

US WAR PLANS AND THE PANAMA CANAL

The plans for the defence of the Canal, and of Panama, did not exist in isolation. In fact, as would be expected from any military, the US had a whole set of war plans, providing for different potential enemies and scenarios. As well as the main overall plans, the War Department and Navy Department had their own plans which linked to the main plan, while local overseas commands such as the Panama Canal Department¹ had their own defence plans.

While the various colour-coded plans addressed threats from a host of other countries, War Plan Orange, a war with Japan and without allies, remained the most realistic. It had the highest priority of development during the interwar years until the emergence of the Rainbow plans.²

By the time the US entered World War 2 the previous colour-coded war plans had evolved into a set of “Rainbow” plans. The five “Rainbow” plans were developed to meet the threat of a two-ocean war with multiple enemies and supplanted the previous plans (such as War Plan Orange, which anticipated conflict with Japan), which were withdrawn in 1939.

Rainbow Plan 5 was destined to form the basis of US strategy during World War 2, and assumed that the US would be allied with Great Britain and France, and provided for offensive operations by US forces in Europe or Africa, or both.³

On 4 December 1941, Rainbow 5 was published in its entirety by both the Chicago Tribune and the Washington Times Herald newspapers, just three days before the

¹ The Army command in charge in the Canal Zone.

² *Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange* by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

³ <https://archive.org/details/eagleagainststuna0000spec/page/59/mode/2up>

attack on Pearl Harbor. This leak was thought to have been engineered by President Roosevelt.⁴

While the various plans were framed in respect of a wide range of potential enemies, as far as the Panama Canal is concerned the two most likely threats would be seen to come from Germany and Japan – which, though the type of threat might change, would continue to be the case until World War 2.

In fact, during World War 2, the actual strategy adopted by the US in its fighting with Japan differed little from that envisaged as long before as 1911.

The original colour-coded scheme allocated colours to specific potential enemies - Red for Great Britain, Black for Germany, Orange for Japan, White for France, Yellow for Spain, Grey for Italy, Green for Russia, Crimson for Austria-Hungary, and Saffron for China. Later France became Gold, Spain became Olive, China became Yellow, Italy became Silver, Central America and the Caribbean in general became Grey, Russia became Purple, Mexico became Green, Canada became Crimson, and South America in general became Violet. An insurgency in the Philippines became Brown, and after World War 1, domestic insurrection in the US became White. In the war plans the US was almost always identified as Blue.

US vs The World; America's Color-Coded War Plans and the Evolution of Rainbow Five
by Keith T Ressa (2010).

WAR PLAN ORANGE

The original War Plan Orange dated from 1890, and was the first US doctrine of expeditionary warfare and involved a possible war with Japan. At the turn of the century, the US and Japan had conflicting claims over Pacific islands, including Hawaii (which the US annexed in 1898).⁵ The potential of a conflict with Japan had grown

⁴ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/12/02/Historian-FDR-probably-engineered-famous-WWII-plans-leak/4189565419600/>

⁵ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/war-plan-orange.htm>

after the Spanish-American War, following which the US found itself in possession of the Philippines and Guam.

The Joint Army/Navy Board⁶, created in 1903, had concerned itself with the possibility of a war with Japan, notably after that country's success in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. However, it would be after World War 1 that tensions between the two countries would increase significantly, as militaristic imperialism took hold in Japan, allied to its control of the former German Pacific colonies - islands which lay astride the most direct route from Hawaii to the Philippines.⁷ These factors caused the US Army and Navy to pay even more attention to the risk of war with Japan.⁸ Following World War 1, with Germany defeated and disarmed, Japan remained the most likely opponent, until fascist Germany and Italy emerged as potential foes in the 1930s.⁹

War Plan Orange was in fact a set of plans concerned with possible war with Japan, developed by the Joint Army and Navy Board, which evolved from 1907, and was revised nine times between 1919 and 1938, until withdrawn in 1939, and all foresaw a long war.¹⁰ It was formally adopted by the Board in 1924.

Political realities, the input of powerful civilians in the government, as well as evolving technology (such as the improvement in aircraft and aircraft carriers) exerted significant influence on those responsible for the plan. There was also a troubled relationship between the Army, Navy, and State Department during the interwar years – with an inability of the Army and Navy to agree on fundamental considerations (such

⁶ For the Army, the planning remained in the Army War Plans Division, created as a fifth branch of the Army General Staff in 1921.

⁷ The Marianas (excluding Guam, which became a US possession), the Caroline Islands, and Marshall Islands; controlled from 1920 under a League of Nations mandate. While of negligible economic value, they provided Japan with some of the finest anchorages in the Pacific and the capability to further project her power into the region.

