Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō of the Imperial Japanese Navy on Compass Deck above bridge of IJN *Mikasa* at beginning of Battle of Tsushima, in 1905; oil painting, February 1906, Tōjō Shōtarō

Ghosts of Tsushima or *Kobayashi Maru*?

Japan's Problematic Preoccupation with Decisive Naval Battles in World War II

By Michael W. Major

Dr. Michael W. Major is a Teaching Assistant Professor in the Department of Marketing at West Virginia University.

When the tiny island state of Japan went to war with the continental nation of Russia in 1904, the world expected a lopsided defeat for Japan; no Asian country had ever defeated a modern imperial power from Europe. Much to the world's surprise, Japan won nearly every battle

Scene on board USS *Yorktown* shortly after she was hit by three Japanese bombs on June 4, 1942, during Battle of Midway (U.S. Navy/National Archives and Records Administration/William G. Roy)

during the conflict.[1] The first significant naval victory for Japan was the decimation of the Russian fleet at the Battle of the Yellow Sea, on August 10, 1904. This embarrassing loss prompted Tsar Nicholas II to create the Second Pacific Squadron, comprised of 11 battleships, 8 cruisers, and 9 destroyers from Russia's Baltic Fleet, a grouping many thought would tip the power balance to Russia. Departing for the Far East in October 1904, Russia's Second Pacific Squadron traveled more than 18,000 miles to battle Japan's navy at the Straits of Tsushima,[2] where Russia was decimated: 21 ships sunk, 6 ships captured, 4,380 sailors killed, and 5,917 sailors captured.[3]

Tsushima, the great naval victory for Japan, brought Russia to the peace table. However, the consequences of such overwhelming naval victories in the Russo-Japanese War ultimately led Japan's military leaders to a debilitating preoccupation nearly 40 years later during World War II. As it relentlessly tried to replicate that victorious performance against the United States, Japan's pursuit of another Tsushima resulted in strategic failures that contributed to its defeat in the Pacific, providing an excellent historical example of cognitive dissonance theory and demonstrating why it is important not to fight a current war with a previous war's strategy.

Ghosts of Tsushima

Japan's dominance of the seas at Tsushima had captured the attention of European powers as well as the United States. Japan had done the seemingly impossible against Russia, which motivated President Theodore Roosevelt to spearhead the peace negotiations that resulted in the Treaty of Portsmouth on September 5, 1905. While Roosevelt received the Nobel Peace Prize for these efforts, his motivation was not entirely altruistic; he wanted to limit Japanese expansionist moves in the Far East.[4]

Most had viewed Russia as the victor in the peace negotiations. As the *New York Times* wrote about the Portsmouth negotiations in 1905, "a nation hopelessly beaten in every battle of the war, one army captured and another overwhelmingly routed, with a navy swept from the seas, dictated her own terms to the victors."[5] Furthermore, because Wall Street bankers had financed Japan's war effort, Japan was accountable to the United States for its war debt. The negotiations had been historically bad for Japan; rather than receive war reparations from Russia, Japan spent nearly 10 years repaying its war debt using the territories it gained in Manchuria.[6] Many in Japan were left feeling that Roosevelt had cheated their country out of its war reparations, and resentment toward the United States grew.

Victory in the Russo-Japanese War emboldened Japan's military leaders to declare war against the United States in 1941. The legacy of the Battle of Tsushima would prove to be especially problematic for Japan's military leaders during World War II; it led Japan to believe it could defeat any country in naval warfare. Additionally, Japan's military leaders of the Shōwa era in 1940, who promoted Japanese imperialism and expansion, had a scapegoat for losing the peace. They believed that the Meiji-era leaders in 1905 had betrayed Japan's interests by allowing the unjust peace settlement to occur.[7] The Shōwa-era military leaders supported the creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, in which Japan, as the industrialized power, would lead Asia and remove Western influences from the region. They also felt a blueprint was available to accomplish their goal. Overwhelming naval success in the Russo-Japanese War, coupled with resentment toward the United States for allowing such an atrocity to be inflicted on a war victor during peace negotiations, led to a strategy of naval dominance. This would be followed by equally dominant peace negotiations once the U.S. ability to wage naval warfare was eliminated. The Pacific theater would be an opportunity to rectify the political mistakes and repeat the military successes of the Russo-Japanese War by dominating the enemy with overwhelming naval victories and crushing the opponent's will to fight. However, this time, Japan's diplomats would negotiate a better peace settlement than at Portsmouth and secure territories throughout East Asia, growing the empire.

