

## **PACIFIC BLOCKADE: A LOST OPPORTUNITY OF THE 1930'S?**

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It seems to be unfortunately true that the epidemic of world lawlessness is spreading. When an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community approves and joins in a quarantine in order to protect the health of the community against the spread of the disease.<sup>1</sup>

Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt's quarantine address, which was delivered in Chicago on 5 October 1937, failed to outline any detailed national or international program which would deter potential aggressors, this particular speech was at least a frank and open invitation to military and political leaders at home and abroad to reappraise the tenets of isolationism and appeasement which had become imbedded in the basic structure of their nations' foreign policies. Perhaps the President was not individually ready to initiate or direct an international program of collective action but, by 1937, he was becoming obviously uncomfortable within the confines of the Neutrality Acts where, to some extent, he had placed himself and the country.

Japan's earlier refusal to abide by her naval limitations and the gradual collapse of the League of Nations, together with the years of creeping conflicts up to 1937, had a profound and discouraging effect upon that Kellogg-Briand world which had been assured,

with engaging naivety, that war was outlawed. It was also becoming apparent that the United States could not really snuggle under a blanket of isolation and tuck out the international community. The President, therefore, was leaning toward closer ties with peaceful nations—but the American public was not ready.

Isolationists, pacifists, protectionists, and internationalists of every hue examined the body of the President's speech and found, according to their bent, some reason to reject it. Spectres of embargoes, sanctions, boycotts, foreign entanglements, neutrality violations, and the abandonment of the Monroe Doctrine stalked across the pages of America's newspapers and periodicals. These critics continued to haunt the President until, with discouraging finality, the abortive Brussels' Conference of late 1937 disclosed that unity of effort was an unstable commodity in both the domestic and the international market.

This germ of isolation, which had infected the country since World War I, had not altogether spared the officers of the United States Navy, even as late as 1937. One wrote:

The New World with the support of the United States is completely self-sufficient and impregnable to almost any type of attack. The United States and the

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New World remain intact in the face of potential world destruction.<sup>2</sup>

**Collective Blockades.** Although many courses of positive action could have been effected under the President's "quarantine" banner, there is an obvious facet of naval involvement which is particularly noticeable by its absence. The concept of *collective* pacific blockades, which had been formerly employed with some success, was not considered as a possible ocean strategy against aggressors between 1935 and 1939. Was this because of international reluctance, military inability, illegality (under international law), or a genuine failure to review the operational practicality of suppressing aggression through limited confrontation on the high seas?

As a precedent for action there had been about 20 *collective* pacific blockade cases effectively recorded before World War II. In 1827 Russia, France, and Great Britain, acting in concert, blockaded the Morea to prevent the Turkish fleet from coming out of Navarino during one of the many Turkish-Greek disputes. Again, in 1833, the French and British forces blockaded the Netherlands until the Dutch carried out an 1831 treaty which provided for the independence of Belgium.

From 1845-1850 the French and the British blockaded Uruguay to cut off Argentine supplies to the Oribe forces; and in 1897 Britain, France, Austria, Germany, Italy, and Russia blockaded Crete to prevent other nations from delivering weapons to Greek insurgents. These collective blockades were both pacific and effective and demonstrated how *combined* naval action could create stability within an area.<sup>3</sup>

The League of Nations also could have directed a collective pacific blockade based on its covenant and the principle that "any state or states may blockade the coasts and ports of an-

other state in time of peace to coerce the latter into acting in accordance with the wishes of the blockading state or states."<sup>4</sup>

Great Britain and the United States, for example, had recently acquiesced to this legal gambit when Japan set up a "pacific blockade on 25 August 1937 of the territory between the mouth of the Yangtze and Swatow for all Chinese vessels and nonpeaceful cargo of third states."<sup>5</sup>

By the spring of 1938, then, the international legality of collective pacific blockades was generally unquestioned; the naval forces of the nonaggressor members of the League of Nations, together with the United States Navy, was superior to the collective navies of Japan, Germany and Italy; the violation of the Versailles Treaty and the Kellogg-Briand Pact provided sufficient aggravation for all other signatories to demand a cessation of hostile acts; and the world seemed ready, if not really eager, to listen to advocates of containment. It is therefore surprising that naval officers and seapower savants—including President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill—did not at least gravitate toward the advantages of using their combined naval forces as a threat against the greedy nations, particularly since the success of collective pacific blockades had been well documented.

**Enforcement and Theory.** Admittedly the use of blockade as a weapon is hazardous for it can be as easily pointed in error toward the saintly as in honor toward the sinful. There are, nevertheless, certain singular advantages in using pacific blockades:

1. Pressure can be applied on actual or potential aggressors away from territorial boundaries by warships of the blockading states.

2. Economic restrictions are effected without directly involving the native populace in conflict.

3. Military units can be maintained in nonsovereign waters.

4. International decisions may gravitate toward areas less combatant in nature than war.

5. The alternate avenues of arbitration, mediation, and conciliation can be thoroughly explored before war becomes inevitable.

