

2014

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Recommended Citation

Levy, James P. (2014) "Was There Something Unique to the Japanese That Lost Them the Battle of Midway?," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 67 : No. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol67/iss1/9>

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RESEARCH & DEBATE

WAS THERE SOMETHING UNIQUE TO THE JAPANESE THAT LOST THEM THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY?

James P. Levy

We military historians have a tendency to obsess over the causes of victory and defeat in war. Like economists, we have a profound desire to identify those actions that ensure success or generate failure, and like economists we are not overly good at it. At best, we can state the obvious, as when the disparity of forces between two opponents is extreme, or ascertain certain verities, like “It is good to have the better trained troops,” or “Keep your troops better equipped, fed, and rested than your opponent’s.” At worst, this obsession with winning and losing can lead to a lot of shameless Monday-morning quarterbacking and counterfactual historical speculation.

The battle of Midway is a prime example of this profound desire to identify such causes and, as its usual concomitant, to attribute blame for defeat. The victory of the U.S. Navy over the Imperial Japanese Navy on 4 June 1942 was both clear and unexpected. Since by many criteria the Japanese fleet was both qualitatively and quantitatively superior to its U.S. counterpart, historians have felt a great need to explain the outcome of the battle. One of the most popular books on the subject describes the victory as a “miracle,” and this quasi-supernatural hint at an explanation lies close to the surface of many popular accounts of the battle of Midway.¹ Americans are, like everyone else, often quite content to believe that God is on their side.

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Naval War College Review, Winter 2014, Vol. 67, No. 1

However, let us put aside popular perception to see what naval historians have to say about the outcome of the battle. Many explanations have been proffered. Paul Dull finds the key to the outcome of the battle in what he perceives as

the adoption by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto and his planning staff of a best-case scenario. He cannot understand why Yamamoto did not assume that the Americans would be exactly where they were on the morning of 4 June—a claim I find baffling.² Such an assumption would have required not genius but clairvoyance. Ronald Spector quotes Admiral Matome Ugaki's famous lament that the Japanese had been too "conceited," but this is surely more an excuse on Ugaki's part than an explanation of what happened.³ Douglas Smith sees the root cause of Japanese failure in Admiral Chūichi Nagumo's "arrogance and intransigence"; H. P. Willmott accuses the Japanese of suffering from "victory disease," an ailment whose symptoms he describes as "illusion," "confusion," and "self-deception."⁴ Harry Gailey is a bit vague in his attribution of blame but does point to Nagumo's decisions as "contributing" to Japan's defeat, and he describes Yamamoto's plan as "complex" and "grandiose."⁵ A recurring assumption about the battle appears to be that the Japanese did as much to lose the battle as the Americans did to win it, or more.

The latest and in many ways most complete account of the battle is Parshall and Tully's *Shattered Sword* (2005).⁶ While a work of fine research and well informed analysis, it is obsessed with debunking perceived "myths" about the battle, shooting down Mitsuo Fuchida's account of the battle in particular, and demonstrating the faults the authors believe existed in Japanese practice and doctrine. Parshall and Tully lay on blame with a trowel. Minoru Genda's plan, they maintain, was flawed; Nagumo was rigid and uninspired, lacking a firm grasp of the technical intricacies of his carrier force; while Yamamoto is portrayed as simply inept. In their efforts Parshall and Tully throw around some pretty robust anthropological assertions. Nagumo was not just personally a drone but the product of a culture that "valued conformity and obedience over creativity or personal initiative."⁷ In direct contradiction to this claim, it would appear that Yamamoto and his staff (and Admiral Toyoda later in the war) were too creative, dreaming up intricate "monstrosities" in their febrile Asiatic heads. The authors go even farther, saying, "It is clear that in this regard that Japanese naval strategy was influenced from its very inception by Oriental philosophies on the conduct of war."⁸ Leaving aside the fact that no one uses the term "oriental" anymore, it is hard to reconcile the belief that a society can both be wedded to "conformity and obedience over creativity and personal initiative" and still be the heir of Sun Tzu. Be that as it may, in the end Parshall and Tully simply opine that Japanese strategy was "warped."

Well, perhaps it was warped. Perhaps the Japanese were conceited, arrogant, confused, grandiose, inept, rigid, and taken in by what must be wrongheaded "Oriental philosophies on the conduct of war" that undermined their professional judgment. Yet maybe, just maybe, the Japanese did not lose the battle. Perhaps the Americans, who were very good and very lucky, won it, which leads me to ask

whether any such explanations and approbation as historians have meted out are needed to understand what the Japanese were doing during Operation MI—their campaign to capture Midway and defeat the American fleet. I do not believe we do need them. The plan to use an assault on Midway to provoke a fleet engagement was not at all foolish. Japan still enjoyed a marked superiority over the U.S. Navy in the Pacific. To surrender the initiative would have been dangerous and demoralizing. To wait around for the Americans to shift the carriers *Wasp* and *Ranger* to the Pacific and repair *Saratoga* would have been unconscionable, and to give them a chance to bring the fruits of the Naval Act of 1938 (the Second Vinson Act) off the slipways and into battle would have been suicidal. So in the spring of 1942, it was imperative to attack the Americans as soon as possible.

