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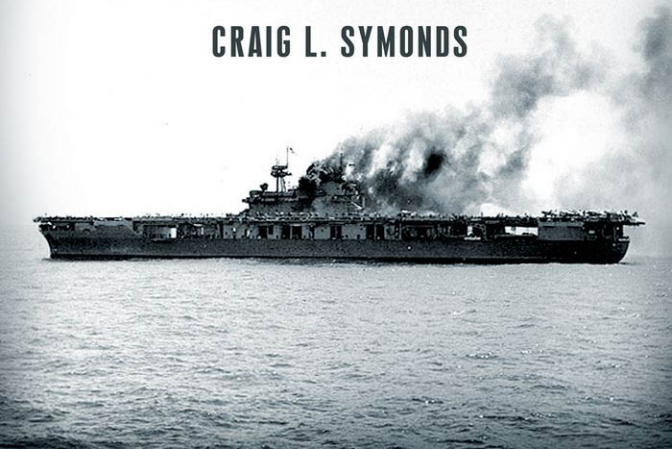
THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

CRAIG L. SYMONDS



THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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Printed in the United States of America
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For my grandson,
Will Symonds

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CONTENTS

MAPS

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In a matter of eight minutes on the morning of June 4, 1942, three of the four aircraft carriers in Japan's principal striking force were mortally wounded by American dive bombers. The fourth would follow later that day. The Japanese Navy never recovered from this blow. These pivotal minutes—the most dramatic in World War II, indeed perhaps in all of American history—reversed the seemingly irresistible momentum toward Japanese victory and started the long comeback of American forces from the disasters at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines six months earlier.

Craig Symonds begins the riveting story of the Battle of Midway with the arrival of Admiral Chester Nimitz at Pearl Harbor on Christmas Day, 1941, to start the planning for the counteroffensive that led to those climactic moments near Midway Atoll, a thousand miles west of Hawaii. American aircraft carriers had been absent from Pearl Harbor when the Japanese struck on December 7, 1941. That fortuitous absence seemed to make little difference at the time, for in the ensuing four months Japanese forces advanced from one triumph to the next until they had conquered Malaya and Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, and Indochina. Japan thereby created its Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, which stretched from China to the mid-Pacific and almost from the borders of Alaska to Australia. So easy were these conquests that they led to an overweening disdain for their enemies—especially the United States—which Japanese historians subsequently and ruefully labeled "the victory disease."

One Japanese leader who did not suffer from this disease was Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, commander in chief of Japan's combined fleet and the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack. The survival of America's small fleet

of carriers enabled the United States to begin a series of counterthrusts in early 1942, including the Doolittle raid over Tokyo, culminating in the Battle of Coral Sea in May. Yamamoto was determined, in Symonds' words, "to eliminate the threat of more carrier raids by engineering a climactic naval battle somewhere in the Central Pacific that would destroy those carriers once and for all." He designed a campaign by Japan's large striking force of four carriers and numerous battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines, designated the Kidō Butai, to draw out the American carriers (only three were available) defending the outpost on Midway Atoll. Yamamoto planned for his superior force to pounce and sink them.

In the event, however, it was the Americans who did the pouncing and sinking. This victory is often described as "the miracle at Midway," a success that depended on the lucky timing of the dive-bomber attack that screamed down from the sky at precisely the moment when Japanese fighter planes (the famous Zeroes) were preoccupied with shooting down the hapless American torpedo planes, whose only accomplishment—though it was a crucial one—was to distract the fighters. Symonds makes clear that while luck played a part, the American victory was mainly the result of careful planning, the effective use of radar (which the Japanese did not have), and superior intelligence. The Americans had partially broken the Japanese naval operations code, which gave them timely intelligence of Japanese intentions and actions. Symonds gives much credit to Joseph Rochefort, an unsung hero of the battle, who as head of the Combat Intelligence Unit was principally responsible for decoding and interpreting Japanese communications.

One of the many great strengths of this book is its emphasis on the important "decisions made and actions taken by individuals who found themselves at the nexus of history at a decisive moment." Symonds' vivid word portraits of these individuals—Japanese as well as Americans—their personalities, their foibles and virtues, are an outstanding feature of *The Battle of Midway*. Readers will come away not only with a better understanding of the strategies, operational details, and tactics of this pivotal battle but with greater appreciation for the men whose decisions and actions made it happen.

James M. McPherson

THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

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INTRODUCTION

In a series that focuses on historical contingency, it is appropriate, perhaps even essential, to include the Battle of Midway, for there are few moments in American history in which the course of events tipped so suddenly and so dramatically as it did on June 4, 1942. At ten o'clock that morning, the Axis powers were winning the Second World War. Though the Red Army had counterattacked the Wehrmacht outside Moscow in December, the German Army remained deep inside the Soviet Union, and one element of it was marching toward the oil fields of the Caucasus. In the Atlantic, German U-boats ravaged Allied shipping and threatened to cut the supply line between the United States and Great Britain. In the Pacific, Japan had just completed a triumphant six-month rampage, attacking and wrecking Allied bases from the Indian Ocean to the mid-Pacific following the crippling of the U.S. battle fleet at Pearl Harbor. Japan's Mobile Striking Force (the Kidō Butai) was at that moment on the verge of consolidating command of the Pacific by eliminating what the strike at Pearl Harbor had missed: America's aircraft carriers. The

outcome of the war balanced on a knife-edge, but clearly leaned toward the Axis powers.

An hour later, the balance had shifted the other way. By 11:00 a.m., three Japanese aircraft carriers were on fire and sinking. A fourth was launching a counterstrike, yet before the day was over, it too would be located and mortally wounded. The Japanese thrust was turned back. Though the war had three more years to run, the Imperial Japanese Navy would never again initiate a strategic offensive. Later that summer the battle for Stalingrad began. The Atlantic sea lanes remained dangerous, but the convoys continued, and Britain survived. The war had turned.

In 1967, a quarter century after Midway, Walter Lord published a history of that battle entitled *Incredible Victory*. The title's assumption is that the odds against the Americans at Midway were so long that their ultimate triumph defied comprehension. So dominant was this perception that when the national memorial to the Second World War was unveiled in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 2004, a sentence from Lord's book was chiseled into its marble façade in letters six inches high: "THEY HAD NO RIGHT TO WIN, YET THEY DID, AND IN DOING SO THEY CHANGED THE COURSE OF THE WAR." Similarly, when Gordon Prange's long-awaited book on Midway came out in 1982, brought to press by two of his former graduate students after his death, it bore the title *Miracle at Midway*. Once again, the implication was unmistakable.

Embedded in these books' titles, and in their conclusions as well, is the supposition that the American victory at Midway was the product of fate, or chance, or luck, or even divine will. In fact, sixty years after the battle, when a group of Midway veterans conducted a survey asking who had played the most decisive role on the American side, one veteran insisted that, as in the days of the ancient Greeks, this improbable earthly event could be explained only as the result of divine intervention.[1]

In *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy argues that great historical events, including (maybe even especially) great military events, are the product of historical forces only dimly understood. The great drama of the Napoleonic Wars, Tolstoy wrote, "came about step by step, incident by incident, moment by moment, emerging from an infinitely varied set of unimaginably different

circumstances, and was perceived in its entirety only when it became a reality, a past event." To him, individuals were not the prime movers of history but its victims, subject to "a boundless variety of infinitesimally small forces"—little more than chaff blown by a storm.[2]

Certainly chance—or luck—played a role at Midway, but the outcome of the battle was primarily the result of decisions made and actions taken by individuals who found themselves at the nexus of history at a decisive moment. In short, the Battle of Midway is best explained and understood by focusing on the people involved. Tolstoy insists that *chance* determines events, but it is *people* who make history, and this book is about the individuals who made history in that perilous spring of 1942. The list is a long one. A Japanese admiral (Yamamoto Isoroku) decided that a battle must be fought and not only initiated the planning but insisted that it go forward in spite of—indeed, almost because of—considerable opposition within his own service. An American admiral (Chester Nimitz) decided that the gauntlet that had been thrown down must be picked up, and he devised a plan of his own. A group of dedicated code breakers, and in particular Lieutenant Commander Joseph Rochefort, supplied the information that ended up giving the Americans a crucial edge. And combatants on both sides—admirals and captains, commanders and lieutenants, petty officers and enlisted men—determined the timing, the course, and ultimately the outcome of the fight. Midway might have ended differently. That it didn't was the result of these men and the decisions they made.

