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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE /COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES COURSE 2

DECEMBER 1999

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz:

The Right Man for the Times

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“Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz: The Right Man for the Times”

by Captain(N) Richard P. Harrison

“It often takes a different kind of leadership to prevail against an opponent all the way to the surrender table than it does to defeat him on the battlefield.”¹

- George M. Hall
- *The Fifth Star*, 1994

INTRODUCTION

On December 7th, 1941 the United States of America was attacked by Japan and suffered a disastrous military defeat at Pearl Harbor. This catastrophic event propelled the American people into World War II, thus ending a lengthy period of isolationism that has not successfully resurfaced to this day. December 7th, 1941 was a day that lives on in the American consciousness as a day of infamy.

Within weeks of this disaster Admiral Chester W. Nimitz arrived in Pearl Harbor to assume command of the Pacific Fleet, and ultimately the Pacific Ocean Areas (POA) theater, comprising all the Pacific except General MacArthur’s South-west Pacific Area. Miraculously, by June 1942 Admiral Nimitz had orchestrated the decisive routing of the Imperial Japanese Navy at the Battle of Midway. This crucial event turned the tide, giving the Pacific Fleet the initiative which, following a long offensive campaign throughout the Pacific, eventually lead to the Japanese surrender. On September 2nd, 1945 Fleet Admiral Nimitz, on behalf of the United States, signed the Instrument of Surrender aboard the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, along with other Allied and Japanese representatives.

How was it that this gentle, dignified, and humble man, with no previous combat experience, could so effectively and decisively lead the United States to victory in the largest

theater of World War II? This paper will commence with a brief historical overview, followed by a look at Nimitz's naval upbringing and career. Then the paper will examine how Nimitz tackled specific challenges of the war, highlighting his leadership style in the process. The reasons for his success and his leadership style will then be examined in relation to the views of some theorists. In the end, the paper will demonstrate that Admiral Nimitz not only had the admirable qualities that fostered success, but that he expertly adapted to his circumstances and understood the perspective of command at the theater level of war.

HISTORICAL SETTING

The ambitions of Japan, which resulted in the attack on Pearl Harbor, were not in themselves a surprise to the United States. Even during Nimitz's time in the Naval Academy, "the Pacific Ocean was carefully scrutinized as a possible theatre of war and the navy's fleet exercises were frequently designed with Japan as the opponent."² Therefore when Japan "invaded" China in 1938, as part of its "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" policy, it was no surprise that this resulted in strained relations between the US and Japan. When the US began to restrict sales of oil to Japan, the Japanese were forced to consider alternate plans. Thus, in July 1941 they moved to occupy southern Indo-China, giving them more airfields that threatened the Philippines, Singapore, and Borneo. In retaliation the US, Great Britain, and the Netherlands East Indies government froze Japanese assets, effectively cutting off all trade between the US and Japan and making it difficult for the Japanese to purchase oil elsewhere.³ Analysts assessed that Japan had three options to resolve her dilemma: to induce the US to unfreeze their assets and

¹ George M. Hall, The Fifth Star: High Command in an Era of Global War (Westport: Praeger, 1994), 21.

² Dede W. Casad & Frank A. Driscoll, Chester W. Nimitz: Admiral of The Hills (Austin: Eakin Press, 1983), 70.

³ E.B. Potter, Triumph in the Pacific: The Navy's Struggle Against Japan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 2.

provide them with oil; terminate their advances and pull back their forces to Japan; or to seize the petroleum-rich East Indies to assure themselves of a supply of oil.⁴

The analysts were partially correct – on December 6th, while high-level secret talks between the US and Japan were faltering, American newspapers were reporting that a large Japanese fleet was forming in Cam Ranh Bay in Indo-China, presumably in preparation for an advance southward. What the Americans appreciated too late was that the Japanese carrier force was in position to attack their main target, the American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor. What Admiral Nimitz didn't realize was that fate was about to propel him into the spotlight of American history.

NIMITZ'S UPBRINGING AND NAVAL CAREER

The future Fleet Admiral Nimitz was born into a German-American family in the heart of Texas in 1885. Although far from the sea, the young Nimitz grew up under the guidance of his grandfather, a former merchant marine captain. Nevertheless, despite the elder Nimitz's desire to send his grandson to sea, the young Nimitz expressed no interest in doing so.⁵ In fact, at the age of 15, after meeting some recent Army officer graduates, Nimitz applied to his local Congressman to take the West Point entrance examination. His dreams were shattered, however, when the Congressman informed him that there were no openings, but the Naval Academy was available. Nimitz was determined to get a college education and, once he made his decision to enter the Naval Academy, he was equally determined to succeed, saying: "I intend to make it. Whatever it takes to get there, I intend to find it."⁶ This was a sign of the determination he would exhibit throughout his naval career.

⁴ E.B. Potter, Nimitz (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 5.

⁵ Casad & Driscoll, 45. (Nimitz's grandfather is quoted as saying "And you will go to sea. You don't think so now – but you will go.")

⁶ Casad & Driscoll, 52.

Following extensive tutoring and a short stint at a preparatory school, Nimitz successfully passed the entrance examine for the Naval Academy. On September 7th, 1901 the 16-year old Chester Nimitz was sworn in at the United States Naval Academy as a cadet, thus commencing a long and eventful naval career.⁷ Nimitz's classmates at the Academy were to prove to be key players in his future challenges in World War II. Bill Halsey, who would later be one of Nimitz's right-hand subordinates, was a year ahead of Nimitz, but became a close friend. Husband Kimmel, whom he relieved in Pearl Harbor following the Japanese attack, was a classmate, as was Raymond Spruance, the second of his most trusted subordinates and part-time roommate during the war. Other future wartime naval leaders in his class included: John Towers (Commander, Air Forces, Pacific Fleet), Fred Fletcher (Admiral in charge of Guadalcanal Expeditionary Force, among other battles), Thomas Kinkaid (Commander 7th Fleet at Leyte Gulf), Kelly Turner (Admiral in command of Gaudalcanal Amphibious Forces, among others), Harold Stark (CNO at the start of WW II), and Robert Ghormley (Admiral in command of South Pacific Force and Area).