By examining the details of the battle, one can argue that certain actions for which the Japanese have been chastised were in no way bizarre or patently incorrect. Dividing the fleet into several dispersed subunits was not reckless or bizarre, and in fact the decision to disperse the fleet was unavoidable, for three reasons. First, the Imperial Japanese Navy was in 1942, like all other major navies, a hybrid force of older, slower ships and newer, faster ones. The carrier force could not be and should not have been combined with the battle fleet. The Americans did not combine fleets in 1942, and neither should have the Japanese. The surviving battlewagons of Pearl Harbor were never shackled like a ball and chain to the fast carrier task forces. This reality also applies to using the carriers *Junyo* and *Ryuho* with the fast carriers of Nagumo's Kido Butai—they were too slow. Second, the Midway operations involved both a convoy escort and an invasion force, as would the U.S. operations against both Tarawa and Guam, to give two examples. This meant the necessary division of the force into a carrier group, a covering group, and a landing group, at least. Third, given the vast expanse of the Pacific and the desire to grapple with the enemy, it was inevitable that forces would be dispersed to increase their chances of finding and engaging the American fleet. An overly compact disposition would have left too much of the ocean uncovered and given the Americans more room both to maneuver and to escape.

Only a dogmatic, Tinkertoy, popularized version of Mahan insists on a complete and permanent concentration of a fleet.⁹ One can as easily invoke the history of the Royal Navy, which the Japanese knew well, and the theories of Sir Julian Corbett, as any attachment to esoteric Asian military theory to understand why the Japanese might disperse their forces to coax an inferior enemy to battle.¹⁰ For the Royal Navy, a key strategic problem had historically been how to entice recalcitrant enemies like Spain, France, Italy, and Germany to come out and fight. Anyone with a cursory knowledge of the campaign of Trafalgar would know that the Royal Navy was never averse to dividing the fleet to increase the chance of intercepting and engaging the enemy. The British

had divided their forces strategically between Admiral Sir William Cornwallis in the English Channel and Admiral Lord Nelson off Cádiz to keep the enemy fleet divided. Nelson then tactically divided his fleet in the face of a numerically superior enemy the better to crush the Franco-Spanish fleet between two fires at Trafalgar. Jutland, the most studied battle of the interwar period, was a stark example of the problem of a massed fleet forcing an enemy to fight when that enemy knew he was outnumbered. On 31 May 1916 both Admirals John Jellicoe and Reinhard Scheer divided their fleets in the hope of drawing part of the enemy fleet into a tactical trap. Once Scheer fully comprehended that the Grand Fleet was out, he successfully ran for home, leaving a rigidly united British fleet to deal rather poorly with his evasions.

As for Yamamoto, since forcing an engagement was his primary objective, he was going to have to take some risks to bring it about. Dividing his fleet into dispersed subunits was just such a risk. The British had run similar risks in their naval war in the Mediterranean during the period 1940–42.¹¹ That the Americans would respond more aggressively than Britain's historical adversaries was something on which the Japanese were counting. Nevertheless, if the Americans discovered the entire Imperial Japanese Navy in one tight formation, they might easily have balked at the odds. Again, the Japanese wanted to fight a battle but were concerned that the Americans might not oblige. The Japanese, however, were not aware that the Americans knew of their plans and had responded preemptively with characteristic aggressiveness. Thus American diligence, not Japanese arrogance or incompetence, was the deciding factor.

This brings us to the issue of the conceit, arrogance, or overconfidence of the Japanese as crucial to explaining their failure at Midway. We have seen that this theme appears in the work of such capable authors as Ronald Spector and H. P. Willmott. Yet I would argue that these terms are meaningless as descriptors of causal agency. Any perusal of history will show that successful commanders from Julius Caesar to George Patton, from Alexander of Macedon to Nelson of Trafalgar, displayed personality traits that could by any definition be construed as conceited and confident in the extreme. Overconfidence, or excessive arrogance, is an *ex post facto* judgment, not an identifiable trait that can be disassociated from the knowledge that a confident or arrogant person has failed. If the Duke of Wellington had lost Waterloo or Robert E. Lee Chancellorsville, you can bet your bottom dollar that they would have been pilloried by historians after the fact as having shown conceit and overconfidence. If you need to know the results of an action to hand down a verdict of "overconfident," one can legitimately contend that the term has no explanatory power.