Japan's Pacific Perspective

Many scholars argue that Japan entered the war with "no realistic plan on how to end it" and go so far as to state that "in terms of grand strategy, Japan's top leadership *utterly* failed their country."[8] However, to understand why Japan consistently sought the decisive naval battle to win the Pacific theater, it is necessary to understand Japan's situation as well as its history.

Japan needed resources for its growing economy and war machine, and the United States was not cooperating. After establishing itself in Indochina in 1941, Japan's oil supplies were diminishing at a rate of 12,000 tons per day due to the U.S. oil embargo.[9] The United States had also moved military forces into the region. The Asiatic Fleet, based in the Philippines, had received a substantial offensive augmentation in the form of the largest concentration of modern U.S. submarines anywhere in the world: 39 modern fleet boats and 6 older coastal defense submarines.[10] The U.S. Army also assigned two of the five independent armored battalions to the area.[11] To repel enemy aircraft, the Philippines had received the best air defense unit in the army, the 200th Coast Artillery.[12] B-17 bombers had started arriving in September 1941.[13] Japan's back was now against the wall, and it needed to act before it was out of resources. From the perspective of Japan's military leaders, a successful strategy was available by replicating past successes.

For Japan's strategists in World War II, the key takeaway from the Russo-Japanese War was clear: "The truly important element in modern warfare was not technology but *morale*; and the morale, not of the army alone, but of the nation from which it was drawn."[14] Japan's military leaders were aware of the U.S. public's desire for isolationism, specifically to avoid engaging in another world war. Japan's military leaders also knew their ability to sink two Russian fleets had ignited a revolution for Tsar Nicholas II and forced a peace settlement. If Japan could duplicate such naval success in the Pacific, it could inflict heavy loss of life on the United States. Since fear of losing American lives fighting another war drove the isolationist beliefs, Japan perceived the Americans' value of life as a potential center of gravity. If Japan could inflict enough casualties, it would force a peace settlement.

Realizing it could never inflict a total defeat on either the United States or Great Britain but desperate to control the seas and maintain its supply of oil and rubber, Japan planned for a limited war in the Pacific in two steps: first, secure resources within the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere; second, create a defensive perimeter to shield the new holdings from Allied counterattack. While concerned about the idea of war with the United States, Japan's military leaders believed attacking Pearl Harbor would knock the United States off balance and provide Japan enough time to secure its gains in Indochina and set a defensive perimeter to repel a counteroffensive.

Japan "proposed to fight the Pacific War as it had fought China and Russia: limiting the conflict by escalating its material and moral costs beyond what the Western powers, America in particular, were willing to pay."[15] By creating a limited conflict, Japan's strategy was "predicated not on American effeteness, but on American rationality."[16] Japan's military planners believed that duplicating victories by eliminating enemy fleets

similar to Tsushima would cause the presumed business-minded United States to "calculate costs and benefits, and come to terms with the realities created by Japanese arms," similar to what Russia did in 1905. However, this time, Japan would win the peace negotiations.[17]

Finally, Japan believed a decisive naval victory would quell the U.S. will to fight because U.S. strategists also believed in seeking decisive naval victories. In fact, Japan emulated Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan's strategy and belief in decisive naval battles. Minister of the Navy Mineo Ōsumi offered a compelling question in 1935 to support the idea that America's will could be broken by losing a decisive naval battle: "Some argue that in future wars a decisive fleet engagement will never take place, but didn't Admiral Mahan, venerated by American strategists, declare that the primary aim of naval power is annihilation of the enemy fleet in a decisive encounter?"[18] Ōsumi believed if the United State lost a decisive naval battle, it would strategically see no option but to surrender.