In the forty years that stretched from his swearing-in at Annapolis until the Pearl Harbor attack, Admiral Nimitz had a varied and productive career. An early highlight that formed the foundation of his respect for the Japanese people, was his encounter with the famous Admiral Togo, the hero of the Battle of Tsushima (or Battle of the Sea of Japan, as it is known in Japan).⁸ As a Midshipman aboard the battleship *Ohio*, anchored in Tokyo Bay, Nimitz was one of several officers invited to attend a victory celebration garden party held by the Emperor in 1905. Near

⁷ At about this same time another Texas-born German tried to get into the Naval Academy, but because he was too old by their regulations he was forced to go instead to West Point. His name was Dwight D. Eisenhower. Casad & Driscoll, 67.

⁸ Nimitz, the person most responsible for the Japanese defeat, was instrumental in ensuring an honourable peace and the commencement of good will. He took steps to preserve Togo's flagship, the Mikasa, from being looted immediately after the surrender signing and eventually commenced the restoration of the ship. As well, he returned

the end of the party, and after much captured Russian champagne had been consumed, Nimitz was selected by his mates to approach the famous Admiral and invite him to join them. To his surprise the Admiral accepted the invitation and spent a few minutes with them conversing fluently in English. Nimitz was impressed by the humility of Admiral Togo and, when he became an Admiral, did much to preserve and honor Togo's memory. In fact, in 1934 then-Captain Nimitz was visiting Japan as Commanding Officer of the new cruiser *Augusta*, flagship of the Asiatic fleet, when Admiral Togo died. Not only did he attend Togo's funeral, but he flew flag's at half-mast, fired a 19-gun salute, and entered a company of sailors and marines in the funeral procession.⁹

Nimitz was to have another unique experience early in his career. In 1907, soon after being promoted to the rank of Ensign, he was appointed in command of an out-of-commission destroyer and charged with putting her back into service. Such an early command was highly unusual and Nimitz did a superb job of it. However, his inexperience was to be his undoing, for in 1908 he ran the *Decatur* aground on a poorly-charted mud bank in the Philippines. He was subsequently court-martialed and received a "public reprimand," as well as losing his command.¹⁰ This event, and the second-chance that was given him by the Navy, was to act as a reminder for him later in his career that mistakes can sometimes be forgiven.

Another unique turn of events was to face Nimitz. Following the inconvenience and embarrassment of his court-martial, he was assigned to the fledgling submarine service. Also uniquely, within eighteen months of his court-martial he was promoted to Lieutenant from Ensign, bypassing the usual rank of Lieutenant (Junior Grade). By 1910 Nimitz was once again

several historic bells to their rightful churches and also returned several prized samurai swords. Casad & Driscoll, 280-281.

⁹ Casad & Driscoll, 99.

commanding ships, but this time in a submarine. In 1912 he was awarded a medal for diving overboard to rescue a seaman, an act that was to win him respect from enlisted men throughout the fleet. It established, early in his career, his concern for the well-being of the sailors under his command. During this period in submarines Nimitz distinguished himself as an underwater tactical experimenter and an expert in diesel engines, leading the conversion from dangerous gasoline engines to diesel engines. Included in his list of experiences was a brief stint in Germany in 1913 studying diesel engine design and production.¹¹

As one of the Navy's foremost diesel engineers, Nimitz was assigned to oversee the construction and installation of the diesel engines in the Navy's second fleet oiler, the *Maumee*. Commissioned in 1916, Nimitz was then appointed as the ship's first Executive Officer and Engineering Officer. Again demonstrating his innovative skills, Nimitz was instrumental in designing a means for refueling destroyers while underway, in a method later to be called the "riding-abeam" or "broadside" method.¹² The *Maumee* headed off in 1917, as the US entered World War I, to refuel ships in the mid-Atlantic, while Nimitz himself was grabbed to serve on the submarine commander's staff, and never saw combat.

The years between the wars saw Admiral Nimitz rise through the ranks and command various ships and formations, in addition to attending War College and holding several administrative positions ashore.¹³ In 1939, in his final sea-going appointment before the war,

¹⁰ The "public reprimand," in accordance with the CinC US Naval Forces Philippines orders, consisted only of the promulgation of the finding and sentence. Potter, *Nimitz*, 61.

¹¹ As to the move to submarines, Nimitz was initially disappointed because he believed that to succeed in the Navy required surface operations. Submarine service was considered hardship duty without extra pay. However, in view of his high reputation, this may have been a deliberate move to improve the submarine service. Potter, *Nimitz*, 62.

¹² Thomas Wildenberg, "Chester Nimitz and the Development of Fueling at Sea," *Naval War College Review*, 46:4 (Autumn 1993): 53.

¹³ While at the War College, Nimitz helped to develop the circular formation, with capital ships surrounded by concentric circles of screening vessels. This was designed to replace the cumbersome columns of ships used previously. John B. Lundstrom, "Chester W. Nimitz: Victory in the Pacific," *Quarterdeck and Bridge: Two Centuries of American Naval Leaders*. Ed. James C. Bradford (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 330.

Nimitz was in command of Task Force Seven on the West Coast, aboard his flagship, the ill-fated *Arizona*. Again this offered him a unique opportunity, for he had already concluded that a conflict with Japan was inevitable. His Task Force, by a twist of fate, was working on developing procedures for underway refueling and refining amphibious landings (resulting in the design of new landing craft). Shortly thereafter Admiral Nimitz was to become the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation in the Navy Department, the Navy's personnel and training bureau. In a rapidly expanding pre-war Navy, this is the job that he was in on December 7th, 1941.

