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J.E. Talbott

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Weapons Development, War Planning and Policy: The US Navy and the Submarine, 1917-1941

J.E. Talbott

In revolutionizing war at sea, the submarine exerted a decisive influence on politics ashore. Germany's resort to unrestricted submarine warfare provoked American entry into World War I. The German Government's wager that strangling British seaborne communications would force Great Britain from the war, leaving France to bleed to death alone before American assistance arrived, proved to be a disastrous miscalculation. But the gamble nearly paid off. Indeed, a German submarine campaign pursued without restraint from the outset of the war might soon have left Germany master in the West, able to discount the likelihood of an early American intervention and free to deal with a Russia verging on collapse.¹

What was to be done about this revolutionary weapon became a leading question of postwar naval policy. After nearly being brought to ruin by the German U-boat campaign, Great Britain favored abolishing the submarine. But the weapon offered other naval powers too many alluring possibilities to make abolition a likely prospect. Arms control treaties negotiated in the 1920s and '30s brought the submarine under the international law of war at sea, which did impose on warships certain rules with respect to the treatment of merchant vessels, their crews and passengers. These rules on submarine warfare *remained* in effect in the US Navy even after Germany resorted again to an undersea campaign against British shipping in World War II.

Hours following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, however, Adm. Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), ordered US naval forces to "Execute against Japan unrestricted air and submarine warfare."² Stark's order of 7 December 1941 relieved American submarine commanders of the need to discriminate between Japanese warships and merchant vessels. Their new instructions, as the Commander of Submarines, Pacific, later put it, were to "sink 'em all."³ So it happened that throughout the Pacific War, the US Navy pursued methods that in 1916 President Woodrow Wilson had

Professor Talbott is a professor of history at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

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condemned as “utterly incompatible with the principles of humanity.”⁴ The resort to practices the United States had earlier made the grounds for hostilities against Germany is one of the ironies that has marked the history of modern warfare.⁵

Most writers have asserted that the decision to wage unrestricted submarine warfare was made and executed in reprisal for the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. In his vast naval history of World War II, Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that “The enemy, by his calculated breach of treaties and international law at Pearl Harbor, had absolved the United States from observing any rule restricting methods of naval warfare unless dictated by self-interest and the danger of retaliation.”⁶ Theodore Roscoe’s quasi-official study remarks that in the face of the demands of war, “the polite little law book went overboard.”⁷ A later history of American submarines in World War II sees Admiral Stark’s order as an attempt on the part of the high command to take responsibility for the actions of subordinates with respect to violations of the rules on submarine warfare.⁸ The most recent study of submarines in the Pacific War tersely notes that, on account of the Pearl Harbor attack, “The London Submarine Agreement (*sic*) had been renounced by Washington.”⁹ And a standard text on international law claims in several editions that the United States employed its submarines against Japanese merchant vessels “as a retaliatory measure.”¹⁰

“One of the most important consequences of the world wars of this century . . . the decision-making process is no longer centered at the top . . . their choice is limited by previously made decisions and arrangements in the construction of the implements of war.”

All these accounts square with the official explanation for the order to wage unrestricted warfare against Japan. As Rear Adm. Richmond K. Turner, head of CNO’s war plans division, remarked to a British admiral on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack, “In retaliation for Japanese bombing of open towns in Oahu . . . orders had been given to U.S. Submarines in the Pacific to sink at sight Japanese merchant ships of all types.”¹¹ And in an affidavit submitted in 1946 to the war crimes trials at Nuremberg, Fleet Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, former Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, testified that unrestricted submarine warfare had been undertaken as an act of reprisal against Japan.¹²

According to an unpublished study by the late Samuel Flagg Bemis, however, the decision for unrestricted submarine warfare in the event of war with Japan preceded Pearl Harbor by several weeks, and possibly by several months. Presented to a seminar at the Naval War College in November 1961

and then put aside with the author's note that "It is not considered in the public interest to publish this study at the present time," Bemis' paper remained classified until 1978.¹³

Bemis points out that in the spring of 1941 the President of the Naval War College recommended revising the forthcoming edition of the Navy's rules of warfare to allow so-called "war zones" to be proclaimed in the expanse of ocean between Japan and the Philippines, the Sea of Japan, and the waters around the Netherlands East Indies. Into these areas, the War College draft read, "all merchant craft would enter at their own peril and risk and cannot expect to receive the traditional warnings before being attacked . . . sink vessels in war zones at sight."¹⁴

Passed along from CNO to the Secretary of the Navy, the Naval War College's recommendations came before the advisory committee of senior officers known as the General Board, which rejected the War College's proposals. "These [war] zones," Adm. W. R. Sexton wrote, "have no justification in international law, and the United States and other nations have vigorously protested the establishment of such zones."¹⁵

But the matter did not rest there. Despite the General Board's action, the Strategic War Plans adopted in May 1941 authorized the commanders in chief of the Pacific and Atlantic Fleets to declare "strategic areas" from which all merchant shipping would be excluded.¹⁶ To be sure, the war plans make no mention of unrestricted submarine warfare. But strategic areas were clearly meant to provide submarines with hunting grounds within which any vessel could be sunk on sight.

In any event, Bemis found more direct evidence on the timing of the unrestricted warfare decision. On 14 November 1941, Admiral Stark drafted an important cable to be sent to Adm. Thomas C. Hart, Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet (CinCAF). Dispatched to Hart's Manila headquarters on 27 November, Stark's instructions could not have been more explicit: "If formal war eventuates between U.S. and Japan quote Instructions for the Navy of the United States governing Maritime and Aerial Warfare unquote will be placed in effect but will be supplemented by additional instructions including authority to CINCAF to conduct unrestricted submarine and aerial warfare against Axis shipping within that part of the Far East Area lying south and west of a line joining Lat. 30 north long. 122 E and Lat. 7 north long. 140 E which you will declare a strategical area."¹⁷

Drafted three weeks before the Pearl Harbor raid and received in Manila ten days in advance, Stark's instructions make clear that if it were American policy to wait for the Japanese to strike the first blow, it was not American policy to defer how to respond until after the blow had been struck. Bemis' findings diminish reprisal to no more than a justification for a submarine campaign devised and pursued on other grounds.