Essential to understanding those decisions is an appreciation of the culture that informed these individuals, for while they were free agents, they were also products of their society, and their actions were shaped and constrained by the world in which they operated. For that reason, a history of what is perhaps the most pivotal naval battle in American history necessarily must explore the culture of both the U.S. Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy, as well as the politics and technology of the age. It does not detract from the drama of the event, nor diminish its significance, to acknowledge that in light of these factors, the outcome of the Battle of Midway was less incredible and less miraculous than it has often been portrayed.

1

CinCPac

An hour after dawn on Christmas morning in 1941, a lone PB2Y-2 Coronado flying boat circled slowly over the fleet anchorage at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, at the end of a seventeen-hour flight from San Diego. From inside her fuselage, 56-year-old Admiral Chester Nimitz peered out the window at the devastation below. Even dressed as he was in civilian clothes, he would have prompted a second look from strangers on the street, for his face had been weathered by years at sea and he had snow-white hair, which led a few of his young staffers to call him "cottontail"—but only behind his back. His most arresting feature, however, was his startling light-blue eyes, eyes that now scanned the scene below him. As the four-engine Coronado approached the harbor, its pilot, Lieutenant Bowen McLeod, invited Nimitz to come up and take the copilot's seat to get a better view. Through a steady rain that added to the pall of gloom, Nimitz saw that the surface of the water was covered with black fuel oil. From that oily surface, the rounded bottoms of the battleship *Oklahoma* and the older *Utah* protruded like small islands. Another, the *Nevada*, was aground bow first near the main entrance

channel. Other battleships rested on the mud, with only their shattered and fallen superstructures extending above the water. Here was the U.S. Navy's vaunted battle fleet that Nimitz had been sent halfway around the world to command.[1]

Nimitz made no comment, only shaking his head and making a soft clucking sound with his tongue. While en route by rail from Washington to San Diego on the Santa Fe "Chief" to catch the flight to Hawaii, he had studied the reports of the devastation that had been wrought by the Japanese in their attack three weeks earlier on December 7. The reports could not convey the extent of the destruction. Even the photograph he had seen of the battleship *Arizona* engulfed in black smoke did not prepare him for the scene that now met his eyes. The seaplane splashed down and slowed to a stop on the oily surface of the roadstead. The doors were thrown open and the powerful odor of fuel oil, charred wood, and rotting flesh hit him like a fist. It was the smell of war.[2]

The reserve that Nimitz normally displayed in moments of crisis had earned him a reputation as unemotional; at least one officer described him as "coldly impersonal." Nimitz was certainly undemonstrative, able to maintain an astonishing coolness under pressure. Even as a midshipman, his quiet reserve impressed classmates, who described him in the Naval Academy yearbook, the *Lucky Bag*, as one who "possesses that calm and steady-going Dutch way that gets at the bottom of things." As an example of that, a quarter century later, during his command of the heavy cruiser *Augusta*, he had directed Ensign O. D. Waters (inevitably nicknamed "Muddy") to "bring the ship to anchor." Perhaps nervous with the captain's eyes on him, Waters brought the big cruiser into the anchorage too fast, overshot the mark, and had to order the engines full astern while paying out ninety fathoms of anchor cable before the ship finally came to a stop. Nimitz remained silent throughout. Only when the *Augusta* was securely at anchor did he remark, "Waters, you know what you did wrong, don't you?" Waters responded: "Yes, sir, I certainly do." To which Nimitz replied, "That's fine." While Nimitz was not cold—he was a great teller of jokes and fond of terrible puns—he did keep his emotions under control, rarely betraying them to others. His most confrontational response was generally "Now see here."

That ability to remain calm under pressure would be severely tested over the next six months, and indeed throughout the Pacific war.[3]

Before he stepped out of the flying boat and into the launch that had come out to greet him, Nimitz turned and shook hands with every member of the seaplane's crew, apologizing for keeping them from their families on Christmas Day. His first question to the officer on the launch was about Wake Island, a tiny outpost of coral and sand two thousand nautical miles to the west. When he had left California, Wake's small Marine garrison was still holding out against a Japanese invasion, and an American relief force was steaming toward it at best speed. Told now that Wake Island had surrendered and that the relief expedition had been recalled, Nimitz said nothing, staring out silently over the rain-spattered surface of the harbor for several minutes, his expression unreadable. As the launch headed for shore, he could see several small boats moving about the roadstead. They were fishing the bodies of dead servicemen from the water.[4]

Nimitz had been ordered to Pearl Harbor as commander in chief, Pacific (CinCPac), because Washington had concluded that keeping Admiral Husband Kimmel in charge after the disaster of December 7 was politically impossible. On December 9, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox had left Washington for Pearl Harbor to assess things for himself. Arriving two days later, the wreckage still smoldering, Knox was appalled by what he saw. He was also appalled that no one seemed able to explain to him why the Japanese had achieved such complete surprise. His annual report, issued the previous summer, had asserted that "the American people may feel fully confident in their navy." Just three days before the attack, Knox had spoken at a small dinner party in Washington in honor of Vice President Henry Wallace. "War may begin in the Pacific at any moment," he had warned the assembled guests. "But I want you to know that no matter what happens, the United States Navy is ready. Every man is at his post, every ship is at its station. The Navy is ready. Whatever happens, the Navy is not going to be caught napping." Yet within seventy-two hours of those assurances, the Navy was caught almost literally napping. Little wonder that Knox was furious.[5]

The 66-year-old Knox had been an unlikely choice as secretary of the navy. A lifelong newspaperman, he was also a lifelong Republican, and had been Alf Landon's running mate on the Republican presidential ticket in the 1936 election. In that role he had been a virulent critic of President Roosevelt and the New Deal. Despite that, after Germany's invasion of Poland and the onset of war, Roosevelt sought to build a bipartisan administration dedicated to rearmament by naming several prominent Republicans to the cabinet. His first thought was to ask both Landon and Knox, the defeated Republican ticket, to join the cabinet, with Landon as commerce secretary and Knox as navy secretary. Landon, however, insisted on a pledge that Roosevelt would not seek a third term as a condition of his acceptance, so Roosevelt instead picked another Republican, 73-year-old Henry L. Stimson, who had been secretary of state under Hoover, to head the War Department. He did, however, ask Knox to take over the Navy Department, announcing both appointments on June 20, 1940, two days before France formally surrendered to the Nazis.[6]

