

# WAS THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR REALLY A SURPRISE?

The Japanese attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 fell like a bolt from the blue on the American people. Outraged and shocked, they rallied without hesitation to President Roosevelt's determined pledge to wreak revenge for this "day of infamy." But did Roosevelt and his closest advisors know about the impending attack and let it go ahead unhindered in order to pitchfork America into World War II?

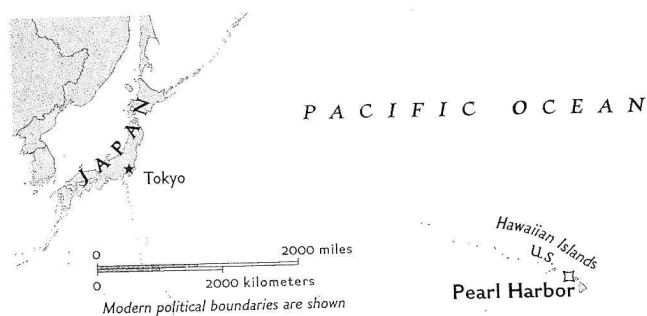


*Above: Admiral Kimmel, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was accused after Pearl Harbor of being unprepared for a Japanese attack. He always maintained that, had he been sent accurate information by Washington, he would not have been taken by surprise.*

In the 1930s, relations between Japan and the United States steadily deteriorated. In 1931, Japan conquered Manchuria, until then a Chinese province, and in 1937 launched a full-scale invasion of the Chinese heartland itself. Evidence of Japanese atrocities in China caused revulsion in the U.S., to which was added growing apprehension when in 1940 Japan entered into a close military alliance with Hitler's Nazi Germany. By the fall of the following year, Hitler's seemingly unstoppable armed forces had overrun continental Europe and were smashing their way through the Soviet Union. Britain was undefeated, but had evacuated its troops from Greece and Crete, had suffered major defeats in North Africa, was facing a savage U-boat onslaught in the North Atlantic, and had been forced to deny the Far East promised reinforcements of warships, troops, and airplanes. Japan, meanwhile, had occupied French Indochina (later Vietnam) and was poised to plunder the riches of Southeast Asia.

The gravity of the world situation put intolerable strains on U.S. foreign policy. There was widespread aversion in the U.S. to getting involved in another European war, after the horrors of World War I. In fact, there was a strong belief in the virtues of isolationism, which was stridently proclaimed by the "America First" movement. President Roosevelt had acknowledged the strong antiwar sentiment by repeatedly pledging to keep his country out of war, but privately he was convinced that the survival of Britain and containment of Japan were vital to American interests.

*Opposite: Struck by Japanese dive bombers, the destroyer U.S.S. Shaw burns after the explosion of her forward magazine, where her ammunition was kept. The attack came while the ship was moored in a floating dry dock at Pearl Harbor, and the blast, captured on film by a navy photographer, became one of the classic images of the Pacific war. Amazingly, the Shaw proved repairable. She was ready for action the following June.*



Right: In his planning of Pearl Harbor, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was inspired by a 1925 novel—*The Great Pacific War*—and the successful British air attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto the previous year. With the attack the Japanese scored a tremendous tactical success, but their decision not to launch a further strike to seek out and sink the absent U.S. aircraft carriers was to cost them dear.

The alternative would be a nightmare future. Once it had crushed the Soviet Union, Germany would be able to concentrate all its military resources against Britain, which would either be forced to capitulate or be wiped out. This would make Hitler master of all Europe, with Africa, the Middle East, and Asia all the way to the borders of India at his feet. Meanwhile, a rampant Japan would sweep south to capture British, French, and Dutch possessions in Southeast Asia and on down to Australia and New Zealand, and west all the way to the great prize of British India. The entire Old World would be divided between Germany, Italy, and Japan, and the United States would be bottled up in the Americas.

To avoid this dire outcome, the Roosevelt administration had already risked conflict with Germany by providing Britain with “all aid short of war.” This included the all-important Lend-Lease legislation, by which the U.S. continued to supply Britain with arms even though the British could no longer afford to pay their bills. As for Japan, the U.S. cut off shipments of oil and other raw materials vital for its economic survival. The decision put the two countries on a collision course. Last-minute diplomatic negotiations to stave off war appeared to be failing. On November 26, 1941, Secretary of State Cordell Hull warned the Japanese to get out of China and Indochina. Since there was no chance of Japan’s complying, such a declaration made war inevitable. Indeed, the Japanese had already come to that conclusion.

