

History 399B6—World War II

The Pacific Theater: War Plan Orange, Island-Hopping, and Amphibious Warfare

War Plan Orange, which formed the basis of American strategy in the Pacific War, was one of the oldest and most elaborately developed American color-coded war plans developed in the early 20th century, with each color representing a potentially hostile country (e.g., Black for Germany, Green for Mexico, etc.). Plan Orange had its genesis in America's Open Door Policy in China and its acquisition of the Philippines and Hawaii in the late 1890s, which created the possibility of military competition between the U.S. ("Blue") and Japan ("Orange") in Asia and the Pacific. It was more thoroughly developed after tensions developed between Japan and the U.S. over Japanese immigration to California in 1906-07, and endorsed by the highest levels of government beginning in 1924.

In 1940-41 Plan Orange was formally retired in favor of Plan Rainbow 5, which contemplated a simultaneous war against multiple enemies (particularly Germany and Japan). Nevertheless, Orange assumptions remained a part of Rainbow 5 and heavily shaped the direction of American strategy in the Pacific from 1941 to 1945.

Plan Orange envisioned that Japan would likely be the country to commence hostilities, probably in the Philippines. an American thrust from Hawaii and the west coast of the United States into Japanese-dominated land and waters of the western Pacific following. Although some factors, such as air power and Japanese activity to the south in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and elsewhere changed how Plan Orange principles applied in practice, the plan was on the whole highly predictive of how American strategy. Admiral Chester Nimitz remarked after the war that the Naval War College's decades of Blue/Orange exercises "were so thorough that nothing that happened in the Pacific War was strange or unexpected."

Some major elements of Plan orange were a) island hopping, or the seizure and establishing of intermittent island bases as stepping stones to the next bases, rather than a direct strike against Japan itself, together with b) leapfrogging, or the bypassing of the strongest enemy bases (e.g., Rabaul in the Solomon Islands, Truk in the Caroline Islands). A third factor, c) amphibious warfare, became a specialty of the U.S. Marine Corps between the two world wars and was key to capturing Japanese-held island bases. Many other factors will be discussed in class.

The following material is from Earl Hancock Ellis, [Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia](#), a secret document published on July 23, 1921. In this document Ellis, a Marine officer, both describes some of the general assumptions of Orange and lays the foundation for amphibious warfare doctrine as the Marines came to practice it before and during World War II.

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Introduction

In order to impose our will upon Japan, it will be necessary for us to project our fleet and land forces across the Pacific and wage war in Japanese waters. To effect this requires that we have sufficient bases to support the fleet, both during its projection and afterwards. As the matter stands at present, we cannot count upon the use of any bases west of Hawaii except those which we may seize from the enemy after the opening of hostilities. Moreover, the continued occupation of the Marshall, Caroline and Pelew Islands by the Japanese (now holding them under mandate of the League of Nations) invests them with a series of emergency bases flanking any line of communications across the Pacific throughout a distance of 2300 miles. The reduction and occupation of these islands and the establishment of the necessary bases therein, as a preliminary phase of the hostilities, is practically imperative.

The fact that our fleet is projecting itself into enemy waters denotes that it will have considerable superiority in gun and torpedo carriers. This being the case the enemy will, during the first phase of the operations, hold his main fleet in home waters, and endeavor with torpedo, mine and air craft to reduce our superiority to a limit where he believes he can safely risk a main fleet action. The fact that more or less extended operations are necessary in order to secure our Pacific line of communications gives the enemy an unusually good opportunity for executing his plan.

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The Theater of Operations

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The Enemy

Japan is a World Power, and her army and navy will doubtless be up to date as to training and materiel. Considering our consistent policy of non-aggression, she will probably initiate the war; which will indicate that, in her own mind, she believes that, considering her natural defensive position, she has sufficient military strength to defeat our fleet.

As previously stated, upon our entry into the theatre of operations, the enemy will endeavor with his torpedo, mine and bomb craft to reduce our superiority in gun and torpedo ships. In support of these operations he will defend with all arms certain points as bases for his sea forces and will mine or garrison others. On account of the fact that the enemy's main hope of victory lies in the defeat of our fleet, it is to be presumed that he will use land forces freely in connection with his sea operations. By a universal shore resistance the enemy will not only complicate and delay the course of our operations, but will create unusual opportunities for his own attacks. The points of resistance will, of course, be those upon which his own ships are based and those which would be of the most value to us. It is not likely that he would, as a rule, strongly fortify atoll anchorages for his own use, except those of the volcanic type, which afford ample facilities for his light forces. The atoll anchorages, best adapted to fleet use, he would probably deny by

land forces and mines: using them until reduced only as emergency refuges and fuel depots.

The Japanese have had a great deal of experience in offensive ship-shore operations, and have always done well. It is expected that they will do equally well on the defensive, and will have ample time, both before and after the beginning of hostilities, to plan and perfect any defenses they desire. They are cunning and resourceful, besides being good organizers--good qualities for the execution of the work in hand. They will have perfect knowledge of the land, sea and air in the theatre of operations.

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The Reduction of the Islands

The Strategy

The theatre of operations, with its checkered inter-supporting island groups, defended and used as bases for the projection of sea attacks, presents in its reduction much the same problem as do modern deep defense lines on land. The reduction of a single group and the projection of our fleet thereinto would be analogous to the assault and occupation of a single center of resistance, thus subjecting the holders to concentrated attacks from both sides. Therefore, the proper procedure would be to reduce all groups in any defined sea area, or line, simultaneously; the limits of any objectives, including, if possible, base facilities for the pursuance of our operations in areas beyond.