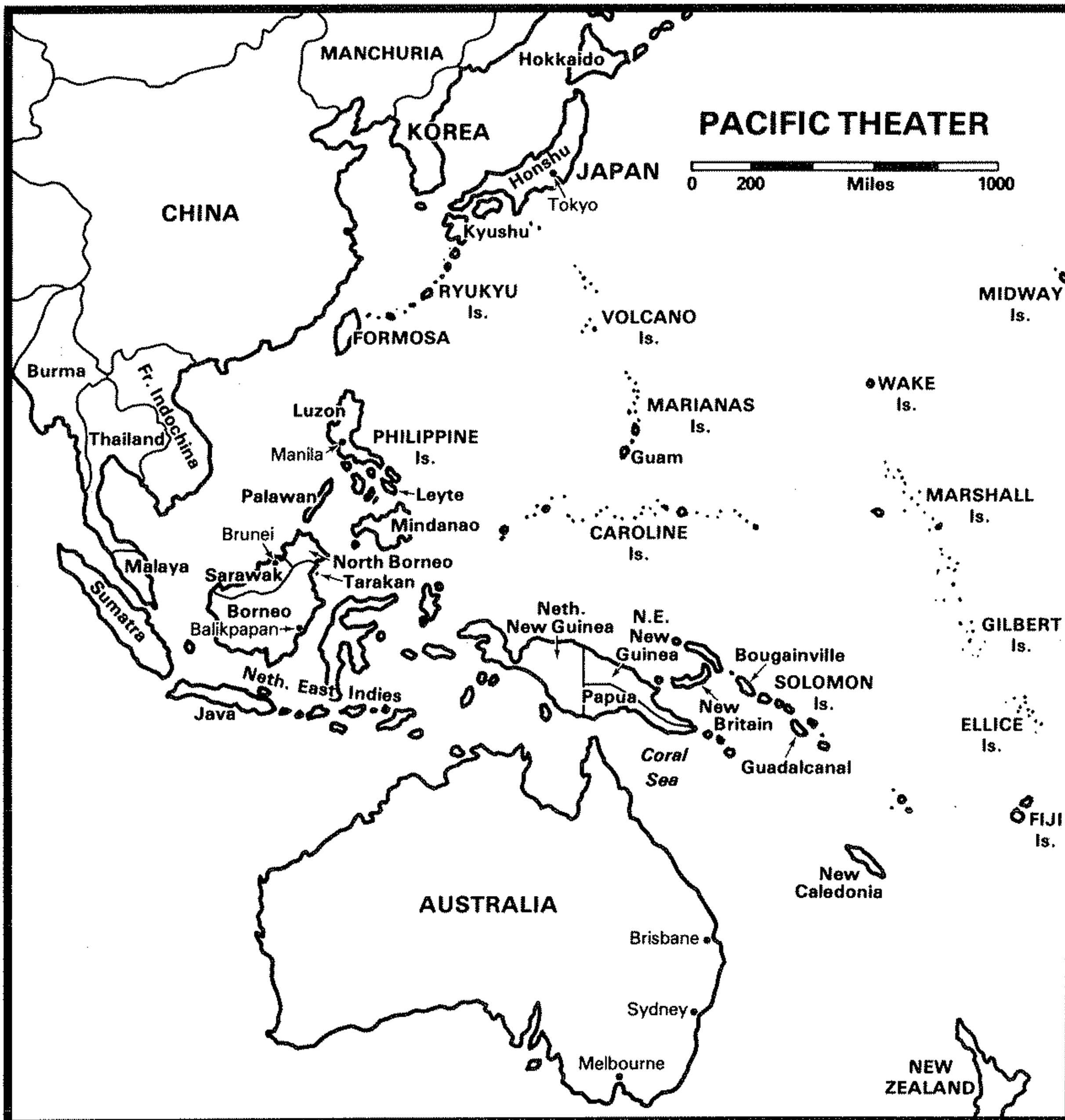
MacARTHUR'S LAPSES FROM AN ENVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN 1945

