



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

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It is generally not appreciated that the US military conducted *two* enormous amphibious operations on opposite sides of the globe in June 1944. Eight days after the Normandy invasion, two divisions of US Marines hit the beaches of Saipan in the Mariana Islands. The massive American battle fleet comprised seven heavy and eight light aircraft carriers escorted by seven new battleships and many cruisers and destroyers. Adm. Kelly Turner's amphibious forces embarked 127,000 Marines and US Army soldiers with all their equipment, escorted by a large supporting force of old battleships and escort aircraft carriers. The counterattacking Japanese fleet suffered a decisive defeat to their carrier air force.

Since the end of the war, both experts and the general public have come to believe the Japanese stood no chance against such military might. In *The Pacific War and Contingent Victory*, Michael Myers (Washington State Univ.) argues that they could in fact have achieved their war aims despite the great US superiority in economic power. Though the author is a specialist in the religion and philosophy of India and East Asia, he demonstrates a thorough understanding of the Pacific War and the source material pertinent to it. He believes that a grasp of the role of contingency in human affairs clarifies many of the choices made by both the Japanese and Americans during the war.

Myers maintains that the Japanese had a small window of opportunity to attain their strategic goals, specifically to secure hegemony in East Asia and the Western Pacific by driving all Western powers out of the area. "The thesis this book is arguing against is that Japan had no chance to win the Pacific War, not that Japan had a limited chance to win the Pacific War or that the odds were against Japan" (5). The first half of the book concerns what the Japanese might have done to better their chances of forcing the United States to the negotiating table. The second explains that American victory stemmed from the contingent factors of US policy, strategy, and mobilization. Historian Francis Pike has recently stated that, "With Japan already fully mobilized in its war with China, the projected conflict with the United States allowed a window of little more than a year to achieve a victory that might force America to the negotiating table."¹ Myers aims to show just how the Japanese used that pivotal year.

The author begins by discussing how Japan could have won the war early on, if its leaders had ensured closer cooperation and better planning between the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and Navy (IJN).

In order to win the war, Japan needed (1) better communication and more flexibility in joint operations mounted by the army and navy, (2) army ground troops and air units committed earlier and in far greater numbers to the war against the Western Powers, and (3) a more comprehensive long-term strategy that included a synthesis of diplomatic and military efforts toward a successful conclusion of the war on Japanese terms. Japan was unable to meet these challenges or achieve victory on its own. Germany's failure was complete; it proved an unfaithful ally. Nevertheless, there are some ways that Japan might have

1. *Hirohito's War: The Pacific War, 1941-1945* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2015) 146.

addressed the challenge of committing the army in better service of a long-term strategy for winning the war. (22)

Myers contends that the Pearl Harbor attack should have included a land invasion of the Hawaiian Islands; occupying the main US base in the Pacific would have forced the Franklin Roosevelt administration to make peace with the Japanese in order to regain Hawaii and allow the United States to concentrate on the war in Europe. He is convinced that resources for such a strategy could have been secured by postponing the planned invasion of Luzon in the Philippines. Such an occupation, he writes, was logistically possible, consistent with the thinking of Japanese military leaders, and likely to induce the American people and their government to seek a negotiated peace (26).

The Japanese did have several alternative plans for “phase two” operations. These included invading Hawaii, Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), Malaysia, and the Dutch East Indies. But attempting any of these while leaving the unoccupied Philippines in their rear would have required a sharp shift in doctrine that few Japanese leaders could accept. The main shortcoming in any attempt to invade Hawaii was lack of sealift and troops. The IJA would have to be convinced that three divisions could be assigned indefinitely for a Hawaii operation. And, too, the main body of the Japanese fleet would have to remain too long in Hawaiian waters to support the invasion. During the planning for the Midway operation, the IJN general staff worried about their ability to supply and maintain that island outpost. In short, Myers does not make a very persuasive case that the Japanese had the wherewithal to invade, supply, and hold Hawaii in 1941–42.