NIMITZ FACES THE CHALLENGES OF WAR

Of the many challenges that faced Nimitz throughout the war, and demanded the best of his leadership characteristics, the first was obviously the assumption of his new Pacific Command. Arriving in Pearl Harbor by Catalina flying boat on Christmas day, Nimitz was overwhelmed by the destruction that he faced: the main anchorage covered with black fuel oil, some ships lying bottoms up, and the twisted remains of several battleships scarring the harbor. One can only speculate at his thoughts on seeing his former flagship, the *Arizona*, lying in ruins with over 1,000 sailors entombed in her hull. Yet the first question to his reception party of officers was to ask about the relief of Wake Island, to which it was answered that the relief expedition had been recalled and that Wake had surrendered. As he was taken ashore in an oil-soaked boat, in response to another question, it was "explained that the boats moving about the harbor were fishing out the bodies of sailors which, grotesquely bloated, were still rising to the surface."¹⁴ In this depressing environment Nimitz soon demonstrated how compassionate, caring, and dignified an officer that he was. On meeting the recently-demoted, and very demoralized, Admiral Kimmel, he said: "You have my sympathy. The same thing could have

¹⁴ Potter, Nimitz, 16.

happened to anybody.”¹⁵ Nimitz was also quick to note that the Admiral had recently been forced to move out of the quarters that Nimitz was moving into. Kimmel was now living with the acting CINCPAC, Admiral Pye, Pye’s wife, and a Navy Captain, in cramped quarters across the street, a result of the lack of quarters following the attack. Admiral Nimitz immediately insisted that they all join him for Christmas dinner that same evening in his new quarters. This pattern continued for several days, as Nimitz had the other two Admirals and Mrs. Pye join him each evening for dinner and then a relaxing game of cribbage. This was a potentially embarrassing and awkward situation, with Admiral Kimmel and his two replacements, attempting to relax together. As well, “Kimmel had launched the Wake relief expedition, which, had it succeeded, might have restored his damaged reputation. Pye, after assuming command, had recalled it. But nothing that had happened in any way marred the friendship of the three admirals, then or later.”¹⁶ This simple scenario explains a great deal about the character of Nimitz, his compassion, and his ability to bring people together in a congenial atmosphere.

Nimitz’s first week in Pearl Harbor quickly showed him that despite the initial defiance in response to the Japanese attack, the morale of the officers and sailors was rapidly deteriorating into inaction, especially after the loss of Wake Island. After assuming command on December 31st, 1941, Admiral Nimitz had a surprise in store for his staff, most of whom believed they would suffer the same fate as their former commander, Admiral Kimmel. Instead, Nimitz told his assembled staff that he had complete confidence in them and that he did not blame them for what happened. As the former Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, he told them, he knew they had been picked because of their competence. This approach, and an earlier address to officers and the press in which he stated, “We have taken a tremendous wallop, but I have no doubt as to

¹⁵ Potter, Nimitz, 17.

¹⁶ Potter, Nimitz, 19.

the ultimate outcome,” provided the initial morale-boosting shot-in-the-arm that Pearl Harbor needed to get back on its feet.

On assuming command “Nimitz had four immediate objectives: the first was to restore morale; the second was to try to divert Japanese strength away from the east Indies; the third was to safeguard communications with Midway and Australia, and the fourth was to hold the line against further Japanese expansion in the Pacific.”¹⁷ Although Nimitz had already shown his compassionate and caring side in these early days of his command, he was now required to demonstrate his ability to provide innovative, and strong leadership, from the perspective of the operational commander.

Nimitz had begun a practice of permitting any senior officers into planning meetings and was known as a good listener. As Admiral Spruance was later to comment, it was “like being in a stuffy room and having someone open a window and let in a breath of fresh air.”¹⁸ When Nimitz’s staff proposed in January 1942 that the support to marines landing in Samoa be followed by a single-carrier raid against the Gilberts and Marshalls, Nimitz listened with interest. Yet he also listened to others, as well, including Admiral Pye who offered an alternate plan that proposed a two-carrier force to counter expected Japanese knowledge of, and resistance to, the Samoa operation. This operation was vocally opposed by Admiral Bloch, a former carrier captain (and former superior of Nimitz), and by most air officers, who were fearful of the loss of any carriers. On the other hand, Admiral “Bull” Halsey loudly supported the operation, while denouncing the defeatism he found. Nimitz was a good listener and wished to hear all views on a plan, but he was not one to shirk from his responsibilities. He approved the proposed raids, lead by Halsey, and once the marine landings had been conducted successfully, provided the

¹⁷ Oliver Warner, Command at Sea: Great Fighting Admirals from Hawke to Nimitz (London: Cassell, 1976), 175.

¹⁸ Potter, Nimitz, 34.

following operational guidance to Halsey: “It is essential that the attacks [on the other islands] be driven home. Exploit this situation by expanding operations, utilizing both task forces in such repeated air attacks and ship bombardments as developments and logistics make feasible. If practicable, extend offensive action beyond one day.”¹⁹ The raids were successful, although more dramatic than truly militarily important. However, they provided an early important boost to American morale. Nimitz allowed Halsey to garner the glory, at his own expense and at the expense of the other Admirals involved in the operations (Spruance and Fletcher), but clearly it was Nimitz’s ability to synthesize the work of the staffs and subordinate commanders into a feasible and decisive operation that was key to this innovative action. Nimitz learned, however, that it was best to provide the operational-level guidance in advance of the mission, and to leave the commander at sea to conduct the operation without interference. This was a lesson that his good friend “Bull” Halsey bluntly taught him and which, to his credit, he took to heart.²⁰

One of Nimitz’s most famous and successful decisions was the one leading to the victory over the Japanese at Midway Island. Despite having the challenge of providing forces to protect the Aleutian Islands, as best they could, and the competing demands of the defense of Oahu itself, “what Nimitz did not do, and had no intention of doing, was to diffuse his efforts and scatter his limited forces in an attempt to meet every sort of attack of which the Japanese were capable.”²¹ He therefore commenced his plan to draw the Japanese into an encounter, with a deliberately false radio report from Midway claiming that their distillation plant had broken down, and therefore they would have no other source of fresh water. Ignoring the pleas of the

¹⁹ Potter, Nimitz, 37.

²⁰ Halsey, who didn’t like the coaching from HQ during the Marshalls operation (and it is believed discussed this with Nimitz afterwards), refused to make radio contact with CinCPac during the February 1942 raids on Wake and Marcus Islands. When he finally broke silence, well after the successful raids, to request an oiler, he added briefly, “This force not, repeat not, damaged.” Nimitz got the point. Potter, Nimitz, 43.

²¹ Potter, Nimitz, 80.