FDR may have been attracted to Knox because the jowly, round-faced newspaperman had been a Rough Rider under Franklin's "Uncle Teddy" in the Spanish-American War. For his part, Knox remained suspicious of the New Deal, but he was foursquare behind FDR on the question of national preparedness, and he admired Roosevelt's get-tough policies toward Hitler's regime. He was also a man of quick decision. As publisher of the *Chicago Daily News*, he had a hardnosed management style, guided by facts and deadlines, that made him impatient with delay or uncertainty. ("All my life I have been fighting against time," he declared during his confirmation hearing.) Roosevelt's deputy chief of staff Harold Ickes thought him "impetuous" and "inclined to think off the top of his head." That impetuosity was evident as the grim-faced Knox toured the wreckage of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 11. When he got back to Washington, he reported to Roosevelt that the Japanese had achieved surprise at Pearl Harbor because of "a lack of a state of readiness," and the blame for that, in his view, fell squarely on the shoulders of the commanding officers, Lieutenant General Walter C. Short of the Army and Admiral Husband Kimmel of the Navy. Eventually a lengthy investigation headed by Supreme Court

justice Owen Roberts would come to a similar conclusion and declare that Short and Kimmel were guilty of "a dereliction of duty." However fair or unfair that conclusion, the political reality was that neither man could be retained in his position.[7]

Once it was clear that Kimmel would have to go, Roosevelt and Knox discussed who should replace him. On December 15, they sent for Admiral Ernest J. King, the talented but abrasive commander of the Atlantic Fleet. While King had compiled an impressive service record during his forty-one years in the Navy, his personality was notorious. He tended to be abrupt and dismissive when dealing with subordinates, and he did not suffer fools gladly, whatever their status. When introducing himself to a group of young officers in Hawaii, he declared, "I'm Ernest King. You all know who I am. I'm a self-appointed son of a bitch." He asserted his privileges of rank as a matter of course. One officer recalled, "You could be halfway through a haircut and he decided that he wanted a shave. You got out of the barber chair and waited until he was shaved." His personal life was notorious. Though he foreswore drinking during the war, he had a well-earned reputation as a heavy drinker and womanizer. What FDR and Knox wanted now, however, was not a role model but a warrior, and King was arguably the most aggressive senior officer in the Navy. When King arrived in Washington on December 16, Knox told him that the president wanted him not merely for the Pacific

■ The tough-minded and tough-talking Admiral Ernest J. King wielded unprecedented authority over the U.S. Navy during World War II as both commander in chief (CominCh) and chief of naval operations (CNO). (U.S. Naval Institute)

command but for the more powerful position of commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet (CinCUS), with authority over both the Atlantic and Pacific and all Navy commands worldwide.[8]

FDR made the formal offer that afternoon. King was willing to accept—he made no secret of his lifelong ambition to "get to the top"—but he had three conditions: first, he wanted his abbreviated title changed from CinCUS (which sounded too much like "sink us") to CominCh; second, he wanted a promise that he would not have to hold press conferences or testify before Congress unless absolutely necessary; and third, he wanted authority over the various navy bureaus, those entrenched centers of political influence that had existed within the Navy as near-independent fiefdoms since their creation in 1842. FDR agreed at once to the first two conditions and told King that, while he couldn't change the law concerning the bureaus, he would see to it that any bureau chief who proved unable or unwilling to cooperate with King would lose his job. King's new authority was unprecedented. According to Executive Order no. 8984, he would have "supreme command of the several fleets . . . under the general direction of the Secretary of the Navy," and would be "directly responsible to the President."[9]

If King reported directly to the president, it was not clear what role the chief of naval operations (CNO) was to play in the new command structure. In King's view, his new position would make up for "the organizational deficiencies" inherent in the CNO's office, and he would naturally "fulfill some of the functions that the peacetime Chief of Naval Operations should have had under his control." The sitting CNO was Admiral Harold Stark, a "modest and self-effacing" man, according to his biographer, who would soon be overshadowed by the forceful and confident King. Like many officers who came out of the prewar Naval Academy, Stark had a nickname. During his plebe (freshman) year in the fall of 1899, an upperclassman, noting Stark's last name, asked if he was related to General John Stark. The young plebe did not know who General Stark was, and the outraged upperclassman told him rather forcefully that John Stark had led American forces at the Battle of Bennington in the Revolutionary War, during which Stark had supposedly declared, "We will win today or Betty Stark will be a widow!" Though it is

uncertain that General Stark ever made such a statement, it was a piece of military lore the upperclassman thought the young plebe should know. From then on, whenever an upperclassman demanded it, Midshipman Stark had to brace up and call out in his parade-ground voice: "We will win today or Betty Stark will be a widow!" As a result, he became known to his classmates as "Betty Stark," and "Betty Stark" he remained throughout his naval career, signing his memos—even to the president—simply as "Betty." He had risen to the top of the Navy's hierarchy despite his curious nickname, as well as his gentle manner and cherubic appearance (Samuel Eliot Morison thought he "looked more like a bishop than a sailor"), but his tenure as CNO would not survive the force of King's personality. In three months, King would replace him in that job, becoming both CominCh and CNO for the duration of the war and exercising near-absolute authority over the Navy.[10]

Of course there was still the question of who would command the Pacific Fleet (or what was left of it) at Pearl Harbor. With little discussion, Roosevelt and Knox decided that the only possible choice was Chester Nimitz. Roosevelt had considered appointing Nimitz to the command back in January, but at that time Nimitz himself had suggested that he was too junior for such a post. Had he accepted, it would have been he, and not Kimmel, who was in charge at Pearl Harbor on December 7. Now, a year later, Nimitz was still relatively junior to many of the other candidates for Kimmel's job, but there was no place for such punctilio in the present crisis. Roosevelt is supposed to have exclaimed: "Tell Nimitz to get the hell out to Pearl and stay there till the war is won." King, too, thought him the right man for the job, though he was less sure that the quiet, undemonstrative Nimitz would be sufficiently aggressive in his new role. He worried that he listened to too many people and was too willing to compromise. "If only I could keep him tight on what he's supposed to do," King remarked. "Somebody gets ahold of him and I have to straighten him out." During the war, King would send scores of messages and require several meetings, all in an effort to "straighten out" Nimitz. But Pearl Harbor was nearly five thousand miles from Washington, and King had two oceans and alliance politics to worry about, which would limit his ability to micromanage Pacific strategy.[11]

In at least one respect, Nimitz was a curious choice as CinCPac, for he did not represent any of the traditional power centers within the Navy hierarchy. The U.S. Navy of 1941 was divided into clearly differentiated, and mutually jealous, warfare communities. The most visible and cohesive was composed of those who served in destroyers, cruisers, and especially battleships. For at least two generations, and certainly since the publication of Alfred Thayer Mahan's famous book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890), governments and navies the world over had looked upon the giant steel castles of big-gun battleships as the final arbiters of naval power and, by extension, of world power. Officers whose careers were dedicated to these mighty battlewagons were members of "the Gun Club." They wore traditional double-breasted blue uniforms marked with gold stripes and black leather shoes, and in their own view, and in the view of most Americans, they were the real navy.[12]

In the 1920s, however, the first stirrings of a coming revolution in naval warfare became evident when the U.S. Navy converted the collier *Jupiter* into the country's first aircraft carrier, the USS *Langley* (CV-1). The men who signed up for pilot training—"naval aviators" in the Navy's parlance—developed a swaggering elan to match the pioneering drama of their service. In the open-air cockpits of their airplanes they wore fleece-lined leather outfits that protected them from the intense cold at high altitudes. On the ground they wore forest-green uniforms marked with black stripes, as well as brown shoes. These "brown shoe" officers conceived of themselves as elite warriors who put their lives on the line almost every day by performing inherently dangerous carrier takeoffs and landings, and they considered themselves a breed apart from the "black shoe" officers who merely drove ships. For their part, the black shoes resented the fact that because of flight pay the aviators were paid 50 percent more than they were.[13]

