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## Research & Debate—Historical Parallels in Command: Nelson and Spruance

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## RESEARCH & DEBATE

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### HISTORICAL PARALLELS IN COMMAND NELSON AND SPRUANCE

*Robert C. Rubel*

*No two, perhaps, of the myriad battles of history have been exactly alike, either in the ground contested or in their tactical combinations; no theatre of war, great or small, on land or sea, is without features that differentiate it from every other, in the apprehension of the strategist; but still among them all are marked resemblances, common general characteristics, which admit of statement and classification, and which, when recognized and familiar to the mind, develop that aptitude, that quickness to seize the decisive features of a situation and to apply at once the proper remedy, which the French call coup d'œil, a phrase for which I know no English equivalent.*

ALFRED THAYER MAHAN, ADDRESS AT THE  
OPENING OF THE FOURTH ANNUAL SESSION OF  
THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, 6 AUGUST 1888

The remark often attributed to Mark Twain that history might not repeat itself but rhymes is used so often that it can become trite, but nonetheless there is objective truth behind it. In terms of military history, parsing such rhyming can offer insights into the process of command. Prussian war theorist Carl von Clausewitz catalogs four ways in which historical examples can be used; the first is to explain an idea.<sup>1</sup> The idea of focus in this article is the command dilemma that naval commanders have faced and likely will face. This dilemma involves

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the uniquely naval matter of weighing the risk of pursuing an enemy fleet or forgoing such a pursuit to protect a strategic position. The complicating factor is uncertainty about the enemy's location and intent. Additionally—and again a uniquely naval matter—the balancing of risk to capital ships versus risk to a position, say a beachhead, factors into the decision-making dilemma. It has been

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many decades since a USN admiral has faced such a command dilemma, and the matter may have faded from the collective professional lore that informs officer development. The emergence of a peer great power—hostile to U.S. interests and intent on building a competitive navy—suggests that future U.S. naval commanders might encounter such command dilemmas, and thus it is appropriate to examine how past commanders dealt with them.

A review of naval history from the Napoleonic Wars through World War II reveals a number of instances in which commanders had to make decisions about whether to prioritize destruction of an enemy force or preservation of a capital-ship force at the risk of leaving a strategic position uncovered. Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher decided to remove his carriers from the vicinity of Guadalcanal once the landings had commenced in August 1942, for fear of Japanese land-based air attacks. In his mind, staying put would have incurred unacceptable strategic risk, given the few carriers available in the Pacific at that time. Admiral William F. “Bull” Halsey’s decision to chase Japanese vice admiral Jisaburo Ozawa at the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 rather than stay in place to protect the beachhead was a case in which the strategic position was left uncovered to seek battle with the enemy fleet. I do not, however, regard it as a true case of historical rhyming, because of the massive superiority the U.S. Navy possessed at the time and the particular locating information available to Halsey. This article will focus on just two examples, because of the compelling similarities in the situations. At the end, an epilogue will report on the author’s personal experience with such a situation.

In 1995, I wrote an article for the *Naval War College Review* (Winter 1995, vol. 48, no. 1) analyzing the parallels in the Battles of Gettysburg and Midway. While these would seem to be unrelated events, on closer study the faulty command decisions that General Robert E. Lee and Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto made were similar in nature and led to similar results.<sup>2</sup> Recently, a rereading of Julian S. Corbett’s *The Campaign of Trafalgar* caused some mental relays to click, and I realized that there existed another case of historical parallels in command. In this case, I will look at the decision-making of two famous admirals, British admiral Horatio Nelson and American admiral Raymond A. Spruance. On the surface, the two men seem to be entirely different in their approaches to command, but on one occasion for each their decisions in maneuvering leading up to a major naval battle “rhymed.” Unlike those of Lee and Yamamoto, the decisions of Nelson and Spruance prior to the Battles of Trafalgar and the Philippine Sea, respectively, led to victory. Parsing this couplet of command decisions offers useful insights into both naval strategy and the dilemmas involved in command at sea.

