Dwarkesh Podcast #87 - Sarah Paine EP 2: Why Japan Lost (Lecture & Interview)

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Before I get going, I've got to make a disclaimer. You can see it written up there: What I'm saying are my ideas. They don't necessarily represent the US government, the US Navy department, the US Department of Defense, let alone where I work, the Naval War College. You got it? This is just me here. Nobody else.

Alright: Americans have a penchant for what I call half-court tennis, which is: they like to analyze international affairs and wars by focusing on Team America – what Americans did or didn't do – and then that explains causation in the world.

And Americans, on the other hand, their beloved sport, I believe, is football. And those people who love football, many Americans, my understanding of it – I'm just someone who reads books, I don't follow football – that's disqualifying, I suppose –

But anyhow, Americans who follow football, they study both sides, right? They look at their home team, but then they also look at not just one opposing team but many down to the individual player and they would no more follow the football game by looking at one half of the football field. And yet Americans when we do foreign policy, that's often what we do and it gets us into all kinds of trouble. For instance in the Iraq war, Americans thought that the Republican guard was going to be really tough. And it turns out it wasn't so tough. But then there was this post-conventional phase, insurgency that went on and on and on that surprised Americans.

Well, the problem isn't actually a new one. In World War II, Americans were terribly surprised by the things that Japanese did. Starting with Pearl Harbor, right? That was a surprise. But also it was the entire way the Japanese fought the war. The way they fought to the last man. The suicides. The brutality. Not only to the POWs, civilians, but into their own wounded.

And the question is, is there any way to anticipate in advance how other people are gonna behave? Is there any way to get a sense of the other side of the tennis court net? Now, here are the two gurus of warfare. One is Sun Tzu for Asia. And the other one, Clausewitz, is the big guru of warfare in the West. And both of them would say, hey, you want to understand the other side. You've got to make a net assessment. What's that? You would look at political, military, geographic, economic factors, the strengths and weaknesses of all sides to get a sense of things.

And today I'm going to make a case for culture. You need to look at that as well. And it's often said that mirror imaging is not what you're supposed to do. What's mirror imaging? It's... we get into a situation and then I decide what I think you're going to do based on what I would do. I project me and mirror [it] on you. And that doesn't work so well. Okay. If I'm not supposed to generalize on the basis of my experience, what am I supposed to do instead?

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I'm going to get at this problem today. How do you analyze the other side of the tennis-court net by looking at Japanese behavior in the thirties and forties. But the method of analysis I'm using, you could apply to anyone you want, you wanna think about Russians today or whatever, you can apply it that way.

So culture, it's important, but it's as amorphous as it is important. For instance, if I'm going to try to figure out the defining characteristics of another culture, it would be difficult to figure out what the list is of all the different things I would need to look at. And even if I could come up with that list, still, how would I figure out how that would work in something like warfare? Hard to know. But the difficulty of the problem doesn't make it go away.

And so we're going to look at it today, and we're going to look at Japanese theorists and belief systems, and that if you believe these things, how this influences your practice. Alright, before I get going here, or actually, I am going to get going here. Tojo Hideki said on December 1st, 1941, that our country stands on the moment, the threshold of glory or oblivion. He got that right, and he's in an imperial conference where he is confirming with Hirohito that Pearl Harbor is going to be a go, but he felt that Japan really needed to do something rather than being ground down, being passive.

And here is Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, who was the man who came up with the operational plan for Pearl Harbor. He thought it had really long odds of being successful. General Tojo gave it a 50-50 chance. Admiral Yamamoto wasn't even sure that it was that good. But he felt it was the best possible plan for Japan to get out of its predicament.

Now, from a Western point of view, this makes no sense. You're talking about getting the United States potentially into a war with Japan that's already overextended in China. Who does this? Either you need to ratchet back the policy objective and/or you need to downgrade your strategy to something a little [less] costly or risky. And I suppose we can go, "Oh, they're stupid." Okay, I guess if I call you stupid that makes me so smart because I can denigrate you. Explains nothing. So, rather than do that, they're very intelligent men. And why are they doing these things? Why do they consider their actions rational? And rational in what context?

So this is what I'm going to be up to. And I can start with a little story to illustrate my point. In the summer of 1943, this is after the battles of the Solomons, New Guinea, Guadalcanal, they're all over with. The Imperial Japanese Army had a war college, and an instructor comes into class one day, and he says, from now on the curriculum's changed. The main emphasis is going to be countering U.S. tactics instead of, what they had been teaching, was Soviet tactics. And it will become the A course. If anyone can teach this, go ahead, because I don't know a damn thing about it.

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Talk about being unprepared for seminar. And then think about it. Where are the Japanese actually fighting most of the time? What is the country that most matters to them at the end of the day? It would be China. And that's not what their war colleges are studying. Something's up here.

Now, they're clearly making a really bad net assessment about the United States. Okay, this country also is known for lousy net assessments. I don't believe ours about Vietnam was particularly good either. And that's one part of the problem.

So here's my game plan for this evening. I'm first going to talk about traditional Japanese theorists and then it's going to be talking about Japanese practice - how if you believe, if you have this belief system, how explanatory it is for practice. This is my game plan right now.

So the Japanese don't have just the one book like Sun Tzu's "The Art of War," or Clausewitz's "On War." What they have is Bushido, Code of the Samurai. It's a whole literature, and it was written in the Tokugawa period, which, quite ironically, was a period known for peace, not warfare. Never mind. And what's interesting about this literature from a western perspective, it's really not about military strategy. It's about deportment. It's how a samurai should conduct himself. And this reflects Japanese values and the things that they emphasize..

And so I'm going to go through it with you. And starting, here's the game plan on the theorists: first I'm going to talk about the philosophical origins of bushido, then the values that underpin it, and then the operational preferences that grow out of it.

That's the game plan for first half. And I'm going to use as my cultural bridge this man, Nitobe Inazō, who wrote a book much later in 1900, "Bushido: Soul of Japan." Why am I doing this? Because he provides concise definition of Bushido, and you can see he's an important figure in Japan. Not everybody gets their mug on the 5,000 yen note, so he's an important figure in Japan.

He had spent 18 years abroad, and he had received higher education in Japan and a variety of Western institutions. He married, believe it or not, I don't make up these things, a Philadelphia Quaker, and he converted to Christianity. And he spent his life trying to serve as a cultural bridge, and that's how I'm going to use him today.

And what he said is, unlike in the West, where notions of morality come from religion, in Japan they come from Bushido. And what is it? It's a code of, chivalrous code of honor for the warrior class, these precepts of knighthood. And from this, there are three pillars of Bushido according to Nitobe.

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They're Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism. From Buddhism, it's where you see Japanese fatalism, the origin of it. And here you have Nitobe saying, it's this “calm trust in fate, a quiet submission to the inevitable”, a “friendliness with death”. And it strikes Westerners reading this Bushido literature, is a preoccupation with death. That, for instance, Clausewitz will talk about violence in warfare, but he's not interested in what constitutes an honorable death, let alone choreographing a soldier's final moments. Different culture.

And from Buddhism, there are four noble truths of Buddhism. One is that existence is suffering, pessimistic view of this life. Second, it's caused by craving and attachment, so don't cling to this life or the things in it. It's all ephemeral. It's like a cherry blossom, blooms for a day and then it's gone. And, but there's a good ending to it all, which is nirvana. And how do you get there? The fourth noble truth is through forms of right conduct. So, the emphasis isn't on what you achieve in your life. It's how you lead it. It's a focus on deportment. It's different from the West.

Second pillar, Shinto, is this extreme patriotism, reverence for the emperor and the third pillar is Confucianism, these imported ideas from China. And what Confucianism is at heart, of how it’s organizing a society and regulating it through interlocking social obligations, hierarchical, and through ritual and etiquette.

So in the West, there's much talk about equality. Right? And in the east, it's duty. It's what you owe other people. In the east, there is no such thing as social- in China, in Japan- of equality. Even twins have a birth order. And it's not about freedom either. It's about what you owe others.

So, if you think that these value systems seem really different, yeah, no kidding. It has nothing to do with the Greco-Roman Judeo-Christian West. Completely different value system. And so, Alice, welcome to Wonderland. Buckle up, we're off for a ride.

And I'm going to start, here's my first piece of the Tokugawa literature, Yamamoto Tsunetomo's "The Hagakure" that he wrote in the early 18th century. It translates variously as “Hidden Leaves”, “Hidden by the Leaves”. And in it, he is describing, I'm going to read you some short passages from it all. What was he? He was a retainer for a daimyo, a feudal lord in Japan. He hadn't actually done any fighting, even though he's writing all about it. So if you don't do, what do you do? You publish.

And I will tell you what the man had to say. One of the first things is this preoccupation with death. And here is Yamamoto: "The way of the samurai is imagining the most sightly way of dying. Merit lies more in dying for one's master than in striking down the enemy. The way of the samurai is found in death. It is not necessary to gain one's aim, but if you live on without achieving it, it's cowardice. However, if you don't gain your aim and die, that's okay."

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This is really different from Clausewitz, where it's all about achieving the policy objective. It's not about how the soldier's leading his life. And here you can see the consequences of this, right? If you're focusing on no fears of death, and if you can't succeed, living on is a disaster. So, think of the banzai charges. When Japanese remnants would go headlong into oncoming machine gun fire, knowing full well what was going to happen. This is not the way other armies have behaved. Different value system.

In addition to death, the Bushido literature's emphasis is on honor. Back to Yamamoto. "The way of avoiding shame is different. It's simply death. Even if it seems certain that you will lose, retaliate." Think of General Tojo and Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku. And here's the, if you suffer a catastrophic defeat, here's the solution. In the event of a mortifying failure, you're gonna wind up committing suicide. 'Cause the alternative, if you live on in shame, you're bringing everyone you're associated with shame.

So how does the suicide work? It's seppuku, hara-kiri. The Samurai who's doing it kneels down with short sword, he plunges it into his belly tries to do a full revolution. And then his second, usually a close associate, takes the long sword, if he does it right, one sweep, head in lap, upright corpse, blood everywhere.

Diplomats in the 19th century, Western diplomats, were told to witness this. If a samurai had murdered a Westerner, okay, the diplomats had to come in and watch the proceedings. They just about lost their lunch. So the Japanese think that they are showing, and what the Westerners think they're seeing, aren't aligning.

And I'm going to use Nitobe to be the cultural bridge. He said, "in our minds, this mode of death is associated with the instances of nobles, deeds and most touching pathos. So this form of death assumes a sublimity and becomes a symbol of new life." It's a way to escape from disgrace. And in Japanese literature, there is the tragic hero who is pursuing noble but unattainable aims, and rather than making disagreeable compromises, goes down in flames.

This is what seppuku is all about and Nitobe is saying look, death involving a question of honor was accepted in bushido as a key solution to many complex problems. And you can think in World War II, yeah, it was. Complex problems like battle plans not working out and a war that was truly not working out. And you can see the suicide going on both individual and group. And I remember going in the caves in Okinawa and understanding how that works because you could see a lot of the damage. If your commanding officer decides to commit suicide and tosses a grenade in the right direction, the entire room goes with him.

All right, so in addition to death and suicide and honor, we've got loyalty. It's another key value. I'm back to Yamamoto: "Being a good retainer is nothing other than being a supporter of one's lord. A man is a good retainer to the extent that he earnestly places importance in

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his master. Having only wisdom and talent is the lowest tier of usefulness." So much for Silicon Valley. "For a warrior, there is nothing other than thinking of his master."

