

War to the Knife: The US in the Pacific, 1941-1945

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The dominant American interpretation of the Pacific war is that it was racially inspired and racially conducted. Focal point of the argument is John Dower's *War without Mercy*.¹ The position is reinforced by the consistent reinvestigation of Hiroshima/Nagasaki, and by the Japanese internment, which currently produces almost a million Google references. It is sustained by contemporary statements like that of iconic war correspondent Ernie Pyle:

...Shortly after I arrived [in the Pacific] I saw a group of Japanese prisoners...they were wrestling and laughing and talking just like normal human beings. And yet they gave me the creeps, and I wanted a mental bath after looking at them.²

In the presumably more sensitive and empathetic 21st century, Terence Malick's otherwise aesthetic filming of "The Thin Red Line" features at midpoint a group of Japanese prisoners whose appearance and behavior are virtually simian. The taking of human "trophies" by Americans was common enough early enough that in September, 1942, Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Chester Nimitz ordered that "no part of the enemy's body may be used as a souvenir." The order's minimal impact is bet demonstrated by the well known *Life Magazine* photo of May 22, 1944, showing a clean-cut American girl proudly displaying a Japanese skull—a gift from her boyfriend in the Pacific.³

In such contexts, challenging convention invites dismissal as provocative or perverse. This essay nevertheless offers an alternate thesis. It begins by asserting that America's initial approach to war with Japan was structured in the context of a "shared military culture." Not only did that paradigm endure well after Pearl Harbor. America's movement towards "transcultural war," even with its significant racist elements, is best understood as product of the circumstances under which the Pacific War was fought, as opposed to manifesting the deep-seated, virulent racism depicted in standard historiography.⁴

¹ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

² Ernie Pyle, *Last Chapter* (New York: Henry Holt, 1946), p. 5.

³ See generally James J. Weingartner, "Trophies of War: American Troops and the Mutilation of Japanese War Dead, 1941-1945," *Pacific Historical Review*, 61 (1992), 53-67.

⁴ The typology and phrasing are based on Hew Strachan, "A General Typology of Transcultural Wars—The Modern Ages," in *Transcultural Wars From the Middle Ages to the 21st Century*, ed. Hans-Hennig Kortum

Considered specifically, the interwar Army did no institutional planning whatever for the possible war in the Pacific. Its focus on the contingency of war with Japan was almost entirely on the specific, defensive operational problems posed by the strategically exposed Philippine Islands.⁵ The Marine Corps's reconfiguration in the 1930s from a species of colonial infantry to amphibious-warfare specialists was in December 1941 still very much a work in progress. Poorly equipped and organizationally confused, the Corps had no concrete doctrine for fighting the Japanese. The concept of a morally and physically elite shock force was entertained only relative to the US army. No comparisons with Japanese culture or Japanese orders of battle figured in the process, and the concept of Marines as "America's samurai" was a wartime and post-facto construction.⁶ That left the Navy. Since America's initial Pacific involvement at the turn of the century, primary responsibility for any future conflict with Japan was projected as belonging to the fleet. The Navy's doctrine, planning and construction policies in turn rested on the Mahanian premise of seeking a decisive surface engagement with the Japanese main fleet somewhere between Guam and Okinawa. That premise endured until December 7, 1941.⁷

During the succeeding months, when the Pacific Fleet fought a "poor man's war," its central elements remained part of the "shared culture." The Navy's shift to carrier war reflected the loss of its battleships, but the doctrines and methods had been studied and practiced for well over a decade.⁸ The fighter pilots began adapting and abandoning the tactics that cost so many lives in December and January until by the time of Guadalcanal a Wildcat pilot had a solid fighting chance against a Zero.⁹ The unrestricted submarine warfare ordered on December 8, 1941, had been developed by the Germans in World War I, and considered by the US Navy ever since as a possible operational policy.¹⁰

(Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), pp. 85-103.

⁵ Harold R. Winton, "The Interwar Army and the Rising Sun," presented at the 2010 meeting of the Society for Military History. Cf. Brian Linn, *Guardians of Empire: The U.S. Army and the Pacific, 1902-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁶ David G. Ulbrich, *Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), is the best and most up to date analysis of the prewar Corps. Keith B. Bickel, "MARS Learning: The Marine Corps Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915-1940" Ph D Dissertation, Johns Hopkins, 1998, establishes the continued persistence of that approach in Marine Corps thinking almost to the eve of Pearl Harbor.

⁷ Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Academy Press, 1992).

