Paul Kennedy
What Happens Next – 06.26.2022

Larry Bernstein:
Paul, we left off in our first installment of Paul Kennedy's Analysis of WW2 with a discussion of the War in the Pacific from Pearl Harbor to Midway. This second installment will cover the Battle of the Atlantic and the War in the Mediterranean before Operation Torch.

Paul, let's begin the discussion with an overview of the European and African theater and the ongoing conflict with the Axis powers in the months immediately following Pearl Harbor.

Paul Kennedy:
This is early June 1942. The British are reeling in North Africa because they're worried about what Rommel is doing, possibly advancing towards Egypt, frightening there. Their earlier convoys towards Malta have been so badly devastated, the British cabinet is discussing whether Malta should be abandoned. June 1942 sees the cresting point of one of the greatest land battles in the war, Stalingrad. In the North Atlantic, Dönitz U-Boat forces are growing day by day, week by week. So, when you try to step back as, say, a Martian observer looking down on this dynamic, four to five area conflict which we call the Second World War, it is a decisive change in this Pacific campaign area which is going to give the Americans more of an advantage after a long breathing space. But the war is being fought elsewhere in many ways where the allies are not so successful. The war does not suddenly change in the easy advantage of the Anglo-American forces just because four Japanese carriers were taken out at Midway. This is a false reading of the narrative of the Second World War.

Larry Bernstein:
Why did FDR decide to focus the war against Germany first instead of against Japan?

Paul Kennedy:
For Roosevelt, in the struggle against fascism, the number one enemy being Nazi Germany, not Japan, because Germany has so much more in the way of industrial, scientific and technological resources that the United States has to make sure that it cannot just concentrate on the Pacific. In the Battle of the Atlantic, the United States, even as a neutral, has a major interest. It is important for it that the British continues the war. When France falls and there is a fear that Britain might also fall as well, Roosevelt sends a whole number of emissaries plus military Naval Attachés in London to figure out what are the chances of the Britain surviving? How do we help them out?

Larry Bernstein:
Before the war, FDR faced isolationism at home. What changed after France surrendered in June 1940?

Paul Kennedy:
The irony is the fall of France at last causes the U.S. Congress to get so frightened that it's willing to give appropriations in June and July, 1940, for the doubling of the U.S. Navy. It will take two years for those appropriations to turn into real warships. And at the time, you still look with alarm, at the great struggle in the Atlantic as occasional German surface raiders like the Bismarck, but more singularly, the, U-boat concentrated wolf pack attacks under Admiral Dönitz may throttle this daily and weekly flow of convoys carrying war materials to the British so they can carry on the war, defend their home islands, and advance themselves in North Africa and in the campaign against Italy.

Larry Bernstein:
The Battle of the Atlantic was a matter of life and death for Britain because they were desperate for food. Why are the convoys critical for the American strategy and how does this result in the Lend-Lease deal with Britain?

Paul Kennedy:
The Battle of the Atlantic is strategically important to the United States, even in the two years of neutrality, which is why that clever guy, Roosevelt, allows a significant number of clandestine operations and patrols by the U.S. navy to look after the convoys in the first thousand miles of their sailing, while he negotiates with the British and the destroyers for bases deal to give Churchill's navy a large number of older American destroyers, but to get possession of critically strategical bases in the Caribbean.

And then through the Lend-Lease legislation, agreed with by Congress in a nifty way to give an incredibly and most significant flow of goods without the British needing to pay for it to keep them going in the war against the European fascist states. My goodness is this a strategic juggling act led by Roosevelt himself. And the navies allocation of resources in the Atlantic and in the Pacific are part of the overall jigsaw puzzle of American grand strategy.

Larry Bernstein:
I think it is difficult for the modern American listener to appreciate how scared the American leadership was of the loss of Britain and potentially the risk that the Nazis could take control of the Atlantic. Because the Germans could then disrupt American trade routes and potentially invade South America and the Caribbean.

Paul Kennedy:
This comes back to that determinant of long-range geography. The Atlantic is a long, long way from one side to the other. And the Pacific is even more double that. So whichever nation is going to defeat the big obstacle of long-range oceans, and conquer the challenge of geography is gonna be successful. And if you don't do it, you aren't going to win. The allies have advantages, but they also have challenges.

On the other side, the Japanese and the Germans have to get over geographical disadvantages, the disadvantages of the British Isles being in the way of Hitler and his navy and other forces

moving into the Atlantic. And the greater advantage of our still retaining the Hawaiian Islands. Let's put the counterfactual for just half a minute, Larry, to see what I mean.

