

US and Japanese WW2 Battles in the Pacific

What Happens Next – 06.05.2022

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast where the speaker gets to present his argument in just Six Minutes and that is followed by a question-and-answer period for deeper engagement.

Today's discussion will be on the War in the Pacific from Pearl Harbor to The Battle of Midway.

Our speaker is Paul Kennedy who is the J. Richardson Dilworth Professor of History and Global Affairs at Yale. Paul is one of our greatest living historians and he will discuss the battle between the US and Japanese in the Pacific during WW2.

Today's session will be the first in a four-part series with Paul Kennedy. Today's podcast will be followed-up with The Battle of the Atlantic, The Normandy Invasion and the surrender of Germany, and finally the Conquest of Japan. I expect this series to be spectacular.

Buckle up.

If you missed last week's podcast on the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, check it out.

The show was very provocative and I received red hot notes from both sides, which means I must have done something right.

Our first speaker was John McGinnis from Northwestern Law School who evaluated Justice Alito's Dobbs opinion and explained Alito's application of his originalist methodology to the case.

Our second speaker was Howard Husock who is the Senior Fellow of Domestic Policy Studies at AEI. Howard spoke about the political implications of overturning Roe vs. Wade and why putting abortion back into the legislative process will likely decrease conflict in our society?

Every month since the outset of COVID, I have commented on the monthly employment report because it is a critical statistic for evaluating the global economy. This month US employment increased by 390,000 jobs. The unemployment rate of 3.6% and the number of unemployed of 6 million is basically the same as pre-COVID. The labor market is extremely strong. Employers are very challenged finding new employees and they are scared that experienced workers will jump ship for more lucrative opportunities elsewhere.

Wage inflation is increasing at a 5.2% clip, still below the 8.3% inflation rate, but the concern here is that employees may be expecting similar wage increases going forward.

The biggest surprise in the employment announcement related to the COVID questionnaire. This month saw an enormous surge in COVID/Omicron cases, yet the number of workers

claiming that they were prevented from working due to COVID fell sharply from 600,000 to 450,000. And the number of teleworkers shrank from 7.7% to 7.4% over the last month, and this is down from like 25% at the height of COVID. So, the Omicron case surge is largely irrelevant to national employment trends.

I think over the next few months, the key economic question is how will rising interest rates affect hiring and employment.

All right, let's begin today's session with Yale Professor Paul Kennedy.

Paul, can you open your remarks with a brief summary of your new book a Victory at Sea.

Paul Kennedy:

It's a Paul Kennedy, historian at Yale, one volume account of the naval battles from 1939 to 1945.

At the beginning of the story, the United States is one of merely six great navies in the world. After the war, the US Navy has come out supreme right across the globe. The sheer output of American production, like a new aircraft carrier once a month entering the Pacific fleet by 1943, which quite staggers the mind. So please think of this book as about how at that time, the world order of power shifts from being a multipolar to a single polar world, at least in naval terms, from 1945 onwards.

Larry Bernstein:

My first question relates to the importance of geography in WW2. Each major power has its own specific advantages and disadvantages based on its geographical position. How does geography determine whether a country will be successful as a naval power?

Paul Kennedy:

From time and memorial, the geography of the contending naval powers has been of supreme importance, whether you're talking about some power in and around Greek islands, whether you're talking about the Roman naval power in the Mediterranean, whether you're talking in the second World War about countries which have a favorable geographical situation in regard to the sea, and those which are more land-bound.

And for those thinking about this in contemporary circumstances of the Russian Navy today. It can either come out of northern Norway in the ice, it can try to get through the Black Sea or the Baltic, or it can try to get out of a distant place in Kamchatka, but compared with other sea powers, geography gives some countries disadvantages and other one's supreme advantages. One held a supreme advantage in all of the contests for European naval dominance from 1,500 onwards, which was Great Britain. The island nation has a superior number of ports on the western coasts of Europe able to project that power outwards, not to be invaded by land. It had to be a difficult invasion by sea. The United States, Bismarck said, was one of the most favorable countries in the world because of its geography. 3,000 miles away from everybody

else in the Atlantic, 6,000 miles away from a hostile Japan or China, in the Pacific, the benign neighbors to the north and to the south. If it was able to develop its sea power in both its eastern shores and western shores, it was an incredibly favorable position.

