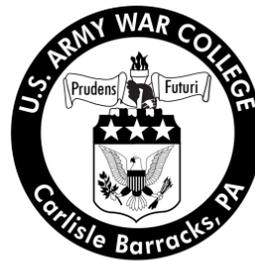


Strategy Research Project

The Strategic Leadership of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz

by

Captain James A. Knortz
United States Navy



United States Army War College
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OF ADMIRAL CHESTER W. NIMITZ

by

Captain James A. Knortz
United States Navy

Colonel Robert S. Buran
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

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THE STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OF ADMIRAL CHESTER W. NIMITZ

No more fortunate appointment to this vital command could have been made. He restored confidence to the defeated Fleet. He had the patience to wait through the lean period of the war, the capacity to organize both a fleet and a vast theater, the tact to deal with sister services and Allied commands, the leadership to weld his own subordinates into a great fighting team, the courage to take necessary risks, and the wisdom to select, from a welter of intelligence and opinion, the strategy that defeated Japan.

—Samuel Eliot Morrison
RADM, USNR (Retired)¹

In early 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was extremely frustrated about the progress of the war in the Pacific. The United States had been dealt a crushing blow at Pearl Harbor, followed by a string of U.S. and Allied setbacks including Wake Island, Guam, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Malaya. The Japanese had quickly seized the initiative in the Pacific, and the U.S. and its Allies appeared powerless to stop the onslaught.² Searching for something or someone to help kick start the U.S. effort in Pacific, President Roosevelt quietly asked Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox in February 1942 to provide a list of the most competent Navy flag officers that could be considered in the top third of the 120 flag officers in the Navy. The “selection board” formed by Secretary Knox consisted of nine senior Admirals including then Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet (COMINCH) Admiral Ernest J. King and Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Harold R. Stark. An officer needed at least five votes to make the list. King and Stark were automatically added to the list, leaving 38 additional selections.³ The final list delivered to President Roosevelt was more notable for its omissions rather than the officers who made the list. Most notably, the officer who had been a close advisor of President Roosevelt and who had recently been selected to

lead the Pacific Fleet after the devastation at Pearl Harbor, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, was left off the list.

In his analysis of the list, World War II historian Richard Frank indicates only a third of those selected could be considered to have been effective wartime leaders, and according to Frank, about 14 per cent could be considered failures or substandard as wartime leaders.⁴ While it is always easier to look at events like this in hindsight, the results of this board lead to questions as to just what qualities an effective strategic leader should possess, and more specifically, what strategic leadership qualities did Admiral Chester Nimitz utilize that not only made him the “go to guy” after Pearl Harbor, but also enabled him to lead the Pacific Fleet and United States Navy from its most crushing defeat to turning the tide in the Pacific War just 6 months later, and on the methodical campaign that led to the resounding defeat of Japan in 1945.

Whatever his peers might have said during that selection board in 1942, Admiral Nimitz’ performance as a strategic leader forever placed him in the most elite of categories in the history of the United States Navy. In a recently released biography of Admiral Nimitz, author and retired Navy Captain Brayton Harris wrote:

Chester Nimitz has long been overshadowed by flamboyant World War II contemporaries, men who collected colorful nicknames like “Bull” or “Howlin’ Mad.” These men knew how to work the media—and write memoirs—to claim credit or settle scores. Nimitz had no nickname, left no memoir, and refused all requests from authors who wanted to “help” tell his story. He had commanded the 2 million men and 1,000 ships that won the war in the Pacific. He felt that was legacy enough.⁵

What then were the qualities that made Admiral Nimitz so effective at such a critical juncture in our nation’s history when other senior Navy leaders seemingly thought very little of him? Established military leadership frameworks can prove useful in this analysis including the U.S. Navy’s Center for Personal and Professional Development’s (CPPD)

Navy Leadership Competency Model (NLCM), and Chapter 12 of the U.S. Army's Field Manual (FM) 6-22, Army Leadership. The NLCM offers five core competencies that apply to every level and position of leadership. These include accomplishing mission, leading people, leading change, working with people and resource stewardship.⁶ The U.S. Army's FM 6-22 mirrors the majority of the NLCM competencies, but also adds an additional strategic leadership quality that is worth considering: dealing with adverse conditions, uncertainty and ambiguity.⁷ Together, these foundational qualities of strategic leadership provide a solid framework to analyze the leadership of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. In doing this analysis, a key question to answer is whether the NLCM is a sufficient model to use in the discussion of strategic leadership, or is the U.S. Army's model as detailed in FM 6-22 a more useful yardstick of strategic leadership qualities?

