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# Wargaming, an Enforcer of Strategic Realism: 1919-1942

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Michael Vlahos

**W**argaming in peace prepares for war. This is a simple and straightforward assumption in both civilian and service world views. Whether board games, computer models, or fleet exercises, there is a notion that such mental simulation encourages operational readiness—it is the recipe for victory. This is true especially of the wargaming that has been done at Newport. The Naval War College (NWC) introduced serious service wargaming to America, and made the act of *kriegspiel* the center of its course in the period “between the wars.”<sup>1</sup>

It has become something like scripture to think of Newport interwargaming as *the* mental tool readying the Navy for the Pacific War. According to popular myth, the unfolding of that war followed faithfully the itinerary preordained in those sleepy, peaceful years. A letter of Chester Nimitz, written in 1965 to Vice Adm. Charles Melson, then president of the Naval War College, lent interwargaming an oracular and mystical element: “The enemy of our games was always—Japan—and the courses were so thorough that after the start of WWII—nothing that happened in the Pacific was strange or unexpected. . . . I credit the Naval War College for such success I achieved in strategy and tactics both in peace and war.”<sup>2</sup>

There is more, however, to what the War College did for the U.S. Navy after “the war to end all wars.” The games not only encouraged an evolution in war plans during the interwar period, they came to drive development of the 1930s’ version of a U.S. “Maritime Strategy.”

In 1919, the U.S. Navy had a generalized mission only: to protect American “interests.” These interests included the sea defense of the Philippine Islands from the only possible threat to them, the Empire of Japan. The rescue of this archipelago by the U.S. Fleet was, in 1919, the only possible wartime navy mission recognized by Congress, President, and people. The Navy, in other

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words, was bound by the strategic world view of the American Government and its electorate, and its parameters of action were circumscribed to a single narrow operational scenario.

From the years 1919-1941, the Navy developed its own strategic world view, one in which the missions of the fleet were integrated into a broad context of American national strategy. If the Navy wanted to define its utility beyond the relief of Manila Bay, then the mission framework had to be dismantled, and exchanged for a broader canvas. The major agency in evolving strategic as well as narrow operational plans was the process of wargaming.<sup>3</sup> The period 1919-1941 was a coherent "era," distinct and well-bounded both historically and structurally. The problem of assimilating the experiences and codifying the "lessons" of the last war, and preparing for some yet-undefined future war on the basis of such acquired "truth" was the basic issue of a peacetime era bounded by two wars.

At the Naval War College, the challenge of straightforward war preparation was contrasted daily with a more generalized "spirit of the age." A unique American antimilitarism allied to a determined antiwar climate throughout the Western World created a special burden on American naval officers attempting to discharge both their higher calling and their institutional ethos.<sup>4</sup> As such, the recognitions emerging from this distinct interwar

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"generation" has special relevance to the problems of war preparation—and more specifically, strategic world view preparation—in an era publicly pacific yet by service definition always potentially prewar. As important as wargaming is as a means of keeping experienced officers "sharp" as potential battle commanders, or training those who will someday ascend to service leadership, the games have an abiding higher service importance.

They are as well the stuff of strategic plans, and strategic plans before the fact have the potential to draw the horizon line of service mission. Indeed, in a world where such mission is politically elastic—still unformed or in flux—the process of gaming can help to test and refine, if not revise, a national mission which must be realized in war by the military services.

### Game Evolution

Between the wars there were three distinct phases to wargaming at Newport, and they corresponded to explicit approaches, outcomes, and reactions to the gaming process.

**Early Phase, 1919-1927.** Postwar gaming was dominated by short-war, “campaign” parameters. The early phase was most resonant to the recent Great War and its “putative” lessons. I say putative, because the real lessons of the sea war were as yet unappreciated. In the aftermath of war, the romantic expectations of classical sea strategy, as codified by Mahan and exemplified by Nelson, still held sway. The U.S. Navy still lived by Mahanist doctrine. This dovetailed nicely into a postwar canvas where the only possible enemy of the United States was Japan, and then only in the context of a strictly limited scenario, almost a rerun of an 18th century “sugar war.”

If Japan and America had gone to war in the 1920s, the Navy’s main mission would have been to succor the Philippines, the main U.S. national interest in the Far East. Since the Washington Treaties of 1922 legitimized a U.S. battle fleet superior to that of Japan, an unquestioning American strategic initiative was clearly implied. The great and unrecognized burden of the Washington Treaty system was that it permitted the U.S. Navy no strategic option other than to undertake an immediate Pacific crossing in war. To nations with the larger force, the offensive was an urgent obligation. One committed to the Mahanian historical vision, where the entire body of his historical vision dwells on the impact of navies on national destiny, could not yield to an admission that Japan possessed real strategic superiority in the Pacific. We had the bigger battle fleet. It would have seemed foolish and weak of us to have avoided immediate decisive battle according to heroic tradition. In political terms, it would have been an unthinkable public abdication by the Navy.<sup>5</sup>

It was a politico-cultural necessity to take an instant offensive lead to straightforward, transpacific fleet movement. The imagined war with Japan in the 1920s took on a superficial, mock-aggressive, mock-confident pose, that a 5:3 fleet had no choice but to adopt. All that seemed necessary was a passage across the broad Pacific to an expected confrontation with a battle fleet that treaty had codified as inferior. Unfortunately, such movement entailed enormous logistical concentration and planning. The fleet that would have made such a transit would have resembled a 20th-century version of the Spanish Armada—the fleet formation would have included 170 ships in the fleet train alone, all moving at 10 knots—and a picking equally ripe for the Imperial Japanese Navy.<sup>6</sup>

The gaming dynamics tended to build up to a “decisive” fleet action. It was expected, in spite of all recent evidence from the recent North Sea naval war, that the numerically inferior Japanese Fleet would meet the oncoming U.S. Fleet under a twin handicap. First, it would accept battle in a classic battleline engagement that would heavily favor the American battle fleet. Second, it would refrain from forcing decisive engagement until the U.S. armada had completed its Pacific crossing and was fully relaxed and ready to do battle.

