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The Whipsaw at Work: U.S. Mastery in Sequential and Cumulative Operations in the Pacific War
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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U.S. joint-service commanders were extremely effective in their combination of sequential and cumulative operations in the Pacific War. In this analysis, effectiveness is evaluated in terms of the aggregate contribution of these operations in providing U.S. policymakers with credible options to end World War II against a severely degraded Japan. Three U.S. efforts demonstrate the masterful balance achieved in the Pacific. First, Navy Admiral Ernest King led a masterful sequence across the Central Pacific to the Marianas Islands that placed the U.S. in a dominant position to attack the Japanese home islands. Second, Army Air Forces General George C. Kenney and Army General Douglas MacArthur drove sequential gains that multiplied cumulative effects as demonstrated by Fifth Air Force's strategic reduction of Rabaul. Third, Admiral Chester Nimitz led a powerful submarine campaign that had three critical outcomes: it annihilated Japanese shipping, enabled the sequential advances that propelled the final U.S. drive on Japan, and eliminated Japan's ability to sustain the war.

While these operations proved essential, critics of this argumentation allege that amassing options to end the war—invasion, blockade or the atomic bomb—was an unnecessary prerequisite for victory. Further, they argue that because the U.S. gained the strategic objectives required to prosecute an end to the war from the Marianas, the Philippines campaign was a wasteful deviation. Though these arguments have some validity, they are less than persuasive. Credible options were required to inform Truman's final decision on how to end the war as the inter-service debate raged regarding the most appropriate method to finalize victory. Furthermore, the Philippines advance was not a misguided departure as it drew the Japanese Navy out for decisive battle in which the U.S. navy thoroughly destroyed Japanese naval power at Leyte Gulf. Although Phillips O'Brien does make a strong point regarding the lack of strategic

necessity in invading the Philippines in his book, *How the War Was Won and Allied Victory in World War II*, he fails to acknowledge the strategic gains of Leyte. Therefore, a crucial modification of O'Brien's critique is necessary: the U.S. should have forgone further attacks on the Philippines after the U.S. destroyed Japanese naval power at Leyte to achieve the most effective combination of these operations. Thus, U.S. joint-service commanders were exemplary, though not perfect, in their combination of sequential and cumulative operations in destroying Japan and in providing U.S. policymakers with viable alternatives to win the Pacific War.

In his work, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*, J.C. Wylie suggests that two dominant patterns support dissecting a war and analyzing its strategy: sequential and cumulative operations.¹ Wylie characterizes sequential operations as those of a "series of discrete steps or actions, with each one of this series of actions growing naturally out of, and dependent upon, the one that preceded it. The total pattern of all the discrete or separate actions makes the entire sequence of the war."² Cumulative operations, on the other hand, are those where the operational pattern is the sum of "lesser" actions that are not dependent upon sequence.³ Wylie goes on to explain that "each individual [action] is no more than a single statistic, an isolated plus or a minus, in arriving at the final result."⁴ However, with all due credit to Wylie's theories on these essential concepts—this framework requires a nuance beyond what he offers in his seminal volume on military strategy. A third integrated strategy exists that Wylie does not address. While commanders can prosecute either sequential or cumulative operations in war, they can also conduct sequential operations that drive significant cumulative effects in support of military objectives. In the Pacific theater of World War II, U.S. joint military commanders demonstrated excellence in conducting sequential operations, cumulative operations, and sequential operations with cumulative effects.

The dynamic effects of these operations are best understood through examination within—and across—each sub-section of the Pacific theater. Beginning in the Central Pacific, the synergy of these operations is manifest in two critical outcomes: sequential gains led to cumulative effects in taking the Marianas in June 1944, and even more devastating results were projected from the seized islands in late 1944-1945. King insisted on the Marianas—“the key to sea power”—as the centerpiece of his strategy.⁵ The Marianas offered the U.S. maximum flexibility in its final advance on the Japanese home islands, or it could pivot to the Philippines or Formosa as required.⁶ Japan’s leaders understood that the Marianas were essential to their homeland defense and considered the loss of the islands a catastrophic defeat.