Japan being an island nation, like Great Britain, had many of those advantages too. It also had the advantages that if it expanded and was aggressive, it could go a long way into the areas where it could be dominant because it's the only modern naval power in Asia.

Germany is just as Italy is a constrained, not quite landlocked power. France, which has always been at a disadvantage in having to split its Navy between the western Atlantic ports and the southern Mediterranean ports. So, if you wanted to give grades, the most favorable the United States. Second, Great Britain. Japan advantageously positioned. The other three also rans constrained very much by geography.

Larry Bernstein:

Before the beginning of WW2, each of the Great Powers had to decide what kind of navy it wanted. What was the decision-making process that led to their choice of inventory of warships?

Paul Kennedy:

So, these admirals, strove for a balanced fleet. The balanced fleet would consist of battleships supported by certain other smaller but somewhat faster warships called heavy cruisers and light cruisers, protected by a whole array of impressive, fast-moving, fast-shooting protection ships called destroyers.

Each of these navies strove to have the U-boat and the aircraft carrier. So, the ideal fleet, Larry, would have a combo of aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and some smaller protective ships as well as the submarines. Go figure. Every one of these admirals constrained by budgetary demands, their treasuries, the rival services, and then the particular geographic circumstances to which we refer.

Italy, for example, deciding not to have an aircraft carrier because it felt it could have enough air bases on land. Great Britain and United States, going ahead with aircraft carrier development, and then the Japanese swiftly coming along with their aircraft carrier development, even though they remained a strong battleship Navy. Inside navies themselves, Larry, there were contestations between what you might call the three big lobbies, the battleship lobby, the aircraft carrier lobby, and the U-boat lobby.

Larry Bernstein:

Great Britain was the leading naval power at the outset of WW2, what advantages did it bring to the table, and how did the loss of France and Norway in 1940 radically change their war strategy. Was the UK like Mike Tyson who made famous the expression that everyone has a strategy until you get hit in the nose?

Paul Kennedy:

So, you're talking about a great naval power which has a vast array of resources behind it, everything from cable communications, a well-trained officer corps, and a vast stock of naval weapon systems. The advantage seems to be enormous at the beginning of the war, and yet, this superior naval advantage seems to be badly damaged by the knocking out of its naval ally, the great French fleet, the loss of the ports of Western Europe, from northern Norway down to the French/Spanish border, the transformation of a balance inside the North Sea, because Germany takes over the Netherlands, Denmark as well as Norway. And then to add to all of these confounding of the early plans, comes along the entry of the war in the second sea of contestation, the Mediterranean, comes along Italy with Mussolini's very substantial and modernized fleet. So, you go from having this superior naval strategic position at the beginning of the war in September 1939 to being, like Mike Tyson's boxer, knocked around (laughs) and finding that as you try to recover from that in a somewhat battered condition, there are two hostile boxers in the ring against you.

And out in the Far East, there is the looming threat of Japan.

From 1940 onwards, the British feel they are juggling with insufficient resources. Difficult choices.

Larry Bernstein:

In 1997, I traveled to Moscow for the first time and had the opportunity to visit the Russian WW2 museum. And I was frankly shocked when the story that the museum told through its exhibits was a struggle between just two antagonists: Russia and Germany. There was little to no discussion of the US, Great Britain or its other allies. And I realized that I too had thought of the conflict primarily through US eyes. How can we take a more balanced view of the war?

Paul Kennedy:

Yes, I'd like to make a remark about your (laughs) initial comment and your visit. You are touching upon a major debate among historians still going on today about whether the second World War was won on land, preeminently by the red army with 85% of all German casualties occurring on the eastern front, or was it won by air naval power from the western allies? You may want to interview the scholar Payson O'Brien, who argues it's sea and air power, which explains the war and the Russian front arguments are exaggerated by Russians and by western pro-Russian sympathizers.

That aside, let's concentrate just on the naval strategic geographic struggle against the Axis powers, and Americans do not get this clearly enough, there is a major third field of naval air contestation that occurs in this war with huge casualties and losses of aircraft carriers, battleships and everything else, which is the battle for the Mediterranean, which begins at the fall of France and the entry of Italy into the war in June 1940, rages through 1941, 42, into 43, before the Anglo-American forces take all of North Africa, move via Sicily into southern Italy, producing this surrender of the major Italian fleet.