And so back in the day it's thinking of your feudal Lord and more recent times it's prioritizing your company over family. In China, it's the reverse - priority is family over company. It's different cultures, different priorities.

Alright, there are strategic implications if this is your value system. This is what arises from it. First of all, you're looking at damage limitation, damage control, not in terms of the physical cost of losing lives, having property blown up, but in terms of honor. Also there's a tendency to equate operational with strategic success. Operational success is "I win this battle here and now." Strategic success is, "okay, we're in a war for some reason".

What is the reason you're in the war? Japan's reasons for being in China had to do with containing communist expansion and also stabilizing the place so that they could make money out of business. So that's your strategic objective. It's not your operational one, but the Japanese Samurai are equating the two saying if I take this hill somehow it's automatically going to deliver the strategic objective. And in fact, they won most of the battles in China, but they lost that war.

Also, there's this focus on what constitutes an honorable death. The western focus of literature is all about preparing the field of battle in advance for success, whereas this literature is all focusing on what to do after disaster.

Here are some more implications. Once the Japanese are failing in battle, operational failure, they are on death ground. What does that mean? It means that... death ground means the only way you survive is if you fight harder. This is what's going on in Ukraine right now, is that when you decide you're going to annihilate an entire culture, you put people on death ground and then they have very few choices on what they do next.

It means for the Japanese to feel that they're on death ground when they're failing means they're not going to give up. They're going to fight brutally against overwhelming odds. So in the West, when we like to mirror image, we want to think of the rational actor with some kind of mathematically based cost benefit of when you should give up, when the costs are so high above whatever your value of the object is you ought to call it quits. Well that kind of calculation does not translate well across the divides between civilizations.

I've got a nice picture here of Lieutenant Onoda who had been hanging out in Philippine jungles for what, 30 years after the end of the war? Carrying on the war in isolation. I don't believe this is how most other armies work or soldiers in them. Different culture, different things you do with your life.

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And here is Sir William Slim, Field Marshal, British 14th Army, that he led in Burma, commenting on his experiences: "If 500 Japanese were ordered to hold a position, we had to kill 495, the last five committed suicide before we could take the place." And “it was this combination of obedience and ferocity that made the Japanese so formidable”.

Okay, this brings me to another value that's emphasized in Bushido: willpower. Back to Yamamoto: "There is nothing that cannot be done. The way of the Samurai is in desperateness. Simply become insane and desperate, and it'll somehow work out for you. One can accomplish any feat." Think of Pearl Harbor. And this emphasis on willpower and just trying harder, it denigrates strategy.

And here you see a picture of the supreme example of honor and loyalty and willpower - the kamikaze pilots. But if this is what you're doing, you're denigrating strategy. And here Yamamoto's talking about tactics, but it has operational and strategic implications. He says, "Learning such things as military tactics is useless. The way of the samurai is one of immediacy and it is best to dash in headlong. If one were informed of military tactics, he would have many doubts."

So the idea is if you think about these things in peacetime, you'll start hesitating in wartime. It won't work out for you if you do this. "During times of peace, when listening to the stories of battle, we should never say 'In facing such a situation, what would a person do?'" Well, so much for my job at the Naval War College. So much for the case studies. "No matter what the circumstances might be, once you be of the mind to win, once you'd be holding the first spear to strike."

So, here's the implications, if you believe this. What you're doing, it's a very unanalytical way to approach wars. It's all about, whatever it is you want, you just steel the will and go for it, and somehow you'll get it if you want. There's a lack of grand strategy. What's grand strategy? It's integrating all the instruments of national power, not just the army, or the army and the navy, which is what the Japanese are trying to do. But all instruments of national power in pursuit of - if the bigger aim is to stabilize China and keep the communists out, there ought to be some diplomacy and some other things going on. But that's not what's happening in the samurai literature. It's a focus on the military instrument exclusively.

So, I'll give you an example of how this works out. Before the Imperial Japanese Army and the Imperial Japanese Navy invaded French Indochina, neither one of them did a little study saying, "Hey, if we do that, let's check the other side of the tennis court net and what other people, how they might react." They just steel the will and march right on in. Okay, that triggered the U.S. 100% oil embargo. That's a problem. Strategy operational success, strategic mess.

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Focusing on just the operational level is the basis for this ill-founded optimism with which the Japanese just took territory after territory without saying, "Hey, what about the cost of actually occupying these places?" Oh, we're going for these places for resources. So maybe we ought to check it out with the finance ministry and others about how we're ever going to get these resources back home? None of that's going on. It's a disaster for them.

Okay. I'm going to talk about a couple of secondary theorists. One of them is Taira Shigesuke, who is a contemporary of Yamamoto because he provides a really concise definition of the operative values of samurai culture. Only three things are considered essential: loyalty, duty, and valor. So steadfastly loyal as to disregard his own life.

What he's actually talking about is group loyalty. In the West, the basic unit composing society is the individual. Well, in the East, it's the group. And group interests take primacy over individual interests. And for the Japanese, society is divided by in-groups and out-groups. The most basic in-group, biggest overarching one, is the Japanese people vis-a-vis everybody else. But within Japan everybody comes from a different province, a different locality. They go to different educational institutes. They graduate from different kindergarten classes, I kid you not, and college classes. If they work for different companies or they work for the military, they're in different branches.

And you also have family loyalties and you owe each of these nested and overlapping groups different obligations, and sometimes these obligations conflict. And if they're really - if the conflicts are really awful, that's another reason for committing suicide.

And then if you look at the Japanese language - the moment a person opens their mouth to speak to another Japanese, you can immediately listen to the grammatical forms that are being used, the specific word choices to know what's the degree of hierarchy, like where do they sit in this unequal hierarchy and whether it's in-group, out-group.

So everybody feels, or most people feel, some level of group loyalty. This is human. But in Japan, the levels of membership are much more finely calibrated and they're re-emphasized by these social, cultural and linguistic reasons. So this group membership and stove-piping ultimately is going to be a much stronger feature of Japanese culture than some other places.

All right. Last theorist is Miyamoto Musashi who unlike the other two actually did a little fighting. He was born a little earlier and he was a master samurai who taught people martial arts. And from him you get a sense of some of the operational preferences deriving from these values and I'm going to go through all of these in turn.

First is risk intolerance because remember at the beginning I started with the two flag officers saying "well, we're going to do this war in the Pacific when it's unlikely we're going to

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succeed but we're going to do it anyway". And here is Miyamoto: "Furthermore, to fight even five or ten people single-handedly in duels, that's what my military science is all about. So what's the difference between the logic of one person beating up ten people and a thousand people beating ten thousand?" Logistics, my friend, but never mind.

And then another thing that he emphasizes, and in addition, don't expect long odds to deter the Japanese back in the day. Surprise is another one - a situation that has stalemated and is going nowhere, which is what the China theater was for the Japanese. And how do you get out of it? And the answer that Miyamoto has is: not come up with a new policy objective, but come up with a tactic that'll somehow put your enemy off balance and then get what you want that way.

And the way the Japanese did this was often by opening a new theater in a war, by surprising people by the new places that you were going to start engaging in military operations. And here's how it worked: China had been a failed state since 1911. And it had had an escalating series of warlords fighting each other in this multilateral civil war and the Japanese were appalled particularly after the United States passed the Hawley-Smoot Tariff of 1930 that cut them off from international trade.

So then they're thinking, now what? Well we're going to need an empire big enough to survive since no one's going to trade with us. And so they invade all of Manchuria in 1931 and they have it pretty much stabilized by 1933. So okay, that was surprise number one, but the rest of China's a mess and the Japanese - it's coalescing into a bilateral communist-nationalist, nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek, communists under Mao Zedong fight with increasing dosages of Soviet aid and the Japanese are appalled with all this.

And so it's time to surprise everybody again in 1937. And that's when they invade all the way down the Chinese coast and up the Yangtze river. And it works: they take a lot of territory really fast, but then they get to the end of the railway system. Oh, and by the way, China's not pacified. It's just churning and so now Japan is even more overextended. As a result of doing that, Russian aid goes up and then you're going to get US aid in there.

So the problem's actually getting worse. Time for another surprise - really big one on that infamous day in December '41. It wasn't just Pearl Harbor. That's Team America focusing only on Team America. The Japanese attacked all across the Pacific that day.

Uhh, okay. Now what? Here, China had never been able to threaten the Japanese home islands. Well the United States - here, the United States was totally isolationist. Most Americans couldn't find Japan on the map. Well, after Pearl Harbor, they sure could. And suddenly, the United States isn't isolationist anymore, and they're coming to get the Japanese. So, you can see the samurai values in operation here; "Just try harder". "More dosages of willpower". "Eventually you'll win or you'll die trying". Okay.

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Another operational preference that you can see, which is these, [inaudible] surprise or preemptive attacks. And this is how Japan began all of its wars. The First Sino-Japanese War and the Second Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese War, and the Pacific War. This is how all of them begin.

And finally, Miyamoto offers some advice on how you break the enemy willpower. And in this case, you've already won conventionally. But they're waging an insurgency against you. I'm modernizing the terminology. And the idea is you want a psychological victory. You want them just to quit and somehow you're gonna break their will to resist. And I suspect this is what the Japanese thought they were doing in the Rape of Nanjing and other atrocities. That they were going to do these horrifying things and that would break the will of the other side.

Okay, be careful whom you put on death ground. The Japanese were repeating a mistake done by the Nazis, which is if you're dealing with even a failing state, which Russia was - Stalin had shot so many of his officers in the thirties and then he inflicted a famine on Ukraine - but when the Nazis came in and they were going to wipe out not only the Russian government, but also the Russian people, you will superglue people, government, and military, and you will transform a failing state into a lethal adversary. And this is what Nazi brutality does to Russians, what Japanese brutality does to Chinese, and what Russian brutality today is doing to Ukraine. Don't do it. Bad strategy.

All right, there are strategic implications from these values. One is this emphasis on the offensive preemption. It's emphasis on military action to solve all your problems. And you have a fixed policy objective, whatever it is. And if you're in a given battle, you have to win that battle. It's not, "Oh, I have an overarching objective. It's too costly here. I'm going to call off this battle and I'm going to try again somewhere else." Uh-uh.

This is your field, the moment your plan has failed, you're a failure. So they're not thinking of planning in terms of branches of sequels and there'll be unexpected events that take place you'll adapt to - none of that. You're a failure if any of that stuff happens to you. So there's a real insensitivity to risk and there's no grand strategy.

But if you believe these things you will be lethal in warfare. You're not going to give up easily at all. And so you look at the Japanese at the end of the war and go why don't they quit a lot earlier? Well, it's because in a way, they're already dead men. They suffered social death. And so they're going to keep on until the very, very end of all of this.

And it's a great sin of omission, this absence of grand strategy. The Japanese aren't the only ones to have done this. The belligerents on all sides in World War I were thinking all in terms of using the military instrument, got themselves into trouble. So if you look at what the Japanese are doing, they had some vague ambitions and wanted to take advantage of

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opportunities. But there's no definition of what "win" in this war is. How much territory should Japan take? And then call it a day. Say, done, we've been successful here. Rather, their territorial acquisitions are really a function of what they were able to take and what, in anger, they did take, but also a function of strategic failure. No matter what they did, it never pacified the China theater. Problem for them.