⁸ Charles Mellhorn, *Two-Block Fox: The Rise of the Aircraft Carrier, 1911-1929* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1974); and Thomas Wildenberg, *All the Factors of Victory: Admiral Joseph Mason Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Air Power* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2003).

⁹ John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team: Pacific Naval Air Combat from Pearl Harbor to Midway* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Joel Ira Holwhitt, *Execute against Japan: The US Decision to Conduct Unrestricted Submarine Warfare*

The US buildup of air and ground forces in the south Pacific was initially a response to the concerns of Australian and New Zealand allies, the bulk of whose deployable manpower was halfway round the world fighting for the British. The buildup continued in Japanese initiatives in New Guinea and the Solomons increased fear of a projected invading of Australia. Such an ambitious project was never considered by Japan's high commands, Army or Navy. Japan's push southward was essentially to deepen the "barrier" that would break the American nation's strength and spirit, and lead to negotiations.¹¹ Japan's strategy might be called total war for limited objectives.

Parenthetically it might be observed that this strategy, imprudent but hardly irrational, was derived more from a "shared military culture" of following up victory than from any specific Japanese military/cultural experience.¹² Concern for the possibility nevertheless led to the deployment of more American troops in the Pacific than in Europe by the end of 1943—too many simply to leave inactive as a garrison and holding force, especially given the increasing limits on US manpower. Nor could they be redeployed to the US, given the continued scarcity of shipping. They would have to be used.

The US Navy's success in getting approval for a general counteroffensive was far more significant than pre-existing racism in the Pacific War's development into a "transcultural" conflict. The massive deviation from the strategy of "Germany first" made optimal use of an immense naval construction program, already well under way, whose ships were designed for Pacific operations. It reflected the US Navy's effective lobbying for a theater where its role would be dominant—as opposed to a Europe where it would be third behind the US Army and its air force, and Britain's Royal Navy.

More than standard interservice rivalry was involved here. The US and Japan were the only major military powers whose armies and navies stood on an essentially equal footing. That equality was a far more significant, far more deeply rooted part of America's cultural dynamic than anti-Japanese sentiments still essentially marginal. One of Franklin Roosevelt's major responsibilities as a war leader was to keep the army and the navy on-side: fighting the same war rather than squabbling with each other. The Pacific campaign was in good part a strategic response

(College Station: Texas A& M Press, 2009).

¹¹ Cf. Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 1-45, for an overview. More detailed are John B. Lundstrom, *The First South Pacific Campaign: Pacific Fleet Strategy December 1941-June 1942* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1974); and H.P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies, February to June 1942* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1983).

¹² Edward G. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), pp. 225-227.

to an institutional issue, not a racial one.¹³

The course of the midgame naval war after Midway, in the central Pacific and during the fingertip-range grappling around Guadalcanal, was scarcely Mahanian. Until the emergence of the kamikazes off the Philippines in the fall of 1944, the Navy's direct view of the Japanese remained shaped by "shared culture." They were skilled and dangerous, but not an alien enemy—rather, a mainstream one.¹⁴ As for the Marines, Wake Island was initially processed in what might be called the traditional context of a heroic stand against overwhelming odds.¹⁵ The 1st Marine Division has—controversially—been described as landing on Guadalcanal in the context of a cultural mission and an ideological struggle.¹⁶ Most first-hand accounts from both Guadalcanal and Tarawa, however, stress individual training, flexibility, and esprit de corps, rather than boot-camp rumors and barroom gossip, as keying Marine effectiveness in the campaign's beginning.¹⁷

The army divisions initially involved in America's Pacific counteroffensive were primarily drawn from the prewar Hawaiian garrison, and from the National Guard mobilized in 1940. They did not receive significant, systematic racially-based anti-Japanese indoctrination before deploying to the theater of operations. Harold Winton has suggested that West Point officers might have entertained notions of "payback" for classmates and comrades lost in the Philippines.¹⁸ But at the Leavenworth Command and General Staff School, the first mention of a race war was tacked onto a general lecture on the "Jap" fighting man, delivered only in October 1942.¹⁹ Not until the turn of that year did reliable information on the fate of the Philippine prisoners become available. The Bataan Death March was not made public knowledge until January, 1944.

General national policy reflected a similar pattern. Even the Japanese internment was not a

¹³ Grace Person Hayes, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II, Vol. II, The War against Japan* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), is detailed and well balanced. See also Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Seapower: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980).