Initially, the British were set back because Italy, if you look at the map of the Mediterranean, Italy seems to be bestriding the center of it. How on earth can the British maintain their long former imperial lines of trade and communication, entering by Gibraltar, going past the narrows of Sicily, dangerous waters, past their own beleaguered little island base of Malta, and then going towards the Suez Canal. Remember, Italy also holds major positions and a huge army inside of air bases in Italian North Africa.

So, the struggle for the Mediterranean is one which Churchill believes has to be won. If you lost Malta, if you gave up in the Mediterranean, Italy, and Germany would move against allies like Greece, would move into the eastern Mediterranean, might take over Egypt and the canal, might get to Jerusalem, God help the Jews there, if Hitler ever got there, his big ambitions, and take over the Levant and maybe even get to the oil fields. So, for the British, this was almost life apart from defending the home islands.

This was the second most important area of fighting, and when you total up the number of warships of the Royal Navy, which was sunk in those three years in the convoy battles and the attacks upon Italy and other forms of trying to beat the U-boats which came into the Mediterranean, the struggle is major. And yet, the British claim in this long three-year battle, some of the most remarkable battle victories of the entire war, and one in which they're very, very proud, indeed, is the attack by the Royal Navy aircraft carrier and the Mediterranean fleet at night on the giant Italian base of Taranto.

It's all the way down in the heel of Italy, the major warship base on which the Italian battleships and cruisers were lying there in the harbor itself, and due to superior British training of aircraft carrier landings and takeoffs, there was this incredibly successful strike by torpedo planes, which in the night, dropped their torpedoes, surprising the Italians and devastating at least three battleships and a couple of heavy cruisers. This is the forerunner to Pearl Harbor. The Japanese naval attaché in Italy reported it to Tokyo.

Larry Bernstein:

How did the surprise attack on Taranto compare to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?

Paul Kennedy:

The surprise out of the blue, the launching of carrier aircraft, which were three different categories, medium-level bombers, dive bombers, and torpedo bombers. That is to say aircraft specifically designed to carry the very heavy and powerful torpedoes a long way from the harbor itself.

These were naval strikes from the sea, Larry. This was an entirely new form of naval air warfare, and it's not surprising that scholars have focused upon this. You're going to attack those big, giant battleships unfortunately resting in their harbor, as the Italian battleships were in Taranto, as the U.S. battle fleet in the Pacific was resting in Pearl Harbor. You'd strike out of the blue. The aircraft would take off a long way from the actual target area. They'd come in by

surprise. The carriers would make a run even closer in the darkness towards the area so they could pick up the returning planes and rescue them, as it were, and then head off into the dark. Surprise attack from the sea on the largest battleships and warships in the world.

Larry Bernstein:

Next question, what were the Japanese war aims?

Paul Kennedy:

Right. That's the best place to start.

Larry Bernstein:

Why would Japan, a country that had one-tenth the GDP of the US, choose to go to war with it?

Paul Kennedy:

So, let's begin with the national circumstance in the geography as well as the political aims of the country in question. Here is Japan, a very large population, but not really able to feed itself. The first industrial power of Asia, enormously successful in developing its own modern navy and modern naval air force. A country which also had an even superior armed service, the army, which had ambitions to move into Korea, Manchuria, but also further afield into China itself.

Japan is a strategically-torn nation, a powerful army, wanting to move westwards into the continent of Asia, and a navy wanting to be a contender for sea power in the Pacific against the British and the American navies. Japan was an ambitious authoritarian state, which believed its time on the world stage had come, why should the world be dominated by those western powers of France, of British, of the United States? Was it not time for us? Nihon, the imperial Japanese destiny to go forward.

But if you were going forward, Larry, you needed to do it moving step by step down the east shores of Asia. Now you had Taiwan, you had South Korea, you were moving into French Indochina with the permission and support of Hitler by 1940, 41. Could you go further towards the great oil fields of the Dutch East Indies? Could you go further south, maybe taking out British bases of Singapore, Malaya without those arrogant Americans getting in the way.

Paul Kennedy:

And those arrogant Americans, remember, having bases in the Philippines, which look bestride, looked as if they're threatening the lines of communication from Japan to the south. But if you decided in the logic chain of Japanese thinking, if you decided to take out the American bases at, say, Manila, and in the Philippines, and the British base of Hong Kong in order to get the petroleum, 'cause you have none yourself. If you're gonna take out those British and American midway possessions of the Philippines, what about that looming, dangerous American fleet over there in Pearl Harbor?

