**HOW INTERSERVICE RIVALRY LED TO DIVIDED COMMAND IN THE WWII PACIFIC THEATER**

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In March 1942, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) established divided command between the Army and the Navy in the WWII Pacific theater. Army General Douglas MacArthur commanded the Southwest Pacific area, and Navy Admiral Chester Nimitz commanded the Pacific Ocean area. The three leading schools of thought on this issue involve the JCS attempting to increase chances of victory against Japan, personality problems between military officers, and interservice rivalry. I argue that interservice rivalry was the primary reason the JCS divided command. I support my argument by demonstrating that the JCS was in a position to know that divided command would hurt chances of victory, illustrating how personality problems may have arisen from interservice rivalries, and showing that neither the Army nor the Navy would accept unified command from the other service.

**INTRODUCTION**

In March 1942, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) established divided command between the Army and the Navy in the WWII Pacific theater. Army General Douglas MacArthur commanded the Southwest Pacific area, and Navy Admiral Chester Nimitz commanded the Pacific Ocean area. Throughout the war, divided command resulted in duplication of effort, delayed decisions, and inefficient allocation of resources (Morton 1961, 250).

This paper examines why the JCS adopted an inefficient command structure in the Pacific. The three leading schools of thought on this issue involve the JCS attempting to increase chances of victory against Japan, personality problems between military officers, and interservice rivalry. I argue that interservice rivalry was the primary reason the JCS divided command. Prior work on this subject has not attempted to assign importance to each of these three explanations. My argument will contribute to this scholarship by claiming that interservice rivalry was more important than the other two explanations. I support my argument by demonstrating that the JCS was in a position to know that divided command would hurt chances of victory, illustrating how personality problems may have arisen from interservice rivalries, and showing that neither the Army nor the Navy would accept unified command from the other service.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Scholars in the rationalist school of thought argue that the JCS adopted divided command in the Pacific to increase U.S. chances of victory against Japan. For example, Phillip Meilinger argues that divided command increased flexibility for the commanders and U.S. war planners (Meilinger 2010, 156). Meilinger also argues that divided command put MacArthur and Nimitz in competition with each other, incentivizing

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both leaders to exert more effort (Meilinger 2010, 156). Meilinger claims that divided command did not undermine coordination in the Pacific because Nimitz and MacArthur were still able to communicate about strategy.

Other scholars argue that personal conflicts between military officers led to divided command. For example, Kyle Beckman claims that General MacArthur, the leading candidate for commander of the Pacific in 1941, had a personality that infuriated many people (Beckman 2002, 20). MacArthur had a reputation for being egotistical and difficult to work with. John Gordon argues that JCS member Admiral King and many other military officers had personal problems with MacArthur (Gordon 2011, 315). During the 1941 Philippines defense, many perceived MacArthur as immature and antagonistic. Proponents of this school of thought argue that Admiral King and many other officers were unwilling to see him as the unified commander of the Pacific due to their personal problems with the General. Thus, the JCS split command between Nimitz and MacArthur to appease those who had personal conflicts with MacArthur.

Other scholars argue that divided command was the result of interservice rivalry between the Army and Navy. For example, Raymond W. Thorne points to the long-standing rivalry between the Army and the Navy as a reason neither service was willing to subordinate itself to the other (Thorne 1991). Instead, the only acceptable solution to both the Army and the Navy was to split command over the theater. James P. Drew argues that the structure of the JCS incentivized them to reach an interservice compromise (Drew 1997, 2). Many scholars point to how specific service interests caused both the Army and the Navy to seek command in the Pacific. Ronald H. Spector and Thomas B. Buell argue that the Navy needed to maintain its superiority in the Pacific theater, and could not accept subordination to Army command. Leonard Mosley argues that the Navy especially could not accept subordination after the humiliation of Pearl Harbor (Mosley 1982, 485). Scholars such as Grace Person Hayes and Michael Stephen Sherry argue that the Army also could not accept subordination to the Navy, as they wanted to establish credibility in the Pacific theater and preserve control over their resources (Hayes 1982, 96). William H. Bartsch argues that the Army had an interest in proving themselves after their defeat in the Philippines (Bartsch 2012).