¹⁴ James D. Hornfischer, *Neptune's Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (New York: Bantam, 2011), is a spirited account of the midwar Navy's graduation exercises in the Solomons. Jeff Reardon, "Breaking the U.S. Navy's 'Gun Club' Mentality in the South Pacific," *The Journal of Military History*, 75 (2011), 533-564, is tactical/doctrinal in focus. The experiences of direct combat, of course, did not exclude the indirect influences of the ground forces' experience and home-front propaganda.

¹⁵ J. Gregory Urwin, *Facing Fearful Odds: The Siege of Wake Island* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Craig M. Cameron, *America's Samurai: Myth and Imagination in the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941-1951* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Ulbrich is the most current starting point on a subject that continues to generate scholarship, polemics, and controversy. Gordon Rottman, *U.S. Marine Corps Pacific Theater of Operations 1941-1943* (Oxford: Osprey, 2004), is extremely useful for details of tactics and organization.

¹⁸ Personal comment, Aug. 30, 2011

¹⁹ Lt. Col. Warren Chase, "Close-Up of the Jap Fighting Man," Lecture delivered Oct 1942, CARL Archives. I am indebted to Prof. Winton for this reference.

monolithically race-based decision. Paul Thomsen's detailed examination of the relevant sources shows that Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, the Western Defense Commander usually denounced as the principal architect of the internment, actively fought against evacuation and internment of West Coast Japanese. Race also played little role in the Roosevelt administration's final decision, compared to concern for national security in the face of a strategic situation, misinterpreted intelligence reports and misconceptions about Japan's capacities and intentions. Finally, a close examination of period periodicals reveals that examples of racism in the press were far less frequent than previously believed, and were often cited negatively as a criticism of wartime xenophobia.²⁰

Thomsen concludes that the major driving forces behind this sad chapter in modern American history were limited information, poor decision making, and the banality of stupidity. One need not entirely accept his argument to assert that from American perspectives the Japanese began as almost a secondary enemy. The sheer size of the Pacific environment; the seemingly endless spaces of sky, sea, and land intimidated even sons and daughters of a culture able to "ride in a bus, travel all day, and still be only two states away." The absence of civilization, indeed of habitation, was as disconcerting as the distances. Almost nowhere was there the countervailing emotional reassurance provided by human order. The environments encountered included islands of coral rock and volcanic ash, jungles of dank vegetation, hills and mountains that defied human access. Moisture and heat sapped vitality and inflicted an unrelenting spectrum of debilitating illnesses. Fauna from sharks to mosquitoes added more to misery and malaise.

Even remedies and palliatives became identified with the problem. To cite one example malaria, the scourge of the tropics, could be effectively countered by atabrine, a synthetic replacement for quinine. It promptly became a virtual article of faith that Atabrine produced sterility. Denials issued by symbols of masculinity like Errol Flynn had little effect; failing to take Atabrine became a disciplinary offense.

Americans processed the Pacific's alien environments in terms of their own far west: as a frontier to be tamed by controlling and reshaping landscapes and peoples. A familiar joke said the Australians and the Japanese were both skilled jungle fighters—but the Americans made jungles disappear. The revitalized cargo cults of Melanesia, centered on gods bringing riches from the air and sea, illustrate and exemplify the comprehensive cultural impact of strangers aliens who appeared, then vanished, for no discernible reasons and left things utterly changed.²¹

²⁰ Research results summarized by Paul Thomsen, September 6, 2011. I am deeply indebted to my colleague for sharing this material, a major element of his forthcoming dissertation.

²¹ Peter Schrijvers, *The GI War against Japan: American Soldiers in Asia and the Pacific in World War II*

In rear operational areas the dominant signifiers were isolation and monotony. At the front Americans confronted not only a comprehensively strange and hostile ecology, but the also hostile presence of Japanese who seemed comfortably at home there. Appearances were profoundly deceiving. The Japanese army was trained, organized, and equipped—however inadequately—to fight the Soviet Union in Manchuria.²² Its recent war experience had been on the plains of China. Pacific environments were no less alien to Japanese than Westerners. Their sufferings at the end of fragile supply lines increasingly disrupted by air and naval operations were exponentially greater. The Kokoda Trail was no less “a path of infinite sorrow” for men from Kochi Prefecture than for those from New South Wales—and far fewer survived.²³

The image of the Japanese soldier s a jungle superman was the consequence of a myth, improvised in the six months after December 1941 to explain Japanese successes in its initial “centrifugal offensive” into south Asia. In Malaya and the Philippines, Burma and the Dutch East Indies, Japanese ground troops achieved a sequence of victories as unprecedented as it was unexpected. More to the point, the victories were achieved with profoundly embarrassing ease. Postwar research credits Japanese success to a combination of effective individual and small unit training; tactical doctrines emphasizing speed, surprise, and aggressiveness; and light-weight equipment unintentionally suited to jungle operations by a semi-motorized army. At all levels of command, down to company and platoon, Japanese officers embodied initiative and flexibility.²⁴