Larry Bernstein:

At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor the US had a very small army and navy. But the key issue was its potential. How did the Japanese so badly misjudge the American wartime response?

Paul Kennedy:

There are two things in that. One is the larger consideration of the huge gap in GDPs, share of world product of technological backup resources. But if you had decided that you were going to try to prevent this United States from coming into the western Pacific and into East Asia, would you not want to knock out some of the critical midway points to make it all the way difficult? What if there was a naval conflict to knock out midway stations like the great American base at Guam? What if there was no way westwards of Pearl Harbor before you get to, say, the Philippines, nowhere where the Americans could stop.

So, the idea of knocking out an intermediate position, and that's how we could see Pearl Harbor as being, made a lot of operational strategic logic from the viewpoint of a Tokyo. If you were going south and if you were gonna take out the British bases at Manila and Hong Kong, best to stop the Americans from interfering by knocking out their major middle of the Pacific base. Now, all this is well and true and done successfully at Pearl Harbor, but again, Yamamoto, the most distinguished of the Japanese admirals who had been naval attaché in the United States, who had been on a rail journey across continental United States and seen how wide and productive it was compared with his native Japan, and was allegedly have told a number of people, "Give me six months and I can run havoc in the Pacific, but after that you have to settle for some sort of deal with the Americans." Because Yamamoto knew in the way that we know retrospectively that this American giant had the productive resources and a GDP almost 10 times that of Japan. Not a wise, grand, strategical move at all.

Larry Bernstein:

How did Japan surprise the Americans at Pearl Harbor?

Paul Kennedy:

From the viewpoint of the military and the naval historian, it has to be admitted that the Japanese planning, execution, and preparation for this surprise attack upon the main American naval base at Pearl Harbor was one of the most superbly successful military acts in world history. The Japanese had prepared for this in a way by developing this carrier fleet of about six large fleet carriers and some smaller half fleet carriers, training with these carriers in groups of four rather than individual carriers going out on patrol or going out on anti-U-boat ventures as the British were doing at the beginning of the war.

If you had the best trained naval pilots in the world with the best equipped dive bombers and torpedo bombers at the time, if then your weapon of strike was so much better and coherent than other navies, and if you had determined upon this fateful way of striking immediately and secretly against the Americans and British to give you the initial advantage in the war, and if

then you planned it carefully, that as the clock was ticking towards the decision for war at the beginning of December 1941, you sent out that carrier fleet into the north Pacific, keeping radio silence, following a route which would be far away from any American patrol aircraft over the oceans, going to a position south of the Aleutian Islands and attacking Pearl Harbor from the north, out of the blue, on a Sunday morning at about 7:00 where everybody was either jogging, fast asleep after the ballroom dancing of the night before, or looking in the wrong direction, was the consolidated air strike from six aircraft carriers.

And by surprise, hitting and sinking so much that your first strike seemed to be an enormous blow against American naval power, could you not then return safely to your bases in Japan itself? Or should you have gone on to strike further parts of the base and the navy establishments at Pearl Harbor to make it a truly rounded attack?

Larry Bernstein:

Let's now take the American perspective. Good God, we knew from our deteriorating diplomatic discussions with the Japanese that the risk of war was imminent, how could we have left the battleships at Pearl Harbor and our air force in Hawaii so defenseless? And how lucky were we that the Japanese did not follow up their initial raid with follow-up attacks destroying other US defense assets in Hawaii?

Paul Kennedy:

The Americans were taken by surprise, there is nothing in all of these conspiracy works which said that Roosevelt or Stimson knew that the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor but were willing to let it happen because they wanted desperately to get into the Second World War, and if they got into the war with Japan then probably Hitler would come in as well, as indeed he did. But there's nothing in the many investigations here of the archives to suggest it. The United States government at the highest level was taken by surprise at the news on the morning of December the 7th that the Japanese had attacked.

The news that the Japanese had attacked the Philippines would not have taken them by surprise. The news that the Japanese somewhere in that week would have attacked the British positions in Hong Kong would not have taken them by surprise. This was a surprise attack. There were many instructions sent out by Marshall to the American naval and military leaders at Pearl Harbor, they were often asking them to go on the high alert and then come back down off the high alert. Kimmel and Short, the commanders at Pearl Harbor were quite exhausted by these various instructions.