There were two U.S. fleets in the Pacific theater—the Asiatic Fleet based on the Philippines, and the Pacific Fleet based on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, at Pearl Harbor. In October 1941 the Japanese general staff had given final approval to a plan devised by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Japanese fleet, for a surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The strategic thinking behind the



*“Climb Mount Niitaka 1208.”*

ADMIRAL ISOROKU YAMAMOTO’S SIGNAL TO HIS FLEET FOR THE ATTACK TO GO AHEAD (12/08 WAS THE DATE IN JAPAN WHEN IT WAS 12/07 IN HAWAII)

U.S.A.		The World	
<i>Gone with the Wind becomes the most successful film in U.S. box office history.</i>	1939	1939	<i>Hitler invades Poland. Britain and France declare war on Germany.</i>
<i>While still neutral, the U.S. helps Britain with armaments and vital supplies.</i>	1940	1940	<i>Germany defeats France, but Britain’s Royal Air Force beats the Germans in the Battle of Britain, securing Britain against invasion.</i>
<i>The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brings the U.S. into the war.</i>	Dec 1941	Jan 1942	<i>The Wannsee Conference in Berlin plans the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals will be killed.</i>
<i>The Japanese invade the U.S.-occupied Philippines; U.S. General MacArthur vows to return.</i>	May 1942	Apr 1942	<i>Allied shipping losses reach their peak in the war against the German U-boats in the Atlantic.</i>
<i>In the turning-point of the Pacific war, the U.S. navy sinks four Japanese aircraft carriers in the Battle of Midway.</i>	June 1942		
<i>U.S. troops land in North Africa.</i>	Nov 1942	Nov 1942	<i>The British defeat the Germans and Italians at El Alamein in North Africa.</i>
<i>U.S. forces win control of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, in the Pacific, after bitter fighting.</i>	Feb 1943	Jan 1943	<i>German forces surrender at Stalingrad, Russia. This is the limit of the German advance in Russia and the turning-point of the war on the eastern front.</i>
<i>U.S. troops invade Sicily and go on to land in Italy.</i>	July 1943	Sept 1943	<i>Italy surrenders to the Allies; but the German armies and Italian fascists fight on in Italy, creating a virtual civil war as Italians fight on the Allied side, too.</i>
<i>U.S. troops land in the Gilbert Islands, in the Pacific.</i>	Nov 1943		
<i>U.S. marines land on Guam in the Marianas Islands.</i>	July 1944	June 1944	<i>D-Day: The Allied forces land in Normandy, starting the drive on Germany from the west.</i>
<i>The Battle of the Bulge takes place: German forces counter-attack U.S. troops in the Ardennes, France.</i>	Dec 1944	Jan 1945	<i>Auschwitz concentration camp is liberated by the advancing Russians.</i>
<i>President Roosevelt dies and is replaced by Truman.</i>	Apr 1945	Apr 1945	<i>The Russians reach Berlin, and Hitler commits suicide.</i>
<i>The U.S. drops the first atom bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan surrenders.</i>	Aug 1945	May 1945	<i>Germany surrenders.</i>

*“We have awakened a sleeping giant and have instilled in him a terrible resolve.”*

ADMIRAL YAMAMOTO AFTER THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR

*Right: U.S. Navy personnel, still in their Sunday dress uniforms, inspect the wreckage of a downed Japanese torpedo bomber in this imaginative reconstruction from the blockbusting movie Pearl Harbor. The sinking battleship Arizona blazes in the background. The Japanese put 353 aircraft into the attack, manned by the finest pilots of their Imperial Navy.*



attack, which was to be supported by a simultaneous assault on the Philippines, was to deal with the only serious naval obstacle in the region to Japan's plans of conquest.

