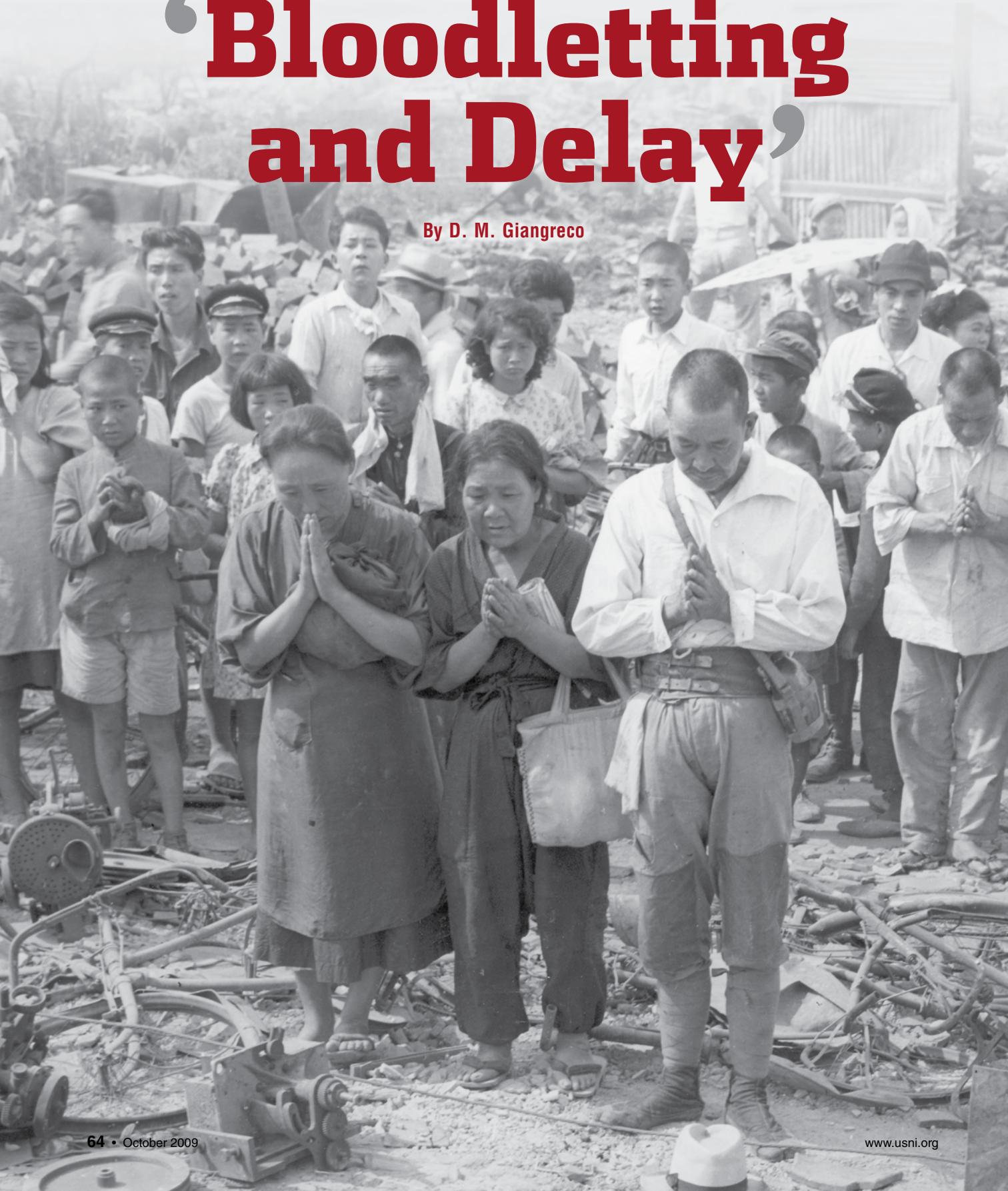


# The Maximum ‘Bloodletting and Delay’

By D. M. Giangreco



**Based on years of original research,  
*Hell to Pay: Operation DOWNFALL  
and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1947*,**  
a new book out this month from the  
Naval Institute Press, examines the  
true projected cost of an invasion of  
the Japanese Home Islands.

