

Missteps and Misfires: Perceptions of the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor

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The 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is perhaps one of the most recognizable events in United States and foreign relations history. Extensive research on this topic has been conducted, covering a wide variety of interpretations of the events leading up to the attack, the attack itself and the lasting effects it left on the United States. A debate has emerged over whether the surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor was a surprise, and if the attack itself was as shocking as it seemed. This paper will investigate the level of U.S. surprise towards the Japanese offensive, as well as the extent of the damage created by the bombing. Evidence such as various telegrams, correspondence, speeches, etc. suggest a more ample amount of prior knowledge of the possibility of an attack on the part of the U.S., as well as a deliberate lack of initiative taken to prevent such an event. Additionally, it is known that the goal of the Japanese was to severely damage the U.S. Pacific fleet as a way to keep the U.S. from becoming another opponent of the Axis powers. While the attack on Pearl Harbor was thoroughly premeditated, it was unsuccessful in achieving its main purpose and instead became a platform of resilience employed by the U.S. government as motivation to win World War II.

The research specialization that revolves around Pearl Harbor and Japan-U.S. relations is substantial, and is split into two categories. One is based in the traditional view resulting from the post-Pearl Harbor congressional investigations, which reached the conclusion that while there were several mistakes committed by military and government personnel, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was not a pre-mediated plan established by President Franklin Roosevelt to create justification for the United States joining World War II. Gordon W. Prange's work *At Dawn We*

Slept is an example of this category. After his passing, Prange's work was continued and co-authored by Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillion. This work is a military and political history focused on explaining Pearl Harbor from both perspectives of those involved. Prange conducted extensive interviews with government officials and military personnel from both the United States and Japan. Prange's work covers the pre-war planning by Japan, the events at Pearl Harbor and the investigations executed by the Congressional Joint Committee. Prange argues that the blame should not be pointed at any one particular person, and that there was no malicious intent on the behalf of American officials. Prange does specifically name Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and General Walter Short as two individuals among many others who were partially responsible for the lives lost during the bombing.

The other viewpoint is referred to as the revisionist version, and it is based on the idea that FDR meant to allow the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor in order to involve the United States in World War II. *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath* by John Toland is a source based in the revisionist perspective. Toland's work covers the time period in which the Joint Committee investigated the Pearl Harbor attack from 1945 to 1946. He states that a "cover-up"¹ did exist in the post-attack period, and that FDR allowed the attack in order to obtain the grounds necessary to enter the war. Toland also directly contradicts Prange and argues that Admiral Kimmel and General Short were not culpable because of the lack of information provided to them by their superiors. Lastly, the author claims that any conflict between the United States and Japanese was avoidable², contrary to the traditional viewpoint that it was inevitable.

For years prior to 1941, the relationship between Japan and the United States was contentious. After years of Japan trying to expand its influence in the Pacific, the United States became more defensive. Then Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, and created a new government

there, which the U.S. did not acknowledge as legitimate. An added factor came in the form of the Stimson Doctrine, which was adopted by the United States in 1932 as a way to protect China and shun Japan. This doctrine established that the U.S. would not legitimize a treaty agreed upon by China and Japan unless the U.S. was in agreement with it.³ It was completely ineffective, as the U.S. was still providing Japan with the very same supplies it needed to continue its growth. So, Japan took advantage and started gaining more territory through the invasions of British Malaya and Indochina, which supplied them with resources that the United States had stopped providing them with. Japan moved forward with plans to invade the Dutch East Indies causing the conflict between the United States and Japan to reach a deadlock. Then the planning of an attack and invasion of the United States is initiated.

The man behind the bombing was Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who was extremely deliberate in the planning and execution of the offensive because he believed that if the surprise attack was executed successfully, and the Japanese managed to wipe out enough of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the U.S. would be left significantly weakened and unable to retaliate. On the morning of December 7, 1941, two waves of Japanese fighter pilots bombed Pearl Harbor. In the days leading up to the attack, “six carriers, along with fast battleships, two heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, eight destroyers and a train of three oilers and a supply ship were bound for Hawaii.”⁴ The first wave, estimated to have occurred at about six o’ clock in the morning, included a total of 183 planes consisting of 43 fighters, 49 horizontal bombers, 40 torpedo bombers and 51 dive bombers.⁵ At about seven o’clock, the second wave in which 16 floatplanes, 54 horizontal bombers, 77 dive bombers, and more than 36 fighters⁶ hit Pearl Harbor. In the first wave, the Japanese pilots “achieved nearly complete surprise” and that wave alone was responsible for “about 90 percent of the damage.”⁷ The second wave was not as successful, mostly due to the fact that the element of

surprise was gone. In all, “the Japanese managed to strike 20 percent of the 101 ships.”⁸ In addition, about 300-400 U.S. aircraft were either destroyed or damaged. As far as human casualties, 2,403 Americans died and 1,178 were wounded in the attack. Most of these were attributed to the sinking of the U.S.S. *Arizona*. On the Japanese side, there were 129 deaths.⁹ However, just looking at the numbers is misleading, and that would prove costly for the Japanese in the future.