None of these qualities were profound secrets. Western, specifically American attaches and observers had commented on them for years and decades—but not in a possible context of jungle warfare, and never in a way generating institutional interest, much less response. The result was a process of intellectual and emotional shorthand: the ascription of Japanese combat performance to racial rather than military qualities.²⁵ And myth tended to be countered by myth. “Japs” could not be out-thought, because their combat behavior was ultimately non-rational. They had to be outfought—on every level, whatever it took.

(New York: New York University Press, 2002), especially pp. 101-134, surveys the physical aspects of the war. Cf. for more detail Eric Bergerud, *Touched with Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (New York: Penguin, 1996); and for cargo cults the excellent anthology *Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique*, ed. H. Jebenz (New York, 2004).

²² See particularly Alvin Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia*, 2 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

²³ In English see most recently Craig Collie and Haiime Marutani, *The Path of Infinite Sorrow: The Japanese on the Kokoda Track* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2009).

²⁴ Maj. C. Patrick Howard, “Behind the Myth of the Jungle Superman: A Tactical Examination of the Japanese Army’s Centrifugal Offensive, 7 December 1941 to 20 May 1942,” MA Thesis, USACGSC, Ft. Leaven worth, 2000.

²⁵ Greg Kennedy, “Anglo-American Strategic Relations and Intelligence Assessments of Japanese Air Power, 1934-1941,” *The Journal of Military History*, 74 (2010), 737-773, makes the same case in a different context

The impacts on American mentality of environment and imagination were enhanced by the nature of Pacific ground operations. Japanese offensives were seldom larger than regimental scale; Aitape, during July and August 1944 on in New Guinea was the major exception.²⁶ Beginning with Guadalcanal, Americans were on the offensive. Japanese were there “first:” as occupiers—and as defenders. Paradoxically, a secondary element of “shared military culture” contributed significantly to the near-universal trope of the Japanese as a “natural” jungle fighter. That conclusion was essentially based on Japanese skill at field fortification and camouflage: both were as “shared” and as “western” an aspect of warmaking as can be imagined. Japanese tactical doctrines may have been obsessively offensive. But their engineers were first-rate. Their soldiers were conditioned to hard work whatever its nature. In the jungles of the south Pacific and on the Central Pacific’s coral islands, Japanese commanders adapted field works and tactics to circumstances. Defense at the waterline gave way to defending further inland of unfavorable terrain and American firepower. The terrain that handicapped rapid counterattack, however, was increasingly and systematically incorporated into complex defensive networks designed to force an advancing enemy to move into the open. Fire discipline was excellent and sniping deadly. Infantry units’ high organic firepower time and again proved devastating at short range and from unexpected directions. Bunkers were dug deep, kept low, and provided with overhead cover sufficient to turn heavy shell hits. Strong points were used as launching points for counterattacks, particularly against enemies disorganized and euphoric by hard-won local success.²⁷

In short the Japanese in the Pacific were never an obliging enemy. Their positions could be taken; their defenses overcome—but at a price that usually involved closing with an enemy who died where he stood.

On Peleliu, for example, the garrison rebounded from the swift defeat of a tank/infantry assault on the invasion beaches, and turned a projected short operation into a two-month nightmare among the island’s hills and caves.²⁸

The first major ground encounters, on Guadalcanal and Tarawa, only reinforced the Americans’ sense of confronting aliens in an alien world. An arguable catalyst was the ill fated Goettge patrol on Guadalcanal. It began with an intelligence officer’s ill-considered attempt, based on ephemeral information, to negotiate surrender. It ended with the patrol’s destruction in a

²⁶ See Edward J. Drea, “Defending the Driniumor: Covering Operations in New Guinea, 1944,” Leavenworth Papers NR. 9 (Ft. Leavenworth; USACGSC, 1984).

²⁷ The best overview in English is Gordon Rottman, *Japanese Pacific Island Defenses 1941-1945* (Oxford: Osprey, 2003).

