

Pearl Harbor: A Successful War Lie

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One type of "defensive" war is one that follows a successful provocation of aggression from the desired enemy. This method was used to begin, and repeatedly to escalate, the Vietnam War, as recorded in the Pentagon Papers. Setting aside the question of whether the United States should have entered World War II, in either Europe or the Pacific or both, the fact is that our country was unlikely to enter unless attacked. In 1928 the U.S. Senate had voted 85 to 1 to ratify the Kellogg-Briand Pact, a treaty that bound — and still binds — our nation and many others never again to engage in war.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's fervent hope for years was that Japan would attack the United States. This would permit the United States (not legally, but politically) to fully enter the war in Europe, as its president wanted to do, as opposed to merely providing weaponry, as it had been doing. On April 28, 1941, Churchill wrote a secret directive to his war cabinet:

"It may be taken as almost certain that the entry of Japan into the war would be followed by the immediate entry of the United States on our side."

On May 11, 1941, Robert Menzies, the prime minister of Australia, met with Roosevelt and found him " a little jealous" of Churchill's place in the center of the war. While Roosevelt's cabinet all wanted the United States to enter the war, Menzies found that Roosevelt,

" . . . trained under Woodrow Wilson in the last war, waits for an incident, which would in one blow get the USA into war and get R. out of his foolish election pledges that 'I will keep you out of war.'"

On August 18, 1941, Churchill met with his cabinet at 10 Downing Street. The meeting had some similarity to the July 23, 2002, meeting at the same address, the minutes of which became known as the Downing Street Minutes. Both meetings revealed secret U.S. intentions to go to war. In the 1941 meeting, Churchill told his cabinet, according to the minutes: " The President had said he would wage war but not declare it." In addition, "Everything was to be done to force an incident."

Japan was certainly not averse to attacking others and had been busy creating an Asian empire. And the United States and Japan were certainly not living in harmonious friendship. But what could bring the Japanese to attack?

When President Franklin Roosevelt visited Pearl Harbor on July 28, 1934, seven years before the Japanese attack, the Japanese military expressed apprehension. General Kunishiga Tanaka wrote in the Japan Advertiser, objecting to the build-up of the American fleet and the creation of additional bases in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands:

“Such insolent behavior makes us most suspicious. It makes us think a major disturbance is purposely being encouraged in the Pacific. This is greatly regretted.”

Whether it was actually regretted or not is a separate question from whether this was a typical and predictable response to military expansionism, even when done in the name of “defense.” The great unembedded (as we would today call him) journalist George Seldes was suspicious as well. In October 1934 he wrote in Harper’s Magazine: “It is an axiom that nations do not arm for war but for a war.” Seldes asked an official at the Navy League:

“Do you accept the naval axiom that you prepare to fight a specific navy?”

The man replied “Yes.”

“Do you contemplate a fight with the British navy?”

“Absolutely, no.”

“Do you contemplate war with Japan?”

“Yes.”

In 1935 the most decorated U.S. Marine in history at the time, Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler, published to enormous success a short book called “War Is a Racket.” He saw perfectly well what was coming and warned the nation:

“At each session of Congress the question of further naval appropriations comes up. The swivel-chair admirals...don’t shout that ‘We need lots of battleships to war on this nation or that nation.’ Oh, no. First of all, they let it be known that America is menaced by a great naval power. Almost any day, these admirals will tell you, the great fleet of this supposed enemy will strike suddenly and annihilate our 125,000,000 people. Just like that. Then they begin to cry for a larger navy. For what? To fight the enemy? Oh my, no. Oh, no. For defense purposes only. Then, incidentally, they announce maneuvers in the Pacific. For defense. Uh, huh.

“The Pacific is a great big ocean. We have a tremendous coastline in the Pacific. Will the maneuvers be off the coast, two or three hundred miles? Oh, no. The maneuvers will be two thousand, yes, perhaps even thirty-five hundred miles, off the coast.

“The Japanese, a proud people, of course will be pleased beyond expression to see the United States fleet so close to Nippon’s shores. Even as pleased as would be the residents of California were they to dimly discern, through the morning mist, the Japanese fleet playing at war games off Los Angeles.”