This was a period of complacency. What hubris! Here the United States faced a fleet that had defeated the Third World naval power, that of imperial Russia, a mere generation ago and had since gone from strength to strength. It was building some of the most advanced combatants in the world and possessed the advantage of strategic geography. In spite of all these dangling warning signs, the U.S. Navy of the 1920s still tended to view the Imperial Japanese Navy with a trace of disdain.<sup>7</sup>

Gaming scenarios were developed in response to a simple strategic mission—relief of a beleaguered Philippines. As the U.S. Navy moved the battle fleet from the Atlantic to the Pacific in 1919, it placed its strategic glass on an enemy who seemed distant and unrealistic. During the time of “Taisho democracy,” the possibility of a Japanese assault on the Philippines was remote. Japan appeared to be a parliamentary system integrating into the common tradition of the Western democracies. If a conflict evolved, it was reasoned, it would surely erupt over marginal, not vital national interests on either side. A hypothetical war with Japan in the 1920s was imagined publicly as limited and restrained.<sup>8</sup>

The then war game mission-charter was forced to focus on residual American commitments that were out of step with the international climate of the 1920s. To make matters worse, the Navy was trying to keep itself honed for war in a domestic climate that was not merely determinedly antiwar, but anti-internationalist. The Navy was attempting to keep alive in the schema of national policy. In the 1920s this was reduced to the rescue of the Philippines. Unfortunately, such an event had distinct atavistic overtones, and American society was shedding not only internationalist but former imperialist notions. The Philippines were becoming a national embarrassment. The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 eventually defined the islands as something to divest progressively as a progressive nation should.

According to traditions and political norms, the Navy was merely attempting to carry out traditional charter—to defend national interests as its gaming showed. But the Navy had a problem. It was trying to deal with a world where its national interest seemed either unthreatened or unworthy: what was its future?

***Middle Phase, 1928-1934.*** Then there began a slow shift to protracted war operations. Wargaming at Newport mutated after 1928 and, as might be expected, so did the Navy’s expectations about future war. The notion of conflict with Japan became studded with serious obstacles, and the attainment even of limited national objectives was in doubt. In short, the vision of a single, transpacific campaign climaxing in an American Trafalgar was replaced by an incipient sensation that future naval operations in that area were foreboding.

Game problems began to emphasize mobilization assets, as during this period the War College initiated several major economic and logistically oriented exercises. As war with Japan became a greater gaming challenge to the Navy, it

became clear that the resources necessary to conduct such a war transcended the sum of peacetime forces in the U.S. Fleet, and indeed, the capability of purely "naval" forces. If the United States were to fight a major Pacific war with Japan, army units and the military resources of potential regional allies in the Western Pacific would be necessary to defeat the Japanese Empire. Several specialized games after 1928 focused on joint operations with the U.S. Army and many games after 1930 included as strategic "givens," alliance with non-U.S. forces.<sup>9</sup>

Instant and imperative transpacific offensive operations gave way to an initial defensive posture. As the notion of a cartoon-like armada—a Dreadnought juggernaut—majestically rolling across the Pacific to inevitable victory evaporated in rigorous gaming, the strategic mission—charter of the "defense of national interests" was revised. In effect, the original objectives and purposes underlying a hypothetical war with Japan now required reexamination.<sup>10</sup>

War might begin with the actual loss of the Philippines and the prostration of American arms. What would be the actual objectives of a war with Japan framed by humiliation and initial defeat? If, as in 1920s' expectation, victory would be a simple rescue of a beleaguered garrison heroically resisting, then the narrow mission of the Navy decreed by government and electorate would be enough. Honor would be salvaged, and national purposes as well. The principle of proportionality would be served by inflicting a sharp and salutary slap in 18th-century manner according to limited belligerent provocation.

But what if the Philippines fell? What if the last bastions of American power and influence in the Western Pacific were eliminated, leaving American naval power the task of retaking them before any opportunity would finally present itself to destroy the Japanese Fleet? What if, in attempting to reestablish American power at one breadth, the Navy was so depleted that Japan could avoid a fleet action completely?

This possibility spurred a thorough gaming examination of combined operations with the Army, including joint Army and Navy War College scenarios focusing on large-scale amphibious operations. The Navy in the late 1920s began to realize that the loss of American possessions in the Western Pacific prior to an advance of the U.S. Fleet would require a recasting of the entire campaign. The gaming of the late 1920s and early 1930s forced the Navy to confront the truth behind the Washington Treaty system—that Japan traded a superficial concession in capital ship tonnage for a real advantage in strategic geography. In that treaty, Japan under protest accepted a battleship ratio only 60 percent that of the United States. In return, however, the United States agreed not to further fortify any of its outposts in the Western Pacific. Superficial superiority in battleship numbers would not compensate for true strategic inferiority. Games began to make it clear that any transpacific advance would have to wait for the development of superior

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offensive resources, and this meant amphibious capability and oceanic logistics. Mahan's battle fleet was no longer the simple equation of national power.

