

Unity of Command in the Pacific During World War II

By PHILLIP S. MEILINGER

One of the myths of World War II is that, unlike in Europe, unity of command was lacking in the Pacific. The argument goes that the Southwest Pacific had one commander, General Douglas MacArthur, and the Pacific Ocean areas had another, Admiral Chester Nimitz. MacArthur often commented that the Pacific Ocean areas drained resources for little gain that he could have put to far better use. In his memoirs, he railed against the command structure: “Of all the faulty decisions of war perhaps the most unexplainable one was the failure to unify the command in the Pacific. . . . [It] cannot be defended in logic, in theory, or in common sense. . . . It

resulted in divided effort, the waste, diffusion, and duplication of force, and the consequent extension of the war, with added casualties and cost.”¹

For its part, the Navy believed that the Pacific war was “a naval problem.” Admiral Ernest King, Chief of Naval Operations, insisted that “the entire Pacific Ocean should constitute a single theater with a unified Naval command headed by Nimitz.”² Because MacArthur and Nimitz were so powerful, and because their champions in Washington were so entrenched, however, unity could not be achieved. As a result, a fundamental principle of war was violated, and the result was inefficiency, confusion, waste, and an “ad hoc”

and “piecemeal strategy.”³ Another historian is even more critical, arguing that the U.S. effort in the Pacific was “hamstrung” because of the inability to appoint a single theater commander. The result was “a wasteful allocation of resources, a dispersion of effort, and a consistent failure to pursue the most effective and economical strategy against the Japanese.” The compromise of appointing two commanders for two different theaters was “grotesque.”⁴ In truth, however, a basic assumption of the above argument is false. There was no unified command in Europe, so the ideal to which the critics of the Pacific war allude never existed.

U.S. Navy



President Roosevelt at conference in Hawaiian Islands with GEN MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater, ADM Leahy, Senior Member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and ADM Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, 1944

Defining Unity of Command

First, a word about the term *unity of command* is in order. Principles of war, in one form or another, have been claimed since Sun Tzu wrote over 2,000 years ago. The first modern effort to enumerate such principles was by a British officer, then-Captain J.F.C. Fuller, who published them in 1916. These principles were soon enshrined in British *Field Service Regulations*, and in 1921 were adopted with minor revisions by the U.S. Army. These early doctrinal writings referred to a principle of “cooperation” that allowed diverse fighting forces to work efficiently toward success.⁵ By 1931, the U.S. Army had substituted the term *unity of command* for this idea, stating authoritatively: “It is a well-established principle that there shall be only one commander for each unit, and one commander in each zone of action, who shall be responsible for everything within his unit or within his zone of action.”⁶ This principle was not, however, established in a joint environment. Theater commanders were not yet common in American military operations; rather, Army and Navy commanders were still expected simply to “cooperate” when circumstances dictated. This would lead to problems as late as 1941, when the Services could not agree on a single commander for the Caribbean.

The Caribbean was a crucial theater for the United States because it guarded the Panama Canal, vital to hemisphere defenses. Yet when the Army appointed Lieutenant General Daniel Van Voorhis as commander of the Caribbean Defense Command, it quickly discovered that the Navy had other ideas. Whenever Van Voorhis attempted to exert the authority given him by the President over the naval forces in the theater, local admirals replied tartly that “he was not in their chain of command.”⁷

Pearl Harbor changed things. In October 1942, U.S. planners preparing for the Casablanca Conference issued a definition to guide Allied leaders regarding future joint and combined commands:

Unified command is the control, exercised by a designated commander, over a force integrated from combined and joint forces allocated to

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*him for the accomplishment of a mission or task. This force will include all the means necessary for the mission’s successful execution. Unified command vests in the designated commander, the responsibility and authority to control the organizations of all arms and services composing his force, by the organization of task forces, assignment of missions, designation of objectives, and the exercise of such control as he deems necessary to insure the success of his mission.*⁸

It was such unity of command that existed in Europe. Or did it?

Disunity of Command?

Italy is part of Europe, as are the Balkans and Poland. Most definitions would also include Iceland and Greenland. And yet the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, General Dwight Eisenhower, had no authority over the Mediterranean theater of operations, which included Italy and Greece and was led by Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander. Nor did Eisenhower control the Atlantic sea lanes or the vital bases in Iceland and Greenland that fell under the authority of Admiral Max Horton at Allied Naval Forces in the Atlantic. Finally, Eisenhower had no say over—and indeed, was barely informed of—Soviet operations in Eastern or Central Europe. A look at the map (next page) illustrates this issue even further.