Okay. Alice, that was Wonderland. Now we're going to get to how it works, how other people live - of if you believe these things, how does it help explain what actually happened in World War II? And I'm going to start with two sins of omission, the Japanese neglect of paying more careful consideration to logistics. And then another sin of omission is a neglect of protecting their sea lines of communication. And then I'm going to - the last two are about these in-group, out-group divisions and the problems it caused for within each military service, intra-service rivalries, and then between the two services, the Navy and the Army in the war that caused them such difficulties.

Okay. The Japanese, if you start at the beginning of the war, Japan never produced more than 1/13th U.S. steel and coal production. It never did more than 10 percent of what U.S. munitions productions were. I believe if you do the math and take all the battleships and divide people into... everything, that each U.S. soldier had four tons of equipment per, whereas each Japanese soldier had about two pounds of equipment. Japanese main weapons in this war were the grenade and the bayonet. Their artillery and machine guns were totally, were very obsolete, what they had going in the Pacific War.

And then you flip it around and look at the United States. The United States had about 18 men in- or men and women, but mostly men- in supply services supporting each rifleman at the front. Other militaries in this period had about an 8 to 1 ratio, Japan had about a 1 to 1. So Japan's already suffering food shortages before Pearl Harbor. And then when you get to the winter of 1942-43, the Japanese are having critical shortages of oil, so they no longer can deploy the fleet at will.

That means forget about convoying anything because you just haven't got the oil to do it. And yet when you get to '45, when they're predicting they're going to have absolutely zero aviation fuel and other fuel by the end of '45, you have the government saying still we're going to fight on for this honorable whatever it's going to be. These bushido ideas that you just persevere - loyalty, honor, duty. Keep going.

I'm going to be quoting this gentleman's diary, Admiral Ugaki Matome. He was the chief of the staff of the combined fleet until his plane and Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku's plane were shot down. US code breaking was quite good. We figured out where they were and we killed Admiral Yamamoto, but this man survived.

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And by the time he wrote this entry, he was the head of an air fleet in the home islands sending kamikaze flights out, because Japan simply lacked the ability to do too much else this late in the day. And here is his last diary entry written on August 15th, 1945. This is after two atomic bombs had been dropped and after the Russians had deployed into Manchuria.

And he said, okay, “there are various causes for today's tragedy. And I feel that my own responsibility is not light, but more fundamentally it was due to the great differences in national resources between the two countries." It's too late to come to that conclusion. U.S. production statistics had been on the books forever. But when Japanese read these numbers, they thought they were ludicrously high and discounted them as propaganda. And those who knew better, who'd done tours of duty in Britain or the United States, they weren’t promoted because they were defeatists.

I believe that Admiral Ugaki kept and maintained his diary is because he was an honorable samurai. He had believed in Bushido, the ability of material, of willpower, to more than compensate for inferior resources, but the war's outcome had proved him incorrect. And so, as an honorable samurai, he paid with his life, and he kept his diary - nothing to be ashamed of, he’d done what he was going to do.

Here I have the last Prime Minister of Imperial Japan, Prince Higashikuni Naruhiko, talking about his take on the war. He said, "I think the basic cause of defeat was the loss of transport shipping." Okay, by the end of the war Japan was down to one ninth of its transport shipping. It meant the empire was paralyzed. What's the point of taking all these territories if you can't get the resources back?

The navy had always focused on the mission by Alfred Thayer Mahan – who's from where I work, back in the day. It was all about fleet on fleet engagements and things. But it turns out that the Japanese navy hadn't focused on convoy duty. Mahan had called that a promising secondary operation. Actually, it turned out to be primary in the Pacific that U.S. submarine services paralyzed their sea lines of communication. Go submarines!

But so here's Admiral Ugaki Matome who is talking- he eventually comes around to recommending a more defensive strategy of not having this fleet on fleet because they don't have - they've lost a lot of the fleet and then they don't have the fuel to run it. But by the time he's recommending a more defensive strategy, they don't have the fuel or the assets to do that either.

Earlier in the war, here's his take before all that bad stuff had happened: "It's too bad for the officers and men of the submarine service that they have not yet sunk any important men of war, only merchant men." Well, his disdain for the target would cost him. And he noted, later on, when he's trying to - it's the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, when he's trying to account for why the Battle of Guadalcanal is going so badly for Japan, he said, "The aim and transport to

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the front has not even been half fulfilled each time. It led those on the verge of death"- i.e. the army- "to be extremely skeptical about the Navy and thinking that the Navy is just sacrificing the army."

Well, no kidding that's what the army thought. Because for an expeditionary force, you absolutely need the Navy to deliver you there, to maintain your supplies there and they're thinking, the army's thinking, you navy are being irresponsible, not doing any of these things.

So there are tremendous inter-service rivalries between the army and navy in Japan. And it goes back to the pre-war budget wars where Japan's a resource poor country, and both services have what they consider absolutely essential things to be funded. Japan didn't have the money to fund both. And then when you get in war and you start expending these things, you need even more money.

And so the disagreements were brutal. But before I get there, the in-group, out-group differences that stovepipe things and cause problems aren't simply between Army and Navy. They're within each service. So I'm going to start there, and I'm going to be, to be fair, I'm going to provide one example for each service.

I'll start with the Army. It was the Kwantung Army, or Japan's Army in Manchuria, that decided to invade all of Manchuria back in '31. It was not the home office back in Tokyo, but it's this branch that turns out kicks off a 15-year war. So these folks think that they know what's best for Japan and how best to defend the empire and they're just off and running.

Meanwhile, there are a series of coup attempts. Some of them were Navy as part of it. A lot more of them were the army that's dealing with it, going back and forth. And at the very end when Emperor Hirohito is capitulating, there was one last coup attempt which, amen, it failed, because the war might not have turned out quite the way it did if it had succeeded.

So the point is, if you've got coups running on, that is not called unified command. It's a mess. And the Navy wasn't any better. I have a different sort of example here. During the war, the U.S. Air Service, people who were flying planes, they would alternate combat and training missions so that you would bring back someone who had survived and learned something from combat to tell new people the things to avoid, how not to get yourself killed and some other things.

Well in Japan, in-groups out-groups - you sign up together, you train together, you fight together and you die together. It doesn't mean the Japanese couldn't have grafted people between groups. It's just culturally it's not the natural thing that comes to mind. Moreover, and this apparently applies to the present, that in the U.S. military, they have what are called hot washes after different operations, where you come back and you're very

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self-critical about all the things that went wrong, to figure out how to do it better the next time.

Well, there are cultural reasons why you would not want to do that in Japan, just, it's different. So, if these in-group, out-group things are causing problems within services, and it gets toxic between the services and I've got four examples and I'm going to start with organizational issues.

So it's only in 1944 that the Army and Navy finally get it together to have regular liaison meetings in Tokyo. Just in time to, you know, figure out how the capitulation is going to work. And then, the army wanted to unify the two high commands. The navy wanted nothing to do with that one because they knew they'd just become the box lunch delivery service for the army. Didn't want to do that.

So, by 1945, they did unify their information department. Great. They can spew the same propaganda and maybe share Tokyo Rose on a good day, who knows? But there was no planning even under the imminent threat of invasion to how they're going to coordinate their assets to protect the home islands. They aren't even coordinating their air assets. Disaster.

And this disaster goes back way in time. They had very- far back in time. They had a very successful war against Russia that ends in 1905. But afterwards, in 1906, immediately afterwards, the Army and Navy are allowed to have completely separate war plans. The Army plan is all about fighting Russia for the big land grab in Eurasia. The navy plan has a completely different set of enemies. It'd be the United States and Britain for the big gambit - you're not gonna use ships in Siberia - the big gambit for empire in the Pacific.

And each of these plans, A, they're secret from the other service and B, each plan assumes the other service is going to do all kinds of important things for them. Okay, great.

So, I guess the idea of secrecy and surprise, normally you apply that to your enemies, not your sister service, but that's how it works in this setup. Now, the army does come around to the Navy plan. Why? Because they get walloped by the Russians on the Mongolian border at the Battle of Nomonhan. The Russians just decimate them in 1939.

So now the army says, okay, okay, maybe that southern advance thing wasn't such a bad idea. And so the Navy thinks this is great. And they do their Southern advance. Let me see where I am here. They go zooming down and the Japanese mind over matter stuff seems to be going really well.

Because, in 1942, the Army takes more land than, over a more dispersed theater, than any country on the planet. The Navy hasn't lost a single ship. I mean, it's looking really good.

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Except there are a few little details here that are a problem. What the Navy hadn't told the Army is that actually they weren't ready for this whole thing - that they needed this outer perimeter reinforced by airfields in order to make the thing work. And actually, that wasn't complete.

And the army learned about this on August 17th, 1942, because one of these airfields was being built in this tropical nightmare called Guadalcanal that the United States knew about, even though the army didn't. And all of a sudden the Navy is in deep, dark trouble and needs the Army to help them out of Guadalcanal.

So now think Samurai. The Japanese 17th Army had been ordered to take Port Moresby in New Guinea, that's what they were up to. But with Guadalcanal, they are told, "Ah, you need to tack on Guadalcanal to that Port Moresby event." Okay, enter logistics. They're a thousand kilometers apart.

So now the army is gonna be lying to the navy about how many people they've got at Guadalcanal because they're scared the navy won't provide enough rations and things. The navy doesn't provide enough rations, people starve anyway. And then the navy that got the army into this mess wants to call it off and move out. But the army, good samurais, want to fight on and they just expend all kinds of resources.

And this thing has enormous strategic effects. Prior to Guadalcanal, the Japanese army wanted to continue their strategy of chasing the nationalists out of China. Back in 1937, the Japanese had conquered Nanjing, which is the original nationalist capital, and the nationalists had fled up the Yangtze River to Chongqing beyond some gorges and some other things, and beyond the rail network.

And in 1943, the Japanese were planning to attack Chongqing and then at that point, I think if you're a nationalist you're fleeing into Burma. And if that had happened, then the Japanese could have probably pulled hundreds of thousands of people out of the China theater and put them elsewhere and that would have caused all kinds of problems. Also, the Japanese had to call off their plans to invade Australia. So Guadalcanal has enormous strategic implications. So if you're focusing samurai on one battle, Guadalcanal, well, it has implications in places called China and Australia that are a long way off.

Okay, the United States also had inter-service rivalries. Right between our army and navy and that's why you have two separate campaigns for Admiral Nimitz and General MacArthur - each big ego is one campaign for each ego and apparently that wasn't even big enough for MacArthur. Okay but even so I don't believe the inter-service rivalries in the United States were remotely on the scale that they were in Japan.

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I have one final example to prove that one. So, after Pearl Harbor, that had been tremendously successful for Admiral Yamamoto, he wanted to do, the next thing was to attack Midway, because U.S. basing there. And the Army said, I don't want, we're not going to do this. And Yamamoto goes, "I'm going to resign". And the Army, "we don't care". "I'll commit suicide". "We'll buy popcorn".

And here's what changes this. So after Pearl Harbor, Americans wanted to let the Japanese know that we were thinking about them. And so this is where Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle, named for the Doolittle raids named after him. In April 1942, it was a one way trip off an aircraft carrier because they had so much fuel in order to get to Japan that the idea was they were going to go bomb Japan and then ditch in China whoever survives. Very brave people who did this.