⁸ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/war-plan-orange.htm>

⁹ *The US Navy and War Plan Orange 1933-1940: Making Necessity a Virtue* by Michael K Doyle (Naval War College Review, Vol 33 No 3, 1980): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44642633?seq=1>
The Naval War College would give only “nominal” attention to a conflict with Britain in the Atlantic and Caribbean, despite lingering rivalries, while pervasive isolationism ruled out any formal alliance.

¹⁰ <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1941/prelude.html>

as whether or not defence and rapid relief of the Philippines was feasible), to say nothing of the lack of guidance received from the State Department.¹¹

Before World War 1, War Plan Orange provided for the time needed for the US Fleet to reach the Philippines – the obvious first target for an attacking fleet - from the US East Coast as 100 days – this being before the Canal available. This compared for the eight days that Japan would need to reach the islands from the home islands. Hence the US Army in the Philippines would be on its own for a considerable time before any relief could be expected.¹² War Plan Orange evolved in response to changes in the strategic environment and inherent constraints placed on the planners, but did evolve from being likely unrealistic to (in some officer's view) unduly pessimistic – particularly in respect of the likelihood of a successful defence, and/or retaking of the Philippines.¹³

After the Canal opened in August 1914 the plan was reassessed due to the anticipated reduction in time needed for the US Fleet to reach the Philippines – this being reduced from around 100 days to just 68.¹⁴ Hence, the protection of the Canal was essential, and became an integral part of all successive iterations. One factor mitigating against any direct naval assault on the Canal was the distance any would-be attacker would need to travel, and after the end of World War 1 the likely attacker would be Japan, located on the far side of the wide Pacific.¹⁵ Before and during World War 2 sabotage of some sort was viewed as a more likely danger.

¹¹ *Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange* by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)

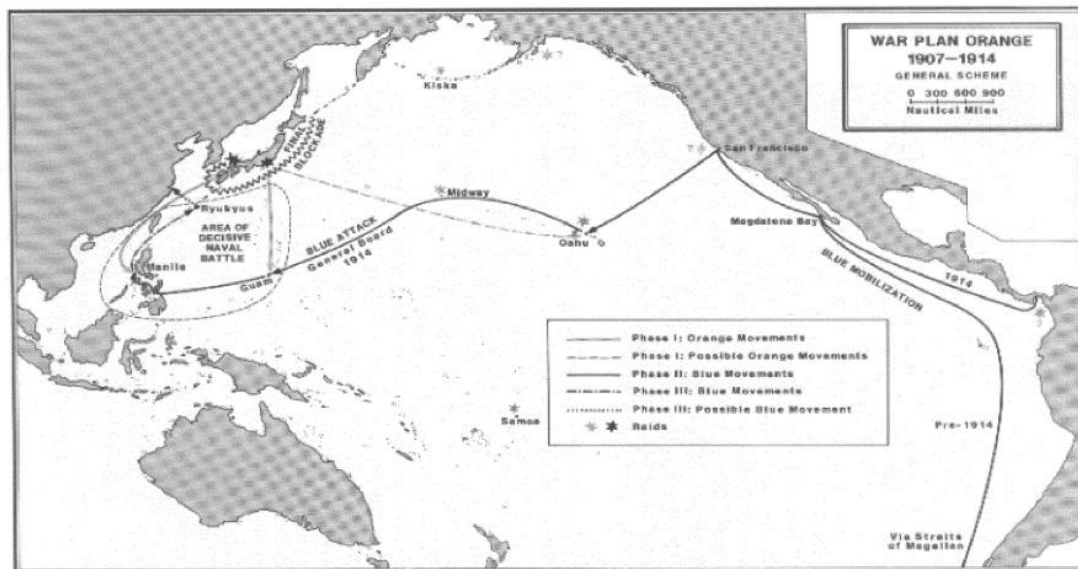
<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

¹² *Joint US Army-Navy War Planning on the Eve of the First World War* by Adolf Carlson Colonel (US Army War College, 1998).

¹³ For a good summary of the development of the plan, and the pressures, political constraints and even wishful thinking, that surrounded its evolution, see *Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange* by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)
<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

¹⁴ A reduction of around 8,000 miles (12,874 km) or two months.

¹⁵ One should bear in mind that even the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was a risky operation, with a long and potentially hazardous voyage from the home islands. During the war not even Japanese submarines reached the Canal approaches (though they did reach the West Coast of the Continental US).