Nimitz belonged to neither clan, for he had spent much of his early service in submarines, starting in 1909, when the sub service was what carrier aviation became in the 1920s: a cutting-edge career that attracted ambitious and daring young officers who could rise quickly to command in an experimental service. Soon, despite his youth and his rank, Nimitz was the commanding officer of the aptly named *Plunger*, a tiny (107 ton) training

submarine only sixty-four feet long and twelve feet wide. He spent World War I on the staff of Captain Samuel S. Robison, commander of U.S. Atlantic submarines, and as a member of the Board of Submarine Design. During the early 1920s, while the Navy's air arm was being created, Lieutenant Commander Nimitz was engaged in supervising the construction, and subsequently the command, of the submarine base at Pearl Harbor. As it happened, that sub base was one of the few targets the Japanese had overlooked in their strike on December 7.[14]

After World War I, Nimitz became an expert on the design and construction of diesel engines, and he supervised the engineering plant on the new-construction oiler *Maumee* (AO-2), becoming first her chief engineering officer and then her executive officer. In that capacity, he helped pioneer the practice of refueling U.S. Navy warships while they were under way, a protocol that dramatically extended the fleet's cruising range and seakeeping capability. After a tour in command of the heavy cruiser *Augusta* in the early 1930s, he served two tours in Washington in the Bureau of Navigation (subsequently renamed the Bureau of Personnel). To some observers in the Navy, this was cause for concern. They worried that by becoming a "Washington repeater," Nimitz was spending too much time pushing paper instead of at sea. In addition, much of his time in Washington was spent working with those navy bureaus so despised by King. And his Washington

■ Admiral Chester Nimitz took over as commander in chief, Pacific (CinCPac) on the last day of 1941. Beneath a placid and stoic demeanor, Nimitz concealed both a warrior's instinct and a willingness to take bold risks. (U.S. Naval Institute)

service kept him away from the "real Navy." He did not, for example, play a role in Navy strategic planning during the 1930s, nor participate in any of the tactical fleet exercises that were an important component of peacetime service in the interwar years. On the other hand, whatever he had missed by devoting himself to the administration of BuNav, it put him in touch with, and made him known to, the nation's political leaders.[15]

When Nimitz stepped ashore at Pearl Harbor on that gloomy Christmas Day of 1941, he was met not by Kimmel but by Vice Admiral William S. Pye. Kimmel had learned on December 16 that he was going to be relieved and, appreciating that his continued presence would be awkward, had volunteered to be detached in favor of Pye, his second in command. Pye was a Naval Academy classmate of Ernie King and a half decade older than Nimitz, with forty-one years of active service, most of it in battleships. Raised in Minneapolis, he had the pugnacious physiognomy of a cop on the beat, with a bulbous nose and dark eyes crowned by shaggy eyebrows. At age 61, his hair was thin but still dark, combed straight back from a high forehead.

It was Pye who had felt compelled to order the recall of the Wake relief expedition. Kimmel had built a task force (Task Force 14) around the aircraft carrier *Saratoga* (CV-3), which had been in San Diego during the Japanese attack and returned to Pearl Harbor a week afterward on December 15. After a quick refueling, Kimmel sent her on toward Wake Island the next day under Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher with an escort of three cruisers, nine destroyers, a seaplane tender, and a fleet oiler to keep them all supplied with fuel. Betty Stark gave Kimmel the authority to evacuate the garrison if necessary, but the hope was that Fletcher could reinforce the defenders of Wake by delivering supplies and a new squadron of airplanes. To distract the Japanese, Kimmel sent Vice Admiral Wilson Brown and the *Lexington* (CV-2) southward to attack the Japanese-held Marshall Islands, and Vice Admiral William F. Halsey and the *Enterprise* (CV-6) westward to support Fletcher. Critics argued subsequently that Kimmel should not have waited for the *Saratoga* before sending a relief expedition, or, alternatively, that he ought to have sent all three carriers to Wake rather than trying to distract the Japanese by sending them out on different missions.[16]

Whatever the merits of these criticisms, after Kimmel was relieved of command, the expedition became Pye's responsibility. On December 20, with the *Saratoga* task force still 725 miles from Wake, Pye learned that the Japanese had renewed their assault and, more importantly, that they had committed at least one of their carriers, and possibly two, to the attack. The two carriers were, in fact, the *Sōryū* and *Hiryū*, both of which had participated in the Pearl Harbor attack. If *Saratoga* got tangled up with two (or more) of Japan's big carriers, it dramatically escalated the risk. Then, two days later, on the morning of December 22 (Hawaii time), with the *Saratoga* task force still more than five hundred miles from its destination, Pye learned that the Japanese had secured a lodgment on the island and were overpowering the outnumbered defenders. A poignantly laconic message from the garrison's commander summed up the situation: "Issue in doubt." At about the same time, Pye received a message from Stark in Washington that read, in part, "Wake is now and will continue to be a liability." That message authorized Pye "to evacuate Wake." A note at the end read, "King concurs." But evacuation was impossible now, and Pye wired Stark to tell him so. Eager as Pye was to come to the aid of the gallant Marines on Wake Island, he was not willing to risk the *Saratoga* task force against two enemy carriers in what now looked like a lost cause, especially if Washington considered Wake "a liability." Reluctantly, he issued orders for the *Saratoga* to turn around. When Fletcher got that order, he threw his hat to the deck in frustration. The pilots on the *Saratoga* who were scheduled to fly off the carrier the next day to support their fellow Marines were near mutinous, and there was angry talk about ignoring the orders and going ahead with the relief mission anyway. But discipline held; the Marines defending Wake were left to their fate.[17] *

* More than fifteen hundred Americans were taken prisoner by the Japanese when the island fell. Most of them (1,146) were civilian construction workers; the others included 368 Marines, 65 Navy men, and five Army soldiers. Most were transported to Japanese POW camps where they remained—those who survived—until 1945. A hundred or so of the construction workers were retained on Wake, and in 1943, when it looked like the island might be recaptured by the Americans, the survivors were lined up and shot.

The decision was a body blow to American morale. In Washington, Roosevelt was so upset he told Stark to demand an explanation from Pye. Though Stark himself had played a role in the decision, he dutifully wrote Pye that it was "essential for understanding required by higher authority that you furnish me with further information as to considerations which governed [the] retirement of two Western task forces." Pye might have written back that he did it because Stark and King had labeled Wake "a liability," but instead he wrote: "I became convinced that the general situation took precedence and required a conservation of our forces." FDR remained unsatisfied and never quite forgave Pye. Knox was furious. In a letter to Kimmel the previous January, the Navy secretary had written: "There is no such thing as fighting a safe war. . . . Prudence must be relegated to a secondary position to the bold and resolute employment of the fleet." He saw nothing bold or resolute in the decision to abandon the beleaguered Wake garrison. Nimitz, too, was disappointed that the effort to succor Wake had been recalled, but he spent no time regretting what he could not change: it was "water over the dam," he said. And he continued to hold both Pye and Fletcher in high regard. Still, it was one more bitter disappointment for a country still reeling from the shock of Pearl Harbor, and one more burden for the new commander to bear.[18]