**I**n the spring and summer of 1945, the United States and Imperial Japan were rushing pell-mell toward a confrontation of catastrophic proportions. World War II's sudden and unexpected conclusion after atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki masked the fact that the United States had already commenced the opening stages of Operation Downfall, a series of land invasions on the Japanese Home Islands that U.S. Army planners and senior leaders calculated would cost anywhere from 250,000 to 1 million American casualties during just the initial fighting.

On Monday, 6 August 1945, some 5,400 soldiers of the 20th Armored Division on board the SS *John Ericsson* were nearing New York while the heavy cruiser *Augusta*, carrying President Truman and almost six hundred nautical miles due east, was making its own approach to Chesapeake Bay and the naval base at Norfolk. After carefully navigating through the minefields protecting the harbor, *Ericsson* continued west then turned northwest toward the narrows and its Hudson River pier when the ship was greeted by a yacht with a Women's Army Corps (WAC) band and a bevy of young women who waved and threw kisses. This was not a time for any fears of what the future might hold, and the soldiers eagerly looked forward to thirty-day furloughs before they had to assemble at Camp Cook, California, staging area for the Japan invasion. They knew nothing yet of the strange new weapon that was saving many of their lives.

In fact, nearly 100,000 westbound soldiers earmarked for the invasion—in addition to the first few thousand heading home permanently because they were lucky enough to be “out on points”—had passed Truman on the high seas in July as the *Augusta* raced east at an average speed of twenty-six-plus knots to deliver him to the Potsdam Conference. Little more than a day after Truman’s departure, he crossed paths with both the 4th Infantry Division heading for New York and the 8th Infantry Division, which would retrace his route through Chesapeake Bay while heading for Hampton Roads.

Troops from both divisions disembarked on 10 July and were immediately hustled into trains that brought them to camps, where they received new uniforms, huge dinners with all the trimmings, and entertainment from USO troupes before leaving on furlough.

The process repeated itself near the mid-Atlantic with the 87th Infantry Division, sailing for a New York

U.S. ARMY

**MOURNING THE DEAD** An invasion of the Japanese Home Islands would have produced casualties many times the number caused by dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The figure of 20 million—sometimes for “casualties” and sometimes for “dead”—was regularly used by senior Japanese military and civilian authorities when discussing the ultimate price Japan would pay during a prolonged land invasion by U.S. and Allied forces. Here Japanese nationals pray over the charred remains of their countrymen.



appalling Marine and Navy casualties in the Pacific.

The number of dead, wounded, injured, and missing reached its peak during the months of November, December, and January at 72,000, 88,000, and 79,000 respectively, even as the War Department, in conjunction with the Office of War Mobilization, hammered out both the details of how to handle the nation's manpower shortage and what needed to be done to ensure that the public's support for the war with Japan did not waver during 1945 and 1946. The result was a partial demobilization in what was then believed to be the *middle* of the conflict. Through use of a "points system," the longest-serving

**GO WEST YOUNG MAN** The SS *Queen Elizabeth* arrives in the Port of New York on 29 June 1945, the first of four transits that would cycle 70,000 redeploying troops to the United States by mid August. Later that year, the ship, along with the *Queen Mary*, *Aquitania*, *Mauretania*, *Nieuw Amsterdam*, and *Ile de France* were to begin the movement of redeployed formations from West Coast ports to Manila Bay as well as a British division to the Far East for Operation Downfall.

arrival of 11 July, and again with the 2d Infantry Division, which, moving in a convoy of three slow transports, would not dock in New York until the 20th. Numerous ships with mixed passenger complements of smaller units and individual soldiers were passed during the *Augusta*'s approach to the English Channel and as it and its escorts picked their way through the Channel minefield and scores of wreck buoys marking the graves of Allied and Axis vessels. By the time the *Augusta* prepared to sail up the Wester Schelde Estuary for the final run to Antwerp, the *Queen Elizabeth* had already pulled into the Clyde with the 44th Infantry Division and, to the south at Le Havre, advance elements of the 5th Infantry Division had begun boarding for their voyage to Boston. The objective of this vast movement of men and material was nothing less than Tokyo itself.