#### CONTEXT: POSITION VERSUS ATTRITION

The two classic naval theorists, the American Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Briton Julian Corbett, produced different approaches to naval strategy. Both

highlighted the importance of seizing command of the sea via destruction of the enemy's fleet, but Mahan's approach was more focused on waging a decisive battle for command, whereas Corbett offered a more nuanced view that recognized the importance of geographic positions. Thus, among naval strategists there grew a theoretical disagreement over the relative importance of defending or seizing a position versus destroying the enemy fleet. Almost everyone accepted that final victory in war depended on operations ashore, but the relative importance of naval versus land operations at any particular moment became the locus of contention. For "Mahanians," the destruction of enemy naval forces was a strategic prerequisite to operations on land. Free and secure movement on the seas, as well as denying such to the enemy, made land operations possible and therefore always must be the priority in naval strategy. "Corbettians," on the other hand, believed there could be situations in which the protection of a position took precedence over attrition of the enemy fleet.<sup>3</sup>

The intent here is not to take sides in the matter but rather to lay the foundation for the command dilemmas both Nelson and Spruance faced: whether to risk uncovering a position to create an opportunity to destroy an enemy fleet or forgo such an opportunity to ensure the safety of a position. In both cases there were powerful incentives pulling the admirals in different directions. In both cases an unlocated enemy fleet was the source of the command dilemma. In both cases the uncertainty of where the enemy fleet would go produced the risk framework. In both cases the admirals chose ensuring the safety of a position over seizing the opportunity to engage the enemy fleet. The admirals' reasoning illustrates the necessary subordination of naval strategy to overall war strategy.

### BRITAIN'S STRATEGIC SITUATION, 1805

Napoléon's virtual annexation of the Netherlands in violation of the 1801 Treaty of Lunéville was a key factor that prompted Britain to declare war on France in 1803.<sup>4</sup> Britain simply could not live with a nation in the hands of a hostile ruler in such close proximity across the narrow seas. But in 1805, Britain did not have an army of sufficient size to challenge France on the Continent; it had to enlist allies. Foremost among potential allies at the time was Russia. Both Britain and Russia had interests in keeping the Kingdom of Naples out of Napoléon's hands. Russia promised to dispatch an expeditionary force to southern Italy if Britain did the same. In March 1805, the British organized an expedition that was to sail to Malta and from there support Russian initiatives. At all costs, the goal of both the British and the Russian forces was that Napoléon must not be allowed to capture Sicily or take over the Kingdom of Naples. Thus, the British expedition constituted not only British bona fides with Russia that would cement the anti-Napoléon alliance; it also would protect positions, especially Malta, that were

critical to maintaining command of the sea in the Mediterranean, which in turn was critical to maintaining contact with Russia.

France had significant naval forces, but these were dispersed among ports ranging from Toulon in the Mediterranean to Brest in the English Channel. Napoléon's goal at the beginning of 1805 was to mount an invasion of Britain to remove his principal enemy. To do so, he needed to secure at least temporary command of the Channel, and to accomplish this he needed to unite his dispersed naval forces, along with such Spanish forces as could participate. In addition to this grand unification of forces in space and time, he needed to prevent the Royal Navy from doing the same. Napoléon thus concocted a grand scheme of deceptive naval maneuvers to lure British forces away from the Channel. In fact, the Royal Navy was dispersed rather widely, and it was occupied with blockading the French ports and protecting commerce with the far-flung colonies. That said, almost all British admirals understood the need to protect the Channel. Admiral Nelson, celebrated victor in the Battle of the Nile, was placed in command of the British Mediterranean squadron tasked with maintaining command of the Mediterranean and protecting British land operations there.

