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THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR – THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR

World War II, or the Second World War, was a worldwide conflict fought between the Allied Powers and the Axis Powers. The war started on 1 September 1939 and lasted until 2 September 1945. The German invasion of Poland is considered to be the immediate cause of the Second World War. By Japanese attacks on China, Pearl Harbor and British and Dutch colonies the war became worldwide.

The most important aim of German policy was to return the German territories taken by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler's goal was to acquire a Germany's rightful living space, by invading and dominating lands to the east – mainly Russia. He also attacked a various political and ethnical groups that he acclaimed to be outside of the Nazi world-view. Six million Jews, Roma, Slavs, Communists, homosexuals and some other groups were murdered by Germany and the Nazi in genocide which is known as The Holocaust.

The United Kingdom's and France's policy was a policy of appeasement, because they wanted to avoid a new European war. In the Munich Agreement in 1938 they agreed with Germany's annexation and immediate occupation of the German-speaking regions of Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, Germany invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and the appeasement policy failed. On 23 August 1939 Germany and Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which included a secret protocol that would divide the Central Europe into German and Soviet areas of interests. They agreed that Soviet Union would help Germany with invasion of Poland. Hitler claimed from Poland the territories of the Free City of Danzig and the Polish Corridor. Poland refused to do so and Hitler was ready to provide his plans of big German Reich, by invasion of Poland.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 is considered as a main reason of the United States entering the war. The United States declared war on Japan on 8 December 1941 and Germany declared war on United States on 9 December 1941.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA BEFORE ENTERING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The road by which the United States of America entered the Second World War was long and tortuous. They passed an isolationist foreign policy, except in 1917 – 1918, when the USA became a belligerent against Germany in the First World War. That experience cost 50,000 American lives and failed to retain the peace that President Woodrow Wilson had promised, as the reward of American participation. American diplomacy returned to isolationism and they didn't leave that policy until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Disappointment with the results of US intervention in the First World War was vividly manifested in the rejection by the Senate of the Versailles settlement, including its provisions for American membership in the League of Nations. In addition, Washington also agreed not to fortify its Pacific possessions west of Pearl Harbor including Guam and the Philippines. In the 1920s and 1930s the US Navy had a complement of fewer than 100,000 men and the army in that same period averaged about 135,000 men. The Roosevelt's administration authorized some new naval construction beginning in 1933, but the continuing isolationism and the economic crisis of the Great Depression kept the size of the American military to a minimum.

The weak diplomatic hand of USA was revealed in 1931, when Japan seized control of Manchuria from China and established the puppet state of Manchukuo. The USA condemned the Japanese action, but was unprepared to give force to its disapproval by either economic or military means. Soon, Japan and China started a full-scale war in July 1937. In January 1938 the House of Representatives called for a Constitutional amendment that would require a national referendum on a declaration of war. At the time, as the British Prime Minister, Chamberlain, accurately observed that “it is always best and safest to count on nothing from the American but words.”¹

The Congress has gone so far that they signed the Neutrality Acts, to prevent the possibility that the USA might again be involved into a mistaken internationalist adventure. The first of three Neutrality Acts was passed in 1935, which prohibited, among other restrictions, arms sales to belligerents. When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, Roosevelt induced Congress to cancel the arms embargo, but the Neutrality Act of 1939 still placed limitations on arms sales by including a *cash-and-carry*² provision. American opinion was strongly anti-German and anti-Japanese, but the expectation prevailed that France and the UK could contain Hitler in Europe and that some *modus vivendi* might yet be worked out in Asia.

The fall of France in June 1940 left UK and its empire the only Great Power facing Hitler and Roosevelt made the crucial decision to bet on the UK’s survival. Throughout 1940, Roosevelt started to strengthen American military capacity. On 5 November Roosevelt conveniently won re-election to an unprecedented third presidential term, while pledging that the USA would not go to war. He intended to leave the actual fighting to the UK, while making the USA, as he said in a radio address of 29 December “the great arsenal of democracy”³ but not a belligerent. Roosevelt signed on 11 March 1941 the Lend-Lease Act and later, from 9 to 12 August 1941 Roosevelt and Churchill met at Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, and drew up the Atlantic Charter. The Atlantic Charter was issued as a joint declaration on 14 August 1941 and it established the vision for a world after the war, despite the fact that the USA had yet to enter the war. In London, on 24 September 1941 met the governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and representatives of General Charles de Gaulle, the leader of Free France. They all agreed with the Atlantic Charter. The Axis Powers interpreted these agreements as a potential alliance against them and in Tokyo, the militarists in the Japanese government pushed for a more aggressive approach against the USA and the UK. The Atlantic Charter proved to be one of the first steps towards the formation of the United Nations.