Content to demonstrate that the decision to wage unrestricted submarine

warfare preceded Pearl Harbor instead of following it, as the reprisal thesis maintains, Bemis did not consider the connections between US policy, naval strategy, and weapons development. Taking such connections into account shows that, far from being an *ad hoc* response to the deepening crisis with Japan, unrestricted submarine warfare was the probable outcome of decisions made as early as 1919 and pursued throughout the interwar period.

At the end of the First World War, the London Naval Planning Section, an office of the American naval command in Europe, recommended that the United States align itself with Great Britain in supporting abolition of the submarine. "The chief reason why the United States should not build submarines," the London planners advised the CNO, "is that public opinion would never permit their use in the same manner as that of our adversaries. Their chief use would be in the destruction of enemy merchant shipping. This the national conscience would not permit, certainly not after the German manner."¹⁸ But Woodrow Wilson had lost interest in the submarine question; he opposed including abolition of the weapon on the agenda of the Paris Peace Conference.¹⁹

The London Planning Section's recommendations had no support elsewhere in the Navy, let alone at the White House. By 1919 the attention of naval officers in Washington had already turned to the Pacific, where they expected sooner or later to be required to defend American interests against a military challenge from a restless and ambitious Japan.²⁰ Capt. Thomas C. Hart, former commander of the small force of US submarines in Europe and head of the Navy's newly created Submarine Section, argued that in the event of a Pacific war, "the submarine will be an extremely valuable weapon for . . . operations against Japanese commerce. There is no quicker or more effective method of defeating Japan than the cutting of her sea communications." Submarines, Hart predicted, "would put Japan in the same position that the German submarines did the British Islands—if they were used to attack communications."²¹

But in 1919 US submarines could not have performed such a mission. The American submarines of the First World War—small, cramped and unseaworthy, had barely been up to operating in the narrow seas around England. The postwar S-class submarine marked something of an improvement, but it was slow, limited in range, and alarmingly susceptible to accidents.²²

Indeed, an expedition meant to demonstrate the utility of the submarine in the defense of the Philippines wound up exposing the inadequacies of the Navy's most advanced operational vessel. On 31 May 1921 Captain Hart put to sea from New London, Connecticut in the submarine tender *Beaver*, bound for Manila in the company of 10 S-boats, a voyage he had proposed as chief of the Submarine Section 18 months earlier. Struggling after the *Beaver* in the manner of ducklings pursuing their mother, strung out for a hundred miles on the surface of a sea in which no enemy lurked, bedeviled by frequent breakdowns,

the S-boats barely passed a test far less severe than most they could expect to meet in wartime.²³ Hart's voyage made clear that any submarine capable of finding employment in the Western Pacific had first to be capable of getting there.

Since before the First World War, younger submarine officers had urged the building of a fleet submarine—a powerfully armed boat of great range, excellent seakeeping qualities and fast enough to act in concert with the battleship squadrons that composed the main striking power of the fleet. As Lieut. Chester W. Nimitz had confidently predicted in a 1912 article: "The steady development of the torpedo together with the gradual improvement in the size, motive power, and speed of submarine craft of the near future will result in a most dangerous offensive weapon, and one which will have a large part in deciding fleet actions."²⁴

The fleet submarine had been conceived with Atlantic operations in mind. But in 1920 the Navy's Director of Plans advised the Chief of Naval Operations that "the design of our [submarine] craft should be such as to meet the conditions that will exist in a Pacific campaign."²⁵

The vast expanses of an ocean nearly empty of repair facilities demanded that an American submarine be designed with an eye to self-sufficiency. Japanese control of the Western Pacific would in all likelihood preclude an early challenge from the US fleet. But a submarine capable of operating alone would have a good chance of eluding enemy naval forces and bringing the war to Japan's home waters. Such a weapon, a young submariner explained to the General Board, would be "able to lie off the enemy's ports and sink what shipping we could . . . whether merchantmen or men-of-war."²⁶ Indeed, the War Plans Division already envisaged for the submarine a vital strategic role in the event of war with Japan. "Such an economic blockade," its 1920 memorandum concluded, echoing Hart's views, "would probably be the only way in which we could exert decisive pressure upon the enemy . . ."²⁷

A speed of at least 21 knots on the surface had been regarded as the essential requirement of a genuine "fleet" submarine. But independent operations in the Pacific would require such qualities as long cruising radius, ruggedly designed machinery, ample stowage for ammunition and supplies, and habitability; but speed would need to be sacrificed to get them. Reducing the rate at which a submarine burned fuel, for instance, would increase its cruising radius. In fact, an ability to cover the great distances of the Pacific mattered less than an ability to keep the sea for long stretches of time (in terms of fuel consumption, these qualities amounted to the same thing).²⁸ For the longer a submarine kept station near an enemy's lines of communication, the more likely it was to encounter targets of opportunity in the shape of enemy merchant vessels.

