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John A. Adams, *If Mahan Ran the Great Pacific War: An Analysis of World War Two Naval Strategy*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2008. Pp. x, 458. ISBN 978-0-253-35105-0.

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The Second World War in the Pacific was the greatest naval conflict in history. For nearly four years, the Japanese and American navies (the latter receiving minimal assistance from allied powers) dueled over that ocean's vast expanses, employing numerous fleets, hundreds of warships, thousands of aircraft, and hundreds of thousands of fighting men. This conflict would therefore appear to present a perfect opportunity to assess the validity of Alfred Thayer Mahan's concepts regarding naval warfare. Unfortunately, John A. Adams,<sup>1</sup> in *If Mahan Ran the Great Pacific War*, turns that idea on its head: he presumes all of Mahan's ideas to be gospel and then measures the performance of both nations' admirals against them. Not surprisingly, few officers in either navy fare well in this disappointing book's analysis. Also not surprisingly (except, perhaps, to the author), the book shows the problems of evaluating the conduct of war according to theoretical prescriptions.

*If Mahan Ran the Great Pacific War* seems not to have seen an editor's pen. Its title and subtitle are emblematic of larger difficulties: the former employs the nonidiomatic past tense rather than the past perfect;<sup>2</sup> the latter promises a book that is "An Analysis of World War II Naval Strategy," which it is not, since it omits Germany's U-boat campaigns, among other topics. These problems, apparent even before the reader opens the book's cover, are the prelude to a text that abounds with one- and two-sentence paragraphs, sentence fragments, and unfocused paragraphs with no coherent topic.

A good editor might also have caught some of the text's historical errors. For example, Adams refers throughout to American signals intelligence operations against Japan as "Ultra" (239 and passim), but this term appropriately refers only to a very narrow range of signals intelligence operations against *Germany*, not Japan. Adams also misstates casualty figures for the Battle of Okinawa in writing (414) that all Japanese troops were killed; it was in fact the only battle in which large numbers of them surrendered (ca. 30,000 of the 130,000 total).<sup>3</sup> Though relatively minor issues in Adams's larger thesis (that there were few Mahanians on either side), such errors will not inspire confidence in critical readers.

Most importantly, a competent editor might have saved Adams from contradicting his own conclusions, sometimes in the same paragraph. For example, he contends that "A Japanese victory at Guadalcanal would not have changed the war's outcome," yet, only three sentences later, that "victory at Guadalcanal in the fall of 1942 was Japan's last hope" (107). Such glaring inconsistencies are common in the book.

Adams presents the naval conflict in the Pacific as a giant war game over which Mahan is the ultimate umpire: "in private Captain Mahan might have cautioned the American admiral"; "if MacArthur could have ever stomached advice, Mahan might have gently edged him to the side of the room"; "Mahan might also have noted that Japan seemed to be bifurcating her fleet" (153, 162, 261). Such observations are not only stylistically annoying, creating an image of schoolmaster Mahan lecturing his students, they frequently presume that the admirals and generals Adams is evaluating had near-perfect intelligence. For example, his critique of Raymond Spruance's actions at the Battle of the Philippine Sea assumes the admiral knew both the condition of the Japanese mobile fleet as well as its operational plan (287-89). He presumes William F.

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<sup>1</sup> Adams is "an airline executive and longtime business strategist with an interest in the use of economic principles to analyze history [...] as an avocation he has extensively researched military strategy and tactics," according to the Indiana Univ. Press webpage announcing his forthcoming *The Battle for Western Europe, Fall 1944: An Operational Assessment* <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0916.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0916.htm)>.

<sup>2</sup> Required in the protasis of a past contrary-to-fact conditional.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb* (NY: Ticknor & Fields, 1992) 509-10.

Halsey must have known, due to the status of aircraft and air crew training, that the Japanese battleships, not the carriers, were the “center of gravity,” at the Battle of Leyte Gulf (352). And he assumes Yamamoto Isoroku, at the Battle of Santa Cruz Islands, had a clear understanding both of Halsey’s fleet’s condition and of his intentions (156–57). Of course, these commanders possessed no such knowledge, unlike Adams’s “schoolmaster” Mahan, viewing the war from his god-like perspective.