Dealing with Adverse Conditions, Uncertainty and Ambiguity

Taking into consideration his entire remarkable body of work during World War II, it is in the category of dealing with adverse conditions, uncertainty and ambiguity where Admiral Nimitz accomplished his greatest achievements. In August 1939, Admiral Nimitz was assigned as the Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Navigation in Washington D.C.; essentially the organization that managed all Navy personnel matters including the assignment of flag officers. Admiral Nimitz immediately developed a strong bond with President Franklin Roosevelt, who preferred to personally choose his top naval commanders. The outbreak of war in Europe brought about a time of great change as the U.S. military prepared for war. Under the leadership of Admiral Nimitz at the Bureau of Navigation, the Navy expanded enlistment programs, officer training programs and modified its reserve programs among other initiatives.⁸ In early 1941, a disagreement

developed over the stationing of the Pacific Fleet in Hawaii between then Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral James O. Richardson and his superiors in Washington D.C., including the President. The disagreement cost Admiral Richardson his job and Roosevelt offered it to Admiral Nimitz; however, Nimitz explained to President Roosevelt that he was too junior for such a position, and based on Nimitz' recommendation, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel was given the nod instead.⁹ Admiral Nimitz was concerned about potentially causing ill will among his fellow flag officers if he jumped over almost 50 more senior officers, and based on the authoritative biography of Admiral Nimitz written by E.B. Potter, Nimitz did not appear to have any other motive than this for turning down the appointment. Conspiracy theorists might argue that Admiral Nimitz had some type of foreknowledge of coming hostilities with Japan; however, according to Potter, Admiral Nimitz in his current administrative position was not directly concerned with military operations, and was uninformed regarding high level negotiations between the U.S. and Japan.¹⁰ This turn of events was fortuitous on a couple of fronts. First, it was Admiral Kimmel and not Admiral Nimitz that was in command when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and second, Admiral Nimitz could not, and in fact would not turn down his second opportunity to command the Pacific Fleet.

On December 16, 1941, Admiral Nimitz was called in to meet with the Secretary of the Navy. Secretary Knox, who had just returned from a visit to view the devastated Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, indicated that a change had to be made in both leadership and direction in the Pacific. Admiral Kimmel and his staff were overwhelmed by the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack and had settled into a defensive mindset. Secretary Knox wanted a leader to instill a sense of confidence and take the offensive

against Japan and offered Admiral Nimitz the job.¹¹ In the most difficult and adverse time in the Navy's and perhaps the country's history, it was Admiral Chester Nimitz who got the call. Although it was Secretary Knox who gave him the news, it was President Roosevelt who had made the decision. Neither CNO Admiral Stark nor COMINCH Admiral King would've made the same choice and Admiral King in particular, looked at Nimitz as a paper pusher who used politics to get ahead.¹² President Roosevelt knew he had the right man and told Secretary Knox to "tell Nimitz to get the hell out to Pearl and stay there until the war is won."¹³

Admiral Nimitz took on this enormous task with the same calm and cool demeanor with which he had attacked all of his previous assignments. When told a plane was waiting to fly him to the west coast, Admiral Nimitz instead decided to take a train to catch up on his sleep, gather his thoughts and read operational reports.¹⁴ The disaster at Pearl Harbor and ensuing Japanese onslaught was not the only problem he was facing. There were many other significant issues at hand. Just as Admiral Nimitz was heading to assume command in the Pacific, the President had established a commission led by Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts to look into the disaster. In addition, Admiral King, who reportedly never thought much of Admiral Nimitz, was given expanded authorities as COMINCH, making him responsible for the Navy's current war efforts and shifting the Chief of Naval Operations into a more nebulous administrative and planning role.¹⁵ Admiral Nimitz would soon learn why many in the Navy Department believed that Admiral King was so tough that he shaved with a blowtorch.¹⁶ Admiral Nimitz had to take on all of these challenges as he headed westward for Pearl Harbor.