These were years of the demise of the classic "fleet problem" in gaming. In the period before America's entry into the Great War in 1917, the Navy worried about defending the Americas against attack, and every threat was capable of reduction to a "fleet problem" codification. If Black (Wilhelmine Germany) descended on Puerto Rico with its coal-burning *schlachtschiffe*, then the U.S. battle fleet would sortie and the outcome, even if it required several months of delicate positioning, would finish with a final clash of dreadnoughts. The legacy of Mahanian readings of 17th and 18th-century naval warfare lingered on for the U.S. Navy into the 1920s, in spite of German reluctance to play at Jutland. Japan, like Germany, also would operate with inferior battleship numbers. Germany demonstrated the importance of a numerically inferior battle fleet utilizing other advantages to negate simple ship superiority. Against a determined opponent, able to use its naval assets from established strategic positions across the Western Pacific, a "fleet problem" approach to naval strategy was impossible.<sup>11</sup>

It was a time of strategic awareness. The gaming at Newport in the late 1920s suddenly experienced a kind of reality collapse. That is, the assumptions, or if you wish the normative vanities that attempted to describe the reality of naval operations were torn down in a process of brutal simulation. There was in an era of complacency no complacent gaming. For a while it was possible to play at the kind of war that seemed promising for the Navy and acceptable to the American people. Then the reality of gaming set in. Perhaps as a function of the American ethos, it has been difficult to make devices of testing and truth—such as wargaming—perform as ritual mechanisms of cultural self-fulfillment. In interwar Japan, it was acceptable and even necessary to wear the Emperor's clothes. There was no such ritual at Newport.<sup>12</sup>

There emerged an awareness of the need for an all-out naval campaign effort in order to defeat Japan, and so counter its threat to the Philippines and U.S. interests in the Western Pacific. What kind of naval effort would be needed to defeat Japan, if a simple battle fleet procession could lead only to politically disastrous stalemate, if not outright defeat? How could the Navy respond to a Japan capable of controlling the Western Pacific after an initial period of war, seizing all defended U.S. possessions? Clearly, in order to regain American possessions, a path would have to be cleared and the Japanese Fleet effectively destroyed. To achieve these limited aims the U.S. Fleet could not hope to undertake a transpacific offensive without preponderant naval power. This would entail an initial period of defensive holding, of going on the strategic defensive, while America mobilized. The offensive against a prepared enemy defensive position, would have to be

deliberate, destroying Japanese resistance through attrition. By the time that U.S. naval forces reached the Philippines, several years of war might have passed. For strictly limited objectives, a relatively unlimited war would be necessary.

This final point in the process of strategic recognition forced the Navy to face the new truth—that a successful strategy to relieve the Philippines required the defeat of the Japanese Fleet and of Japan itself, as a power in the Pacific. A war objective confined merely to transoceanic passage after several years of combat would be disproportionate to the effort and sacrifice. The war itself would not necessarily, let alone satisfactorily, be terminated by a simple geographic return to prewar frontiers. Both the Imperial Japanese Navy and the sources of its effective strength—the industrial might of the Japanese homeland itself—would have to be destroyed or neutralized permanently in order to secure a war objective commensurate with war effort.

**Late Phase, 1935-1941.** By the mid-1930s, war scenarios of three to five years duration were becoming common. The bruising experiences of the recognition phase led to several concrete revisions in the gamers' approach to future war. The first was an acceptance of wars geared to three to five years—long wars, gritty wars and expensive wars.

Coalition war scenarios with multiple actors and strategic-geographic planning—involving the Dutch East Indies and the Soviet Union for example—were tested. The wars began to exploit the theater geography and leverage of regional allies. Even the Soviet Union was considered as an ally of the United States, tying down Japan in Manchuria. The cooperation of the Netherlands through its possessions in the Dutch East Indies was particularly favored, since it gave the Navy a forward springboard for an assault on the Philippines.

Scenarios encouraged a phased, consolidative transpacific advance through island amphibious assault. This had become the foundation of expected war with Japan. At first, this strategic bridging was limited to the quick seizure of Truk as a way-station. Later, it was admitted that the advance would require a serial amphibious process, the image naturally later giving rise to the metaphor of "island-hopping." From an early assumption that island seizure would be straightforward, the later period anticipated rough scrimmaging on atoll beach after beach.

The destruction of the Orange (Japanese) battle fleet became subordinate to an elimination of enemy capacity to wage war. In the gaming process the U.S. Fleet was typically ground down in offensive attrition battles, and climactic fleet actions became less critical to campaign or war goals' achievement. There were still big battle games, of course, but the late period relied less on the theater spectrum—naval attrition

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war, small unit war, war over sealanes and amphibious landings. It was war on a big scale writ small, where the accumulative welter of lesser battles produced a strategic effect not dissimilar to a single battleship big bang. Increasingly, gaming and doctrine came to describe the battleline as supportive, necessary for the operation of more active forward task groups, but not in itself the direct agency of enemy combatant attrition.