In November 1941 Congress revised the Neutrality laws to allow the arming of merchant ships, and to permit sending them into war zones. American naval ships had by that time begun escorting British convoys carrying Lend-Lease goods across the Atlantic, which led to an undeclared naval war between Germany and the USA. Yet neither Hitler nor Roosevelt used that war to create a *casus belli* – Hitler was preoccupied with his invasion of the Soviet Union and Roosevelt was restrained by his electoral promises against war and by continuing signs of isolationist strength in Congress.

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1. Neville Chamberlain, British Prime Minister; *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001
 2. Cash and carry is a component part of the Neutrality Act of 1939, signed on 4 November, and it is devised by Bernard M. Baruch. Belligerents were again permitted to buy American arms and strategic materials, but they had to pay cash and to transport the goods in their own ships.
 3. *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001

Between January and March 1941 American and British military planners had agreed that in the event of American belligerency with both Germany and Japan, the defeat of Germany would be the first priority. They did not expect the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

SITUATION IN JAPAN BEFORE THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR

To continue its war against China, Japan depended upon purchasing critical materials in the USA, particularly scrap metals and petroleum products. Yet the Americans made no secret of their disapproval of the Japanese role in China. The Japanese government was worried about the dependability of its American supplies of metal and oil and they were constantly looking for some alternative sources. Without oil, Japan could only survive for 18 months at the most. The Japanese hierarchy argued that time was running out for Japan and that a military strike to consolidate was needed sooner rather than later. Under the circumstances, the Japanese looked naturally to the special opportunity presented by the German subjugation of the French and the Netherlands in the spring of 1940. The collapse of the French and Dutch governments left their colonies in French Indo-China and the Netherlands East Indies, rich with oil and strategic metals, very vulnerable to Japanese penetration.

As the attacks against China grew stronger, Japanese were condemned by the USA, the UK, Australia and Netherlands. In response to the diplomatic pressure, Japan resigned from the League of Nations and on 25 November 1936 Japan signed Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany, which declared common interests of the Nazi Germany and Japan.

Throughout 1940 and 1941 in Tokyo army leaders pressed for more aggressive moves towards the south and in Washington, on 26 September 1940 the USA imposed a formal embargo on sale of iron and steel scrap to Japan and they also closed the Panama Canal to Japanese shipping. The following day, on 27 September 1940 Tokyo announced that Japan has signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Fascist Italy, which set out a code of co-operation between the three and they formed the Axis Powers. The thing troubled the Americans was how the inevitable conflict would begin.

Japan wanted to enlarge its lands because in 1939 its population reached 99 million and its home islands were becoming overcrowded. Britain, France and the Netherlands all enjoyed the benefits of colonies. The USA, although ideologically opposed to colonialism, had its spheres of influence. Japan felt entitled to the same. In the half of the 19th century Japan had come out of isolationism and they followed the British and American examples and were set on a program of industrialization. During the First World War Japan joined the Allies and afterwards, the Japanese wanted to be accepted as a part of the New World Order on equal terms with other nations. They thought that they could do so, but then American President Woodrow Wilson placed a ban on Japanese people entering the USA and Australia, too, had a “whites only” immigration policy. Japanese felt cheated and angry, unable to trust the countries they had until now known as friends. Slowly, with growing admiration for the achievements of Nazi Germany, Japan swung towards militarism.

In November 1940 and in July 1941 Japanese troops started occupying French Indo-China. On 26 July 1941 Roosevelt froze all Japanese assets in the USA, which prevented all shipments to Japan including, most crucially, oil. At first, Roosevelt intended to release some oil shipments in return of promises of Japanese good behavior – at this late hour he was hoping to reach some *modus vivendi*, but then he concluded that it would be a sign of weakness to do so.

On 6 September 1941 a Japanese Imperial Conference said that if they don't settle an agreement with the USA by the early October, Japan should move towards war. Prime Minister Konoe requested a secret meeting with Roosevelt, and Ambassador Joseph Grew advocated the meeting from Tokyo as the last chance to avoid the war. But the US government saw no hope to make a deal, especially because of significant Japanese concessions over China, and they rejected the offer. Konoe's government fell on 16 October 1941 and the following day General Tojo became Prime Minister. On 5 November 1941 Japanese Imperial Conference directed that war plans should go forward and that was confirmed on 25 November if a last effort to secure American agreement to Japanese terms for a settlement failed.

THE TARGET IS PEARL!