In March 1935, Roosevelt bestowed Wake Island on the U.S. Navy and gave Pan Am Airways a permit to build runways on Wake Island, Midway Island, and Guam. Japanese military commanders announced that they were disturbed and viewed these runways as a threat. So did peace activists in the United States. By the next month, Roosevelt had planned war games and maneuvers near the Aleutian Islands and Midway Island. By the following month, peace activists were marching in New York advocating friendship with Japan. Norman Thomas wrote in 1935:

“The Man from Mars who saw how men suffered in the last war and how frantically they are preparing for the next war, which they know will be worse, would come to the conclusion that he was looking at the denizens of a lunatic asylum.”

The U.S. Navy spent the next few years working up plans for war with Japan, the March 8, 1939, version of which described “an offensive war of long duration” that would destroy the military and disrupt the economic life of Japan. In January 1941, eleven months before the attack, the Japan Advertiser expressed its outrage over Pearl Harbor in an editorial, and the U.S. ambassador to Japan wrote in his diary:

“There is a lot of talk around town to the effect that the Japanese, in case of a break with the United States, are planning to go all out in a surprise mass attack on Pearl Harbor. Of course I informed my government.”

On February 5, 1941, Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner wrote to Secretary of War Henry Stimson to warn of the possibility of a surprise attack at Pearl Harbor.

As early as 1932 the United States had been talking with China about providing airplanes, pilots, and training for its war with Japan. In November 1940, Roosevelt loaned China one hundred million dollars for war with Japan, and after consulting with the British, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau made plans to send the Chinese bombers with U.S. crews to use in bombing Tokyo and other Japanese cities. On December 21, 1940, two weeks shy of a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, China’s Minister of Finance T.V. Soong and Colonel Claire Chennault, a retired U.S. Army flier who was working for the Chinese and had been urging them to use American pilots to bomb Tokyo since at least 1937, met in Henry Morgenthau’s dining room to plan the firebombing of Japan. Morgenthau said he could get men released from duty in the U.S. Army Air Corps if the Chinese could pay them \$1,000 per month. Soong agreed.

On May 24, 1941, the New York Times reported on U.S. training of the Chinese air force, and the provision of “numerous fighting and bombing planes” to China by the United States. “Bombing of Japanese Cities is Expected” read the subheadline. By July, the Joint Army-Navy Board had approved a plan called JB 355 to firebomb Japan. A front corporation would buy American planes to be flown by American volunteers trained by Chennault and paid by another front group. Roosevelt approved, and his China expert Lauchlin Currie, in the words of Nicholson Baker, “wired Madame Chaing Kai-Shek and Claire Chennault a letter that fairly begged for interception by Japanese spies.” Whether or not that was the entire point, this was the letter:

“I am very happy to be able to report today the President directed that sixty-six bombers be made available to China this year with twenty-four to be delivered immediately. He also approved a Chinese pilot training program here. Details through normal channels. Warm regards.”

Our ambassador had said “in case of a break with the United States” the Japanese would bomb Pearl Harbor. I wonder if this qualified!

The 1st American Volunteer Group (AVG) of the Chinese Air Force, also known as the Flying Tigers, moved ahead with recruitment and training immediately and first saw combat on December 20, 1941, twelve days (local time) after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

On May 31, 1941, at the Keep America Out of War Congress, William Henry Chamberlin gave a dire warning: "A total economic boycott of Japan, the stoppage of oil shipments for instance, would push Japan into the arms of the Axis. Economic war would be a prelude to naval and military war." The worst thing about peace advocates is how many times they turn out to be right.

On July 24, 1941, President Roosevelt remarked, "If we cut the oil off , [the Japanese] probably would have gone down to the Dutch East Indies a year ago, and you would have had a war. It was very essential from our own selfish point of view of defense to prevent a war from starting in the South Pacific. So our foreign policy was trying to stop a war from breaking out there."

Reporters noticed that Roosevelt said "was" rather than "is." The next day, Roosevelt issued an executive order freezing Japanese assets. The United States and Britain cut off oil and scrap metal to Japan. Radhabinod Pal, an Indian jurist who served on the war crimes tribunal after the war, called the embargoes a "clear and potent threat to Japan's very existence," and concluded the United States had provoked Japan.