Hawaiian army commander to be prepared for a potential Japanese attack on Oahu, he took command of the Seventh Air Force bombers and sent most of them to Midway. Meanwhile, he sent only a limited Task Force to the Aleutians, ordered Admirals Halsey's and Fletcher's Task Forces to hasten back to Pearl Harbor from the South Pacific, and expedited the deployment of the *Saratoga* task force from San Diego. Additionally, instead of allowing the submarine commander to scatter his boats in search-and-attack missions, which Nimitz viewed as ineffective given the time available, he ordered them into defensive sectors in the approaches to Midway. The final decision to commence the operation was a courageous move by Nimitz, for many in his command suspected that the intelligence information on which he was basing his decision could have been falsely planted by the Japanese.

Nimitz faced several other challenges in mounting the Midway operation, including placing his faith in the same intelligence staff that failed to properly predict the Pearl Harbor attack only six months earlier. Additionally, it was necessary for him to concur with the hospitalization of the bellicose, but successful, "Bull" Halsey, and replace him with Spruance. Although the doctor had ordered him hospitalized for severe dermatitis, the result of overwork and strain, Halsey was hoping to still be able to conduct the Midway campaign. Nimitz, as well, wanted Halsey in the operation, but would not take the bait and countermand the doctor's orders, knowing Halsey's health was more important in the long term. As well, he had to grill Admiral Fletcher on his actions in the Coral Sea operation in the South Pacific, as both he and, more importantly, Admiral King in Washington, had doubts as to the aggressive war-fighting spirit of Fletcher.²²

²² There is speculation that King was also bitter over the loss of the *Lexington*, his former command. As well, despite Nimitz's recommendations for a promotion and medal for Fletcher, King refused. He would not give medals to commanders who lost their ships. Nimitz was prepared to believe that Fletcher worked with the best information that he had and nevertheless had achieved a decisive victory. The Coral Sea battle was not a tactical victory, but an

The selection of Spruance for such a high-risk operation was propitious and, in the end, Nimitz came to accept Fletcher, reconfirming his own earlier faith in Fletcher's abilities. Nimitz stated to King, "he is an excellent, seagoing, fighting naval officer and I wish to retain him as a task force commander in the future."²³ These personnel issues reflect well on Nimitz's sense of fairness and his courage to stand by those he believed in and to remove those that needed to be removed.

Fletcher and Spruance were dispatched on the Midway operation with the following guidance from Nimitz: "Inflict maximum damage on the enemy by employing strong attrition tactics . . . In carrying out the task assigned in Op Plan 29-42, you will be governed by the principle of calculated risk, which you will interpret to mean the avoidance of exposure of your force to attack by superior enemy forces without prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage to the enemy."²⁴ The results of the Battle of Midway are recorded in history: the Japanese fleet's military advantage in the Pacific was decisively erased and, in particular, they suffered the severe loss of many trained aviators. Although Nimitz humbly congratulated all participants in the battle, acknowledging as well that it was "truly a victory of the United States' armed forces and not of the Navy alone,"²⁵ the success was directly attributable to his determined and innovative leadership. Nimitz not only brought together the staffs and the operational commanders of all services into an effective team, but it was his own firm vision of the battle that led to success.

In 1942 Nimitz was presented with another challenge of command – replacing a flag officer. As the Guadalcanal campaign faltered, it became clear to Nimitz, and to many others,

important strategic one. Thomas B. Buell, Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1980), 200.

²³ Potter, Nimitz, 86.

²⁴ Potter, Nimitz, 87.

that Admiral Ghormley was struggling in his command. Nimitz made a visit to the South Pacific in the Fall of 1942 to personally assess the situation and was disturbed by “Ghormley’s pessimism and inability to inspire his command with a will to win.”²⁶ As Nimitz would write to his wife: “Today I have replaced Ghormley with Halsey. It was a sore mental struggle and the decision was not reached until after hours of anguished consideration. Reason: Ghormley was too immersed in detail and not sufficiently bold and aggressive at the right times. I feel better now that it has been done . . . The interests of the nation transcend private interests.”²⁷ This was a courageous, but necessary decision, which was executed in a fair, honest, and compassionate manner.

Nimitz’s war-fighting vision and innovation was demonstrated clearly at the Battle of Midway, but two other examples of his war-winning determination and resolve to put his operational stamp on the war are interesting. The first was the decision on the best plan for the assault on the Marshalls in 1944. Admirals Turner and Spruance, and General Holland Smith, fresh from heavy casualties at Tarawa, insisted that this be a two-stage assault, commencing with an attack on the atolls of Wotje and Maloelap, and later against the main target, Kwajalein. After canvassing the opinions of the Fifth Fleet flag and general officers, all of whom preferred the two-stage option, Nimitz calmly advised them they would attack Kwajalein directly and early. When Spruance and Turner argued privately with Nimitz over his decision, he established his authority and control with the words, “This is it. If you don’t want to do it, the Department will find someone else to do it. Do you want to do it or not?”²⁸ The Admirals of course agreed to proceed, but in so forcing them, Nimitz had not only established who was in charge but also

²⁵ Potter, Nimitz, 105.

²⁶ Dean C. Allard, “Nimitz and Spruance: A Naval Style of Command,” Military Leadership and Command. Ed. Henry S. Bausum (Lexington, VA: VMI Foundation, 1989) 115.

²⁷ Potter, Nimitz, 197.

imprinted his theater-level vision for the conduct of the war. To add icing to the cake, Nimitz's plan was totally successful.

The second example occurred in the battle for Okinawa in 1945. The campaign for the island became a subject of heated debate in the press and fostered some inter-service conflict. Yet the value of this island to the expected future invasion of Japan reinforced its crucial importance. Admiral Nimitz, in overall command of the operation, encouraged General Buckner to speed up the operation ashore in order to release the supporting fleet. In pointing out, in reply, that this was a ground operation and implying that the Navy should keep its hand off army business, he challenged Nimitz's authority. Nimitz icily replied: "Yes, but ground though it may be, I'm losing a ship and a half a day. So if this line isn't moving within five days, we'll get someone here to move it so we can all get out from under these stupid [kamikaze] air attacks."²⁹ Nimitz, as the "joint" commander, was not solely concerned about the loss of ships (and lives) at sea, but was equally cognizant of the need for motivational and innovative leadership ashore. The Admiral may have been a gentle, polite, and humble officer, but he was as determined, decisive, and sharp a war-fighting leader as any other.