As is apparent, the European and Mediterranean theaters combined were much

smaller than either the Pacific Ocean or Southwest Pacific areas. (Note that the Pacific Ocean areas consisted of four subcommands, although the South-East Pacific area was never activated.) If, therefore, one advances the argument that the areas of Eisenhower, Alexander, and Horton were too large to be commanded effectively by one man, then *how much more impossible* would it have been for any one person to run the *entire* Pacific?⁹

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Similarly, it is specious to argue that effective coordination between the Pacific Ocean and Southwest Pacific areas was unattainable. Such coordination existed in Europe and was exercised by the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS)—the union of the British and U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). The CCS met regularly throughout the war to debate and draft grand strategy and to allocate resources between the theaters. They would then recommend a course of action to their political superiors.¹⁰ Although the CCS system was not perfect, and many would argue that national and Service politics too often shaped its decisions, the system in the main worked in Europe. If landing craft or forces had to be moved from the Mediterranean



U.S. Army



U.S. Navy

Above: ADM Chester W. Nimitz
Left: GEN Douglas A. MacArthur

theater to reinforce the European, or if air assets from Europe were needed to bolster the Middle East, the CCS directed such changes—often overruling the wishes of the theater commanders involved.¹¹

In the Pacific, command relationships were less cumbersome. Both the Pacific Ocean and Southwest Pacific areas were largely American affairs. The British played almost no role, and when they attempted to interject themselves into operations near the end of the war, U.S. military leaders adamantly rejected their offer. At the Potsdam Conference in May 1945, for example, the British offered to deploy more of the Royal Navy to the Pacific to take part in the planned invasions of the Japanese home islands scheduled for November 1945 and March 1946. Admiral King heatedly objected, arguing that he could neither use nor support additional British vessels.¹² The Australians were steadfast and loyal allies throughout World War II, but U.S. leaders effectively denied them much of a voice in Allied planning or command despite the

fact that in 1942 and 1943, Australians comprised the majority of MacArthur’s combat forces.¹³ In short, the Pacific was controlled almost totally by the JCS. As a consequence, it was not necessary to go through the time-consuming and politically charged process of securing the approval of Allies as was the case in Europe.

Strategic Airpower

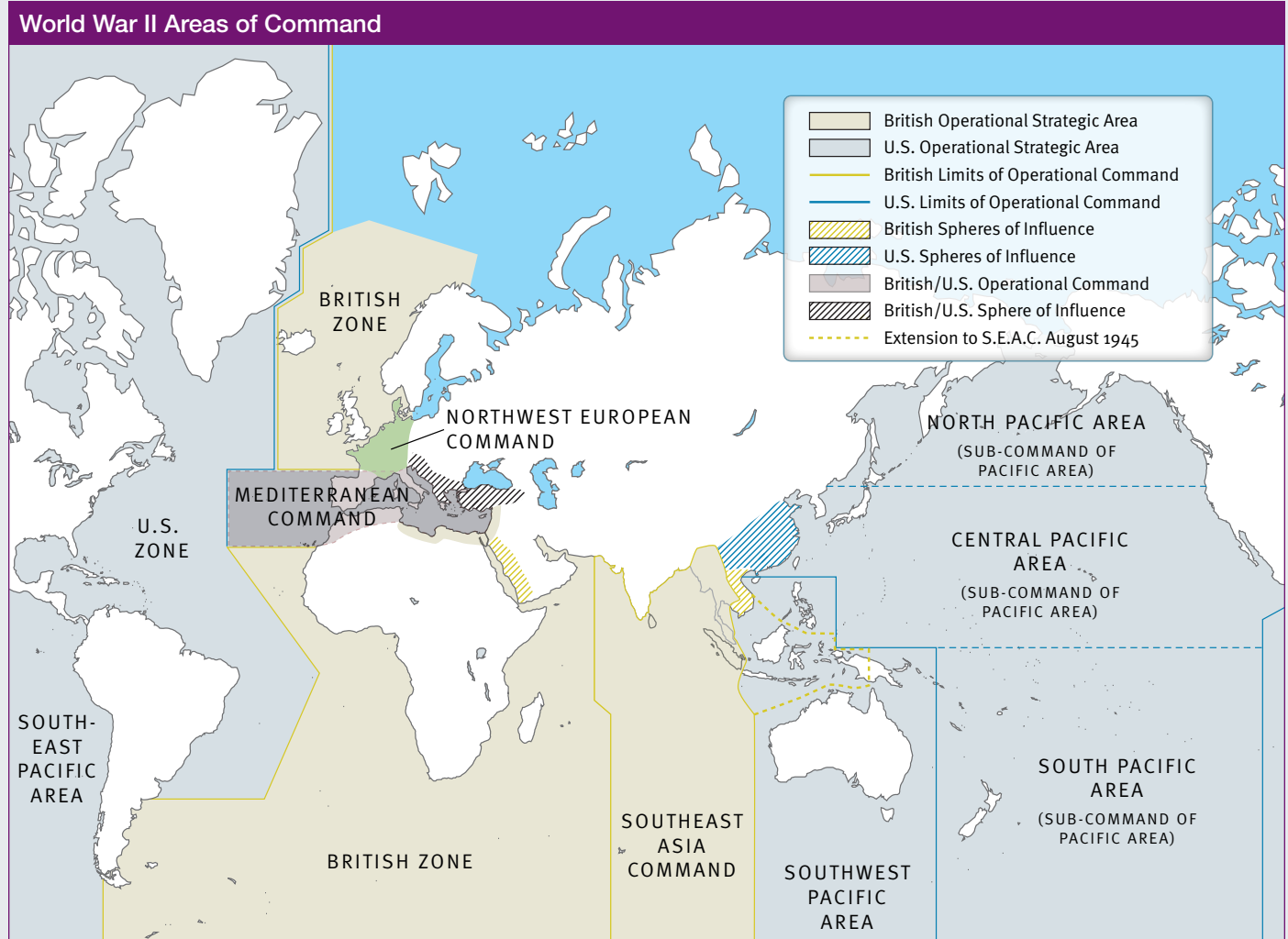
Another anomaly throughout the war regarded the status of the British and American strategic air forces. In Europe, the Royal Air Force’s Bomber Command, led by Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris after February 1942, enjoyed a special status during the war. Harris was a favorite of Winston Churchill, who ensured that Bomber Command existed as a separate force, answerable directly to the CCS, and thus was treated as an equal of the various theater commands.¹⁴