The theory of pacific blockade also has exceptional attraction. It is usually bloodless, which appeals to the humane; it is done with a minimum of military force, which entices economists and politicians; and it is imposed on the sea, away from the territory of the offending state, which results in an irresistible charm for statesmen and naval advocates. Admiral Powers has written:

Although it has been stated that unilateral pacific blockade is no longer permissible for an individual member of the United Nations, the possibility of one should not be dismissed. A unilateral declaration of pacific blockade which was stated to be in the interest of world peace, which was justified by the action of the nation blockaded, and which was accepted by the world, should be upheld.<sup>6</sup>

By 1937, a similar posture of enforcement which did not directly threaten the political structure of another nation nor intrude upon its sovereignty with armed forces may have been the only rational answer to overt aggressors.

No attempt has been made to charge, in retrospect, that American leaders or naval officers were delinquent in not publicly proposing that collective pacific blockades were a panacea for early Axis aggressions. Neither is there a directed verdict that collective pacific blockades could have been successfully effected or that their initiation would have thwarted or delayed the ambitious designs of Italy, Germany, or Japan. It is merely that the lack of naval

affiliation with quarantine bears scrutiny, not only because of the natural affinity between naval power and foreign relations, but because writers, both then and now, have neglected to advocate the possibility of using seapower and collective pacific blockades as an obstacle to expansionist movements.

**Navy Posture in the 1930's.** The primary interests of the United States Navy in the 1930's were in the funding of a badly needed shipbuilding and research program and in the tactical training and operational readiness of its officers and men against possible future adversaries.

If the United States Navy had been modernized and brought to the parity limits allowed by the Washington and London Conferences, perhaps her sea supremacy over all other nations, except Great Britain, would have encouraged adventures in power ploys abroad. At least, such leadership would have issued a temptation to use this force in international discussions by 1937—despite the isolationist sentiment that might have refused to sanction its actual application. Unfortunately, the American Fleet was approximately 65 percent of treaty strength at this time, while the Japanese Fleet approached 95 percent; and, even when marines were being sent to Shanghai in August 1937, the Asiatic Fleet was only a modest force. It was not until after Great Britain entered World War 'II that President Roosevelt asked Congress to expand the Navy beyond the old treaty limits or to beef up the island outposts in the Pacific.

The pretense of naval superiority through ceiling limitations had, in reality, severely handicapped the United States. The Navy had neither the ships nor men to enforce a *unilateral* pacific blockade against Italy in 1935, and it was even less capable of effecting such action against Japan by 1937.

There were, however, adequate grounds for proposing that the Presi-

dent's quarantine might be translated into the formidable posture of *collective* pacific blockades. While such a plan would have been more effective if it had been initiated against Italy in 1935, continued against Germany in 1936, and used in its third phase against Japan in 1937, there was still an opportunity for a forthright combined naval program in early 1938 if future European allies had joined the United States in a relatively moderate confrontation of the three major aggressors before Munich.

It is easy to discard moderate sea-power proposals as futile because they could not have altered the inevitable course of history. By 1937, for example, the Nine Power Treaty had crumbled, initial aggression had been tolerated, and the U.S. Neutrality Acts were a stern reality; but the leaders of many nations seem to have been awakening to the need for action, even if they were divided or completely unaware of how their efforts could be directed.

The imposition of *collective* pacific blockades, therefore, still might have been a valuable strategy as a response to the President's quarantine quandary. It would have required delicate diplomacy, a strong legal position within the restraints of international law, coordinated naval tactics, and exceptional leadership by the heads of nations who contributed unit support. Perhaps these elements could have led public opinion into the peace offensive toward which

President Roosevelt dedicated his later efforts.

An examination of combined allied naval strengths and the suitability of collective naval blockades indicates that the formulation of a *combined* sea-power posture would have been one practical application of quarantine under international law—though certainly not the only possible bulwark to the cupidity of the Axis leaders from 1935 to 1939.

However, after Great Britain determined to recognize Italy's conquest of Ethiopia and Hitler occupied Austria, there was no longer a major detour around Munich. No leaders sincerely desired to ratify aggression, but neither did they wish to embrace conflict. Collective action, while contemplated, never became a matter of active military involvement. Pacific blockades, while logical, were not equated with quarantine by naval or civilian scholars. The fleeting opportunity to test quarantine as a deterrent to aggression passed over the heads of seapower advocates from October 1937 until October 1962.

Since establishment of the United Nations, claims coercively to blockade are to be measured against the requirements of self-defense, enforcement action by regional arrangements, or police action by the organized community. The position of quarantine, however, as a collective pacific blockade, still remains nebulous.

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## NOTES

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2. Howard Gray Bronson, "Sea Power and World Peace," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, December 1937, p. 1697.
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4. Alfred E. Hogan, *Pacific Blockade* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), p. 70.
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6. Robert D. Powers, Jr., "Blockade: for Winning without Killing," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 1958, p. 66.