The Reality

Japan's military leaders misread the American will to win. According to Clausewitz, an opponent's level of resistance can be measured by

> *the product of two inseparable factors, viz. the* total means at his disposal *and the* strength of his will. *The extent of the means at his disposal is a matter—though not exclusively—of figures, and should be measurable. But the strength of his will is much less easy to determine and can only be gauged approximately by the strength of the motive animating it.*[19]

Unfortunately for Japan, Washington viewed the Pacific theater as an unlimited war and aimed to replace Japan's government. The United States was willing to dedicate all its resources to victory, and the population was united with one goal: to defeat Japan. In Clausewitzian terms, the United States had total means at its disposal, and the strength of its will would be unbreakable until Japan was defeated.

From a means perspective, the "material superiority of the U.S. Navy was almost inconceivable."[20] The United States could outbuy and outbuild Japan. Japan knew it was at a ship-building disadvantage as early as 1934, as the Japanese Navy Ministry Armament Limitation Research Committee (JNMALRC) noted, "The Japanese shipbuilding capacity was 45,000 tons per year, compared to 80,000 tons in the U.S."[21] The U.S. ability to outproduce Japan by 45 percent in 1934 meant that Japan needed to cripple the United States almost immediately for any chance at victory. Furthermore, the JNMALRC, aware of Japan's limitations, grossly underestimated U.S. abilities: America would be ready to produce more than 300,000 tons per year. Once Congress passed the Vinson Act in June 1940 and the Two-Ocean Navy Act in July 1940, Japan knew it must strike quickly; the bills called for an 11 percent increase in naval tonnage, leading to orders for 4,500 new naval aircraft and 1.3 million tons of warships to be completed by 1944.[22] Additionally, wartime supplemental orders would push U.S. totals even higher, adding more than 38 million tons of *Liberty* ships, 7.5 million tons of *Victory* ships, and 10 million tons of T-2 tankers.[23]

Japan also greatly underestimated the strength of will for the United States. Specifically, the "United States, unlike China and Russia and despite the Great Depression, was not beset by internal problems that would cripple its military. On the contrary, the war lifted the United States out of the depression and both the government and citizenry fought to win."[24] The attack on Pearl Harbor had created hatred toward Japan and mobilized the entire U.S. population. As Admiral William Halsey stated on December 7, 1941, "When this war is over, the Japanese language will be spoken only in hell."[25]