On January 1, 1944, the United States established a similar system. General Carl Spaatz became commander of U.S. Strategic

Air Forces (USSTAF), consisting of the Eighth Air Force based in England and the Fifteenth Air Force based in Italy. Cutting across theater boundaries, USSTAF ensured unity of command of the strategic air forces, but ingeniously employed the principle of focusing that unity on the target—Germany—rather than in the different theaters where

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the bombers were based. This system was modified prior to Operation *Overlord*, when the CCS gave Eisenhower temporary targeting authority over both USSTAF and Bomber Command to support the Normandy invasion. He relinquished control of the bombers





U.S. Navy

Motion of propeller forms aura around F6F Hellcat aboard USS *Yorktown*, 1943



U.S. Marine Corps

Marines shell Japanese positions on Iwo Jima, 1945

in September 1944, and they returned to the overall direction of the CCS.¹⁵

The situation was similar in the Pacific, although only U.S. air units were involved. In April 1944, B-29 long-range bombers began deploying to India, and staging bases were also established in China. B-29s of XX Bomber Command would depart from their bases in India, land in China to refuel, continue on to bomb targets in Japan, and then return to India via China. In October 1944, the Mariana Islands were liberated by Allied forces and airfields were immediately built on Guam, Saipan, and Tinian to accommodate the B-29s of the newly formed XXI Bomber Command. This meant that B-29 bases were established in two different theaters—in the South-East Asian theater commanded by Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten (Royal Navy) and in the Pacific Ocean areas under Nimitz (U.S. Navy) while transiting the theater of General Joseph Stilwell (U.S. Army) in China.¹⁶ Who was in overall command of the B-29s?

In an unusual move, General Henry “Hap” Arnold, commanding general of Army Air Forces in Washington, formed Twentieth Air Force, composed of XX and XXI Bomber Commands, and then elected to command the Twentieth himself. Arnold argued that, as in Europe, unity of command over the *target area*—Japan—was far more important than unity of command in the *basing areas*.

He maintained that it would be impossible to delegate command authority to three different theater commanders and have any hope that an effective, coordinated strategic air campaign could be conducted against Japan. (When selling this idea to his fellow chiefs, Arnold noted that much the same system in the U.S. Navy allowed Admiral King to command U.S. Antisubmarine Command,

redesignated Tenth Fleet, while remaining in Washington as Chief of Naval Operations.¹⁷) As in Europe, however, if the ground situation was such that the strategic bombers were needed, Arnold would place them at the disposal of the theater commander. This happened in March and April 1945 when Twentieth Air Force was diverted from its strategic



U.S. Navy

GEN MacArthur signs formal surrender of Japan aboard USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, September 2, 1945

bombing campaign to support the invasion of Okinawa; targeting authority then passed temporarily to Nimitz.¹⁸

In sum, in both Europe and the Pacific, strategic air forces operated side by side with the theater commanders, all of whom took their guidance from the CCS, or in the case of the Pacific, from the JCS. If the situation required, forces or resources were shifted from one theater to another, or air assets were temporarily placed at the disposal of a theater commander if the tactical situation deemed it necessary. The system worked.

