

War Plan Red: the American plan for war with Britain

John Major discusses an astonishing aspect of past Anglo-American history

All great powers have developed contingency plans for war with each other, and the United States in the early twentieth century was no exception. Each of Washington's schemes was given a distinctive colour. Green mapped out intervention in neighbouring Mexico, Tan the occupation of the US protectorate in Cuba. Brown dealt with insurgency in America's colony, the Philippines, Yellow mounted an expedition to China, Orange addressed a Pacific war with Japan. Plan Red orchestrated the American response to a showdown with Great Britain, or rather, with nothing less than the entire British Empire.¹

This article looks at its evolution in the 1920's and 1930's, starting in August 1920, that is, not two years after America's involvement as Britain's partner in the First World War. But rivalry had always underlain Anglo-American relations, so the military attache in London was told to discover whether Britain planned war with the United States, and to build up a picture of British opinion on the issue.²

The reply came back that Britain was irritated by America's insistence on full repayment of its war debt and by Washington's attitude of 'splendid isolation and aloofness'. For the British, the attache concluded, 'America is getting to be too serious a rival. England is convinced that she cannot crush America, therefore she will try to block us at every possible turn, and will endeavor to surround us with potential enemies... . There is hardly a shadow of doubt that England is keeping up the closest and friendliest contact with Mexico, Japan and South America and is gradually lining them up against us.'³

The American riposte was slow to gather momentum, however. Not until December 1925 did the head of the Army's War Plans Division summon his men to action. 'The important work before this Division is War Plan Red,' he proclaimed, 'The most successful war plan ever conceived was dictated by its author in about two hours to a man who took it down in longhand... . It was dictated by the great master of the art of war and it resulted in the surrender of Ulm and the capture of Vienna.'⁴

Planning then went ahead, but not at Napoleonic speed. 'A war with Great Britain,' stated an Army spokesman in February 1928, 'seems highly improbable in the near future', but it was important for the defence establishment to think the scenario through. First, because British sea power was the only force in the world capable of bringing home an attack to both the continental United States and to Washington's far-flung dependencies in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Second, because Canada – a Dominion of the British Commonwealth – was so close to America's

industrial heartland in the states of the north-east. Consequently, 'our estimate of possible British attacks should be the governing consideration in our peacetime preparedness program.'⁵

The *casus belli* of an Anglo-American conflict was judged to be 'constantly increasing Blue (American) penetration and expansion into regions formerly dominated by Red trade, to such an extent as eventually to menace Red standards of living and to threaten economic ruin.' This remarkably Leninist diagnosis concluded that Britain would therefore aim to eliminate America as a commercial threat 'by destruction of Blue merchant marine and foreign trade, and by acquisition of Blue overseas possessions, including control by Red of the Panama Canal.'

The focus of the British onslaught would be America's war machine in the manufacturing cities of the North. From the Montreal-Quebec region of Canada (Crimson) would come an invasion designed to 'capture or destroy Blue vital war-making industries', coupled with sustained air strikes against 'vital war industrial facilities and on centers of governmental, financial and industrial administration', that is, Washington, New York and Pittsburgh. The same objective of crippling US war potential would underlie attacks on the Great Lakes waterways which carried nearly 90% of America's iron ore to the smelters.⁷

Outside the continental USA the main British targets would be trade routes, the Panama Canal, American islands in the West Indies, and the Philippines, in an expedition probably to be led by Australia (Scarlet). As its reward Australia would no doubt demand some or all of the Philippines archipelago, New Zealand would claim American Samoa, and Canada possibly the whole of Alaska.⁸

At the same time British propaganda was likely to be spread energetically throughout Latin America. The most receptive republic would be Washington's long-standing opponent Argentina, followed closely by Mexico, which had lost half of its territory to the United States in the war of 1846. The Mexican government, it was predicted, would turn a blind eye to British agents stirring up anti-American feeling in order to tie down US troops on the Rio Grande. As for Central America, British Honduras, 'if left intact', would become hostile to the governments favourable to Blue established in these countries.⁹

Yet were the British really capable of fighting such a war? As one staff officer asked, for the British was it still the old strategy of muddling through – 'vague and ill-considered policy, dissipation of resources, vacillation and compromise

in the essential and ultimate thing, blind and bull-necked confidence in the means to the end?¹⁰