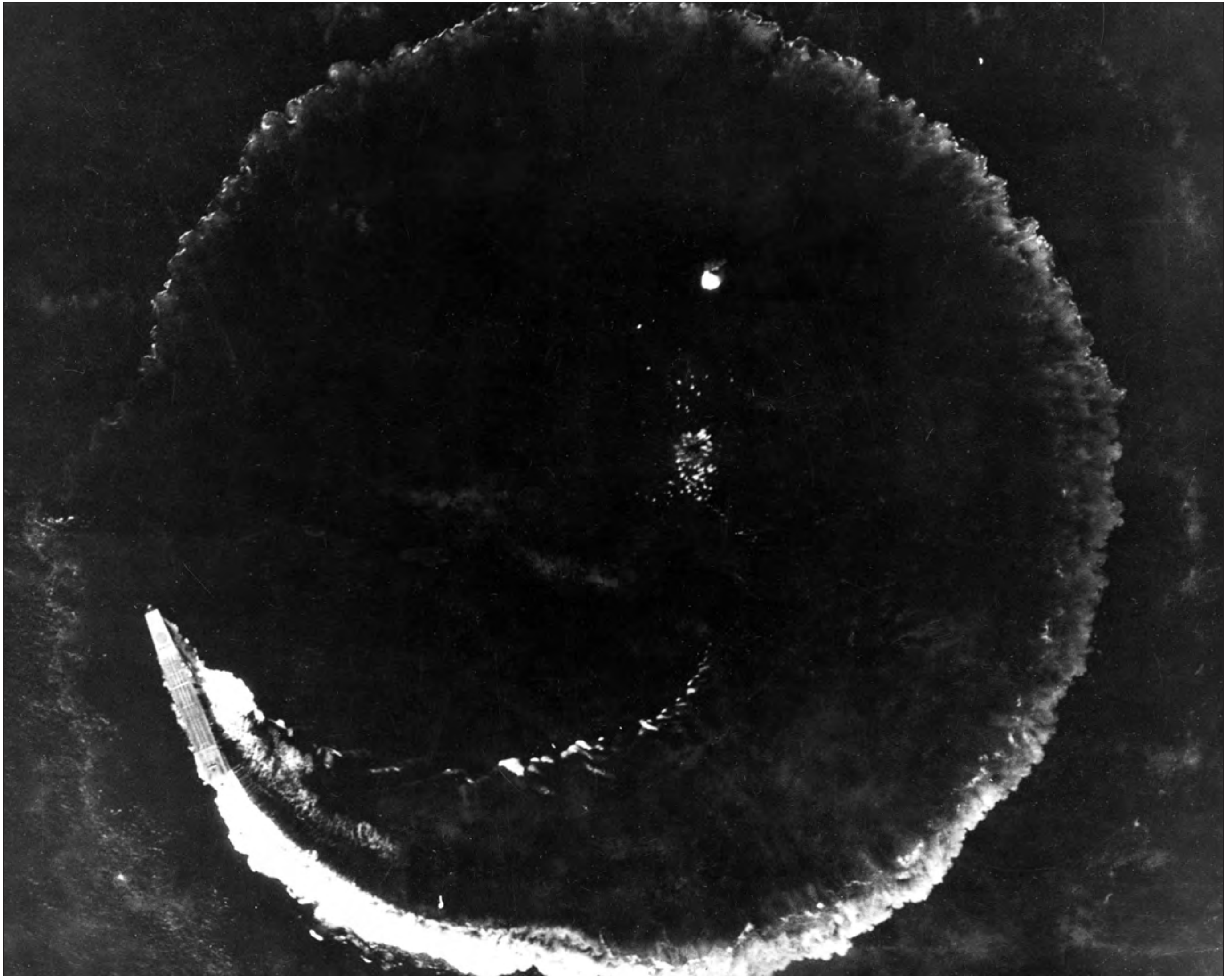
The Pursuit for Tsushima's Sequel: The Elusive Decisive Naval Battle

The Imperial Japanese Navy "planned to employ its battleships and cruisers to conduct a decisive battle."[26] Japan's strategists held on to the belief that their technology and superior tactics "would give the inferior Japanese fleet an edge in the decisive battle."[27] After Pearl Harbor, Marshal Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto stressed the need for a quick and decisive blow to crush the U.S. will to fight, and in April 1942, he advised, "The navy takes the initiative and keeps pounding the enemy. . . . We must always deliver fierce blows on the enemy and hit him where it hurts."[28] This preoccupation with the decisive naval victory played out during three significant battles: Midway, the Philippine Sea, and Leyte Gulf.

Japan initially planned to repeat Tsushima at Midway in June 1942. However, Yamamoto could not rely on overwhelming force against the United States, so an alternative battle strategy was necessary. Comparing the forces at Midway, Japan's four carriers were matched against three U.S. carriers (plus the Midway Atoll itself).[29] Japan's fleet also consisted of 2 battleships, 2 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser, 11 destroyers, and 248 planes. When compared with the U.S. force of 7 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser, 14 destroyers, and 360 planes, Japan did not have an overwhelming force.[30] As a result, Yamamoto developed a complex plan based on deception for a decisive victory.

