

The “American Way of War” and the U.S. War with Japan 1941-45

Geoffrey Wawro

The “American Way of War,” a thesis coined by Russell Weigley in 1973, holds that America since the Civil War has used industrial production and technology to achieve crushing economic and military superiority in order to defeat adversaries through annihilation or attrition. It aims also at the total overthrow of the enemy, without any possibility of negotiation or compromise.

Weigley wrote his book during the Vietnam War, and was as pessimistic about the future efficacy of the American Way of War then as we are today, after the twin experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan.

But for Japan in the years 1941-45, none of this American self-doubt intruded. There we saw the American Way of War projected with vigor, violence and a stunning degree of innovation. No power had ever fought an Oceanic War as vast and complicated as World War II in the Pacific, and the total US victory there – against steep odds – was remarkable at the time, and still remarkable in retrospect.

The “production miracle” that made possible the US campaigns in Europe and the Pacific has been widely covered, and I will merely summarize it here. Between 1939-44, when US industrial output reached its wartime peak, American GDP rose 55%, and the military’s share of that spending as a percentage of GDP rose from 1.4% in 1939 to 45% in 1944. The civilian sector – cars and other modern conveniences – was put on hold for the duration of the war to make military hardware, yet, in contrast to Japan, which endured a starvation economy during the war, the US standard of living actually improved!

In all the US spent \$288 billion on World War II, which, in today’s dollars, works out to \$3.6 trillion. In inflation-adjusted terms, that is 8 times the cost of the New Deal, 9 times the cost of the Korean War, and 5 times the cost of the Vietnam War. During World War II, the US produced 11 times as much coal as Japan, 222 times as much oil, 13 times as much steel, and 40 times as many artillery shells.

In the first year of the war, the US took a capital ship loss of 40 percent, the Japanese 30 percent. The US quickly made up those losses and then expanded. The Japanese, in the entire course of the war, never even made up the initial losses. US naval appropriations in 1940 alone exceeded the previous decade of Japanese naval construction. In 1943, only three aircraft carriers were under construction in Japanese yards, while 22 were being built in the US. Japanese aircraft production was only 20 percent of America’s. During 1942, the US built 49,000 airplanes, the

Japanese just 9,000. Over the course of the war, the Americans built 325,000 combat airplanes, the Japanese just 76,000.

As early as 1943, with only 15 percent of US resources dedicated to the war in the Pacific, America – as we will see – was able to turn the tide in its war with Japan. That statistic alone indicated the gross economic mismatch between the two powers. In this context, it's well to remember the pre-war division of the Japanese navy into "treaty" and "fleet" factions. The "fleet faction" had argued for shipbuilding in excess and violation of the 5-power Washington and London Naval Treaties of the 1920s and 1930s. The "treaty faction" had argued for adherence to the 60 percent ratio conceded Japan precisely because it was the best way – the only way – for a relatively weak power like Japan to maintain any kind of competitiveness with the U.S., which, if it ever harnessed its overwhelming industrial superiority and embarked on a massive expansion of its Navy, would easily bankrupt Japan.

Still, economic and material primacy did not determine the outcome; hard fighting did. Yamamoto had insisted on the Pearl Harbor attack, as he put it, "so that the morale of the USN and her people plunges to such an extent that it cannot be recovered." He had argued that Japan would not need to win on the battlefield. They would win by "a surrender in the White House, in Washington itself ... where the politicians of the day [lack] the willingness to make sacrifices." Just as the Japanese assumed that they would never conquer the U.S., they assumed that the U.S. – exhausted by fighting in Europe and the long march across the Pacific, so similar to Russia's plight in 1905 – would never conquer Japan, but merely compromise instead. Among many Axis strategic miscalculations in WW2, these were among the worst.

The US war against Japan stands out as one of the most unusual wars in history, in the sense that its problems of distance and supply and the peculiar nature of its main battlefield – the Pacific Ocean – were beyond comparison with any other conflict, including the one with Germany.

In retrospect, we often think that Japan stood little chance in the war, but that would be to ignore the considerable advantages that Tokyo enjoyed at the outset. It's fair to say that only the American Way of War – and U.S. democracy, which simply could not fold in the face of Japanese bluster, as the Japanese had intended – could have overwhelmed those advantages.