War termination became a dominating concept. As these hard-headed games were played, grappling and seizing island after island, climactically landing on the Philippines themselves, it became clear that the war could not end with strategic repossession. There was a metamorphosis in the objective of the war. The Navy, which began its gaming of theoretical war with Japan as a kind of lark, ended in recasting not only the nature of the war enactment but the purposes of the war itself.

War termination came to be linked in scenarios to a notion of Japanese national surrender, and of national military strategy aimed at bringing such surrender about through elimination of enemy capacity to resist. Game outcomes began to insist on the carrying of the war to the Japanese home islands. War termination in these games was achieved through bringing war to the Japanese and reducing the Japanese people either by blockade or strategic aerial bombardment. This was a period of conceptual emplacement, where a working naval strategy was shaped within the broad context of a complete theater-level war.

### Game Outcomes

If the process of gaming promoted this strategic recognition, what did the gaming show? How did actual game outcomes and the process of gaming itself, in this distinct era, demonstrate the role of the War College in encouraging strategic evolution?

How did gaming play unfold to wrench the Navy from preconceptions and customary assumptions about transpacific war? How did gaming results encourage Navy improvisation in the face of strategic adversity, and how did such concepts lead to actual doctrinal and technological innovation in naval warfare?

**Early Phase, 1919-1927.** Tac.96, 1923. This is a typical exercise from the complacent postwar period. The entire Blue fleet was assembled in Hawaii, complete with 170 auxiliary ships of the fleet train. The armada, in symmetrical formation then, as the game history put it, "dashed" across the Pacific to Manila.<sup>13</sup> By game end, Manila was successfully relieved. All attempts by the Imperial Japanese Navy to arrest the victorious progress of the American task force were of no avail.<sup>14</sup>

In the course of several sharp transit engagements, 3 Blue capital ships were lost out of a total of 18. Orange had lost 2 battleship and battle cruiser, and its 8

remaining capital ships were all damaged. Its light forces had been decimated.<sup>15</sup> Fleet movement had been initiated and the entire campaign completed by D+90. The war was over and the Orange fleet retired after prolonged suffering and the Philippines were secured.

**Middle Phase, 1928-1934.** OP.IV, 1928 characterizes the shifting transition period in interwargaming. In this exercise, when the U.S. Navy had 18 battleships, only 10 reached Tawi-Tawi combat-capable. (Sixteen years later, this would be the chosen site for Japanese counterattack, to stop American assault on Leyte.) This was mere numerical parity with the Japanese battle fleet. By crossing the Pacific, the Navy succeeded in presenting itself for battle in Japan's chosen arena on Japanese terms.<sup>16</sup>

OP.VI, 1929 was a continuation of OP.IV, from the situation existing at the end of play the previous year: "This situation, which was about as bad for the Blue fleet as could be expected, short of actual defeat, also offered the possibility of framing additional problems, to be solved and played at the Naval War College, with the object of . . . defending the line of supply across the Pacific with naval forces which would not be superior to Orange forces."<sup>17</sup>

In spite of an adverse balance of capital ships, and absence of floating docks to repair damaged battleships, the game continued. At Tawi-Tawi, 56,000 Army and Marine troops were concentrated for the assault to retake Luzon. One Marine division was in the Marshalls, and the 2nd Army Division was in Hawaii, as well as four more Army divisions being readied in CONUS for commitment to the recapture of the Philippines.<sup>18</sup> To a great extent, Blue weakness in battleships was to be compensated by air superiority: "The Blue Fleet may be in a position of temporary inferiority, but ultimately should possess a great superiority in aircraft."<sup>19</sup> This was to be achieved at sea with rapid introduction of eight XOCV aircraft carriers converted from the premier liners in the American merchant marine, including the *Leviathan*. Here we see the introduction of the concept for the future CVE.<sup>20</sup>

"It is not possible to regain Luzon with the Fleet alone," so read the Estimate of the Situation. Even though transpacific fleet movement was still thought possible in 60 days, the war was now protracted to at least a year, culminating in a series of multidivision landings in the central Philippines. Against an estimated 100,000 Japanese troops in Luzon, the United States planned to throw 350,000 Americans in coordinated landings. In the intricate and detailed planning for these operations, the old armored cruisers and XOCVs in the Blue fleet were used much as Oldendorf's old BBs and the "jeep carriers" at Leyte Gulf fifteen years later.<sup>21</sup>

OP.IV, 1933 was a decisive game. As usual the Blue offensive sortied from Honolulu in armada-formation—a main body of 239 ships, although the size of the fleet train was now pared down to 69 for 170 combatants.<sup>22</sup> From a

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standard start, however, things turned sour. Though in 1933 the Navy had 15 battleships, only 7 reached Manila Bay, all heavily damaged, and 18 out of 24 cruisers and all 4 CVs were either sunk or damaged beyond repair. Two night torpedo attacks pressed home by “practically the whole Orange Fleet,” make the 1942 night battles at Guadalcanal seem tame.<sup>23</sup> The postgame critique, yesterday’s form of “hot wash-up,” was unsparing of Blue. The simple, short transit to Manila was finally declared infeasible. This game was the last of the simple transit, short war scenarios of future war with Japan.<sup>24</sup>