At the theater-level of command it was important that "senior commanders attempt to serve as tough-minded and yet adaptable arbiters between the competing demands of senior authorities, of cooperating military organizations, and of the components of one's own command."³⁰ A measure of Nimitz's success was his relationship with two crucial players: Admiral King, the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, and General MacArthur, the other Pacific theater commander. Admiral King, a superb strategist and organizer, was much like Nimitz in his dedication and intellect. Yet, unlike Nimitz, he was known for his acerbic manner

²⁸ Potter, Nimitz, 265.

²⁹ Potter, Nimitz, 375.

and his black and white approach when dealing with people. Nimitz and King, his strategic master, formed an effective team, with both respecting the other's position and responsibilities. King occasionally provided his subordinate with more direction than he ought to, and at one point early in the war he completely exasperated Nimitz, and his staff, with a proposal to task the old battleships to operate with the carriers. The battleships, the latest of which had been built in 1923, could only travel at 21 knots, and could never keep up with the 34-knot carriers. The battleships would have been a liability, which Nimitz could ill afford to protect at those early stages in the war. Nimitz could not convince King in message traffic that his fleet was still inferior to the Japanese and that the battleships would be more of a hinderance than a help. Nimitz solved this dilemma by dispatching Admiral Pye to Washington to brief King. Pye, a prudent and experienced commander, and respected strategist, was also a classmate of King's and one of his few intimate friends. The tactic worked and King soon relented on his demands.³¹

Nimitz, at several points during the war, would either withhold information from King, or put him on the spot by taking unilateral action and then forcing King to either silently accept it or countermand the action. One example of this was King's procrastination in approving the return of Halsey's force from the South Pacific in order for Nimitz to conduct the Midway campaign. King believed that the Japanese would attack in the South Pacific. Nimitz tired of waiting and recalled Halsey to Pearl Harbor, later advising King that he would send him back south if new intelligence suggested it was required. This ploy, while perhaps seen as a failure to follow the orders of a superior, was Nimitz's determined, but prudent, way of conducting his responsibilities and not allowing his superior to do his job for him. "It was a common tactic to

³⁰ Allard, 110.

³¹ Potter, Nimitz, 42.

force a reluctant senior into a decision.”³² At the end of the war, it was King that recommended Nimitz to be his successor as CNO.

Dealing with General Douglas MacArthur required a slightly different approach. The General, who truly believed that he should have been commanding the entire Pacific campaign, was an enigmatic officer with a flare for the dramatic and a reputation for being pompous. It has been stated that, whereas Nimitz had a public relations staff of three, MacArthur had a staff of 200!³³ But “whatever Nimitz thought privately of MacArthur, he never permitted at CinCPac headquarters the overt censure of the general and his strategy that was common in the Navy Department . . . Nimitz found MacArthur highly intelligent, with a magnetic personality, but also with an unfortunate tendency to strike poses and to pontificate.”³⁴ Nimitz was always the calm and reflective proponent of a plan, but was also never one to back down from a good debate on strategy. No doubt MacArthur appreciated the Admiral’s determination, his willingness to stand up to MacArthur as an equal, and, perhaps silently, his successes. Clearly, both officers were professionals, and despite their differing personalities, and the ever-large ego of MacArthur, the two worked well together.

THE REASONS FOR SUCCESS

“In retrospect, Nimitz ranks with Field Marshal William Slim of the British Army as the senior commander whose leadership in World War II has come closest to winning universal praise from professional contemporaries and from military historians.”³⁵ The best summary of

³² Buell, 201. This tactic of withholding information from superiors was not unknown to King, who “would withhold losses” from the JCS team. As well, he did not trust Secretary of the Navy Knox. “King had a simple solution – he did not tell Knox anything.” Buell, 200.

³³ Admiral Chester W. Nimitz: Thunder of the Pacific, writ. Lou Reda, Sammy Jackson, Don Horan, and Michael Cascio, Lou Reda Productions in association with A&E Network, 1996.

³⁴ Potter, Nimitz, 221 and 291.

³⁵ D. Clayton James, A Time for Giants: Politics of the American High Command in World War II (New York, NY: Franklin Watts, 1987), 74.

Nimitz's attributes as a wartime leader came from his only officially sanctioned biographer, the historian E.B. Potter, in a tribute following the Admiral's death.³⁶

Nimitz's success in war and in dealing with men was the product of his extraordinary balance. He wielded authority with a sure hand but without austerity or arrogance. His perfect integrity was untinged with harshness. He demanded the best from those who served under him but never failed to give credit where credit was due. He was courteous and considerate without leaving any doubt who was running the show. He was serene and unruffled and at the same time vigorous and hardworking. He took his responsibilities with deadly seriousness, yet never lost his sense of humor. He grew with his responsibilities, but even when he commanded 2,500,000 men, he retained his simplicity and common touch.

He surrounded himself with the ablest men he could find and sought their advice, but he made his own decisions. He was a keen strategist who never forgot that he was dealing with human beings, on both sides of the conflict. He was aggressive in war without hate, audacious while never failing to weigh the risks.

The study of leadership has produced numerous methods for analyzing the reasons for success as a leader, and more particularly as a General or Admiral. The favourite method is based upon the concept that traits will differentiate the good leader from the bad, or unsuccessful, leader. Clausewitz is one of the most quoted and influential authors of this method, although certainly not the only proponent. Indeed, almost every successful leader has commenced his self-analysis with a list of characteristics that are essential to effective leadership (including, Saxe, Jomini, Fuller, Napoleon, Slim, Montgomery, Ridgway, and Wavell). Clausewitz listed three primary qualities or characteristics: courage, both moral and physical, was at the top of his list; second was physical strength, or fitness; and finally, intellectual