At the Naval headquarters building, Nimitz met with the officers of Pye's (formerly Kimmel's) staff, shook their hands, and asked them to stay on to help him. Having expected a dressing down, the officers immediately brightened in response to this appeal; one recalled that Nimitz's arrival was like someone opening a window in a stuffy room. Indeed, after a careful assessment, Nimitz concluded that the terrible losses of December 7 had been less disastrous than they first appeared. Though all eight battleships had been hit, and five of them sunk, it had happened in the shallow waters of Pearl Harbor where most of them could be raised and repaired. Had the fleet gone to sea in an effort to drive off the attackers, those ships would very likely have been sunk in deep water and lost forever, and with a much greater loss of life. Instead, six of the eight battleships that were sunk or damaged on December 7 would be raised and repaired and would see action again later in the war.[19]

Moreover, while the death of the crewmen aboard these ships was unquestionably tragic, the temporary loss of the battleships themselves proved not to be all that strategically important. The very success of the Japanese attack underscored what some had been arguing for years: that battleships had been supplanted as the dominant weapon of naval warfare by aircraft carriers, and all three of America's Pacific Fleet aircraft carriers had been out of port when the Japanese struck. As already noted, the *Saratoga* was at San Diego and about to return to Pearl Harbor after a refit at the Puget Sound Navy Yard in Bremerton, Washington. The other two American carriers were also at sea on December 7. In response to a "war warning" that he received from Washington on November 27, Kimmel had sent them off the next day to ferry combat planes to the distant American outposts at Wake and Midway. Halsey and the *Enterprise*, escorted by three cruisers and nine destroyers, had ferried a dozen Marine fighter planes to Wake Island, where those planes played a major role in fighting off the initial Japanese attack, and Rear Admiral John H. Newton and the *Lexington* with a similar escort carried planes to Midway, though news of the Japanese attack led Newton to turn the *Lexington* around before he could deliver them.[20]

Kimmel had ordered Halsey to return to Pearl Harbor by December 7, but refueling at sea and an accident involving a cable that became wrapped around a propeller of the cruiser *Northampton* delayed him, and he was still several hundred miles out when he received the startling message, "Air Raid Pearl Harbor. This is no drill." Halsey's first thought was that it was a case of mistaken identity. In order not to enter port with a deck load of airplanes (which could not take off from an anchored carrier), the Americans routinely flew their airplanes into Oahu from up to a hundred miles out. Halsey had launched a number of scout planes that morning that would have been arriving at Pearl just about the time of the report; he feared that nervous gunners at Pearl had mistaken his planes for enemy aircraft. As it happened, the planes from the *Enterprise* arrived in the midst of the Japanese attack, and some of them were targeted by friendly fire. Once Halsey realized that the raid was real, he launched more planes to search for the enemy. He sent most of them southward toward a reported contact—false, as it turned out—and thus missed the retiring enemy fleet. It was just as well,

for had Halsey's scout planes found the six carriers of the Japanese strike force and opened a general engagement, he would have been hopelessly overmatched, and the *Enterprise* might well have become the next victim of the day, with consequences much greater than the temporary loss of eight battleships.[21]

As a result of these circumstances, Nimitz had three large aircraft carriers he could count on to be the nucleus of his new fleet. A fourth was on the way, for the *Yorktown* (CV-5), which had been sent to the Atlantic in April along with three battleships and several light cruisers and destroyers, was now ordered to return to the Pacific. That would give Nimitz four aircraft carriers and a powerful strike force to counter future Japanese initiatives. Of course it was theoretically possible for the U.S. to bring even more warships around from the Atlantic to the Pacific, including some battleships. That was problematic, however, in light of the fact that on December 11 Hitler declared war on the United States, committing the U.S. to a two-front war with enemies in both oceans.

The onset of a two-ocean war necessitated a reconsideration of American strategic plans. For more than twenty years, the U.S. Navy had focused most of its planning, training, and war gaming on a possible war with Japan. The blueprint for that future war was officially known as Plan Orange, and the first version of it had been sketched out in 1911. Its basic outlines were simple—even simplistic. It presumed an outbreak of war triggered by a Japanese assault on the Philippines, following which the U.S. fleet would gather in Pearl Harbor and strike out across the broad Pacific for a showdown with the Japanese battle fleet somewhere in the western Pacific. Over the years the plan had been updated and modified, and several options built into it, but the basic outline remained the same.[22]

Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s had led to both ambitious rearmament programs and strategic adjustment. The Vinson-Trammel Act of 1934 began this metamorphosis, and by the time of Pearl Harbor the United States had an enormous armada under construction: eight battleships, twelve carriers, thirty-five cruisers, 196 destroyers, and more than three thousand airplanes—a force, taken together, that was larger than the entire Japanese

Navy. None of these new-construction warships, however, would be ready for deployment until very late in 1942 or early 1943. In the meantime, the Nazi conquest of France in June, 1940, and the ensuing U-boat threat to the Atlantic lifelines, dramatically changed many of the assumptions behind Plan Orange. Until then, U.S. strategists had hoped that Britain and France could hold off the Germans long enough for America to complete her rearmament. Now with France defeated and occupied, and Britain teetering on the brink of collapse, it looked possible—perhaps even likely—that Hitler might complete his conquest of Europe before the U.S. had fully rearmed. In light of those facts, in November of 1940, a few weeks after Roosevelt's reelection to a third term, and a full year before Pearl Harbor, Betty Stark wrote a lengthy memo to Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox that offered a completely new strategic blueprint.[23]

Stark's November 1940 memo was one of the most consequential documents ever submitted to the government by a naval officer. Executing Plan Orange against Japan, he wrote, "would take a long time," and as a result "we would have to accept considerable danger in the Atlantic." In fact, as Stark well knew, there was *already* "considerable danger" in the Atlantic, where U.S. destroyers were engaged in a kind of quasi-war with German submarines in an effort to keep open the line of supply from the United States to beleaguered Britain. Concerned about a British defeat, and the

■ Admiral Harold "Betty" Stark served as CNO until replaced by King in March 1942. His November 1940 "Plan Dog" memo was instrumental in reorienting American strategy from the Pacific to Europe. (U.S. Naval Institute)

dire consequences of such an event for the United States, Roosevelt repeatedly stretched the meaning of "neutral" by expanding U.S. Navy operations in the Atlantic. Stark was concerned about Britain, too, and to address those concerns, he recommended reversing twenty years of Navy planning to reorient American focus from the Pacific to the Atlantic. "The reduction of Japanese offensive power," he wrote, could be achieved "chiefly through economic blockade" while the United States devoted the bulk of its efforts to "a land offensive against the Axis powers." That would require "a major naval and military effort in the Atlantic," during which time "we would . . . be able to do little more in the Pacific than remain on a strict defensive." The great danger, of course, was that Britain might collapse in spite of American support, in which case the U.S. would find itself on the defensive in both oceans. But Stark was betting on the British to hold out.[24]

After laying out his argument, Stark presented four strategic alternatives, which he labeled A, B, C, and D. The last of them was his preferred option. Known as "Plan Dog" in Navy lingo, it asserted that in case of war with both Germany and Japan, the U.S. should remain on the defensive in the Pacific and devote its "full national offensive strength" to the defeat of Nazi Germany. "Should we be forced into a war with Japan," Stark wrote, "we should . . . definitely plan to avoid operations in the Far East or the mid-Pacific that will prevent the Navy from promptly moving to the Atlantic forces fully adequate to safeguard our interests and policies in the event of British collapse." Finally, Stark urged the initiation of "secret staff talks" with British officials.[25]