**Rationalist School of Thought**
While proponents of the rationalist school of thought claim that divided command increased flexibility and competition, I argue these outcomes were still possible under unified command. Proponents of the rationalist school of thought argue that by not choosing a single commander, U.S. planners were flexible to choose which commander would lead the offense later in the war. They argue this flexible command structure forced Japan to defend itself from offensives in both the South Pacific and Eastern Pacific. Meilinger argues this flexibility was an advantage for the U.S., as the Americans had more resources to fight multiple offensives than the Japanese did to defend against
multiple offenses. Meilinger also argues that divided command increased the commanders’ efforts in the war, as both commanders wanted to claim their command was responsible for defeating Japan. However, establishing a single supreme commander in the Pacific would not preclude the JCS from establishing sub-commanders to encourage flexibility and competition. These sub-commanders could still launch multiple offensives against Japan. For example, Admiral Nimitz was the supreme commander of the Pacific Ocean areas, but he oversaw three sub-command areas.

Proponents of the rationalist explanation also emphasize that the divided command structure did not preclude coordination between the commanders. Nimitz and MacArthur were encouraged to cooperate (Meilinger 2010, 153). The JCS established themselves as ‘supreme commander’ in the Pacific. The JCS were able to direct a coordinated strategy in the Pacific and resolve disagreements between the two commanders. The set-up for the European theater effectively modeled how coordination between different commanders was possible. Prior to the war, leaders of the Allied countries established the Combined Chiefs of Staff to develop a strategy for the war and designate specific tasks to commanders. Mellinger argues coordination between the commanders in the Pacific was easier than in Europe, as the United States had sole authority over the Pacific theater, and only had to coordinate with itself, rather than coordinating with Allies.

Contrary to the rationalist school of thought, I argue that decision-makers should have foreseen that divided command would weaken coordination of information. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army and the Navy operated with divided command in the Pacific (Thorne 1991, 9). The Pearl Harbor attack came as a surprise to the military in part because of lack of communication between Army and Navy commanders in Hawaii. Army commanders assumed the Navy was conducting long-range reconnaissance, while Navy commanders assumed that the Army’s aircraft warning systems were activated (United States Government Printing Service 240-241). Both of those assumptions were inaccurate, but neither commander checked with the other one. This lack of information-sharing was likely to be repeated during the war, as the divided command structure also divided intelligence and logistics services for each commander (Garvin 2017, 32). One of the JCS members, General Marshall, recognized the implications of Pearl Harbor for command in the Pacific theater. “I am convinced that there must be one man in command of the entire theater,” he told the other JCS members after the attack on Pearl Harbor (Morton 1961, 160). Pearl Harbor also alerted President Roosevelt to the dangers of divided command, causing him to recommend to the JCS that they select a single commander for the Pacific theater (Hayes 1982, 93).

The JCS should have anticipated that divided command would reduce chances of victory against Japan by causing inefficient allocations of resources. Division of command also resulted in division of administrative work for allocating resources to the Pacific (Garvin 2017, 30). The Army and the Navy each had different systems for resource acquisition and supply in the beginning of 1942. The Navy’s supply sys-
tem was decentralized, and made decisions that were often impossible to calculate in advance. In contrast, the Army’s supply system was larger and more centralized. The Army and Navy utilized different shipping routes and ports. There was no channel in place for administrators in the Army and Navy to communicate about their supply shipments, creating redundancies in supplies and duplication of effort.

The JCS should have also anticipated that divided command would delay key decisions during wartime. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had four members. There was no head of the JCS, so all decisions had to be reached through lengthy debates attempting to find agreement among all members (Morton 1962, 250). The JCS supervised nine other committees including the Joint Intelligence Committee and Joint Strategic Survey Committee, limiting the amount of time they could devote to decision-making in the Pacific (Morton 1962, 231-232). The JCS was aware of how long they took to make decisions prior to the Pacific war. JCS member Admiral King refused to even send his initial draft of the proposal for divided command to the JCS because he thought deliberations would take too long (Hayes 1982, 99). He remarked that he wanted to “save the time that might be lost through the possibly prolonged discussions of the Planning Staff.” It took the JCS five weeks to make the final decision to utilize divided command in the Pacific (Morton 1961, 248). Delayed decisions would diminish the U.S.’s chances of victory, as Japanese forces advanced quickly. Japan captured the Admiralty Islands, Buka, Bougainville, Lae, and Salamaua in the five weeks before the JCS made the decision to divide command (Barlow 1994, 77).