by

D. CLAYTON JAMES

The strategy which General of the Army Douglas MacArthur adopted in 1945 in the southwest Pacific campaign has received scant attention from historians. Symbolic of this neglect is the omission in the American Army's series on the Pacific conflict of a sequel to Louis Morton's *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*, whose coverage ends in late 1943. The treatment of MacArthur's late-war strategy in most college-level textbooks on recent American or military history ranges from no mention whatsoever to propagation of a host of myths. This essay challenges three of those myths still widely believed: (1) That after the Joint Chiefs of Staff finally authorized an invasion of Luzon, the directive was subsequently implemented by MacArthur in the manner envisioned by his superiors; (2) that having gained credit, often justifiable, for brilliant moves bypassing strong Japanese forces, MacArthur continued to the war's end his policy of bypassing and thus neutralizing the enemy forces in his theater's rear areas, rather than attacking them; and (3) that during the final weeks preceding Japan's capitulation, the next major invasion that MacArthur had in mind was Operation Olympic, the landing on Japan's southernmost island, Kyushu, which was set for November 1945.[1]

Although MacArthur had proclaimed upon arriving in Australia in March 1942 that he would return to liberate the Philippines, the Joint Chiefs had not given much thought then to a long-range plan to defeat Japan, much less to a counteroffensive led by him. Indeed, the development of a plan that would most directly and rapidly bring about Japan's surrender did not become a seriously debated issue until well into 1943 when the Allied buildup in the Pacific warranted such consideration. The Joint Chiefs were flexible in their thinking at first and weighed a wide assortment of strategic alternatives for dealing with Japan. In no small measure because of pressures from MacArthur and Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King to give priority to the axis of advance each favored—respectively, the New Guinea-Philippines axis



from the south and the central Pacific route from the east—the Joint Chiefs gradually narrowed down the alternatives to the seizure of either Luzon or Formosa as prerequisite to an invasion of Japan.