Stark's memo found a ready audience in Washington, where Roosevelt, too, was worried about a British collapse, and the staff talks that Stark had recommended took place in January 1941 in Washington. From those meetings emerged a document known as ABC-1, which outlined the strategy subsequently known as "Germany First." Specifically, it held that "since Germany is the predominant member of the Axis Powers, the Atlantic and European area is considered to be the decisive theater. The principal United States Military effort will be exerted in that theatre, and operations of United States forces in other theatres will be conducted in such a manner as to facilitate that effort." That exact language was subsequently incorporated into the

American war plan called "Rainbow 5" that was adopted in November 1941, just eighteen days before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and thirty-five days before Nimitz took command. Given these strategic realities, Nimitz knew he would not be able to count on any significant reinforcement for his Pacific command until the new-construction warships began to slide off the building way in about a year. He would have to fend off the Japanese with what he had: three (soon to be four) aircraft carriers, a dozen cruisers, a few squadrons of destroyers, and the handful of submarines that had been overlooked by the Japanese on December 7. Nimitz would also have control of Task Force 1, made up of the old battleships that survived the Pearl Harbor attack (plus the *Colorado*, which had been undergoing overhaul in Puget Sound), and three more battleships returned to the Pacific from the Atlantic. Given recent events, however, it was unclear just how much of an asset those old battleships would be.[26]*

Nimitz was eager to use the submarines right away. An old submarine hand himself, he held his change-of-command ceremony on board the submarine *Grayling* (SS-209) on the last day of the year. He did so not only because of his longtime association with submarines but also to boost the morale of the so-called silent service. Given the fact that the U.S. had gone to war against Germany in 1917 ostensibly because of Germany's conduct of unrestricted submarine warfare, it is ironic that the first operational command sent out in December 1941 was the one to "EXECUTE UNRESTRICTED SUBMARINE AND AIR WAR AGAINST JAPAN."[27]

Before the war was over, American submarines would take a terrible toll on the Japanese Navy and on her merchant fleet, and play an important role in several major surface actions as well, including Midway. But in the first year of the war, their impact was compromised by the fact that their torpedoes didn't work. The American Mark 14 torpedo was equipped with an advanced magnetic proximity detonator that was designed to run underneath the target vessel and explode when it recognized the iron hull of the

* In fact, these old battleships were too slow to operate with the much faster carrier and cruiser forces and needed significant modification even to fulfill their eventual role as shore bombardment vessels.

ship above it. Though no one in the Navy knew it in December 1941, the torpedoes ran eleven feet deeper than the specifications indicated, which was often too deep for the warheads to register the magnetic anomaly of a ship's hull. Even after some sub skippers changed the settings so the torpedoes didn't run so deep, the warheads often failed to detonate. Some torpedoes actually struck an enemy ship only to bounce off the hull with a perceptible metallic clang and sink. Finally, the torpedoes were so erratic that their course was unpredictable, a few of them running in a circle, targeting the sub that had fired them.

There were two explanations for these catastrophic failures. The main one was that the peacetime Bureau of Ordnance had been underfunded during the Depression years, and, since the torpedoes cost ten thousand dollars each, the Bureau forbade live-fire testing. The second explanation was that the cutting-edge magnetic warhead was classified SECRET, and, according to the official postwar history, "security . . . became such a fetish, that measures designed to protect [the magnetic warhead] from enemy eyes actually hid its defects from those who made the regulations." The result was a torpedo that often simply failed to detonate. On the very day that Nimitz arrived in Pearl Harbor, Commander Tyrell D. Jacobs, in command of the submarine *Sargo* (SS-188), fired eight torpedoes at three different ships from close range and scored no hits. He could not believe that he had missed and notified his superiors that there had to be something wrong with the torpedoes. Officers in BuOrd attributed his failure to bad shooting. Even after other skippers reported similar problems, the Bureau continued to insist that it was due to human error and not technical failure. Nimitz himself finally ordered deactivation of the magnetic proximity detonators in June of 1943, eighteen months after the war began.[28]

These were the tools that Nimitz had to hand when he assumed command of the American Pacific Fleet: a battleship fleet that rested on the bottom of Pearl Harbor, three carriers with a theoretical capacity of 264 airplanes, a handful of cruisers and destroyers, and a submarine fleet whose torpedoes did not work. The arrival of the *Yorktown* from the Atlantic would give him a fourth carrier, but because of the Allied commitment to Germany

First, as well as the industrial production schedule, he had little prospect of getting any other meaningful reinforcement anytime soon. In the weeks and months ahead he would have to decide how best to use these tools to contest Japanese domination of the Pacific, careful to preserve what he had, yet not so cautious that he conceded the Pacific to the enemy.

Throughout that period, to all outward appearances, Nimitz maintained a cool, confident demeanor that lifted the spirits of those about him. It was an act, for he was beset by unrelenting anxiety. Though he worked hard all day, at night sleep refused to come. On the day he assumed formal command as CinCPac, he wrote his wife, "I have still not reached the point where I can sleep well because there is so much going on and so much to do." He felt like he was on "a treadmill whirling around actively but not getting anywhere very fast," and even after a month, he confessed to her, "I do feel depressed a large part of the time."[29]

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Pacific, the Japanese celebrated what certainly looked like a decisive victory at Pearl Harbor, and they had already embarked on a campaign to consolidate their triumphs by establishing what they called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: an empire that stretched from China to the mid-Pacific, and from Alaska to Australia. At the heart of this Japanese success was the group of six Japanese aircraft carriers that had executed the attack on Pearl Harbor, a force known as the Kidō Butai.

2

The Kidō Butai

Translated literally, the Japanese term Kidō Butai means "Mobile Force," though the spirit of the term is better understood as "Attack Force," or "Strike Force." Composed of six large aircraft carriers plus two fast battleships, and screened by a dozen cruisers and destroyers, it was the most powerful concentration of naval air power in the world. The American practice was to operate carriers singly, putting each one at the center of an independent task force as Kimmel had done with the *Saratoga* for the aborted relief mission to Wake Island. That meant that an American task force could put ninety airplanes in the air at most, though sixty was more realistic. With the Kidō Butai, however, the Japanese put all their eggs into one basket, operating six heavy carriers as a single unit that, theoretically at least, could put 412 airplanes aloft at the same time. For the attack on Pearl Harbor, they had launched 350 aircraft.[1]

The man who had conceived that attack was the commander in chief of Japan's Combined Fleet, Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku. A somewhat enigmatic figure in the history of the Pacific war, Yamamoto was neither

physically intimidating nor particularly aggressive. At five foot three he barely met the minimum height standard for admission to the naval academy at Eta Jima, and he possessed what one fellow officer called an "almost feminine delicacy," a characterization that was intended as a compliment. He was both keenly intelligent and fiercely ambitious, traits that contributed to his boundless self-confidence. He was also something of a maverick; one recent scholar remarked on his "pronounced individuality." While serving two tours as the Japanese naval attaché in Washington, he had taken courses at Harvard University and traveled extensively throughout the United States. He was one of a very few Japanese naval officers who supported flight training, believing strongly that aviation was key to the future of naval warfare. Subsequently, he commanded both the aircraft carrier *Akagi* (1928–29) and the First Carrier Division (1933–34). He shared at least one characteristic with Chester Nimitz: he had a quiet confidence and austerity that led others to defer to him. One associate noted that "however difficult the question, he always appeared totally unperturbed," though an American officer who knew him before the war claimed, "You could see it if something irritated him for his eyes would become hard and cold."[2]

■ Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, shown here in his official portrait, was a maverick in the Imperial Japanese Navy who seemed to enjoy imposing his daring plans on the Army and Navy hierarchy. (U.S. Naval Institute)