Supposing Yamamoto had been bold and successful enough to conquer the Hawaiian Islands in 1942. How difficult it would've been for us to do the comeback? All the miles from the Western Pacific coast to Hawaii protected like an enormous giant bunker in the hands of the other side. Supposing, and this was the other great strategic fear, supposing the British had collapsed, or supposing there had been a political coup d'état somewhere, because the Battle of Britain was going the wrong way and the British negotiate a Vichy France type of deal with Hitler. What then?

Even then, there is difficulty for the Germans to get down to the Caribbean, just as a difficulty for the Japanese to think of invading all of California. But it doesn't mean that we didn't have fears or apprehensions about that. Therefore, holding onto Hawaii and building it up, and holding and giving supplies to MacArthur, claiming that he can win the war from the Southwest Pacific, both of those make strategic sense in the Pacific Zone of fighting. Just as finding ways to keep Churchill's Britain going in all sorts of ways from 1940, '41 onwards also make strategic good sense.

You are protecting the United States and its large insular continental position by making sure the fight is over there in the, (laughs) on the other side of the Atlantic or in the Central Atlantic and over there in the Southwest and Central Pacific. It doesn't come to America despite a lot of the alarmism about subversion from within or the Germans being able to get Bermuda and then even Florida. Lord help us. What a thought.

Larry Bernstein:
War is much more destructive when the battlefield is fought in your country. Millions of civilians would die, the housing and industrial base would be destroyed. It is a total catastrophe, and that is exactly what happened to Russia and Germany. But the United States was spared. The fighting is not on our shores. America can take full advantage of its unscathed industrial production to win the war.

Paul Kennedy:
So, here's the number one principle of successfully fighting a war. On the whole, try to make sure that the fighting is over there (laughs) and it's not with you. This of course was Hitler's initial success where fighting was either way into the east striking towards Stalingrad, by taking France and Western Europe and giving support to the Italians in the Mediterranean. It's going to take about five years of fighting in Europe before the war comes to be here in the German case. It's going to take a long time in the Pacific War before it gets close to Japan.

So yes, indeed. If you can put out your armed resources, naval, air force, and army to hold bases, to maintain lines of communication, to get domination of the air and to conduct the war a long distance over there is a very successful long-range overall military grand strategy.

Larry Bernstein:
The Battle of the Atlantic is most famous for the U-Boat Wolf Packs, but there were also German battleships. Tell us about the breakout of the German cruiser the Graf Spee and the chaos that ensued.

Paul Kennedy:
The great writer Mahan in an essay called the disposition of navies in like 1902 said that this is a great advantage that the British have against European naval powers that they prescribe the access and the egress to the Atlantic, which can only be overcome if the Germans would build a fleet larger than the Royal Navy itself and extended out to the north and to the south of a British Isles.

This never happens. So that the German naval leadership coming up late because of the constraints of the naval limitation treaties can only send out these lone wolf raiders, these long-range Panzerschiffe or pocket battleships like the Graf Spee. Later on, the Scharnhorst battle cruisers, later on the Bismarck itself. And hope to disrupt the convoys and the trade.

In the case of a most interesting example here, the one you mentioned, the heavy cruiser pocket battleship Graf Spee, is sent out in a clandestine way to patrol in the Central and Southern Atlantic, even before the war comes in September, 1939.

When the war comes and long-range radio signals tell a Captain Langsdorff, the ill-fated captain of the Graf Spee, to go raiding, and attacking, and to disrupt British and French trades in the Central Atlantic and in the South Atlantic, and even further into the Indian Ocean, the Graf Spee has a number of months, a field day. From time to time, it spots a British merchant ship. Destroys it. Takes on the crew because it's trying to observe the rules of war and the Geneva Conventions and causing such disruption that by about November, 1939, so the third months of the war, the British and the French have about nine or 11 large-scale hunting groups all over the North, Central, and South Atlantic and in the Indian Ocean, searching for this single disruptive raider is an enormously successful operational strategy.

If you think about it, Larry, supposing that there had been, not just the Graf Spee, but three or four of its sister ships capable of being ready and behind it, they're about six months too late, the two even larger German battle cruisers, the Scharnhorst and the Gneisenau, they would've paralyzed allied overseas trade. And would've taken the Royal Navy and the French Navy a lot of good luck to get them.

So, the very fact that you have a single successful long-range raider in the South Atlantic, this is a story of a Graf Spee, is something that has to be given as a tribute to the German Navy. It isn't much, but my word, it carries out an enormous disruptive campaign. And the British find it difficult to counter it.