Adversity spurred innovation. In OP.IV, routine underway replenishment of task groups was introduced into game play six years before operational testing in the fleet. The problem of achieving working war termination became an issue in postgame discussion in early December 1933. For the first time, strategic bombardment of Japanese home islands was suggested as an alternative to simple blockade: “It was said that in a war with Orange we were holding on to the old idea of economic strangulation of Orange . . . and urged thought on ways of conducting a more successful war with Orange . . . . It was brought out that Orange is very much worried about air attacks on her cities.”<sup>25</sup>

A nagging question remains, why did the U.S. Fleet begin to fail in gaming in the late 1920s? To a relatively ignorant public, the visible naval balance did not begin to shift until the mid-1930s, when it became obvious to all that Japan had taken advantage of, while the United States neglected, the opportunity to build to treaty limits. How did a triumphant Blue fleet of the early 1920s become the bedraggled, bruised and beaten task force of the early 1930s?

First, gaming evolved during the 1920s. The gaming process improved as the campaign problem of a strategic campaign against Orange was explored. As the transoceanic movement was repeated again and again, Japanese as well as American gambits and approaches were explored. It was discovered that a mature Orange strategic defensive posture could figuratively cut the heart out of Blue.

Second, professionals at the War College were much more sensitive to potential trends in the interwar Japanese shipbuilding program than a public lulled by treaty security. The very early Japanese 8” cruiser program was creating problems for U.S. naval perceptions as early as 1925. The big new cruisers and destroyers of the IJN had no equals in the U.S. Navy. In OP.IV, for example, the Orange fleet, newly reinforced by cruisers and destroyers superior to U.S. counterparts, was considered capable of launching debilitating night torpedo attacks. The instructors and students at the Naval War College correctly framed an area of Japanese tactical superiority—which would be so devastatingly asserted in 1942—without specific knowledge of large-diameter, oxygen-propelled torpedoes. The perceived strategic balance had shifted

**Late Phase, 1935-1941.** By 1935, in OP.III, gaming plans of operations were detailing a careful central Pacific advance by prepared stages through the Mandates, with the development of a forward base at Truk. For OP.V., 1938, the itinerary had been established—Eniwetok to Ponape to Truk. OP.VII, 1938, continued the advance to Yap and Peleliu, and then on to Mindanao.<sup>27</sup> Scenarios in the late phase actively included regional allies for Blue. Both OP.VII, 1938 and 1939 assumed Brown (the Netherlands and Dutch East Indies) to be committed to the American cause.<sup>28</sup>

The 1939 scenario starts, not at D+30 or 90 or 180, but in the *third year* of war with Orange. Blue's advance across the central Pacific has taken all that time, and the game begins with three million Americans under arms, and 400,000 of them concentrated on the northern New Guinea coast at Biak (not far from where MacArthur would end the Southwest Pacific drive, at Hollandia), preparing for an amphibious assault on the Philippines. Two games, Tac. VI, 1934 Sr., and OP.III, 1937 Sr., both suggested an American-Soviet coalition against Japan, with the Soviet Union (Purple), attacking Orange in Manchuria.<sup>29</sup>

One final document deserves comment. The Advanced Class of 1935-36 presented a consensus report on a plan of operations for a transpacific offensive. As a result of the cumulative lessons of gaming, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Successful execution of this operation (depends) on first being able to reduce Japan's Air Force.
- Increase the carrier-based Air Force to at least double that of Japan.
- The preparation of the Bonins as a launching point for continuous air attacks against the vital centers of Japan.
- To exploit the relative inability of Japan to sustain a prolonged war . . . .<sup>30</sup>

## War Game Record

These are some salient examples of games that shifted the boundary posts of Navy strategic world view, but there were many games played each year. The common assumption in modern historiography is that the games simply tended to repeat standard scenarios and unfold in standard patterns for the instruction of officers at the War College. It is contended here that gaming at Newport not only changed in form and outcome over the 22 interwar years, but that these changes themselves had a powerful impact on Navy strategic world view.

How can these results be interpolated in the overall context of all wargaming conducted at Newport over 20 years? In general, what was the record?

There were 318 war games recorded and preserved in the War College Archives played between 1919 and 1941.<sup>31</sup> Of these, 136 were clearly campaign,

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war. Of these, 127 were conducted against Orange. The remaining nine were focused on Red or, in the late prewar, from 1939–41, on Black-Silver (Germany and Italy) combination threats.<sup>32</sup> There were 106 purely tactical games. Seventy-one of which were full fleet actions, the formal clash of battle fleets. Forty-eight of these Jutlands or Trafalgars were against the Red fleet.<sup>33</sup>

The Naval War College has been criticized at academic length for repeating, year after year, the kind of battle that the next war could prove anachronistic. However, the Jutland cliché reruns tend to be Blue-Red, and there were important reasons for this. The first of these may have been unconscious, yet they touched on the utility of wargaming in an unquantifiable and yet critical realm, that of reinforcing service ethos.