How fast did the submarine in question need to be? According to experts in the Bureau of Steam Engineering, it required only "sufficient speed to overhaul the average merchantman or to escape from a heavily armed naval

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auxiliary." Sixteen to 18 knots, instead of the suggested fleet submarine's 21, were enough.²⁹

Trading three knots in favor of other qualities had immensely important implications. Conceived as an auxiliary to the battleship, the fast fleet submarine conformed to the ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the strenuous advocate of concentrating force with a view to a decisive engagement with the enemy fleet. Submarines made self-sufficient at the expense of speed, however, could be pressed into the service of an entirely different strategy: the dispersal of force characteristic of commerce-raiding, the "*guerre de course*" that Mahan had disdained.³⁰

A submarine capable of operating against Japanese seaborne commerce in the manner that submariners prescribed remained a submarine of the imagination well into the 1930s. Important technological problems had to be resolved before such a vessel actually put to sea. Resolving these problems was complicated when the General Board recommended in 1921 that the development of naval aviation, a far more glamorous and open pursuit than the secret and furtive-seeming work of the submariners, be given priority over the submarine.³¹ And in a navy that continued to be dominated by battleship sailors, whatever the pretensions of the aviators, *guerre de course* exerted considerably less appeal than the grand fleet actions dear to Mahan. Finally, national policy came to exclude the strategy advanced by Hart and other students of a Pacific war from the uses US submarines could be put to.

Restrictions on submarine warfare were the consequence of American efforts to keep naval arms limitation talks from foundering on the submarine question. Alarmed at the prospect of a new and potentially ruinous naval arms race, Great Britain in 1921 proposed limitation talks among the principal naval powers of the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France, and Italy. Sensing the mood of public antipathy to arms spending in the United States, the Harding administration seized on the British proposal, and in late 1921 a naval conference convened in Washington.³²

The submarine question immediately threatened to disrupt the talks. Believing it had most to fear from the submarine, Great Britain renewed its proposal to abolish the weapon. British officials privately conceded that abolition was an unlikely prospect, but nevertheless pressed ahead with their proposal, in the hope of benefiting from the pressures of strong public sentiment against submarine warfare.³³

The French adamantly opposed abolishing the submarine. In 1921 France had relatively few submarines—in which its navy saw a cheap substitute for the capital ship—and wanted more. The experience of the late war gave French naval officers reason to believe that submarines based in the Channel ports might be useful in the event that French and British interests diverged.³⁴

The United States found itself caught between its World War I associates. Senior naval officers were not enthusiastic about putting limitations on submarine warfare, let alone abolishing the submarine. And arms control was the province of the State Department, not the Navy, so in the end the General Board endorsed the principle that "Submarines shall conform in all respects to the rules for surface vessels of war."³⁵

Senator Elihu Root made this principle the basis of a series of resolutions he presented on behalf of the American delegation in the hope of mediating between France and Great Britain, and averting the collapse of the Washington Conference. Root also aimed to assuage American public opinion, in which abolishing submarines had strong support.³⁶ His initiative succeeded. The British were already prepared to fall back to limiting submarine warfare; the French, still unhappy with some aspects of the Root resolutions, were willing at least to reserve judgment on the issue. Having broken the impasse over submarines, the Conference moved on to questions that most participants considered far more important.³⁷

Despite the General Board's reservations about the Root resolutions, at later arms-control conferences the US Government continued to advocate rules for submarine warfare along the same lines. Several of these meetings adjourned short of agreement, but talks in London in 1930 produced a major naval limitation treaty.³⁸ Once again Great Britain and France found themselves at odds over the submarine question but, in the end, Article 22 of the London Naval Treaty continued to prescribe for submarines the rules of warfare that applied to surface ships:

"(1) In their action with regard to merchant ships, submarines must conform to the rules of International Law to which surface ships are subject.

"(2) In particular, except in the case of persistent refusal to stop on being duly summoned, or of active resistance to visit and search, a warship, whether surface vessel or submarine, may not sink or render incapable of navigation a merchant vessel without having first placed passengers, crew, and ship's papers in a place of safety. For this purpose the ship's boats are not regarded as a place of safety unless the safety of the passengers and crew is assured, in the existing sea and weather conditions, by the proximity of land, or the presence of another vessel which is in a position to take them on board."³⁹

Observing these rules would have required a submarine to operate on the surface, surrendering the elements of stealth and surprise that made it such a formidable warship, giving away its position to merchantmen equipped with radios, exposing its fragile hull to gunfire and aerial bombardment, imposing on its captain the impossible burden of taking aboard his vessel passengers for whom there was no room. The rules transformed the submarine from a deadly weapon into a vulnerable target; they rendered a shark a sitting duck.

By adhering to them, a submarine captain was sure to subject his vessel and

crew to great hazards. Or his navy could choose to desist from commerce-raiding as a form of submarine warfare, the choice the rules were meant to encourage.

At the same time that the Washington Naval Conference limited submarine warfare, it had other consequences that seemed to enhance the potential strategic value to the United States of conducting unlimited warfare in a Pacific campaign. In exchange for Japan's acceptance of the short end of the famous 5:5:3 ratio in capital ships (an early example of an arms "freeze," as the formula affirmed the status quo in the battleship and cruiser strengths of the British, American and Japanese navies), the United States and Great Britain agreed not to improve the fortifications of their naval bases in the Western Pacific. As none of the American bases in the Philippine Islands, Guam or the Aleutians were adequately fortified, Japan's position in the region was greatly strengthened.⁴⁰ The threat of an early American fleet intervention in the event of war with Japan was virtually removed. For all its firepower and mobility, the battle fleet at sea required massive logistical support from ashore, from bases relatively close at hand. But after 1922 the one major fortified naval base allowed the United States in the Pacific was Pearl Harbor, 4,850 miles from Manila and 3,400 miles from Tokyo Bay.

War Plan Orange, which laid out the scenario for a war between the United States and Japan, sought to overcome these formidable distances by means of wishful thinking. Executing the plan depended on the Army's ability to defend Manila Bay until the fleet arrived from Pearl Harbor or possibly even the West Coast. That the army garrison in the Philippines could hold out as long as such a movement of men and ships would require, especially in the likely event that Japan controlled the surrounding seas, was a doubtful assumption indeed, as many critics—especially army officers—pointed out. The 1935 revision, which substituted leapfrogging through the Marshalls and Carolines for steaming directly to the Western Pacific, a course of action requiring the defenders of Manila Bay to hold out even longer, made Plan Orange more unrealistic than ever.⁴¹

But the long-range submarine was meant to be free both of such impediments as encumbered the movements of the fleet and of the circumstances that, in the wake of the Washington Conference, vastly complicated the making of war plans. Free of dependence on heavily fortified naval bases, able to evade detection in enemy-controlled waters, the long-range submarine would be able, without delay, to take the war to Japan.