During his train ride to the West Coast Admiral Nimitz was able to finally read the full report on the disaster at Pearl Harbor, complete with pictures of the sunken and damaged vessels including his former flagship the USS ARIZONA. His immediate reaction was not to blame Admiral Kimmel or the other commanders. Instead he seemed to instantly know that it could have been him in Admiral Kimmel's shoes. Indeed, he felt this disaster could've happened to anyone.¹⁷ He would later remark in a letter to his wife that he was sorry that he did not make it to Pearl Harbor sooner, before the Roberts Commission.¹⁸ Admiral Nimitz was already thinking about the well-being of his future staff. He seemed to instinctively know that leadership during this crisis would be all about people.

Leading People and Creating a Positive Environment

The Center for Creative Leadership, led by retired Navy Vice Admiral John Ryan, published a short book titled *Crisis Leadership* in 2003. Chapter 5 discusses the tenets of leadership after a crisis which includes the ability of a strategic leader to rebuild and reassure, review and revise, reflect and renew, and restore and reinvigorate.¹⁹ As he arrived in Pearl Harbor on Christmas Eve 1941, these are precisely the things that Admiral Nimitz set out to do. Admiral King probably would've said that when the going gets tough, they needed the toughest officers, but Admiral Nimitz was not that type of leader. Admiral Nimitz was a leader who consistently quelled his desire to drive and instead preferred to lead more by example, persuasion and inspiration.²⁰

Upon arrival in Pearl Harbor, Admiral Nimitz was greeted by Rear Admiral Kimmel and Rear Admiral William Pye. Admiral Kimmel had recently been relieved as Commander of the Pacific Fleet and Admiral Pye had been appointed caretaker until Admiral Nimitz arrived. Admiral Nimitz told Kimmel, "You have my sympathy. It could've

happened to anybody.” Already starting to rebuild and reassure, Admiral Nimitz knew he would need Admiral Kimmel and Admiral Pye’s help to get him up to speed on operations in the Pacific. Admiral Nimitz reluctantly moved into good friend Admiral Kimmel’s old quarters, but would share many meals and evening time with both Admiral Kimmel and Pye.²¹ Was this feeling of sympathy expressed by Nimitz genuine? According to his son retired Admiral Chester Nimitz Jr. it was. Recounting an conversation with his father in the mid-1930’s, the younger Nimitz shared a forecast his father had made:

Let me say one thing. I do believe that we are going to have a major war, with Japan and Germany, and that the war is going to start by a very serious surprise attack and defeat of U.S. armed forces, and that there is going to be a major revulsion on the part of the political power in Washington against all those in command at sea, and they are all going to be thrown out, though it won’t be their fault necessarily.²²

Admiral Nimitz would continue to reassure as he toured the damaged ships and facilities, indicating that despite the heavy losses, there was something positive to be taken from the disaster. Ships and planes had been destroyed and damaged, but the repair shops and facilities were still intact, and the carrier force was safe. The fuel tank farms where nearly 5 million gallons of critical fuel were stored also escaped damage. Nimitz also knew that had the slow battleships been caught out at sea and sunk, the death toll would have been significantly higher. Finally, as a trained submariner, Admiral Nimitz knew that the submarine fleet was not targeted in the attack and was available for immediate offensive operations.²³ While inwardly grieving the losses at Pearl Harbor and the trouble facing his good friend Admiral Kimmel, “Nimitz’ ready and infectious smile offered reassurance,” and “the incisive thrust of his questions made it clear he

was steeled for the tremendous task he was to assume,” according to Pacific Fleet Intelligence Officer at the time, retired Rear Admiral Edwin Layton.²⁴