Meeting in hypothetical and unrealistic combat the world's largest fleet, with the most glorious traditions and the highest reputation, would tend to develop benchmark moral equality that would elevate U.S. Navy morale. It could instill an operational confidence that would be needed to face an adversary as tough, as determined, and as well-entrenched as Japan. It is true that pro forma war plans were maintained against Red into the 1930s. Their purpose in perusal is obvious: to challenge the planning parameters of a theater war in the Atlantic, to keep alive some mental readiness to respond to an Atlantic, as well as Pacific strategic threat. With the emergence of a true Axis threat in the late 1930s, Atlantic wargaming took on a more urgent mien.<sup>34</sup>

The second purpose in fighting a matched but improbable foe was equally subtle. Creating tactical scenarios where the U.S. Navy did not have superior numbers helped to cement an aggressive, antidefeatist, anticomplacent combat ethos among naval officers by placing them consistently in adverse battle environments. This device was made all the more critical by a natural tendency to place all thoughts about war with Japan in the context of mental campaign architectures and an inclination, given peacetime treaty ratios, to assume that the U.S. Fleet would enjoy a comfortable numerical superiority. Fighting an equal or superior fleet, again and again, cancelled this impulse. Endless, frustrating Jutland reruns with Red helped to prepare the U.S. Navy for the equal frustration awaiting it in 1942 and 1943, and instilled the tactical grit needed to survive and win.<sup>35</sup>

As a Campaign Problem, the repeated strategic gaming of Orange war forced the Navy to divest itself of several former "reality-assumptions":

- The notion that war at sea was defined according to a formal, climactic clash of battle fleets, and that naval strategy consisted of maneuvering one's fleet to bring the adversary to decisive engagement.

- The belief that superior peacetime naval order of battle was equivalent to *available* force in war, that a peacetime treaty status quo would persist indefinitely, and that only traditional naval weapons according to traditional hierarchies of importance would be necessary to defeat the enemy.

- The assumption that naval war across an oceanic theater could be conducted quickly, and that enemy advantage in strategic geography was marginal both to strategic planning and to the conduct of naval operations in war.

- The hypothesis that war with Japan would be limited in forces engaged, in objective, in belligerent participants, and in time.

Once these traditional building blocks of U.S. Navy world view were swept away, in large part due to balanced and realistic wargaming, the Navy began to shape its own, mature approach to naval war and national strategy in that war:

- It developed in gaming the doctrine and practice of progressive transoceanic offensive operations, where there had been before mere transit itinerary.

- It recognized, again through the process of cumulative lessons in yearly gaming, that the demands of such an operation on such a scale, and against such an adversary, required a critical examination of overall national war planning and Navy missions in a protracted theater war, including extensive combined operations and the prospect of serious coalition warfare.

Gaming as well forced a conceptual linkage between the demands of total war planning and a more expansive strategic world view. It underscored the need for the Navy to develop a coherent maritime strategy that would support more than traditional norms of the defense of national interests. Gaming reality forced the Navy to seize a set of strategic concepts about the conduct of future war which had the capacity to redefine the very nature of America's role in the world. When world dynamics shifted in the later 1930s to threaten visibly even the narrowest construction of American national security, the operational concepts developed by the Navy provided the national command authority a ready instrument of global war.

### From Interwar to Postwar to . . . ?

Today the spirit of interwar Navy wargaming is being revived in a series of "Global Games" played annually at the Center for War Gaming at the Naval War College. These exercises are much broader both in participation and in scope than the purely naval matches fought by War College students 50 years ago. Today's Global Games bring together players and observers from all agencies and military services in the U.S. Government, and even include academics, scientists, and engineers. The intent, however, is the same: to put to the test in hypothetical war not only America's military and political leadership, but the very sense of reality underlying our assumptions about war and strategy.

Like the interwar era, the spirit of this age opposes the exercises called war games as either childish exercises (as depicted by the recent movie), or evilly

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conjurative, as by “wizards of Armageddon” bidding demons into the light—by the very act of consideration somehow making war more possible. As in the interwar era, the Navy after 1945 received the new norms of a changed postwar national security policy, and attempted to fit them to its own traditional, operational ethos.

Those norms—well known to us as deterrence, escalation, and the acceptance of a kind of nuclear utility—are today in the process of perceptual transformation. The freeze movement, the Strategic Defense Initiative, the desire to substitute classical conventional warfighting capability for nuclear-theater deterrence in Europe, all point toward a common American yearning to escape the iron maiden of Mutual Assured Destruction.

In such nonnuclear imaginings, where the deterrent mechanism of controlled nuclear escalation is replaced by the threat of classical battle, the vision of the unthinkable not only becomes acceptable, but the horrific short war leading to nuclear holocaust is transformed into a potential “protracted” conventional war. It is in this latter-day mutation of future war expectation that the problem of defining the Navy mission begins to resemble that of the Navy in 1928.<sup>36</sup> As it was some 60 years ago, the more the uses of naval power in such a context are examined, the more the norms themselves are redefined.

What has been the bedrock assumption of deterrence theory for almost 40 years—a short conventional phase of major war, eventually escalating to inevitable nuclear use—is changing. A conventional deterrent, however, risks a long war, in the manner of the last two world wars. Given the lack of political resolve among most NATO members to foot the bill for conventional parity with the Warsaw Pact, the ability of the Alliance to stalemate, and so deter, Soviet conventional provocation is marginal. In a protracted conventional war, Soviet victory without resort to nuclear use appears possible.