Larry Bernstein:
Why was the German Navy unprepared for the war, after all they were the aggressors?

Paul Kennedy:
I think we have to introduce two points here, Larry. First of all, Admiral Raeder, the head of the German Navy, rebuilding frantically in the late-1930s had been assured by Adolf Hitler that Germany was not going to war against the Western Maritime powers, especially against the British, until about 1944.

Therefore, the plans for the German Navy for much, much bigger surface navy could then be realized, including perhaps even one or two of the first German aircraft carriers, but a much, much bigger battle fleet. So, when the war comes because Hitler deciding that he cannot wait to take out, Poland in September, 1939, provoking the British and the French because they have given guarantees to Poland. When that war comes, the German surface navy is so much smaller than Raeder hoped it to be. It was going to be those expeditions by raiding warships.

The second thing is that the German campaign to take over Norway in the spring of 1940, although it ended up in the result of the German land occupation and takeover of the whole of Norway, as well as Denmark, it led to enormous casualties on this relatively small German surface navy of Raeder's. Most of his big fleet destroyers were eliminated in the second Battle of Narvik. Many of his larger surface warships, one heavy cruiser was sunk. Some of the other ones were damaged in the battle. By June, 1940, when France falls, there's hardly any effective surface combatant vessel left in Raeder's navy.

Supposing the radical submarine arm strategists in the German Navy had said, forget about the heavy investments in large-scale, fast battle cruises like the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. Forget the even larger investments in the super battleships like the Bismarck and the Tirpitz.

If you had invested all of those resources, including the trained man, the iron and the steel and the ball bearings and everything else to quadruple or quintuple, a much larger U-boat fleet on its own, after we had conquered the Norwegian and French forward bases, would we not, with hundreds of submarines, Larry, been able to totally paralyze and get control of the Atlantic, the entry to the Mediterranean, and all the way after, all to Brazil and to the Caribbean? Should we not have invested in one single new arm of naval warfare, the submarines?

Had we done so, would we have not found ourself in a position, from 1941 to 1942 to 1943, where we have limited U-boat resources to throw against the allied convoys? And in that campaign which was leading to considerable successes and sinkings, nonetheless provoking the British, especially, but also the Americans through a vast array of counter-submarine resources.

Larry Bernstein:
I think one of the problems with limited historical counterfactuals is that you must consider the antagonist's response. If the Germans were investing vast resources in U-Boats and not battleships, then the Americans and the Brits would have invested in new weapon systems to counter the submarines.

Let’s move the discussion to the U-Boat wolf packs and their attacks against the convoys.

Paul Kennedy:
Let's reflect on the fact that this ancient form of naval commercial warfare, the convoy, is something hardly known in the Battle of Pacific. At the late stages of the war that the Japanese try to convoy their merchant ships and their oil tankers because by that stage, American submarine arm has got past its defects and is attacking successfully. But whereas there's hardly any convoy war in the Pacific, convoys are particularly important in reinforcing the British Isles, and in reinforcing British imperial and fighting positions in the Mediterranean.

Convoy is a form of warfare which was pretty well established by the closing years of the great British struggle against Napoleon. French surface raiders, heavily armed frigates could go out and reek an enormous amount of damage upon unprotected merchant fleets. If the merchant fleets were clustered to get in numbers of 10, 20, 50, and protected by two or three British fighting frigates to come from across the Atlantic, or to come up from West Africa to, to beat off the French frigate attacks, then you would successfully convoy the material resources to the position you wanted to the British Isles.

So, the British were ready for convoy warfare in 1939. This is not an unknown form of warfare contestation, either on the German side or on the British side. And the British have a whole array of small surface competence, an intelligence system, a command-and-control system to protect merchant ship convoys when the war comes.

They're not very good in understanding that the Germans are going to attack, not from underneath the surface where you can detect them with ASDIC, but they're going to come chiefly at night on the surface. This is Donitz’s wonderful way, strategically, tactically, of ordering his wolf packs forward. And they, therefore have this enormous challenge, Larry, of how, at any given day in the war, and it intensifies by 1941, '42, any given day of the war, there are literally thousands of allied merchant ships on the seas, across the Indian Ocean, coming round the Cape, the great grain trades and beef trades out of Argentina.

The vital oil supplies coming from Venezuela, which have to be protected. The British have to protect about 15 to 20 merchant ship convoys, clusters of merchant ships, in any given day. So, the Germans have a choice here, where should you attack to be the most effective when you have a limited number of submarines? This is like Admiral Donitz's chess game from 1940 onwards, was a limited number of attacking pawns and dangerous forces behind, where would you go to attack and throttle?