Are they going to cause massive damage in Japan? Well, yeah, if you're directly underneath you won't appreciate it, but in general it causes minor damage. But it has a major unanticipated strategic benefit - think samurai. The Army, all of a sudden, is backing the Navy, that they're gonna now do Midway with them. And it's, right, don't think, retaliate, avenge your honor. The Army was appalled that anyone had been able to bomb Japanese skies, so now they're all over it.

Okay, so how does Midway work out? Really poorly for the Japanese. They lose four aircraft carriers. They've only got 12. They've lost a third. Oops. And- here we go, in-group, out-group- the Navy doesn't tell anyone for three or four months. Incredible. In a war. Right? So, they're thinking about their little stovepipe, and they're ignoring Japanese interests when this is going on. Okay?

Different story. So, they do get their operational end to the whole thing. It's called the firebombing of Tokyo. The whole place went up in flames. In fact, it got so hot, the canals boiled. It's an operational solution. It's unconditional surrender after a protracted war of annihilation that destroys just about every single Japanese city, minus a couple that survived.

What broke the stalemate? And here's what happened. It's three really bad things that happened in four days. Talk about a concentration of really bad events from a Japanese point of view happening all at once. When you want to talk about- this is the psychological shattering that actually happens to the Japanese.

First the United States drops an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Two days later the Russians pour 1.3 million people into Manchuria- the nightmare scenario of the Japanese army. And they know if this war protracts, the Russians are going to come down through Manchuria, down the Korean peninsula, onto Hokkaido, and down the home islands. It'll yield a divided Japan if it goes on for a long time.

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And then the next day the United States drops the second atomic bomb with a bluff - the idea being we're going to keep doing this daily or every other day. Except we don't have any more atomic bombs and we cannot build them quickly for a long time. So that's big bluff.

But the emperor then has had enough and he breaks the deadlock in the cabinet and the cabinet allows the deadlock to be broken the next day and then he makes an unprecedented radio broadcast - never had that happen before - to his subjects telling them "game over". And then the next day he sends three imperial princes to the Manchurian Chinese and southern theaters conveying his orders at game over.

And from that moment on his samurai obeyed him and they absolutely cooperated with the occupation. There's no insurgency, no nothing going on after this. And at the end of the war, the United States came to understand the Japanese. At the beginning, totally misread the situation with the oil embargo that's meant to deter and instead it precipitates the war that we didn't want.

But at the end of the war, the United States realizes you're going to need some level of Japanese cooperation if you're going to occupy the place. I'm going to use Emperor Hirohito for this. Hirohito is scared to death that it's not so much that he'll be hanged, but that the United States will extinguish his dynasty, kill him and his son, and then it's over.

And so he's willing to sign any piece of paper that MacArthur puts under his pen. And one of those is the Constitution of Japan, that it's going to change their civil and military institutions, demilitarize the place, and try to get a democracy going there. The Constitution was written in one week by MacArthur's staff. They're running around raiding bombed out libraries for examples of Western constitutions, and they cobbled this thing together. And this is the unamended Constitution of Japan still in effect to this very day - MacArthur's gift to Japan.

All right. I've been incredibly critical of the Japanese but to sum up here, there are cultural explanations for their neglect of grand strategy, inability to cut their losses, inability to coordinate, and the ferocity with which they fought. So if you look at their values, they're explanatory of what may well happen when things get set off.

But I've been really critical of Japan. I want to even out the story by ending on the United States a little bit because the United States played a good game or bad game of half court tennis and mirror imaged at the beginning of this war.

So when the Japanese go into Manchuria in 1931, we want them out. We don't ask, well, why are you doing this? And their answer would be, well, hey, you passed the Hawley-Smoot tariff. That means we're trade dependent. Whom are we going to trade with? And once you did the tariff, everyone retaliated. So you've now shut down international trade. So we need

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an empire that's big enough to survive. So that's why we're in Manchuria. And by the way, there are way too many communists here. We got to get rid of those.

And then in 1937 when they up the ante, going into the rest of China, we didn't inquire what's going on. And from what the Japanese want to do is wall off communism, don't want that, and then they want to stabilize China so that you can have some productive economic growth. And if you go, well, what were U.S. post war objectives for China? Ooh, sounds remarkably similar, familiar. Communists out, stabilize the place.

Okay, well, how does the war affect all this? Well, actually the warfare that went on wiped out the two barriers to communist expansion in Asia. What are the barriers? Well, one is Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists in China. The Japanese wipe him out. They don't totally defeat him, but they have so weakened him and so discredited him that by the end of World War II, he is really poorly positioned to win the Chinese Civil War, which he promptly loses.

And then what does the United States do? What's the other barrier to communism? Well, it's the Japanese! We wipe them out. So what do you get? A unified communist China, which makes really complicated wars in the Korean War and the Vietnam War. And the problem is the gift that keeps on giving. We're still dealing with this problem today.

So take a little word from Sun Tzu - know your enemy or the other side. Know the person you're talking to. Don't play half court tennis. It's a really dangerous game. Rather, try to analyze why - ask yourself, why is someone doing whatever they're doing? And just because you're trying to understand it doesn't mean you're condoning it. It's just trying to figure out the logic of the other person. It'll set you up for more informed choices.

Anyway, that was my Code of the Samurai event for you. And thank you very much for showing up and listening to all this. Appreciate you being here.

[Interview]

Dwarkesh Patel
I'm a little confused about some of the Bushido stuff and how it explains Japan's actions in the war. This Zen Buddhism stuff, the cherry orchards that are blossoming, and "you must act with the generosity of a samurai" — all this Bushido moral stuff. How does that square with the conduct of Japan during the war? The Rape of Nanking, the killing of millions of Chinese, the treatment of prisoners of war, which rivaled the fatality rates of the Nazi extermination camps?

It's like, where's the Buddhism there?

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Sarah Paine
Well, I'm not an expert on Buddhism, but you've got a lot of things conflated in there. If you're asking about the part of the brutality of the war is, Japan was totally out of resources. You're thinking it's going through a massive area of territory.

They actually had no ability to take POWs. Or if they took POWs, they'd have to halt the military operation and then put these people somewhere. So they just slaughtered them instead.

There were POWs and there were cases of hostile civilians who also got slaughtered. I don't know the "because," but they had very limited numbers of people to deal with this. On the one hand, you've got absolute desperation. I don't think any people behave well when they're desperate.

The war had been going on for years by the time we get interested in it, right? It starts in '31. So you have desperate people.

There's another piece. I can just add little pieces. I can't explain a whole people. In the prison camps in Japan, if I'm going to be — let's say you were Japanese. You and I are looking each other in the eye. That's how you do it in the West, showing that you're paying attention.

That's not how you do it in Japan. In Japan, if you're Japanese, I'm looking at your shoulder. It's rude to look people in the eye. It's just too intrusive; you're getting too much information probably from that person's face.

So you can imagine a Westerner in a prison camp looks his guard in the eye, and the guard's going "Oh, who is this arrogant person? You're a POW-" You can imagine bad things are then going to be happening. These are guesses on what's going on.

There are certain values that I've talked about. There's certain desperation that's going on. And then there's the dehumanization of what wartime's all about, right?

Initially, conscripts go in of all armies having trouble killing people, and then they get better at it over time. This is the tragedy of human beings. I don't know if I answered your question. I don't know that I know the answer.

Dwarkesh Patel
Here's another thing that I want to clarify: If you were trying to understand Britain's conduct in World War I, why they initiated it and why they conducted it in the way they did, and you tried to understand it using cultural explanations — what some British guy wrote in the 17th century — I don't know how far you'd get. Maybe the more illuminating thing is just to look at what was happening in the 1910s. What were the proximal strategic objectives?

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So with Bushido, why are we looking back at what people were writing in the 1700s?

Sarah Paine
I'm going to break up the British thing into two parts. One analytical framework is that you can look at wars in terms of underlying causes and proximate causes. The underlying causes are like the tinder of grievances on both sides, and there can be cultural components to that, or other components.

So there's this accumulating tinder where you've got two different sides, at least across purposes. But then there's the match, the proximate cause, which is a whole series of matches. Finally, the last one is Pearl Harbor, and you are off and running to a place you might not want to go to.

So there's that. And then there's culture. Let's look at Britain's strategic culture. I'm no expert on British strategic culture, but these are some basics.

They are an island, and they want to be able to trade with the world, but they don't want any one power dominating the continent. This is their strategic thinking from way back. So if there is a power that's on the verge of dominating the continent, you want to back the other side to prevent that outcome.

That's very much a part of British thinking, it goes back a long time and you can read things going back a long time describing that situation. There's another piece that goes back a long time in the British: navies are rarely decisive in warfare.

What I mean by "decisive" is that you actually get the goal that you're after from fighting, whereas armies can be. If your goal is, "I want to occupy all of France," or better yet, the Holland, something smaller, an army might be able to do that for you, one instrument of national power. But Britain's reliant on a navy and doesn't like to have a big standing army.

So they're thinking in terms of diplomacy and allies, working economics, and making money from trade. They are the ones who coined the term "grand strategy." It is their gift to us, and it absolutely informs their thinking at a very macro level.

No one thing is entirely explanatory. Also, we human beings game the system. The moment I tell you you're Japanese and you think this way is the moment you go, "Oh, that's what she thinks? We're going to do something different."

Right? So this is the problem with human beings.

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Dwarkesh Patel
The loyalty precept: Wasn't one of the problems with the Japanese military that they weren't loyal, that they were trying to do these coups all the time, and the young officers were insubordinate?

Sarah Paine
That's an excellent question. And what you're doing is feeding me back the Greek principle of logic, which is the law of non-contradiction. You cannot simultaneously believe mutually exclusive things. So what's going on?

You're telling me it's all hierarchical, and now you're telling me junior officers are doing, or mid-level officers are doing things. What's going on here? Ah, but that's a fundamental principle of logic that the West puts great credence on.

Not the case in the East, necessarily. Now, people have educations that are different. So we're going back in the day where people are not looking in terms of, "Okay, we're going to have a logically consistent argument."

Rather, there are these social values that we are gonna- if it's all about group loyalties, that's what we're going to prioritize. And if my subgroup is going to be my unit or whatever, that's how that's going to go.

So you're doing a wonderful piece of Western logic. It's excellent. And this is why other cultures find dealing with Westerners like battery acid because they have these different belief systems.

And you go like, "Okay, you have women, and we got women. Our women drive cars, and yours are like, where? Is there something wrong with your women?" It's battery acid on other cultures.

Dwarkesh Patel
I was struck when you were describing that the Nazis were putting their enemies on death ground, the Japanese are putting their enemies on death ground, and in both cases, it was detrimental because you're preventing the other side from surrendering.

That seems even worse than what was happening before that period in history where you can think over time that our norms about civility and war crimes are improving, but it seems like in World War II, the way people were acting was even worse than they were acting in World War I. The way Germany and Russia were fighting in World War I was probably more civil than how they were fighting in World War II. And then obviously what Japan was doing in China at the time.

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What was going on around the world that people just got so demonic during this period?

Sarah Paine
Warfare is not civil, you're killing people. I love people who talk about just wars. It's rather a horrible piece of human existence.

There are a number of things that have gone on with the Industrial Revolution. You can now kill people on an industrial scale. When you're doing it with bows and arrows, it takes a lot more time to create the mayhem. So that's one thing, the ability just to wipe out people.