Ultimately, Midway was not a decisive battle for either side, but it did tip the balance of power in the Pacific to the United States: "In one fell swoop, Japan lost four of its six first-line fleet carriers. The effect was far greater than had exactly the same losses been incurred incrementally."[31] Midway was the final offensive that a hobbled Japanese navy would launch during the war. Midway also accelerated Japan's loss of experienced naval aviators: 30 percent of Japanese carrier pilots present were killed, and 40 percent were wounded.[32] Midway was the turning point of the war in the Pacific.[33]

Despite its losses at Midway, the Imperial Japanese Navy did not abandon its original strategy, for "as late as the spring of 1944, the A-Go Plan called for a decisive battle."[34] Japan saw another opportunity to deliver a decisive naval blow and enact the A-Go Plan at the



Japanese aircraft carrier IJN *Sōryō* circles, evading a direct hit, while under high-level bombing attack by U.S. Army Air Force B-17 Flying Fortress bombers from Midway base, shortly after 8:00 A.M., June 4, 1942 (U.S. Navy)

Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944. However, the United States was able to dictate the terms of the engagement, and U.S. pilots referred to the encounter as the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" because of the degradation of Japan's airpower due to the loss of experienced pilots.[35] This pursuit of another decisive battle further degraded Japan's airpower, as the "100 operational carrier aircraft that the Japanese had available after the Marianas Turkey Shoot were reduced to less than 50."[36] The Battle of the Philippine Sea also affected Japan's surface fleet: only two of Japan's nine aircraft carriers remained seaworthy.[37] Defeat at the Battle of Philippine Sea, which Japan designated as the " decisive battle," left two options: "another 'decisive battle' to defend the Philippines; and the introduction of a new offensive type of operation, the *kamikaze* attack."[38]

Still believing in a decisive naval battle approach, the Imperial Japanese Navy planned for it at Leyte Gulf in October 1944. To fully support the goal, the "entire remaining combat power of the Imperial Japanese Navy was thrown into the breach at Leyte."[39] The Battle of Leyte Gulf would be described as the "largest and one of the most decisive naval battles in history."[40] Ironically, it was decisive for the United States, as Japan lost 4 aircraft carriers, 3 battleships, 9 cruisers, and 10 destroyers—and the "Japanese Navy never recovered from this defeat."[41] Scholars now refer to the A-Go Plan as a "disaster."[42] Japan's blind pursuit of this strategy had lasted to the end. The reasons behind such a catastrophic approach must be examined to understand the rationale of Japan's military leaders.

Cognitive Dissonance and Social Support

Japan's military leaders believed the strategy of winning a decisive battle, traced back to Tsushima 40 years earlier, would work. Takijirō Ōnishi, chief of the education division of Japan's naval

aviation department in 1937, supported the traditional view that the "decisive battle is the essence of combat, and combat should always be based on the decisive battle."[43] Osami Nagano, chief of Japan's naval general staff, predicted in 1940 that the decisive battle against the United States would occur during a fight for the Micronesian islands.[44] However, despite clear and repeated evidence that the victory was not feasible, Japan's military leaders held on to this belief. Cognitive dissonance theory offers a theoretical explanation.

Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual experiences a conflict between a belief and information. Sources of information that can cause cognitive dissonance include behaviors, feelings, opinions, and the environment. The conflict between the belief and contradicting information creates the uncomfortable feeling known as cognitive dissonance. According to Leon Festinger, the psychologist who posited cognitive dissonance theory, "if a person knows various things are not psychologically consistent with one another, he will, in a variety of ways, try to make them more consistent."[45] To resolve the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance, a person has several options: change his or her belief to align with the information, change behaviors to align with his or her beliefs, change his or her opinion about the information causing

On flight deck of USS *Lexington*, Lieutenant Junior Grade Alexander Vraciu, U.S. Navy Reserve, holds up six fingers to signify his "kills" during Great Marianas Turkey Shoot, June 19, 1944, Philippine Sea (National Archives and Records Administration)

the dissonance, or ignore the inner conflict causing the cognitive dissonance.