There's one consideration that you might go and attack distant areas, because those merchant ships are still on way to United Kingdom. If trying to attack well-armed convoys around Britain, an island, is a tough challenge, why not send out your U-boat groups to attack the oil tankers in the Caribbean, which are totally unprotected? Why not attack, when United States comes into the war, the unprotected flow of merchant ships coming up the East Coast of the United States, that happy hour where the Americans do not put the coastal lights out so you can actually see

the profiles of these unprotected merchant ships and sink them in dozens, rather than the highly contested convoy battles of Iceland?

You've got choices here, Larry. And Donitz, despite his limited number of U-boats, has choices. The other side also has choices. Where would you put your ships and long-range aircraft for convoy protection. Where do you put your limited resources to get the best effect in this gigantic struggle of the Battle of the Atlantic?

Larry Bernstein:
In 1943 the U-Boats devastate the American, British, and Canadian Merchant Marine. You mention one specific convoy lost 30% of its merchant ships in a single trip. This is incredible and unsustainable. And then suddenly, the Americans and the British started to beat back the U-Boats, what happened?

Paul Kennedy:
In the struggle between the German U-boats on the one hand and the defense of the British and then allied convoys on the other, it's worth remembering that this pace of the convoy battles at sea, generally diminishes over the winter months (laughs) because it's so difficult to get submarine attacks on the surface when you've got 50-foot waves sweeping around or ice flows going around. So generally, the U-boat warfare against the convoys intensifies each year from springtime onwards. And this is no different when the window of 1942, '43 is over, the convoy flow to the United Kingdom is growing and growing because you're trying to build up a large American Air Force in Europe for strategic bombing, because you're trying to build up a large American Army would be quartered, and because you still have to keep supplying the United Kingdom and all of its needs.

So, when the bigger convoys resume coming out of New York and Newfoundland and Baltimore in March and April of 1943, to go across the Atlantic, Donitz and his wolf packs are waiting for them. And a small number of convoys in March, April of 1943 are really badly battered by these U-boat attacks. The 30% loss of the number of merchant ships in one convoy operation on its own, means that every time if you're doing worst case scenarios, the next convoy loses 30% of its merchant ships and the next one and the next one, you'll hardly have sufficient Merchant Marine sailors to help you, even if you're building a large number of liberty ships in your home bases, and you won't have a number of established commodores and captains, and you might be deficient in a number of oil tankers.

So, the success of the German U-boat campaign against the Atlantic convoys in March and April 1943 is one where Churchill and the British admiralty fear that even a convoy system might not be working. The convoys attract the U-boats to them, like hornets or bees going after honey. Why not dismiss the convoys and just cross fingers and hope and send all of these ships individually across the Atlantic? Like an active hope, but maybe they would be picked off successfully by three or four waves of increasing numbers of U-boats.

By 1943, Donitz is having something like 60, 70, 80 U-boats operational. And others, of course, refueling in the ports. And then comes the decisive turnaround, Larry, that we've talked about, in May of 1943, a number of new technologies are being developed on the Anglo-American side. And it has it be emphasized that in this struggle between the Anglo-American forces and the fascist forces, the existence of in-depth technology and science and creative development, and echelon strength that the British and the Americans have means that they, even though they get defeats and lose large numbers of merchant ships in 1942, you can think out the Battle of the Atlantic in the winter months and come forward in the spring with even newer technologies, ever long-range patrol aircraft, more successful command and control of convoys, maybe better interception of Donitz's messengers, more ocean protection from newer forms of frigates and corvettes with miniaturized radar, with depth charges, with forward firing hedgehogs.

All of this, you can bring into the fray in May and June of 1943 to counter the wily Donitz with all of his German technology and increased U-boat numbers to try to win from his side onwards. This is a struggle of productive warfare as well as men fighting against each other in the mist and the blackness of the mid-Atlantic.

Larry Bernstein:
In their book A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War by Williamson Murray and Allan Millett in their analysis of the Battle of the Atlantic, they focused on the rule of 80/20. 20 percent of the German U-Boats were responsible for 80% of the sinkings of the allied merchant ships. The British and the Americans had broken the German naval codes. And they knew where the U-Boats were going to surface to refuel. And the allies decided to attack the top 20% most destructive U-Boats. How important was it that the allies destroyed the Germans most productive U-Boats?