World War I on the Western Front was all entrenched. On the Eastern Front, there was a great deal of movement, but on the Western Front it was entrenched, which meant civilian populations weren't really touched by it. Where the initial fighting, yeah, they're leveled, but once you get a trench, you're not. And then we in the West don't actually study too much what happened to the civilians on the Eastern Front where it's moving around.

This is back to my half-court tennis, so we're not paying attention to those civilians. For the West, very few civilian casualties. Whereas when you get to World War II, you're bombing people. Now, with new technologies, you can get at people.

And invading also, it's the lesson of World War I, the feeling that the Germans really hadn't felt their defeat, and that allowed them to make up this story about how it was they weren't defeated. "The Jews did it," or whoever. They were betrayed. And Churchill and Roosevelt decided there would be a march to Berlin to disabuse them of that.

And that involved killing a lot of civilians to get to Berlin. And of course, the Russians were determined to pay back for what the Nazis had done to them. And we had no sympathy for what- we were going to turn a blind eye to what the Russians were up to because the Nazis had been so heinous.

Dwarkesh Patel
This is probably wrong, I want you to correct me, but maybe one way you can explain why the Japanese were so brutal in their campaign around this time is, if you think that when you lose, you have this idea that you have social death, it's better to kill yourself than go back to your family and say, "I surrendered". Maybe they just applied, this is their failure to empathize with, or think it from, the perspective of their enemy, but they were just thinking, "Listen, if we lost, we would commit seppuku. When they lose, they forfeit human rights." And in some sense, it was just applying the principle of social death to their enemy.

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Sarah Paine
The whole war is brutal. They're doing a lot of hand-to-hand brutality, and part of it has to do with lack of equipment. That firebombing of Tokyo happened in one night. I think it's 80,000 Japanese are incinerated.

Okay, let's talk about brutality. Now, the reason why Americans did that is because they knew the alternative was sending American kids onto Japan who would die doing that. And so the decision was it was better to kill a lot of Japanese civilians than it was to kill American soldiers.

And that's also the reason that went into the atomic bombing. That's controversial, right? The Americans, why did they drop atomic bombs on the Japanese? And there was no disagreement about that in the United States at the time because it was a question of: are you going to send American young men your age- and millions of them would have died hitting the home islands- or are you going to do the bombing? And of course, the Americans did the bombing.

So there's brutality all around in this war. Wars don't come up with clean hands.

Dwarkesh Patel
Was there any way for the West to, or for America to, win the Pacific War without the firebombing?

Sarah Paine
Well, okay, let's, this is a whole other topic. Win in wars. What does win mean? For us, it was put Japan back in its box, right?

But this is a whole problem for Japan. What's win? Or this country in Afghanistan, what's win? Is it booting Osama bin Laden out of Afghanistan? Once that happens, it's a day. Is it overthrowing the Taliban at a particular period, or is it trying to turn the whole place into a democracy?

Okay, those are all radically different things, but you need to make up your mind what it's going to be. I think it's a miracle. Well, A, okay.

The win, if you're going to have the win be that the United States transforms Japan into a functional democracy, or sets them on the road so that they will become one, if that's what the win is- no. Because if you don't, I showed you the three horrible events in four days. That's quite incredible to have that much bad news happening in a half a week.

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And that absolutely shattered the Japanese, and it also opened the door for those who thought they were in crazy land to capitulate. If you don't do that, okay, we invade the home islands. Americans were sick of the war, and you start losing lots of American kids in Japan.

I think at some stage, we decide to pull them out of Japan and blockade them eternally. And then you've got, I don't know, Japan is like a new North Korea, just this inevitable, these eternal, non-functioning society. So, no.

Wars are tragic, and also, don't think that you have all the cards, that you're going to make the decisions about what's going to happen. The other side is going to put you into corners where you're going to choose from very unpleasant alternatives.

Dwarkesh Patel
I want to ask you about how the war starts. So, there's obviously, you go 10 years before, and you've got the tariffs, and that creates the incentive to build an empire. But even months before, when there's negotiations between Japan and America to get rid of the embargo, it's striking to me how much miscommunication and the ability for both sides to just understand that there was a compromise here was such a big factor here.

I feel like if Prince Konoe and FDR could get on a Zoom call, I feel like the war...

Sarah Paine
You're an optimist. Let's talk about sunk costs. I'm going to talk about sunk casualties. By the time you're there, the Japanese have suffered 600,000 casualties in China.

There is no easy out of that one. The United States' minimum program is "you get out of China". Not happening if you're Japanese.

If you look at the government, the government's definitely on death ground with that one because there's no way they stay in power if they get out of China. Particularly, this is why Hirohito is Mr. Silent for most of the war. Initially, he's all for it until it goes sour, and then he's less so.

He knows that he'll be, if not assassinated, declared insane. Then his perfectly serviceable adolescent son, or however old his son was, would be the token emperor. So, I don't think the Zoom call is going to change the fundamentally high stakes that are involved for both sides.

Dwarkesh Patel
You really think if Hirohito had stepped in and said, "No, we're not doing this," that he would have been usurped as emperor?

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Sarah Paine
Yeah, early on. Oh, and there's another piece. Let's look at the United States in 1941: Great Depression, isolationists. This is where the first "America Firsters" are. They're the ones who created the idea. They didn't want to know about all these foreign places.

Totally isolationist. Hawaii wasn't even a state. It doesn't become a state until 1959. If you're Japanese, you look at a place, "Oh, it's a colony."

So, it'll be like the dog that barks. You take a newspaper and flap them a few times, and maybe the dog will start barking. Because what the Japanese want is the United States to just mind its own business, stay out of Asia. "It's our backyard. It's not your backyard."

And looks at the United States. The United States doesn't have that much trade with Asia compared to the rest of the world. Sure, it sells Japan most of its oil, but that's not most of US trade.

Dwarkesh Patel
I was reading about this before preparing to interview you, the particular cases where diplomacy broke down. There are examples where the translators between Japan and America are, and I can't believe this is true, you can tell me if this is not, but they're exaggerating what each side is saying to make them more vivid to read. Like if Tojo says something conciliatory, it's exaggerated.

That's obviously not the role of a diplomatic translator. And there are many cases where, after the war, Tojo says, "If we had gotten the modus vivendi that FDR apparently was contemplating sending to us, if we saw those agreements, we would have agreed." Or apparently, they misunderstood that the final agreement they got from Secretary of State Hull, where it said that you must return China, they thought it included Manchuria.

Hull didn't intend it to include Manchuria. They might have said yes to that. It seems like the work really could have been averted if a couple of mistranslations were avoided.

Sarah Paine
I wouldn't take Tojo as my source for anything. He's a guy who, he was before a graduating class of cadets or something, and he was talking about how people had said that he was mediocre, but look where he'd risen to be. He's this great man.

And then at the end, when he's supposed to commit suicide, well, the way you do it is as I've described. He's an army officer, so what does he do? He takes a gun and he shoots himself.

Buddy, it's point-blank range with a gun. How hard can it be? And he survives that one.

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We glue him back together. So here's the honorable samurai who sent so many children, or young people, to their deaths, and at the end, when he knows full well what he's supposed to be doing- can't do it. So I wouldn't take him as my source.

Also, at the end, he's got this whiny answer of, "Oh, it wasn't my fault. It's all your translators."

And, "Oh, the peace on Manchuria." No, I don't know that that would have been a compromise. The League of Nations had sent in something called the Lytton Commission, which had told the Japanese they had to get out.

Oh, by the way, it is a fiction that Manchuria is not a part of China. It is an integral part of China, has been for the longest time. What the Japanese did is they kidnapped the last Qing emperor- Manchu, Manchuria- whose ancestors came from Manchuria, popped him in, Henry Puyi, and made him the emperor to try to come up with this fiction that oh, Manchuria is a separate place.

Excuse me, it's not. It's part of China. It's the internationally recognized territory of China.

Dwarkesh Patel
So I wonder if one of the problems here is, look, it was not in the vital strategic interest of America to secure or liberate China. In fact, the outcome of the war obviously is a national seizure of communist state power. And as we'll talk about in the next lecture, that was the very opposite of liberating China.

Basically, America puts in this oil embargo and knows that the outcome of failed negotiations on getting rid of that embargo is a total world war of this kind. And it's not even for the main strategic objective, which is, you know, you got to get Hitler, you got to beat Germany. Wasn't this just our failure of grand strategy to realize, why are we doing this? What's our strategic objective here?

Sarah Paine
Hold on. We weren't fighting Germany. The only reason we fought Germany is because Hitler made a major blunder.

He had an alliance with Japan that said if Japan was attacked, he would come in. Not if Japan attacked someone else that he would come in. He interprets it broadly, and he declares war on this country.

That is how the United States got into World War II, Europe. If Hitler had not made that blunder, FDR would have been in a world of trouble trying to explain why he's suddenly going to be fighting Nazis over an attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese. So that's a separate issue.

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The main thing that Americans who thought deeply cared about is the international system, that we should deal with each other through laws, through freedom of navigation. So this is how you run your commercial transactions, that big countries don't get to overrun small countries because if they do, the entire international system goes down.

And the logic that you're describing is excellent logic, and this is what the Japanese are saying. It's like, why would the Americans care about this? Americans care deeply about the international system, or people who are thoughtful about it.

And it's also like, why not let the Russians eat all of Ukraine? Why are the Europeans suddenly all over this problem, right? And they've unified very recently on this.

It's because the whole system is at stake. So it is really high stakes at a strategic level. The Japanese are looking at the operational level and going, why do you care about these countries?

We care about the entire system because our prosperity is based on it.

Dwarkesh Patel
So I wonder if the problem here is that America isn't, at least at the time, wasn't willing to give enough concessions to the factions within Japan that cared about peace so that they can save face and actually argue for ending war? Just the idea that they're going to give up Manchuria as well, obviously that's not going to happen.

And when Secretary of State Hull just sees these vacillating telegrams from the Japanese, he assumes it's because they're fickle or something. It's like, no, it's the civilian part of the government trying its best to prevent the military from taking over. You got to give them something to save face.

Sarah Paine
That faction had already lost. They lost in 1936. Takahashi Korekiyo was Japan's longest-serving finance minister, and he was a very distinguished man.

In fact, he brought the Japanese economy out of the Great Depression before anyone in the West was doing it, through government spending and trying to get people to spend at home. He told the army, he said, "Fellas, if you go on this bent for empire, you're not gonna actually get resources because you're gonna spend a lot of money fighting with people, resources doing that. And then it's gonna take you years of investments to access these resources. So you gotta be able to cover these investments for years and years and years. Cooperate within the international system. That is the way to prosperity for Japan."

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Well, that was the February young officers revolt, where he and I can't remember how many others were murdered. They came to his home in the middle of the night, and as he stood up to talk to them, they literally hacked him apart. They lost. That whole game is over.

Dwarkesh Patel
But Prince Konoe doesn't, like he knows he going to- the person who's Prime Minister in 1941, realizes that they're going to lose a war against America and he doesn't want to do that. It's just that Tojo, the war minister at the time, doesn't answer to him. The Prime Minister doesn't want war, and we don't give him enough to save face.

Sarah Paine
Wait a minute. They have a huge army there that's more than capable of assassinating people when they get in the way. So that ship has sailed. This is what a pivotal decision is. Once you've made it, there's no going back to the way the world was.

Japan lost too many people, and there are too many figures in the army. We think that it's an inevitable outcome of having the world the way it is now, with Japan this wonderful country now, just at the lead of so many different areas of human endeavor. We think, oh, that's the inevitable outcome. It's not.