### **'The Casualty Surge'**

On 6 August 1945, the United States had been at war for almost exactly three years and eight months. Entering World War II "late," and with no invading armies rampaging across its soil, it had not even begun to suffer the huge day-in, day-out losses common to the other antagonists until just the previous summer. Operation Overlord, the invasion of France, and Operation Forager, the invasion of the Mariana Islands, marked the beginning of what the U.S. Army termed "the casualty surge" in postwar analyses, a year-long bloodletting that saw an average of 65,000 battle casualties among young American soldiers and Army airmen each and every month from June 1944 to May 1945. And these figures did not include the considerable Army losses due to sickness and disease or the

troops were allowed to return home for good, even as Selective Service inductions were nearly doubled in March 1945 to 100,000 men per month in preparation for the grim losses expected from upcoming series of operations on the Japanese Home Islands.

Official figures for American casualties during the war, repeated in countless books and articles, vary only slightly depending on such things as whether or not the early phases of the postwar occupations of Germany and Japan are included, or the loss of the U.S. Army's Philippine Scouts are factored in, and usually stand at 291,577 dead and 671,846 wounded. Occasionally, when "other deaths" from accidents and disease are added, the mortality figure is presented as 405,399, and totals are often rounded. These figures are perfectly sufficient for most uses, such as general comparisons with the losses suffered by other nations or of America's previous wars, but it is important to understand that they represent only a fraction of what the nation's military and civilian leaders at that time recognized as the war's true cost.

Excluding the Merchant Marine, a civilian body whose 243,000 sailors actually suffered the highest American combat mortality rate of the war, some 16,425,00 men and 150,000 women (including 17,000 who served in combat theaters) put on uniforms between 1941 and 1946. The U.S. Army saw 12,435,500 soldiers and airmen pass through its ranks as it struggled to maintain an authorized strength of 7,700,000. And maintaining that troop level often seemed an impossible task. While the frequently quoted number of Army and Army Air Force casualties stands at 936,259, this figure does not include a wide array of administrative separations as well as 9,256 non-

battle deaths or other categories that continually drained the Army of manpower and were closely monitored by senior leaders. These included 50,520 disability discharges due to nonbattle injuries in combat zones (such as loading accidents), combat-related psychiatric breakdowns accounting for 312,354 discharges, and medical discharges totaling a stunning 862,356 from illnesses contracted in disease-ridden overseas theaters—and none of these figures account for soldiers who were hospitalized and then returned to their units after recovery.

Navy and Marine Corps battle casualties at first appear small by comparison, only 159,495 to 162,668 men (depending on how one constructs the totals), but these figures were more than eight times the number of killed and wounded among our seaborne forces in all the other wars of the United States combined. They also do not include stateside administrative and medical attrition of military personnel; the Merchant Marine and Coast Guard's 10,095 dead and 12,000 other battle casualties, primarily from German submarines; nor the Navy and Marines' 30,442 nonbattle deaths. There were also 111,426 Army and Army Air Force prisoners of war in Europe and missing in action in the Pacific who survived their captivities and were counted as casualties *during* the war. In all the United States' armed services had to contend with losses amounting to no fewer than 2,580,000 men in overseas theaters, with the monthly totals running generally in tandem with the rapid growth of forces overseas and leaping upward

when the tempo of operations intensified during the last year of fighting. And this was before a single soldier or Marine set foot on a Japanese beach.

## Serious Shortfalls

Although the precise details of Selective Service conscription statistics remained a closely guarded secret until after the war, Truman, his military and civilian advisors, and senior members of Congress were painfully aware that there was a yawning gap between the draft "calls"—essentially targets—and the number of men actually inducted. Subsequent to a spate of successful months in early 1943, when the number inducted exceeded the calls, the rest of the year and 1944 saw few occasions when quotas were met. The armed services absorbed 4,915,912 draftees during that period, an impressive figure by any standards. However, the calls, in order to fulfill the insatiable demands of global war, had actually totaled 5,815,275.