Since you didn't assume that there was going to be an attack by an outside naval striking force, they feared saboteurs on American warships resting in the harbor, link them all together so they could be protected. In the same way as you feared the Japanese American population in the Hawaiian Islands, maybe there'd be somebody who'd try to blow up your aircraft on the air bases. So line up the aircraft side by side. Don't deploy them at other distant, scattered places, but have them lined up so you could protect them from saboteur attack on the ground. And Larry, that means that you're like sitting ducks when the Japanese fliers come over. They

can hardly believe it, there's lines of battleships unprotected because the torpedo nets are down.

Whoever thinks that anybody could attack, how are you gonna get a large Japanese submarine in Pearl Harbor? You didn't think of that. And all of these unprotected aircraft because you're just thinking of one or two guys with rifles would protect these consolidated lines of aircraft, and nobody else would attack them. Oh, my.

Larry Bernstein:

Pearl Harbor was a disaster, but it could have been a lot worse. The Japanese could have sunk the American aircraft carriers which had left for sea the day before, destroyed the American naval repair facilities, burned our petroleum storage facilities, etc.

Paul Kennedy:

First, the American forward investment was in this gigantic complex of air and naval bases and oil installations and everything else they had at Pearl Harbor. So, when the Japanese first successful strike knocked out the battle fleet, we have to ask ourselves, Larry, what did they not knock out?

And this is what the criticisms of Nagumo and the other Japanese admirals for not coming back for a second strike when the Americans were sprawled across the ropes, to use your boxing analogy. What could they have done? They could have attacked some of the air base installations more thoroughly so the United States would find it difficult to rebuild. They could have attacked the oil supply installations. Had there been a gigantic burning inferno of the petroleum reserves of Pearl Harbor, a wrecked petroleum installation. What if you'd taken out all of the repair facilities of the dockyards, of the engineering works? And what also if you had managed to knock out the elusive and still very, very dangerous American carrier fleet of the Pacific?

If you were going to see the enormous advantages and striking power of your Japanese carrier fleet, didn't you want to wipe out the American equivalent? And unfortunately for the Japanese navy, those American carriers which were in the Pacific, and there were not many of them, most of them were still on the eastern shore board, but those ones like Halsey's great Saratoga were out at sea and could not be attacked. When they came back in, they could immediately begin the process to reestablish American control in the central Pacific.

A further thing to be remarked upon is a number of those American battleships were only partially damaged. Other ones could be recovered and rebuilt to more modern battle fire conditions. The United States navy therefore could, after a year or two, have a reduced battleship fleet to be joined by 1943 of a much larger modern set of battleships. By then it had become clear that the war in the Pacific was a war of long-range striking carriers. It was not to be the Jutland battle of the future, of battleships against battleships. Alas for the battleship navy admirals who detested the thought of this.

Larry Bernstein:

You have focused so far on the disputes within the US Navy for resources and power, but even more important was the interservice battle between the army and the navy for resources and war strategy.

Paul Kennedy:

Almost all modern armed societies have a division within their armed services between those with a preference for land warfare, those with a preference for sea, naval, maritime operations, and in addition, after the First World War onwards there was of course air power. And between the three services there was intense rivalry. Not just for resources, not just for shares of the budget, but for where you would fight the war.

Naval men wanted to fight the war predominantly at sea. Land men, generals wanted to fight it on land and claim that it is land power that counts. Apart from the case of the Soviet Union, which had a very small navy, all of the rest of these nations, Britain, Germany, Italy, France, the United States and Japan, all of them had these internal contestations between army and navy men and their services. Of course, not surprising, Larry, that when we focus upon how on how are we to wage the war against the Japanese Empire and bring it down? The Army, and particularly the dynamic, arrogant General MacArthur knocked out of the Philippines, humiliated there, determined that he would return, gathering his strength and forces from Australia and New Guinea northwards, wanted to carry the fight by land based or hopping across the islands of the Indonesian archipelago to Philippines and into China.

And the Navy said this was quite nonsense. First of all, we were knocked out with our fleet at Pearl Harbor, we're going to recover there. Secondly, anybody who looks at a map of the Pacific could see that you could go straight westwards from the recovered base at Pearl Harbor, take out those intermediate islands like the Carolines and the Marianas, and move more directly upon Japan. Why should we pay any attention to MacArthur down in his jungles in southwest, you know, Borneo? Stay there in Borneo, stay there in Solomons and stuff like that. Let the Navy and its carrier win the war. MacArthur would have nothing of that.