At the end of March 1805, Napoléon ordered French admiral Pierre-Charles de Villeneuve to sortie his Toulon-based squadron and proceed to Martinique in the West Indies to initiate his emperor's grand scheme. Nelson received reports of Villeneuve's departure from Toulon, but his exact whereabouts and his intended destination remained a mystery to the British forces.

#### AMERICA'S STRATEGIC SITUATION, 1944

By mid-1944, the Allies were on the offensive everywhere against the Axis powers. In Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower's armies were rolling back the Germans from the west and Stalin's armies were doing the same from the east. In the Pacific, the two major offensive prongs—General Douglas MacArthur's southwest Pacific campaign and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz's central Pacific campaign—were in high gear as they island-hopped toward the innermost Japanese defensive perimeter. Derived from the prewar Plan ORANGE, the central Pacific drive was a progression of island seizures that created a series of forward bases that supported naval operations with air support and logistics. The objective was to create a series of positions close to Japan that would support operations to secure the Allied policy of unconditional surrender. In 1944, it was still uncertain how the endgame would play out: slow starvation through blockade, strategic bombing, or invasion of the home islands. One concern was how long it would take to secure victory. The American public's massive support for the war and its willingness to endure rationing and tolerate the growing casualty lists were not considered infinite by national leadership. The concern for accelerating

the Pacific campaign is evidenced by a message from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to Nimitz and MacArthur on 13 June 1944, six days before the Battle of the Philippine Sea:

The Joint Chiefs of Staff . . . are considering the possibilities of expediting the Pacific Campaign by any or all of the following courses:

A: By advancing the target dates for operations now scheduled through operations against FORMOSA.

B: By by-passing presently selected objectives prior to operations against FORMOSA.

C: By by-passing presently selected objectives and choosing new objectives, including JAPAN proper.

On basis of over-all situation which will obtain as result of FORAGER operation [code name for the seizure of the Marianas] CinCPOA and CinCSowesPac directed to present their views and recommendations.<sup>5</sup>

The message was sent to Nimitz, and I know of no evidence that it was forwarded to Spruance, but I believe the latter would have been aware of the strategic intent the message reflects. Successful seizure of the Marshall Islands in early 1944 and the observed weakness of Japanese forces on islands previously slated for invasion (such as Truk) prompted a decision to move directly to the invasion of the principal Mariana island of Saipan. Saipan was the bulwark of Japan's inner defense ring, and holding it justified the commitment of the Imperial Japanese Navy's remaining aircraft carriers, which had been withheld from opposing the Gilbert and Marshall operations.

In June 1944, when reports of the American assault on Saipan reached Tokyo, Admiral Ozawa was ordered to sail and defeat the amphibious operation. Spruance received reports that the Japanese fleet was on the move, headed east. It was clear that Ozawa intended to respond to the invasion, but exactly how he would do so was unknown. Was his target Task Force 58 (TF 58)—the powerful carrier force covering the assault—or would he attempt to avoid engaging that force and attack the beachhead and the assembled transports supporting it?

#### MANEUVER TO AVOID BATTLE

The mobility of naval forces is their chief characteristic, and it is critical to use that mobility to achieve tactical advantage. Sometimes that mobility is used to precipitate a battle, and at other times to avoid it. In all cases, the end goal is to engage the enemy from a position of tactical, if not strategic, advantage. In Villeeneuve's case, he was to avoid battle with Nelson, escaping out of the Mediterranean Sea and heading for the West Indies to lure British naval forces there. The idea was that once the Royal Navy had chased Villeneuve there, he then would

head back to the English Channel and effect the grand unification before the British could respond. The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) had a bit of a different approach to the matter. Since its carrier aircraft could outrange those of the U.S. Navy significantly, the goal was to detect the American force and launch strikes while still out of range of U.S. attack aircraft. Also, luring TF 58 away from the beachhead would allow land-based Japanese aircraft to attack the transports. This was the intent at Saipan; later, at Leyte Gulf, Ozawa's intent was to lure Halsey away from his covering position of the assault beachhead so that Japanese admiral Takeo Kurita could sneak through the San Bernardino Strait with his battle-ships unmolested and attack the beachhead.

