

December 7, 1941: The Bombing of Pearl Harbor and Japan's Early Conquests 82 Years Ago

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Global Research, December 07, 2023

Region: [Asia, USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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This incisive article by Shane Quinn was first published by Global Research on December 13, 2021

December 7, 2023. Commemoration of Pear Harbor, 82 Years ago on December 7, 1941

From the outset of World War II, the Franklin Roosevelt administration envisaged that America would emerge from the conflict in a position of global dominance. The United States had boasted the world’s largest economy since 1871, surpassing Britain that year, and the gap increased through the early 20th century and beyond.

Diplomatic historian Geoffrey Warner summarised, “President Roosevelt was aiming at United States hegemony in the postwar world”.

From 1939, high-level US State Department officials highlighted which regions of the globe the US would hold sway over, titled by Washington planners as the Grand Area. In the early 1940s, the Grand Area of US dominion was assigned to consist of the following regions: the entire Western hemisphere, the Far East, and the former British Empire which contained most crucially of all, the Middle East’s oil sources.



President Roosevelt made deliberate and significant steps towards war during 1941. On 11 March of that year he signed into law the Lend-Lease Act which, for the majority, would benefit Britain by furnishing her with vast quantities of war matériel, oil and food supplies (amounting to around \$30 billion in all); to a much lesser extent, US deliveries of such commodities were sent to the Soviet Union from December 1941, months after the Germans invaded, and it would come to about \$10 billion altogether; despite the Soviets bearing the war's burden from June 1941.

The German Army's high command, on hearing of the Lend-Lease Act, believed in general that it "may be regarded as a declaration of war on Germany", and Hitler also "agreed that the Americans had given him a reason for war" with the introduction of Lend-Lease, according to Ian Kershaw, the English historian. Through 1941 a state of almost undeclared hostilities existed between America and Nazi Germany, as their vessels dangerously rubbed shoulders with each other in the Atlantic Ocean. War against America was officially declared by Hitler, a few days after Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese militarists viewed the Lend-Lease Act with grave misgivings too. Their opinions were strengthened further when, on 26 July 1941, Roosevelt's government froze all Japanese assets in America, a cruel and drastic move which immediately eradicated 90% of Japan's oil imports and 75% of its foreign trade. Britain and the Netherlands followed suit. The date 26 July 1941 was not one "which will live in infamy", as Roosevelt later described Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor, rather it was forgotten, in the West at least but not in Japan.

Roosevelt's decision to freeze Japanese assets, in response to Tokyo's occupation of southern French Indochina (over 8,000 miles from Washington), amounted to a virtual

declaration of war on Japan. For a resource-poor nation of 73 million people dependent on food and petroleum imports, Japan had for example only an 18 month supply of oil left.

It was no shock, therefore, that when the Japanese cabinet discussed the options open for it, they shifted towards war with America and further conquests. Military author Donald J. Goodspeed wrote, "In the light of the evidence, it seems probable that in the autumn of 1941 Roosevelt wanted war – against Nazi Germany if possible, but if necessary against both Germany and Japan. He maintained the economic stranglehold on Japan, and refused to relax it expect on terms he knew Japan would not meet".

Already in November 1940, a US military plan to "bomb Tokyo and other big cities" met the warm endorsement of Cordell Hull, the US Secretary of State, and Roosevelt himself was "simply delighted" when informed of the idea. With this intention in mind, from July 1941 increasing numbers of American B-17 heavy bombers were sent to US air bases, like in the Philippines, just over 1,000 miles south of Japan. The Japanese were of course aware of this hostile military build-up, and we can note there was no Japanese military presence in the Western hemisphere.

On 26 November 1941, just 11 days before the Pearl Harbor attack, Roosevelt consciously made war with Japan a certainty. Secretary of State Hull told the Japanese envoys, Saburo Kurusu and Kichisaburo Nomura, that a "general peaceful settlement" between America and Japan could only be reached should Tokyo – among other things – withdraw its armies from China and French Indochina, and effectively revoke its membership of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, while recognising the US-backed Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek. These proposals were totally unacceptable to Japan's administration and the country's commanders.