The US's only major Pacific – at Pearl Harbor – lay thousands of miles from Cavite, the small US naval base in Manila bay. There was nothing in between. Midway, Wake and Guam had no facilities to speak of and were unfortified until the last minute, when they were overwhelmed by the Japanese anyway. (Two of the three American carriers that escaped the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor were not at anchor in Hawaii because they were delivering planes to Midway and Wake for their defense; the third had been at San Diego.)

Initially, Japan made maximal use of its strong position, and Western weakness.

The main and secondary Japanese bases in home waters were invulnerable to air attack. Further forward, the Japanese had defied international prohibitions in their Mandates, and had built a chain of naval and air bases in the Marianas, Marshalls and Carolines. Truk lay athwart the main US supply route to the Philippines, Rabaul on the route to Australia.

After their invasion of China in 1937, the Japanese raked in all of the Chinese ports; with Taiwan, they now surrounded the Philippines; in the second half of 1941, they encroached on French Indochina and secured the use of Cam Ranh Bay, which was a first class anchorage just 750 miles from Singapore.

Then, they struck Pearl Harbor, followed by the attack on the Philippines, Thailand, and the oil-rich islands of Borneo, Sumatra and Java; Hong Kong was attacked and cut off. Landing in Malaya, the Japanese sank the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle-cruiser *Repulse*, employing shore-based Japanese naval air from Saigon. That victory was as stunning as Pearl Harbor, where the eight damaged US battleships had been surprised with skeleton crews while riding at anchor. The two British ships had been manned and underway, yet Japanese airplanes had sunk them anyway. Thailand surrendered on December 9; Hong Kong fell on Christmas Day; Manila surrendered on January 2, 1942. Singapore – the great bastion of British Malaya -- fell on February 15, and then Bali three days later.

Japan’s early gains through April 1942 – a 10,000-sq mile resource base and empire that stretched from China to the mid-Pacific, from Alaska to Australia – might have been invincible but for the full-blooded application of the industrialized American way of war. The Japanese had developed fast, long-range two-engine land-based bombers in the 1930s – the Nell and the Betty – precisely for deployment on the islands of the Central and South Pacific, where they could be used (along with the “Val” divebomber and the “Kate” torpedo plane and in tandem with submarines) to whittle away at the US Navy as it drove toward Japan.

Before this war, we generally thought of bases as fixed installations on supply lines that connected industrial resources to military units. In this war, with the huge ocean spaces and unimaginable expenditure of supplies – a task force of one carrier, three cruisers and six destroyers burned up 6,000 barrels of oil/day, and more when conducting flight operations – a new system had to be invented. Unless the supply line was always full, nothing could be guaranteed at the operational end, or loaded fast enough at home. So, in this war, fixed bases were supplemented with “operational bases” that offered a choice of movements in the campaign. Supplies could be continuously pushed forward so operating units never ran out.

The Japanese had banked on the US being pinned down by the Battle of the Atlantic and the worsening situation in Europe, where the USSR seemed on the brink of collapse. Indeed America's "Plan Dog" elaborated in Nov 1940 – and formalized in "Rainbow 5" in November 1941 – called for a "Germany First" strategy that would leave the Pacific theater underequipped and on the defensive for at least a year.

Yet from 1942 on, the US began to recover in the Pacific. The Japanese thought it would be sufficient to secure every position that the allies might potentially use as springboard to roll back their gains.

The appointment of 56-year-old Admiral Chester Nimitz to CINC-Pacific two weeks after Pearl Harbor was arguably decisive in facilitating the US counter-attack. One of the greatest naval commanders of all time, Nimitz absorbed the losses of Pearl Harbor impassively, and resolved not merely to defend, but to attack with what he had in January 1942: three carriers with a capacity of 264 aircraft, a handful of cruisers and destroyers, the one battleship that survived Pearl Harbor, and a submarine fleet whose torpedoes – with their faulty magnetic proximity detonators – did not work. Nimitz knew that he would have to hold on for at least a year until the first new-construction carriers and other warships began arriving in the Pacific.