PERSONALITY CONFLICTS SCHOOL OF THOUGHT
While the personality conflicts school of thought correctly identifies personal problems between MacArthur and other military leaders, many of these conflicts arose from interservice rivalries. Most of General MacArthur’s conflicts arose between him and the Navy. For example, Naval Admiral Hart grew frustrated with MacArthur during the Philippines campaign because MacArthur repeatedly made false reports, and the Navy refused to support him (Gordon 2011, 315). Hart remarked that “Douglas [MacArthur] is no longer sane.” Similarly, Navy Lieutenant commander Knoll described MacArthur as “condescending” to the Navy throughout the Philippines campaign. The Navy was further offended by MacArthur’s refusal to grant any awards to Marine units that fought in the Philippines as he claimed, “the Marines had enough glory in World War I” (Thorne 1991, 47). MacArthur also insulted the Navy by claiming that “the term fleet cannot be applied to the elements of your command” (Thorne 1991, 10). Outside of the Navy, MacArthur was a popular figure. In WWI, the New York Times described MacArthur as “one of the ablest officers in the United States Army and one of the most popular” (Manchester 88). General Marshall respected MacArthur’s leadership (Mosley 1978, 485). Marshall remarked, “I don’t think I ever said an adverse word about General MacArthur” (Mosley 1978, 193). When MacArthur arrived in Australia in early 1942, he was met with a large celebration.

While personality problems likely influenced the JCS, historically, the Army
and Navy still divided command in instances when there were no personality conflicts. As far back as the American Civil War, there was divided command between the Union Army and Navy (Thorne 1991, 2). During World War I, military leadership proposed unifying Army and Navy command in Hawaii, but the proposal was rejected (Jablonsky 2010, 12-13). Again, in the interwar period, there were discussions of placing control of the Army and Navy under a single board, but these proposals were never adopted. Official doctrine outlining joint operations between the Army and the Navy prior to WWII called for cooperation between commanders rather than unity of command (Holzimmer 2005, 102).

**Interservice Rivalry School of Thought**

The Army and the Navy had a long-standing rivalry. The War and Navy departments had been separated since 1798 (Sherry 1975, 30). The Army and Navy competed for budgets every year. Interservice rivalry was evident in major American military operations throughout history. In 1864 in the American Civil War, the Union Army, and the Navy blamed failed attacks on each other’s incompetence. During the Spanish-American War in 1898, Army commanders refused to engage in joint operations with the Navy. In WWI, leaders from each service had multiple disputes, as each service felt that their contributions to the war had not been adequately recognized.

The interservice rivalry between the Army and the Navy escalated in the years leading up to WWII. First, competition over budgets increased after WWI. A series of fiscally conservative presidents cut the budget, increasing competition for resources between the services (Huntington 1961, 40-52). President Calvin Coolidge, for example, cut the defense budget from over $1 billion to only $750 million (Huntington 1961, 40). National sentiment against increased militarization after WWI caused further restrictions on the services (Sherry 1975, 3). Budget cuts were especially difficult for the services in this time period, as the United States military was beginning to increase its global presence in the first half of the twentieth century (Daso 2014, 60).

Second, the increasing importance of military aircraft during and after WWI escalated interservice rivalry. Both the Army and the Navy had their own air force divisions and wanted to emerge as the leading air power. Budget limitations meant that there was not enough money to modernize the air force of both the Army and the Navy (Wildenberg 2014). Throughout the interwar period, the Army and Navy had multiple disputes over which service’s air power should be prioritized.

Interservice rivalry within the Joint Chiefs of Staff contributed to their decision to divide command. The JCS was composed of two Army officers and two Navy officers (Drew 1997, 8). While JCS members were supposed to be neutral about their services, they regularly showed favoritism towards their own service (Porter 1978, 326). JCS members’ rank was based on the support of their service. If they acted in ways displeasing to their service, they could be removed. Service favoritism within the JCS was evident in their proposals to fight German submarines in early 1942. Naval Admiral King was a strong advocate of using the navy to conduct anti-submarine war-
fare (Thorne 1991, 37). Army Generals Marshall and Arnold, on the other hand, were strong advocates of using the Army’s air power to strike German U-boats. The JCS exhibited similar service biases when selecting commanders for the Pacific. Marshall was a strong advocate for MacArthur as the sole commander of the region, while King advocated for a Navy commander (Drew 1997, 2).

The Navy was unwilling to cede their preeminent position in the Pacific by subordinating themselves to an Army commander. The Pacific theater had traditionally been viewed as a “special preserve” of the Navy (Spector 1985, 206). From the 1920s, the Navy led strategic planning for a “primarily naval” war against Japan (Hayes 1982, 4). Japan was an island nation, thus any major offense against it had to involve amphibious warfare (Barlow 1994, 77). The Navy argued that only their commanders had sufficient technical knowledge of amphibious warfare to adequately lead the Pacific campaign. After twenty years of preparation for a naval war in the Pacific and claiming that only the Navy had the expertise to lead, ceding the entire theater to Army command would undermine the Navy’s credibility (Buell 1980, 173).