Goodspeed wrote of the Roosevelt government's offer of 26 November that it "made war inevitable and it was intended to do so. For two days after the receipt of the American reply, the Japanese cabinet debated the issue, but on the 29th [of November] it reached a firm decision to go to war"; while Japan's resolution to take up arms against America "was also an indirect result of the rapacity of the industrialized West, which had led the way in the exploitation of China and the corruption of Japan".

On 25 November 1941 the US Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, wrote in his diary that he and colleagues had pondered at a White House meeting on that day "how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot, without allowing too much danger to ourselves". Stimson continued that Roosevelt "brought up the event that we were likely to be attacked perhaps next Monday [1 December 1941], for the Japanese are notorious for making an attack without warning, and the question was what we should do".

The Japanese Army was, itself, artificially inculcated with the extreme samurai traditions of the ancient warrior class. The military wielded a huge influence on Japanese policy. Japan's army leaders were, on the whole, poorly informed of world affairs, and dismissive of the materialism and perceived softness of America. They were also grossly overconfident in their armed forces.

The Japanese Navy leadership were more realistic, because they were regular travellers who had a better understanding of the world before them. The Japanese strategy for war against America was designed by the commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Isoroku

Yamamoto, an experienced and popular officer aged in his mid-50s. Admiral Yamamoto knew quite clearly that his country could not decisively defeat America in a conflict.

What Yamamoto proposed for Japan was a limited but still ambitious war aim: the establishment of a defensive perimeter in the Pacific Ocean, stretching out in a giant arc from the north-east to the south-west, from the Kuril Islands to the borders of India. This would enhance Japan's status as a major power, but could not have prevented America from attaining pre-eminence across much of the remainder of the globe.

Within this final Japanese line lay various countries they would take over or retain, including the Philippines, British Malaya (Malaysia), Burma, Indochina and, of greatest significance, oil rich Indonesia (Dutch East Indies). If Japan could secure this area in the first three or four months of their war with America, it should be possible to consolidate a powerful defensive barrier the US would dare not breach. Or so that is what Yamamoto hoped. He advocated a surprise attack on the US military, similar to the Japanese assault which destroyed the Russian fleet at Port Arthur in 1904.

Yamamoto boldly picked out the formidable US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Oahu, Hawaii, 3,865 miles from Tokyo and 2,580 miles from the American mainland coast at Los Angeles, California. Yet in his planning, Yamamoto committed two serious errors - he misjudged how a surprise raid on US forces would be viewed in America, which in the event united the US Congress and the American people firmly behind Roosevelt; and Yamamoto underestimated the true potential of US industry which, within two or three years, would easily outstrip that of Japan.

The 54-year-old Vice Admiral, Chuichi Nagumo, commanded the Japanese fleet which would attack Pearl Harbor. His task force set sail on 18 November 1941. Almost three weeks later at 5.30 am on 7 December, a Sunday, Japan's assault force neared its launch area. Two Japanese reconnaissance planes flew south to observe the Pearl Harbor base, and reported back that all was quiet.

Despite Washington having cracked Japanese codes in 1940, including Tokyo's highest diplomatic code, the Purple Cipher, US personnel at Pearl Harbor were not informed of the imminent Japanese attack. This was an incredible occurrence. Neither the direct scramble telephone, nor the US naval radio communications, were used to contact the American officers at Pearl Harbor. A warning message, not marked urgent, was instead sent through a much slower medium, as Kershaw noted via "Western Union's commercial telegram service, which had no direct line to Honolulu [Hawaiian capital]. It had still not arrived in Hawaii when the attack began".

From 230 miles north of their target, the opening wave of Japanese warplanes departed from their aircraft carriers shortly after 7 am. As they reached Pearl Harbor, below them were the US Pacific Fleet warships, lined up neatly and close together, as though the world had never been at war. The first group of Japanese aircraft descended at 7:55 am. They bombed and strafed to their hearts content for 30 minutes. A mere 25% of the US anti-aircraft guns at Pearl Harbor had crews to fire the weaponry. Most of them were on shore leave, as previously agreed by Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, commander of the US Pacific Fleet.