In other ways, however, Yamamoto was quite different from his dour American counterpart. He was something of a showman, even a show-off, and frequently acted as if he were deliberately tempting fate. With very little encouragement, he would perform daring gymnastic feats, such as standing on his hands on a ship's railing. One of his most salient characteristics was his fondness for (perhaps even obsession with) games of chance. Though he was proficient at games of skill such as *shogi* and chess, he was infatuated with the Japanese game of *go* and American poker. (Chester Nimitz's favorite card game was cribbage.) Yamamoto would bet on almost anything and did so often, sometimes bullying subordinates into betting against him. He could play poker for hours, foregoing sleep and playing literally around the clock. That willingness to tempt fate may also have contributed to his remarkable candor. In a society in which a misspoken word might become the start of a bitter feud, he tended to speak his mind openly even when it offended powerful elements within the government. Indeed, he seemed to relish this risky high-wire act. This last quality was particularly evident during the 1930s when Yamamoto assumed great professional and personal risk by expressing opposition to the political and strategic agenda of the Japanese Army.[3]

It is impossible to understand the origins of the Pacific War without appreciating both the extraordinary influence the Army had on Japanese government policy, and the intensity of the rivalry between the Army and Navy over the direction of that policy. Because the cabinet ministers representing the armed services had to be active-duty officers, the Japanese Army or Navy could topple a government merely by withdrawing its minister. Though the Navy seldom availed itself of this gambit, the Army did—or at least threatened to do so—unless its policies were adopted. The practical result was that by the mid-1930s, the Army effectively controlled the government. Most Navy officers resented this. Yamamoto himself once incautiously referred to "those damn fools in the Army," and as a result some marked him as an obstacle to Japan's emergence as a great power.[4]

Virtually all Japanese Army officers sought to strengthen the armed forces and increase their role in national politics. There was disagreement, however, about how to bring this about. The dominant Army faction was

the *Tōseiha* (Control Faction), whose members sought to work within the existing framework of government. But an extremist element known as the *Kōdōha* (Imperial Way Faction) was impatient with the slow pace of change and the perceived obstructionism of the bureaucracy. These "Spirit Warriors" sought to lead the nation to glory by championing an idealized, mythological past. While claiming to revere the emperor, they were also determined that he adopt their expansionist views. They were perfectly willing, even eager, to take unilateral action. In 1931 Japanese soldiers detonated a small explosion near the Japanese-controlled railroad in Manchuria, and the Army used that "attack" as a justification for the occupation of Manchuria. In July 1937 a brief exchange of fire between Chinese and Japanese soldiers near the Marco Polo Bridge provided a pretext for what was called "the China Incident"—in fact, a full-scale war of conquest. Many Army officers also admired the vitality and ambition of Hitler's regime in Germany and advocated a military alliance with the Third Reich. Those who opposed these views risked public criticism and disparagement—or worse, for members of the *Kōdōha* did not shrink from assassinating government ministers whom they saw as trying to thwart their aspirations. More often than not, the assassins were merely chastised rather than punished, as if extreme patriotism somehow excused their actions.

On February 26, 1936, a group of junior Army officers forced their way into the office of the minister of finance and murdered him. They also killed the lord privy seal and the inspector general of education. They invaded the home of Prime Minister Okada Keisuke, intending to assassinate him, too, though in their fervor they inadvertently killed his brother-in-law instead. Their goal, they insisted, was patriotic: to protect the emperor from ministers who did not understand the Imperial Way as Army officers did.*

This time there were consequences. After a series of trials, seventeen of the killers were executed, and other members of the *Kōdōha* were purged

* Imperial Navy junior officers attempted a coup of their own in May 1932 when a group of them participated in the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi. As in 1926, the long-term result was an effort to placate and appease the dissatisfied junior officers.

from the Army. Even so, the episode did not slow the Army's growing control over policy; having punished the leaders of the February 26 coup, the Army now argued that it had to be even stronger to protect the government from future coup attempts.[5]

The Imperial Army's increasing domination over government policy had disastrous consequences for Japan. Army leaders insisted on resolving the China Incident—that is, completing the conquest of China, an ambition that was jeopardized by a growing scarcity of strategic materials, especially oil. Because Japan's traditional source of oil—the United States—was increasingly unreliable, Japanese leaders convinced themselves that it was necessary to move southward to the oil-rich Dutch East Indies and British Malaya. In August 1936, the government formally adopted a document entitled "Fundamental Principles of National Policy," which established the goal of becoming "in name and in fact a stabilizing power for assuring peace in East Asia, thereby ultimately contributing to the peace and welfare of humanity." The Japanese presented this to the Americans as a kind of Japanese Monroe Doctrine, though in practice it signaled their intent to dominate East Asia and the western Pacific. To prepare for wars in two directions, both the Army and Navy were to be expanded. For the Army this meant more active divisions; for the Navy it meant formal abandonment of the Washington Naval Arms Limitation Treaty. The Imperial Japanese Navy had long resented this agreement, which restricted the Japanese to a battleship force only 60 percent as large as that of either Britain or the United States. Its abandonment now made possible the construction of a new and greatly enlarged fleet, including new battleships and aircraft carriers.[6]

The rivalry in the Army between the *Tōseiha* and the *Kōdōha* was mirrored in the Navy by competition between the so-called treaty faction and the fleet faction. Members of the latter embraced two ideas almost as articles of faith. The first was that the United States was Japan's logical, even inevitable, enemy; and the second was that because war with America was inevitable, it was essential for Japan to maintain a battle force that was at least 70 percent as large as the American battle force. Many officers believed that the 60 percent ratio imposed on them by the Washington Treaty was not only

a national insult but also undermined Japan's security, and even her sovereignty. So widespread was this view among junior and middle-grade officers that some admirals feared that taking a contrary position would incite mutiny. The emperor himself worried that the Navy would "no longer be able to control its officers" and was "jeopardizing vital diplomatic issues for the sake of placating subordinate officers."[7]

Because the British and Americans did not build their own navies up to the limits imposed on them by the 1922 treaty, Japan was able to maintain her fleet at a level that was roughly 70 percent that of the United States Navy despite the treaty. It was evident, though, that if the Americans did suddenly decide to expand their Navy to the treaty limits, any serious effort to match that expansion would bankrupt Japan. Therefore, members of the fleet faction sought to overcome America's quantitative advantage by focusing on quality—that is, by building ships of such size and power that they could outrange or overwhelm American battleships. They supported the secret construction of four *Yamato*-class battleships, which, at 73,000 tons each when fully equipped, would be more than twice as big as the largest American battleship. The project was hugely expensive and commanded a disproportionate share of the national budget, but it allowed the champions of the fleet faction to argue that they had an answer to America's numerical and industrial superiority.

Yamamoto was skeptical. Speaking to a class of air cadets in 1934, he compared battleships to the expensive artwork that wealthy Japanese families displayed in their living rooms: they had no particular function, he said, except to serve as "decorations." Yamamoto's rivals in the fleet faction were infuriated. They hadn't forgotten that he had been a delegate to two naval arms limitation conferences, and his two tours as Japan's naval attaché in Washington made him suspect in their eyes. His apostasy concerning the utility of battleships was simply one more reason to distrust and even despise him.[8]

Yamamoto himself was a member of the treaty faction, which also included Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa. Yonai and Yamamoto held that the key overall effect of the 1922 treaty was to restrain the United States from using its overwhelming industrial superiority to outbuild the Imperial Navy, which would have placed Japan at a far more disadvantageous position than the treaty did. With the backing of the emperor, Yonai served as prime

minister for six months in the first half of 1940. His efforts to promote an accommodation with the Americans were anathema to the *Kōdōha*, however, and he was the target of several assassination attempts. In July 1940, he was replaced by Prince Konoe, who was more sympathetic to the ambitions of the *Kōdōha* and the fleet faction.

