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Pearl Harbor: A Rude Awakening

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How did American intelligence fail to give warning of the devastating Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, nearly three years into World War Two? According to Bruce Robinson, the conspiracy theorists have got it all wrong.

Introduction

It all happened so quickly. At 7.55am on Sunday 7 December 1941, the first of two waves of Japanese aircraft began their deadly attack on the US Pacific Fleet, moored at Pearl Harbor on the Pacific island of Oahu. Within two hours, five battleships had been sunk, another 16 damaged, and 188 aircraft destroyed. Only chance saved three US aircraft carriers, usually stationed at Pearl Harbor but assigned elsewhere on the day. The attacks killed under 100 Japanese but over 2,400 Americans, with another 1,178 injured.

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Although swift in execution, the attacks had been slowly brewing for years. The US had once looked upon Japanese ambitions with a level of sympathy, even indulgence. Hit hard by the Great Depression of the early 1930s, however, Japanese disillusion with party government grew and moderates gave way to militants. In 1931 Japan occupied Manchuria in northern China. Over the decade conflict intensified and in July 1937 war was declared. As Japanese aggression increased, its relations with the US deteriorated.

Occupied Manchuria was rapidly exploited with the establishment of heavy and light industries. This was a practical necessity for Japan. Lacking in natural resources itself, the search for alternative supplies underpinned foreign and military policy throughout the decade and led to the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Pacific War.

On top of practical economic considerations, early military success and an inherent sense of racial superiority led Japan to believe that it deserved to dominate Asian politics. As with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, this combination bred an aggressive and neo-colonial foreign policy, the 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere'. Higher birth-rates and economic considerations required more land; the gene-pool justified it.

Relations with the US

The policy increased in urgency as relations with the US sank further. Historically, Japan had relied on America to supply many natural and industrial resources. Increasingly alarmed by Japanese aggression, however, America allowed a commercial treaty dating from 1911 to lapse in January 1940. In July it followed up by embargoing scrap iron and aviation fuel. Things got worse in September when Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy. It was now a formal member of the Axis alliance fighting the European War.



A briefing of Japanese pilots before the attack ©

... Japan knew that a full-scale invasion of South-east Asia would prompt war with America.

This posed real problems. Although officially neutral, there was no doubt where American sympathies lay. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had already strained the sinews of neutrality by supplying Britain with money and arms under the 'lend-lease' agreement. The Tripartite Pact meant that supplies to Japan would indirectly be helping Italy and Germany; further embargoes followed.

For Japan, embroiled in a long war with China, these were disastrous. Considering its very survival under threat, Japan intensified the search for a permanent alternative. The most obvious target was South-east Asia, rich in minerals and oil. German success in Europe in 1940 had orphaned French and Dutch colonies in the region and they became the focus of Japanese attention.

While occupying French Indochina in July 1941, Japan knew that a full-scale invasion of South-east Asia would prompt war with America. It needed a mechanism to buy itself sufficient time and space to conquer successfully crucial targets like the Philippines, Burma and Malaya. The attack on Pearl Harbor was that mechanism; merely a means to an end. By destroying its Pacific Fleet, Japan expected to remove America from the Pacific equation for long enough to allow it to secure the resources it needed so desperately and hoped to crush American morale sufficiently to prompt Roosevelt to sue for peace.

An ill-prepared America

With war so widely expected, why was America so woefully ill-prepared? Rumours that began in the war are still hanging around, well past their sell-by date, fuelled only by revisionist historians and conspiracy cranks. They claim Roosevelt was itching for war with Japan but was constrained by US neutrality, so needed a solid reason to fight. Hence they accuse him of suppressing prior knowledge of the attack, or of provoking it to enable America to enter the war by the back door. Some even say that the attack on Pearl Harbor was deliberately engineered by a crypto-communist president guilty of high treason.



President Roosevelt declares war on Japan following the attack at Pearl Harbor. ©

In 1941 America was not ready for war.

It doesn't add up. In 1941 America was not ready for war. With US forces queuing for arms alongside Britain and Russia, Roosevelt knew he needed more time to build America's military capacity. If war was to come, he wanted Japan to be seen to be the aggressor, but Roosevelt was in no hurry.