Furthermore, groups who share a strong belief are able to support individual members despite strong evidence that contradicts the original belief. Experimental psychologists Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter demonstrated the power of social support to resolve cognitive dissonance and maintain devotion to challenged beliefs. They joined a small cult in Chicago called the *Seekers* that predicted the world would end on December 21, 1954, but its members would be rescued on a flying saucer and taken to the planet Clarion.[46] The cult consisted of adult leaders and college students. When the world did not end as predicted, the college students who went home for Christmas vacation and were separated from the group abandoned their beliefs and made no attempt to contact the group. However, the group members who were together on the night of December 21 continued to believe in the prophecy. To maintain their belief, cult members sang Christmas carols, cut all metal off their clothing, and quit jobs; remaining cult members also intensified their recruitment efforts to gain more followers.[47] Even though the belief was clearly flawed, and the cognitive dissonance created by the multiple disconfirmations should have caused them to abandon the prophecy, the social support provided by the group to individual members allowed the flawed belief to persevere.

Social support similarly enabled Japan's military leaders to continue believing in the decisive battle strategy after multiple defeats in World War II. Japanese naval doctrine for winning a decisive naval battle against the U.S. fleet due to superior naval tactics was built on an antiquated and flawed framework. However, because Japan's military leadership was fully committed to this belief, and because it was strongly shared among the group, losses intensified this commitment to the belief. These leaders ignored overwhelming evidence to the contrary and refused to adopt a new strategy. Their collective social support enabled them to cling to the belief that the decisive naval battle strategy would still bring victory. Through this cognitive dissonance, the "Japanese disasters at the Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf were the consequence of a desperate attempt" to land a decisive victory and reinforce collective belief.[48] Had Japan's military leaders been more individualistic thinkers, alternative strategies might have been adopted, such as a defensive strategy to hold key areas.

One specific example of individual cognitive dissonance within Japan's military leadership in the early phases of the Pacific War occurred when Yamamoto submitted a paper on January 7, 1941, to Naval Minister Koshirō Oikawa expressing concern about the decisive battle strategy. Yamamoto noted that "in past war games of such decisive battles the navy never achieved a convincing victory, and that these war games were usually suspended when it appeared that Japanese forces would be gradually whittled away."[49] Yamamoto's paper clearly questioned the widely held belief that repeating Tsushima was the path to victory. However, Yamamoto's beliefs would change, as he later posited that Japan must "strike the U.S. fleet a blow at the initial stage and afterwards destroy each fleet as it sets out."[50] The cognitive dissonance generated within Yamamoto by questioning the traditional belief of decisive battles was resolved by becoming a fervent proponent of the decisive battle strategy demonstrated in his planning for Midway.

Yamamoto's example shows not only individual cognitive dissonance resolution to adhere to the decisive battle strategy but also Japan's collective cognitive dissonance resolution to avoid the unpleasant reality that defeating the United States was not possible. Yamamoto, noting that war games were usually suspended on evidence that Japanese forces were losing, also demonstrates a cognitive dissonance sequence at a group level. Specifically, Japan's leaders believed that their nation was tactically superior and would quickly defeat the United States in a limited war. However, the continuous war game losses indicated that this was a flawed belief. To resolve their cognitive dissonance and continue with war planning, Japan's military leaders canceled the war games to avoid facing the unpleasant truth: attacking the United States had no path to victory.

Kobayashi Maru

Fans of the *Star Trek* science fiction series may recognize some parallels between their fandom and Japan's situation in World War II. A training exercise administered to cadets at Starfleet Academy, known as the *Kobayashi Maru*, is an unwinnable scenario designed to help Starfleet officers face death. Cadets are assigned to rescue a civilian ship, named *Kobayashi Maru*, that has broken down in the Neutral Zone. A violation of the Neutral Zone is considered an act of war, and an enemy force will destroy the cadet's ship. Essentially, the *Kobayashi Maru* places Starfleet cadets in this no-win situation: "attempt to rescue the crew of a disabled civilian vessel and be destroyed in the process or avoid confrontation and leave the disabled ship and its crew to be captured or killed."[51] Of note, as it relates to Japan's strategy in the Pacific, is the *Star Trek* fandom debate over the scenario's name. One group of fans takes a literal interpretation from Japanese to English and believe the doomed ship's name is *Little Woods*, which implies that students should not risk their ships for a small prize.[52] However, a second fan theory offers that the *Kobayashi Maru* scenario "is named after WW2 Japanese commander Michio Kobayashi who went down with air carrier *Hiryū* while attacking American carrier *Yorktown* during the Battle of Midway on 4 June 1942."[53]