²⁸ Harry Gailey, *Peleliu 1944* (Annapolis: Nautical & Aviation Press, 1983), is good from an operational perspective.

legitimate operation of war. It metastasized into a story of Japanese treachery, including alleged misuse of the white flag.²⁹

The vicious see-saw grappling around Henderson Field, characterized by Japanese attacks *à outrance* mounted almost literally around the clock, had its counterpoint in the trench-and-bunker fighting in New Guinea at Buna and Gona.³⁰ Under other circumstances the ferocity and the effectiveness of Japanese troops in attack and defense, the consistent, comprehensive refusal to surrender, might have inspired at least respect. Instead Japanese behavior in combat was increasingly described in terms of deliberate ignoring of Red Cross armbands, indiscriminate killing of prisoners, and even cannibalism. The lines separating truth, rumor, and invention in such matters are always difficult to maintain, but documented Japanese combat-zone behavior was grim enough to furnish a core of reality sufficiently large and irreducible to negate its processing as part of “the filth of war.”³¹

Even more fundamental to Americans in establishing Japanese “otherness” was the acceptability of individual and collective suicide. It must be emphasized that Japanese conduct of the Pacific War was not in principle suicidal. Officers could and did halt failed attacks and order retreats. Higher commands were skilled at evacuating garrisons when circumstances demanded, Cape Esperance and New Georgia are two solid examples. Last stands, as at Buna/Gona, correspondingly served a legitimate military purpose: delaying an enemy advance and increasing its cost.³²

Last stands are a common element in military cultures. Their usual accompaniment is an injunction to fight to the death. Equally usual is the modification of that exhortation by the men on the spot.³³ During World War II, only Japanese soldiers systematically took it literally. Suicide, however, was for Americans a defining alienator. During the Tokugawa Era surrender was recognized, if both sides could agree to its terms. Suicide was also an accepted response among the samurai class to atone for mistakes or defeat. Under the Meiji Restoration the army

²⁹ Frank, 129-131, and Bergerud, 408-410, summarizes the patrol’s genesis and fate.

³⁰ The latter fighting, often neglected in American writing, is graphically presented and contextualized in Peter Brune, *A Bastard of a Place: The Australians in Papua* (Crowns Nest NSW: Allen& Unwin, 2003).

³¹ See the survey by Yuki Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1996). Cannibalism: also involved eating human flesh as a bonding and strengthening ritual for individuals and groups. See Chester Hearn, *Sorties Into Hell: The Hidden War on Chichi Jima* (New York: Praeger, 2003).

³² Bergerud, 416.

³³ Leonard Smith, for example, built a major work around his discovery that “fighting to the last man” was a rhetorical flourish in official reports, but highly negotiable in practice: Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the Fifth French Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

popularized and institutionalized the concept of “death before dishonor.” During the interwar years, soldiers were indoctrinated to fight to the last man under any circumstances. Japan did not sign the 1929 Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war because the concept was irrelevant.³⁴

Anthropologists and social historians speak of shame cultures and honor cultures. America in general, and its armed forces in particular, are characterized by a “coping culture:” do the best you can and never give up. A coping culture offers second chances; a shame/honor culture, only one. A coping culture offers redemption in life; a shame/honor culture does so only in death. A coping culture is viscerally likely either to process suicide as cowardice, or ultimately deny it as dehumanizing—especially in the context of the strong Judeo-Christian religious prohibitions of self-destruction that fundamentally influenced most World War II servicemen.³⁵

Even then, had Japanese merely killed themselves, as at the Tenaru River at the end of Guadalcanal, alienation might have gone no further than wonder at the strength of their cultural indoctrination. But as organized resistance in a sector or on an island collapsed, as defeat became certain, Japanese soldiers, wounded, sick, starving, with no hope of evacuation or relief, essentially helpless, continued to kill Americans. The delays caused by these self-immolations were minimal. The costs they exacted were in no way proportional to the cost in Japanese lives.³⁶ In the final stages of operations the tally of prisoners taken usually increased, thanks in part to leaflets and loudspeaker appeals. Sometimes stragglers gave themselves up, or were overpowered. The totals might have been higher had near-helpless men not blown up themselves and any American in range with grenades, and hospital patients picked up rifles they were too weak to aim.³⁷

In the Pacific a loathed and hostile environment *a priori* invited personalization and humanization. Japanese behaviors systematically enabled that process. The result was a mentality

³⁴ Drea, *Imperial Army*, pp. 17-18, 158, summarized the conventional position on this subject. But cf. Naoko Shimazu, “The Myth of the ‘Patriotic Soldier’: Japanese Attitudes towards Death in the Russo-Japanese War,” *War & Society*, 19 (1992), 69-89.