### MANEUVER TO PRECIPITATE BATTLE

Royal Navy forces in 1805 and USN forces in 1944 were—ship for ship—superior to their enemies both in design and armament and in the skill and experience of their crews. Therefore, commanders of both navies were eager to bring the enemy to battle. Ideally, if a major engagement could be created, command of the sea could be secured in one fell swoop, and that was the goal of both navies—both in overall doctrine and in the specific circumstances Nelson and Spruance encountered in the situations in question. The ghost of the decisive naval battle haunted both navies; Salamis (480 BC), Actium (31 BC), and Lepanto (1571) (and Trafalgar for Spruance) glittered like jewels in the naval histories that the admirals of each navy studied in their formative years. In fact, both Nelson and Spruance were veterans of battles that were perhaps not as strategically decisive as those of antiquity but nonetheless decisive in altering the vectors of their respective wars. In the Battle of the Nile (1798) and the Battle of Midway (1942), both admirals had made aggressive decisions that produced destruction of the opponent's force—in each case, an opposing force that was not ready to engage properly.

### COMMAND DILEMMAS

Most people who have had command of fighting forces have faced dilemmas of various kinds, many of which take the form of “damned if you do, damned if you don't.” To add to the burden of command, in combat the stakes involve the lives of servicemembers and perhaps the nation's fortunes. The pressure is tremendous. Moreover, there is a time element that complicates matters further; often a decision is required before there is opportunity to digest the accruing factors adequately. Then there is the *fog of war*—the collection of unknowns and perhaps inaccurate information. All these force the commander back on his or her instincts, born of education, experience, and fundamental personality traits. These instincts are what Clausewitz called the *coup d'oeil*—the inner eye that sees the glimmer of truth.<sup>6</sup> Both Nelson and Spruance were commanders well endowed

with the ingredients that form the coup d'oeil and were as well suited as anyone to deal with the dilemmas of combat command. In both March 1805 and June 1944, the dilemmas boiled down to making a choice between protecting a position and seeking an attritional battle when the enemy's location and intent were unknown.

### *Nelson's Decision*

Nelson's orders were to protect British interests in the Mediterranean Sea. He suspected that Villeneuve, if he sortied, would seek to seize Sicily or Naples or perhaps attack British positions in Egypt. He thus positioned his force to cover such eventualities. Interestingly, he went to a "secret position" between Majorca and Sardinia from which he could ambush Villeneuve if he indeed did head for either Sicily or Egypt. This is reminiscent of Point LUCK, the position the American task force took to ambush the Japanese at the Battle of Midway. Given Villeneuve's initial proposed navigation route east of Majorca, Nelson might have succeeded in intercepting Villeneuve even if his intent was to escape via Gibraltar. As luck would have it, a merchant who had seen Nelson's force subsequently was stopped by Villeneuve and reported the location of Nelson's fleet. Villeneuve thus altered his course to the west of Majorca and escaped.

Lacking locating information on Villeneuve, Nelson now had to make a decision: Should he remain in a position to cover Sicily or head west looking for Villeneuve, under the assumption that he was heading for Gibraltar? If he could intercept and defeat Villeneuve, Napoléon's scheme for achieving a concentration of force in the Channel would be defeated before it rightly was begun, and Sicily, as well as British command of the Mediterranean Sea, would be protected. However, if Villeneuve's objective was indeed Sicily and he got around Nelson, the British strategy of courting the Russian alliance would be compromised. Nelson elected to stay in place until he had definite locating information on Villeneuve. This information did not arrive for several days, thus producing Nelson's long chase across the Atlantic Ocean and back. Corbett, in his history of the Trafalgar campaign, extols Nelson's decision, citing his firm adherence to overall British strategy even if it meant forgoing a potentially decisive naval engagement.