16

Between the world wars, disillusion with war, isolationism, and Congressional parsimony, meant that military planning in the US was largely theoretical. Germany was defeated and disarmed. Russia was preoccupied with internal problems (though Communism was seen as a menace) and in no position to engage in military adventures. Neither France nor Italy had sufficient naval force to attempt any major operation the Western Hemisphere and had no reason to do so. Hence, aside from Japan, only Great Britain was theoretically in a position to engage the US in war with any prospect of success, but the possibility of a contest with Britain was extremely remote.¹⁷

In the early 1920s, the War Department and the Navy Department drew up contingency plans for a war fought in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, including with Japan over resources and territory in the Pacific. Other of these colour-coded plans included –

- Plan Red – an Atlantic strategic war plan with conflict involved Britain – either as an ally of Japan, or due to Britain's imperial possessions¹⁸; and

¹⁶ <https://warontherocks.com/2015/04/distributed-maritime-operations-an-emerging-paradigm/>

¹⁷ *Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II* by Louis Morton (Center of Military History, US Army, 1960)
https://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/CMH_2/www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/70-7/70-7_01.htm

¹⁸ <https://historycollection.com/war-plan-red-the-forgotten-u-s-plot-to-battle-britain/>

- Plan Red-Orange – a two-theatre war envisaging first defeating Britain in the Atlantic, before turning to face Japan.¹⁹

Following the 1921 Washington Naval Conference and the subsequent Five-Power Treaty in 1922, Britain chose to align with the US, rather than its former ally – though the Red-Orange Plan is said to have remained on the shelves of the Joint Board.

A war with Japan was seen as primarily a naval one, including the threat of attacks on Hawaii, the Panama Canal²⁰ and even the US West Coast – although plans saw no real prospect of Japan being able to seize any of these places. Japan was to be defeated by blockade and by the disruption of its vital sea communications.

The 1922 Washington Naval Treaty²¹ impacted War Plan Orange, as Article XIX of that Treaty denied the US Navy the bases it required to fulfil objectives of the plan. Article XIX, which recognised the status of current US, British and Japanese bases in the Pacific, forbade the US fortifying its Pacific islands.²² However, Hawaii, Alaska (excluding the Aleutian Islands), and the Canal Zone were not affected.²³

The Five-Power Naval Treaty saw Japan virtually assured that the Philippines, Guam, and Hong Kong would not become formidable fortresses threatening the home islands. In addition, although Japan had to accept British and US superiority in capital ships at the Washington Conference of 1922, its naval position in the Pacific improved greatly as a result.²⁴

¹⁹ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/war-plan-orange.htm>

²⁰ In its revisions, War Plan Orange included potential surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor.

²¹ An agreement between Britain, the US, Japan, France, and Italy, and intended as a step towards disarmament, and to prevent a naval arms race. Its main purpose was in restricting numbers and types of various naval vessels in each country's navy. However, what emerged was a far-reaching security agreement intended to create conditions for stability in the Pacific region. In 1936, both the 1922 and 1930 naval limitation treaties expired.

²² The Treaty did allow for the routine maintenance of facilities and the replacement of worn-out equipment, but prohibited substantial improvements.

²³ *Joint US Army-Navy War Planning on the Eve of the First World War* by Adolf Carlson Colonel (US Army War College, 1998).

²⁴ *Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II* by Louis Morton (Center of Military History, US Army, 1960)

https://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/CMH_2/www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/70-7/70-7_01.htm

In any case, during the 1920s, aside from interventions made into Central America, US defence plans were not overtly aggressive in form. It garrisoned its overseas possessions – the Philippines, Hawaii, and the Canal Zone – but otherwise only required a relatively modest force to administer, organise and train a civilian reserve, meet minor emergencies, and absorb the first shock of any aggression.²⁵ Defence allocations were frugal, even for the Navy, although it seemed to have done better than the Army.

The 1928 iteration of the plan was seemingly more realistic than the 1924 version, though still adamant that an urgent relief of the Philippines was essential. Nevertheless, it is argued that with of these versions would have led to an early defeat for the US forces. It was also influenced by the reduction in strength and condition of the Regular Army in the wake of the National Defense Act 1920²⁶, and it recognised that any war might begin without notice, declaration of war, or the ability to mobilise²⁷

Neither iteration of War Plan Orange made provision for a landing on the Japanese home islands. Japan was to be defeated by "*isolation and harassment*", by the disruption of its vital sea communications, and by "*offensive sea and air operations against her naval forces and economic life*" (i.e. blockade). However, the planners recognised that they might have to take "*such further action as may be required to win the war*".²⁸

²⁵ *The Army and Its Air Corps Army Policy toward Aviation 1919–1941* by Lt Col. Dr James P Tate, USAF (Ret) Air (University Press Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama), 1998:

https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B_0062_TATE_ARMY_AIR_CORPS.pdf

²⁶ After 1924, the overall manpower levels of the Army remained steady, but well below the authorized strength of 240,000, and almost half were overseas garrisoning America's possessions in the Philippines, Alaska, Hawaii, and the Canal Zone.