Dwarkesh Patel
Is there anything America could have done in the immediate years leading up to the war that could have prevented this outcome? Because the fact that there is a world war, prima facie, you should assume that if there is a world war, things weren't done optimally, right? That doesn't mean everybody's equally at fault. But is there anything that could have been done differently?

Sarah Paine
Yeah, Hawley-Smoot.

Dwarkesh Patel
But like in the years directly before.

Sarah Paine
No no no, but this is serious. That Hawley-Smoot tariff is a game of half-court tennis. You're looking at the United States, it's in a terrible depression, you want to protect jobs here, and so you raise these big tariff walls.

Okay, what's the other side going to do? They're going to raise their tariff walls and pay you back. What's that going to do? It's going to cost a lot of American jobs if you play that game.

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You need to be talking with other people. So once you have set the conditions, hothouse conditions, for fascists to take over in Germany and in Japan, you are in a world of hurt. The easy solutions are no longer there anymore.

Dwarkesh Patel
Maybe I'll ask the question this way: the oil embargo, was it a mistake? Because if the idea is to protect the international system, prevent empire- well we got more empire, we got a world war, we got communists taking over in China. Whatever would have happened if we got rid of the oil embargo, it can't have been worse than that, right?

Sarah Paine
Well yeah, it was. What Roosevelt was really scared of was that the Japanese would attack Russia, because he thought Russia would fall. And if Russia fell, he thought the Nazis would win. So at least when the Japanese attacked, they attacked us. That was actually better than attacking Russia.

So the oil embargo... so let's say you don't do it and Japan never attacks us, and then the Russians are down and you've got Nazis in control of the world, somehow that's better?

Dwarkesh Patel
But you don't have the world war with America. It doesn't seem insane to think that, and we're still going to fight the Nazis.

Sarah Paine
You're not going to have an international system. Oh, and if that's the case, the Nazis were gearing up, because eventually they're going to fight us.

So, this is another problem. Another concept that I think is useful is limited versus unlimited objectives. An unlimited objective is, "I want to do regime change on your country." The most unlimited variety is that not only do I want to do regime change, but I want to kill all your people while I'm at it. So if that is what your opposite number is planning, if you compromise with them, you are simply setting them up and putting them in a stronger position when they come at you for the final kill.

If they have limited objectives, then by all means compromise with them, and negotiate away on what it is you want, just this little sliver of territory, or you want some preferential treatment? We can do that for you. But you're talking about a world order here, whether it's going to be based on laws increasingly, or these opposing spheres of influence.

Dwarkesh Patel
To keep pushing back on this...

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Sarah Paine
I don't have an answer. I've given you what little I can think of. But hey, I'm not the grand puppeteer in this world. These questions you're asking me are way above my pay grade.

Dwarkesh Patel
People in the YouTube comment section get mad at me when I keep asking about counterfactuals. And I understand. Obviously, I don't understand what was happening at the time. I'm naive about history or whatever. But I do think it's important.

What are we trying to do when we try to understand history? We're trying to understand if we had done things differently, what would have happened. What are the lessons we take? And counterfactuals are the main way we can do that.

Sarah Paine
Yeah, I'm all for it. We teach by counterfactuals. Replay it. Can you come up with different options?

I think you're in a series of really awful options.

Dwarkesh Patel
The difference between the Japanese and the Nazis is that the Nazis had the ideology that we got to kill millions of people. That is what they believed. The Japanese didn't, in the same way, have that ideology.

Naturally, they had, they're a continental [maritime] empire. They also want to trade. And they don't like Communists. They don't want the Communists to take over in China.

It just seems like, naturally, if we didn't go to war with them, we might have been allies, as we ended up being later on.

Sarah Paine
Well, they attacked us...

Dwarkesh Patel
After the oil embargo.

Sarah Paine
Yeah yeah. But -

Dwarkesh Patel
But the question is, should we have gotten rid of the oil embargo? So the attack wouldn't have happened.

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Sarah Paine
But wait a second, the Japanese are saying, "We have the rights to your oil." Excuse me, we have the right to sell it or not sell it to anyone we feel like.

Since when do they have the rights to it? Okay, great. So you're going to do all this crazy stuff and then still think we have to sell you oil? And, oh, by the way, this oil is being used to kill Chinese all over the place. This is what their Japanese bombers are running on.

Dwarkesh Patel
Morally, I agree, we don't want to like, they don't own our oil. The question is, it's not about are they are entitled to it. It's like, should we have given it to them? Would the outcome have been better if we did?

Sarah Paine
I'm telling you, I suspect the outcome wouldn't have been better, but I don't know. And you're asking me things where my experience is, I'm just a professor. I just show up at seminar on time, and I try to do reading and prep.

And my experience has not been in government, let alone at the highest echelons of government, of what's feasible and what's not feasible. And the answers I've given you are where I'm at, but I can't tell you more.

Dwarkesh Patel
All right.

Sarah Paine
Sorry.

Dwarkesh Patel
I'll ask about other things, too. The sort of delusional optimism of the Japanese to think that they could beat America, how much of that is motivated by the idea that they actually do think they're led by a living deity?

Is that related to why they thought they could win?

Sarah Paine
No, but you're looking at the United States as isolationist. If you're Japanese, and you're looking at these absolutely isolationist Americans who are letting Britain, their closest ally, potentially go down to Nazis, right?

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Because think about Britain. How did it all work? Fall of Norway, fall of France, then they lost Crete. We aren't even in the war. They're about losing everything, and we're not doing anything.

So... wait a second, now I'm losing my track of my train of thought. Revisit the question again, please.

Dwarkesh Patel
Can somebody in the audience remind me of the question?

Sarah Paine
Yeah, the optimism of the Japanese. So they're looking at it and going, "The United States is not bailing out its key ally. Hawaii's a colony, right? It's a bunch of white people dominating Hawaiians."

"So we're just going to do a little, set an example that, hey, if you mess with us, it's going to get costly. And we know you don't have much trade in Asia. Sure, we want to buy your oil, but overall, most trade is elsewhere." And so they're looking at it. Isolationists, won't the answer be the isolationists go, "Woo, this is expensive, let's get out of here?"

And of course, that's not understanding Americans. I remember I was in seminar the day that 9/11 happened and there was a TV in the seminar rooms, and there was a break, and after the end of the break, the students had the TV on, and we're watching. Tower One had gone down, and then while we're in seminar, the next one, we're watching it, goes down. And I thought, "Oh my, there's going to be hell to pay for this one."

Because this is how Americans are, that if you mess with us, boy, does it get ugly. And boy, this is like, don't think, retaliate. So the Japanese didn't understand that part of us. In fact, a lot of people don't. They look at Americans, we look like a bunch of hedonists. But if you mess with us, it's ugly.

Dwarkesh Patel
If you are in the Japanese government a couple of years before, like 1939 or something, it sounds like from your earlier answer that you think it was a sort of hopeless situation. If you're the finance minister or if you're the prime minister, to- is there anything they could have done to prevent an inevitable conflict with America?

Sarah Paine
They brought it up, and they say, "Well, we can't afford this. The resources aren't here." The army wasn't interested, and they shut up because the last guy had been killed in his house in his pajamas. So, they weren't up for that.

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Dwarkesh Patel
How much stock do you put in the idea that if you have a society that rapidly industrializes, that goes from a feudal state to advanced industrial nation in a generation, it's just not enough time for the culture to evolve? And so, the way that the Japanese behaved in the lead-up to the war and during the war, the feudal values just didn't have a chance to evolve. The Meiji Restoration happened too fast.

Sarah Paine
No, it didn't happen too fast. It's that institutions take a long time to take root. Look at this country; it's been an evolving democracy for hundreds of years. We no longer have slavery- amen- but look at really consequential things about our own institutions.

So, now we're going to go pick on the Japanese because they managed in one generation to westernize their political, judicial, legal, educational, you name it, they westernized them, but there wasn't enough time for these things to grow deep roots.

And then if you think about who's doing this, they're called the Genrō, this very distinguished generation of Japanese who all knew each other. Their career paths were very broad, covering both civil and military areas. And when they died, they couldn't transfer their prestige to anyone else, nor had they institutionalized it in some kind of cabinet or something that would force all these different groups to discuss things without giving primacy to the military.

Then, understand what is the tradition in Japan: Shogunate. That's what Japan had before. What's a shogun? Shogun is a Japanese word for "general." So the long history of Japan is military rule so when it comes back in World War II, that is a kind of normalcy.

It would have taken a long time. So, this comes back to the United States and fooling around with tariff walls, thinking that was such a clever idea. Maybe if the Great Depression had been managed better, it would have given time for these institutions to take deeper roots.

No one knows, but I would not criticize the Meiji generation. They're brilliant. They did so much, but you're talking just a number of years.

Look at this country. We're having major problems with our institutions, wondering whether we've got a stalemated legislature, whether we've got a skewed court system, or whatever it is and we're sorting these things out. And then to criticize the Japanese because they couldn't do it all in 25 years?

Dwarkesh Patel
One thing I found really interesting in your book is that you were arguing that not only was the military not in charge of the officers, but nobody was even in charge of the military. I

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think you call it a "system of irresponsibility," that it was basically government by committee. Tell me more about that. Why does that lead to mistakes?

Sarah Paine
I'm going to flip it around and look at how the West has done it. It's all about- it's supposed to be and of course there are exceptions- that it's not that it's about you if you have a particular job, it's that your job gives you certain authority by law to do things, and then we have courts to adjudicate when you in that position, other people think that you've exceeded your authority, and they start suing about different things.

And that's how it goes in the West, it's very legalistic, going all the way back to the Romans. When I think about what is the West, it's Greek logic, it's Roman law, and then it's these Judeo-Christian moral values. Those are essential pillars of what the West is all about.

So in Japan, yeah they get laws and they westernize, but they had their own indigenous way of dealing with things and it's very much about different in-groups and out-groups handling things in whatever the committee is. And so we're going, "Well, who actually did that? Whose fault is it?" Because we have this very legalistic way and fault and law.

We're going to either put you in jail or whatever. It's just different ways of organizing ourselves. But we in the West assume, because going back to Roman times, that institutions are going to be a really big thing, that that's how things are going to work.

So then when we get into somewhere like Iraq and we think the police is going to still be functioning after we blow the government, it's like, whoa, whoa, whoa, it's not an institutionalized- I'm no expert, but you're projecting the kind of institutional setup that Western countries typically have to other people.

They may name these things the same thing, police or whatever, but they may function in very different ways.

Dwarkesh Patel
When you look at the soldiers who fought these hopeless battles, where tens of thousands of them on a single island might starve or be forced into a banzai charge that they knew was hopeless and they were all going to die, and they knew that they were put in this hopeless situation because of these destructive petty fights between the Navy and the Army, where one of them isn't willing to supply the other one, why didn't that break their morale more? It's just like, "Look, we're supposed to die and commit seppuku because you guys didn't give us the right supplies, because you guys aren't willing to share information or something."

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Sarah Paine
I don't know the answer, because I'm not a social historian where you would really be doing- I've always done more diplomatic and military, so you're looking top-down. But what you're asking is a very important question: how do individuals react to all this? And that I do not know the answer.

And you'd have to—and there's another piece that makes it hard in Japan since people don't want to talk about failure because it's considered a loss of face. Whereas in the West, one of the fundamental assumptions of Christianity is we're all sinners, right? Original sin, we're all defective goods from the very beginning.