Within minutes, the US Pacific Fleet was in tatters. The Japanese bombs had set aflame the battleships, 'Arizona', 'Oklahoma', 'California', and the 'West Virginia', all of which were in the process of sinking. Likewise in flames and going under were three US cruisers, three destroyers, and some ships of smaller size. Heavy damage was inflicted upon the American battleships the 'Nevada', 'Maryland', 'Tennessee' and 'Pennsylvania'.

The second wave of Japanese aircraft arrived over Pearl Harbor at 8:40 am. Along the nearby air fields, Japan's bombers destroyed 188 US warplanes, most of them on the ground. By the time the Japanese pilots had returned to their aircraft carriers at 11:30 am, 2,403 Americans were dead, while the Japanese had lost 29 planes out of 350 and suffered 64 deaths.

The Pearl Harbor attack was a severe blow to American pride and naval power, but it was not a deadly one. Pearl Harbor's installations such as the submarine pens were undamaged, as were the large oil tanks in the dockyard. Of major importance, the three American aircraft carriers were by luck out to sea at the time. Their survival would allow the US military to rapidly launch offensive operations. Nevertheless, Japan's commanders were pleased with the devastation inflicted at Pearl Harbor, which had exceeded their expectations.

The Japanese generals did not rest on their laurels either, and morale was very high among their troops. A few hours before the bombing of Pearl Harbor had even started, the Japanese 25th Army (commanded by Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita) landed at British Malaya in south-east Asia. On 8 December 1941, the Japanese 15th Army (Lieutenant-General Shojiro Iida) led the way in invading neutral Thailand, just a few hundred miles north of Malaya. Thailand, which until then had escaped colonisation, capitulated quickly and signed a formal alliance with Japan.

Four hours after the bombing of Pearl Harbor ended, the Japanese 14th Army (Lieutenant-

General Masaharu Homma) attacked the Philippines, a south-east Asian country and US colony since the late 19th century. Much to their delight, Japan's troops destroyed dozens of US aircraft on the ground at Clark Air Base, in the northern Philippines.

On 10 December 1941 Japanese soldiers landed at Luzon, the Philippines' largest and most populous island in the north of the country. On that same day, 10 December, the Japanese 55th Infantry Division (Major-General Tomitaro Horii) captured the strategically important Pacific island of Guam from the Americans, almost 1,500 miles to the east of the Philippines. So for now ended the four decade US occupation of Guam.

Another 1,500 miles further east again in the Pacific a US territorial possession, Wake Island, was taken comfortably by Japanese marines from the outnumbered Americans on 23 December 1941. Christmas that year was not celebrated with wild enthusiasm in America.

On 16 December 1941 Borneo, the world's third largest island and less than 1,000 miles south of the Philippines, was attacked by Japanese units comprising mainly of the 35th Infantry Brigade (Major-General Kiyotake Kawaguchi). Landing in north-western Borneo, the Japanese met little resistance from the British, and they swiftly took the coastal towns of Miri and Seria.

Further north, Hong Kong, in south-eastern China, a British colony from the days of London's drug trafficking wars, was assailed by Japan's forces on the morning of 8 December 1941, led by the Japanese 23rd Army (Lieutenant-General Takashi Sakai). The Battle of Hong Kong turned into a rout, as the Japanese captured at least 10,000 Allied troops, among them British, Free French and Canadians. The myth of the white man's invincibility was evaporating like mist in a morning breeze.

On Christmas Day 1941 Mark Aitchison Young, the British Governor of Hong Kong, surrendered in person to Lieutenant-General Sakai, the victorious commander of the Japanese 23rd Army. Much to Winston Churchill's disappointment, the Allied soldiers at Hong Kong withstood Japan's rampaging troops for just 18 days. Britain's century-long rule over Hong Kong was broken.

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