Designers and builders of warships have not always paid much heed to the opinions of the men who sail and fight them.⁴² Between the wars, however, submarine officers themselves exerted a considerable influence on the design and construction of the fleet submarine. That the most experienced submarine officers continued after 1922 to advocate building a long-range

submarine does not mean that they set out deliberately to build a weapon incompatible with the rules of submarine warfare, or to circumvent the war plans of their own navy, which conformed to these same rules. Such considerations as naval professionalism, the ambition to come to the notice of superiors and rise in the naval hierarchy themselves, the challenge of problem-solving and a concern for their own safety, were all more likely to have influenced the submariners' recommendations on submarine design than an urge to meddle in policymaking.⁴³

By 1939 the Navy was able to put to sea essentially the submarine that most submariners had advocated since 1919. "The radical increase in performance characteristics built into submarines now reporting to the Fleet," Rear Adm. H. G. Bowen, chief of the Bureau of Engineering, assured the CNO in January 1939, "represents an advance over anything previously attempted That these vessels have successfully passed trials and performed long shakedown cruises without serious derangement is a tribute to the inherent correctness of their design."⁴⁴ Such submarines were easily capable of mastering the conditions that had nearly defeated Hart's arduous expedition of 1921.

The first of the new submarines completed sea trials and joined a Navy still committed to War Plan Orange as its strategy for war in the Pacific. A 1934 memorandum on implementing the Plan instructed the Blue (US) commander in chief "to *operate submarines* in accordance with the same international laws as are applicable to surface vessels."⁴⁵ Submarines were to act in support of fleet operations, especially against larger enemy warships; to watch the harbors of the Japanese Mandated islands, in order to be able to report enemy fleet movements; and to defend Pearl Harbor—duties that all appeared to conform to the rules on submarine warfare. The 1936 version of Plan Orange continued to prescribe for submarines the roles of watching enemy harbors, operating against the enemy fleet, and defending Pearl Harbor.⁴⁶ The submarine force carried out these missions in tactical exercises with the fleet.⁴⁷

By the late '30s, however, Plan Orange had come under severe criticism, not only from the Army, which faced the impossible task of holding out in Manila until the fleet sailed to its rescue—and regained control of a base essential to its operations—but from within the Navy as well. Against the concept of an American battle fleet advancing across the Pacific in search of a decisive encounter with its Japanese counterpart, Adm. Harry E. Yarnell, 1937–38 Commander in Chief of the Asiatic Fleet, urged "the prosecution of [a] naval war of strangulation." In Yarnell's view, the potential enemy's economy made a more inviting target than its navy, a thought that decades earlier had occurred to German naval strategists contemplating a war with England. By severing—or "strangling" in the imagery favored by advocates

of blockade—the lines of communication of a nation utterly dependent on trade, Japan might be brought to terms, and without needing to dispatch the battle fleet west of Pearl Harbor.⁴⁸

Yarnell's strategic ideas were reflected in an agreement between the United States and Great Britain worked out in January 1938 by Capt. Royal E. Ingersoll, the head of the War Plans Division and Capt. Tom Phillips, R.N., his British counterpart. The United States would be responsible for interdicting Japanese commerce within the Western Hemisphere, while Great Britain would act along the Malay Barrier and in the Indian Ocean; together the two navies would cut Japan's trade with the world beyond East Asia.⁴⁹ An understanding negotiated between two senior naval captains did not commit their governments to action in the event of war. And their agreement did not specifically mention the submarine as a weapon of blockade. Nevertheless, the plan not only foreshadowed the manner in which the two navies divided responsibilities when war came, but also reflected the shift in American strategic thinking from the assumptions of War Plan Orange to the idea of long-range blockade in the service of economic warfare.

Germany's conquest of Western Europe in 1939-40 precipitated the recasting of American naval strategy in the Pacific. War Plan Orange, which Adm. J.O. Richardson, Commander in Chief, US Fleet, dismissed as better suited to extracting shipbuilding appropriations from Congress than to fighting a Pacific war, was set aside.⁵⁰ A more realistic plan advocated by Richardson in October 1940 would embody "long-range interdiction of enemy commerce."⁵¹ In January 1941 Richardson wrote Stark that his "Plan Dog," which assumed on the part of United States naval forces a waiting attitude in the Pacific, required establishing defensive submarine patrols off the outlying US-controlled islands of Midway, Johnston, Wake and Palmyra. But in the event Japan entered the war, US submarines should "make an initial sweep for *Japanese merchantmen* and raiders in the Pacific."⁵²

That Japan would indeed enter the war, and at an early date, was one of the assumptions under which joint British and American military and naval staff talks were conducted in Washington in late March 1941. The conferees agreed that allied strategy for the Far East would be defensive, but US naval forces would nevertheless be engaged "offensively in the manner best calculated to weaken Japanese economic power."⁵³

Six weeks later the CNO advised Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet, that he had decided to assign all long-range US submarines to the Pacific. Because these newer craft were the warships best suited to conditions in the Pacific, he explained, "the CNO has decided that as many United States submarines as possible shall be used on the strategic offensive, and be operated in far distant waters where the greatest density of enemy naval operations will occur."⁵⁴

Ten days after sending this dispatch, Stark approved "Rainbow 5," the strategic plan that prevailed down to US entry into the war.⁵⁵ As Royal Ingersoll, assistant CNO at the time, later told one of the committees investigating the Pearl Harbor attack, Rainbow 5 assigned the Pacific Fleet a largely defensive role. "There were other offensive tasks against Japanese communications and shipping," Ingersoll went on, "but those were largely tasks for submarines."⁵⁶