Nimitz' pugnacity was all the more remarkable in view of Japanese strength – the force known as the *Kido Butai* (Mobile Force), which was essentially the Japanese instrument to apply Mahanian principles of fleet concentration to the dawning age of naval airpower. Whereas the Americans used carriers singly at the center of independent task forces, Yamamoto and his admirals put all of their eggs in one basket. The force that attacked Pearl Harbor and would then attempt a war-winning blow at Midway comprised six large aircraft carriers and two fast battleships screened by a dozen cruisers and destroyers. What that meant was that the Japanese could put 412 planes aloft at any one time, against the sixty to ninety that might be managed by a US task force. The Japanese had launched 350 planes for the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Nimitz formed Task Forces with his carriers and cruisers for defensive sweeps, and to cover supply and reinforcement. He immediately launched an offensive campaign with his subs. He aimed to hit whatever targets of opportunity the Japanese offered in the Central Pacific and to steal the initiative from the Japanese. Whereas CNO Admiral Ernest King (and President Roosevelt) pressed Nimitz to detach large forces to the Southwest Pacific to contest the Japanese position at Rabaul and maintain communications with Australia and New Zealand, Nimitz constantly lobbied for a more offensive employment of his limited forces in the Central Pacific.

Still, immense logistical difficulties remained: repair bases were distant, advance bases just beginning.

Nimitz’s unexpected boldness after the shock of Pearl Harbor pushed the Japanese back into a defensive posture, and converted their offensive strategy unveiled in late 1941 to a defensive one. Initially poised to take Australia and even India, Japan was compelled to stand down by Nimitz’ carrier task forces, which hit the Marshalls and Gilberts in January 1942, Rabaul in February, Wake and New Guinea in March.

Nimitz was exploring new possibilities of naval air and oceanic warfare. The Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 was the first naval battle in history decided by carrier-borne air without any ships exchanging salvos. The risks of the battle were mind-boggling; the Coral Sea was 3,500 miles from Oahu and 600 miles from the nearest source of fuel oil, leaving the American flattops there totally dependent on their fleet oilers. A tactical win for Japan, the Coral Sea was a *strategic* one for the US in that the Americans could easily make good the loss of the *Lexington*, whereas the Japanese could not replace all of the planes (105) and experienced pilots that they lost in the battle, as well as a light carrier.

Midway in June 1942 was the decisive victory of the war in the Pacific, comparable in scope to Trafalgar or Tsushima. Attempting to lure the three US carriers that had escaped the attack on Pearl Harbor into battle, the Japanese were roundly beaten. Against the loss of one carrier, one destroyer, 150 aircraft and 310 men and officers, the US Navy destroyed four Japanese carriers, one heavy cruiser, 275 planes, and 4,000 men and officers, including some of Japan’s most experienced operators.

Midway, facilitated by code-breaking, but also by Nimitz’ prompt, shrewd counter-moves and willingness to stand against pressure from Washington, stole the initiative from Japan once and for all. Yamamoto knew before the battle that America had eleven big carriers under construction, all of which would become operational in 1943. (Japan had only a single carrier under construction, and it wouldn’t be ready until 1944.) After Midway, Japan no longer commanded the sea, and never would again. Moreover, Japan’s fleet, still strong, was fatally unbalanced. Henceforth, Japan would merely cling to its defense perimeter, hoping that it could wear down the US Navy as it advanced into the heart of the Japanese Empire.

Guadalcanal in November 1942 was the first Allied offensive move. But it was fought in the shadow of the U.S. landings in North Africa, which required the bulk of American shipping and landing craft.

At Guadalcanal, Nimitz’s strategy of island hopping took shape. With the Japanese reluctant to surrender or evacuate, Nimitz grasped that the real road to Tokyo and the heart of the Japanese Empire lay over the sea alone, and not via the defended perimeters.

Studying his maps, Nimitz grasped that Japan’s 14,200 mile ocean perimeter from Burma to

the Aleutians simply could not be defended. As the US Navy recovered, nowhere did the Japanese enjoy even local control of the sea. The sprawling Japanese garrisons in hundreds of islands, their bases and airfields and forts and ports, and even bastions like Truk – ostensibly impregnable – did not ultimately matter.

The Americans just bypassed most of them and pressed ahead, on the assumption that when US forces reached Japan, all of those marooned fragments of Japanese power would fall into US hands without a fight. In the course of the war, the US Navy and Army bypassed places like Truk, Yap, Rabaul, Wewak in New Guinea, Java and Taiwan, which were crammed with Japanese forces.

But to do this, Nimitz needed command of the sea and a few advanced bases as stepping stones, to cross the great Pacific.