The planners thought not. Britain was assumed to have made diplomatic arrangements in Europe to cover its back and allow a concentration of forces in the Atlantic. And, provided the Royal Navy retained control of the ocean, the British were believed capable of producing almost everything they needed for the war effort, in spite of their dependence on the United States for such critical items as cotton, copper and oil.¹¹

Britain's Navy, the Americans acknowledged, was a formidable proposition. Forty days after the outbreak of hostilities, the Admiralty could assemble at the Canadian ice-free port of Halifax, Nova Scotia, a Grand Fleet of no less than 14 battleships, four battle cruisers, 38 cruisers, five aircraft carriers, 130 destroyers and 34 submarines.¹²

The Red Army was similarly impressive. Sixty days after war began, 148,000 British reinforcements could be expected to gather in Canada, to be supplemented by four divisions from India, two from Australia, and one each from New Zealand, South Africa and – somewhat improbably given Irish Anglophobia – from the Irish Free State. All told, some 2.5 million men, including Canadians, could come together on Crimson soil.¹³

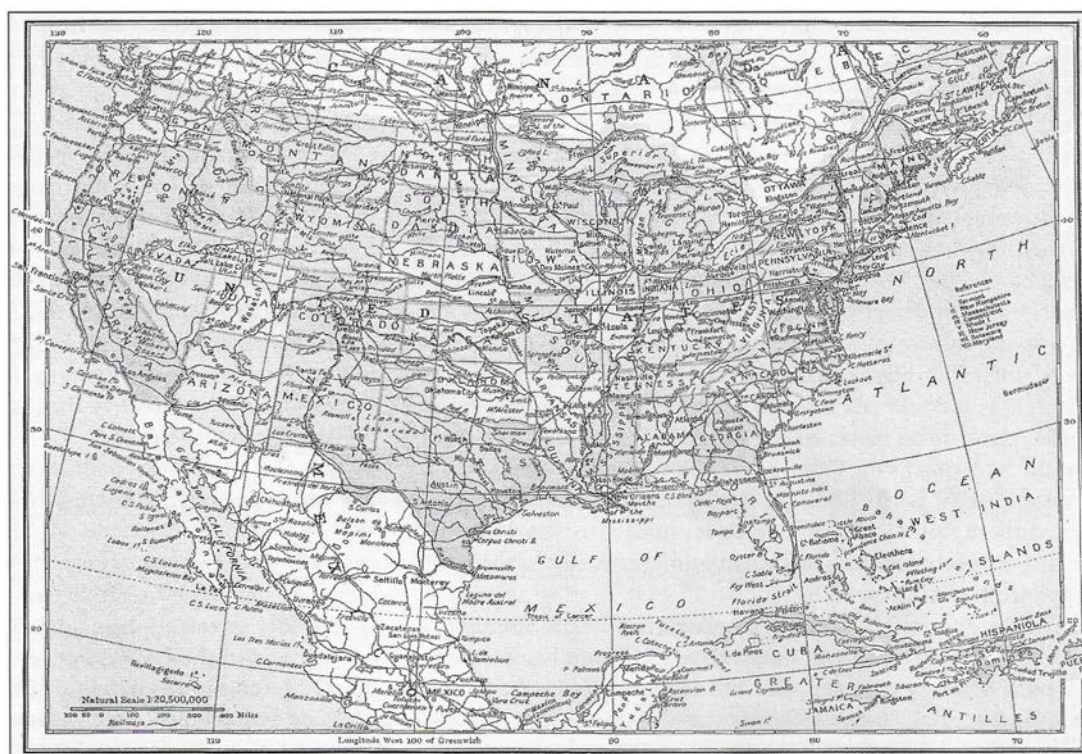
In air power too, Red was strong. Within 30 days, 30 Royal Air Force squadrons could have been shipped over by cargo vessel, while 13 squadrons could be brought across by aircraft carrier in only ten days. And these calculations did not include the planes of the RN's Fleet Air Arm.¹⁴

As seen from Washington, then, the British were in a commanding position. If Red forces penetrated as far as Albany, capital of New York State, 'the effect on the Blue industrial region and system of communication would be far-reaching.'¹⁵