### *Spruance's Decision*

The beachhead on Saipan had been established successfully, although Japanese opposition ashore was more stubborn than anticipated. Preceding sweeps of Japanese airfields within range of the invasion had been conducted by TF 58 in the days immediately prior and had all but neutralized that threat. That said, the Japanese plan had relied on airpower to circumvent U.S. fleet air defenses and attack the beachhead, including the amphibious ships supporting it. Ozawa was unaware of the status of the land-based air forces as he steamed toward Saipan. Spruance received reports of Ozawa's sortie from Japan, and he started moving



his fleet to the west to intercept. The U.S. tactic—once a Japanese carrier force was located—was to steam toward it at high speed at night so it would be in range at daybreak (neither navy flew at night with any regularity). However, Spruance neither had specific locating data on Ozawa nor knew the disposition of his force; was it concentrated in one group, or was it dispersed into several? The problem for Spruance was that the farther west he ran, the bigger the gap between his force and the beachhead, providing the opportunity for Ozawa to get between Spruance's force and the beachhead. Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher, Spruance's TF 58 commander, wanted permission to dash west so that when Ozawa was located, he would be in position to attack and destroy the remainder of the IJN's striking power. That essentially would open the door for the endgame against Japan.

On the other hand, if it was Ozawa's intent to avoid Spruance and attack the beachhead, the transports on which the safety of the troops ashore depended (so Spruance thought) could be sunk and the landing defeated, possibly resulting in setting back the timetable of the central Pacific campaign. Such a delay might have had adverse strategic consequences, not the least of which would have been erosion of public support, which in turn might have undermined the policy of unconditional surrender. In the end, Spruance ordered Mitscher to turn back east if Ozawa's force had not been located by midnight. He felt the importance of protecting the beachhead overrode the potential opportunity to achieve the final destruction of the Japanese navy. Of course, the ensuing battle—in which Ozawa's carriers launched long-range strikes against Spruance's force—turned into the "Marianas Turkey Shoot," in which the carrier airpower of the Japanese navy was all but eradicated at almost no cost to Spruance's force.

As a side note, the author, who was a planning and decision-making instructor at the Naval War College in the early 1990s, checked out one of only two copies held by the library of Corbett's history of the Trafalgar campaign, which had been on the shelf since shortly after it was first published in 1910, and realized that Spruance likely had read that very book. Was Spruance "being Nelson" that night in 1944? It is impossible to say, but in this business of parsing historical parallels in command, it is intriguing to come across a potential direct linkage between two command decisions separated by almost 140 years. Certainly, Corbett's glowing assessment of Nelson's decision was compelling: "For all his passion for action, for all his firm belief in the destruction of the enemy's fleet as the solvent of all difficulties, never once did he seek such a decision at the risk of laying open a vital point. Never once did he expose what it was his essential function to defend for an uncertain chance of contact with the enemy's fleet."<sup>7</sup> And likewise, this: "Obviously, then, if Nelson had chosen to make a dash for Villeneuve directly he heard he was out, he might have destroyed or captured the whole of the ships that were still with his flag. A less correct officer might well have done so. But for

Nelson it was not good war. The chance of contact was far too uncertain to justify uncovering the point of greatest danger.”<sup>8</sup>

### CRITIQUE

Criticism of Nelson’s decision to delay pursuit of the French squadron of course was dampened by his subsequent victory at Trafalgar. Nonetheless, there was some later second-guessing, including by no less an authority than Mahan, who asserted in a note to the introduction of his famous work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* that Nelson’s concern that Villeneuve might head for Egypt led him to make a “false move” that delayed his pursuit.<sup>9</sup> Yet Corbett took the opposite view: “No great captain ever grasped more fully the strategical importance of dealing with the enemy’s main force, yet no one ever less suffered it to become an obsession; no one saw more clearly when it ceased to be the key of a situation, and fell to a position of secondary moment.”<sup>10</sup>