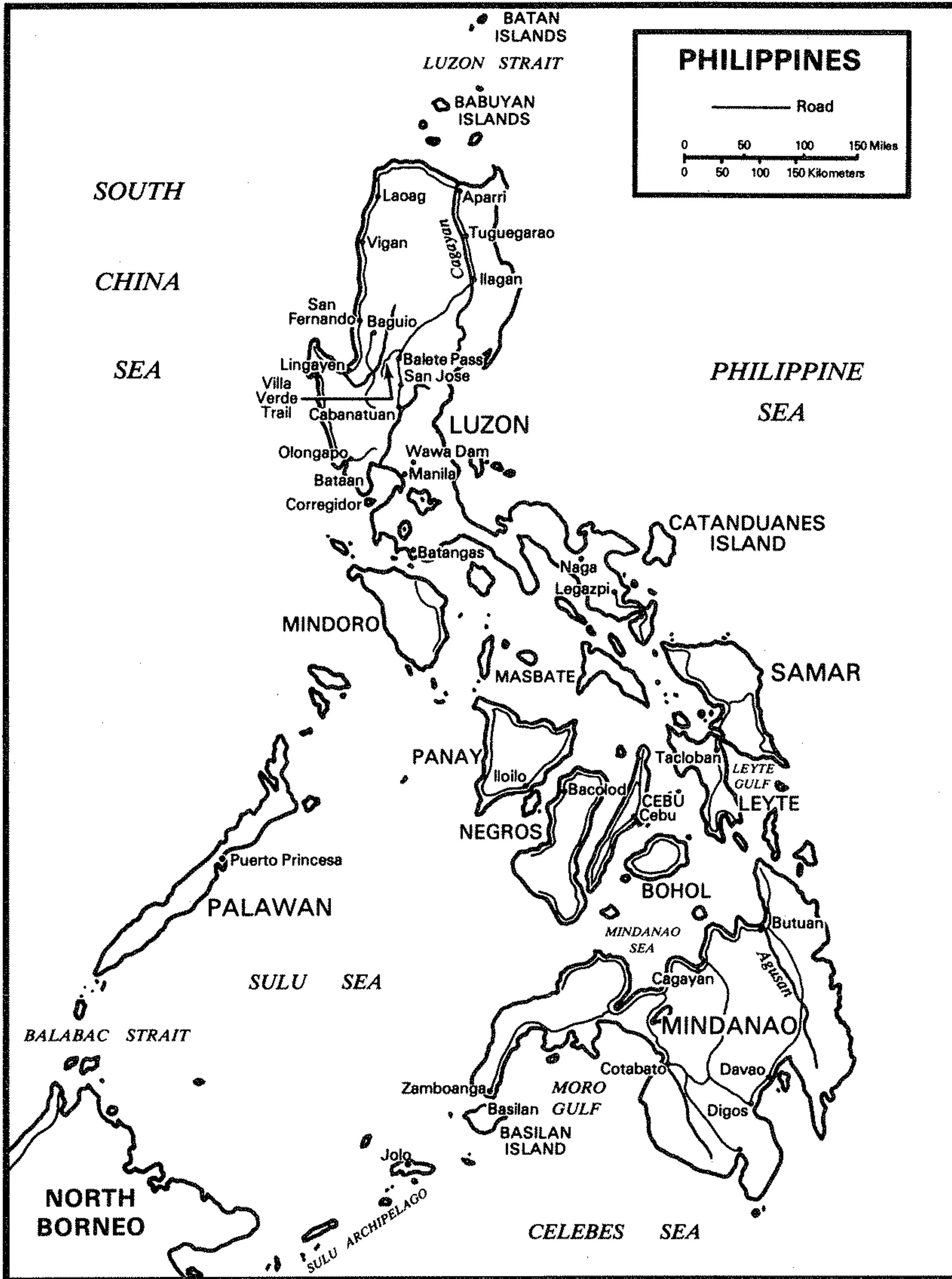
King had long objected to continuing a major offensive via the southwest Pacific axis, and by late spring 1944 Generals George C. Marshall and Henry H. Arnold were also increasingly critical of the liabilities of an attack on Luzon. Marshall felt that MacArthur's Luzon plan would be "the slow way" and "would take a very much longer time than to make the cut across" from the Marianas to Formosa.[2] MacArthur argued that the Formosa plan was militarily "unsound" whereas political, humanitarian, and strategic considerations "demand the reoccupation of the Philippines."[3] Through studies extending over a year and a half the

Joint Chiefs and their committees had been steadfastly concerned with determining which plan would be the most logistically feasible, the most economical in manpower and materiel losses, and the most strategically decisive in producing the fall of Japan. They arrived at the decision in favor of MacArthur's proposal with reluctance and trepidation. By late September 1944, Admirals King, Chester W. Nimitz, and their planners admitted that the Formosa invasion was not practical in the near future due to insurmountable logistical difficulties. On 3 October the Joint Chiefs issued a directive authorizing the Luzon operation.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, while MacArthur's armies were fighting on Leyte and Luzon, the Joint Chiefs assured their British counterparts that they had no intention of committing United States forces to reconquer the rest of the Philippines (such as Mindanao, Panay, Negros, Palawan, Bohol, and Cebu) and the Netherlands East Indies. For several months, however, MacArthur had been working on his Victor Plan for the seizure of the remainder of the Philippines and his Oboe Plan for the invasion of the East Indies rather than leave the two large island groupings to wilt on the vine. In fact, he had decided as early as September 1944 to send Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberger's Eighth Army to seize the rest of the Philippines as soon as General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army was securely entrenched on Luzon. A few weeks after the Lingayen beachhead on Luzon was established in January 1945, and while the Sixth Army was suffering severe losses in battles for Manila and other strong points on Luzon, MacArthur unleashed the Eighth Army in the reconquest of the Philippines to the south. By the time the Joint Chiefs changed their minds and issued a directive in April authorizing operations in the Philippines below Luzon, MacArthur's forces already had undertaken eight of the eleven major amphibious operations which proved necessary to secure that territory. Astoundingly, the Joint Chiefs resigned themselves to MacArthur's fait accompli and raised no objections to the eight operations conducted prior to their directive. Pondering the "mystery how and whence . . . MacArthur derived his authority to use United States forces to liberate one Philippine island after another" at a time when he "had no specific directive for anything subsequent to Luzon," Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, the distinguished naval historian, concludes that "the J.C.S. simply permitted MacArthur to do as he pleased, up to a point."[4]