Paul Kennedy:
A lot of British code breakers had been partly successful in the First World War, becomes the first war in which each side has the chance, through reading the radio signals. If they can break the messages which are being sent on the radio waves, to the commanders in the sea or to the U-boats, has the chance interpreting those messages to reposition their own armed forces to destroy the other side.

On the other hand, if you can read those instructions and you can get to know what the other side is doing, you can reposition your own resources. And remember, also, that there is a struggle of rival decrypters and encrypters, not just in naval intelligence and naval codes, Air Force codes and German Wehrmacht Army codes. The British code breakers are all concentrated at a place called Bletchley Park, were not only reading Italian as well as German codes, but they were finding that German Army codes and Air Force and Italian codes were easy to break. German Navy codes were very difficult to break, and from time to time you lost insight into them until you figured out the new and advanced sophisticated way the Germans were making their more invulnerable.

And the Germans, on the other side, were trying to break the codes giving disposition of where the convoys would set out from, and Donitz, once he sent his U-boats out into the wider world, wanted them to pop up at certain locations, either to be refueled or to get instruction by long-range radio as to what they had to do next. So, if you could determine the position of where those German U-boats were surfacing, to get their messages or the get their refueling, and you put either long-range aircraft or anti-submarine corvettes in that position, you could take them out.

So, this is a battle of intelligence, of technology, of positioning, of trying to understand where the other side's U-boats are, and try to understand where your convoys are going. Are they jigging north or jigging south across the Atlantic routes? This is a battle of intelligence in an applied form across the Atlantic. It's one of the most interesting parts of the war. And sometimes, the British and American code breakers and forces are on top of this and in control, sometimes they lose control where the German Navy changes its codes, and you're back in the dark again.

Larry Bernstein:
The military historian John Keegan in his fabulous book Intelligence at War tells the story of the Battle of Crete. In May 1941, the British control Crete but they fear a German invasion. A New Zealander Major General Bernard Freyberg commands an allied force made up of Brits, Kiwis, Australians and Greeks. The British intercept German orders from their stolen Enigma machine that the Germans will invade Crete using a parachutist attack at a specific landing spot with the purpose of taking the Herakleion airport to land thousands of German troops. Freyberg is ordered to move his soldiers off the beaches to eliminate the German parachutists at specific locations. Freyberg is unwilling to follow the orders fully because he does not know the source or quality of the intelligence. Frankly, he thinks he knows better and is unwilling to risk an invasion by sea. Sure enough, the Engima based intelligence was accurate and the Germans do attack at the specified locations, the parachutists are picked off easily as they float down, sitting ducks, as the allied forces fire machine gun at them. But enough parachutists do get through and the airport is insufficiently defended. The Germans take the airport, fly in thousands of soldiers, and eventually win the battle for Crete. This is an example that even with the best intelligence, you can still lose the battle.

Paul Kennedy:
It has to be recalled that the suppliers of intelligence on each side are kind of terrified that their own generals and their own leaders will blow to the enemy the fact that you're reading their codes. So, in many cases, you only say, "We have intelligence information about this or that or the other." You're not really going to trust your general in the field and say, "We have a way of reading the enemy's codes, and we know where they are coming," because the enemy might understand that and might take countermeasures, like deciding no longer to use radio signals. God help us if, if one side invented not using radio signals or just using land wire or undersea cable communications. Then the story would be quite different. So, many older-fashioned generals are not told at all about the new forms of decryption and intelligence. You're suggesting that you have a spy in Berlin or among the German Armed Forces, and that the

parachutists are going to come down in a certain part in land because they want to seize the inland air bases.

As you say, even when the really professional German paratroops are dropped on these bases in Crete, they meet considerable resistance. There are some New Zealand troops, as well as the usual local Cretans, who come out to try to kill as many Germans as possible. But the Germans do manage by the surprise attack to seize the airfields. Hitler's conclusion that he has lost so many of his favorite parachute battalions that he doesn't want to trust paratroop operations for the rest of the war is a serious, serious mistake. The allied planners draw the conclusion that parachute operations to seize an advanced base, though risky, are worthwhile practicing for, worthwhile attaining, so they do develop Anglo-American considerable parachute resources to use to seize beyond the landing bases when you attack Normandy in June 1944. But it is one of the riskiest operations in the world, because paratroopers sailing down onto a hostile-held position are completely vulnerable.

Can be shot out of the sky like partridges. It's a risky thing. If you can put the paratroops way further inland and to begin to occupy a position without being attacked in the vulnerable flying down, then parachute operations might well work.