How did America aim to meet the threat? The ultimate US objective was 'the expulsion of Red from North and South America ... and the definite elimination of Red as a strong competitor in foreign trade'. In trying to reach it, Washington was on its own. The policy of diplomatic isolation meant it had no allies, and there was only slender hope of pro-American sympathy in the British Commonwealth and Empire. There might be a possibility of revolt in India and opposition to Britain from French

Canadians. At the same time the Irish could perhaps be moved to give 'active support to an American Expeditionary Force attempt to secure a base of operations on the Irish coast'. This idea, however, did not feature in the final plan.¹⁶

American victory was to come primarily through an invasion of Canada. Here, of course, Americans had had a certain amount of practice. Quite apart from the campaigns against the French in 1690, 1710 and 1759, there had been assaults on Canada in both the War of Independence and the War of 1812. Invasion plans were drafted during the Oregon crisis of 1839-42, in the final year of the Civil War of 1861-65, and during the Venezuelan imbroglio of 1896. In 1890 the influential naval strategist Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan had war-gamed a suicide raid by sea on Halifax.



Map of North America circa 1939

Royal Geographical Society, London

Halifax also featured prominently in the Navy's thinking in the 1920's. The army was to dispatch 25,000 men by sea to take the port and deny it to the British, thus preventing the entry of reinforcements into Canada. Simultaneously, Army planners envisaged a massive ground attack on several fronts. A full field army was to muster east of Lake Champlain, with the seizure of Quebec and Montreal as its mission. To the west, three bridgeheads were to be lodged in Canada to protect Buffalo and the Niagara power installations, Detroit, and the Sault Sainte Marie canal system. Another task force was designated to take Winnipeg and cut the Canadian-Pacific Railway. In all this the contribution of air and sea power was ancillary. The Army Air Corps was confined to the tactical support of ground troops, while the Navy's part was also secondary: convoying the Halifax expedition; securing Halifax against a British

counter-thrust; and providing back-up for the Army in the Great Lakes theatre.¹⁷

Outside Canada, however, the navy expected to come into its own. In the Far East it was to harry British trade in the China Sea. In the Atlantic it was to intercept Britain's supplies of wheat and nickel from Canada and meat from Argentina. But the key field of operations was to be the Caribbean. Here, the Navy's first care was the Panama Canal, the vital sea-link between America's widely-separated seaboard. But it also had the immediate job of cutting off the flow of oil to Britain from Latin America. Then, if the campaign in Canada went well, the US Marines were to seize Jamaica, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Trinidad, St. Lucia and the nest of subversion in British Honduras.¹⁸

This last project reflected Washington's intense proprietary interest in Latin America. 'It is of the utmost advantage', the Plan declared, 'to cultivate a feeling of Pan-American solidarity.' Should there be local objections, 'Blue should be prepared to exert military and naval pressure against recalcitrant Nations of Central America and West Indies.' Thus the infection of British influence would be quarantined.¹⁹

Looking to the closing stages of the war, the Army was instructed to destroy all enemy forces in Canada and to occupy further critical areas: the Ontario Peninsula (seat of one third of Canada's munitions capacity); Sudbury (the sole source of America's nickel supply); and the Vancouver-Esquimalt region. The Navy for its part was to extend raids on British commerce throughout the Atlantic and even perhaps to move into the Mediterranean.²⁰

But, the planners had to ask themselves, was the United States capable of carrying all this off? The answers were disturbing. For the Navy, the chief concern was the fact that the Fleet was stationed on the Pacific coast as a deterrent to what the Navy deemed the country's chief enemy - Japan. It would therefore have to transit the Panama Canal before it could be brought to bear in the North-West Atlantic. If close to the Canal it could make the voyage in eight days, but it was accepted that to shift the Fleet in a hurry would probably precipitate war and the risk of a British air strike on the Canal's vulnerable locks. If the Canal were blocked, the concentration of the Fleet in the Atlantic would be severely delayed. Secondly, the Navy simply could not function efficiently in support of the Canadian invasion without Halifax as a base, and as we shall see, the chances of taking Halifax were not rated highly. Thirdly, the Navy was compelled to admit that it could not prevent five of America's ten principal trade routes from being cut by the British and that two more would be in dispute. Finally, the Plan predicted that in the event of defeat in the Philippines, the ships of the Asiatic Fleet based there would either have to withdraw to Pearl Harbor or disperse into the Indian Ocean and eventually 'work their way into the Atlantic.'²¹