The Navy especially needed to maintain preeminence in the Pacific after their humiliation at Pearl Harbor. The Navy lost eight of their nine Pacific battleships and over 2,000 men during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The Navy perceived this attack a humiliation for their service (Beckman 2002, 6). The Navy was further humiliated by the blame placed on them after the attack. President Roosevelt chose to turn the Navy into a scapegoat for the attack, rather than the Army (Mosley 1982, 184). Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Kimmel received most of the blame for the attack (Drew 1997, 10). He was fired and replaced by Admiral Nimitz. Admiral King was especially bitter about the firing of Kimmel. He remarked that if Kimmel were to be fired, Marshall and the Army commanders would also have to be fired. Public newspapers reported that the Navy’s incompetence was responsible for the attack (Thorne 1991, 16). The Navy wanted to lead the war against Japan both to enact revenge for Pearl Harbor and to prove themselves against the Army (Beckman 2002, 6).

The Army also could not cede the Pacific theater to the Navy without damaging its credibility. MacArthur was the senior commander in the Pacific (Hayes 1982, 96). The Army did not want to subordinate themselves to a lower-ranked commander. Moreover, Army commanders resented that the Navy treated the Pacific theater as their own “rightful domain” (Thorne 1991, 45). The Army led war planning for a land-based defense of Australia and other South Pacific allies after WWI (Hayes 1982, 4). Thousands of Army troops had already been placed in the South Pacific, and the Army did not want to switch their command to a Naval officer (Morton 1961, 10). The Army needed to regain credibility in the Pacific after defeat in the Philippines in 1941 and 1942. Despite multiple reports citing deteriorating conditions in the Philippines in 1940, General Marshall made the decision to continue the military’s defense of the Philippines (Bartsch 2012, 12). MacArthur committed the U.S. military to defend the entire Philippines, rather than just the forces at Manila Bay. In February
of 1942, it became clear to many military and governmental officials that the U.S. would suffer defeat in the Philippines (Gordon 2011, 190). MacArthur, however, refused to withdraw. MacArthur’s decision not to evacuate the Philippines resulted in the loss of hundreds of Americans and thousands of Filipino lives (Manchester 1978, 233). MacArthur pledged that he would return to liberate the Philippines (MacArthur 2012). To follow through on its commitment and regain credibility after its defeat, the Army wanted to lead the campaign to liberate the Philippines from Japan (Hayes 1982, 99). When drafting the zones of control, Marshall explicitly asked that the Philippines be included in MacArthur’s sphere. The Army also wanted a command in the Pacific to protect its resources. Army officials resented that the Navy had a larger budget almost every year (Sherry 1975, 23). To expand their post-war budget, Army officials wanted to prove that they were as vital to national security as the Navy. They especially wanted to prove their capabilities as an air power to justify post-war expansion of aviation budgets. Army leaders feared that they would be forced to hand over their B-17s, their most valuable form of air power, to the Navy if the Navy had command (Morton 1961, 10). Army leaders also feared that Naval command would result in more casualties for the Army. Navy commanders’ strategy was to take Pacific islands and have Army forces hold the islands. This strategy would cost the Army resources and soldiers (Thorne 1991, 48).

**CONCLUSION**

One weakness in my argument is that it does not account for the role President Roosevelt played in the decision to adopt divided command. While the JCS drew up the proposal for divided command, President Roosevelt signed it off (Cook Jr 1978, 55-61). The JCS was influenced by interservice rivalries due to its structure, but President Roosevelt was largely insulated from the rivalries. Thus, it is puzzling why he agreed to this command structure. Future research can investigate possible explanations for President Roosevelt’s decision to agree to divided command.

My argument has two implications for future decision-makers. First, future war planners must keep in mind how service allegiances may cause them to act against the national security interests of the United States. While some degree of interservice rivalry is inevitable, decision-makers must be able to set aside service favoritisms in situations critical to American national security. The United States was still able to win in the Pacific WWII theater with a divided command structure, but delayed decisions and weakened coordination cost U.S. soldiers their lives and resulted in a more costly war. Second, decision-makers should investigate reforms to reduce interservice rivalries. These could include unifying some of the leadership of the Army and Navy, increasing joint training, and finding ways to reduce competition over budgets and weapons. In future wars, if decision-makers continue to prioritize service biases over national security, interservice rivalry may prevent the United States from winning.


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