Initially both the Japanese and the United States believed the wreckage created by the bombing of Pearl Harbor was devastating and detrimental in allowing for U.S. retaliatory efforts. During the attack, it seemed as though the Japanese had gotten lucky because “the American targets were sitting ducks- the ships were arrayed in rows in the harbor, and the planes were bunched and lined neatly up on airfields to protect them from sabotage.”¹⁰ However, that was quickly proven untrue. The Japanese did substantial damage, except that the targets were not what the Japanese were expecting to hit. Perhaps their biggest targets were the eight battleships sitting in Pearl Harbor: *Arizona*, *Maryland*, *California*, *West Virginia*, *Oklahoma*, *Tennessee*, *Nevada*, and *Pennsylvania*. All eight were hit during the attack, but “... the youngest of these had been launched twenty years earlier, and all were in substantial need of modernization... In fact, four were due to be officially declared over-age in 1942.”¹¹ Additionally, “even the ships they had sunk or capsized were readily available for repair, resting accessibly... on the bottom”¹² of the harbor. The other factor revolving specifically around the battleships was that they were no longer the most effective vessels in warfare. Carriers were prominent, and the Japanese had not hit a single U.S. carrier. Ultimately, carriers became a fatal weapon that the U.S. employed against the Japanese later in the war.

There were also several other targets and opportunities for further destruction that the Japanese did not capitalize on. For example, none of the twenty-five submarines utilized by the

Japanese successfully rendered a U.S. warship destroyed.¹³ There was a huge amount of oil stored next to Pearl Harbor that was left untouched, and they “failed to even hit half of the light cruisers, 86 percent of the destroyers, or any of the heavy cruisers or submarines in the harbor....”¹⁴ These are prime example of how the Japanese fell short. Taking resources such as oil would have been incredibly detrimental in the U.S. efforts to rebuild, and not hitting those only helped the U.S. more.

The recovery time of the United States is where the Japanese realized that they had not accomplished their objective. They had put significant weight on bombing every piece of machinery they could possibly hit, and hoped that they could do enough damage to keep the United States from joining the war long enough for them to take complete control of the Pacific. The Japanese had underestimated the power of the United States to regroup quickly. The battleships were a prime example, with the *Maryland*, *Pennsylvania* and *Tennessee* all made operational by December 20, 1941. The *Nevada*, *California* and *West Virginia* were in full use between 1942 and 1944.¹⁵ So “when repair and restoration are considered, the United States suffered a dead loss of only two out of the harbor fleet of over 100.”¹⁶ These two were the *Arizona* and *Oklahoma*, and coincidentally were the two oldest battleships at Pearl Harbor. They were also set to be retired in 1942. Also, even though they would not be returned to operational status, military personnel were able to recover parts that were used for other purposes.

The post-bombing period in the United States and especially Pearl Harbor was characterized by a massive rebuilding effort. In the pre-war period, there had been a huge shortage of manpower in Hawaii. Consequently, that problem was solved immediately after the bombing, as the decreased amount of vessels needing to be occupied meant that military personnel could be redistributed as needed.¹⁷ As far as machinery and military weaponry is concerned, the rebuilding

effort was incredible for the U.S. and a nightmare for Japan. In four years, the United States Navy added eight battleships, 352 destroyers, and “the fleet grew by 18 aircraft carriers, 9 light aircraft carriers, 77 escort carriers, 2 large cruisers, 13 heavy cruisers, 33 light cruisers, 412 destroyer escorts, and 203 submarines, not to mention 55 high-speed transports and 83,219 landing craft.”¹⁸ The U.S. Army had also regrouped quickly and had almost fully recovered to its pre-attack numbers within two weeks.¹⁹ Contrary to the hopes of the Japanese, the United States had not only recovered, but made significant advancements to its military status and capabilities in the Pacific. In attacking Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had managed to spur the need for U.S. military improvement forward more quickly than it would have without attacking, and in doing so compromised its own success.