The Army was suspicious of Yamamoto, too, and officially assigned a group of men to "guard" him, though their real task was to keep an eye on him. As vice minister of the Navy, Yamamoto lived in constant expectation of being murdered, and he avoided one assassination attempt only by leaving town at the right moment. Indeed, his appointment to command the Combined Fleet in 1939 was engineered by his friends in the hope that sending him to sea would save him from being killed in his bed. The appointment satisfied his enemies in the Army and the fleet faction because it got him out of Tokyo. Yamamoto was aware of the motives behind his appointment, but he did not protest. "I can turn my back on everything else," he wrote to a friend, "and devote myself entirely to naval matters."[9]

Yamamoto took up his new duties as commander in chief of the Combined Fleet on September 1, 1939, the very day Germany invaded Poland marking the beginning of the Second World War in Europe. To those pushing for closer ties with Germany, this was more evidence of the vigor and clear-sightedness of the Nazi regime, and they renewed their advocacy of an alliance with Hitler's government. It had the opposite effect on Yamamoto. Only three days after assuming command, he wrote a fellow admiral, "I shudder as I think of the problem of Japan's relations with Germany and Italy." He was convinced that an alliance with Germany meant war with the West, including the United States, and insisted that "a war between Japan and the United States would be a major calamity." His concerns fell on deaf ears. One year later, Japan signed what became known as the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, and a year after that the Army's domination of the government became complete when General Tōjō Hideki became both war minister and prime minister. By then the descent into war had generated its own unstoppable momentum.[10]

Yamamoto was realistic enough to see that, whatever his own views, once Japan signed the Tripartite Pact war became inevitable, and it was

his professional duty to prepare for it. As the government's statement of fundamental principles put it: "Since war with the United States may become unavoidable, sufficient preparations must be made for this eventuality." Just as American naval officers designed their war games around Plan Orange and modeled their summer exercises on imagined confrontations with the Japanese fleet, so, too, did Japanese officers—Yamamoto included—conduct their war games and fleet exercises in the assumption that the U.S. Navy was the likely enemy. As early as 1934, Lieutenant Genda Minoru, who was already emerging as one of the Imperial Navy's most original thinkers, wrote a paper at the Navy Staff College with the title "Naval Armament Essential for the Effective Prosecution of War with the United States."[11]

For Yamamoto, Genda, and other Navy planners, the question was how to structure the Navy so that it could win such a war. The traditional assumption, in Japan as well as in the United States, was that the war would culminate in a classic battleship engagement somewhere in the western Pacific. What the Japanese needed was a way to whittle down the American fleet as it moved toward this inevitable confrontation so that the smaller Japanese battle fleet could emerge victorious. To do that, Japan counted heavily on its fleet submarines and on land-based aircraft. The Japanese vastly improved their submarine capability in part by studying German World War I submarines, and they simultaneously focused on building a new generation of long-range, multiengine aircraft. According to the Japanese war plan, the American warships would be picked off one by one by submarines, or damaged by land-based aircraft operating from a web of island bases, until the opposing fleets were near parity. Massed torpedo attacks by destroyers and cruisers the night before the battle would weaken the Americans further, and in the final battle, superior Japanese fighting spirit (*Yamato damashii*) would determine the outcome.[12]

Yamamoto himself devoted much time and energy to the development of a long-range, land-based bomber. First in 1935 came the Mitsubishi G3M, which the Allies dubbed the "Nell," a big two-engine bomber that at 200 knots (230 mph) had an impressive range of over 3,500 miles, so

that it could patrol widely over the central Pacific to search out American warships and damage or sink them. Then in 1939 came the G4M1, which the Allies called the "Betty." The Betty had better armament than the Nell and at 230 knots (265 mph) was slightly faster, but both planes were vulnerable, for in order to increase range, the designers sacrificed both armor and self-sealing fuel tanks. A few Japanese advocates of air power, such as Rear Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi, believed that land-based aircraft could successfully defend Japan's island empire without the assistance of the fleet. Inoue went so far as to argue for the abolition of both battleships *and* carriers and for investing the nation's treasure exclusively in land-based bombers. Yamamoto would not go that far. He supported the development of land-based aircraft, but he also backed the production of more and bigger aircraft carriers.[13]

Organizationally, Japan's aircraft carriers were grouped into carrier divisions (CarDivs) of two carriers each. CarDiv 1 was composed of Japan's two biggest carriers, the *Kaga* and *Akagi*. Both were accidents of circumstance. The terms of the 1922 Washington Naval Arms Limitation Treaty had allocated the United States and Great Britain a maximum of 525,000 tons of battleships each, while Japan was limited to 315,000 tons. Quite apart from the perceived national humiliation of those limits, one practical problem was that Japan had several new battleships and battle cruisers under construction at the time, and their completion meant Japan would exceed the limits imposed on her by the treaty. That treaty, however, allowed both Japan and the United States to convert two of their big ships into carriers.*

Until then, carriers had been relatively small, displacing 10,000 to 12,000 tons each and carrying only enough airplanes to provide cover for the battleships. But these new carriers were constructed on top of capital-ship

* Initially the Japanese had planned to convert the battle cruiser *Amagi* into a carrier, but after the *Amagi* was damaged during a 1923 earthquake, the Japanese were allowed to substitute the even larger battleship *Kaga*. As shown in the next chapter, the Americans did much the same thing with two battle cruisers that they had under construction that subsequently became the carriers *Lexington* (CV-2) and *Saratoga* (CV-3).

hulls, and they were enormous. Displacing over 40,000 tons each when fully loaded, they had flight decks over 800 feet long. Together these two behemoths could carry as many as 182 airplanes. One drawback was that because of their large armored hulls, they were also relatively slow. The sleeker battle-cruiser hull of the *Akagi* allowed her to make a respectable 31 knots, but the heavy armored battleship hull of the *Kaga* kept her to a top speed of 28 knots. This compared unfavorably with the 33-knot speed of America's big carriers.[14]

The 1922 treaty also affected the size and capability of Japan's next carrier, though in a different way. Because *Kaga* and *Akagi* took up such a large percentage of Japan's available tonnage for carriers (81,000 tons), Japanese designers tried to build a carrier that displaced less than 10,000 tons in order to squeeze it in under the treaty's definition of a capital ship. It didn't work. The *Ryūjō*, laid down in 1929 and commissioned in 1933, simply could not accommodate all the necessary functions with so small a hull, and during construction her displacement crept up to 12,500 tons, though this was kept a secret at the time so that Japan would not be found in violation of the treaty.

In December of 1936, when the government formally renounced the Washington Treaty, Japan embarked on a naval expansion program that produced four new big-deck carriers in as many years: the *Sōryū* and the *Hiryū,* each of them displacing just under 20,000 tons when fully loaded and capable of carrying sixty-three airplanes each, and the *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku*, at 32,000 tons and capable of carrying seventy-two planes each. These last two were commissioned in 1941, only four months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. By the end of 1941, the Japanese had a total of ten carriers, which were collectively capable of carrying over six hundred airplanes.*

The idea that Japan's six biggest carriers should operate as a single task group may have originated with Genda Minoru, a precocious and outspoken advocate of air power, who claimed that he got the idea while watching a

* Japan also had three large seaplane tenders (*Ryuho, Chitose*, and *Chiyoda*) that were converted into aircraft carriers after the Battle of Midway. See Appendix A.