The Japanese, in order to secure their access to the raw materials of French Indo-China and the Netherlands East Indies, had first to eliminate the threat to their eastern side. And the threat was the US Pacific Fleet. The islands in Pacific were economically wealthy and because of that Japan wanted to incorporate them into empire. Japan would become stronger than ever if only it could avail itself of the assets there. With Japan's vast military might, the islands were easy targets. The Japanese thought that they acted from what they considered as economic and political necessity, but most of the world thought that it was a naked aggression.

The Japanese leadership rightly guessed that America was unlikely to sit back and watch the powerbase being occupied. Americans would send its big ships to trouble spots. The answer, it seemed, was to knock out the American navy to get the freedom of the seas. The pride of the US fleet was based in Hawaii, closer to Japan than the inaccessible mainland of the United States. And so the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor was conceived. It was a brilliant short term strategy drawn up by Admiral Yamamoto. Key to its success was the element of surprise. Yamamoto's idea for a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was inspired by his hero, Fleet Admiral Marquis Togo Heihachiro, who in 1904 had, without declaring a war, attacked the Second Russian Pacific Squadron at the Battle of Port Arthur in the Russian-Japanese war. The Russians lost two battleships and several cruisers, and never fully recovered. A year later a young Ensign Yamamoto was injured in the Battle of Tsushima, where the Japanese destroyed almost entire Russian fleet.

On 3 February 1940 Admiral Yamamoto send a letter to Captain Kanji Ogawa of Naval Intelligence about the potential attack plan. He asked him to start gathering the intelligence on Pearl Harbor. Captain Ogawa had already spies in Hawaii, but he also added 29-year-old Ensign Takeo Yoshikawa. He went to Hawaii and assumed the cover name Tadashi Morimura. He even had grown his hair longer than military length. He visited Pearl Harbor frequently, sketching the harbor and location of ships trying to memorize the number of visible planes, pilots, hangars, barracks and soldiers. He was also able to discover that Sunday was the day of the week on which the largest numbers of ships were in harbor, that patrol planes went out every morning and evening. Information was returned to Japan in coded form.

In early 1941 Commander-in-Chief Yamamoto was authorized to choose who will develop the actual attack plan. He assigned General Minoru Glenda, who thought that surprise attack would be inevitable. By April 1941 the Pearl Harbor plan became known as "Operation Z".

There was a summer of training for the pilots of the fighters, dive bombers and torpedo bombers which were to be shipped in for the pre-emptive strike.

They trained on the Japanese island of Kyushu. Captain Glenda chose Kagoshima City to be training area because it was very similar to Pearl Harbor and its geography and infrastructure presented most of the same problems torpedo bombers would face at Pearl Harbor. On a beach in Kagoshima Bay Lieutenant Heijiro Abe, commander of ten high-level bombers, used lime to draw an outline of a battleship in the sand. He ordered his men to drop fake bombs on it. Only he knew it was the outline of the battleship California.

The problem for torpedoes was shallow water of Pearl Harbor, so Japanese created and tested modifications allowing successful shallow water drops. The most popular was 24-inch torpedo known as the “*Long Lance*”, containing 1,000 pounds of explosives and it was among the most powerful weapons in the world. Japanese weapons technicians also produced special armor-piercing bombs which were able to penetrate the armored decks of battleships and cruisers.

By 1941 the US signals intelligence had intercepted and decrypted considerable Japanese diplomatic and naval cipher traffic, but none of those actually carried any significant meaning for the attack. There was only one message from the Hawaiian Japanese consulate, sent on 6 December 1941, which included mention of an attack on Pearl Harbor and it was not decrypted until 8 December 1941.

On 26 November 1941 the Japanese navy set off from its base commanded by Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, using an obscure route and maintaining strict and complete radio silence. It was the most powerful carrier force with the greatest air power in the history of naval war. The strict radio silence meant that the US Pacific Fleet and Rear-Admiral Kimmel had no idea where the carriers were. When, on 2 December he asked his fleet intelligence officer their location, the officer replied he did not know. “Do you want to say”, said Kimmel, “they could be rounding Diamond Head and you wouldn’t know it?”⁴ Kimmel had to keep aircraft in reserve because he was required to raid the Japanese Marshall Islands. He didn’t have enough aircraft to cover whole territory. So, he concentrated on the sector that covered the Marshall Islands and the closest Japanese territory to Hawaii – there they expected the Japanese attack. But Nagumo approached from the north. In Washington US planners were also looking the wrong way as they considered the Philippines the most likely area for a pre-emptive Japanese strike. Considering Hawaii, they thought that sabotage and submarines were the most likely forms of attack. Kimmel transferred many of his P40 fighters to Wake and Midway islands to cover bombers being flown to reinforce the Philippines.