³⁶ E. B. Potter, in James, 74. Nimitz would not allow a biography of himself when he was alive and refused to write his memoirs following the war. He deplored the rush at which some wartime leaders wrote their version of history. He believed that history should be written by historians, not participants. He was also determined not to be the author of controversy over the roles or actions of his wartime colleagues. Nimitz collaborated intimately with Potter on "Triumph in the Pacific", which provided a factual historical account of the war. From this time together, and obviously discussion of other events that did not get into the historical account, as well as from Nimitz's letters to

capacity.³⁷ It is clear from Nimitz's career, and in particular from the World War II era, that he exhibited all of these characteristics. His moral courage was demonstrated in his ability to take hard operational decisions or to remove unsuccessful leaders. As to physical courage, although he never experienced combat himself, this characteristic was certainly demonstrated early in his career with his entry into the new and dangerous submarine program, as well as his lifesaving heroism. Even during the war, when he had to command from the relative safety of Hawaii, he nevertheless had frequent visits to war zones, including Midway (just a short time before the famous battle), to the South Pacific islands (including Kwajalein only 3 days after its capture), and Okinawa (while the island was only partially under American control and still 2 months from being wholly captured). During the latter stages of the campaign Nimitz's headquarters was operating from Guam, instead of Hawaii, and therefore closer to the action and the danger. As to his intellectual capacity, this was clearly exhibited by his innovations and vision throughout his career and in the war. However, it could be said that many of the Admirals working for Nimitz also exhibited many of these same characteristics. It would be difficult to attribute his success to his training, because, as previously noted, many of his wartime colleagues and subordinates were former classmates. Was it only fate, resulting in Nimitz receiving his wartime appointment, that permitted him to demonstrate "more" successful leadership than the other commanders?

Another method of analyzing leaders is the behaviour method, which examines the leader-follower roles. Martin Van Creveld has spent much time with this method. A version of this method has also been utilized recently by the Canadian researchers, Carol McCann and Ross

his wife and from interviews with other players, Potter was to produce the only approved biography. It is consistently used by all other authors as a source of much of their information on Nimitz.

³⁷ Karl von Clausewitz, On War (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1943), 32.

Pigeau, who posit the question, “what sets the general officer apart from the private?”³⁸ They put forth three qualities of command: competency, authority and responsibility, each with its subsets of components. These subsets include intellectual competency, i.e. the ability to be creative, flexible, and willing to learn. As well, there is interpersonal competency, which includes the “attributes of trust, respect and empathy that promote effective teamwork.”³⁹ Under personal authority they include the factors of reputation, experience and character. Other researchers, in a similar vein, have found that “the majority of us look for and admire leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent” and, of these factors, “the qualities of being honest, inspiring, and competent compose what communications researchers refer to as source credibility.”⁴⁰ Conversely, from the negative perspective, “according to Janis, groupthink contributed to some extent to many historical fiascoes, including...the failure of Admiral Kimmel’s inner circle to respond to warnings about the invasion of Pearl Harbor.”⁴¹ Certainly all of these positive characteristics of the leader-follower relationship were resident in all of the wartime leaders, including Nimitz and his colleagues. Perhaps what is different is the degree to which each exhibited those characteristics, although they are beyond effective measuring.

John Keegan rejected the study of command based on social science, stating: “the warfare of any one society may differ so sharply from that of another that commonality of trait and behaviour in those who direct it is overlaid altogether in importance by differences in the

³⁸ Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, “Clarifying the Concepts of Control and of Command.” Proceedings of the 1999 Command and Control Research and Technology Symposium (Newport, RI: US Naval War College, June 1999), 7.

³⁹ Pigeau and McCann, 7.

⁴⁰ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose it, Why People Demand It (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 13 and 21.

⁴¹ I.L. Janis, Crucial Decisions: Leadership in Policymaking and Crisis Management in Kouzes and Posner, 265. Groupthink: strong desire to maintain harmony among group members, and an understandable need to maintain their own self-esteem, inclines them to avoid creating discord.

purposes they serve and the functions they perform.”⁴² In short, he claims that the commander will act within the context of his time and place. The existence of unusual qualities in the leader “may be taken for granted,” states Keegan, but what is more important is “how the societies to which they belonged expected such qualities to be presented.”⁴³ One can see such reasoning in the Persian Gulf War success of General Schwarzkopf, who had to succeed in a battle to eject the Iraqis from Kuwait, which was really about the security of western oil supplies, and to do so in an overwhelming and quick way, in order to avoid sending troops home in body bags. Admiral Nimitz, similarly, had societal demands upon him, and even freedoms, that were a product of the time in history. It could be suggested that MacArthur, successful in World War II, was unsuccessful in Korea because he failed to act in concert with the demands of society at the time. Yet this explanation of leadership is somewhat incomplete. Even Keegan, who rejects the social science approach, essentially endorses the approach in describing his five imperatives of command, behind whose mask the commander functions. These imperatives (kinship, prescription, sanction, action, and example) are very close copies of the social science models of traits and behaviours. Nevertheless, his theory regarding a commander functioning within the context of his time and place remains a valid component of leadership success.

George Hall has taken a slightly different approach to the study of leadership success. In an interesting comparison, he notes that “some of the same forces under some of the same leaders that prevailed in World War II had to settle for a draw in Korea five years later.”⁴⁴ He attributes this to the failure of at least some of the leaders to realign the various levels of perspective of war, as clearly the capabilities and attributes of senior commanders had not changed that radically. Hall suggests it is important to understand that, firstly, there are five

⁴² John Keegan, The Mask of Command (Harrisonburg, VA: Penguin Books, 1987), 1.

⁴³ Keegan, 11.

distinct levels in a war, as follows: heroism, tactics, operations or campaigns, theaters, and national purpose and resources.

