Admiral Bill Halsey and the Unanticipated Strategy: The South Pacific in World War II

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Before World War II, the United States Navy devoted decades of intellectual capital to War Plan Orange, its masterful imagining of a conflict with Japan. Most of what the Navy bought and much of what it thought from 1920 to 1940 was the product of this creativity. Orange was a staple of the curriculum at the Naval War College, and by 1941 virtually every flag officer eligible for command at sea was a graduate of the Newport school, bequeathing to an entire generation of admirals a sound sensibility of the strategy that guided the nation upon the vast maritime stage of the Pacific Ocean, so much so that Chester Nimitz spoke for many when he opined very little of the actual war surprised him, having had practiced it so often on the gaming board in Newport.

The South Pacific Theater was the one great exception. Before the war, neither Japan nor the United States anticipated the scope of the fighting south of the equator. Japanese success in the war's first months, however, created momentum sufficient to birth embryonic ambitions for Australia and New Zealand among Imperial officials—at the same time Allied supply lines from the United States to Australia became sacrosanct after the war in North Africa had cut Britain's Mediterranean routes to her Oceanic commonwealths. Suddenly, sleepy South Pacific isles, heretofore known only to natives, whalers, and coconut planters, became important enough to spark some of the war's most sustained and brutal combat in what strategists call meeting engagements—battles over areas with little intrinsic value but where opposing forces collide nevertheless. This development would have astounded any respectable pre-war strategist, in either Washington or Tokyo.

From the fall of 1942 to the spring of 1944 most of the Pacific War's fighting took place on, near, or above New Guinea and small South Pacific outcroppings. In the Solomon Islands, first on Guadalcanal, then at New Georgia, and finally along the west coast of Bougainville, the compact geographic tableau demanded triphibious operations, to use a phrase coined by Winston Churchill. Thoroughly integrated air, sea, and ground campaigns, amid some of the globe's most demanding environmental circumstances, confronted officers of every service with a host of challenges not foreseen by Orange. How well they did, both individually and collectively, helped determine the outcome along that edge of the world.

Bill Halsey assumed command of South Pacific forces on 18 October 1942, after Robert Ghormley had failed to rally sufficient morale to fuel the epic struggle for Guadalcanal, then in its tenth week. Within a week, he had committed the bulk of his sea power to the Battle of the

Santa Cruz Islands; within a fortnight, he had commandeered every available resource within a thousand miles to succor the First Marine Division defending Henderson Field; and within a month had won the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, putting the crisis of Guadalcanal behind the Allies.

That was but the start. With a pre-war career devoid of joint operational experience and training, ignorance of fellow officers wearing Army khaki or, in most instances, Marine fatigues, and with even less knowledge of Army, air forces, and Marine fighting ways, Halsey navigated command of a new kind of war. This was a process marked first by hesitation and mistake and later by increasing confidence of the kind history later bestowed upon him. Along the way, he and his command transcribed a steep learning curve across the meaty middle of the war, at a time when the basic outcome was in doubt. At the end of the line, in the spring of 1944 and with the Japanese bastion at Rabaul in effect the Allies' largest prisoner of war camp for Japanese, the war's winner and looser were clear, even as great questions of strategy and operations awaited the Central Pacific drive, the liberation of the Philippines, and a dozen other things.

Across the entire period, War Plan Orange offered little direct guidance. But a generation of practice for a war that was foreseen in basic outline rendered Halsey and his many cohorts well equipped to adjust when modification was necessary, to endure when endurance was right, and to distinguish between stubbornness and perseverance in ongoing military operations—surely among the trickiest of all strategic attributes. Any history of the any future would fairly brim with conceit, mistake, and imprudence, of course, but confront the future we must—knowing full well of the vanity of the enterprise, of the nature if not the specifics of blunders to come, and of the dangerous flirtation with folly. If predicting the future is a fool's errand, the process of imagining it, shaping it, and inventing it yields to the strategist rich dividends in operational prowess, strategic acumen, political adroitness, and, most of all, mental agility. As Dwight Eisenhower once famously opined, "Plans are nothing. Planning is everything." Without it, we have nothing, or maybe even less.