In his first press conference following his change of command ceremony on New Year’s Eve 1941, Admiral Nimitz remarked, “We have taken a tremendous wallop, but I have no doubt about the outcome.”²⁵ Admiral Nimitz had been equally positive with his new staff the same day, keeping them on when most expected to be reassigned or fired. He told his new staff that as former head of Navy personnel, he knew they had been selected for their current assignments based on their qualifications and that he had complete confidence in them and did not blame them for Pearl Harbor.²⁶ Indeed Admiral Nimitz wanted them to stay on due to their familiarity with their duties and to provide some continuity. Admiral Nimitz even kept on Admiral Kimmel’s Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Commander Edwin Layton, who would join Admiral Nimitz as the only other officer to remain assigned to the Pacific Fleet staff for the duration of the war.²⁷ Leading people during a crisis involves managing the emotional roller coaster that many are feeling. Admiral Nimitz’ quiet, confident demeanor became a source of reassurance and confidence for the Pacific Fleet. There is no doubt that Admiral Nimitz was focused on the operational aspects of the war, but he realized that he needed to focus on rebuilding the confidence of his people. He knew that they were all good men and that he needed to salvage them for future use during the war. One officer recalled that “in a very few minutes, Admiral Nimitz convinced all hands of his ability to lead us out of this.”²⁸

Working with People

The NLCM indicates that working with people involves the ability to explain, advocate and express facts and ideas in a convincing manner, and negotiate with

individuals and groups internally and externally. This leadership competency is characterized by several sub-competencies including influencing and negotiating, partnering, political awareness.²⁹ While these skills are most certainly important in the previous discussion on leading people, this section on working with people will focus on Admiral Nimitz' ability to work with his superiors, peers within the Navy, and subordinate flag officers. These are all areas where Admiral Nimitz was dealt a challenging hand and demonstrated the ability to overcome the challenges and excel.

Admiral Nimitz' relationship with his immediate superior, COMINCH Admiral Ernest King was vitally important to the success of the U.S. in the Pacific. Although the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and British Chiefs of Staff together controlled Allied military operations, the strategy in the Pacific was left mainly up to Admiral King and Admiral Nimitz who were forced into close cooperation despite their significant geographic separation. The fiery, temperamental personality of Admiral King stood in contrast to Admiral Nimitz' purposeful, matter of fact way of doing business, but it has been said that the two were probably more alike than most realized. Their principal difference centered on the way they handled personnel matters. Admiral Nimitz tended to deal with the hand he was dealt, trying to balance the needs of the Navy with empathy towards the individuals whereas Admiral King did not suffer fools and instead stocked his own staff with those he wanted while quickly dispensing with those that did not seem to cut it.³⁰

Admiral Nimitz seemed to instinctively know how to manage his sometimes overbearing boss and quickly developed acceptable methods to communicate with him and a sense for knowing when he could take leeway with guidance and direction

provided by Admiral King. For example, in early 1942, with U.S. forces in the Pacific in full retreat, the pressure was tremendous for something positive to be accomplished. Admiral King was no doubt feeling great pressure from President Roosevelt and passed that “heat” along to Admiral Nimitz. As he was known to do, Admiral King provided some specific operational guidance which included his desire to see the Pacific Fleet hit back against Japanese held islands in the Central Pacific. Admiral King even specifically requested the use of the battleships stationed at Pearl Harbor be used in hit and run style attacks. Admiral Nimitz, having already anticipated this guidance, had his staff hard at work to devise plans for aircraft carrier led raids against Japanese targets. He seemed to know the limits as to how much advice from Admiral King he needed to take in forming these plans. Admiral Nimitz dismissed the guidance to use battleships. He knew they were too slow for this type of operation, used too much fuel, and that he had insufficient numbers of cruisers and destroyers to protect both the battleships and carriers.³¹