In seizing the Marianas, the U.S. devastated Japan’s capacity to sustain the war. On 19 June 1944 alone, U.S. carrier aviators shot down a staggering 397 planes to only twenty-five American losses.⁷ By the end of the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the Fifth Fleet ravaged the Japanese fleet inflicting losses including 476 planes, 445 pilots, three carriers sunk, and two carriers damaged.⁸ Japanese naval air power was now in shambles, and the loss of these carriers meant that Japan’s offensive carrier mobility had been eliminated.⁹ In his piece “A Pivotal Campaign in a Peripheral Theater: Guadalcanal and World War II in the Pacific,” Bradford Lee calls Japan’s naval aviators its “operational center of gravity, the ‘hub of all power and movement.’”¹⁰ Their destruction began in the Solomons, intensified in the Marshalls with raids on the Japanese stronghold at Truk, and culminated in the Marianas. Denied their “hub of all power,” Japan lost its primary defense against the ubiquitous American advance.¹¹ However, the aggregate effects of this sequence increased after seizing the islands.

Cumulative effects achieved after capturing the Marianas had a profound effect on crushing Japan and provided the U.S. with dynamic options to conclude the war. A major

technological development bolstered this synergistic relationship—the introduction of the B-29 to the Pacific theater. Because of its increased 1,500-mile range, the B-29 could assault the home islands from the Marianas as the U.S. exploited this forward-basing with U.S. Army Air Forces General Curtis Lemay’s city bombing campaign against Japan’s industry and citizenry.¹² Lemay also strengthened U.S. mining operations in the aptly-named Operation Starvation in March 1945 as his B-29s dropped thousands of mines to seal the Shimonoseki Strait.¹³ Sealing the strait kept Japan’s warships from contesting the mining campaign and led to scores of port closures, exacerbating Japan’s plight as it was being starved from the sea and rained fire upon from the air by 6,960 sorties in seventeen B-29 incendiary attacks.¹⁴

The Marianas campaign was critical because crushing the will of the people was a major precondition of President Roosevelt’s political objective of unconditional surrender. In the city bombings, the U.S. killed 410,000 Japanese and made 15 million homeless as it simultaneously laid ruin to Japan’s industry.¹⁵ In order to establish a lasting peace, there could be no doubt amongst the Japanese citizenry that they were militarily defeated. Furthermore, Truman’s ultimate decision to use atomic weapons was also made possible by this integration: the Enola Gay departed on its fateful sortie from an airbase in the Marianas that was seized in King’s masterful Central Pacific drive.

However, the eventual dropping of the bomb from Tinian in the Marianas must not overshadow the powerful war termination options the islands provided. From the Marianas, the U.S. could drive a final invasion of Japan, conduct a much-closer blockade, or drop atomic bombs to end the war. In the end, each option offered a means to achieve unconditional surrender because extremely effective sequential operations had enabled decisive cumulative effects that set the conditions for Japan’s capitulation. Seamless Army and Army Air Forces cohesion played

a monumental role in the ultimate effectiveness of the sequential and cumulative operations that brought Japan to its culminating point.

Mirroring the synergy of the Central Pacific, Kenney and MacArthur applied unremitting pressure on Japan in the Southwest Pacific in 1943-1944 via sequential gains to multiply cumulative effects. Demonstrating a keen awareness of the operating environment, Kenney insisted upon gaining air superiority through progressive island advances to enable much larger aggregate results..¹⁶ He understood that the strategic whole was much greater than the sum of individual island parts. Kenney worked seamlessly with MacArthur in taking islands with the explicit objective of establishing air bases to project air power over the vast Pacific theater..¹⁷ Thus, the systematic joint-service advance enabled Kenney's Fifth Air Force to overwhelm Japanese land-based air power in a series of air engagements destroying 4,400 fighters, and 3,400 bombers..¹⁸ This relentless destruction was significant because Japan could not replace these expert pilots lost, forcing it to fight with inexperienced fliers who lacked the expertise to survive the onslaught—let alone defend Japan's environs..¹⁹

In a perfect complement to this integration in King's theater, the American destruction of the Japanese fortress at Rabaul epitomized the reciprocal relationship between sequential operations and cumulative effects. Kenney and MacArthur paralleled the excellence in combining sequential and cumulative operations of the Central Pacific as they destroyed Japan's defensive perimeter in the Southwest. For example, these leaders revealed their sophistication in sequential operations when they raided—not invaded—the major Japanese garrison of 100,000 dug in troops at Rabaul with air power rather than hazard thousands of American casualties in a ground attack..²⁰ Tōjō cited U.S. bypasses of Japan's strongholds as a primary reason for Japan's defeat: as Japan hemorrhaged territory, it could not even count on its strongest positions to halt

the advance as the U.S. simply bypassed strongholds. After Kenney crushed Rabaul by November 1943, no Japanese heavy ships ever attempted a major reinforcement there, and the Imperial Navy could no longer threaten MacArthur's amphibious landings at Bougainville, clearing the way for the 1944 Southwest Pacific thrust..²¹