Given this assessment, there is not much that the Japanese can be blamed for doing wrong in the planning and execution of Operation Mi. On an abstract

level, fault can be found in the rigidity of Japanese carrier doctrine, designed as it was to deliver massed, integrated, and coordinated blows against a given target. When the tactical doctrine was given two things to do simultaneously, as it was at Midway (neutralize the island *and* the American carrier force), trouble arose. However, since the doctrine of massed strikes for decisive results is that espoused as the correct one by carrier enthusiasts then and now, and since the British have been roundly criticized for not adopting such a doctrine, it is a bit disingenuous for historians to blame the Japanese for sticking to it.

On a practical level, Yamamoto should very likely have pushed up the Dutch Harbor raid by a day, to give the Americans more time both to worry about its implications and to organize a response. Nagumo and his staff should have increased the dawn search by as many as six more Nakajima BSN (Kate) torpedo bombers acting in a reconnaissance role. All Japanese commanders should have immediately broken radio silence once it became obvious that the fleet had been sighted and surprise was no longer a consideration. All these actions would have been prudent, but none would likely have changed the outcome of the battle, because the Americans did very many things right. Brilliant code breaking was combined with an outstanding application of the intelligence thus obtained. Admirals Jack Fletcher and Raymond Spruance bravely and correctly launched their strikes before all the relevant information was in, and at an uncomfortably long range. Once success had been gained, the Americans acted with admirable caution. When you add in elements like long-range Catalina flying boats, radar, and luck, the Americans had more than enough factors working in their favor to win the battle. No cultural traits or ethno-racial characteristics need be invoked to explain the outcome.

What are my conclusions? First, military historians collectively, as a profession, are too often quick to apportion blame. I would posit as a model for avoiding this habit Eric Grove's excellent account of the battle of the Philippine Sea, wherein he praises both Spruance and Admiral Jisabūro Ozawa while stressing—and thereby hitting the nail on the head—the differences in technology and training as having been decisive.¹² Second, we military historians can be too eager to adopt cultural explanations, the wholly inadequate expedient of positing “national character,” or some other vague formulation as an explanatory force. As I like to ask my classes: Was French national character expressed in 1805–1806 or in 1870–71? Who were the “real” Frenchmen, the victors on the Marne in 1914 or the losers at Sedan in 1940? Some historians may take comfort in such “explanations,” but this author does not find them powerful or persuasive.

On a final note, I believe military historians are too often wary of invoking another power—the power of chance and contingency. It is understandable, and in many ways laudable, to try to determine causality and the factors that contribute

to victory and defeat, but we can be fooled into adopting an overly Newtonian view of battle, as if victory were controlled by iron laws of discrete cause and effect. In short, no matter how disquieting or unsatisfactory it may sound, luck (by which I mean unplanned or unexpected events that take place in an unintended manner without or outside human control) can play an explanatory part in assessing the causes of victory and defeat. The smile of the goddess of battle may be a more powerful metaphor than we would like to believe for the random or chance factors that influence the course of battle.

NOTES

1. See Gordon Prange, *Miracle at Midway* (New York: Penguin, 1983).
2. Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy 1941–1945* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2006), pp. 166–67.
3. Ronald Spector, *At War at Sea* (New York: Viking, 2001), pp. 202–203.
4. Douglas Smith, *Carrier Battles: Decision in Harm's Way* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2006), p. 118; H. P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1983), pp. 79–80.
5. Harry Gailey, *The War in the Pacific* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1996), pp. 152–71.
6. Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2007).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 408–409.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
9. See Jock Gardner's chapter 7 in *The Development of British Naval Thinking*, ed. Geoffrey Till (New York: Routledge, 2006), esp. pp. 134–59. The quote on page 151 is illuminating: "The proper balance between the concentration and division of force is difficult to achieve. Roskill was, like Sir Julian Corbett (whom he much admired and frequently quoted), suspicious of the tradition of massing forces as a prerequisite to seeking decision with the enemy by battle at sea." The Japanese, like the British, were not wedded to mass.
10. For the influence of the Royal Navy on the Imperial Japanese Navy, see Arthur Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), and Sir Julian Corbett's masterwork *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988). The introduction by Eric Grove to this edition is priceless.
11. For several examples of operational dispersion and misdirection see the Naval Staff history, *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys* (New York: Routledge, 2007), as well as Jack Greene and Alessandro Masignani, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean, 1940–1943* (London: Chatham, 1998).
12. Eric Grove, *Sea Battles in Close-Up* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1993), pp. 163–97.