What tasks did Ingersoll have in mind? For all its voluminous detail, Rainbow 5 is an ambiguous document—at least insofar as the employment of submarines is concerned. On the one hand, the plan enjoined commanding officers to respect the rules limiting submarine warfare.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Rainbow 5 prescribed missions inconsonant with the rules. For the main task to be assumed once war with Japan commenced was to "Establish and maintain maximum practicable submarine patrols against Japanese forces and communications near the Japanese homeland."⁵⁸ Specifically, Rainbow 5 provided for stationing submarines off Yokohama, Nagasaki and Shimonoseki, in the Bungo and Kii channels, in the straits of Tsushima, between Korea and Japan, and Tsugaru, separating the home islands of Honshu and Hokkaido.⁵⁹ A submarine captain required to respect the rules on submarine warfare in waters certain to be under the constant surveillance of Japanese air and naval forces would have put his ship and crew in extreme jeopardy. But Rainbow 5 made no such demand, despite its injunction on obedience to international law. For all Japanese merchantmen were expected to be armed or to be operating under the authority of the Imperial Japanese Navy. In these circumstances, the rules on submarine warfare did not apply. "Specific instructions on this subject," the war plan promised, "will be issued later."⁶⁰

That unrestricted submarine warfare was expected to be the practice at least in certain regions of the Pacific was made clear in the paragraph authorizing fleet commanders to proclaim "strategical areas" into which, it will be recalled, any merchant ship that ventured would be considered fair game.⁶¹

In the spring and summer of 1941 the boundaries of these strategical areas in the Far East were the subject of discussions between the British and American naval commanders in chief. An exchange of correspondence on these discussions provides an additional fragment of evidence on American intentions with respect to the use of the submarine. Comdr. R.D. Coleridge and Maj. R.F.G. Jayne, secretaries of the British Joint Staff Mission in Washington, asked Comdr. L. R. McDowell, their US naval liaison, whether "combat zones," as they described them, were the equivalent of what the British called danger zones, "in which submarines will be given authority to sink merchant ships at sight." The British Government, they explained, "has always been and remains opposed to unrestricted submarine warfare." But as

an act of reprisal in the war against Germany, the British had been driven to torpedoing enemy merchant ships; in the event of war with Japan, the same policy might need to be extended to the Pacific. Did the American Government concur in this?⁶²

The question of strategical areas had been under study by American naval authorities for some time, Commander McDowell replied. Further, on several occasions during the past year the subject had been a matter of communications between the Chief of Naval Operations and the Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet, especially with respect to actions the Asiatic Fleet might take under existing war plans (a reference to Rainbow 5). "It is apparent that it would be the purpose of declaring strategical areas, should circumstances require and justify such action, to wage unrestricted warfare not only by submarines but by aircraft." Justifying such a step would not necessarily require similar action by the enemy. But the United States was on record, McDowell went on, as being opposed to unrestricted warfare. In view of this, "until the United States is at war, it obviously would be impracticable for its Government to adopt any policy other than the one which has heretofore been set forth on numerous occasions. It is, therefore, judged expedient to let final decision wait until the actual outbreak of hostilities."⁶³

The Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet, who McDowell had in mind, was Adm. Thomas C. Hart. Stark, in writing to Hart in November 1940 said, "I believe that the Allied objective should be to reduce Japan's offensive power through economic starvation."⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the only surviving communications on submarine warfare between the CNO and his fleet commander arise in dispatches they exchanged on the very eve of war. In response to Hart's request to be relieved of his command, for instance, Stark—who wanted to keep an officer whose judgment and experience he valued greatly right where he was—replied that his successor "must have a profound knowledge of the employment of the most important weapon he will have at his disposal—the submarine."⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Hart's diary affords indirect clues—some of them rather cryptic, given the admiral's discretion in professional matters—as to the role submarines were expected to play in the theater where war with Japan was expected to begin. The circumstances in which Hart issued his unrestricted warfare order also merit attention.

The oldest admiral in the US Navy serving afloat, his retirement delayed in order to put his great experience to use in a command whose responsibilities far exceeded its means, Hart had little confidence in the war plans sent him from Washington. They smacked too much of the Naval War College's theoretical perspectives, he told his diary, bore too little of the impress of experienced Pacific hands.⁶⁶ And in the manner of a field commander in every time and place, he constantly complained of being kept in the dark by

the high authorities in the capital.⁶⁷ He knew that great events were afoot, believed that the Japanese might strike the Philippines without warning at any time, and was determined to be as ready as his resources in men and ships allowed.⁶⁸

The importance Hart attached to submarines is clear. On 14 November 1940, two days after Stark had cabled his remark on the strategy of economic blockade, Hart expressed his enthusiasm and relief at the news he was to receive "another reinforcement of five big submarines!"⁶⁹ At month's end, three of the five arrived: "three of the largest and newest submarines that the Navy owns."⁷⁰ On 5 December, Hart learned that more submarines would be coming out to join those already sent him. "Haven't been informed about several things which I need to know about all these reinforcements," he went on.⁷¹ Whether these things included the rules of warfare under which submarines would operate, he did not say. In any event, on 20 December, two more fleet submarines arrived, completing the five he had been promised, and by mid-January Hart had them out performing tactical exercises.⁷²

Toward the end of September 1941, Hart received word that he might possibly be sent six more submarines.⁷³ An additional 12 boats and a submarine tender are mentioned in a diary entry of 24 October, and on 8 November Hart wrote that "I got eight more big Submarines this afternoon." A week later Rear Adm. Richmond K. Turner, Director of War Plans, recommended to the Director of Ship Movements "that every effort be made to expedite the completion of long-range submarines and their assignment to the U.S. Pacific Fleet."⁷⁴

Reinforcing the Asiatic Fleet with the newest long-range submarines had the obvious purpose of helping defend the Philippines from a Japanese seaborne invasion. Concentrating fleet submarines in the Pacific could have been recommended for several reasons, among them enhancing the deterrent value of the battleships riding at anchor in Pearl Harbor.