Sensing a growing disconnect between himself and Admiral King on the appropriate tactics to use in the Pacific, Admiral Nimitz dispatched his Deputy, Admiral Pye, to Washington D.C. to meet with Admiral King, which helped resolve their disagreements about the feasibility of offensive operations.³² The situation improved somewhat but Admiral Nimitz’ concern that the U.S. lacked a coherent strategy for the Pacific persisted and in April 1942, Admiral Nimitz traveled to San Francisco to meet with Admiral King in person. In addition to strategy, the two admirals had an extensive discussion about personnel. Admiral King expressed concern about the performance of Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher. While Admiral Nimitz shared some similar concerns, he

also knew, as with Admiral Kimmel at Pearl Harbor, that bad things sometimes happen to good people. Earlier in his own career, Admiral Nimitz had been taken to court martial when the old destroyer he commanded ran aground. Admiral Nimitz was by no means someone who commanded with the zero defect mentality. In fact, perhaps to a fault, he believed in giving subordinates every chance to prove their capabilities, whereas Admiral King was a man who held past shortcomings against his subordinates. For this reason, Admiral Nimitz told Admiral King that he would rather not be so heavily involved with the assignments of flag officers in the Pacific. He preferred to allow his successor handling personnel at the Bureau of Navigation, Admiral Jacobs, handle flag officer assignments with Admiral King.³³ Although Admiral Nimitz was confident that he could succeed with the personnel hand he was dealt, his willingness to allow subordinates to have multiple chances would eventually create some challenges.

While it seems clear that Admiral Nimitz quickly grew comfortable in his relationship with his principal superior Admiral King, he had some trying times with subordinate flag officers including Admiral Halsey and Admiral Ghormley. His relationship with Admiral Halsey started off somewhat poorly but improved over time, but his relationship with Admiral Ghormley eventually resulted in Ghormley's removal. Despite the different results, in both cases Admiral Nimitz demonstrated tremendous patience, willingness to compromise and a penchant for allowing his subordinates to accomplish their missions without prohibitive interference from him and his staff. He wanted to give his subordinates freedom of action, but when they did not perform up to standards, he fired them.³⁴

In the aftermath of the U.S. victory in the Battle of Midway, Admiral Nimitz and the Pacific Fleet were determined to continue their momentum with offensive action against Japan. In August 1942, the U.S. invaded the island of Guadalcanal, part of the Solomon Island chain in the South Pacific. Over the course of the next several months, the campaign for Guadalcanal resulted in some of the fiercest fighting in the Pacific. This first offensive, dubbed “Watchtower” came under the command of Admiral Robert Ghormley, commander of naval forces in the South Pacific Area.³⁵ Although the initial landings went smoothly, the U.S. would find itself embroiled in a tenacious conflict on land and at sea around Guadalcanal for more than 26 weeks. The difficulties of the Guadalcanal Campaign have been documented in detail over the years, and mistrust over some decisions made still lingers between the Navy and Marine Corps today. As the conflict dragged on, Admiral Nimitz became increasingly displeased with the perceived lack of aggressiveness and leadership by Admiral Ghormley so 2 months into the campaign, Admiral Nimitz replaced his old friend Admiral Ghormley with Admiral Halsey.³⁶

Admiral Halsey had built a reputation for his aggressiveness and strength of character. Unlike Admiral Nimitz, he was an outspoken, flamboyant leader who became a favorite of the fleet and the press corps covering the war, quickly becoming the Navy’s equivalent to the Army’s General George Patton.³⁷ Admiral Nimitz would struggle at times in his interactions with Admiral Halsey, but eventually the two admirals developed a good working relationship. In January 1942, as the U.S. desperately tried to strike back against the Japanese, Admiral Nimitz and Halsey had several disagreements over tactics. Admiral Halsey took offense that Admiral Nimitz, a man that had never piloted a

plane or commanded a carrier would give him detailed tactical recommendations and Admiral Nimitz fumed at times at the lack of reporting he received during Halsey's operations. Admiral Halsey was likely unaware of the intense pressure Admiral Nimitz was under from Admiral King, Secretary Knox and President Roosevelt. The two admirals were able to forge an understanding, and soon their relationship flourished.³⁸

As he grew into his leadership role in the Pacific, Admiral Nimitz developed a reputation for flexibility, patience and non-interference. He would not micromanage his subordinates, but would give them freedom of action. He gave brief, clear orders and allowed his subordinate commanders to take the initiative to accomplish the mission. Admiral Nimitz fully embraced this concept of decentralized mission execution, what is described in modern terms as Mission Command. At times, this way of doing business would cause him difficulties as in the case of Admiral Ghormley, but most of the time, it worked out to the distinct advantage of U.S. forces in the Pacific.³⁹

