

History as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy:

Trafalgar, Jutland, and Admiral Halsey at Leyte Gulf

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One episode more than any other in the Pacific war of 1941-1945 illustrates the prevailing twentieth-century American naval strategic viewpoint about how to fight at sea. It occurred during the battle of Leyte Gulf (October 23-26, 1944), when Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., in command of the Third Fleet, the major striking arm of Pacific Fleet commander-in-chief Chester W. Nimitz, left the scene of action to pursue a decoy fleet of under-armed Japanese carriers. They had sortied from Japan with the sole purpose of inducing Halsey to abandon the American amphibious landing forces at Leyte, in the Philippine Islands. Convinced that the crisis had passed in the battle for Leyte, Halsey sped two hundred miles north in search of a grand Trafalgar-like engagement. While Halsey was rushing northward toward Japan with his heavy—or “fleet”—carriers, a Japanese battle fleet coming from the west struck at the American ships that remained as a shield off the landing area. The Japanese were repulsed, but not without cost to the Americans. The Seventh Fleet of Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, whose chain of command made him subordinate to U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur and not to Nimitz, lost a small carrier, two destroyers, and a destroyer escort. Some of these surely would have survived if Halsey’s heavy carriers had been providing air cover, and the toll exacted from the Japanese for counterstriking the invaders would have been much higher if Halsey’s naval airpower had been present.

This episode marked a grave failure of tactical leadership on the part of a man who

enjoyed the reputation of being a superb and bold tactician, and Halsey knew it. He was deeply humiliated by the wording of the October 25 message from Admiral Nimitz demanding to know why his fleet carriers were not at Leyte: “Where is, repeat where is, Task Force 34. The world wonders.” Admiral Ernest J. King, the chief of naval operations (CNO), seriously considered reprimanding Halsey but decided against it because, in the opinion of Naval Academy historian Robert W. Love, Jr., to do so “would strengthen General [George C.] Marshall’s ongoing argument that [General Douglas] MacArthur be given overall command of the Pacific campaign. . . . Moreover, Halsey was a national hero . . . for whom both King and Nimitz had genuine respect and affection.” So Halsey emerged from Leyte with nothing worse than a slightly tarnished image--and with the mournful lifelong regret that he had reversed course, back toward Leyte, at the moment when the northern Japanese fleet “was exactly 42 miles from the muzzles of my 16-inch guns. . . . I turned my back on the opportunity I had dreamed of since my days as a cadet [at the Naval Academy].”

Halsey’s lasting regret was not that he had rushed north to intercept and destroy Ozawa’s fleet. He later wrote, “Given the same circumstances and the same information as I had then, I would do it again.” His remorse stemmed from turning back when he was so close to his target. A few months after the debacle, in a conversation with Admiral King, Halsey said, “I still think it was a mistake to turn south when the Japs were right under my guns.” King demurred, “No. It wasn’t a mistake. You couldn’t have done otherwise.” There was no mention--and thus no criticism--of Halsey’s decision to abandon the Leyte landing in the first place.

After Leyte, Halsey went on to command the later stages of the invasion of Okinawa, rampage with his carriers in Japanese home waters, and tender his flagship, the battleship

Missouri, for the surrender ceremonies in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. He ultimately received the fifth star of fleet admiral, an honor not accorded to any U.S. naval commander in the Atlantic war and one denied to Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, the architect of the victories at Midway, Saipan, and Okinawa. In a 1995 quasi-official television biography, Halsey was resurrected, his statue dusted off, and his place in the pantheon of authenticated American naval heroes firmly reclaimed. In the video depiction, Ernest J. King and Chester Nimitz are supporting actors, and Spruance remains safely offstage.

The idolatry of Halsey is often ascribed to his charisma as a bold, risk-taking leader in the proud tradition of such early swashbuckling raiders as John Paul Jones and Stephen Decatur. For example, Nathan Miller writes in his *War at Sea: A Naval History of World War II* (Scribner, 1995) that Nimitz did not relieve or even seriously reprimand Halsey because of the adverse impact disciplinary action would have had on the morale of men at war in the Pacific.

A supplementary hypothesis can further explain why Nimitz did not discipline Halsey following Leyte: Halsey was fighting precisely as twentieth-century training and doctrine compelled U.S. naval officers to fight whenever they had the chance. The U.S. Navy's unrelenting interwar (1919-1941) inculcation of belief in the decisive battle at sea as the *summum bonum* of Pacific Fleet naval strategy in the forthcoming war with Japan is well known in terms of war planning and war gaming. In his meticulous study, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Naval Institute Press, 1991), Edward S. Miller states that from the beginning of the twentieth century, "American naval imaginations were obsessed by the dramas of Trafalgar, Tsushima, and Jutland."

