The Pacific War and Contingent Victory: Why Japanese Defeat Was Not Inevitable, by Michael W. Myers

Richard J. Norton
a misprint, because North Korea did not invade South Korea until June 1950. These items are minor and easily corrected in a future edition. What remains still is a powerful book that goes into great detail, benefiting from the storytelling ability of H. W. Brands. We hope that a civil-military conflict between a towering figure like MacArthur and a sitting U.S. president is unlikely to reoccur. Yet the story remains a valid one today, with its lessons on the reach of military power in a democracy, the role of the president in setting national policy, and the role of civilian oversight of military power.

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The Pacific War and Contingent Victory is “an exercise in the elucidation of terms”—an exercise necessary to determine whether the Empire of Japan could have avoided defeat at the hands of the United States and its allies. The focus on “terms” is important, as precision and clarity are vital to Professor Michael Myers’s effort to challenge the near-universal acceptance of the idea that Japanese defeat was inevitable. On the contrary, Myers argues that there were several points in the war where the arc of history was subject to change, given a different mix of luck, skill, will, or strategy. Myers’s book takes aim at British historian H. P. Willmott—a leading proponent of the inevitability school—and Willmott’s assertion that since “the defeat of Japan was assured” no single battle or campaign can be considered “decisive.” The Pacific War and Contingent Victory challenges this conventional view that inherent industrial, financial, and demographic shortcomings all but guaranteed Japanese defeat.

Myers is also careful to argue that, while the Japanese could have avoided defeat, this does not mean necessarily that they ultimately could have gained victory. Rather, Japan might have realized outcomes short of actual defeat, such as an armistice preserving some of the gains made early in the war, a return to the status quo ante bellum, or even a negotiated surrender that left Japan more intact than it would be when it ultimately did surrender in 1945.

Myers’s challenge to Willmott and the rest of the proponents of inevitable Japanese defeat is built on an insistence on precise terms: as he explains, all that is required is to show that there was the slightest chance of a Japanese victory, however long the odds or improbable the required chain of events. If, even under the most remote of conditions, a different outcome could have occurred, then the inevitability argument is defeated. Myers then argues that if defeat was not a certainty, then one or more events—be they battles or campaigns or just a moment of good or ill fortune—had to be decisive. It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to argue with Myers’s logic. His position is somewhat similar to that of a lawyer defending the owners of a carnival who offer a commonly found midway game involving tossing softballs into milk cans for prizes. All the lawyer has to do is show that it is possible for the softball to
go into the can, even if the likelihood of that happening is as close to zero as one can get, and no one ever wins a prize. Myers produces ample evidence to prove his point. He notes that even Willmott himself acknowledges that a German victory in Europe could have enabled Japan to achieve something other than defeat in the Pacific. If the avatar of inevitability admits the possibility of an alternative outcome, what else is needed to carry the argument? However, the clarification that Japanese defeat was nearly inevitable versus simply inevitable is a distinction without a difference. If this were all there was to Myers’s book, it would be scant reward for the cost of purchase or the time spent reading it. Luckily there is more.

*The Pacific War and Contingent Victory* identifies a number of ways by which Japan might have avoided defeat. These include a United States willing to settle for a negotiated conclusion in the face of mounting casualties and war weariness. Greater success against Australia, which Myers argues could have been achieved, perhaps combined with a successful invasion and occupation of Hawaii, might have been another means to a different end. In sum, Myers’s book—which has been used in the Naval War College’s curricular case on the Pacific theater in the Second World War—by focusing on war’s contingent nature, illustrates well the oft-noted maxim that in war the enemy truly does “get a vote.”

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