Larry Bernstein:

Why did FDR or General Marshall who was chief of staff of the US army during the war, allow General MacArthur who managed the army's war in the Pacific theater to focus on his return to the Philippines? MacArthur's war plan seemed ridiculous fighting in the Jungle so far from the key objective of Japan. Why not put all of the American war resources with the Navy to pursue the island-hopping strategy to get to Japan as soon as possible?

Paul Kennedy:

There are three reasons. One the egocentrism of MacArthur and wanting to do it his way from his particular geographic position. The idea of long-range successful amphibious warfare, island hopping across great distances between small atolls, looked very precarious. It was almost brand new. One or two thoughtful Marine Corps officers had conceived of amphibious warfare and island hopping, as happens in the Second World War in the Pacific from 1943, '44 onwards.

That looked very risky. Don't you need to be within range of land based heavier bomber aircraft such as the bomber aircraft squadrons which were under MacArthur's control down in Australia and in New Guinea?

Secondly, there's a question of logistics. The British and the Americans do start off with significant logistical base resources by moving out of northern Australia across the waters to New Guinea, slowly developing and building up your resources there, being supplied across the Pacific from the western American ports diagonally down across to Australia and New Zealand, which were not intercepted at all by Japanese submarines. So you had a safe line of supply. There was a certain amount of security of resource supply logic behind MacArthur, and there was the question of the untried nature of central Pacific amphibious long-range warfare. And then you come back to the issue of the rivalry between the Army in the Pacific under MacArthur and the Navy in the Pacific out of Pearl Harbor, under Nimitz, behind whom was the formidable head of the American Navy, Admiral King.

Each of these believe they have a better way of defeating Japan. But then there is the supreme political operator of Roosevelt himself. MacArthur was so notoriously egocentric. Nobody wants him back in Washington, nobody wants him to be in control of the operations in North Africa. Better give it to the more agreeable Eisenhower and try him out. So let us use sufficient number of new aircraft squadrons, new divisions of Marines and Army to MacArthur and see how well he does. But let's hold the cards in our hands and let's give Nimitz the chance to show whether strategic long-range amphibious operations backed by the new carriers in the central Pacific drive will work as well.

And if you think about it, in a way it turns out to be very smart. If you have a two-pronged attack against a giant but vulnerable Japanese position sprawled across the Pacific, and one prong is coming up from the southeast, out of New Guinea and the Solomons, led by MacArthur, and one prong is coming across the Pacific Central led by the carrier forces. The two-pronged approach is actually a rather nifty thing in strategical operational terms.

Larry Bernstein:

The Geneva Convention does not allow for the assassination or murder of specific individuals. The Americans had broken the Japanese code and were aware that Admiral Yamamoto, the Japanese head of the Navy, was flying on a specific route at a specific time. And the order was given to shoot that plane down. The decision was approved by Roosevelt personally as well as other senior members of the American military. What do you think of the application of the Geneva Convention to the assassination of Admiral Yamamoto?

Paul Kennedy:

So, I've always wondered, Larry, at how far down in the levels of command and operational position does that Geneva Convention reach?

Is it about making illegal the attempted assassination on the political leadership of the other side? Or does it go all the way down to the naval led leadership of the other side? If the British

in their battle in North Africa had at any time discovered that their great foe, General Rommel was flying from an air base in Benghazi back to get some health care problems settled back to Southern Italy and decided to send an attack to try to shoot down Rommel's plane, would that itself have been against the Geneva Convention? I don't know the answer to that. If you tend to strike some part of your senior levels of the other side's armed forces is that not just a regular act of war, common sense to reduce the effectiveness of the other side? It's not the case, should we actually try to assassinate Hitler? Mussolini? Churchill? Are the political leaders at least legally protected by the Geneva Convention? So, I scratch my head as to whether the taking out the head of the Japanese Navy, Yamamoto, is going to fly in to the Southwest Pacific to do an inspection and to talk about a reconsolidation of the Japanese position. They're able to plan an ambush of his flight and to destroy him. I would leave for the legal scholars whether that really is a breach of the Geneva Convention.