The battle of Jutland (1916) was the largest engagement of the British and German battle

fleets in World War I. For its importance to U.S. naval war games in the 1920s and 1930s, it is illustrative to recall Nimitz's post-World War II remark that the playing and replaying of Jutland at the Naval War College in Newport had firmly cast the mold for the U. S. Navy's strategy in the Central Pacific. More immediately, as the planning to retake the Marianas Islands intensified in the spring of 1944, Admiral Nimitz felt compelled to reassure Admiral King that the "destruction of the enemy fleet is always the primary objective of our Naval forces." A few months later, Nimitz included in his operation plan for Leyte Gulf the phrase, "In case opportunity for destruction of [a] major portion of the enemy fleet can be created, such destruction becomes the primary task."

While Admiral Nimitz, as commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet in Hawaii, was rearticulating the most basic U.S. naval strategy, midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis were being indoctrinated with the same philosophy for war at sea. Proof of this assertion may be found in the following document: "N.R.O.T.C. Pamphlet No. 10(a), Outlining Course in Naval History as given at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD," published by the GPO in 1942 and at the time offered for sale by the Superintendent of Documents for \$0.20. This revealing curriculum guide was very present-minded. It enjoined the instructor using it to "impress upon your midshipmen the practical value of naval history, how it may and should help them in the war in which they will soon play a part."

The guide includes texts, reading assignments, and weekly lesson topics. For the weeks of February 9 through March 14, 1942, there were eleven lessons on the naval aspects of World War I. The topical breakdown follows: navies and national policy (1 lesson); Coronel (1); Falklands and Dogger Bank (1); Dardanelles (1); the U. S. Navy in World War I (1); Jutland (5).

The battle of Jutland, in other words, constituted the core of the Naval Academy's teaching on the naval history of World War I at the very moment that the U-boats of Karl Dönitz were devastating American cargo ships and tankers along the East and Gulf Coasts of the United States and throughout the Caribbean and West Indies. Writing in *The Two-Ocean War* (Little, Brown and Company, 1963), America's premier naval historian, Samuel Eliot Morison laments, "The massacre enjoyed by the U-boats along our Atlantic Coast in 1942 was as much a national disaster as if saboteurs had destroyed half a dozen of our biggest war plants." The U.S. Navy had not prepared itself conceptually or materially to repulse this life-threatening assault on the maritime oil flow from the Gulf Coast to the industrial northeast--despite the fact that as early as the World War I era U. S. naval strategists had actively contemplated a naval war against Germany fought in the Western Hemisphere, War Plan Black.

Still, "N.R.O.T.C. Pamphlet No. 10(a)" is not totally devoid of references to the U.S. role in World War I. Following six *pages* of detailed instruction on how to teach the battle of Jutland, the manual devotes a miserly six *paragraphs* to the U. S. Navy in World War I, the most helpful of which contains the injunction to "show parallels between the First and Second World Wars, particularly as to transport services, convoys, use of destroyers, antisubmarine campaign, etc."

This summary of an obscure document prepared for Naval Academy midshipmen and for the "Second Reserve Officers' Training School" at Annapolis does not tell the whole story of the focus of naval history at the Naval Academy between World Wars I and II. There was also a substantial body of supporting literature written by uniformed and civilian professors of the fabled Department of English, History, and Government, much of it published by commercial presses. The most significant of these books was the longstanding textbook for the mandatory

course in naval history, *A History of Sea Power*, by Professors William O. Stevens and Allan Westcott, first published by Doubleday in 1920 and reissued with some changes in 1937 and 1942.

Each edition of *A History of Sea Power* traces western naval history from the time of the ancient Egyptians to the date of publication. The 1942 version devotes three chapters to World War I, one of which exclusively analyzes the battle of Jutland. The authors adopt an interesting posture toward the monumental clash of the principal German and British battle fleets that occurred on May 31 - June 1, 1916. They discuss the engagement in terms of its strategic significance and the tactics employed by both sides, but they reserve their real pedagogic passion for a commentary on naval leadership.