A variety of factors underlay MacArthur's motivation in attacking the previously bypassed Philippine islands. The Philippine political faction of Manuel Roxas, which had MacArthur's backing, was eager to have the areas south of Luzon liberated before the Philippine Congress convened in June, because political sentiments there were predominantly against President Sergio Osmeña. As it turned out, the freed southern congressmen helped the Roxas faction to attain majorities in the Philippine Senate and House. Also, MacArthur felt a strong duty to free the entire archipelago lest the bypassed enemy troops turn with vengeance upon hapless American prisoners and Filipinos, as had occurred in the Palawan massacre of December 1944.[5] Moreover, use of the Eighth Army, Seventh Fleet, and Thirteenth Air Force in these operations blocked their transfer by the Joint Chiefs to Nimitz's theater in the central Pacific, a possibility had they remained idle for long. In addition, MacArthur wanted the central and southern Philippines in order to establish air bases to cover his projected Borneo operations and to train and stage the expected huge influx of units from Europe for the invasion of Japan.

MacArthur's dispatch of the Eighth Army to the Japanese-held Philippine islands south of Luzon and his transfer there of three Sixth Army divisions had a crippling impact on Luzon operations. Especially in the hard-fought battles at Wawa Dam, Villa Verde Trail, and Balete Pass, the lack of adequate troops and firepower was sorely felt by the Sixth Army. Operating against perhaps the ablest Japanese ground commander, General Yamashita, and the largest enemy army that American soldiers met during the Pacific


BATAN ISLANDS
LUZON STRAIT
BABUYAN ISLANDS
PHILIPPINES
Road
0 50 100 150 Miles
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SOUTH CHINA SEA
Laoag
Aparri
Tuguegarao
Vigan
Cagayan
Ilagan
San Fernando
Baguio
Lingayen
Balete Pass
San Jose
Villa Verde Trail
Cabanatuan
LUZON
PHILIPPINE SEA
Olongapo
Wawa Dam
Manila
Bataan
Corregidor
CATANDUANES ISLAND
Batangas
Naga
Legazpi
MINDORO
MASBATE
SAMAR
PANAY
Iloilo
Tacloban
LEYTE GULF
Bacolod
CEBU
Cebu
LEYTE
NEGROS
Puerto Princesa
BOHOL
PALAWAN
Butuan
MINDANAO SEA
Agusan
Cagayan
SULU SEA
MINDANAO
BALABAC STRAIT
Cotabato
Davao
Zamboanga
MORO GULF
Basilan
Digos
BASILAN ISLAND
Jolo
NORTH BORNEO
SULU ARCHIPELAGO
CELEBES SEA

war, the Sixth Army found itself locked in a costly, drawn-out, and frustrating campaign on Luzon, with Yamashita cornered but still fighting with over 50,000 troops when the war ended. MacArthur would have been wiser to have used the Eighth Army primarily to expedite the reconquest of Luzon, for few bases set up in the central and southern islands proved of value later and the beleaguered enemy garrisons south of Luzon were so isolated that they posed no threat to MacArthur's lines of communication or his future moves. The United States Army's official history states frankly that, for the most part, the southern campaigns "had no strategic importance" but "were designed for the purpose of liberating Filipinos, reestablishing lawful government, and destroying Japanese forces."[6] This was fortunately not general knowledge to the hard-pressed men of the Sixth Army during their bloody campaign on Luzon.