This shortfall of nearly a million men fell heaviest on the draft's biggest customer, the Army, and had an immediate impact on the ground force element that engages in the heaviest, most prolonged fighting—the infantry. And although the effort to generate a large pool of potential inductees to choose from resulted in the calls exceeding the armed services' actual needs, the dearth of young men being sent forward was painfully real and contributed to a deficit of up to 400,000 soldiers during the countdown to the invasion of France. Without either an upswing in the



NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

**A GRIM PREVIEW** Sugar Loaf Hill on Okinawa was an unimposing little hill with a total area of not much more than two football fields. Note the size of the two soldiers at the summit. In five days of fighting in May 1945, the Japanese defenders here and on two supporting hills behind it inflicted more than 3,000 Marine casualties—in spite of lavish tank and artillery support—before they were finally defeated. The fall of Okinawa capped a year-long period of bloodletting that produced an average of 65,000 U.S. casualties per month among all combat theaters.

number of new men wearing khaki, or a serious revamping of its force structure, the Army would not be able to conduct a two-front war without risking serious reverses and possibly even local defeats that would prolong the fighting and ramp up the nation's cost in "blood and treasure."

Seeing the writing on the wall, the Army embarked on myriad initiatives to minimize losses, such as imposing the highest practical hygiene standards on units in the field, while simultaneously fine tuning and downsizing the composition of combat divisions themselves. For example, the table of organization strength of the Army's eighty-nine active divisions in April 1945 was only 70,000 men higher than the seventy-three and a half largely paper divisions in December 1942. Still, the huge shortfalls made the formulation of a stable replacement pool virtually impossible, and stateside divisions were gutted, sometimes repeatedly, to supply new men for the ones already deployed. It was not unusual to find a formation in the midst of training losing nearly the equivalent of its stated strength in a series of "division drafts." One standard-sized, 14,253-man division, the 69th, was forced to give up 22,235 enlisted personnel and 1,336 officers before it was finally shipped to France.

Administrative manipulations and gyrations of this sort were largely, but not completely, beyond the eyes and ears of both Japanese intelligence and diplomatic corps, and the structure of the U.S. division cut off in the Philippines in 1941, and eventually lost, was only generally representative of what such formations looked like by 1943. Fighting against complete U.S. combat divisions in New Guinea generated some idea of their weight and structure through use of signals (radio) intelligence, but the fact that Japanese units took few American prisoners and were, in any event, either cut off or functionally annihilated meant that the Imperial General Staff in Tokyo operated largely in the dark and had to depend on the Germans for detailed intelligence on U.S. Army's force structure. What the Japanese could and did get, however, was a look at the overall U.S. war effort and public opinion from the American press. And it was quite an eyeful.

## The Power of the Press

Foreign agents, often working in the embassies and consulates of neutral or nominally allied nations, harvested newspapers and magazines of all kinds, including official publications such as *Yank* and *Air Force*, which could be obtained for the price of a subscription. Despite military censorship and the great care taken by domestic newspapers to follow the Office of Censorship's "voluntary" guidelines, articles designed to buck up home-front morale or run-of-the-mill news stories often carried nuggets of hard information that could be combined to form at least some understanding of what the Arsenal of Democracy was capable of producing in terms of the war's basic hardware, such as ships and planes, as well as the manpower available to prosecute the war. Yet it was the robust criticism of the lengthening war and growing casualty lists—

all gleaned from editorials, letters, and opinion pieces—that supplied much of the rationale behind the strategic decisions of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany alike when it came to deciding how to handle the United States.

The leaders of both nations had entered the war convinced that there was little to fear from America, and Adolf Hitler voiced the prevailing wisdom one month after Pearl Harbor when he said, "It's a decayed country. And they have their racial problem, and the problem of social inequalities. . . . Everything about the behavior of American society reveals that it is half Judaized and the other half Negrified. How can one expect a State like that to hold together—a country where everything is built on the dollar?" The Japanese were confident that their devastating attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet, quick string of Asian and Pacific conquests, and the decision by an ascendant Germany to honor its alliance by immediately declaring war on the United States would cow the feckless Americans into accepting the reality that they simply could not win. One of their number, however, was less certain.

Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku had conceived and planned the strike on Pearl Harbor, yet he warned that Japan would likely lose the war if it could not be wrapped up quickly. As a young man, he had studied at Harvard and later served as Japan's naval attaché in Washington. Yamamoto's nearly six years in the United States gave him insights into an America that was incomprehensible to his warrior colleagues raised in a homogeneous, and in many ways still closed, society. As with the Nazis, they had little real understanding of how the American press worked, let alone how it fit into a society that somehow managed to be both skeptical and optimistic at the same time. What they beheld was a chaotic, mongrel nation suffering under the weight of a weak, inefficient democratic process; what Yamamoto saw was vitality and inner strength.