³⁵ For background cf. Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999); Maurice Pinguet, *Voluntary Death in Japan* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). A more specific comparison is Stephen Morillo, “Culture of Death: Warrior Suicides in Europe and Japan,” *The Medieval History Journal*, 2 (2001), 242-257. Maxwell Taylor Kennedy, *Danger’s Hour: The Story of the USS Bunker Hill and the Kamikaze Pilot who Crippled Her* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), is an outstanding case study in the combatants’ respective attitudes to life and death.

³⁶ Bergerud, 131-133, 416, develops this argument.

³⁷ See generally Allison B. Gilmore, *You Can’t Fight Tanks with Bayonets: Psychological Warfare against the Japanese Army in the Southwest Pacific* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

facilitating waging “hard war” in an alien world against an enemy understood as “other.”

The Australians deployed in New Guinea, facing less intense military resistance, seem correspondingly to have considered the ecology their primary enemy.³⁸ Not so with the Americans. Pacifists among medics and corpsmen discarded armbands and carried weapons. Teeth and skulls were more common than live prisoners. One US division, seeking prisoners for intelligence purposes, offered a case of beer or a bottle of whisky as an incentive. Another report spoke of three days’ leave and ice cream as an effective lure. Even with such bonuses, after two months of fighting on Okinawa four American divisions had taken a total of fewer than a hundred prisoners.³⁹

It does not require a detailed account of operations to make a legitimate generalization that between 1942 and 1944, fear and frustration nurtured hatred. Hatred in turn metastasized, becoming instrumental and behavioral. What is frequently described as the dehumanization of the Japanese, paralleling an ideologized Wehrmacht’s approach to Slavs and Jews, is better understood as ahumanization: a sense of fighting aliens with whom no meaningful contact was possible.

By 1945 US soldiers and marines approached the battlefield with the mentality of exterminators. When the high explosives that were an industrial nation’s signature weapon failed, Americans turned to something older, something primal: fire. Flame-throwers on the ground, napalm from the air, became the war’s defining weapons in its final year, arguably as much for psychological as operational reasons. On Okinawa a Japanese soldier was sprayed with napalm, and then set ablaze by a tracer round. “We cheered that incredibly horrible sight, the burning of another human being,” recalled a Marine company commander, “because we’d been reduced to something non-human.”⁴⁰

That tactical mentality reflected increasing strategic frustration. After Leyte Gulf the US Navy was reduced to striking Japan indirectly. What remained of Japan’s navy was essentially confined to its bases. The merchant fleet had been virtually annihilated. Ship targets were so few that American submarines were regularly surfacing to destroy sampans and fishing boats with gunfire. Naval planners argued for a strategy of direct attrition: coordinating an underwater blockade with air and surface bombardment. No solid evidence indicated, however, that Japan was likely to

³⁸ Generally suggestive on this subject is Judith A. Bennett, *Natives and Exotics: World War II and Environment in the Southern Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009).

³⁹ Clayton D. Laurie, “The Ultimate Dilemma of Psychological Warfare in the Pacific: Enemies Who Don’t Surrender and GIs Who Don’t Take Prisoners,” *War & Society*, 14 (1996), 99 -120; Schrijvers, 207-225.

⁴⁰ Cited in George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), p. 353.

abandon the war in the face of even the most extreme material privation.⁴¹

Even before the war, air power enthusiasts had hypothesized that Japan's inner defenses might be breached directly from above. The commitment of what seemed an ideal instrument for that purpose, the B-29, led initially to a disastrous series of defeats for Nationalist China as Japanese troops overran the vulnerable bases and much of the worthwhile territory still under Chang Kai-Shek's control. When the air offensive's base was transferred to the newly conquered Marianas, results remained marginal. In March 1945 the Army Air Force shifted from precision bombing to incendiary bases area bombing from relatively low levels. Japan's cities blazed and Japan's people died. By summer the targeting was almost casual, including urban areas whose defenses were best described as primitive. Toyama suffered the destruction of 99.5 of its acreage.⁴²

Japan was being deindustrialized and demodernized on a scale unknown since Tamerlane. It was clear that the US possessed the capacity from the air to destroy every city and starve the entire population. By war's end even the Home Islands' songbird population had been eaten. Yet Japan fought on,

That left matters up to the ground-pounders. And their experiences and prognoses were also grim. By this time the Americans had largely left jungle and coral behind. But Bellona is a mistress of irony. Douglas MacArthur made good his promise of a return to the Philippines in October, 1944. Three months later he attacked the main island of Luzon. A near-simultaneous advance into the southern Philippines was a tour de force of combined operations that left little more than mop-up operations remaining in that region. But Luzon demonstrated that there were still no short cuts.