²⁷ After all, this had been a successful ploy adopted by Japan when it attacked Russian forces in 1904. *Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange* by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

²⁸ *Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II* by Louis Morton (Center of Military History, US Army, 1960)

https://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/CMH_2/www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/70-7/70-7_01.htm

The later hero of the Pacific War, Douglas MacArthur, became Army Chief of Staff in 1930.²⁹ He was said to be unimpressed with the then current version of the plan, dating from 1928, perhaps in part due to his own personal links to the Philippines. He convinced the General Staff to make changes, including the shipping of additional troops to the islands by way of the Suez Canal, together with two divisions to be sent to both Hawaii and the Panama Canal Zone. Then, in 1933, a wargame saw the relief fleet “defeated”, which resulted in revision of the details.³⁰

The Army was said to favour a more defensible “strategic triangle” running from Alaska to the Canal via Hawaii.³¹ This arose because, during the 1930s, in view of Japan's growing power and the low state of US armaments, and with the independence of the Philippines scheduled for 1946, the General Staff concluded that the US should not attempt to hold the western Pacific.

By 1937, the new Chief of the Army War Plans Division was of the mind that War Plan Orange consisted of two distinct parts. The first part was the massing of the Army's forces within the defensive perimeter of Alaska-Oahu-Panama, while the second part was the subsequent conduct of operations.³²

This revised position resulted in two years of dispute between the Army and Navy - remained concerned about defending the distant US territories and had disputed that the Philippines would likely be lost. The dispute was resolved in the latest (and last) version of War Plan Orange in 1938.³³ Nevertheless, even this revised plan envisaged

²⁹ He remained in the post until 1935.

³⁰ The final version of 1938 gave no indication of how long it should take the US Navy to reach the Philippines, and tacitly recognised the hopeless position of the US forces there.

³¹ *Institutional Politics and the US Military's War Plan Orange* by Steven J Pedler (a thesis, 2007).

³² *Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange* by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

³³ The argument resulted in specific Presidential authorisation being required for any operations west of Midway, recognising the hopeless prospect of holding the Philippines. However, it retained as a basic mission “to hold the entrance to Manila Bay, to deny it to Japanese naval forces”, but with little hope of reinforcement.

https://history.army.mil/html/books/010/10-6/CMH_Pub_10-6.pdf

that the Japanese would likely seize Guam and the Philippines, with raids anticipated on Hawaii, Alaska, and even the US West Coast. In addition, it was expected that the Panama Canal could be targeted, perhaps by sabotage.³⁴ However, unlike earlier versions of the plan, the 1938 version adopted a more honest assessment of the capabilities of the Army, and a wiser course of action.³⁵

In attempting to produce the latest version of the plan, in view of the many changed circumstances (such as the growing power of, the threat from, Germany and Italy) the planners were unable to agree on the best way to meet the threat. Faced with a split report, the Joint Army/Navy Board turned over the task of working out a compromise to the Deputy Chief of Staff and the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations. After a month of discussion, these finally came up with a new plan on 18 February 1938. For the first time, this took into account a potential two-front war, with a simultaneous attack in both Atlantic and Pacific. The Army had moved decisively from concentration on the Pacific, and events in Europe in 1938 appeared to fully justify this.³⁶

The 1938 version reflected a radical departure from the 1928 plan in that it proposed no action beyond remaining on the strategic defensive within the Alaska, Hawaii, and the Panama Canal perimeter, and assuming a position in readiness until “conditions” could be set that would allow for a strategic offensive. It included provision for troops to augment the garrisons of Oahu, Alaska, and the Canal Zone.³⁷

US Global Defense Posture, 1783–2011 by Stacie L Pettyjohn (RAND Corporation, 2012):

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt24hrv8.15>

<https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/war-plan-orange.htm>

³⁴ *The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Japan* by Karl C. Dod (Center of Military History, US Army, Washington DC), 1987: https://history.army.mil/html/books/010/10-6/CMH_Pub_10-6.pdf

³⁵ *Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange* by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

³⁶ *Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II* by Louis Morton (Center of Military History, US Army, 1960)

https://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/CMH_2/www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/70-7/70-7_01.htm

³⁷ The plan provided no guidance for how long the garrison must defend or if it can expect relief from the US.

Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA597405.pdf>

In 1933, the commander of Harbor Defenses for Manila and Subic Bay wrote a memorandum for the commander of the Philippine Department summarising the situation in the islands, stating that there was a progressive weakening of the military position there. As such, he felt that the islands were a liability, and to execute War Plan Orange in its current 1928 configuration would be “an act of madness”. He instead recommended a massive build-up, or the neutralisation of the Philippines and a withdrawal to the Alaska-Oahu-Panama defensive line. He would go on become Assistant Chief of Staff, War Plans Division, and then Deputy Chief of Staff from 1936, and so influence the final 1938 version of the plan.

Scylla and Charybdis: The Army's Development of War Plan Orange by Major Adam M Cannon (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012)

In all the revisions to War Plan Orange the role of the Canal remained vital, as did its protection. Without the “two-ocean navy” proposed in World War 1, and which eventually come about in World War 2, some attack rendering the Canal inoperative was seen as a likely, or even probable, prelude to war with Japan.

In April 1939, the Joint Planning Committee, which involved Army and Navy members, completed a strategic estimate that envisioned an offensive in the Western Atlantic to protect the Canal, Latin America, and South America against German and Italian forces. However, the planners acknowledged that the German and Italian threat was unlikely at that time due to their naval limitations and the tense European situation. Nevertheless, a major concern was protecting the Canal from the perceived threat of Fascist footholds and political influence in South America.³⁸

Although officially withdrawn in 1939, as late as October 1940, War Plan Orange remained the only well-developed plan (as we shall see, Roosevelt only formally approved the Rainbow plans after the Pearl Harbor attack), even after Western Europe was overrun and Britain was bracing for invasion.³⁹

³⁸ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1160006.pdf>

³⁹ *The US Navy and War Plan Orange 1933-1940: Making Necessity a Virtue* by Michael K Doyle (Naval War College Review, Vol 33 No 3, 1980): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44642633?seq=1>

Regardless of the overall war plans, and according to a joint Army/Navy plan drawn up in 1935, the defensive roles for the Canal Zone were divided between Army, Navy, and the Panama Canal Administration as follows –

- Army – (including the USAAC) to defend the Canal from sabotage and hostile attacks;
- Navy – to patrol the coastal zone and control and protect shipping therein; and
- Panama Canal Administration – to protect, operate and maintain the Canal, its adjuncts and appurtenances to ensure continuous service at the required levels.⁴⁰

RAINBOW PLAN 5

War Plan Orange, as well as the other colour-coded plans, was officially withdrawn in 1939 in favour of the Rainbow Plan series, drafted between 1939 and 1941, which catered for a two-ocean war involving multiple enemies.

This change took account of the dominant German strategic position at the time, the threat of a new war in Europe, the ongoing war in China – and the threat posed by Japan. The US Government now saw Nazi Germany, as well as Japan, as the chief threats to the country's security. It also sought to expand its military presence in the Western Hemisphere, but with its efforts oriented toward repelling an Axis invasion and/or preventing or countering Axis influence in the region where both German and Italian influence had grown. However, many assumptions were carried forward to what became Rainbow Plan 3, which was in many ways a modified version of War Plan Orange.⁴¹

Another new element included in the plans in the 1930s was the likelihood of "*participation with allies*", instead of it being anticipated that the US would be fighting

⁴⁰ <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3672&context=etd>

⁴¹ It that it envisaged fighting a defensive war with the Japanese in the Western Hemisphere and as far south as the 10th parallel (i.e. roughly to northern Peru, and thus including Central America and the Canal), before then seeking to regain or defend US territories in the distant Pacific.

alone.⁴² This was a marked change from the isolationist approach which had been evident since the end of World War 1. Indeed, a notable feature of the Rainbow plans was that the US explicitly committed to defending other countries from external attack. This had not been a clear commitment hitherto, despite the inferences that could be derived from the Monroe Doctrine. The Roosevelt administration had come to the view that isolation of the US could not provide sufficient security.⁴³ It would be Rainbow 5 that would form the basis of the “Atlantic first” policy adopted by the US during the war.⁴⁴

In May 1939, the Joint Army-Navy Board issued a directive to the Joint Planning Committee that led to the drafting of what were to become Rainbow Plans. The Committee was asked to consider the relations of the US with the various democratic powers and their enemies. The scenarios put forward included where the US was acting alone, as well as situations where the US was supporting, or was being supported by, one of the democratic powers. The Committee was also asked to devise a plan which included “*England, France, and the United States on one side (possibly Russia also), and Germany, Italy, and Japan (possibly Spain also) on the other side*”.⁴⁵

Five scenarios were envisaged -

1. The US alone and facing Germany, Italy, and Japan; with the US objective being confined to the defence of the area of the Western Hemisphere north of 10 degrees south latitude, essentially north of the bulge of Brazil.⁴⁶;

⁴² *US vs The World; America's Color-Coded War Plans and the Evolution of Rainbow Five* by Keith T Ressa (2010).