On August 7th four months before the attack the Japan Times Advertiser wrote: "First there was the creation of a superbase at Singapore, heavily reinforced by British and Empire troops. From this hub a great wheel was built up and linked with American bases to form a great ring sweeping in a great area southwards and westwards from the Philippines through Malaya and Burma, with the link broken only in the Thailand peninsula. Now it is proposed to include the narrows in the encirclement, which proceeds to Rangoon."

By September the Japanese press was outraged that the United States had begun shipping oil right past Japan to reach Russia. Japan, its newspapers said, was dying a slow death from "economic war."

What might the United States have been hoping to gain by shipping oil past a nation in desperate need of it?

In late October, U.S. spy Edgar Mower was doing work for Colonel William Donovan who spied for Roosevelt. Mower spoke with a man in Manila named Ernest Johnson, a member of the Maritime Commission, who said he expected "The Japs will take Manila before I can get out." When Mower expressed surprise, Johnson replied "Didn't you know the Jap fleet has moved eastward, presumably to attack our fleet at Pearl Harbor?"

On November 3, 1941, our ambassador tried again to get something through his government's thick skull, sending a lengthy telegram to the State Department warning that the economic sanctions might force Japan to commit " national hara-kiri." He wrote: " An armed conflict with the United States may come with dangerous and dramatic suddenness."

Why do I keep recalling the headline of the memo given to President George W. Bush prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks? "Bin Laden Determined To Strike in U.S."

Apparently nobody in Washington wanted to hear it in 1941 either. On November 15th, Army Chief of Staff George Marshall briefed the media on something we do not remember as "the Marshall Plan." In fact we don't remember it at all." We are preparing an offensive war against Japan," Marshall said, asking the journalists to keep it a secret, which as far as I know they dutifully did.

Ten days later Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote in his diary that he'd met in the Oval Office with Marshall, President Roosevelt, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, Admiral Harold Stark, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Roosevelt had told them the Japanese were likely to attack soon, possibly next Monday. That would have been December 1st, six days before the attack actually came. "The question," Stimson wrote, " was how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves. It was a difficult proposition." Was it? One obvious answer was to keep the fleet in Pearl Harbor and keep the sailors stationed there in the dark while fretting about them from comfortable offices in Washington, D.C. In fact, that was the solution our suit-and-tied heroes went with.

The day after the attack, Congress voted for war. Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin (R., Mont.), the first woman ever elected to Congress, and who had voted against World War I, stood alone in opposing World War II (just as Congresswoman Barbara Lee [D., Calif.] would stand alone against attacking Afghanistan 60 years later). One year after the vote, on December 8, 1942, Rankin put extended remarks into the Congressional Record explaining her opposition. She cited the work of a British propagandist who had argued in 1938 for using Japan to bring the United States into the war. She cited Henry Luce's reference in Life magazine on July 20, 1942, to "the Chinese for whom the U.S. had delivered the ultimatum that brought on Pearl Harbor." She introduced evidence that at the Atlantic Conference on August 12, 1941, Roosevelt had assured Churchill that the United States would bring economic pressure to bear on Japan. "I cited," Rankin later wrote, " the State Department Bulletin of December 20, 1941, which revealed that on September 3 a communication had been sent to Japan demanding that it accept the principle of 'nondisturbance of the status quo in the Pacific,' which amounted to demanding guarantees of the inviolateness of the white empires in the Orient."

Rankin found that the Economic Defense Board had gotten economic sanctions under way less than a week after the Atlantic Conference. On December 2, 1941, the New York Times had reported, in fact, that Japan had been "cut off from about 75 percent of her normal trade by the Allied blockade." Rankin also cited the statement of Lieutenant Clarence E. Dickinson, U.S.N., in the Saturday Evening Post of October 10, 1942, that on November 28, 1941, nine days before the attack, Vice Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., (he of the slogan "kill Japs, kill Japs!") had given instructions to him and others to "shoot down anything we saw in the sky and to bomb anything we saw on the sea."

Whether or not World War II was the "good war" we are so often told it was, the idea that it was a defensive war because our innocent imperial outpost in the middle of the Pacific was attacked out of the clear blue sky is a myth that deserves to be buried.

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