Spruance’s decision was subject to its own criticism, despite the victory at Saipan. Spruance’s biographer Thomas Buell assessed that the beachhead at Saipan was not as vulnerable as Spruance assumed. Moreover, Spruance had become convinced that the Japanese fleet would try to circumvent his forces and get to the beachhead. Buell states: “With Spruance in that state of mind, the entire Japanese navy could have announced its presence on the western horizon, but Spruance would not have gone after it unless he was positive the enemy would not attack from either of his flanks.”<sup>11</sup> Mitscher was disappointed and embittered, despite the aerial victory over Japanese forces. Spruance’s chief of staff, Captain Charles J. Moore, wrote, “There will be a lot of kibitzing in Pearl Harbor and Washington about what we should have done,” and indeed there was; Admiral John H. Towers, Nimitz’s deputy commander of the Pacific Fleet, even demanded that Spruance be fired for mishandling TF 58.<sup>12</sup> Spruance himself felt compelled to justify his decision, writing in a postwar letter to historian Samuel Eliot Morison, “I think that going out after the Japanese and knocking their carriers out would have been much better and more satisfactory than waiting for them to attack us; but we were at the start of a very important and large amphibious operation and we could not afford to gamble and place it in jeopardy.”<sup>13</sup> Given the desire reflected in the 13 June JCS message to Nimitz and MacArthur, the overriding concern that could have factored into Spruance’s reasoning was the effect a successful Japanese attack on the beachhead might have had on the campaign schedule.

There is never an a priori correct answer to the command dilemmas that occur, which is why it generally is only the most-capable officers who end up in high command during war. Both Nelson and Spruance were clearly of that caliber, and both made similar decisions in similar circumstances. Interestingly, both officers had the flexibility of mind to proceed counter to their personalities when

circumstances demanded. Nelson, normally a very aggressive commander, chose caution in March 1805. Spruance, a normally cautious commander, took aggressive action at Midway in June 1942 when he ordered a half-organized strike to proceed using rather hazy locating information. Whereas Halsey was consistently aggressive and thus made a “false move” at Leyte, both Nelson and Spruance were capable of subordinating their normal proclivities when circumstances demanded it.

## RELEVANCE

There is a vast gulf of technological differences between the Battles of Trafalgar and the Philippine Sea, but the nature of the command dilemmas facing Admirals Nelson and Spruance was similar enough to support Mahan’s assertion that the principles of naval strategy are unchanging. If this is so, then the technology gulfs that separate 1805, 1944, and today are not enough to obviate the problem of command dilemmas that involve the choice between attrition and position. Even a cursory examination of the maritime geography of the East Asian littoral indicates that naval commanders involved in a potential war there likely will experience some form of this dilemma. This is especially true if the Marine Corps adopts its proposed concept of expeditionary advanced base operations, in which small detachments with shore-based antiship-missile batteries are placed on islands within the first island chain. Admirals in the People’s Liberation Army Navy might experience similar dilemmas owing to the militarization of the artificial islands China has built in the South China Sea. Increasingly capable reconnaissance and information technologies coupled with long-range missiles might convey the impression that future warfare will consist simply of servicing target sets, but a capable enemy will do everything in its power to interfere with that process. When that happens, naval maneuver and command decision-making will become once again the key discriminators of victory and defeat.

The unique factor that attends naval warfare is the strategic value of capital-ship forces. That value must be weighed against the strategic value of the position in jeopardy. Such a dilemma very well could be thrust on American admirals if China invades Taiwan. Such a balance was a bit less of a factor in Nelson’s decision because the element of airpower was not present, but nonetheless the destruction or protection of capital ships was the underlying motivator in all cases.

This comparison of Nelson and Spruance highlights the importance of preparing the mind to make combat decisions under the pressure of uncertainty. This is nothing new but sometimes can get lost in the attempts to achieve “dominant battlespace knowledge,” “information superiority,” and other glittering concepts through advanced technology.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps such efforts will bear fruit, but here again, a capable and determined enemy will do everything in its power to disrupt the certainty that the application of such technology is intended to produce.