Some of Adams’s contradictions expose the problems of a purely Mahanian analysis of the war in the Pacific. In critiquing American strategic decision making in 1944, Adams concludes that the drive along the New Guinea coast toward the Philippines was strategically unimportant because “there was nothing in the South Pacific [*sic*] that was remotely likely to bring the Japanese fleet to battle” (260). This is certainly a Mahanian line of thought, but Adams offers no reason to think that bringing the Japanese fleet into battle was the *only* factor to be considered in setting strategy. In this and other instances, he simply accepts Mahanian strategic prescriptions. Moreover, he soon contradicts his entire critique when he acknowledges that the American invasion of the Marianas diverted the Japanese fleet from MacArthur’s landing at Biak to the Central Pacific (271).<sup>4</sup> So, apparently, it was possible that U.S. activity in the Southwest Pacific could instigate a fleet action there.

This blind acceptance of Mahan’s prescriptions leads Adams into other contradictions. He is sharply critical of the Japanese Navy’s decision to seek decisive combat in the event that the Americans invaded the Marianas:

Mahan certainly would have admired the [Japanese Navy’s] concentration of force. However, an inferior fleet should avoid battle with a superior enemy.... Captain Mahan’s writings repeated the importance of the fleet in being. As long as it remained a credible threat, it restricted the enemy’s freedom of action, which might delay an enemy victory but could not prevent it. One can imagine Captain Mahan glumly choosing this alternative in the hope that something better might show up. It would have been hard for a dispassionate analyst to see much opportunity in the Japanese position as the summer solstice approached (268).

Such a Mahanian assessment of the Japanese decision might also be made of the American decision to meet the Japanese fleet at Midway. Yet, in that case, Adams concludes that “Mahan truly would have been in awe of the bold decision of Admiral Chester A. Nimitz” (119). Nowhere does he explain why Mahan would have seen the American move as “bold” but that of the Japanese, under similar circumstances, as a glum alternative.

Adams’s analyses of the battles of the Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf offer a similar dichotomy. Using impeccable Mahanian logic, he sharply criticizes Raymond Spruance’s insistence on protecting the invasion fleet during operations in the Marianas in June 1944 and his belated efforts to seek out and attack the Japanese fleet during the Battle of the Philippine Sea (288–89). But, in evaluating William F. Halsey’s performance at Leyte Gulf, Adams proposes that Halsey should have split his fleet, thereby violating one of Mahan’s inviolable axioms (351). Yet he also makes an interesting observation regarding both of these controversial actions. At the Battle of the Philippine Sea,

Spruance refused to be pulled too far away from the invasion fleet and missed an opportunity to destroy Ozawa’s carriers. Halsey [at Leyte Gulf] allowed himself to be pulled away by Ozawa’s fleet, which was a shadow of its former self and almost precipitated a disaster by allowing Kurita’s battleships free passage to the invasion fleet.... [Halsey later commented that] “I wish that Spruance had been with Mitscher at Leyte Gulf and that I had been with Mitscher in the Battle of the Philippine Sea” (350).

In this conclusion, Adams implies that a sterile Mahanian analysis has its limits when one considers the personalities involved. He is more explicit in this regard only a few pages earlier when he concludes (albeit awkwardly) that

Viewing this battle [Leyte Gulf] from the Japanese perspective underscores the enormous pressure, the intense risk, the overwhelming uncertainty, and constant possibility of near instantaneous disaster that officers in all

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<sup>4</sup> See, among others, Ronald Spector, *Eagle against the Sun: The American War against Japan* (NY: Free Press, 1984) 251–52.

the war's naval battles had to withstand. As Mahan continually emphasized, the most important element in naval warfare is the trained and hardened officers that can continue to function with immediacy in an environment that would paralyze lesser men. In an information-rich hindsight, it is easy to criticize decisions that had to be made with only the information available (347).

This is a valuable insight, and Adams would have done well to heed it throughout his book.

*If Mahan Ran the Great Pacific War* has its strengths. For those who wish to understand Mahanian ideas without trudging through *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Adams offers a nice summary. The book also has wonderful maps that will help readers better grasp both operational and strategic issues. And, too, there is an interesting, if poorly written, comparison and assessment of the American and Japanese navies at war's start. Still, in the end, this is a disappointing work.