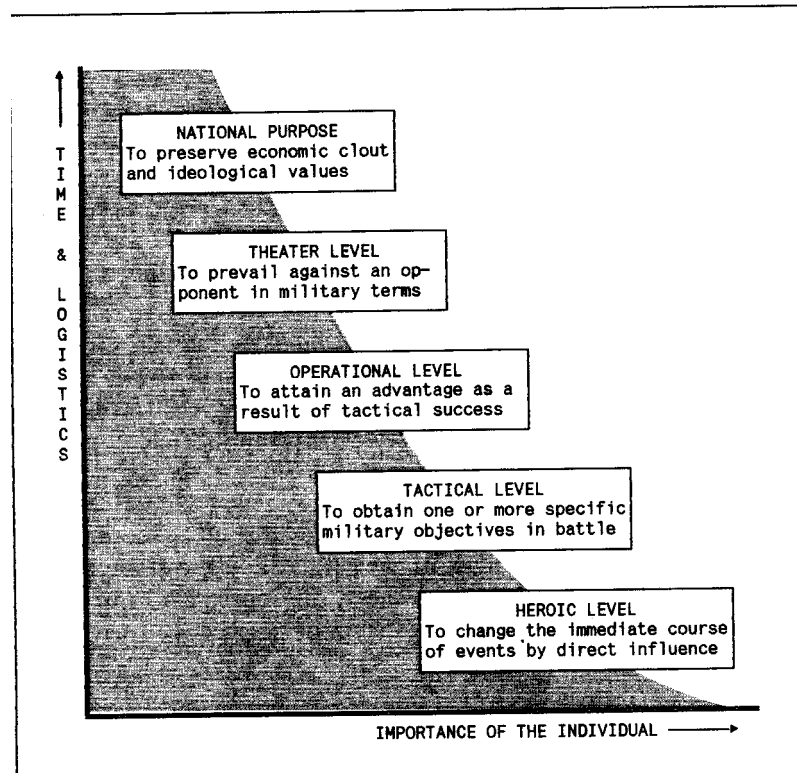


FIGURE #1 -- LEVELS OF PERSPECTIVE IN WAR ⁴⁵

The successful leader must function appropriately within these levels, but also within a second influence, the continuum of a democracy's political requirements. Hall notes that wars "are fought within the context of a national ethos and purpose."⁴⁶ This concept is consistent with Clausewitz's adage that war is an extension of politics, as well as Keegan's views. At one end of the scale is the requirement to demonstrate initiative and to impose one's will on circumstances,

⁴⁴ Hall, 140.

⁴⁵ Hall, 142.

while at the opposite end the focus is on accommodation and compromise. Hall's levels of perspective of war are combined with the political context in the following figure:

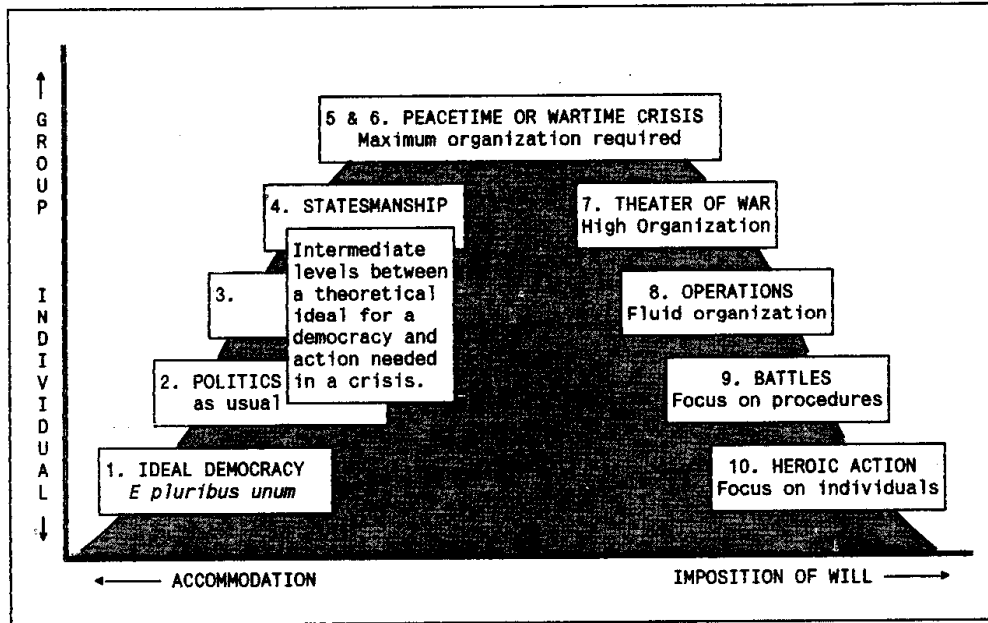


FIGURE #2 -- SCALE OF LEADERSHIP REQUIREMENTS⁴⁷

Hall's leadership model is both attribute and situation oriented, and moves to the third stage by adding the following : character and flaws; information processing, intelligence, and perception; personality or style; and concern for the troops.⁴⁸ These leadership traits and behaviours combine to determine the capability of the leader, which then must be applied against the levels of perspective of war and within the political context. This is an extremely interesting model that combines much of the methods of traits, behaviour, and even Keegan's time and place context. In a comparison of the American officers who wore the fifth star, Hall concludes

⁴⁶ Hall, 151.

⁴⁷ Hall, 152.

⁴⁸ Hall, 159-161.

that Nimitz would have excelled across all levels of perspective, and certainly did so at the higher levels of World War II.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

The study of greatness in leaders is one whose results do not easily cater to firm categorization. Researchers, social scientists, historians, and military analysts would all like to be able to put people into convenient boxes, each with prescribed descriptions. The reasons for one Admiral or General being successful, or more successful than others, is more reasonably attributable to a complex, and likely unmeasurable, integration of all factors. The successful operational level commander, like Admiral Nimitz, must possess the traits espoused by Clausewitz, and others, just as he must also exhibit the behaviours that will make him effective in the leader-follower relationship. To give credit to Keegan, it is understandable that a successful leader will be a product of his time and place in history, for if he is not, he would be unable to advance to the stage where he could be successful. Finally, the requirements for commanders, as noted by Hall, to understand and to function effectively within the appropriate level of perspective, will also determine a leader's success. The unanswerable question is how much of any one quality is required to ensure success? How compassionate and caring should you be? How much of a warrior demeanor must you exhibit and how frequently? How much humility or how much ego? How much can a training system infuse these characteristics or must they be self-taught and acquired? How much of one's upbringing must provide the leader with the right personality and how much can be added to throughout life's experiences? The answers to these questions will never be adequately provided and indeed a different formula for each

⁴⁹ Hall, 175-184. Two of Hall's other tables, on leadership traits and the comparison of leaders, are included as figures at the end of this paper.

individual may produce greatness in different ways. As noted by the esteemed officer-historian S.L.A. Marshall, “There is not one perfect life in the gallery of the great.”⁵⁰

What we can say about Nimitz, as noted in Potter’s eulogy above, is that he had extraordinary balance. He had all the right qualities in the right quantity. He was a man who you could like and respect. He had credibility. He was at ease with Presidents or the most junior sailor, and made them all feel at ease with him. He was humble, but determined. He would willingly listen to all advice and input, but when a decision was made you knew it had his stamp on it. He could provide effective, visionary leadership without over-controlling his subordinates. As Admiral Spruance said of Nimitz: “His personality, character and ability are those that any young man could emulate and make no mistake.”⁵¹ In short, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz was the right man, at the right place, at the right time.