During the summer and fall 1941 public press reports and Hawaiian newspapers reported about the growing tension in the Pacific. On 27 November, all US Army and Navy commanders had received a final war warning. But this had not mentioned Hawaii as a possible target, and the island’s army commander, General Walter Short, interpreted it as a meaning that any attack on Hawaii would take a form of sabotage. He brought his defenses to the highest state of alert for sabotage and informed Washington that he had done so. When he received no reply he assumed that he had interpreted the war warning correctly. The Americans were unprepared, the ships in Pearl Harbor were undefended and the USAAF aircraft on the ground were easy targets as they were grouped together unarmed. They were all alerted only to sabotage. If any of these warnings had produced an active alert status in Hawaii, the attack could have been resisted more effectively, and perhaps might have caused less death and damage.

4. The Oxford Companion to World War II, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001

Though both Kimmel and Short were undoubtedly culpable for allowing a normal Sunday routine to continue in such circumstances, much of the blame for Hawaii's lack of preparedness lay in Washington. A few days before the attack, a long message⁵ was sent to Washington from Tokyo, but the last part arrived late and the message, breaking off negotiations, was delivered several hours after the Pearl Harbor attack. There were delays in delivering the final part of the message to Hawaii and it was actually delivered to General Walter Short, by a young Japanese-American cycle messenger, several hours after the attack had ended.

THE ATTACK

By 22 November the striking forces of Japan were at the Kurile Islands. Four days later it sailed and under cover of a weather front and it was able to reach a position 450 km north of Pearl Harbor, without being detected, and admiral Nagumo then launched his aircraft. The first wave, which comprised 49 bombers, 40 torpedo bombers, 51 dive-bombers and 43 fighters, was followed by a second wave of 54 bombers, 78 dive-bombers and 36 fighters. As the first wave approached Hawaii the clouds parted to reveal the target. This seemed so miraculous to Nagumo and the first wave's leader, Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, that both of them saw in it the hand of divine intervention.

Yamamoto planned that any shipping not sunk in the air attack would be destroyed by sixteen submarines, and at 06:45 am a patrolling destroyer sank a midget submarine as it tried to enter the harbor. It was first seen three hours previously, but its presence was never reported to the army. That is a typical example of the lack of inter-service co-operation, which is the hallmark of the Pearl Harbor catastrophe. However, none of the submarines accomplished anything and that arm of the Japanese Navy consequently suffered a loss of prestige from which it never wholly recovered.

The first contact with the incoming waves of Japanese aircraft was made by the Opana Mobile Radar Unit, whose operators were under training. Their operational hours had been extended after the war warning, from 04:00 to 07:00 am, and on that particular morning, between 06:45 and 07:00 am, all three radars picked up a float plane from the Japanese force. Its presence was reported but no action was taken. Then, because the breakfast truck was late, one team of operators kept their seat on. This detected the approaching carrier aircraft which was also reported to the inexperienced duty officer, Lieutenant Kermit A. Tyler. But because the operators failed to report how many planes they had seen, he again did nothing as a flight of B-17 US bombers was expected from the same direction. Unwilling to announce its intentions and give its game away, Japan didn't deliver its declaration of war to America until Pearl Harbor was smoking.

At Pearl Harbor, a new day was beginning, clouded only by a general fear of war. Still, the beaches were silvery, the sun was warm and the majority of the servicemen based there were looking forward to a day of relaxation. In harbor that Sunday morning was 70 warships, including 8 battleships and 24 auxiliaries, but the heavy cruisers were at sea with the fleet carriers. Guided on to this target by the music being played by a local radio station, the first wave of torpedo and dive bombers attacked the battle fleet, bombed and strafed the airfields. The first wave of aircraft took off at 06:00 am and Captain Fuchida broadcast to his men, screaming "Tora, Tora, Tora" – "Tiger, Tiger, Tiger"⁶, literally translated.

5. The message was encrypted with the Type 97 cryptographic machine, in a cipher named PURPLE by US cryptanalysts.
6. Handbook of World War II, Abbeydale Press, Leicestershire, England, 2004

The message informed them that the Americans were still unaware of what was to come. At 07:56 am the first shots ran out. In neat formations, the Japanese well-practiced pilots made runs over the lines of vessels anchored along “*Battleship Row*“, the section of the harbor where the capital ships lay. Ship after ship was blasted and soon the air was filled with thick, oily black plumes of smoke. As the flaming oil from one stricken vessel spilled into the sea, it set light to another.