Continuing in the spring of 1945 to send his forces on tangents south of Luzon, MacArthur disregarded advice from Washington planners and the Australian high command in embarking on an invasion of Borneo. In early 1944 the Joint Chiefs had ordered staff studies on a possible seizure of petroleum-rich Borneo, but the idea was dropped because the undertaking would have drained MacArthur's resources, so powerful was the enemy's estimated strength in the Greater Sundas. Yet MacArthur offered a plan to the Joint Chiefs in February 1945 for an invasion of North Borneo by the Australian I Corps. He maintained that "90 days after the beginning of such an expedition it would be possible to begin operations for the production of crude oil,"[7] but the Army-Navy Petroleum Board in Washington countered that it would take a year or more. Nevertheless, at Yalta later that month the Combined Chiefs authorized him to invade "British Borneo," that is, Sarawak, Brunei, and North Borneo, if an invasion of Japan did not become possible before the end of 1945. Prime Minister John Curtin and General Thomas Blamey of Australia protested his proposed use of their nation's forces in Borneo, criticizing mainly the command arrangement and strategic wisdom of the plan. MacArthur, however, finally won them to a grudging acceptance of his scheme.

In March he came forth with his six-phase Oboe Plan, calling for the invasions, in order, of Dutch Borneo, Java, the rest of the Netherlands East Indies, and finally British Borneo. Interestingly, though his superiors had told him to go ahead with contingency plans for only an attack on British Borneo, his Oboe Plan relegated it to last among the East Indies operations he intended to stage. Without much enthusiasm for the idea, the Joints Chiefs in April approved a revised version of Oboe that included only landings at Tarakan (May), Brunei Bay (June), and Balikpapan (July). These operations along the eastern and western coasts of Borneo were successfully executed, with MacArthur providing strong American air, naval, and logistical support for the Australian I Corps.

While the American Eighth Army and the Australian I Corps were following MacArthur's southward tangents in 1945, the Australian First Army was committed to annihilating the bypassed enemy forces in Northeast New Guinea, Bougainville, and New Britain. MacArthur had informed Blamey in July 1944 that soon his First Army was to "assume the responsibility for the

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continued neutralization of the enemy in Australian and British territory and mandates in the [Southwest Pacific Area]."[8] Upon the arrival of the Australians that autumn, six American divisions were released to join the operations in the Philippines. Until March 1945 the First Army generally confined its role to passively guarding perimeters around the remaining enemy units in the theater's rear areas. But at a meeting with MacArthur in Manila that month, Blamey learned of the plans for the Eighth Army in the Philippines south of Luzon, which the Australian commander concluded were based on "political rather than military grounds." Forthwith Blamey began to press for, and obtained, authorization for his First Army to go on the offensive. He shrewdly argued his case, citing the Eighth Army's action as precedent: "Just as it is necessary to destroy the Japanese in the Philippines, so it is necessary that we should destroy the enemy in Australian territories where the conditions are favourable for such action and so liberate the natives from Japanese domination."[9]

Australian casualties from combat and diseases were alarmingly heavy as Blamey's troops attacked the trapped enemy forces in the dense jungles of New Guinea, Bougainville, and New Britain during the ensuing months. Why MacArthur, who had taken such pride in the lives saved earlier by bypassing these Japanese units, reversed himself and allowed Blamey to nullify the strategic value of the previous envelopments is not fully known, but probably was related to pressure on him from the Australian Government and public to either use the First Army in combat or send it home. The Australian Army's official chronicle is blunt in judging MacArthur's "complex of decisions, some contradictory and some illogical," in 1945 which resulted in the Australian I Corps, "well equipped and with powerful air and naval support, . . . fighting battles of doubtful value in Borneo," while units of the First Army in the regions to the east "were fighting long and bitter campaigns (whose value was doubted) in which they were short of air and naval support, and suffered . . . a poverty of ships and landing craft."[10]