For example, a 1934 plan had envisaged the US alongside the Soviet Union, Britain and China fighting Japan.

⁴³ *US Global Defense Posture, 1783–2011* by Stacie L Pettyjohn (RAND Corporation, 2012):

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt24hrv8.15>

⁴⁴ The other Rainbow Plans were 1 (fighting a defensive war with the Japanese in the Western Hemisphere and as far south as the 10th parallel, and without any allies); 2 (as per Rainbow 1, but with allies such as Britain and France); and 4 (as per Rainbow 1 but encompassing the entire Western Hemisphere).

⁴⁵ *US vs The World; America's Color-Coded War Plans and the Evolution of Rainbow Five* by Keith T Ressa (2010).

<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1133&context=masters>

⁴⁶ As using such an area as base could threaten vital interests of the US, including the Canal.

2. The US versus Germany, Italy, and Japan; with the focus of the US armed effort in the Western Hemisphere restricted to north of 10 degrees south latitude, as well as to vital US interests in the Western Pacific;
3. The US versus Germany, Italy, and Japan; with the objective of defending the entire Western Hemisphere;
4. The US, Britain, and France versus Germany, Italy, and Japan; with the US providing maximum participation to allied armies in Europe; and
5. The US, Britain, and France versus Germany, Italy, and Japan; with the US not providing maximum participation in continental Europe, but maintaining the Monroe Doctrine⁴⁷ and concentrating on the Pacific.⁴⁸

The five Rainbow Plans that were prepared were based on the US facing threats from both German (probably allied with Italy) and Japan⁴⁹ –

- **Rainbow 1** - assumed the US to be involved in a two-front war without major allies. Its forces would prevent the violation of the Monroe Doctrine by protecting the territory of the Western Hemisphere north of 10 degrees south latitude, from which the vital interests of the US might be threatened. The tasks of the Army and Navy included protection of the US, its possessions and its sea-borne trade. It would remain on the defensive in the Pacific from behind the line drawn from Alaska to Hawaii and Panama, until developments in the Atlantic permitted concentration of the fleet in mid-Pacific for offensive action against Japan;
- **Rainbow 2** - assumed that the US was joined by Britain and France, but with limited participation of US forces in Continental Europe and in the Atlantic. The US could, therefore, undertake immediate offensive operations across the Pacific.

⁴⁷ The Monroe Doctrine, which dated from 1823, when enunciated by then President James Monroe, included 4 elements, of which the most relevant was that any attempt by a European power to oppress or control any nation in the Western Hemisphere would be viewed as a hostile act against the US.

⁴⁸ *US vs The World; America's Color-Coded War Plans and the Evolution of Rainbow Five* by Keith T Ressa (2010).

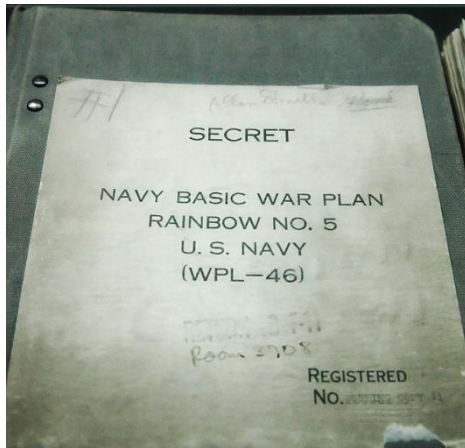
⁴⁹ *The Official History of the Washington National Guard: Volume 6: Washington National Guard in World War II* (Headquarters Military Department, State of Washington Office of the Adjutant General, Camp Murray, Tacoma 33, Washington State): <https://mil.wa.gov/asset/5ba41fe3eab43>

- **Rainbow 3** – as in Rainbow 1, here the US was presumed to be acting without allies, and it would defend the Western Hemisphere. However, there would be early projection of US forces from Hawaii into the Western Pacific.
- **Rainbow 4** – another variation on Rainbow 1. It was assumed the US to be at war without major allies, employing its forces in defence of the whole of the Western Hemisphere, but with provision for troops to be sent to the Southern part of South America, and to be used in joint operations in eastern Atlantic areas. As in Rainbow 1, it would remain on the defensive in the Pacific until the situation in the Atlantic permitted transfer of major naval forces for an offensive against Japan,
- **Rainbow 5** – this assumed the US to be joined with Britain and France. The Western Hemisphere was to be defended, with early projection of US forces to the eastern Atlantic, and to either or both the African and European continents. The first priority would be defeat of Germany (and Italy), while remaining on the defensive in the Pacific until success against the European powers permitted transfer of major forces to the Pacific for an offensive against Japan.⁵⁰