This first phase lasted until 08:25 am and was followed, after a standstill of fifteen minutes, by high-level bombing attacks on the harbor. They had difficulty locating targets through the smoke. Then at 09:15 am the dive-bombing was renewed before the raiders withdrew at 09:45 am. The battleship *Arizona* was hit and exploded – 1,200 members of her crew died. The battleships *West Virginia*, *Oklahoma* and *California* were also destroyed, and *Nevada*, *Maryland*, *Tennessee* and *Pennsylvania* were damaged. Further casualties included the cruisers *Honolulu*, *Raleigh* and *St Helena*, and the destroyers *Shaw*, *Cassin* and *Downs*. These ships were symbols of America’s greatness. In that chaos a contingent of American aircraft arrived. Their pilots must have gasped in disbelief at the scenes before them. What once was a landing strip had been set ablaze, along with most of the aircraft on it. On the airfields 164 planes were destroyed and another 128 damaged. Altogether, 2,403 servicemen and civilians were killed, and 1,178 wounded.

At times the Japanese pilots screeched in so low they were clearly visible to the frantic Americans. A stunned Commander Logan Ramsey ordered the men in Pearl Harbor to take action, bellowing the words: “Air raid Pearl Harbor! This is not drill!”⁷ Despite the shock and disbelief, the Americans soon manned the guns as they had done before in training and claimed Japanese planes. Others raced to rescue comrades trapped in blazing ships or operated fire-fighting equipment. Japanese combat losses were light: 29 aircraft downed, 5 midgeet submarines sunk and 64 men dead or missing. Finally, there was calm. The surviving servicemen set about their grim tasks with one ear open for the return of the Japanese. Vice-Admiral Nagumo, fearing a counter-attack, made a critical mistake by refusing to launch a third wave of the attack, which would have destroyed Pearl Harbor as a base. The Japanese were very satisfied with the results of the operation which went better than any of the Japanese commanders dared to hope. Nagumo decided that the US carriers *Lexington* and *Enterprise* might appear, and that a quick getaway was now in order.

Though traumatic, the disaster welded the US nation together for war as few other acts could have done. The Japanese won a significant tactical victory, but brought upon themselves a long-term strategic defeat of awesome proportions. The attack was as much a psychological shock to the USA as a physical one. Nobody revealed the President Franklin D. Roosevelt, or any of his subordinates, guilty of misconduct. So far no evidence has ever come to light that Roosevelt allowed the attack to occur in order to bring his country into the war. Although some took the opportunity to condemn Roosevelt for his lack of readiness, most US citizens were determined to pull behind him because they were furious at the Japanese action.

“Yesterday, December seventh, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.”

-Franklin D. Roosevelt, Address to Congress, 8 December, 1941

7. Handbook of World War II, Abbeydale Press, Leicestershire, England, 2004

On Monday, 8 December 1941, with a sole dissenting vote, the Congress of the USA declared war on Japan.

As military admirable as it might have seemed to the Japanese at the time, the consequences of the attack on Pearl Harbor were clearly long-term. Japan had a superb navy, powerful enough to compete with that of America or Britain. Still, Japan could not have hoped for an occupation of the USA. It was a geographical and numerical impossibility. If the leaders of Japan hoped the action at Pearl Harbor would encourage the Americans to capitulate, they sorely misjudged them. The aim seems to have been merely to cause enough damage to keep America at bay while Japan built up its strength in the Pacific. It is likely they were then hoping for a war in which America would compromise. Admiral Yamamoto clearly had an inclination of what lay ahead when he said: "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve."⁸

A correspondent for the National Broadcasting gave this account of the bombing of Pearl Harbor:

"The most thickly populated air base was attacked by Japanese planes a little after 8am local time. After machine-gunning Ford Island the Japanese planes moved to Hickman Field. Observers say that considerable damage was done there but a number of planes were brought down. Three ships of the United States Pacific Fleet based at Pearl Harbor were attacked and the 29,000-ton battleship *Oklahoma* was set on fire. All lines of communication appear to be down between the various Army and Navy aerodromes and the Army in the field. The Army has issued orders from all people to remain off the streets. The first raiders carried torpedoes and did considerable damage to shipping in Pearl Harbor and off Honolulu. They came in squadron formation over Diamond Head, dropping high explosives and incendiary bombs. They came over Honolulu itself and were at once met with anti-aircraft from Pearl Harbor, Ford Island, Wheeler Field, Honolulu Municipal Airport, Hickman Field and the new Navy repair base. A terrific barrage was put up but all the points I mentioned appear to have been attacked. The chief of fire services has reported that the fires were under control and were not as bad as expected."⁹

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