At Midway, Kobayashi was a lieutenant commander who led the dive bomber unit on the carrier *Hiryū*, "which was widely regarded as among the best in the fleet."[54] Although he did not know it at the time, there was little Kobayashi could have done that day to prevent the deaths of his men or himself. As with the Starfleet cadets approaching their unwinnable scenario, Kobayashi performed his duties to the

Scene from *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), directed by Nicholas Meyer and starring (from left), Lieutenant Sulu (George Takei), Admiral James T. Kirk (William Shatner), Lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), and Dr. Leonard "Bones" McCoy (DeForest Kelley) (United Archives GmbH/Alamy)

best of his abilities, but ultimately, his dive bomber unit was doomed. It was an unwinnable situation.

While *Star Trek* might have honored the unwinnable situation of one outstanding officer, Japan as a nation faced its own *Kobayashi Maru* scenario the moment it bombed Pearl Harbor. The United States was not tsarist Russia, and it would have been nearly impossible to score a decisive naval victory that would force Washington to peace negotiations. Even if Japan would have won the Battle of Midway in a Tsushima-style victory, destroying all three U.S. carriers and not losing any of its own, the United States was able to outproduce Japan in new aircraft carriers nearly 10 to 1 by June 1943.[55] Furthermore, the U.S. population was twice that of Japan, and the United States produced five times more steel and seven times more coal in addition to having massive oil reserves.[56]

The United States was also far more effective at naval warfare than Russia, and following Pearl Harbor, the U.S. population was completely committed to the war effort. Not only could the United States defeat Japan in battle as it had demonstrated at Midway, the Philippine Sea, and Leyte Gulf, but it also had a manufacturing advantage; it could lose multiple ships as long as Japan would lose one. For Japan, the war in the Pacific was an unwinnable situation; Japan was in the *Kobayashi Maru*.

Conclusion

Two critical lessons for future military leaders must be taken from Japan's strategic failures in the Pacific during World War II. First, just because a strategy worked in a previous war does not guarantee that it will work in the future. History will indeed regard the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 as one of the greatest naval victories in history, and Japan has every right to be proud and celebrate it annually. However, for Japan, the ghosts of Tsushima made military strategists unable to adapt to how a war could be won in 1941. They were living in the past, pursuing a strategy that probably would not have been successful even if it had been tactically executed. The

United States would have been able to replace a lost fleet and keep fighting.

Second, it is important to understand how cognitive dissonance can impact decisionmaking at both the individual and the group levels. Leaders must be able to recognize when their strategy is failing and make adjustments instead of holding on to a belief that a flawed strategy will somehow lead to victory. Sun Tzu advises, "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril."[57] Japan did not understand the United States in 1941 and instead assumed that it was fighting a country with beliefs similar to those of Russia in 1904. When the Second Pacific Squadron was sunk at Tsushima in 1905, Tsar Nicholas II faced a rebellion within Russia and received external pressure from Germany to end the Russo-Japanese War. Japan envisioned a similar response from the United States in 1941. However, the United States viewed World War II as an unlimited war; the population sacrificed material goods, cultivated victory gardens, and committed to defeating Japan. In other words, Japan was ignorant of its enemy and itself. Failing to recognize that the United States was not behaving the way Japan assumed it would, Japan maintained a flawed belief, as its insistence on repeating Tsushima was exacerbated due to the cognitive dissonance of Japan's military leaders. These leaders held on to the flawed strategy of winning a decisive naval battle until Japan no longer had the equipment and troops to pursue one.

Ultimately, Japan's inability to know itself or its enemy put it in the *Kobayashi Maru* scenario. Past victories may inform but cannot dictate military strategy. Defeating the United States with a Mahanian-style blue-water battle was impossible, yet despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Japan refused to acknowledge this fact and held on to its flawed belief until the bitter end. **JFQ**

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