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Module 1: Fundamentals of Strategy D14

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Session 1.3 / FA #4

Prompts

While some contend that the Battle of Midway marked the point in World War II where the tide turned irrevocably against Japan, others cite the fight to maintain control of Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands as decisive in the outcome of the Pacific War. Which argument is correct and why?

- Strong answers will incorporate elements from one or more theorists.
- Your answer should be 350-500 words in length. Additionally, you are required to respond to at least two of the Blue Team DBF answers. These responses should be a minimum of 100 words in length and are due NLT 48 hours after the initial post due date.
- **Due:** The primary post is due on NLT Monday at 2359 and the secondary posts are due NLT Wednesday at 2359.

1. Gold Team

a. Gold Team will take the “Guadalcanal was more decisive” side of the argument.

2. Blue Team

a. Blue Team will take the “Midway was more decisive” side of the argument.

Gold Answer

GOLD POST:

While the Battle of Midway is often cited as the critical turning point in the Pacific War, a deeper look at events makes the aftermath of Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands campaign far more decisive in terms of strategic momentum against Japan. Midway delivered a tactical blow, but it was at Guadalcanal that Japan's ability to conduct offensive operations collapsed and the Allies seized the initiative for good. Viewed through the lens of Clausewitz's culminating point, Guadalcanal marks the moment when Japan's military ambitions exceeded its strategic grasp.

Clausewitz defines war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" and warns of the danger in surpassing one's culminating point (Clausewitz, *On War*, 75). Professor Jeff Shaw's lecture echoes that Japan's objective for WWII was to wage unlimited war against China. But they likely exceeded their culminating points of victory. Guadalcanal was where this overreach became fatal. Japan could no longer sustain its tempo of operations, and its repeated attempts to retake the island failed in the face of Allied sea and air control.

While Symonds gives Midway credit for shifting the strategic initiative, he also implies that Guadalcanal might have had a longer impact in the course of the Pacific War. He writes that Guadalcanal was positioned along vital sea lanes that "could patrol, and potentially dominate, the vital sea-lanes between Hawaii and Australia" (Symonds, *World War II at Sea*, 289). Despite the shock at Midway, Japan was still dangerous afterward. It was the grinding battles at Guadalcanal that broke its offensive capacity and exposed its logistical limitations.

Bradford Lee describes Guadalcanal as the turning of the tide, writing, "the transition from the defense to the offense had occurred, and the attrition of enemy capabilities had developed apace"

(Lee, *A Pivotal Campaign*, 84). Clausewitz stressed the significance of holding the initiative and after Guadalcanal, the Allies had it and never lost it again.

Prados notes, “Dramatic though it turned out to be, the battle of Midway unfolded for the Japanese with all the inevitability of a Greek tragedy” (Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded*, 323). Although Midway was a critical tactical defeat, it did not change the basic calculus for Japan’s war effort. The Guadalcanal campaign, in contrast, revealed Japan’s inability to conduct a sustained, joint campaign. Mahnken adds, “The campaign demonstrates that tactical competence and technology are both key constituents of competence in battle” (Mahnken, *Asymmetric Warfare at Sea*, 96). Japan’s performance showed its limitations in sustaining prolonged, joint operations.

Parshall and Tully acknowledge Midway’s importance, but concede its limitations, writing, “if Midway itself did not harm Japan’s military in absolute terms as much as the following years’ worth of warfare in the Solomons would, it clearly opened the gates to this hellish attritional cycle” (Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, 23).

Midway was dramatic, but Guadalcanal was decisive. It marked the culminating point of Japanese expansion and the start of the long-Allied march to Tokyo.

Blue Response #1

Emmanuel, Thanks for the thoughtful post. I actually agree with you that Midway was the more decisive moment, in that it dealt such a crippling material blow to the Japanese fleet from which they never fully recovered. Having said that, as a member of the Gold Team, I will make the case

that Guadalcanal was the more transformative shift. Midway checked Japan's momentum, but Guadalcanal reversed it. It was the first time the U.S. had taken and held a piece of Japanese territory, which forced Japan on the defensive and demonstrated their limitations in mounting joint operations over time. If Midway was the punch, Guadalcanal was the slow grind that sapped their will and staying power.

Blue Response #2

Great post, William! You really spell out how Midway broke the Japanese offensive momentum and changed the strategic balance. I will concede that without that victory, Guadalcanal probably would not have occurred when and as it did. That said, I would argue, Guadalcanal delivered the more lasting blow. It revealed Japan's weakness to maintain protracted joint operations, and it left them with a slow-motion withdrawal that they could not reverse. Midway had been sharp and sudden, but Guadalcanal was a grinding bite that hollowed out Japan's capacity to wage war. One was the inflection point, the other was the meltdown, and both were necessary.