In any case, on 27 November 1941, in the dispatch quoted at the beginning of this paper, Stark set forth the rules of warfare under which submarines in the Pacific were to operate when the war with Japan broke out.⁷⁵ A day earlier, Hart wrote in his diary that he had just received from Washington—"straight from the horse's mouth"—what amounted to a war warning, and he had set about making last-minute preparations.⁷⁶ For the last ten days of peace he had in hand as guidance in making these preparations Stark's "additional instructions" to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare.

In the event hostilities broke out without a formal declaration of war, Stark's instructions provided that the same rules would probably apply, but only on the further advice of the CNO.⁷⁷ The attack on Pearl Harbor fitted this contingency exactly. Such evidence as is available suggests that Hart did not await instructions. On the contrary, he appears to have issued orders to conduct unrestricted warfare before Stark sent out the same command from Washington.

Awakened in his Manila quarters by an aide at 3 a.m. local time on 8 December with news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, minutes later Hart broadcast the command: "*Japan started hostilities. Govern yourself accordingly.*" At 3:45 a.m. he sent a second message: *Submarines and aircraft will wage unrestricted warfare.*" At 5:15 a.m. he informed local commanders that submarines would depart Manila that afternoon. At 7:12 a.m., in accordance with Hart's orders, the Commander Submarines, Asiatic Fleet, Capt. John Wilkes, ordered S-38 to its patrol station off the entrance to the Verde Island passage, the main channel into the Lingayen Gulf, where Japanese forces were expected to land. "Mission," the orders read, "unrestricted attack." At 7:31 a.m., orders went out to S-36 to patrol the entrance of Lingayen Gulf between Bolinao and San Fernando: "Wage unrestricted warfare."⁷⁸

In the meantime, at 2:28 p.m. Washington time (9:28 a.m. in Pearl Harbor), Admiral Stark called President Roosevelt to confirm the attack on Pearl Harbor. According to Harry Hopkins' diary, the main source on Roosevelt's actions on the day of the attack, the President told Stark "to execute the agreed orders to the Army and Navy in event of an outbreak of hostilities in the Pacific." The conversation ended before 2:30, when Roosevelt called Steve Early, his Press Secretary.⁷⁹ Hopkins' account makes no mention of unrestricted warfare. In an interview with Samuel F. Bemis twenty years after the phone call in question, however, Stark claimed that he had read to Roosevelt a draft of the telegram bearing the famous order, and the President had told him to send it.⁸⁰

The CNO's order went out at 5:52 p.m., Washington time.⁸¹ But Hart's order to the Asiatic Fleet had been sent four hours earlier than the Washington dispatch; indeed, it had gone out 13 minutes before Stark even called Roosevelt to confirm the Pearl Harbor raid. And precisely at the moment the CNO's general order to conduct unrestricted warfare was issued in Washington, Capt. Wilkes was issuing specific orders of the same kind to the captain of S-38.

It would appear that Hart jumped the gun, setting aside the rules on submarine warfare before the Chief of Naval Operations, speaking for the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, had authorized him to do so. In view of Stark's dispatch of 27 November, however, it seems quite likely that Hart regarded the thoroughly unambiguous attack on Pearl Harbor as authorization enough. And even if Stark's recollection of his Sunday conversation with Roosevelt was faulty, the "agreed orders to the Army and Navy" the President had in mind when he spoke to the CNO might possibly have included the "additional instructions" with respect to submarine warfare conveyed in the dispatch sent the Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet, ten days earlier. In any event, Stark's order of 7 December merely confirmed his instructions of 27 November and the tendencies of two decades of submarine development.

The history of the submarine between the wars offers a case study of the relationship between strategic planning, weapons development, and the conduct of foreign policy, and especially of the links between capabilities and intentions with respect to the use of force.

By adhering to arms control treaties limiting submarine warfare, the United States proclaimed that it did not intend to use the submarine against merchant vessels except in the manner prescribed for surface warships by international law. These agreements were concluded, however, with an eye to mediating opposing views between former associates in the war against Germany, and to reassuring an American public strongly disposed against the submarine; they were negotiated on behalf of a navy committed to Mahanian conceptions of naval warfare, in which the revolutionary weapon was expected to play at best an auxiliary role in the grand actions between battle fleets that were to take place somewhere in the grey mists of the Atlantic.

In the Pacific, however, the United States faced a different set of circumstances, and as early as the end of the First World War, submariners pushed for a submarine built to meet them. The Navy committed itself to producing such a weapon, but not until the mid-1930s did a submarine capable of the performance the developers had in mind actually put to sea.

In these same years, the Navy's strategic thinking with respect to war in the Pacific underwent a profound shift. Realists argued for a strategy that would compensate for the vulnerability of the Philippines and the inadequacy of forward naval bases by taking advantage of the weaknesses of Japan.

Japan was an island nation, as dependent as Great Britain on trading by sea. Economic blockade was the answer to the American strategic problem, and the fleet submarine the answer to how such a blockade might be conducted. Such an answer made sense, however, only if the limits on the manner in which submarine warfare was to be conducted were removed. Otherwise, the pressure that could be exerted on Japan would fall far short of strangulation, and submarine crews were far more likely than their targets to become the victims of sudden death. From the late 1930s, as the likelihood of war with Japan increased, the gap between what the United States intended and what it was capable of with respect to submarine warfare narrowed to the vanishing point.