King called this dual advance the "whipsaw," and Eric Larrabee proclaims in *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, And Their War* that this unrelenting strategy won the Pacific War..²² In its methodical advance across two distinct paths, the American military commanders achieved maximum flexibility in applying the "unremitting pressure" on Japan that senior U.S. policymakers required of the joint force..²³ Such dynamic flexibility kept Japan from defeating the U.S. anywhere as it desperately attempted to defend itself everywhere. Furthermore, weapons adaptations bolstered the whipsaw's lethality as submarine attacks crippled enemy merchant shipping, fast-carriers surged U.S. mobility in island-hopping, and long-range bombers punctuated collective effects in destroying Japan..²⁴ The U.S. had secured the prerogative of where and when to strike and Japan had little hope of keeping up..²⁵ With such constant pressure thrust upon Japan from multiple directions, the sequential and cumulative relationship in the Southwest and Central Pacific was working in harmony as American joint forces surged towards the home islands in 1945.

Concurrent with the drives of the dual advance, Nimitz' submarine campaign from 1943-1945 was an exemplary cumulative operation that made a huge impact on the sequential and cumulative effects of the whipsaw. In a crucial departure from pre-war doctrine at President Roosevelt's direction, U.S. submarines refocused their attacks against merchant ships rather than warships and eviscerated Japan's war-sustaining capability by crushing the shipping network the island nation relied upon to survive..²⁶ By 1944, American submarines destroyed 90 percent of

Japan's 10 million tons of merchant shipping..²⁷ Capturing the essence of this cumulative process, Wylie explains, "We are not, even today, able to tell precisely when that took place. But it did take place."²⁸ A catastrophic spiral ensued that doomed Japan: the inability to transport iron ore resulted in less oil, making gasoline exceedingly scarce, leaving pilots without fuel to train, exacerbating the pilot crisis across the Pacific..²⁹ Without quality pilots, Japan could not defend itself. Ironically, this cumulative operation stripped Japan of the very resources it had gone to war to secure. Tōjō cited this devastation as a foremost factor in Japan's defeat as it lost the capability to wage offensive warfare..³⁰

The submarine campaign's vast cumulative effects made each of the war-ending alternatives much more feasible. With its merchant shipping annihilated and the flow of critical war-sustaining resources like food, oil, and aluminum extremely degraded, Japan struggled to sustain the war. As a result, sequential operations thrived as Japan lacked the supplies to defend its key positions. Thus, Japan faced the prospect of repelling an invasion, resisting a blockade, or withstanding the effects of atomic bombs without the merchant shipping it desperately needed to survive. For these reasons, the submarine campaign was a major factor in the successful combination of sequential and cumulative operations.

Despite the impact of these operations, critics take exception with these arguments for two foremost reasons. First, critics dispute this standard of effectiveness, suggesting that the collection of options to end the war was unnecessary and should not serve as a criterion for effectiveness. For instance, Navy leaders insisted that its plan could end the war with a minimal loss of American lives by continuing a blockade strategy of the home islands rather than pursuing an invasion. Meanwhile, Army leaders argued that a naval blockade would take far too long to finish the war—if it would work at all. Thus, multiple options to end the war were

unnecessary as each service maintained that their strategy alone was sufficient. Therefore, detractors like outspoken leaders from the individual services, believed that multiple paths to end the war were superfluous and not a precondition of victory—if only the President adopted an individual service’s preferred method for defeating the Japanese.

The most pointed criticism, however, comes from detractors like O’Brien who point to a major departure from the successful combination of sequential and cumulative operations as evidence that these actions were not so masterful at all. O’Brien cites the 1944-1945 Philippines Campaign as an inefficient deviation from a sound strategy that accomplished no strategic objectives not already gained in the Marianas. The logical application of O’Brien’s critique is that these operations must not be considered exemplary because they lacked legitimate strategic objectives, and U.S. commanders should have bypassed the islands in the most sophisticated island-hop of the war.³¹ In his most scathing criticism, he calls “MacArthur’s campaign” a “waste” that served only to satiate his personal agenda—an inexcusable pretext for the “historic” casualties suffered in the invasion.³² Such a glaring departure from purposeful sequential and cumulative operations makes the overall combination unworthy of being considered extremely effective.