The Navy has become central to the debate over a substitute strategy of conventional deterrence in ways undreamed of in an earlier era of nuclear utility. Whether Soviet provocation risks limited or general war, the survival of the West is dependent not simply on the balance of ground and air forces in Central Europe. The flexible offensive strength of the Navy may offer the West its strategic reserve, its only conventional credibility to deter Soviet thoughts of force majeure on the Central Front.<sup>37</sup> By redefining its potential contribution in such a hypothetical scenario, the Navy is doing what it did in the 1920s and 1930s.

Above all, it is developing not simply a doctrine for naval utility in a protracted, conventional general war, it is searching for ways in which Allied naval power—the one advantage of NATO in the power balance—can be used to terminate a Soviet conventional offensive. How is this being explored? Why, through wargaming, of course.<sup>38</sup>

## Notes

1. On this, see William McCarty Little, "The Strategic Naval War Game, Or Chart Maneuver," Lecture delivered June 1912, Record Group II, p. 10, Naval War College Naval Historical Collection (hereafter NHC); also, Bradley A. Fiske, *The Navy as a Fighting Machine* (New York: Scribner, 1916).

2. Nimitz to Adm. Charles L. Melson, 24 September 1965, NHC. The myth is preserved today. See Adm. James Watkins' reference to the Nimitz' statement in Hearings Before the Senate Subcommittee on Seapower and Force Projection, 14 March 1984, p. 3882.

3. This linkage was established well before the creation of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. In the first decade of the 20th century, nearly all naval war planning was developed through gaming and conferences held at Newport. After the "Great War," planning was the responsibility of the War Plans Division, OP-12 with "interagency" planning coordinated through the Joint Board. Gaming at the Naval War College, however, was the testing agency of the assumptions and expectations that underlay official war planning doctrines. For more on this, see Capt. W.S. Pye, "War Plans," Lecture delivered 7 January 1926, Record Group 15, NHC, and Cdr. R.B. Coffey, "The Naval War Plans Division, Naval Plans and Planning," Lecture delivered at the Army War College, 11 March 1924, Record Group 8, NHC. Many of those trained in the War College course, or who returned as instructors, later applied their personal gaming experience to revisions and amendments to the main war plan WPL-9. This is attested by J.O. Richardson, *On the Treadmill to Pearl Harbor* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1973), p. 261.

4. As late as 1938, Senate Hearings Before the Committee on Naval Affairs, "Naval Expansion Program" (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1938), included 65 pages of testimony and statements from 42 peace groups. They called not for naval expansion, but for unilateral U.S. naval disarmament; and this, in times of accelerating international strife and military buildup. As J.O. Richardson lamented in 1934, at Newport: "... the American people are unalterably opposed to entanglement in European affairs, [and] they will not support entanglement in Asiatic affairs. . . . An American Naval Strategy that would be in keeping with present public opinion would be a purely defensive strategy. . . . The Hawaiian Islands would be a defensive outpost rather than a stepping off place for our westward movement across the Pacific." Capt. J.O. Richardson, "The Relationship in War of National Strategy, Tactics, and Command," Thesis, 1934 Senior Class, Record Group 13, NHC, p. 2.

5. This theme of an American offensive as judgment on American character was hammered on the interwar Navy by several vocal younger officers, especially Cdr. Holloway Frost. As he wrote to Adm. W.S. Sims: "I hope that I was able to emphasize the necessity of our officers being infused with the offensive spirit; it is necessary that we develop what might be called 'Offensive Minds' in the service; and to instill in all the idea of thinking about what we can do to the enemy rather than what the enemy can do to us." Frost to Sims, 14 October, 1923, Sims Papers, Naval Historical Foundation, Library of Congress. His voluble public writing framed Navy world view, especially his *Battle of Jutland* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1936), which scathingly condemned British irresolution in 1916 for failing to finish the German battle fleet.

6. This was from the game history of "The Battle of the Marianas," Tac.96, Record Group II, NHC.

7. For an illustration of this attitude see Navy Department, Office of Naval Intelligence, "Memorandum Regarding Japanese Psychology and Morale," 1 March 1927 File JNP, Record Group 8, NHC. This general perspective began to change in the late 1920s, as the IJN began to introduce new classes of combatant visibly superior to U.S.N. counterparts. It also became clear by 1930 that Japanese political commitment to building up to treaty limits, in contrast to Hoover's budget-cutting, would lead to a "real" Japanese Fleet strength 80 percent of the United States'. See comparative assessment in Capt. R.A. Koch, "Blue-Orange Study," 31 March 1933, File UNOP, Record Group 8, NHC, Appendix 1.

8. This impression is highlighted by Navy clippings of responses to popular fiction of future war with Orange, especially Hector Bywater's *The Great Pacific War* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1925). Various critiques of the Bywater scenario were collected from a range of sources, including British and Japanese. Nowhere is there any sense that the Bywater teaser was anything but reasonable. Wrong in details, a bit too civilian. But acceptable. See Navy Department, Office of Naval Intelligence, "THE NEXT GREAT NAVAL WAR, Criticism of Hector Bywater's Book, The Great Pacific War," File XSTP, Record Group 8, NHC.

9. See 1929 Senior Class, Op. 6, 1934 Senior Class, Op. V, 1934 Senior Class, Tac. VI, 1937 Senior Class, Op. III, 1938 Senior Class, Op. VII, 1939 Senior and Junior Classes, Op. VII, Record Group II, NHC.