The generous assistance that MacArthur provided the Australians in Borneo was directly related to his scheme to develop bases there for an invasion of Java—a plan that he had never dismissed despite its rejection in the first Oboe Plan he had presented to the Joint Chiefs. General Eichelberger, Eighth Army commander, said that MacArthur confided to him in late spring that "if the Navy idea of piddling around for a long time before doing anything against the Japanese homeland carries through, he still wants me to go into Java rather than have my troops sit around and stagnate."[11] Based on the evidence of similar comments in interviews with other officers close to MacArthur, together with the still tentative and confused preparations for Operation Olympic (Kyushu invasion) by early August as well as MacArthur's previous record of success in persuading or ignoring the Joint Chiefs, it is highly probable that he would have sent the Eighth Army into Java about September. In an understatement the Australian official history says, "In retrospect the wisdom of embarking upon this third thrust—westward against Japanese forces isolated in the Indies—seems doubtful."[12] It was fortunate for the lives of the Allied troops and for MacArthur's reputation that the war ended before he got his way on the Java plan, for that attack could have produced not only a tragic bloodbath in Java but also a logistical paralysis for the impending invasion of Kyushu.

If before the zenith of the Luzon-versus-Formosa debate in 1944 the Joint Chiefs had been able to foresee the tangential moves south of Luzon that MacArthur would launch, they surely would have terminated his offensive after the conquest of Netherlands New Guinea. It is regrettable that MacArthur's strategy in 1945 has gotten little scholarly notice, but it is tragic that the decisionmakers in the White House and Pentagon contemplating the North Korean invasion of the South, in June 1950, did not recall his behavior pattern of five years before. Perhaps some of them had begun to notice by April 1951 that there were similarities between MacArthur's strategic concepts and his attitude toward his superiors

during the last stages of the Pacific war and during the first nine months of the Korean conflict.

NOTES

1. This essay is based mainly upon a synthesis of data in D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur*, Vol. II, *1941-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), especially chaps. 9, 12, 13, 16, and 17. The footnotes for the relevant passages in these chapters, in turn, cite the primary and secondary materials used in the research. Hereafter in the notes of this essay sources will be cited only when actually quoted.

2. Henry L. Stimson, Diary, 22 June 1944, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn.

3. Douglas MacArthur to George C. Marshall, 18 June 1944. Records of War Department Operations Division, Executive File, Record Group 165, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

4. Samuel E. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol. XIII, *The Liberation of the Philippines: Luzon, Mindanao, and Visaya, 1944-1945* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), p. 214.

5. On Palawan, a Philippine island southwest of Luzon, Japanese guards at a prisoner of war camp panicked on 14 December 1944 when news came that MacArthur's forces were approaching (Mindoro was invaded 15 December). The guards poured gasoline on 149 American prisoners, set them afire, and machine-gunned the survivors (miraculously, nine managed to escape).

6. Robert R. Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, one of several works constituting *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific*, volume 2 of the official history published by the Office of the Chief of Military History (Washington: Department of the Army, 1963), pp. 584-85.

7. MacArthur to Marshall, 5 February 1945, Operations Division, Executive File.

8. MacArthur to Thomas Blamey, 12 July 1944, Records of General Headquarters, Southwest Pacific Area, Record Group 3, MacArthur Memorial Bureau of Archives, Norfolk, Va.

9. Blamey, Appreciation [Report] on Operations of the AMF [Australian Military Forces] in New Guinea, New Britain, and the Solomon Islands, 18 May 1945, quoted in Gavin Long, *The Final Campaigns. Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Series I (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1963), p. 609.

10. Long, p. 547.

11. Robert L. Eichelberger to "Miss Em" [his wife], 28 April 1945, Robert L. Eichelberger Papers, Duke University Library, Durham, N.C.

12. Long, p. 547.