In the space of just a few years, Yamamoto was dead, the victim of broken Japanese codes and long-range American fighter aircraft. Hitler and his regime were clearly reaching their end, too, as massive armies pummeled their way toward the German borders from east and west. Articles in the American press of victories and armies moving ever forward were familiar to the totalitarians in Tokyo and what was left of the Third Reich, which exercised an iron control over their own newspapers and state-controlled radio. But to the Japanese in particular, much hope was derived from what must have appeared to them to be a shocking amount of publicly allowed and reported negativity.

Editorial after editorial forcefully complaining about America's allies, the conduct of generals, and even of specific pieces of military equipment; fathers and mothers bemoaning in letters that their sons were pulled from the colleges they attended under the once much-ballyhooed Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) to fill the critical need for soldiers with engineering, language, mathematics, and other demanding skills; readers appalled at the rapidly escalating casualties and demanding

that eighteen-year-old draftees be given more training before being shipped overseas; church groups and individual citizens expressing outrage that the U.S. House of Representatives had passed a bill authorizing the drafting of women nurses; wives demanding to know why husbands with small children who had been drafted a year before Pearl Harbor could not be sent home now that there were “so many men in uniform”—it could all be found on the pages of daily newspapers as well as in the periodic lists of local dead and wounded. Moreover, the rallies and marches by the gaggle of organizations making up the isolationist America First movement, some huge by standards of the day, were hardly a distant memory. The “weakening will” that Japanese leaders perceived from the American press offered them a degree of hope at a time when they had lost battle after battle and finally the key Marianas chain in the summer of 1944, a calamitous event that put U.S. heavy bombers in range of the Home Islands. While this came as a shock to Japanese from all walks of life, including Emperor Hirohito himself, the country’s military leaders firmly maintained that America’s victories were built on her industrial might and that it was they, not their own people, purportedly infused with the “Yamato spirit,” who were “suffering and desperately trying to bring the war to a decisive end as early as possible.” Optimism and firm assurances, however, don’t win battles, and by the time the American juggernaut reached the Philippines in the fall, Japan’s increasingly desperate military failed again, even though it authorized the first use of suicide kamikaze planes and offered up a significant part of their remaining fleet for destruction as a decoy.

Yet in spite of America’s successes, there seemed to be almost as much bad news as good for the U.S. press to report. Just weeks after optimistic stories of a collapsing German army, predictions that the war in Europe might be over by Christmas, and reports of the destruction of the Japanese navy in the Leyte Gulf battles, the papers were filled with demands for finding who was to blame for the Germans’ early successes during their Ardennes counter offensive and why so many ships were falling prey to kamikazes in Philippine waters. There were also ominous



**A SPENT FORCE?** The commonly held view is that Japanese industry was practically nonexistent by the summer of 1945. But as this photo of midget submarines at the Kure naval base taken shortly after the Japanese surrender shows, highly technical priority items not only could still be produced in quantity by the Japanese but also could be missed or successfully hidden from the prying eyes of U.S. reconnaissance aircraft for nearly six months after they commenced operations from nearby Okinawa.

warnings from Washington that monthly draft calls were going to have to be increased (they, in fact, were nearly doubled between December 1944 and March 1945) and that “the number of returned sick and wounded is now so large that the Medical Department can no longer make it a policy to send patients to hospitals nearest their home towns.”

Yes, battle after battle had been lost and the fleet was gone, but Japan still had millions of men under arms and it appeared that there was good reason to believe that they could still salvage a victory of sorts over a decadent United States less concerned with winning than with the lives of its sons. Victory was redefined as achieving a military stalemate that left, at minimum, the core empire intact (the Home Islands, Manchuria, Korea, and Formosa) and guaranteed the continuance of the imperial structure. A decision was made to stretch out the fighting through “vigorous, protracted operations” designed to inflict the maximum “bloodletting and delay” (*shukketsu* and *jikyu senjutsu*) on U.S. forces. The Japanese military confidently maintained that attrition warfare or “bloodletting operations” (*shukketsu sakusens*) would simply prove too much for Americans to bear.

**Mr. Giangreco served as an editor at *Military Review*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, for 20 years and has lectured widely on national security matters. He is the author of several books, including *The Soldier from Independence: A Military Biography of Harry Truman (Zenith, 2009)*.**