The US Army had manifested a steep learning curve from the Pacific War's first days. It produced not merely effective jungle-fighting divisions, but what might be called jungle/mechanized formations, which combine motorized mobility and armored punch with the ability to operate away from road nets. Deployed in the Philippines, especially on Luzon, they proved their worth—but were also constantly frustrated by a defense that offered no opportunities for anything like William Slim's explosive breakthroughs in Burma. Even as ground operations escalated to corps and army scale, the Japanese, able to reinforce their garrison during much of the fighting, were able to set high prices on victory without relying on mass bayonet charges or

⁴¹ H.P. Willmott, *The Last Century of Sea Power*, Vol. II, *From Washington to Tokyo, 1923-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 473-525, analyzes the final stages of the naval blockade.

⁴² Among many studies of this subject Barrett Tillman, *Whirlwind: The Air War against Japan, 1942-1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), is a useful beginning for its comprehensive coverage. Cf. for background Robert Wolk, *Cataclysm: General Hap Arnold and the Defeat of Japan* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2010).

suicide attacks. One US division alone suffered three thousand casualties in a four-week period, with six thousand more evacuated sick or suffering from combat stress. The capture of Manila left the city in ruins and over a hundred thousand Filipinos dead, after weeks of close-quarter fighting that rivaled Stalingrad.⁴³

Luzon's counterpart, Iwo Jima, was a Navy show, a Central Pacific island operation written large—and written in blood. The Japanese defense in depth featured over ten miles of tunnels connecting its bunkers, and strong points—and was uncompleted when the Americans landed. In a month months the 18,000-strong garrison inflicted over 60,000 casualties. Only 200 prisoners were taken. The three Marine divisions committed there never fought again. Seventy years later the question remains whether the bomber crews saved were worth the Marine lives lost: almost 7,000 of them.⁴⁴

Okinawa, the proverbial last step, proved as well the perihelion of Japan's island defensive tactics. There was no longer room for reckless sacrifice of life. Every Japanese casualty must serve a common purpose: to wear down American morale, to show them that their machines were useless against fighting spirit multiplied by prepared positions. Thousands of bunkers, weapons pits, and fighting positions were supported by elaborate networks of tunnel systems and dugouts. Okinawa became Japan's version of high-tech war.

The result was fighting whose stresses literally approached the limits of human sustainability. A Marine battalion that began with 1100 men at the start of the invasion passed over 3,000 to through its ranks by the time the fighting ended. Rates of physical and emotional collapse exceeded anything experienced in Europe, or in the earlier Pacific operations. Periods of endurance shrank from months to weeks, in the worst of the fighting sometimes to days. And these were not the scrapings of the US replacement pool, but youngsters physically tough, well trained, and highly motivated.⁴⁵

Offshore the Navy was paying dues to a kamikaze offensive that hammered a fleet pinned in place by its mission of supporting the landings. The "divine wind" accounted for three dozen ships sunk and three times the number damaged. Almost 10,000 sailors were killed or wounded—nearly a fifth of the Navy's total during the whole war. The knowledge that Japanese airmen were willing

⁴³ The post-Leyte ground fighting in the Philippines remains significantly neglected. The best work is the official history, Robert Ross Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, US Army, 1963). James S. Powell, *Learning Under Fire: The 112th Cavalry Regiment in World War II* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2010), pp. 135-167, is brief and excellent at the tactical level.

⁴⁴ Robert S. Burrell, *The Ghosts of Iwo Jima* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010), strongly challenges from an operational perspective America's long-standing Iwo Jima mythology in general.

⁴⁵ In the extensive body of literature on Okinawa Feifer's *Tennozan* stands out for its treatment of the human dimensions.

to immolate themselves systematically with what seemed heedless insouciance was shocking and unnerving to the ships' companies who fought off repeated attacks that seemed directed personally at everyone on board the target. Eventually defensive tactics improved to the point where nine out of ten kamikazes were brought down. That was small comfort to the victims of the tenth one.⁴⁶

Looming ever larger in America's planning was an even less encouraging prospect. By itself the ironic example of "shared military culture" that contributed so heavily to Japan's refined defensive tactics did not bode well for a large-scale invasion of Japan. Intelligence information accurately reported that the Japanese anticipated almost exactly where an initial landing would be made, on Kyushu. The resulting buildup increased ground forces by four times the original US prognostications, and aircraft by a factor of three.