Focusing on Japan's Defeat

It would be difficult to prove that a single commander in the Pacific could have waged the war more effectively than the combination of Nimitz, MacArthur, and Arnold working under the guidance of the JCS. Indeed, there is no evidence that the refusal to settle on either a central Pacific thrust or one coming up through New Guinea and the Philippines delayed Allied victory. On the contrary, simultaneous attacks on the central and southern fronts—as well as the strategic bombing offensive, the U.S. Navy's unrestricted submarine warfare campaign, and the operations in China and Burma—stretched the Japanese defenders to the breaking point. Had the Allies focused on a single thrust, the Japanese would have been able to use their interior lines to concentrate their forces to meet that threat. Instead, they were forced to disperse and defend against attacks from several directions. The Allies had the forces to conduct such a multipronged strategy; the Japanese did not.

In such a view, redundancy is the true American way of war. The United States had the personnel and materiel resources to follow several different strategies. To put it more cynically, indecision became the key to flexibility. Because U.S. political and military leaders refused to decide upon a supreme commander in the vast Pacific region, they unwittingly introduced enormous flexibility into Allied planning—and consternation into Japanese planning.

In truth, the competition between Nimitz, MacArthur, and even Arnold spurred them and their staffs to heightened efforts. All wanted to claim that it was *their* command that was the decisive instrument in bringing Japan to its knees.¹⁹ Indeed, this has been a central issue in postwar debates by historians ever since.

One should also note that the entire grand strategy of attacking the enemy simultaneously on several fronts was a deliberate and essential aspect of the war against Nazi Germany. Why should such a multipronged offensive be considered inspired in Europe but a “grotesque compromise” in the Pacific?

In reality, the entire “unity of command” argument seems to be nothing more than an inter-Service turf battle. However, because it would look unseemly for one Service to admit that it wanted command priority simply because it would enhance its prestige, the debate has acquired the fig leaf of centering on a hallowed principle of war—unity of command. As the facts show, there was actually far greater unity of command in the Pacific than there was in Europe during World War II, and operations against the Japanese did not suffer in any event. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 172–173. This argument is echoed in the Army's official history: Louis Morton, *The War in the Pacific: Strategy and Command, The First Two Years* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962), chapter 11.

² D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur: Vol. II: 1941–1945* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1975), 309.

³ Stephen T. Ross, *American War Plans, 1941–1945* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 50.

⁴ John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York: Viking, 1990), 505, 510–511.

⁵ John I. Alger, *The Quest for Victory: The History of the Principles of War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982), 240.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷ Larry I. Bland, Sharon Ritenour, and Clarence E. Wunderlin, Jr., eds., *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, Vol. III: “We Cannot Delay,” July 1, 1939–December 6, 1941 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 257.

⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Washington, 1941–1942, and Casablanca, 1943* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1968), 733–734.

⁹ One should also note that the Atlantic Ocean—far smaller in area than the Pacific—was divided into U.S. and British zones with no overall commander.

¹⁰ The history of the Combined Chiefs of Staff has not yet been written. For a brief overview, see Vernon E. Davis, “The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II: Vol. I: Origins of the Joint

and Combined Chiefs of Staff,” Joint Chiefs of Staff History Office study, 1972.

¹¹ Regarding the allocation of landing craft, for example, see *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1970), 1146–1148. As for air assets, the Eighth Air Force in England was denuded of aircraft and trained crews throughout 1942 in order to stand up the Twelfth Air Force in preparation for the invasion of North Africa. See Wesley Frank Craven and James L. Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, 7 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948–1958), vol. II, chapter 2.

¹² *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference at Quebec, 1944* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972), 333.

¹³ James, 311–314. In April 1943, MacArthur's land forces consisted of 18 divisions, 15 of which were Australian.

¹⁴ Max Hastings, *Bomber Command* (New York: Dial, 1979), 136–137.

¹⁵ Craven and Cate, III, 79–83.

¹⁶ China was technically part of Mountbatten's theater, but Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek ran things within his country with little interference. To help smooth things out, Stilwell was dual-hatted as the deputy to Mountbatten and the chief of staff to Chiang.

¹⁷ George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890–1990* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 203; Haywood S. Hansell, *Strategic Air War against Japan* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1980), 26–27. Hansell was on the Air Staff at the time the Twentieth Air Force was formed and then took over XXI Bomber Command in the Marianas.

¹⁸ Craven and Cate, V, 630–631.

¹⁹ This was purportedly the deliberate intent of Joseph Stalin when he played his two great marshals, Georgy Zhukov and Ivan Konev, against each other to see who would take Berlin first. See Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944–1945* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 461–476.