The Army too faced a host of problems. In the summer of 1930 the Regular Army in the continental United States had a strength of no more than 102,700 officers and men. To provide the necessary manpower for the war the National Guard militia of 175,000 would have to be mobilized, plus the Organized Reserve of 120,000. But this would still leave considerable shortages in the troops needed during initial

operations, and the planners were also bound to confess that the scope of the Army's opening moves would be curtailed by serious deficiencies in supplies and equipment.²²

The same held good of the Army Air Corps. In May 1926 the Air Service had submitted a grandiose scheme for a strategic air offensive aimed at the destruction of the Canadian Air Force, attacks on Canadian industry, the denial of all Canadian ports to Britain, the denial of air bases to Britain as far afield as Newfoundland and Greenland, and the severing of Britain's transatlantic communications.²³

In truth, however, the Corps was not fitted to play a decisive part in any contemplated war. The 1926 proposals had contained an admission that the Air Corps possessed few units 'that can be employed to great advantage at the outbreak of war.' Four years later, in the final plan, things were no better, with the Corps described as 'only a very weak force with which to meet a major emergency'. Earlier estimates had freely forecast Royal Air Force raids on Detroit, Buffalo, Boston and New York and Fleet Air Arm sorties against the East Coast. If they came, America was obviously not equipped to repel them.²⁴

It was this disclosure which first threw doubt on the advisability of a Halifax expedition. The main offensive, the Army believed, should be aimed at the Quebec-Montreal area. If that were captured, the British would find it very difficult to re-take via the rugged terrain of northern Maine. This led the chief of the War Plans Division to question the assumption that the seizure of Halifax was vital, and in February 1929 the director of Military Intelligence advised against the expedition on the grounds that the Royal Navy would already be in place to meet it.²⁵

As a result the Halifax campaign was effectively cancelled. In the euphemistic words of the final plan, it would be launched 'in case the situation at the outbreak of war indicates the practicability of the operation', and the decision rested with the President. One possible alternative was an overland assault, but in the light of the Plan's statement that Nova Scotia's road and rail communications were 'entirely inadequate for the operation of large forces', this seemed unlikely. Another was the neutralization of Halifax by air attack and the mining of its sea approaches, though given the relative strengths of the opposing navies and air forces, its chances too would be slim.²⁶

With this major proviso War Plan Red was approved in the early summer of 1930 and issued in February 1931. Its life was short. It was revised marginally in May 1935 and during the winter of 1935-36 the US First Army enthusiastically simulated the ground campaign against Halifax. But in reply to its report on the manoeuvres, the Army Staff stated on 1 May 1936 that the Plan had been placed 'in low priority'. The following October it was officially declared obsolete by the Chief of Staff, with the directive that no action be taken towards its revision or replacement.²⁷

The reasons for its demise were twofold. First, Red had been little more than a theoretical means of testing out the War Department's General Mobilization Plan of 1928, which foresaw the creation of an army of no less than 4,600,000 men. As planning for Red had helped show, however, this was wildly over-ambitious, particularly in the straitened

circumstances of the Depression. In 1936, therefore, the chief of Staff ordered a sharp reduction in Army mobilization targets.²⁸

More importantly, Red was made redundant by changing international conditions. In 1927 mutual antagonism over naval disarmament had led to feverish talk of an Anglo-American war, but in January 1938 Major-General Stanley Embick wrote that developments since 1933 had made nonsense of the concept. He was speaking of the growth of Nazi German influence in Latin America, which made the defence of the Western Hemisphere the Army's first priority. In that context the United States needed at the very least Britain's benevolent neutrality. The two countries were also thrown together by the aggressive Japanese challenge to both their interests in the Far East. The US Navy had all along taken the view that the real threat to America came from Japan and had seen planning for Red as a futile diversion. 'From beginning to end', wrote one senior naval planner in May 1939, 'this plan has had little validity. It has not been supported and it was largely useless work.'²⁹

This now made Canada a potential partner in hemisphere defence, not the springboard for invasion, and British seapower an important guarantee of American national security, not the greatest menace to it. Writing on the eve of King George VI's visit to Washington in midsummer 1939,

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the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Leahy, could truthfully describe War Plan Red as 'wholly inapplicable to present conditions'. It included directives 'which could be adapted to ... any war in the Atlantic requiring a major effort', but when that war came, Britain and the United States were to be on the *same* side.³⁰

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