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## A Distant Mirror: Wargaming after World War II

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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### A DISTANT MIRROR WARGAMING AFTER WORLD WAR II

*John T. Kuehn*

*Blue versus Purple: The U.S. Naval War College, the Soviet Union, and the New Enemy in the Pacific, 1946*, by Hal M. Friedman. Historical Monograph 24. Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2017. Index, photographs, maps, figures, bibliography, and notes after each chapter. 442 pages. \$78.

Hal M. Friedman continues to mine the archives of the Naval War College (NWC), producing another detailed monograph to add to his already substantial body of work about the Navy and naval policy in the period just after World War II. In particular, this monograph, as Friedman makes clear in his introduction,

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picks up where *Blue versus Orange* (2013) and *Digesting History* (2010) left off. Readers unfamiliar with the monograph format are cautioned that Friedman's approach does not lend itself to the "casual reading" by which one might address a standard narrative naval, military, or political history; however, those readers interested in understanding deeply, or academics looking for a deep treasure trove about, the wargaming process during this critical period will be rewarded.

The structure of the monograph is chronological. After some initial comments and a fine introductory chapter giving a valuable overview of the NWC curriculum, Friedman over several chapters details the framework and rules for wargaming. He then begins an in-depth discussion of each

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exercise and its components, spanning from June 1946 to November 1946 (a total of seventeen chapters). The focus is overwhelmingly on a “new” enemy labeled “Purple,” using the old war-plan color-coding system of the interwar period. Purple stood for the Soviet Union, and the monograph breaks new ground in showing how—at least for the Navy, at the Naval War College—the Cold War already was being conceptualized and operationalized as early as 1946.

The intricate discussions are supported throughout by photographs of various “players” (literally and figuratively), as well as charts and figures that the officers used in their games. For those unfamiliar with the milieu of wargaming at the Naval War College, the work highlights how the Navy’s conception in these problems covered vast geographic distances and what can only be described in today’s doctrine as an *operational*-level approach—that is, an approach at the campaign level, although tactics clearly played a big role in gaming.

The choice of the Pacific frames the end point of Friedman’s analysis and presumably implies another work forthcoming, because the wargaming focus switched to the Atlantic for the remainder of the 1946–47 academic year (p. xxii). This may seem odd to those of us who participated in the late Cold War, with its very Atlantic focus on the problems of the Greenland–Iceland–U.K. gap and the intricacies of executing the 1984 Maritime Strategy.<sup>1</sup> However, Friedman shows how the shadow of the recent war in the Pacific still dominated the naval officer culture after the war, and that starting things out in that arena—with the implication that the Soviets might attempt a Pearl Harbor repeat—made perfect sense to them, if not to us. Friedman also emphasizes striking parallels with today’s perception of an antiaccess/area-denial (known as A2/AD) threat—despite *démarches* from our current Chief of Naval Operations—that was inherent in the expected adversary’s anti-Navy tactics: “Soviet naval doctrine, for instance, stressed initial strikes against American carrier battle groups by, first, torpedo-firing, later missile-firing, submarines, followed up by strikes from long-range, land-based naval aviation, and then surface battle groups. Some of the 1946 scenarios at the Naval War College already reflected this pattern of doctrine” (p. xxii).<sup>2</sup>

Friedman emphasizes how recent experience in the Pacific War at places such as Guadalcanal and Okinawa seemed to justify these concerns. He then draws direct parallels with Chinese naval developments and capabilities today.

Hidden within the detailed account are various nuggets, but the reader must remain attentive to catch them. For example, in the overview of the curriculum the reader learns that each student was assigned to write two lengthy (a recommendation of nine thousand words) research papers, on the following topics: “Relations between Russia and the United States, and Their Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy” and “The Influence of the Atomic Bomb on Future Naval

Warfare.” Clearly, the Navy leadership at the College, including NWC President Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, had two main concerns on its collective mind. Later, the reader learns how combined-arms operations—involving aircraft of various types, submarines, destroyers, and even battleships and cruisers—had become so integrated in all phases of naval warfare, particularly in the early search and reconnaissance phases of the movement exercises (pp. 70–72). Finally, during an exercise in which officers role-played Purple, one sees elements of World War II cropping up in an attempted Purple invasion of Attu, as Purple pushes out from bases on the Kamchatka Peninsula (pp. 142–56). This was prescient; the peninsula became a key geographic area and base for the Soviet Far Eastern Fleet during the Cold War.

Throughout the text, a modern War College student will find how open the dialogue and the criticisms often were. The goal was not so much to wargame with a view to justifying a capability or force structure as it was to develop the student-officers’ minds and their decision-making skills. With regard to the larger arguments of the work, thankfully Friedman summarizes those in a concise and hard-hitting final chapter. He emphasizes the transition from an Orange (Japanese) enemy to a new threat. With regard to the games’ practical value, he notes that “major aspects of war gaming reflected the theoretical underpinnings of the activity itself, as well as more-practical applications of interwar and wartime doctrine.” The focus was not doctrinal conformance but “learning opportunities” aimed at “naval operational decision making” (p. 405). He explains the apparently counterintuitive focus, especially on surface warfare, which seemed at odds with the lessons learned about aircraft carriers and aviation becoming the dominant components of naval warfare. To resolve this problem, he brings up the historical record and the experience and actions of a surface officer such as Spruance, or even William F. Halsey Jr., in the Pacific campaigns: from desperate surface combat in the Solomon Islands, to later plans and actions vis-à-vis Japanese surface threats in the Marianas, and especially at Leyte Gulf (pp. 406–407).

Thus, Navy leaders after the war still took surface threats very seriously indeed. This does not mean they discounted submarine and air threats, but they realized that any future war at sea would be a three-dimensional, combined-arms fight. Accordingly, they paid particularly close attention in their scripting to the “manned cruise missiles” they had faced only recently, at Okinawa in the last year of the war; and the threat of submarines—which sank more U.S. aircraft carriers than any single other platform—was never far from their thoughts. They even gave Purple some aircraft carriers, even though the Soviet Union had none of those platforms yet. Friedman also argues that Navy leaders did not buy into the idea that atomic weapons had eliminated the peer maritime threat. They justly can be credited with anticipating that the main maritime threat indeed would be

the Red Banner Fleet of the Soviet Union, and in the games they had it employ just the sort of tactics and platforms (missiles, submarines, surface ships, and aviation) that it eventually would do in actuality (p. 408).

Obviously scholars such as I have much to gain by acquiring, reading, and otherwise examining monographs like this one, but they will provide value and benefit for anyone else wanting a “deep” look into a distant mirror. BZ, Professor Friedman.

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#### NOTES

1. Norman Friedman, *The US Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988).  
Western Pacific: Anti-access/Area Denial and the Airsea Battle Concept,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 14, no. 3 (2012).
2. For A2/AD, see, for example, Kyle D. Christensen, “Strategic Developments in the