From this perspective, the order to wage unrestricted submarine warfare against Japan seems less a decision than a foregone conclusion. The development of the submarine and the evolution of thinking about submarine warfare in the interwar period illustrate a tendency that Felix Gilbert recently noted. One of the most important consequences of the world wars of this century, he observes, has been that "the decision-making process is no longer centered exclusively at the top—the head of the government or the military commander; their choice is limited by previously made decisions and arrangements in the construction of the implements of war."⁸²

In light of Gilbert's remark, the decision to wage unrestricted warfare looms less large than the decision to build a long-range submarine, the resolution of the technical problems that such a project raised, and the decision to pursue a strategy of economic warfare. The history of submarine development also affirms that when the responsible authorities find in their hands a weapon that promises to make the waging of war more efficient, they will use it.

On the morning of 11 December 1941, USS *Gudgeon*, with Lt. Comdr. E.W. Grenfell at its helm, left Pearl Harbor to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare in the Bungo Channel, the first American warship to enter Japanese waters since the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁸³ On the morning of 31 December, Adm. Chester W. Nimitz assumed command of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on the deck of the submarine *Grayling*. Nimitz liked to say he chose *Grayling* because the Japanese attack had left no other deck available.⁸⁴ In view of the importance submarines were to assume in the war he was to conduct, the former submariner could hardly have made a better choice.

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Notes

1. See Bernard Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 308, 325-26.
2. Stark's order can be found in Theodore Roscoe, *United States Submarine Operations in World War II* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1949), p. 5.
3. Charles A. Lockwood, *Sink 'Em All; Submarine Warfare in the Pacific* (New York: Dutton, 1951).
4. Quoted in Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York: Harper, 1954), p. 215.
5. Raymond Aron, *Peace and War; A Theory of International Relations*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), p. 37. For a different view of the matters discussed in this paper see Ernest Andrade, Jr., "Submarine Policy in the United States Navy, 1919-1941," *Military Affairs*, January 1971, pp. 50-56.
6. Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: Vol. IV, Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 190.
7. Roscoe, p. 19.
8. W.J. Holmes, *Undersea Victory; The Influence of Submarine Operations on the War in the Pacific* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 46.
9. Clay Blair, Jr., *Silent Victory; The U.S. Submarine War Against Japan* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), p. 106.
10. A. Pearce Higgins and C. John Colombos, *The International Law of the Sea*, 1st ed. (New York and London: Longmans, Green, 1945), p. 336. The same language is to be found on the same page of the sixth edition (1967).
11. Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, DC. (Cited hereafter as OA.) Sea Frontier Commands, Series III, Box 69. Record of a conversation between Adm. Little, RN, and Rear Adm. Turner, 7 December 1941.
<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol37/iss3/8>

12. *Trials of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 11 November 1945-1 October 1946* (Nuremberg, Germany, 1948), pp. 378-381.

13. Samuel Flagg Bemis, "Submarine Warfare in the Strategy of American Defense and Diplomacy, 1915-1945," Unpublished Manuscript, Yale University Archives, p. 1.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

17. OA. Fleet Dispatches. OpNav to CinCAF #271422.

18. Navy Department, Office of Naval Intelligence, Historical Section, Publication Number 7, *The American Naval Planning Section London* (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1923), p. 473.

19. Col. E.M. House to President Wilson, Paris, 22 May 1919. Memorandum: Questions remaining to be settled after German and American Peace treaties are disposed of. House's reference to the question of the abolition of the submarine drew Wilson's marginal notation: "Not for the Conference, I think." Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States; The Paris Peace Conference*, vol. XI (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1945). Warner R. Schilling, "Weapons, Doctrine and Arms Control: A Case from the Good Old Days," in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, ed., *The Use of Force; International Politics and Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 473-74.

20. Harold and Margaret Sprout, *Toward a New Order of Sea Power; American Naval Policy and the World Scene, 1918-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 33; Richard D. Challenger, *Admirals, Generals and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 408; Hector C. Bywater, *Sea Power in the Pacific; A Study of the American-Japanese Naval Problem* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), pp. 276, 313-314; William S. Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1909-1922* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 489-90.

21. OA. Abolition of Submarine Warfare—Historical. Capt. T.C. Hart to CNO, 6 January 1919, 4 February 1919; Capt. T.C. Hart, Capt. W. Evans, Capt. H.E. Yarnell to CNO, n.d. [January 1919?].

22. Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen, *Rickover: Controversy and Genius* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 78.

23. OA. Admiral Thomas C. Hart Diary, 30 May, 5 August, 6 September, 29 September, 3 November, 1 December 1921.

24. Chester W. Nimitz, "Military Value and Tactics of Modern Submarines," US Naval Institute Proceedings, December 1912, p. 1198.

25. OA. General Board 420.15 Hearings (1920) (Cited hereafter as GB) Director of Plans Division to CNO, 13 January 1920.

26. OA. GB 420.15 (1920) Preliminary Design of Fleet Submarines, p. 161.

27. OA. GB 420.15 (1920) Director of Plans Division to CNO, 13 January 1920.

28. OA. GB 420.15 (1920) Preliminary Design of Fleet Submarines, p. 171.

29. OA. GB 420.15 (1920) Bureau of Steam Engineering: Fleet Submarine, Great Cruising Radius, 3 February 1920.

30. Mahan's aversion to commerce raiding is expressed in his most famous book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1889), but see especially, his *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*, 2 v. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1892-94).

31. John D. Alden, *The Fleet Submarine in the US Navy; A Design and Construction History* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1979), p. 14.

32. On the Washington Conference, see especially Thomas H. Buckley, *The United States and the Washington Conference, 1921-22* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970), and Roger Dingman, *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation 1914-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

33. King George V continued to believe that "we should press strongly for the total abolition of submarines." Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars: Vol. I, The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism, 1919-1929* (New York: Collins, 1968), pp. 303-306.

34. William Roger Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 97-99.

35. OA. GB Circular 438.1001, 12 September 1921; Action of the General Board of the Navy in Connection with the Conference on the Limitation of Armament, 1921-1922, v. I. GB to Secretary of the Navy, 30 November 1921.