While Rainbow 5 clearly laid out the pattern that would be broadly followed by the Allies during World War 2, was neither a blueprint for victory nor a definitive plan of operations. It merely outlined the objectives and missions of US forces in case of war on the basis of assumptions that seemed sound at the time. Specific plans would still be required to follow through the general concepts – and pre-war there had been no real coordination of US war plans with its potential allies.⁵¹

⁵⁰ <https://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pha/misc/rainbow5.html>

⁵¹ *The Official History of the Washington National Guard: Volume 6: Washington National Guard in World War II* (Headquarters Military Department, State of Washington Office of the Adjutant General, Camp Murray, Tacoma 33, Washington State): <https://mil.wa.gov/asset/5ba41fe3eab43>



Interestingly, the Rainbow Plans were not formally approved by President Roosevelt, until that was quickly given after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. It is said to have been held up by a lack of Presidential direction and the usual inter-service disputes. Hence, the preceding War Plan Orange was the only well-developed plan available in the dark

days of 1940, as the war seemed to be going so badly.⁵²

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 gave a fresh urgency to the planning. At the time, Rainbow 2 seemed to fit the situation, and work went forward on the development of plans. Meanwhile, measures were taken to strengthen the national defences and to keep the US out of the war by keeping war away from the Americas, with the Neutrality Patrol in the Western Atlantic.⁵³

In October 1939, a Colonel Clark of the US Army War Plans Division wrote an analysis of the possible consequences of an Anglo-French defeat in the war which had broken out in Europe the month before. One prediction he made was that Germany would undoubtedly step up its activity in Latin America, and might attempt to pave the way for later direct action by first overthrowing governments friendly to the US.⁵⁴

Clark also foresaw Germany seeking to block the Panama Canal while the bulk of the US Fleet was in the Pacific, and that this could be achieved by sabotage or air attack. At the time, it was thought that both Germany and Japan had the ability to launch attacks

⁵² *The US Navy and War Plan Orange 1933-1940: Making Necessity a Virtue* by Michael K Doyle (Naval War College Review, Vol 33 No 3, 1980): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44642633?seq=1>

⁵³ There was also a lesser-known neutrality patrol in the Pacific. Concurrently with operations in the Atlantic, neutrality patrols were also carried out in the Pacific by naval air patrol assets mainly based at Cavite, Philippines, home port of the US Asiatic Fleet. Meanwhile, in 1940, in recognition of the potential threat posed by Japan to US territories in the Pacific, Asiatic Fleet units were fully withdrawn from Chinese waters and concentrated in the Philippines. <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1941/prelude.html>

⁵⁴ *United States Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere - The Framework of Hemisphere Defense* by Stetson Conn and Byron Fairchild: <http://tothosewhoserved.org/usa/wh/usawh01/>

against the Americas – Japan with its eight aircraft carriers, Germany using its large bomber force from across the South Atlantic, and establishing a presence in Brazil.⁵⁵

Then, in the Spring of 1940 the situation changed abruptly. In April, Germany invaded and occupied Denmark and Norway, following this with the defeat of France in June, with Italy also joining the war. Now, with France defeated and Britain facing attack and invasion, the threat from the Atlantic looked real indeed.⁵⁶

As far as the Panama Canal was concerned, all the Rainbow Plans saw protection of the Canal as a vital interest of the US, facilitating the movement through it of naval assets and troops, as well as acting as a potential base from which the US could project power into Latin America. As with the previous colour-coded plans, the garrison was expected to be able to withstand any initial assault by an enemy in the early period of a war, until reinforcement or relief could be sent from the Continental US. However, considerable numbers of more modern fighter aircraft were rushed to the Canal Zone to bolster its defences – air attack being seen as one of the two most likely threats (the other being sabotage of some sort). Rainbow 5 itself would make more than two dozen references to Panama in its text.⁵⁷

However, as already mentioned, and despite having been official withdrawn in 1939, as late as October 1940 the preceding War Plan Orange remained the only well-developed plan (as mentioned, Roosevelt only formally approved the Rainbow plans after the Pearl Harbor attack), even after Western Europe was overrun and Britain was bracing for invasion. This has been said to underline the inadequacy of the Rainbow war planning efforts.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ This latter point led to US interest in the Natal area of Brazil, the part closest to West Africa, and keeping Brazil on its side. There were fears at around the same time of the German presence in Colombia, worryingly close to the Canal, including through the SCADTA airline.