Future commanders must be mentally prepared to make decisions in an environment infected by the fog of war. Understanding the relationships between position and attrition in naval warfare can help with such preparation.

#### EPILOGUE: ARAB-ISRAELI WAR, 1973

In October 1973, Arab forces from Egypt and Syria attacked Israel. The Israeli air force suffered high losses to Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) in the early going, and the United States rushed replacement aircraft to the Israelis via a chain of aircraft carriers positioned across the Atlantic and Mediterranean. As the tide of battle turned against the Arabs, their Soviet sponsors threatened to send in airborne troops to assist them. The United States then positioned an aircraft carrier battle group to intercept the Soviet airlift if it occurred. Both the U.S. Sixth Fleet and the Soviet Mediterranean Eskadra bolstered their forces, with the Sixth Fleet expanding to sixty-three ships and the Soviet force to ninety-six. Soviet naval forces concentrated at several anchorages but kept “tattletales” steaming with U.S. carrier groups, three of which were operating in various places in the Mediterranean. The United States went to Defense Condition 3, indicating the degree of tension.<sup>15</sup>

As a freshly minted A-7 Corsair pilot assigned to a squadron aboard USS *Independence* (CV 62), I routinely was assigned to “bird-dog” Soviet ships, many of which were armed with long-range antiship missiles. This mission involved orbiting overhead the Soviet ships in my aircraft, armed with five-hundred-pound bombs, and watching for smoke on the deck that would indicate a missile launch. When we saw smoke, my job was to transmit a “Zippo” report warning the carrier task force that Soviet antiship missiles had been launched. Then—if the Soviet ship had not shot me out of the sky with SAMs already—I was to roll in and perform a Battle of Midway-style dive-bombing attack. We had no other tactics at the time and no antiship missiles of our own—a product of a decade-long institutional focus on land attacks in Vietnam. Even as a junior aviator, it was clear to me that the carrier was highly vulnerable to a Soviet first strike with missiles.

Between missions, we would gather in the planning rooms to discuss potential alternative actions. One idea that surfaced was, if it looked as though combat was imminent, to run the carrier group west through the Strait of Sicily to gain maneuver room and perhaps deny locating and targeting information to the Soviets. Once that was accomplished, we might have been able to execute some kind of rollback campaign using long-range air strikes. However, such a move would have left the Soviets in command of the eastern Mediterranean and isolated Israel. In the event, Washington was dictating the positioning of naval forces, and we stayed in the eastern Mediterranean. Fortunately, the situation blew over and we resumed our normal deployment activities.

Looking at that episode from the perspective of this article, one can see that our situation was a kind of inverse of Nelson's and Spruance's: we would maneuver (run) to avoid engagement. However, as in the earlier cases, staying in place covered a strategic position (Israel) and, in its own way, incurred risk. The locations of U.S. allies in the Far East—Japan, South Korea, and presumably Taiwan, not to mention the Philippines and Singapore—are all within the expanding maritime area-denial capability of China. The aircraft carrier-centric design of the U.S. fleet ensures that some American admiral will encounter a command dilemma of a similar nature. The correct decision cannot be determined in advance, but familiarity with the dilemmas that our naval predecessors faced cannot help but increase the odds of a useful decision being made.

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#### NOTES

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3. James R. Holmes, "From Mahan to Corbett?," *The Diplomat*, 11 December 2011, thediplomat.com/.
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6. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 102.
7. Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, p. 36.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.
9. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, 5th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890, 1894; repr. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1987), p. 23. Interestingly, in a subsequent work Mahan took a more favorable view of Nelson's performance: "Justified as his action was to his own mind, and as it must be by the dispassionate review of military criticism . . ." and later, "His action left nothing to be desired." Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1897), vol. 2, p. 289.
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11. Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), p. 296.
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