A successful landing was no more than a first step. Manila had been destroyed in order to liberate it. What would happen in an urbanized Japan? The anticipated level of American casualties remains a subject for debate. A more meaningful indicator is the number of Purple Heart wound awards produced in anticipation—almost a half million. Over a hundred thousand remained in stock almost a half-century later, after Korea and Vietnam.⁴⁷

No less frightening was evidence—again accurate—that Kyushu's civilians would be directly integrated into the defense, even at front-line levels. On Saipan and Okinawa large-scale civilian suicides had been significantly disconcerting even to hardened front-line soldiers. What if Americans found themselves gunning down women and children systematically, as a matter of survival?⁴⁸

Policy offered no relief from the military dilemma. Since before Pearl Harbor the US had been able to read Japanese military and diplomatic codes successfully and comprehensively. Even by the second half of 1945 these offered no significant indications of an interest in negotiation. The few vague mentions of terms were on a level amounting to status quo ante bellum—acceptable neither diplomatically nor politically to the US.⁴⁹

America's response was a cautious de facto adjustment of its grand strategy to emphasize

⁴⁶ Cf. Robert Cecil Stern, *Fire from the Sky: Surviving the Kamikaze Threat* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010); and Robin L. Rieelly, *Kamikaze Attacks: A Complete History of Japanese Suicide Strikes on American Ships, by Aircraft and Other Means* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010).

⁴⁷ The most comprehensive account is Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999). D.M. Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation Downfall and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1947* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), is excellent on the military aspects. Steven J. Zaloga, *Defense of Japan 1945* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010), provides technical and tactical details.

⁴⁸ On this subject see especially Matthew Hughes, "War Without Mercy? American Armed Forces and the Deaths of Civilians during the Battle for Saipan," *The Journal of Military History*, 75 (2011), 93-133.

⁴⁹ Douglas MacEachin, *The Final Months of the War with Japan: Signals Intelligence, US Planning, and the A-Bomb Decision* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), is a useful introduction.

Japan's postwar reconstruction, not its annihilation as a society. Whether that shift was poorly communicated, misunderstood, or rejected is, again, an enduring subject of debate.⁵⁰ But the war's end in Europe, combined with growing Soviet-American stress, and growing domestic pressure for peace and demobilization, to encourage movement to a low common denominator: the nuclear initiative.

In the context of this paper it must be emphasized that in military circles the atomic bomb was considered "just another weapon." Postwar doubts expressed about its use were largely postwar constructions. Had invasion of Japan's home islands been necessary, American operational planning incorporated using poison gas and nerve agents against Japanese fortifications and defenses, with nuclear weapons a solid possibility.⁵¹ This reflected the collective, insouciant ignorance that during the Bikini atom tests had sailors in shirtsleeves shoveling nuclear waste on the derelict targets. It reflected as well an extreme—perhaps an ultimate—manifestation of "hard war" against military objectives: the war the US had been waging since at least 1942.

America indeed wound up waging a transcultural war in the Pacific—a war to the knife. That war's roots, however, were in a shared military culture. Its nature was situational rather than structural. And that point is arguably best demonstrated by a coda: the postwar behavior of US servicemen during the occupation of Japan was an aftermath of conquest, not its continuance.⁵² Criminal, as distinct from socially disturbing, conduct was at low echelons and low levels even before most of the combat veterans were rotated home. Far from indulging in the rapine and pillage whose anticipation led the Japanese government to create brothels staffed by volunteers as a front-line defense of Japanese virtue, the Americans were more fascinated than repelled by what they found. And with the exception of confiscated Samurai swords, the victors paid for most of what they took—women included.⁵³ They paid in money, cigarettes, and nylons; but also with attitudes and behaviors. Historical and cultural memories are not fixed. They can be ignored; they can be transformed. The nature of occupation contributed in no small part to a still-developing trans-Pacific culture and a still-enduring trans-Pacific relationship.

⁵⁰ See Gerhard Krebs, "Operation Super Sunrise? US-Japanese Peace Feelers in Switzerland, 1945," *The Journal of Military History*, 69 (2005), 1081-1120.

⁵¹ Barton J. Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb: A Reinterpretation," *Political Science Quarterly*, 90 (1975), 23-89; and "Truman and the A-Bomb: Targeting Noncombatants, Using the Bomb, and Defending the Decision," *The Journal of Military History*, 62 (1998), 547-570.

⁵² Even John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton, 1999), concedes, albeit grudgingly, that the victors behaved themselves "with far greater discipline" than had the Japanese (p. 211)—not a particularly demanding benchmark.

⁵³ For a general hint of an explanation see Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Knopf, 2003). Martin van Creveld, *The Culture of War* (Novato, Ca.: Presidio Press, 2008), is also suggestive.