Despite some validity in these arguments, each critique is less than persuasive. To begin, multiple courses of action to finish the war were necessary as the inter-service debate on how to end the war raged until summer 1945. The entire Pacific War had been a compromise between Army and Navy strategies as evidenced by Roosevelt’s authorization of the dual advance to satisfy service-specific agendas. Even after the Joint Staff approved the invasion of Kyushu, Navy leaders insisted that blockade was the only logical choice.³³ Alternatively, the Army believed that an invasion was necessary to bring the war to a timely end. Further, regarding the

atomic bomb, there was no guarantee that it would work—mechanically or in its ability to produce Japan’s capitulation.

Although Truman did opt for the use of atomic bombs over blockade or invasion in order to bring the war to a decisive end—that choice was exceedingly difficult for three reasons. First, until mid-summer 1945 it was not clear that the bomb would be ready for employment against Japan to serve as a credible war termination option. Second, when ready and approved for use, the U.S. had no guarantee that the bomb would actually denotate, and even if it, did no one could be absolutely certain of the actual destruction it would have on a robust Japanese city. Third, American policymakers could not be certain that one—or even two—atomic bombs would have the intended effect of forcing Emperor Hirohito’s capitulation. Further, even if the bombs were proved so devastating that Hirohito agreed to American surrender terms, there was a very real possibility that fanatical Japanese leaders would lead the Japanese in fighting on. In the event that two bombs did not deliver Japan’s surrender for any combination of these reasons, the U.S. would have exhausted its inventory of available atomic weapons. For these reasons, even with the powerful option of dropping atomic bombs on Japan, Truman had to be prepared to end the war via other means.

Lacking a unified theory of victory well into 1945, Truman weighed his available courses of action to determine how best to achieve unconditional surrender with the greatest economy of American life. Truman’s gathering of options was consistent with Clausewitz instruction for the proper relationship between the political objective, the political context, and the conduct of the war: “The nature of the political aim...and the total political situation of one’s own side, are factors that in practice must decisively influence the conduct of war.”³⁴ Truman understood his political condition: to achieve unconditional surrender most efficiently, with an American

citizenry eager to end the war, he needed viable options to determine the conduct of this critical phase of the war. Though each of his hard-fought options was feasible—none was ideal. Ending the war by employing a lengthy blockade or casualty-heavy invasion could erode domestic support for the war. After the war in Europe ended, U.S. citizens began to grow impatient to end the war in the Pacific as it raged into its fourth year. However, the circumstances in Europe were significantly different than those in the Pacific. Understanding those differences is most helpful in evaluating the ultimate effectiveness of U.S. sequential and cumulative operations in the Pacific.

The war in Europe provides an excellent case for comparison to illustrate why multiple options to end the war in the Pacific were so necessary. First, in Europe after Normandy, Allied troops were advancing on Berlin on land from the east and west. In the Pacific, on the other hand, a similar land invasion of the home islands presented a most dangerous course of action as American casualty projections ranged between 63,000 and 100,000.³⁵ Second, in Europe, blockade or naval bombardment was never a realistic U.S. option to end the war on the European continent—the Allies had to liberate Europe on the land. Blockade and bombardment was a much more viable option to end the war in the Pacific. Japan's island geography and dependence on external resources made it much more vulnerable to a war-ending blockade strategy than Germany. Third, the atomic bomb was not available to contemplate its use to end the war against the Germans in the spring of 1945. As it became increasingly clear in the summer of 1945 that the bomb would be a real option to terminate the war, the atomic option gave Truman yet another course of action he could choose to defeat Japan. Thus, selecting a method to end the war was much more complicated in the Pacific than in Europe. However, extremely effective sequential and cumulative operations prepared worthy options to inform Truman's monumental decision.

Finally, contrary to O'Brien's argument, the Philippines campaign made a resounding contribution to bringing the war to its most direct end. O'Brien fails to recognize that in driving on the Philippines, the U.S. achieved a critical strategic objective in isolating Japan from its southern resource base and in destroying Japanese naval power at Leyte Gulf. Japanese leaders, like Toyoda, perceived this significance: "Should we lose in the Philippines, the shipping lane to the south would be completely cut off...there would be no sense in saving the fleet at the expense of the loss."³⁶ Faced with strategic catastrophe, the Japanese risked their fleet at Leyte and with sea control decided there, the Americans dominated the Pacific and tightened their stranglehold on Japan. Thus, the campaign was not an inefficient departure from effective strategy; rather, it provided an immense strategic gain that bolstered U.S. power exponentially.