Stevens and Westcott are fatalistic in their summary of the importance of Jutland to the war. "Strategically, Jutland was neither lost nor won, since thereafter the naval situation remained much as it was before." The Royal Navy's Grand Fleet continued "to close Germany's approaches to the Atlantic and cut off her overseas trade." But the accomplishment was incomplete: "The North Sea itself remained a disputed area throughout the war." Moreover, the German navy retained "control of the Baltic and her shallow, well-protected North Sea coastline, which, combined with modern weapons such as mines, aircraft, and submarines, made an old-fashioned close blockade impossible." In other words, despite its aspirations to become a global sea power on the Mahanian model, the German navy remained the masterful coastal arm of the military-naval establishment of a continental power. It is the authors' view that if the British had annihilated the enemy fleet in the mode of Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar, the effect could have been quite decisive to the war. They contend that the Allied blockade of Germany could have

been drawn in closer, and the British could have moved into the Baltic.

The British failure to destroy the Germans at Jutland was not the result of faulty tactics, according to Stevens and Westcott. Both sides, in the authors' opinion, made their fair share of tactical mistakes, an inevitable phenomenon given the great size of the fleets, the primitive nature of radio communications, and other characteristics of the conditions of the battle. Where the failure lay was in temperament or spirit. The authors repeatedly criticize the British Admiralty and the Grand Fleet's commander-in-chief, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, for adamantly refusing to display Nelsonian boldness. The substance and strident tone of the criticism did not change from the time Stevens and Westcott first wrote the book immediately after World War I through the period when they were contemplating the initial phases of World War II. Their intended readership was always contemporary and future American naval officers.

In 1942, Stevens and Westcott proudly lifted the core of their criticism verbatim from the 1920 edition because "it relates the engagement to certain general principles illustrated in the past, and having an application to future warfare, no matter what the weapons." They reproduced a paragraph whose potency and pertinence can only be grasped by considering it nearly in its entirety:

Finally, in the matter of spirit, the considerations that swayed the movements of the [British] Grand Fleet at all stages were apparently those of what the enemy might do instead of what might be done to the enemy, the very antithesis of the spirit of Nelson. It is no reflection on the personal courage of the Commander in Chief [Admiral Jellicoe] that he should be moved by the consideration of saving his ships. The existence of the Grand Fleet was, of course, essential to the Allied cause. . . . But again it is a matter of

naval doctrine. Did the British fleet exist merely to maintain a numerical preponderance over its enemy or to crush that enemy--whatever the cost? If the battle of Jutland receives the stamp of approval as the best that could have been done, then the British or American officer of the future will know that he is expected primarily to “play safe.” But he will never tread the path of Blake, Hawke, or Nelson, the men who made the traditions of the Service and forged the anchors of the British Empire.

These words from the Naval Academy’s standard textbook on naval history had been repeated without interruption for at least twenty-four years preceding Halsey’s fateful dash north to engage and destroy Ozawa’s fleet. The spirit of leadership they extol perfectly explains why neither Nimitz nor King could find it within himself to profoundly censure his own modern Nelson.

Although the views of Stevens and Westcott on Jutland held sway throughout the Second World War, they began to change immediately after the war, as was evidenced by the publication of *American Sea Power Since 1775* (Lippincott, 1947). Westcott, then a senior professor at Annapolis, edited the book, which was written by his younger colleagues, fresh from duty in World War II. Notable among the contributors was Elmer B. Potter, who had served on Nimitz’s staff.

In the new book, Jutland’s strategic significance was characterized without ambiguity as “a turning point in the war at sea in World War I. Volumes have been written about the meaning of Jutland but if it may be said that the Germans won a tactical victory at Jutland, it remains equally clear that the British won the far more important strategic victory. Although Germany retained a sizeable fleet in being after Jutland, the [German] High Seas fleet never again ventured

to contest Britain's mastery of the sea." In other words, the British had achieved the Mahanian goal of retaining their command of the seas.

Turning to World War II and the battle of Leyte Gulf, the authors observe, "Halsey now faced a problem similar in some respect to that which had confronted Spruance off Saipan [in the amphibious assault of June 15-18, 1944]." The authors assert that Halsey's movement north against the Japanese decoy fleet was justified insofar as it ensured that his force would remain concentrated: "[His] decision to run north has led to much discussion. His was certainly the bold choice, based upon a proper estimate of the enemy's confusion and weakness. He cannot, of course, be blamed for not realizing that [Japanese Vice Admiral] Ozawa's fleet was a mere decoy; that was a fact not certainly known to the United States until after victory." With this stroke, the authors have taken the onus for the American losses at Leyte off Halsey and placed him squarely in the tradition of John Paul Jones, Stephen Decatur, O. H. Perry and all the other flamboyant heroes of the early American navy. He's a bold leader, and off he goes in hot pursuit of the enemy's warships.