At the end of November, a huge Japanese taskforce, organized around 6 aircraft carriers with 24 supporting vessels and roving submarines, set out on this extraordinary mission. By dawn on December 7, the taskforce was about 200 miles (320km) north of Oahu. Just before 8 a.m. the Sunday quiet of Pearl Harbor was shattered by the first wave of 180 or more Japanese planes. While there were some 90 ships at anchor at Pearl Harbor, the main objective for the Japanese dive bombers and torpedo bombers were the eight American battleships, seven of them lined up together in the dock called Battleship Row—almost too good a target to miss. All were hit and three were sunk; the

U.S.S. *Arizona* alone went down with the loss of over 1,100 lives. A second wave of attacks followed half an hour later, and by 10 a.m. the Japanese planes were on their way back to their carriers, having given the Pacific Fleet a terrible mauling at very little cost to themselves. As well as sinking or severely damaging 21 warships, the Japanese invaders destroyed 188 American airplanes, most of them while they sat helplessly on the ground. It could have been much worse, however. The Japanese had expected also to have had three U.S. aircraft carriers in their sights, but two were at sea on an exercise and one was away for repairs.

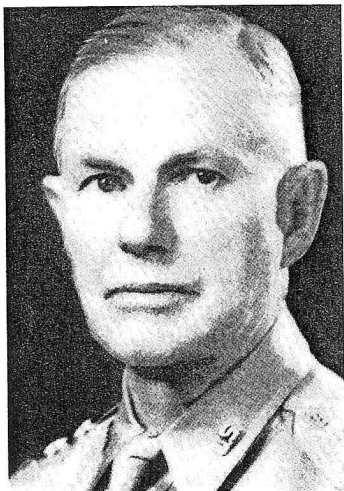
Total U.S. casualties numbered 2,403 killed, with about half that number injured. Coordinated attacks on U.S. installations in the Philippines nearly wiped out the air force there, but it was the assault on Pearl Harbor that brought American minds into focus. President Roosevelt was immediately granted congressional approval for a declaration of war on Japan, and a few days later Germany honored its obligation to its ally by declaring war on the U.S. Four days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States was fully committed to a world war on two fronts—against Germany and Italy in the European and North African theaters of war, and against Japan in the Pacific.

In retrospect, the attack on Pearl Harbor was a disastrous miscalculation by Japan, because it set its empire on the road to ruin. In its immediate aftermath, however, Japanese delight at having achieved such a stunning victory was mirrored by American despair at having suffered so calamitous a humiliation. Immediately, and on several more occasions during and shortly after the war, official investigations tried to unravel the mysteries surrounding the attack, and to apportion blame for what seemed an astonishing lack of foresight. Since everyone knew that war was likely to break out at any moment, how could Pearl Harbor not have been put on the highest defense alert?

The first investigation, completed just six weeks after the attack, pinned the blame on Rear Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and Lieutenant General Walter C. Short, the naval and army commanders in Hawaii, accusing them of “dereliction of duty.” Kimmel and Short requested



*Above: An Italian propaganda postcard celebrates the Japanese triumph at Pearl Harbor. Germany and Italy, Japan's Axis partners, fulfilled their treaty obligations by declaring war on the U.S.A. almost immediately after the attack.*



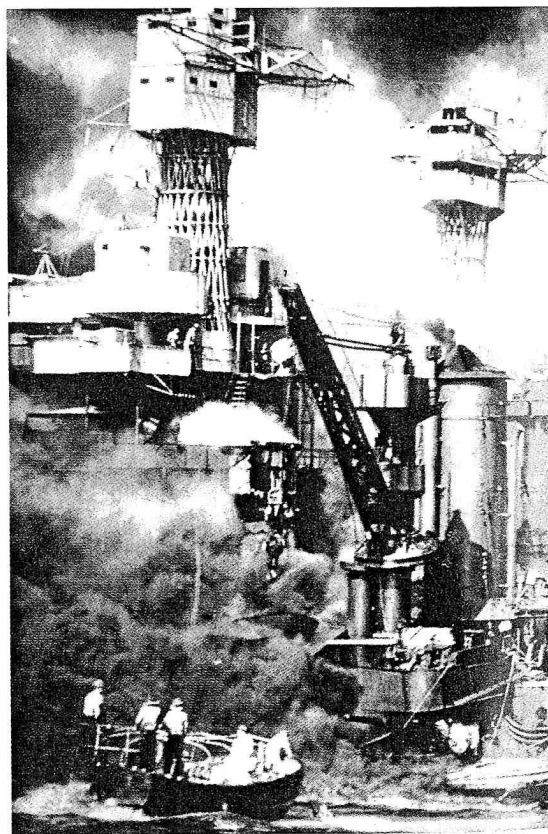
*Above: Lieutenant General Walter C. Short commanded the ground forces in Hawaii. Like Kimmel, he was forced to retire in disgrace. Both men claimed they had been kept in the dark.*