And so there isn't this expectation for perfection because it's known you're kind of a mess to begin with, and so you can talk about these things. So that's a whole other problem of getting people to open up about truly horrible events, so I don't know the answer.

I know that the World War II generation, they came home, they just didn't talk about it with their children. It's just not a matter for discussion. So I can't answer that, of why they followed.

But you look in the West in World War I, soldiers would go up and over the trenches, and they knew exactly what was going to happen to them. And yeah, there were people who didn't, and then they were court-martialed and shot. A lot of people were shot in World War I.

But there's been a change in society about what young men are willing to do when their officers start telling them. The way the Russians solved this problem in Ukraine, but Stalin would do this too, is you send people up ahead, and then you've got the KGB, or whatever the killer unit, so that anyone who tries to go the wrong way in the battlefield, they get machine-gunned by their own side. That's one way to get an army to go forward, and that's what Putin is doing right now.

But anyway, in more democratic places, people aren't willing to go along with this now, but in the West, we did it too.

Dwarkesh Patel
When you're having lunch with your colleagues, with the people who are also experts in this field, and you're discussing, "Look, what are still the big unresolved questions? We don't understand why this person did X, or why events transpired in a certain way," what are the big things where you guys have to hassle it out?

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Sarah Paine
It's more that someone has decided what the curriculum is going to be, and then you teach it. Oh and by the way, as of like six months ago, I've moved to the Maritime History Center, so I'm no longer teaching. I'm just doing research at this stage.

Well, I think the whole point of the curriculum at the War College is to get people out of the operational level. So, the junior course is about the strategic effects of operations. It's like, okay, Pearl Harbor.

To me as an example I'll use, Pearl Harbor it's an A+ military operation. They sink everything. Of course, it's shallow water and we raise most of it afterwards. They lose nothing.

I mean boy, how can you do a more perfectly choreographed military operation than that one? Except it turns an absolutely isolationist country into one hell-bent on coming after Japan, and that would be called a strategic disaster.

So, you've got to be cautious about your military actions and think about what are the strategic consequences. And it's very difficult to gauge those accurately. So that's one big issue that you need to get at.

And then for the seniors, it's: Okay, great, you're an officer and you understand if you're in the Army, you understand how to use armies, in the Navy, about how to use navies. But how does this integrate with all the other instruments of national power that actually account for how wars turn out? And economics is a huge one.

There is no definitive answer in these wars, but rather you can give analytical concepts. And this is my reason for doing these lectures: to say, hey, don't play half-court tennis. Wouldn't that be a basic thing?

Is it going to provide you the answers if you look at the other side? No, it won't, but it'll position you to be in a better shape. Or, tossing out limited versus unlimited wars, and unlimited wars are putting people on death ground.

Does that answer the question? No, but it goes, okay, if Vladimir Putin has an unlimited objective vis-a-vis the world order- and he's basically said that he does- then compromising with him would be a mistake on that subject. And you're going to have to deal with him one way or another.

So, it's the... What is it? History isn't over. The great, long-standing struggle between continental powers that want to divide the world up into mutually exclusive spheres of influence and butcher each other over territory — very negative sum, they tend to be very

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authoritarian — or this maritime order that says, hey, surely, join the party, follow the rules, you'll make money, right?

And this is, Angela Merkel's thinking this, of “hey, we’re gonna”- she was the German chancellor for many years- and she's thinking Putin will sell a lot of oil, he'll make money. It's a win-win, surely.

Well, he's back to his continental stuff, destroying wealth and lives. That's what the alternate world order looks like, is killing people to get things. It's more promising to spread the other one, and this disagreement has been going on for a long, long time.

Dwarkesh Patel
I feel like we had a mini version of this debate in the podcast we did a year ago.

Sarah Paine
I have a limited number of ideas.

Dwarkesh Patel
But if you just said we can't compromise with people who will have these unlimited goals, like Putin, who have these territorial goals... If we're using the analogy, as you're explicitly making it, to Japan during World War II, look what it took. If we wanted to say we're not going to compromise with your territorial goals, we will stop you in every way, what it took was a world war that led to an unconditional surrender. So, if we're using that analogy, does that imply that no compromise requires some unconditional surrender-type event?

Sarah Paine
No, no, no, no, no.

Dwarkesh Patel
Doesn’t this counter the death ground thing?

Sarah Paine
There's something called precision nuclear strike, and it has changed things. During World War II, the United States had sanctuary, which means other people couldn't touch us at home, and our productive base was not touched and that was essential.

There are many things that were essential for Allied victory. Take any one of them away, and the outcome is different. One of the essential things is this productive base.

This time around, all kinds of people can come get the United States. A lot of times in foreign affairs, you can't solve things; and I don't know who originally said this, but you manage things.

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And so, this is where the sanctions and things come in. You give people a timeout from the world order. You don't solve it.

You look at North Korea, that is not solved by a long shot. But at least South Korea can go become prosperous, and the North is just sitting with its timeout and being more and more malign at home. But it's more like that it's- of not recognizing, for instance, conquest.

This is what went on, actually, when Stalin took over the Baltic states. We never recognized that. In fact, they ran governments in exile based on the funds that, I think, the Baltic states had their funds in US banks. So when Stalin overran them, I think those funds became what funded their embassies.

And so, N generations later, we recognize their independence. These things are not solved on anyone's watch. Basically, if you want the things... the way the last Cold War ended, it's because the Chinese and Russians changed their minds. You have to wait for others to come to their own decisions.

Dwarkesh Patel
What is the track record of sanctions actually changing other people's minds? Because if you look at the world today —

Sarah Paine
Unknown.

Dwarkesh Patel
Just to finish the question, because you're advocating that as the way we should proceed, so it's worth asking. If we look at the world today, North Korea, we've sanctioned them for decades. If the idea is we're going to deprive them of resources to do these bad things, well, they're just going to divert resources from their civilians to the military.

And you're just making the people poor. You're not changing the government's decision. Same thing in Iran, same thing in Venezuela.

Sarah Paine
Correct

Dwarkesh Patel
So what are we doing? We're just making the people poor. We're not even changing the government's decision. What's the idea here?

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Sarah Paine
You know, I don't know the answer, and I'm working on an edited book with a wonderful colleague who knows much more about economics than I do, and we have all kinds of chapters. This book will not be a good read.

Well, because you want to learn things, and so I've done a lot of edited books to learn things, different kinds of naval operations, and then they feed into the books that are more overarching. But this one's on sanctions, and we're in the process of writing the concluding chapter now.

And the things that you're bringing up. Sanctions don't seem to make people do what you want them to do. And so a lot of people go, "Well, they don't work," but boy do they inflict pain.

And then of course you're doing it on a, usually an authoritarian regime, that diverts as much of that pain as possible onto the civilian population, and then uses that as an excuse to justify its rather brutal rule. And I don't have the answer.

And the other piece is, so you're dealing with these expansionist powers with a limited toolkit, and the question is which tool to use? And I truly don't have the answer. You've mentioned a really good counterargument, and I've given you an argument, and I don't know which rebuttal is the better one, honestly.

This is another thing about what do you- you were asking about what you're worried about, but here's something to help you with what you're worried about: is thinking in terms of arguments, counterarguments, and rebuttal.

So, you have an argument, I have an argument, and on this one, I'm not sure what the rebuttal is. But it's a good way of thinking about things because it allows you to change your mind. You may well be right, or I may be right, or maybe we're right in one country but not another. I honestly don't know the answer.

Dwarkesh Patel
It does seem like one of the biggest things you want to try to figure out in strategy in general, because if you try to do sanctions, it doesn't seem to work that well. Well if you try to replace the regime, for example, people said look at Saddam's regime after his invasion in Kuwait, this is somebody who has territorial goals, so we can't have somebody who's going to keep trying to do this in power. You try to replace that, and that doesn't work.

Sarah Paine
That worked well, you're right.

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Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah. So, just the idea of what do you do with irascible regimes? That's a big open question.

Sarah Paine
In the Gulf War, Bush Sr. fought a limited war for a limited objective. The limited objective was: get Iraqi troops out of Kuwait and restore the Kuwaiti government. Those were the two really big things, and then call it a day when you've done those things.

That's what he did. It was an incredibly successful war, and it went to our heads. Right? Because when you run a successful limited war, it's over very rapidly. You get stuff with not too much cost, and it's done.

So then we try to do the total makeover of another country and excuse me, what right does one country have to do a total makeover on another country? And then, of course, the Russians and Chinese are apoplectic watching us do this, and that's a problem.

Or you think about Afghanistan, maybe you go in there and at least boot Osama bin Laden out of the country, and then proclaim it victory and leave.

Dwarkesh Patel
All right, going back to Japan.

Sarah Paine
Yeah, okay. I tried to divert you.

Dwarkesh Patel
No, no, I did the diverting. It was interesting. Do we have some sense of what Japanese public opinion was like through the 30s and 40s?

Sarah Paine
I don't know. It's also because it's becoming more and more authoritarian. Yeah, I have no idea on that subject. Again, it's a social historian, that would require really detailed knowledge that I don't have.

Dwarkesh Patel
I had Daniel Yergin, who wrote The Prize, which is the Pulitzer Prize-winning history of oil. He has a big section in the book about World War II because, in his view, oil was a big component of why the war happened the way it did. One of the interesting points he made was that he thinks that the kamikaze missions, a big part of the motivation behind them, was that Japan lacked the fuel to have the pilots fly back. Is that accurate?

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Sarah Paine
Oh, it's worse than that. They didn't have the fuel to actually train the pilots. And as we learned in 9/11- sorry to bring it back- it's really much easier to learn how to take off a plane and crash it into something, right? That's what those guys were doing. Than it is to teach them how to make safe landings under weird conditions.

So, the kamikaze was just an act of—it's a guided missile. And it was an act of having very few assets at the end of the war and not enough fuel to fly anyone anywhere.

So it's going to be a guided missile into an aircraft carrier or a battleship, destroyer, or something.

Dwarkesh Patel
One of the things I learned from your book is that the overwhelming fraction of deaths on the Japanese side during the war happened after it was known that they were going to lose. I think in the last 14 months—and this is all from your book—1.8 million of the total 2.1 million Japanese deaths, that's 85% of the total, happened in the last 14 months of the war. A similar thing is true with Germany, where I think 43% of the deaths happened in the last year of the war, I think 2.3 million out of the 5.3 million.

Walk me through what is going on inside government – when the higher-level people must know that they're losing, but they're going on to make bigger and bigger sacrifices.

Sarah Paine
Well, you're conflating, I think, Western values about what the purpose of the government is. Well, in common wealth, common weal—common weal is common good—this notion that governments are about the well-being of individuals. Okay, well, we're not in societies where we're talking about individuals for openers, certainly not in Japan.

Then there's another: why the deaths so huge? It's at the end of these wars, you've broken the transportation system that gets produce to hungry mouths. And you've also removed so much manpower, literally from the fields, you aren't producing anything.

So that you're talking about mass starvation as a result of having done a number of previous years of warfare. And also, this mass starvation helps account for why one side gets shattered and quits.

And then the thing that ought to give everyone pause is, okay, if Japan's economy was, I don't know, a tenth of ours in World War II, and these are the kind of costs that they could inflict, watch it on getting into wars with countries that you think you're vastly superior to. It may not work out.

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The costs are horrific. You're illustrating the problems with this continental order of taking territories. This is how it goes.