Once they have taken out the most dynamic, far-sighted of the naval leadership of Japan. It's not surprising perhaps that in the months or so following that, nothing is done in any effective or creative way on the Japanese side. Some scholars would argue that at this time the Americans are still not ready for their counter offense in the Central Pacific Islands. There's time for a certain amount of relocation of Japanese resources. There may be time for using what is still a considerable amount of aircraft carriers, as well as the biggest battle fleet in the Pacific, to do more damage. They had a window of opportunity, and they didn't do it. Yamamoto's execution, if you can call it that, is part of the story. Indecisive leadership in Tokyo is surely another part of that story.

Larry Bernstein:

You spoke about Admiral Yamamoto's creative war strategy. What about the US Navy's admirals? Take as an example Admiral Halsey who ran naval operations in the Pacific under Nimitz.

Paul Kennedy:

Below where Nimitz is sitting, controlling the Pacific War in the center, there is the operational campaigns of his carrier and battleship commanders. One of whom is the dynamic but impulsive Admiral Halsey. Like General Patton on land in the U.S. Army, he's so determined to fight and bring the war to the enemy that that itself is a resource. He's a leader who encourages his men and his subordinates. But being impulsive might mean that you'd get it wrong. Sometimes it might mean that you'd ignore your weather advisory staff when they say "Don't go there because we might head into a typhoon". So that the track record of a dynamic Admiral Halsey, if you know everything about Halsey's typhoon, it's a mixed record and some cases you might be diverted away in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the wrong direction. So, from time-to-time Nimitz has to replace Halsey by steadier more reliable carrier admirals to pick up the offensive.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is the Battle of Midway. Admiral Nimitz and his cryptography staff have set a trap for the Japanese. In June 1942, the Japanese Navy had gone dark, obeying radio silence just like before Pearl Harbor. Where was The Japanese Navy going to attack? The Americans

suspected Midway, and over the radio, they mentioned falsely that the fresh water supply at Midway has been contaminated. A few hours later, the Japanese sent encrypted messages that the next big naval target had no potable water. Nimitz made the decision to send all of the American carriers in the Pacific to Midway. The head of the Global US Navy Admiral King was opposed to that because then there would be no American carrier east of Midway to protect the American Coastline! FDR was forced to intervene and sided with Nimitz. What happened at Midway and why was this the most important battle in the War against Japan?

Paul Kennedy:

We are coming up to the 80th anniversary of the most decisive naval battles of the world, the Battle of Midway, early June 1942, 80 years ago. Midway is a small island strategically located but a considerable way westward of the Hawaiian Islands. It's one of those stepping stones between an American strategic drive westwards out of Hawaii or a Japanese strategic drive, island hopping from the Japanese positions via Midway and then perhaps onto attacking Hawaii. So it becomes strategically significant to both of these contending forces just because it is there.

A Japanese plan maybe going further to take the much bigger challenge of conquering the Hawaiian Islands, or from a Japanese perspective that Midway is a kind of tethered goat. It might tempt the Americans forward, the aircraft carriers, bring them into battle so you can wipe them out. So, the Japanese naval high command plans an enormous fleet attack from the carriers to a gigantic battle fleet and then an invasion fleet. But you have to trap those American carriers first.

From a perspective of Nimitz in Hawaii and reporting back to Admiral King and getting his support for what's going on in the civilian battles in Washington, from a perspective of Nimitz, you want to use this battle over the contested island, not only to preserve it, but maybe to find a way of striking those terrifyingly effective Japanese carriers. The advantages the Americans have is not only just maybe two or three carriers, one of them a Yorktown, coming in haste, damaged from the earlier carrier battle at the Coral Sea, but the advantages of being able to read the Japanese naval as well as the diplomatic codes. This is the advantage that the Western allies have almost throughout the war. American code breakers have been able to understand what the Japanese are up to when Japanese send wireless signals. Remember the success of the attack upon Pearl Harbor was that the Japanese carrier striking force obeyed radio silence. If you don't send out messages, they cannot be intercepted and then decrypted.

So, if you know that the Japanese are coming with major forces, and if you can guess generally where their forces are going to be, you don't know specifically where they are, you can send out your carrier forces to probe by sending out reconnaissance planes from your carriers. The Japanese are sending long range reconnaissance land-based aircraft to figure out exactly where the other carrier fleet is. But as the Americans do know more about the Japanese side, then even though you have not so many carriers and not so many carrier aircraft, you have this overall knowledge advantage which may come into good stead if you can find those Japanese

carriers and take them by surprise. If not, it's gonna be a different outcome for the Pacific maybe for the next two or three years of the war itself.