36. It was "necessary," Root told Rear Adm. William Rodgers, "to do something striking and vivid that could be easily grasped by the man in the street." By early January 1922 the American naval advisory committee to the American delegation had received 422,488 messages urging abolition of the submarine and only 4,199 favoring retention. Buckley, pp. 115, 117.

37. Dingman, p. 209; Roskill, pp. 327-28; Richard W. Leopold, *Elihu Root and the Conservative Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1954), p. 160; Philip C. Jessup, *Elihu Root*, v. II (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1938), pp.

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38. On the London Conference see Raymond G. O'Connor, *Perilous Equilibrium: The United States and the London Naval Conference of 1930* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1962).

39. Quoted in Robert W. Tucker, *The Law of War and Neutrality at Sea* (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1955), p. 63.

40. Braisted, pp. 572-74; Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years: Vol. II, The War in the Pacific* (Washington: Office of Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1962), pp. 25-26; Dudley W. Knox, *A History of the United States Navy* (New York: Putnam, 1936), pp. 427-28; Dudley W. Knox, *The Eclipse of American Sea Power* (New York: American Army & Navy Journal, Inc., 1922), pp. 135-140.

41. Louis Morton, "War Plan Orange; Evolution of a Strategy," *World Politics*, January 1959, pp. 221-50.

42. See, for example, Elting E. Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1942), especially pp. 77-104. Sims was a leading naval reformer and, at the turn of the century, a bitter critic of prevailing methods of warship design and construction.

43. On this see the remarks of William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 292-94.

44. NA. Record Group 80, Box 208. H. G. Bowen, Bureau of Engineering, to CNO, 10 January 1939.

45. National Archives, hereafter cited as OA. Strategic Plans Division Records, Series III, Box 64. Plan 0-1 Orange, "The Royal Road" 1934. Emphasis in original.

46. OA. Strategic Plans Division Records, Series III, Box 73. Director of Fleet Maintenance Division to Director of War Plans Division: Employment of Blue Submarines, Orange War. 28 April 1936.

47. NA. Record Group 80, Box 208. J. R. Defrees, ComSubFor: Submarine Organization with the US Fleet, 12 August 1936. The commander of the submarine force regarded tactical maneuvers with the fleet as pointless.

48. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. President's Secretary's File, Navy. Adm. II. E. Yarnell to Adm. William D. Leahy, CNO, 15 October 1937. Leahy was sufficiently impressed with Yarnell's ideas to forward them to President Roosevelt, from whom they elicited an enthusiastic response. Admiral Leahy to President Roosevelt, 8 November 1937; Franklin D. Roosevelt to Leahy, 10 November 1937. See also Waldo H. Heinrichs, Jr. "The Role of the United States Navy," in Dorothy Borg and Shumpei Okamoto, eds., *Pearl Harbor as History; Japanese-American Relations, 1931-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 212.

49. Heinrichs, p. 214.

50. *Pearl Harbor Attack; Hearings Before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack. 79th Congress.* (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1946), part 14, p. 968.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 970.

52. OA. Records of the Strategic Plans Division, Series III, Box 147J. J. O. Richardson, CinCUS Flt. to H. R. Stark, CNO, 25 January 1941.

53. Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: Vol. 3, The Rising Sun in the Pacific* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948), p. 51.

54. OA. Strategic Plans Division, Series III, Box 97. CNO to CinC Atlantic Fleet, 16 May 1941.

55. OA. Strategic Plans Division, Series III, Box 147 F. CNO 26 May 1941. Navy Basic War Plan. Rainbow No. 5.

56. *Pearl Harbor Attack*, part 26, pp. 459-60.

57. OA. Strategic Plans Division, Series III, Box 147 F. CNO 26 May 1941. Navy Basic War Plan. Rainbow No. 5.

58. OA. Strategic Plans Division, Series III, Box 147 F. Task Force Seven (Undersea Force) 3252a Special Information.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. OA. Additional Documents Relating to Unrestricted Submarine Warfare. R.D. Coleridge and R.F.G. Jayne to L. R. McDowell, Washington, DC, 21 August 1941.

63. OA. Additional Documents Relating to Unrestricted Submarine Warfare. L.R. McDowell to R.D. Coleridge and R.F.G. Jayne, Washington, DC, 20 October 1941; Asiatic Fleet Dispatches. Copy of R.N. Dispatch, Action Admiralty Info. CinC. China No. 278/475/1831. 21 October 1941.

64. *Pearl Harbor Attack*, part 14, 973.

65. *Pearl Harbor Attack*, part 16, H. R. Stark to T.C. Hart, 1 November 1941.

66. OA. Hart Diary, 14 August 1939, 6 December 1939, 14 February 1940.

67. *Ibid.*, 15 October, 20 October 1939; 15 September 1940; 6 November, 8 November 1941.

68. *Ibid.*, *passim*.

69. *Ibid.*, 14 November 1940.

70. *Ibid.*, 30 November 1940.

71. *Ibid.*, 5 December 1940.

72. *Ibid.*, 17 January 1941.
 73. *Ibid.*, 27 September 1941.
 74. OA. Strategic Plans Division, Series V, Box 105. Director War Plans Division to Director, Ship Movements Division, 15 November 1941.
 75. OA. Asiatic Fleet Dispatches. OpNav to CinCAF #271422.
 76. OA. Hart Diary, 27 November 1941 (26 November in Washington).
 77. OA. Asiatic Fleet Dispatches. OpNav to CinCAF #271422.
 78. OA. Asiatic Fleet Dispatches. #080345, #080712, #080731; Hart Diary, 9 December 1941, for an account of the events of 8 December.
 79. Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins, An Intimate History* (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 431.
 80. Bennis ms., p. 33.
 81. *Ibid.*
 82. Felix Gilbert, "From Clausewitz to Delbrück and Hintze: Achievements and Failures of Military History," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, December 1980, p. 19.
 83. Holmes, p. 19.
 84. E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1976), p. 19.



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