Leading Change

According to the NLCM, leading change encompasses the ability to create a work environment that encourages creative thinking and innovation. A careful review of Admiral Nimitz' naval career shows that he was a creative, innovative thinker with the flexibility to develop, evaluate and implement new tactics, techniques and procedures in naval warfare. Early in his career, Admiral Nimitz studied and then led the development of large diesel engines for use in naval vessels, and as a trained submariner, he worked hard to develop and advance the capabilities of the U.S. submarine force, to include overseeing the construction of the U.S. submarine base in Hawaii.⁴⁰ Admiral Nimitz' early record of innovation also included accomplishments in administration and personnel as he oversaw the creation of the Navy's first Reserve Officer Training Corps

(NROTC) Unit at the University of California at Berkeley in 1926.⁴¹ Admiral Nimitz devoted significant study during his time the Naval War College on developing the circular formation for ships as well as replenishment at sea techniques. As Admiral Nimitz assumed command of forces in the Pacific, he would put his knowledge with some of these innovations to good use, but more importantly, he led and implemented several other key innovations that would change the U.S. Navy forever. The disaster at Pearl Harbor and nature of war in the vast Pacific did help force his hand, but Admiral Nimitz' creativity, innovative mindset and flexibility supported the critical advancement of carrier warfare tactics, task force operations, amphibious warfare, and intelligence support to operations.

Throughout the majority of Admiral Nimitz' career, the U.S. Navy centered on the large capital ship, the battleship. Like most of his peers in the Navy, Admiral Nimitz had spent time in the battleship navy, although his career was more diverse than most. From the outset of his assignment in the Pacific following the Pearl Harbor attack, it was clear to Admiral Nimitz that it was the fast aircraft carrier that would reign supreme. Admiral Nimitz had a diverse background, but as Admiral Halsey had noted, he lacked experience with aircraft carriers and had never commanded one. This fact was not lost on the Navy's senior aviation officers, some of whom called for the replacement of Admiral Nimitz with an Admiral qualified in aviation. Admiral Nimitz may not have known all the intricacies of carrier warfare, but he knew how to use his most important weapon: his men. Admiral Nimitz relied on and trusted his subordinates who did know carrier tactics like Admiral Halsey and Admiral Fletcher. As author Edwin Hoyt so aptly states:

And yet, Nimitz was the one who shepherded the discussions of air power and use of the air forces in the Pacific. Under his command the

modernization of the tactics of carrier warfare took on new dimensions. It was not simply coincidental that the carrier men expanded and perfected their thinking in the Pacific, it was because Admiral Nimitz had the good sense to see that these young, eager specialists could do the job if they were given the responsibility and authority, and he gave it to them.⁴²

Similar to carrier warfare, Admiral Nimitz had little to no experience with amphibious warfare, which was another key component of the U.S. strategy in the Pacific. Again Admiral Nimitz had to rely on his subordinate commanders to carry the weight. Admiral Nimitz relied heavily on the skill of Admiral Richmond K. Turner, commander of the Southwest Pacific Amphibious Forces, as well as the skill of General Holland Smith. Like with Admiral Halsey and Admiral Fletcher, Admiral Nimitz gave his amphibious warfare leaders the freedom to develop amphibious warfare doctrine on the go, learning more and more with each operation.⁴³ The lessons learned in the early operations proved crucial to even more complex follow on amphibious operations in both the Pacific and European campaigns.

The innovation led by Admiral Nimitz in carrier warfare and amphibious warfare were critical to the success of the U.S. war effort, but almost equally important though less celebrated in history is the innovation Admiral Nimitz facilitated in the field of intelligence support to operations. In similar vein to how he treated his subordinate commanders, Admiral Nimitz bestowed similar trust and confidence in his intelligence team starting from the day he arrived in Pearl Harbor and insisted that the Pacific Fleet Intelligence Officer stay on at his post despite the fact that the Pearl Harbor attack was being criticized as a monumental intelligence failure. The Pacific Fleet intelligence staff was miniscule at the outset of the war, but Admiral Nimitz recognized the value that his intelligence team was providing and in the wake of a tremendous operational and intelligence success at the Battle of Midway in 1942, Admiral Nimitz agreed to the