court-martials so that they could defend themselves against the charge, but this was refused, and they were demoted and forced to retire. Subsequent investigations backtracked on making scapegoats of Kimmel and Short, as it became increasingly clear that they had been kept in the dark about much of the intelligence information that had been available in Washington. Their families' attempts to clear their names were successful in 2001, when a congressional commission posthumously restored their full military ranks.

There is no doubt whatever that, in the days leading up to December 7, a huge amount of intelligence information passed over Washington desks indicating that a Japanese attack was imminent, and that Pearl Harbor was its likely target. American and British code-breakers could easily read intercepted Japanese radio messages, and these messages made Japanese intentions clear. There are many examples, but the one most frequently quoted is a message of late November explaining that the signal to attack would be announced in a fake weather report from Tokyo, with "rain" meaning war and "east" meaning the U.S. On December 4, a U.S. intercept station picked up the weather report "East wind, rain." The fact that Kimmel and Short were not alerted to the danger can only be explained in one of two ways.

Different government and military departments received intelligence warnings, but inter-departmental communication in Washington was extremely poor. In particular, inter-service rivalry between the army and navy meant that neither would share its knowledge with the other. This version of events—that the U.S. got caught out by a combination of bureaucratic complacency and a failure to make proper use of intelligence information, remains broadly speaking the official position.

This version claims to account for even the most shocking examples of ineptitude that in fateful combination led to the disaster. For

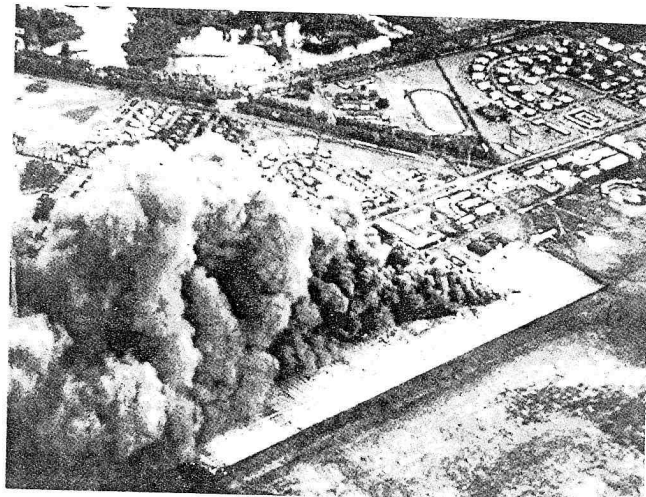


example, Short's aircraft were parked wingtip to wingtip in the middle of runways, making them sitting ducks for the Japanese. The reason for this was that Short thought that sabotage was the real threat he faced (Pearl Harbor was awash with Japanese spies), and that deploying his aircraft out in the open in a cluster made them a difficult target for would-be saboteurs.

Then there is all the confusion surrounding the last-minute intercept that revealed Japanese intentions. Late on December 6, American code-breakers intercepted a 14-part message to the Japanese Embassy in Washington, deciphered the first 13 parts, and passed them on to President Roosevelt and Secretary Hull. The message made clear that an attack was imminent, but not the target. The next morning at about 9 a.m. (4 a.m. in Hawaii) a transcription of the final part of the intercept reached the White House, containing an instruction to break off diplomatic relations with the U.S. Then an hour later another message was deciphered instructing the embassy to deliver the main message at 1 p.m. (8 a.m. in Hawaii).