Larry Bernstein:

The Japanese Admiral in charge of Pearl Harbor who made the executive decision not to send a second wave of Japanese bombers to attack Hawaii, took his winnings and returned to Tokyo. The admiral was challenged by his colleagues for not being sufficiently aggressive. At Midway the same Japanese admiral is also in charge, and he decides this time to refuel his planes to attack with a second wave. When the planes landed, all the jet fuel was brought to the surface of the carriers, and at this moment the carriers were most vulnerable. At the same moment, the American torpedo bombers were seeking the Japanese fleet were terribly low on fuel and moments before turning back, they spotted four Japanese carriers when they broke cloud cover. Minutes later the war in the Pacific was won by the Americans.

Paul Kennedy:

Let's recall, both sides are just beginning to figure out the best operational way of using a cluster of aircraft and aircraft carriers. This consolidated carrier group of four carriers, maybe you should send not the first strike of everybody's planes taking off from all of the carriers, but maybe you should send the first strike from say the first three carriers, and keep a couple of your carriers with aircraft for the second strike when the others come back, so you are never always committed to either having your trousers down and vulnerable because all of your aircraft are coming back from the first strike at the same time. This of course is wisdom in retrospect. It's wisdom that the American carriers can have two or three years later when they have four carrier task groups in the Western Pacific and can send two of the carrier tasks groups to do the offensive attacks while keeping one of the others in reserve.

But in this grappling for understanding where the other side's carriers are, in this brand, new world of long-distance carrier attacks, one group's carrier aircraft against the other's carriers, 200, 300 miles away, nothing like this has happened in world history to give you any clues, you're grappling in the dark and even the decryption of some of the messages which the Americans can get about where Japanese are going does not exactly identify where the Japanese carriers are. Each side is sending out waves and waves hoping to attack, and then the carrier aircraft have to come back and be hastily re-fueled and got off the deck again. It's a very nail-biting experience. And the Americans, as it turns out, are lucky in the timing of sending out of their attack waves and not to be detected by the Japanese reconnaissance aircraft.

Larry Bernstein:

My next question relates to luck in wartime. The American torpedo bombers can find four carriers at Midway and the Japanese will be unsuccessful with the American carriers at Pearl Harbor. How important was luck in the War of the Pacific?

Paul Kennedy:

Napoleon Bonaparte would be nodding his head like crazy at the moment. The anecdote is that when somebody pushed the name forward of a general who he thought should be promoted and Napoleon said "But- yes, but does he have luck?"

Paul Kennedy:

"Is he a lucky general?" Here's one of the greatest military figures in all of world history believing that luck counts, the star of luck. The Americans are incredibly lucky at Midway. May well be said that the instruments they have, the amazingly successful two-seater American Avenger dive bomber, the aircraft carriers themselves, the particularly well-trained squadrons, all of those build up to be something which gives them an effective, devastating fighting force, but they have to find the enemy. And in the patrols at each side trying to find out where the other side was, each side of them launching strikes, each side of them trying to recover their returning squadrons, in this sort of one eyed or even blind struggle.

There is this wonderful story which is told of particular group of American flyers about to return back to their carriers because they're almost at the limit of the oil tank endurance. And the clouds open down below and there, here Napoleon's luck (laughs) comes into the story. McClusky and the others look down and they see this Japanese fleet of four aircraft carriers naked. Naked because they're trying to recover the aircraft from the earlier strikes. No protected air combat patrols over because in another strike of American aircraft has distracted and taken away the resources of the overhead patrols. And so, the American dive bombers can go down with their lethal bombs and just drop them right onto the open and exposed decks of the Japanese carriers. And so you transform this particular, campaign fight in the war. The Japanese carriers are pretty well eliminated. One American carrier, the Yorktown, is destroyed in a Japanese counter strike. A large number of American planes have to ditch in the sea because they go too far coming back.

The war has turned dramatically, from a total Japanese domination to a total American domination after Midway because the Japanese carrier fleet has been so badly damaged. Not totally, but so badly damaged. And luck played an enormous role there.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks Paul for joining us today. That ends today's session.

As a reminder if you missed last week's episode on Roe vs. Wade, please check it out.

You can find all of our previous episodes and transcripts on our website Whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Replays are also available on Apple Podcast, Podbean and Spotify.

Thanks to our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues, good-bye.