The initial American reaction to a Japanese invasion of the Hawaiian Islands would likely have been to concentrate forces for a counterattack, despite the effect that would have on the “Germany First” strategy. The United States would not have negotiated terms with Japan even if the return of Hawaii had been on the table. The Declaration of the United Nations issued during the Arcadia Conference (1 January 1942) explicitly ruled out any separate peace or armistice agreements with the enemy. However, Myers makes the important point that pushing the war out to Hawaii would have bought the Japanese time and, perhaps, added to American war weariness down the road; he notes that historian James Wood² “argues that if the huge battles of attrition that occurred on Okinawa and Iwo Jima had taken place at farther reaches of the Japanese empire, the Japanese would have had a higher probability of attaining a negotiated peace” (32). There is much truth in this line of thought. Certainly, by summer 1945, the American people had grown tired of war and wanted to avoid further mass carnage of their young men.

Myers argues that the Japanese could have realized their war aims even without a successful invasion of Hawaii. Their operations in both the Coral Sea—objective: Port Moresby—and at Midway were initiated to acquire control of the Western Pacific and cut off Australia from American support. At the war’s onset, the United States rushed material and troops to Australia, which was to be the main Allied base for counteroffensives against Japan’s newly won Southwest Pacific Empire.

Although a part of eastern operations, Midway’s primary purpose was to bring the American fleet to bear in order to destroy it and achieve Japanese mastery of the seas. The blockade of Australia depended not only on the occupation of Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia, and the resultant severance of Allied air traffic over this giant swath of Pacific Ocean, but also on the reduction of Allied shipping from the United States to Australia. Thus, the decisive naval battle that was sought by invading Midway was not a battle to be fought simply for its own sake, for the sake of sinking warships, or for the purpose of single-handedly bringing the United States to the negotiating table. (40)

2. *Japanese Military Strategy in the Pacific War: Was Defeat Inevitable?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007) 79.

Needless to say, the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway could easily have turned out differently. Their actual outcomes were contingent on many discrete decisions made by Japanese and American leaders and combat pilots.

Myers devotes three chapters to contingent factors in American decision-making and conduct of the war. An often overlooked or taken for granted aspect of the eventual US victory is its contingency on total-war financial and industrial mobilization. Myers argues at length that nothing about this was inevitable. The nature of American mobilization is vital to Myers's entire thesis. Had the United States repeated the delays and waste of its World War I mobilization, the Japanese would have had a far better chance of forcing a negotiated peace.

The book's final chapter itemizes the major factors that contributed to American victory: (a) the successful dual offensives by Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Adm. Chester Nimitz, (b) the reorganization of the American fleet into the task force system, (c) the creation from scratch of an amphibious fleet, (d) the development of radar, (e) the devastating submarine campaign against Japanese shipping, and (f) the attainment of air superiority in late 1942 with largely land-based air forces. Again, Myers stresses that none of these causes for final victory was preordained; all, however, had extended peacetime gestation periods. For example, the US Marines had long taken pains in developing sound amphibious warfare doctrine, just what was needed by 1943.³ As Myers makes clear in his book, "contingent" does not mean "fortuitous." Ultimately, the United States' superior leadership, organization, and flexibility allowed it to capitalize on its plentiful available resources.

I do have a few reservations about the book. Myers's contention that Japanese naval strategy was not based on fighting a decisive battle is unconvincing. He also omits some very relevant illustrative examples, such as the Manhattan Project and the successful development of an atomic bomb. Missing, too, is any discussion of the Two-Ocean Navy Act (passed 19 July 1940), which made the Japanese realize they would be overmatched in the long run and must seize their window of opportunity in order to stand any chance of reaching their goals. Though Myers claims that the Japanese had planned for a protracted war, their neglect of anti-submarine warfare, large-scale pilot training, and specialized engineering units to build bases in the Pacific indicates otherwise.

These shortcomings apart, serious students of the Second World War will find *The Pacific War and Contingent Victory* well worth careful study, whether or not they are persuaded by all of Michael Myers's provocative arguments.

3. See David J. Ulbrich, *Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2011).