10. This image was preserved for public consumption up to the year of war, 1941, in Capt. W.D. Puleston's (former director ONI), *The Armed Forces of the Pacific* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), p. 242: "The American fleet would cross the Pacific at about the speed of translation of a cyclone. . . . It would resemble the cyclone in a more important phase, levelling everything in its path. . . ."

11. See John H. Maurer, "American Naval Concentration and the German Battle Fleet 1900-1918," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, June 1983, pp. 1-11.

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12. See Michael A. Barnhart, "Japanese Intelligence before the Second World War," from Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

13. Class of 1923, "The Battle of the Marianas," Tac.96, Record Group II, NHC.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-96.

16. 1928 Senior Class, Operations Problem IV, Record Group II, NHC.

17. U.S. Army War College and U.S. Navy War College, Operation Problem VI, 1929, "Joint Army and Navy Operations with Forced Landing," Part I, The Preliminary Situation, p. 1, Record Group II, NHC.

18. *Ibid.*, "Annex (c), Logistic Solution," p. 1.

19. *Ibid.*, Part II, Commander-in-Chief, Blue Fleet, "Estimate of Situation and Decision," p. 16.

20. *Ibid.*, "Operation Order of Commander, Air Group, Support Force."

21. *Ibid.*, Part XII, "Support Force Operation Orders and Accompanying Annexes of Commanders Naval Landing Groups and Air Group."

22. Cdr. J.W. Rankin, 1933 Senior Class, Operations Problem IV-1933, "Statistics and Leading Features."

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

24. 1933 Senior Class, Operations Problem IV, "Stenographic Notes Taken at Critique," May, 1933, p. 11, Record Group 2, NHC.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

26. See for example, Rear Adm. Harris Laning, "Building Program, 1932 (War College Suggestion)," 19 September 1930, File UNC, Record Group 8, NHC; Captain R.A. Koch, "Blue-Orange Study," 31 March 1933, File UNOpP, Record Group 8, NHC. Some of Koch's statements highlight a general contemporary Navy attitude: "Our Fleet has never been built up to the treaty limit, is actually weaker than Japan's in light forces . . . ." [p. 7] "Under present conditions to send the Fleet across the Pacific might well result in its complete loss . . . ." [p. 8] "ORANGE destroyers are each superior in gun power, ship for ship, to each of ours by at least 35% . . . ." [Appendix 1., p. 6].

27. 1935 Senior Class, OP.III, 1938 Senior Class, OP.V, 1938 Senior Class, OP.VII, Record Group 2, NHC.

28. 1938 Senior Class, OP.VII, 1939 Senior and Junior Classes, OP.VII, Record Group 2, NHC.

29. 1939 Senior and Junior Classes, OP.VII, 1934 Senior Class, Tac. VI, 1937 Senior Class, OP.III, Record Group 2, NHC.

30. Cdr. R.R.M. Emmet, "Comment on Plan of Operations submitted by Advanced Class of 1935-1936," Record Group 8, NHC.

31. These are collected in Record Group 2, Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College Archives. They are listed and abstracted in Vlahos, *The Blue Sword: The Naval War College and the American Mission, 1919-1941* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1981), pp. 166-179.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. This is discussed at some length in *ibid.*, pp. 99-112. There was some discussion in the wake of world war of the possibility of a war with Great Britain. Indeed, this was something of an obsession for Cdr. Holloway Frost. He delivered several stinging lectures at the Naval War College between 1920 and 1932 on an American strategy to defeat the British Empire. They were useful planning problems for an Atlantic Ocean theater naval war, but they were not serious pieces of strategic intent. See H.H. Frost, "The Naval Operations of a Red-Orange Campaign," 25 October 1920, Record Group 8, UNOpP, NHC; H.H. Frost, "BLUE Naval Strategy in the Atlantic," 16 February 1932, Record Group 8, XSTA, NHC.

35. A good example of this process can be seen in 1930 Senior Class, Quick Decision Problem B [Record Group 2, NHC] which pitted 3 Blue BBs against 5 Red BBs. This inclination to create tactical encounters with Blue numerical inferiority as a baseline is also reflected in a number of Orange tactical sessions. In the 1935 Senior Class Quick Decision Problems A through F [Record Group 2, NHC], for example Blue task groups were allotted a range of 3-6 BBs, while Orange TGs were always equal or superior at from 5-9 BBs. This was typical of tactical drill sessions. Red confrontations were all the more bracing, however, because of the ability of Red to confront Blue with a mobilized naval order of battle equal or superior to the American.

36. See, for example, comments of Secretary of the Navy John Lehman, in Hearings Before the Senate Subcommittee on Sea Power and Force Projection, 14 March 1984 (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1984), pp. 3854, 3857; or Norman Friedman, "The Maritime Strategy and the Central Front," a paper delivered at a Naval War College Conference on "Maritime Strategy: Issues and Perspectives," May 1985.

37. This notion has been suggested by F.J. West, "U.S. Naval Forces and NATO Planning," a paper delivered at a Naval War College Conference on "Maritime Strategy: Issues and Perspectives," May 1985.

38. A point underscored four times by CNO Adm. James Watkins, in Hearings Before the Senate Subcommittee on Sea Power and Force Projection, 14 March 1984, pp. 3860, 3865, 3869, 3882.