By the fall of 1943, the US had a dozen new Essex-class carriers operating in the Pacific, and the island-hopping-campaign began in earnest. In November 1943, the Navy took Makin and Tarawa in the Gilberts. General MacArthur began his drive to the Philippines, island-hopping on his own, and leaving big Japanese garrisons in western New Guinea in his wake. The Japanese could only watch. Trying to rebuild their carrier strength, they found themselves strategically immobile; they had become prisoners of their own strongpoints.

But, even the Japanese strongpoints were becoming untenable because Nimitz twinned his Central Pacific drive with a submarine assault on the Japanese merchant fleet. Using subs out of Pearl Harbor, Nimitz began to hit Japan's critical supply lines in its eastern and western resource areas as well as the ones right off the coast of Japan. The Allied submarine war hit New Guinea, the Malacca Straits, the Dutch East Indies, Indochina and the Burma coast. In total, 8 million tons of Japanese shipping was lost in combat in World War II, of which 4.8 million tons were destroyed by Allied subs.

The Japanese were totally unprepared for submarine warfare – their obsolete doctrine still maintained that subs were useful only in cooperation with surface forces in battle areas.

By early 1944, Japanese losses far exceeded output, yet the Japanese were unable to collect the vast resources of their beleaguered empire – oil from British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, Thai rice, Vietnamese rubber, Chinese coal and bauxite. Those commodities were all but impossible to move; of the 19 million tons of oil produced in the Japanese occupied territories, only 25 percent ever made it to Japan. Some relief was had in the steady constriction of the Japanese Empire, which reduced demand, but that reduced Japanese power as well. By 1944, the Japanese were reduced to trying to concoct bunker oil and aviation fuel from Taiwanese sugar and Manchurian cereals, so fully had shipping collapsed in the face of US submarine warfare and

land-based air patrols.

As for the 2 million Japanese troops in China during the war – four-fifths of Japan’s active army divisions – with Allied command of the sea and air, it did not matter how many Japanese divisions were in China, because by 1944, the Japanese could not move them anywhere else.

By early 1944, the US carrier advantage in the Pacific was crushing, and battleships increasingly fitted into an effective new role: flak protection for carriers.

Still, US victory was not assured; the tenacity of the Japanese defense everywhere prolonged operations and exhausted units. The distance of American lines of communication naturally lengthened as the drives of Nimitz and MacArthur proceeded.

That, in turn, increased supply and maintenance demands astronomically: fuel, ammo, planes, spares, food, construction materials, bulldozers, trucks, jeeps, tanks, landing craft, floating docks. All were needed in huge quantities, at a time when the US was also feeding Operation Overlord and the invasion of Germany.

The work of US Navy construction battalions (the Seabees) helped as much to win this ocean war as anything else. Like military intelligence, logistics was a crucial area fully valued by the US and consistently undervalued by the Japanese in the war. In Washington, Admiral King constantly warned that “the problem of distribution” threatened at all times to unhinge the war effort: “The problem of distribution became of primary importance; motion not size became the important factor. Distribution was now more important than production. The West Coast ports didn’t have enough; the Gulf and East Coast ports had to be brought into the logistics plan.”

Admiral Raymond Spruance commanded the fleet attacking the Marshalls, and Kwajelin was taken in Feb 1944.

That was a great strategic gain – it had a good lagoon and space on the islands to make the biggest airstrips required. By now, the US Navy had so many carriers that it could twin the assault on the Marshalls with a twelve-carrier diversionary operation against Truk and the Carolines. (That single “diversionary attack” on Truk eliminated at a stroke 10 percent of Japan’s dwindling cargo and tanker shipping, which made trade and communication with the Empire, its resources and citadels all but impossible.)

By now, US tactics were refined. The Marines were landing more effectively, and air/sea rescue was raised to an art, so that the US was rescuing downed pilots, while the Japanese were losing theirs. Radar-controlled anti-aircraft fire got better and better.

Still, with no more than five marine divisions and several army divisions and most of the air burden borne by carrier air, Nimitz was doing a lot with a little. He had very small numbers of men when compared with modern land armies. (MacArthur, for his part, never had more than a

dozen divisions.)

Nimitz hit the Marianas in June 1944. The distances were breathtaking – Saipan was 1,000 miles from Eniwetok, which was the closest operational base in the Marshalls, and 3,400 miles from Pearl Harbor. And Saipan was just 1,350 miles from Tokyo, which made it easier for the Japanese to defend.