The vast U.S. military improvements inspired by the American push for retaliation towards the perceived betrayal of the Japanese. The entirety of the attack on Pearl Harbor is based on the idea that it was a surprise, a low blow to an unsuspecting opponent. Except that not everyone was caught completely off guard by the bombing. In fact, there was a multitude of evidence supporting the possibility of a surprise attack months before December 7th. Tensions had been building for months, and as it drew closer to December, the attitudes of U.S. government officials shifted from optimistic to an expectation of conflict at some point. Through correspondence and intercepted communication by U.S. intelligence personnel, FDR and other U.S. government officials were privy to information that clearly pointed to a potential attack. Officials knew that the location of Pearl Harbor was a potential option that the Japanese might have been considering. Yet, action was not taken preemptively. For example, the Japanese consulate in Hawaii was not shut down. It was later discovered that Ensign Takeo Yoshikawa “operated in Hawaii as a solo spy under the cover of vice-consul.”²⁰ He was responsible for what became known as the Bomb Plot Message,

which consisted of “a plot of Pearl Harbor dividing the anchorage into five areas”, which then Yoshikawa would identify “which ships were moored in each sector.”²¹ The Bomb Plot Message was a huge red flag that directly signaled to a greater interest in Pearl Harbor and its layout specifically. In fact, “both Army and Navy officers in Washington guessed this could be a grid system for a bombing attack.”²² Even more confusing is the fact that all of this information was withheld from two key military personnel: Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and General Walter Short. Admiral Kimmel was the head person in charge of the U.S. Pacific Fleet when the events at Pearl Harbor occurred. General Short was in charge of military defense of Hawaii during this time. Neither of them was informed of the Bomb Plot Message, or any of the other correspondence that were potentially concerning. In the Joint Committee’s investigation of Pearl Harbor, Admiral Kimmel stated the following:

“These Japanese instructions and reports pointed to an attack by Japan on the ships in Pearl Harbor... No one had more direct and immediate interest in the security of the fleet in Pearl Harbor than its commander in chief. No one had a greater right than I to know that Japan had carved up Pearl Harbor into subareas and was seeking and receiving reports as to the precise berthing’s in that harbor of the ships of the fleet... Certainly I was entitled to know when information in the Navy Department completely altered the information and advice previously given to me.”²³

To Admiral Kimmel’s point, the Joint Committee did find that the “Hawaiian commands had failed... to integrate and coordinate their facilities for defense and to alert properly the Army and Navy establishments in Hawaii, particularly in light of the warnings and intelligence available to them during the period November 27 to December 7, 1941.”²⁴ Even some senators who hadn’t been privy to the same information felt that Japan’s history of surprise attacks warranted more attention from military officials in Hawaii and Washington.²⁵ Based on the decision of his superiors to withhold pertinent information, and the fact that he was not able to interpret the Japanese messages himself, there was no possibility for Admiral Kimmel to know of the

impending attack. The only sign pointing to danger that Admiral Kimmel and General Short were aware of was the disappearance of the “main Japanese carrier force” which had “disappeared in late November.”²⁶ Neither thought to consider that Japan was planning to attack Pearl Harbor in early December. Had either of them been informed of the information that their superiors had access to, the result of the bombing might have been entirely different.

Ultimately, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was not a surprise for those in high positions of government and military. It also did not accomplish what it was meant to. Initially a plan to destroy the United States Pacific Fleet and render the U.S. unable to fully participate in World War II, the bombing of Pearl Harbor served as a platform of advancement. Missing important topics and misjudging the amount of damage inflicted left the Japanese overconfident and the United States motivated to retaliate. The damage of Pearl Harbor is significant not in the weapons that were damaged but in the people that were lost. In actuality, Pearl Harbor served as a way for the United States to reemerge from conflict more superior in military than ever before.

¹ Toland, John. *Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath* (Kentucky, Kentucky Historical Society, 1982), pg. 321

² Toland, John. *Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*, pg. 324

³ United State Department of State. “The Mukden Incident of 1931 and the Stimson Doctrine” Office of the Historian.

⁴ Toland, John. *Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*, pg. 8

⁵ Slackman, Michael. *Target – Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), pg.72

⁶ Slackman, Michael. *Target – Pearl Harbor*, pg.72

⁷ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster” (MIT Press, 1991-92), pg. 174

⁸ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 175

⁹ Slackman, Michael. *Target – Pearl Harbor*, pg. 235

¹⁰ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 174

¹¹ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 175

¹² Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 176

¹³ Slackman, Michael. *Target – Pearl Harbor*, pg. 236

¹⁴ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 183

¹⁵ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 178

¹⁶ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 178

¹⁷ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 179

¹⁸ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 179

¹⁹ Mueller, John. “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster”, pg. 180

²⁰ Slackman, Michael. *Target – Pearl Harbor*, pg. 30

²¹ Slackman, Michael. *Target – Pearl Harbor*, pg. 30

²² Toland, John. *Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*, pg. 5

²³ Slackman, Michael. *Target – Pearl Harbor*, pg. 31

²⁴ Goldstein, Donald M., Prange, Gordon W. and Dillon, Katherine V. *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), pg. 722

²⁵ Goldstein, Donald M., Prange, Gordon W. and Dillon, Katherine V. *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*, pg. 723

²⁶ Toland, John. *Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*, pg. 8