Furthermore, he saw Germany as America's main enemy. This 'Europe first' strategy was affirmed with Churchill at the Arcadia conference in late December 1941. Roosevelt had already pushed neutrality to the limit and had assigned warships to accompany convoys in the Atlantic. War with Germany was only a matter of time: why choose to fight another with Japan? Even when European conflict came, it did so only on Hitler's invitation after he gratuitously declared war.

American myopia

However hard you look, there is little evidence of anything more than blushing cover-ups of previous blunders. The real crime was one of incompetence on a huge scale. After all, the US had broken Japan's diplomatic codes and could sometimes decode messages faster than the Japanese themselves. The problem was not raw data, but its interpretation, evaluation and communication: it had to be used properly. This did not happen.

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The administration and military were both guilty of a staggering lack of co-ordination between Washington and Oahu, and between different services. Japanese messages were decoded by the army and navy on alternate days and all too often one service failed to properly communicate their new intelligence to the other. And it wasn't just codes: on the day of the attack, Japanese aircraft were spotted by American radar. No action was taken: they were assumed to be a flight of B-17 bombers due in from the mainland.

It's not as if America wasn't warned. In January 1941 Ambassador Grew in Tokyo passed on intelligence that stated that Japan was planning the attack. It was disregarded. Warnings from military personnel in February and July were overlooked, largely because they recommended massive transfers of aircraft to Oahu, aircraft that America simply did not have. War warnings from Washington to Hawaii ten days before the attack were virtually ignored. Team USA was proving pretty dysfunctional.

This American myopia stemmed from complacent disbelief that Japan would mount such an attack, especially before declaring war. Yet any study of Japanese history demonstrated that pre-emptive attacks such as this were almost standard operating procedure. Instead of concentrating on what Japan could do, the US tried to guess what it would do. It guessed wrong.

The aftermath

Although Pearl Harbor started the Pacific War, a war that Japan would lose badly, the attack itself was no failure. The Japanese wanted to cripple the Pacific Fleet and give them the space to invade South-east Asia. They did: Japan won every major battle until Midway in June 1942. By that time it occupied territory from Manchuria to the East Indies, and from India's borders to deep into the Pacific. The attack on Pearl Harbor bought Japan the space and time it needed.

Although only chance saved the American aircraft carriers, their survival was a major blow. However, the primary problem with the attack was the planning. Had Japan focused beyond the fleet and targeted the crucial shore facilities and oil reserves, it could have inflicted far greater and more lasting damage. As it was, of the ships damaged or sunk on December 7th 1941, only three - the Arizona, Oklahoma and Utah - were damaged beyond repair, and Utah was already obsolete. Japan gave America the chance to rebuild its fleet and re-enter the fight with brand new kit.

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Even worse, rather than crushing American morale as planned, the attack united the country behind Roosevelt and behind war. Americans were incensed by Japan's failure to declare war until later that day: the sneak attack fuelled American determination to fight on, even in the face of the setbacks of early 1942.

Pearl Harbor and the invasion of South-east Asia showcased Japan at its best - capable of massive daring and painstaking preparation. Operationally brilliant, the attack was nonetheless strategically disastrous. Never again would Japan have the opportunity to act with such forethought and planning. It got itself the short term breathing space it wanted, but also a war against both Britain and America. To invite such confrontation was the result of courage, optimism and (possibly) madness on a massive scale. Japan lost. Faced with American military and economic might, it could never really win. So why all the conspiracy theories? Maybe because some just cannot accept that on the day, in round one, their boys were beaten by the better team.

Find out more

Books

Scapegoats by Edward L Beach (1995). A revisionist account.

The Way It Was: Pearl Harbor; the Original Photographs by Donald M Goldstein et al (2001). Personal accounts and photographs of the attack.

Day of Infamy by Walter Lord (1957, 2001). The first classic account of the attack

At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor by Gordon W Prange (1991). The definitive history of Pearl Harbor

Day of Deceit: the truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor Another revisionist account by Robert B Stinnett (2001)

Infamy: Pearl Harbor and its aftermath by John Toland (2001). Pins the blame on Washington.

About the author

Bruce Robinson is a professional journalist who graduated with a first class degree in History from Cambridge University, specialising in English Social, Political and Economic History from 1300 to 1600.