In their only criticism of Halsey, Westcott and his junior colleagues do acknowledge that "less defensible . . . is the fact that he failed to notify Kinkaid [the admiral whose fleet covered the amphibious operation at Leyte] of his departure. Had he done so, the limited Seventh Fleet strength [of Kinkaid] might have been deployed to a better advantage." In other words, Kinkaid might have done better if he knew what was going on.

In evaluating the strategic significance of Leyte, the authors of *American Sea Power* dramatically link it to Jutland. At Leyte Gulf, they write, "American losses in combat ships were one light and two escort carriers, two destroyers, and a destroyer escort. Japanese losses were

incomparably greater. . . . Japan in three days had lost over 50 percent more combat tonnage than was lost by the British and Germans together in the Battle of Jutland. It was a blow from which her navy could not recover.” The Americans had grievously wounded the Japanese fleet at Leyte, whereas the British, too cautious at Jutland, had merely minimized their own losses. Jellicoe in 1916 had retained British command of the seas, but he had failed to annihilate the German fleet.

At the time of the launching of the navy’s first supercarrier, the USS *Forrestal*, early in the Eisenhower presidency, Naval Academy professors E. B. Potter and J. R. Fredland co-edited *The United States and World Sea Power* (Prentice-Hall, 1955). The authors of that book--all of whom were members of the Department of English, History, and Government--established a solid conceptual linkage between the battles of Jutland and Leyte Gulf. “Jutland,” they wrote, “stands out as the last great surface action fought mostly by daylight. . . . When the great fleets met again as in . . . Leyte Gulf in World War II, naval warfare had become enormously more complex, involving effective use of air, surface, subsurface, and amphibious tactics, all in a single vast operation.”

On the question of Leyte Gulf itself, the authors are of two minds. On the one hand, they declare, “The Battle for Leyte Gulf was unquestionably an overwhelming victory for the United States Navy.” On the other hand, they complain, “The United States Navy also achieved less than a full measure of victory when, despite overwhelming power, it let six enemy battleships and numerous supporting vessels elude destruction. The fleets cannot be said to have been handled with utmost efficiency when the main American surface strength [i.e., Halsey’s fleet] cruised fruitlessly north and then south through the most critical hours of the battle, leaving [Kinkaid’s] inferior forces in contact with the enemy’s two main forces.” Thus, without

mentioning Halsey by name, Potter and Fredland actually make a fairly clear criticism of him.

Potter and his associates soon revised their stance in a new book intended for midshipmen. *Sea Power: A Naval History* was published by Prentice-Hall in 1960 and was edited by Potter, in nominal collaboration with retired Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. Written by members of the Department of English, History, and Government and bearing the imprimatur of the admiral whom the navy credited with winning the war in the Pacific, the volume immediately became the standard textbook--indeed the bible--for the Academy's required history of sea power course. It retained that position through the late 1980s, when a second edition went out of print and the global sea power course was transformed into one on the history of the U.S. Navy.

"Potter and Nimitz," as midshipmen affectionately labeled the book, provides an especially poignant gloss on the battle of Leyte Gulf. The authors initially concede that at Leyte "elements of both the Northern and Center Japanese forces were able to escape because Halsey carried the main American surface strength fruitlessly north and then south throughout most of the crucial hours of the battle, leaving [Vice Admiral Kinkaid's] inferior forces to deal with the enemy in two areas." Nevertheless, in the summary chapter analyzing "The Defeat of Japan," Potter and Nimitz overlook their own criticism, unite Halsey and Kinkaid as if they had cooperated with one another flawlessly, and elevate Leyte to mythic status: "The Battle for Leyte Gulf was the Trafalgar of World War II. Halsey and Kinkaid in 1944, like Nelson [who annihilated the Spanish and French battle fleets] in 1805, had finally wiped out the Japanese fleet as an effective fighting force. There would be no more stand-up battles at sea in this war." How in keeping with the emphasis of the interwar years, and how ironic in light of Halsey's own sense

of failure!

For Potter and his colleagues, and hence for Naval Academy midshipmen of the Cold War era, the great sea battle, as epitomized by Leyte Gulf, therefore remained the ultimate U.S. naval desideratum. The classic Potter and Nimitz text thus continued what Stevens and Westcott had begun immediately after World War I: inculcation of the view that everything the navy does in war ought to be subsidiary to the climactic battle for command of the sea, with the important proviso that the proper way to conduct the great sea battle was in the manner demonstrated by the inestimably bold and daring Admiral Horatio Nelson at the opening of the nineteenth century. World War II had united Trafalgar and Leyte as the U.S. Navy's new paradigm for victory. This was Fleet Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr.'s greatest triumph.