As the war climaxed, the US military built bases at Manus, Leyte, Guam and Okinawa: floating docks, stores, fuel, ammo and repair facilities. Behind them came a constant flow of shipping; if the shipping ever stopped, the war would stop. That “Fleet Train” was a major innovation: oilers, repair ships, ammo ships, store ships, and escort carriers with spare planes would arrive at a selected base, and launch fast ships to the operational area under escort with all that the fleet needed.

The Pacific war was won by the aircraft carrier. Without carriers, the US would have been stuck in Hawaii or the Solomons in 1945. Because without carriers – supported by anti-aircraft and anti-sub escorts as well as the Fleet Train and marauding submarines – aircraft simply could not have coped with the vast distances in the Pacific.

The carriers brought tactical and strategic airpower finally into range. They conquered geography, which had been Japan’s only salvation in the face of growing American power. Land-based air patrols from Tinian, Okinawa and China devastated Japan’s last supply routes.

In the five months between April and August 1945, Gen Curtis LeMay’s 21st Bomber Command shattered Japan’s major cities with the B-29 Super-Fortress. Japan’s air defenses were so attrited by shortages, that the bombers flew in at 7,000 feet to release their bomb loads. In 66 Japanese cities, 40 percent of the built-up area was destroyed. Eight million refugees were created. Japanese worker absenteeism rose to 50 percent. Aluminum production fell to 9 percent of its wartime peak; steel production to 15 percent.

And then, of course, there was the atomic bomb. Only America could spare the resources to invent it: “secret cities” at Oak Ridge, Hanford and Los Alamos and a “Manhattan Project” that employed 130,000 and cost \$2 billion, which comes to about \$24.4 billion today. The extreme difficulty of the project is glimpsed in the fact that even with full government backing, an all-star team of scientists, and no interruptions from bombing or sabotage, a nuclear device was not ready until July 1945, too late for the war with Germany, for which the bomb had been intended. A single atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6 destroyed 50 percent of the city and killed 66,000. The bomb dropped on Nagasaki on Aug 9, destroyed 23 percent of the buildings and killed 40,000.

As Richard Overly observed in his book *Why the Allies Won*, airpower “recovered the initiative

for the Allies” in the Pacific. Chinese resistance on the mainland was ebbing in 1944, and, as Okinawa with its 80,000 US casualties revealed, the Japanese were going to inflict massive losses on a US invasion of Kyushu in 1945 and Honshu in 1946. So strategic bombing – conventional and nuclear – was needed to “strike the *coup de grace*.”

The war in the Pacific was the ultimate expression of the strategic “indirect approach.” The US principally targeted Japanese supply and communications, and steadily sliced off Japan’s coalition (such as it was), sea frontiers and foreign trade. That said, we must also note the mix of strategic indirectness and tactical directness. America’s indirect focus on the ulterior object of Tokyo was accompanied by ferocious storm assaults on the key intermediate island groups. The Americans killed twelve Japanese soldiers for every dead American in the Pacific. In all, 685,000 Japanese soldiers died fighting the Americans, along with 414,000 sailors and 50,000 pilots. The bloodshed helped demoralize the Japanese, who had premised Pearl Harbor and indeed their entire strategy in the war on their presumption of US weakness, decadence and even cowardice.

Whereas the US enjoyed a “production miracle” during the war, the Japanese suffered the opposite. Japanese GDP stagnated from 1941-45. Coal, vital for production of everything, simply could not be shipped in sufficient quantities because of naval and air attacks and the steady destruction of Japanese shipping. Well before the atomic bombs were dropped, the Japanese wartime economy had been destroyed: 3 million casualties, 80 percent of its shipping, 35 percent of its industrial machinery, 25 percent of its buildings, and 25 percent of its national wealth – 294 billion yen, in 1945 prices.

US airpower delivered most of this damage, but it was brought into range by the Navy.

US seapower conferred freedom of movement and choice of objective, as well as the choice of approach and the element of surprise. In the Pacific War, the US achieved what would have been impossible for any other nation in that conflict; they took tactical airpower and moved it within range of the Japanese homeland. They took the Army and Marines – which had loaded themselves with so many vehicles to mechanize, thus making themselves so mobile that they couldn’t move – and they moved them, using quantities of shipping that wd have been beyond the ability of any other great power: the American Way of War in a nutshell.