⁵⁰ Marshall in James, 274.

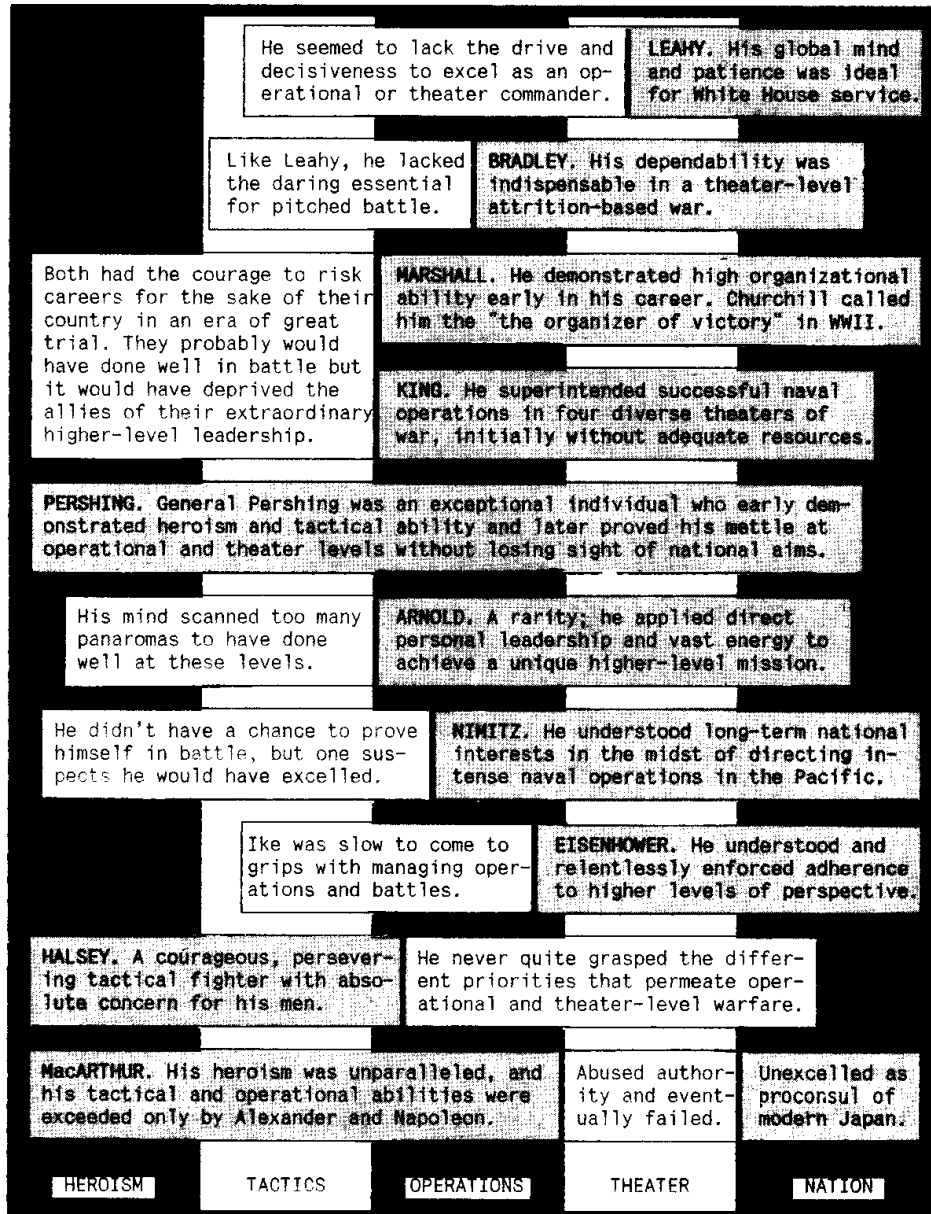
⁵¹ James, 74.

FIGURE #3 -- LEADERSHIP VERSUS LEVELS OF PERSPECTIVE ⁵²

	HEROIC LEVEL	TACTICAL & OPERATIONAL LEVELS	THEATER AND NATIONAL LEVELS
CHARACTER Perseverance Integrity Courage Judgment Decisions	Character is everything at this level; heroism is synonymous with courage. Heroic acts are almost spiritual in nature and earn respect regardless of the outcome.	The character appropriate for these levels varies. Battle leans to heroism; operations depend more on perseverance. Few men possess the range to do equally well on all counts.	Perseverance marks character here, but a lack of integrity will eventually weaken it. As such, heroism appropriate for this level tends to risk reputation more so than life.
THE MIND AS A FILTER Intelligence Perception Instruction Processing	Intelligence is not especially correlated with heroism in battle. Both geniuses and men of plain mind have shown great courage under fire, often at the cost of their lives.	Success in intense situations often depends on rapid processing and dissemination of information and decisions. Equally intense preparation can really count.	Because logistical factors play a dominant role at these levels and typically generate many conflicting priorities, the attributes of the mind are especially critical.
STYLE AND PERSONALITY Polemics of austerity versus amiability	Style has little to do with heroism, but it might in some circumstances indicate the motive for exercising courage, e.g., to save life versus to effect a goal.	Here, amiability is a better asset than austerity. Men must be led, and they will more readily follow if they can readily perceive humanity in their leaders.	By contrast, austerity seems essential at this level. It enables a leader to take a stand in the quicksand of politics, witness Pershing, Marshall, and King.
CONCERN FOR THE TROOPS Extent to which this is put into practice	If the motive is to save life at the risk of one's own, then the expression "greater love hath no man" applies. But if it is to save ego, failure can be tantamount to manslaughter.	This attribute is crucial at these levels. Lacking it, an officer may still succeed on occasion, but as a result he will likely encounter the intense hatred of his men.	Concern for the troops is equally critical here, but in concert with austerity, it is sometimes best exercised by decisions that result in the least cost in human life.

⁵² Hall, 160.

FIGURE #4 -- COMPARATIVE LEADERSHIP ⁵³



⁵³ Hall, 177.

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