expansion of his intelligence staff and the creation of the Joint Intelligence Center Pacific Ocean Area (JICPOA).⁴⁴ JICPOA grew to over 2,000 strong by war's end and included personnel from the Navy, Army, Army Air Corps, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. JICPOA's task was to provide strategic all-source intelligence estimates in support of all major operations, but its chief source of information was radio intelligence through breaking and analysis of Japanese naval codes.⁴⁵ Admiral Nimitz' willingness to support JICPOA's radio intelligence efforts with additional resources spurred the advancement of signals intelligence in the Pacific and left a lasting legacy that remains today.

Resource Stewardship

Among other things, the NLCM describes resource stewardship as the ability to acquire and administer human, financial, material and information resources in a manner that instills public trust and accomplishes the Navy's mission. With the Pacific fleet devastated by the Pearl Harbor attack and faced with a multi-front war characterized by a Germany first policy, Admiral Nimitz faced severe resource challenges at the onset of war in the Pacific. Shortfalls faced by the Pacific Fleet included numbers of aircraft carriers, submarines, aircraft, pilots, replenishment ships, cruisers and destroyers to name but a few. Additionally, the sheer expanse of the geography of the Pacific created inherent challenges to supply lines throughout the war. Near the war's end, the U.S. industrial machine had solved many of the shortfalls in ships and equipment, but the situation during the early part of the war was extremely difficult.

Between 1922 and 1941, Japan had nearly doubled its naval tonnage while over the same period, the U.S. tonnage increased by only 20 per cent. By 1941, WWII Naval

historian Samuel Elliott Morrison indicates that Japan's naval power had eclipsed that of the combined Allied fleets in the Pacific and was in a vastly superior state of readiness for combat operations.⁴⁶ The successful attack on Pearl Harbor and subsequent Japanese offensive in the Pacific increased this advantage even more. In fact, the Japanese Pearl Harbor strike force alone included nearly twice the number of aircraft carriers that the U.S. had available in the Pacific at the time. Admiral Nimitz knew the odds were not in his favor, but he also knew that he had to make something positive happen.

In early February 1942, in response to Admiral King's direction to mount some type of offensive operation against the Japanese, Admiral Nimitz informed Admiral King that since the Pacific Fleet was inferior in all types of ships to the enemy, the only types of operations possible were "hit and run" style attacks while simultaneously keeping enough forces in reserve to guard Hawaii.⁴⁷ In order to make these attacks effective, Admiral Nimitz knew he would need to reduce his forces even more, thus knowingly sending less powerful task forces against Japanese targets. The task forces could not include battleships, which could not keep up with the carriers and used far too much fuel. Short on replenishment ships and destroyers and cruisers for screening, Admiral Nimitz opted for the smaller, faster, more agile carrier task forces. Admiral Nimitz knew the situation was difficult, but he had to press the attack even with the knowledge that the task forces would run low on supplies with sailors being forced at times to subsist on a diet of beans and spaghetti as steaks were raffled off with meat stores dwindling.⁴⁸

While struggling to scrape together enough ships and supplies to support his "hit and run" carrier task force operations, Admiral Nimitz was presented with yet another

challenge. Admiral King had hatched a plan to avenge the Pearl Harbor attack by striking Tokyo and in order to do it would need half of the Pacific Fleet's carrier force. Admiral Nimitz understood the desire to strike the Japanese mainland, but he predicted that the operation would be symbolic in nature and not accomplish anything significant.⁴⁹ As the ships left on their secret mission to bomb Japan, Admiral Nimitz' intelligence staff was already indicating that Japan was planning a major operation with Midway Island a likely target.