⁵⁶ *The Official History of the Washington National Guard: Volume 6: Washington National Guard in World War II* (Headquarters Military Department, State of Washington Office of the Adjutant General, Camp Murray, Tacoma 33, Washington State): <https://mil.wa.gov/asset/5ba41fe3eab43>

⁵⁷ <https://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pha/misc/rainbow5.html>

⁵⁸ *The US Navy and War Plan Orange 1933-1940: Making Necessity a Virtue* by Michael K Doyle (Naval War College Review, Vol 33 No 3, 1980): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44642633?seq=1>

Nevertheless, in September 1941, elements of Rainbow 5 (and Indigo 3⁵⁹) saw troops and material sent to the Philippines and Iceland.⁶⁰ By this time, the international situation had further deteriorated, with Germany having invaded the Soviet Union, while Japan had signed a formal alliance with Germany and Italy in September 1940. In the Atlantic, the US was actively engaging German U-boats that were threatening and attacking US warships, and President Roosevelt had warned German and Italian warships to stay out of waters necessary for US defence.⁶¹

A speech by President Roosevelt in September 1941 in which he issued warnings to German and Italian warships is taken as when Rainbow 5 (and Indigo 3) was activated.⁶²

Rainbow 5 was published in full just prior to Pearl Harbor, on 4 December 1941, by the Chicago Tribune and Washington Times Herald. The newspapers detailed the “top-secret” plans for an army of 10 million, including an expeditionary force of five million men that would invade Europe to defeat Hitler. It is thought that President Roosevelt engineered the leak.⁶³



⁵⁹ The defence of Iceland. British and Canadian troops had occupied the island since May 1940. These were replaced by US Marines. Roosevelt had the State Department redraw the map to place Iceland in the Western Hemisphere, so that it would come under Monroe Doctrine jurisdiction.

⁶⁰ <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/activating-rainbow-5-and-indigo-3/>

⁶¹ <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/activating-rainbow-5-and-indigo-3/>

⁶² Although this might have been seen to lessen the risk, at least for a time, of a German move against the US and its interests.

⁶³ <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/activating-rainbow-5-and-indigo-3/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/12/02/Historian-FDR-probably-engineered-famous-WWII-plans-leak/4189565419600/>

As soon as news of the attack on Pearl Harbor had reached Washington, the Army and Navy both put Rainbow 5 into effect (albeit that, as we have seen, elements had already been activated). On 8 December, the same day that Congress formally declared war on Japan, the Army and Navy directed commanders to prepare to carry out the plan against Germany and Italy as well, since there were indications that these were also about to declare war on the US. Germany and Italy did so, on 11 December, and formal activation of Rainbow 5 in the Atlantic followed. The following day, the War Plans Division recommended that the Army to take all necessary steps to increase the security of the Canal, and to reinforce Hawaii (but without jeopardising the security of the Continental US and the Canal). Indeed, Chief of Staff, General Marshall, insisted priority be given the Canal (and the US Pacific coast, regardless of any threat to Hawaii).⁶⁴

In a conference held in Washington DC, in December 1941-January 1942, Roosevelt stood by RAINBOW 5 and its “Germany first” basis, and not once during the war was the decision successfully challenged.

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

22 July 2025

⁶⁴ https://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/CMH_2/www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/wwii/framework/ch07.htm

ANNEX

THE COLOUR-CODED WAR PLANS

In addition to War Plan Orange, there were:

War Plan Black – war with Germany.

War Plan Grey – two such plans existed: one for war in central America, and another for an invasion of the Azores.

War Plan Brown – dealing with an uprising in the Philippines.

War Plan Tan – intervention in Cuba

War Plan Red – war with the British Empire.

War Plan Red-Orange – a two-front war with an alliance of Britain and Japan.

War Plan Yellow – war in China (such as a repetition of the Boxer Uprising of 1899-1901, as part of a coalition of forces.

War Plan Gold – war with France, and/or its Caribbean colonies.

War Plan Green – war with Mexico to defeat “rebel” forces and establish a pro-US government.⁶⁵

War Plan indigo – an occupation of Iceland (which, of course, did take place during World War 2).

War Plan Purple – invasion of a South American republic.

War Plan Violet – dealt with Central America.

War Plan White – dealing with a domestic uprising in the US, civil disturbances and protests. Communist insurgents were seen as the most likely cause of the unrest.⁶⁶

War Plan Blue – dealt with defensive plans and preparations to be taken in time of peace. In the various plans, “Blue” would usually be used to denote the US.

⁶⁵ This was apparently only officially cancelled in 1946.

⁶⁶ Despite the concern about communism, and “red scares” that existed long before the post-World War 2 McCarthy era, there were no colour-coded war plans involving the Soviet Union.