But sometimes other people visit wars on you, and then you're into their world of hurt. I mean, I think it's like Angela Merkel or Neville Chamberlain back in World War II, who's going, surely these people don't want to do this. It's going to wind up being a bloodbath. Surely they don't want to.

So Neville Chamberlain makes the compromise at Munich, thinking, surely this will be it. We'll compromise them, and they'll go. Wrong. They're going to come in for the whole thing.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah, I still feel like I don't understand. So there are a couple of options, and maybe the correct answer isn't one of these.

One is that there's just denialism. They genuinely do not understand that they are going to lose the war. Another is that they know they're going to lose, but they would prefer to just go out dying.

Sarah Paine
Well they're dead anyway, so who cares, right? Well, this is the problem with nuclear weapons. Push someone into a large corner, or a tight enough corner, maybe they think, "Well, it's my last day, so guess what? It's going to be your last day, too."

Dwarkesh Patel
How much should we question the demand for unconditional surrender, knowing that most of the deaths in World War II happened because, if there wasn't unconditional surrender, maybe we could have reached a peace earlier, and most of the deaths could have been spared?

Sarah Paine
I think by the time, those deaths are Japanese deaths for us. We're looking at these things and we've lost a lot of people. Our idea is, "Hey, we're almost there." We're not worried about Japanese civilian deaths or Japanese military deaths.

We're looking at, these are the people that have killed how many Chinese? And I don't believe China was ever part of Japan. What were they doing there?

So then you're asking for tender mercies out of Americans for the Japanese in those days? No. After all that had happened. It's ugly by the time you've killed this many people, the kind of bitterness on both sides.

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Dwarkesh Patel
Was it a mistake to demilitarize Japan after the war? A couple of things: One is, look, they did become an ally afterwards, and if they did have a military, they could have helped us in the Korean War. The outcome might have been different with military help.

Sarah Paine
Yeah, it was the secret part. They were the ones who knew about de-mining. So we had a big military drawdown after the end of World War II, and the Navy really got cut back because it was going to be all nuclear weapons, and the Air Force was going to deliver, so the Navy didn't get a whole bunch of things that it cared about, including minesweepers.

So when the North Koreans are throwing a lot of mines around, it's Japanese that are helping. It was secret; that's why you don't know about it. It's not your fault. It came out in research that's recent.

Another thing, when MacArthur does his Inchon landings, it's very tricky because the tides are, I don't know how many feet, like 30-foot tides. It's enormous. So you can really get stuck on mud flats if you don't time that right and know where you're going. Who are the pilots to bring it all in? It's Japanese.

And also, they did- they've always had a self-defense force, and they have a very competent navy. It's called a Self-Defense Force, but anybody else would call it a navy. But that then fits in with what the Constitution says we're supposed to have.

But why is it a mistake to demilitarize Japan?

Dwarkesh Patel
Another reason is they had a vested interest in making sure the Communists don't take over in China. They could have provided some amount of support. If the Nationalists, it's obvious the Nationalists are going to lose, at that point maybe they would have decided to support the Nationalists against the Communists.

Sarah Paine
It's too late. They've gutted the Nationalist armies. That was a massive strategic error on the -

Part of it comes from arrogance of don't denigrate the other side. And so the Japanese thought they could... China's a failed state. These people are hopeless. They can't even decide what they're doing. They got warlords everywhere. We'll just push them around and we'll get what we want.

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And they do really well moving into Manchuria. Manchuria is, it's bigger than Germany and France combined. The Japanese actually stabilize it, do lots of investment, that's why it becomes the most industrialized part of Asia outside the home islands, more so than Shanghai, and this is in the 30s. And so they're looking at it like, "Things look pretty good, and they'll get away with it." And they didn't.

Dwarkesh Patel
Let's say in the couple of decades before the war, if you looked at somebody who's young and ambitious in Japan, the kind of person who might come to Silicon Valley today if they're in America, what do they want to do? Do they want to join zaibatsus? Do they want to become a general of the military?

Sarah Paine
This is social history. I just don't know. You don't see a lot. I just truly don't know.

It has to do with - there is so much to know in this world that all of us, all we can do is know a corner of it. So my corner has been a top-down. Actually, in my expertise, I started out with a major field in Russian history and a minor field in Chinese history. And then I realized to deal with those two, you had to understand Japan.

So you're asking me in my weak suit about the social history of that country, and I can't answer it.

Dwarkesh Patel
My friend, Ege Erdil, has this theory that, look, you have... many of the powers that we fought in the 20th century — Japan, Korea, Vietnam, not fought directly, but at least fought over — we ended up becoming allies with them later on, and in fact, they're some of our best allies.

There's two ways to think about it. One is that we had especially good diplomacy with them after the war. The second is that despite having the same interests, despite being in a position where we should naturally have been friends, we basically screwed up the diplomacy beforehand and we didn't ally ourselves with the peaceful factions within these countries. Basically illustrates a failure of diplomacy on our part, that the natural allies we ended up going to war with.

Sarah Paine
There's no manner of diplomacy that's going to solve Hitler. One of the lessons is, don't let the world global economy melt down. When that happens, people who are, not only Americans will get desperate, but people who are poorer than Americans, which is lots of the world, will be truly desperate. So you don't want to do that.

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As for why the Japanese and the Germans are such wonderful allies as they are, is a- what's the word? It's a testament to having a generous peace. So the peace after that war was not to get even, which is what had been the peace in World War I. It was "the Germans, they'd done all this terrible stuff, we're going to make them pay all kinds of money and we're going to tell them it was all their fault and blah blah blah". That doesn't work well.

That was of course what the Russians did to East Germany. But for West Germany, it's how do you reintegrate them back into Europe and get them back on in? And the Japanese as well. And also a serendipitous fact of the Korean War, the Japanese economy was a total mess at the end of this war.

And the United States, of course, is overtaxed because there's Europe to rebuild and there isn't enough money to do everything. But when the Korean War hits, which is immediately in 1950, tons of the supplies were bought in Japan.

That's how the Japanese economy initially is restored, is through the Korean War and then the Vietnam War. Because it's the local place to buy, or more local than the United States, to buy a lot of supplies. So that's another piece of why things work out.

And then there's also the Germans and Japanese who lived- you were asking about what do conscripts think? There are two brilliant generations in Japan's modern history: one's the Meiji generation, and the other is the post-World War II generation.

They did this incredible makeover, and I think of all these wonderful, high-quality products they built. Like, I love my Toyota. I want to rent an American car, and "I can't find anything.

I'm going to kill everyone as I'm trying to figure out how to adjust something". Whereas Toyota is like [makes noise], and we're good.

Dwarkesh Patel
When you were showing the things we learned from the diary entries of different admirals or generals on the Japanese side, as you were going through the archives and looking at these things, I'm curious, were they writing knowing that they were writing for future historians? Or was that actually just a personal record-keeping thing? What was the motivation behind it?

Sarah Paine
I did not read that stuff in archives. Japanese Archives, I was doing strictly diplomatic stuff. The Admiral Ugaki Matome's diary, which is the one thing I cited on these subjects, it was translated. Someone ran into it, translated it into English, and so I just read the whole thing.

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And then the other stuff, the quotations, I think I was ripping off secondary sources where someone else had done the archival research. Then I pulled those, but those are where the quotations came from.

So again, I haven't done this deep read into all of the Japanese thinking about all of these... of what motivated them in their careers. That I have not done.

Dwarkesh Patel
Was there some big "aha" moment when you were going through all this Japanese stuff where like, "I get why they did certain-" like, "Why certain things transpired in a certain way?"

Sarah Paine
Oh, well, this lecture. When I came to the Naval War College in 2000, they assigned me a couple of lectures because it's a group-talk class, and everyone only gives two, three, or four lectures. And so I was junior; I think I got one or two.

And so I was told to lecture on World War II Pacific, and I'm like, "Oh, great, U.S. Navy. This will be a joke, me telling them about World War II Pacific." Because I'm a historian, major field Russia, minor field China, and I've dabbled in Japan. And now I'm supposed to talk about this.

And so my husband said, "Well, hey, I've taught this survey of Japan, read this Bushido stuff." He had some of the books hanging around the house. So I read that, and then I had read some basic things about World War II.

And then I... This is why I'm telling you, I think it's a useful way to approach other cultures: read what they read. What are the key books? Apparently, these were key books.

Then you go, okay, if I believe this, then I'm going to take Western analysis, of going [makes noise] rather than mirror imaging. I'm going to basically take their software, put it in here in my brain, and then say, "Okay, does this inform me of what they're doing in the banzai charges?" I was like, "Oh, yeah, that actually makes sense now," instead of saying, "What are these nut jobs doing?" And it's everyone.

No, no, actually, if you believe these things, then this would explain how you're doing things. So that's how that all came about.

Dwarkesh Patel
One thing I was wondering about when you were talking about the inter-service rivalries is, what were the allies doing that they avoided this? Not only between the branches of the military, but I mean, allies, the word literally says it. Japan wasn't coordinating with Germany in the way that America was coordinating with Britain.

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How are the institutions set up, or the culture set up, that made this possible?

Sarah Paine
Well A, this institutional rivalry is terrible all over the place. Alright, more concepts that are useful: It's really helpful in looking at people when you have disagreements with them, to ask: who is their primary adversary or rival? Not their secondary - they probably have a whole list of people who annoy them - but who's the number one?

And then, where is the primary theater of wherever that disagreement is? Look at that. And then, on the disagreement, how big a deal is it? Is it existential?

Japan thought - the reason it was undeterrable, that we didn't figure out- they thought their entire existence was at stake, that they absolutely had to have territory in China to survive. Now, whether that's correct or not is a completely different story. If they believe it, that's what's motivating them.

So, on these, when you're looking at the war on the Allied side, who's the primary enemy? Hitler. Where's the primary theater? Germany. Even though there's Japan, it was Germany first.

And what about the ultimate goals? Well, actually, that doesn't align at all because the Russians want a communist wonderland, we want everyone decolonized, and the British want the empire on which the sun never sets. But they all shared an intermediate objective that Hitler has to go, and that's a superglue of an alliance.

Now, let's flip it to the Axis. Okay, Italy, what does Italy want? Roman Empire, whatever it is. So, who's the primary enemy? Well, Britain, because that's where British interests are.

Okay, Hitler, what's he all about? He wants to do his Lebensraum, Nazi wonderland all over Eurasia. So, who's his primary enemy? That would be Russia.

Japan, what do they want? They want the big Japanese empire. Who's their primary enemy? It's China. And then when they get us in, they got a whole new problem in their hands. None of this aligns, and so the Axis aren't going to be trading many resources with each other, whereas the Allies... and it really goes back to your original question about the British. Part of their way of running wars is you absolutely coordinate with allies. You give them serious resources, which is what they finally figured out at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, where they're paying big money to support different allies, and then you've got to put skin in the game, actually send your armies.

So the British, and we take this from them, we're students of the British on this, do massive sharing with Lend-Lease. And Stalin isn't sharing too much with us.

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And then we've got the unified commands with the British because they're all about doing that. The Russians won't even let us on their territory to do things. And there are only little bits with the Arctic convoys going up to Murmansk, and it's hardly anyone who's up there. This is a different cultural tradition on how to deal with things.

Dwarkesh Patel
All right, we've come full circle. I think that's a great place to close things. This was excellent. Thank you so much, Sarah.

Sarah Paine
Thank you for coming.

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