As the intelligence picture of Japan's impending offensive against Midway Island developed, Admiral Nimitz knew it would be a race against time. As Admiral Fletcher's task force returned from the Coral Sea with the damaged carrier Yorktown, Admiral Nimitz knew he had to get the ships fueled, armed, repaired and back out to sea as soon as possible. As Admiral Halsey returned from his secret mission to strike Tokyo, Admiral Nimitz received more bad news. Admiral Halsey was suffering from a severe case of dermatitis and needed hospital care. With a Japanese carrier and invasion force bearing down on Midway, Admiral Nimitz had lost his best carrier tactician. On Admiral Halsey's recommendation, Admiral Spruance took command of Halsey's task force and put to sea with Admiral Fletcher in overall command of U.S. forces. Admiral Nimitz now had two officers that had begun the war with little to no carrier experience, leading the bulk of his Pacific carrier force against a Japanese force superior in numbers. The stunning U.S. victory over the Japanese turned the tide in the Pacific and demonstrated that Admiral Nimitz' superbly led team was capable of defying the most difficult odds.

Accomplishing Mission / Conclusion

According to the NLCM, Accomplishing Mission includes the ability to make timely and effective decisions and produce results through strategic planning,

decisiveness, problem solving, risk management and continuous improvement. While historians can look back in hindsight and question decisions made by wartime commanders, the record of accomplishments by Admiral Nimitz is undeniably clear. Admiral Nimitz took over the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet at the most difficult time in its history with morale at an all time low. He used his tremendous capabilities in strategic leadership to excel in the most volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. In this VUCA environment, his skills at leading people, leading change, working with people and resource stewardship forged one of the most capable combat leadership teams in history. It has been said that if Admiral Halsey was the man to win a battle, and Admiral Spruance the man to win a campaign, then Admiral Nimitz was the man to win a war.⁵⁰ It didn't matter that he was left off that famous list of the Navy's top 40 flag officers as he arguably eclipsed them all in achievement. Rear Admiral (Retired) Samuel Elliot Morrison appropriately characterized Admiral Nimitz' strategic leadership in the epigraph of this paper. When combined with his "immense capacity for work, an equal talent at obtaining the best work from others, an almost impeccable judgment of men, and a genius for making prompt, firm decisions," Admiral Nimitz was one of those rare men with the ability to meet any challenge.⁵¹

Looking back in history is always difficult as it can be hard to compare a time of national survival like World War II with the challenges of strategic leadership in today's operating environment. Could Admiral Nimitz be as successful now as he was then? In a recent discussion at the U.S. Army War College, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff provided his opinion of strategic leadership, indicating that the most important qualities of a strategic leader are: being intellectually open to new ideas,

having intellectual agility such as fighting a war while transforming the military, being a team builder, being an integrator and having the moral compass to do the right thing.⁵² As this paper has shown, Admiral Nimitz possessed all of these qualities and so much more, ensuring his tremendous legacy in the annals of military history.

Reviewing the accomplishments of a strategic leader such as Admiral Nimitz provides an opportunity to validate the usefulness of the NLCM. It is clear that the NLCM provides a good framework for starting a discussion of leadership at all levels of command, but it comes up a little short in the realm of strategic leadership, not because it does not include most traits that strategic leaders should have, but in lumping all levels of leadership together, the NLCM fails to recognize the unique nature, requirements and preparation that it takes to be an effective leader at the strategic level. Additionally, while the NLCM does provide a lengthy list of 25 sub-competencies supporting the core competencies, it provides almost no detail to describe the importance of these sub-competencies in any category of leadership. The U.S. Army's model as detailed in Chapter 12 of FM 6-22 provides a more comprehensive and useful tool as a starting point for the discussion of strategic leadership, providing not only an in depth discussion of the core competencies, but also supporting discussion and real world examples describing the sub-competencies. In addition to the inclusion of dealing with uncertainty, adversity and ambiguity, the Army model of strategic leadership also includes other key competencies not specifically spelled out in the NLCM including an emphasis on self-awareness, professional development and the need for a strategic leader to obtain a mastery of strategic art. As a starting point for a general discussion of leadership, the NLCM is sufficient, but for an in depth discussion of the role and

requirements of a strategic leader, the Army's FM 6-22 provides a more comprehensive, tailored analysis of the complex nature of strategic leadership.

Endnotes

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²³ Toll, *Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific, 1941-1942*, 159.

²⁴ Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton, USN (Ret), Captain Roger Pineau, USNR (Ret) and John Costello, *And I Was There, Pearl Harbor and Midway – Breaking the Secrets* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1985), 354.

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