However, O'Brien's argument is not completely flawed. One crucial adaptation of his critique would optimize the sequential and cumulative combination while driving down the cost of victory. After the U.S. achieved its foremost strategic aim of sea control at Leyte, U.S. joint-service leaders should have reassessed the strategic situation and called off subsequent invasions of the Philippines. The U.S. could have avoided the 49,000 casualties suffered in taking Luzon which was still being contested by four American divisions on V-J Day.³⁷ A reassessment after Leyte, even if delayed until after the November 1944 general election to minimize the political ramifications of rejecting MacArthur's crusade to liberate the Philippines, should have resulted in forgoing future land operations on the Philippines. Instead, the joint force should have renewed its focus on the Central Pacific advance with the incredible advantage of sea control it earned in its enormous victory at Leyte. Therefore, U.S. commanders were extremely effective, though not flawless, in their combination of sequential and cumulative operations in placing joint American power at Japan's doorstep. In the end, U.S. joint-service commanders provided

Truman with three much-needed options to achieve the strategic objective of unconditional surrender against a critically weakened enemy.

CONCLUSION

The joint cohesion and incredible synergy achieved in the Pacific War serves as a model that should inform future U.S. military strategy in pursuit of national security objectives. American sequential operations were so successful because they achieved a two-fold effect that overwhelmed the enemy. First, as the U.S. conducted one amphibious assault after another in securing intermediate objectives in its drive on the Japanese home islands, these sequential advances also drove incredible cumulative effects. Next, concurrent cumulative operations like the American submarine campaign against Japanese shipping, helped bring Japan to its knees. As the war progressed, U.S. joint forces achieved a masterful integration of sequential and cumulative operations that directly supported U.S. operational and strategic objectives.

As U.S. military commanders once again prepare the joint force for a high-end war against a peer competitor in the Pacific, lessons learned from the last total Pacific War must inform U.S. joint force readiness. American leaders should emulate the joint synergy and cohesion achieved in the masterful combination of sequential and cumulative operations employed to defeat Japan. Like King, Kenney, MacArthur and Nimitz, contemporary joint force leaders must prepare the joint force to work together to take the fight to the enemy via simultaneous naval, land, and air operations to achieve sequenced intermediate objectives while other air, land and sea forces execute concurrent cumulative operations to crush dozens the enemy's sustainment network. Though modern operations are unlikely to include dozens of sequenced amphibious assaults, the synergy and joint cohesion provides an incredible model to inform future American joint-service operations. However, U.S. leaders must also learn from the

negative elements of this example, including the excessive influence MacArthur's personal aims had on overall military strategy and the joint-services' failure to develop a unified theory of victory. By learning and applying these lessons, current military leaders can prepare the joint force to perform with the same synergy and cohesion that made the whipsaw so effective in delivering U.S. objectives in the Pacific War.

Notes

¹ . C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1967), 117.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 118.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy 1890-1990* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 242.

⁶ Ibid., 243.

⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bradford A. Lee, “A Pivotal Campaign in a Peripheral Theater: Guadalcanal and World War II in the Pacific,” in *Naval Power and Expeditionary Warfare: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theatres of Naval Warfare*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman and S.C.M. Paine (London: Routledge, 2011), 96.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 239.

¹³ Ibid., 269.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Colin F. Jackson, *Cumulative Operations and Strategic Effects*, (2017; Newport: U.S. Naval War College, 2017), Audio Lecture.

¹⁶ Colin Jackson, *Cumulative Operations and Strategic Effects*

¹⁷ Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, And Their War* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987), 335.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 340.

²¹ Ibid., 339.

- ²² Ibid., 342.
- ²³ Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 238.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 247.
- ²⁶ Stephen P. Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 130.
- ²⁷ Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*, 119.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 398.
- ³⁰ Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 236; Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 397.
- ³¹ Phillips O'Brien, *How the War Was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 423.
- ³² Ibid., 420-429.
- ³³ Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 268.
- ³⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 602.
- ³⁵ Barton J. Bernstein, "The Alarming Japanese Buildup on Southern Kyushu, Growing U.S. Fears, and Counterfactual Analysis: Would the Planned November 1945 Invasion of Southern Kyushu Have Occurred?" *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 4 (November 1999): 563.
- ³⁶ Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 255-256.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 263; Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 348