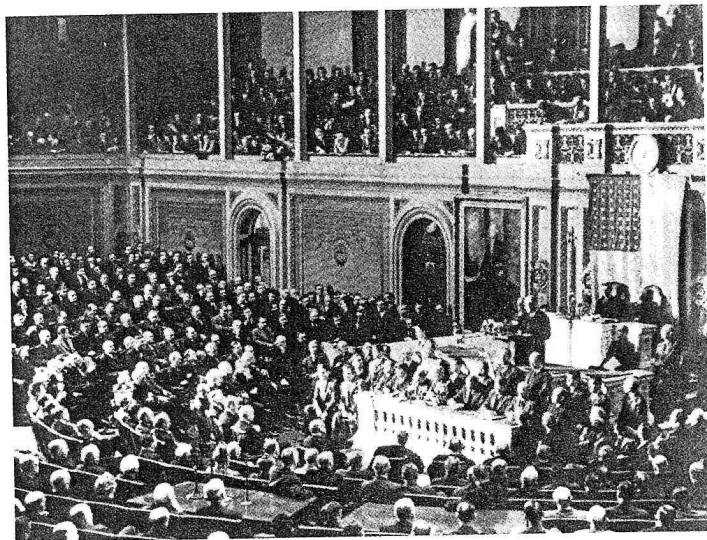
The significance of this for Pearl Harbor was seized upon, since it seemed to imply an early-morning attack. The War Department attempted to alert Short, but because radio contact was temporarily broken it did so by commercial telegram. The telegram arrived about 20 minutes before the attack began, but it was seven hours before it was decoded and finally delivered. Another blunder was made on Oahu at 7:02 a.m., when two operators at the northern shore radar station picked up the first of the approaching Japanese planes and relayed their sightings to a junior officer. He disregarded the report because he thought the sightings were of a squadron of American B-17s expected to be flying in from the west coast of America. The long chain of misfortune and human error led remorselessly to disaster.

The official version of events is strongly challenged by an alternative explanation: namely that President Roosevelt and those around him were fully aware that the attack on Pearl Harbor was coming. According to this reading of events, there is abundant evidence that



*Above: Attacking Pearl Harbor—a Japanese pilot's view. In response to a non-specific war alert warning, Short had ordered his aircraft out from cover into the open, where they could be guarded more easily against sabotage. The Army Air Corps lost 126 aircraft damaged and 77 destroyed, many on the ground.*

*Left: Battling with the fires at Pearl Harbor after the Japanese air strikes had been completed. Both Kimmel and Short had repeatedly complained that they lacked modern equipment to defend the base. That June, Kimmel had told President Roosevelt himself that "because of the deficiencies of Pearl Harbor as a fleet base... the only answer was to have the fleet at sea if the Japs ever attacked."*



Above: President Roosevelt delivers his "day of infamy" address to Congress. When reading a decoded Japanese signal the night before the attack, he reportedly exclaimed, "This means war!"

Roosevelt wanted to bring the U.S. into the war against Nazi Germany at the earliest possible moment. But he knew he could not do so unless the American people were united in believing that there was no alternative to war. And the only thing that could unite the people would be a serious act of aggression against the United States.

Roosevelt's attempts to provoke Hitler into declaring war by blatantly siding with Britain had

failed, so he laid a trap for Hitler's Japanese allies. First he goaded them into attacking (the Hull message was intended to be the final, unacceptable insult to Japanese honor), and then he made sure that the attack succeeded by keeping Kimmel and Short in the dark. The reason he wanted the attack to succeed was that only if Hitler thought the U.S. had been seriously weakened would he honor his agreement with Japan to declare war. In other words, Roosevelt conspired with his closest advisors—who must have known what was afoot—to sacrifice lives at Pearl Harbor (not to mention the reputations of Kimmel and Short) in a Machiavellian scheme to embroil the nation in war with Germany.

Opposite: Looking toward Pearl Harbor on Oahu. It was near this spot that the Americans sited their primitive radar station to warn them of any likely air attack. Unfortunately, the station was manned only part-time, and the report it sent in about the approaching unidentified aircraft was disregarded, since the Japanese air strike almost exactly coincided with the expected arrival of U.S. B-17 bomber reinforcements from the mainland.

*"A Japanese attack upon the United States was a vast simplification of [America's] problems and their duty."*

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL, *THE GRAND ALLIANCE*, 1950

As to why Roosevelt would do such a thing, the conspiracy argument diverges on this. Most argue that Roosevelt was so aghast at the prospect of a world dominated by Germany and Japan that he was prepared to do absolutely anything to enlist the might of America in the struggle to prevent it from happening. If the only way of achieving his aim was to sacrifice Pearl Harbor, then Pearl Harbor had to be sacrificed. There are some, however, who are convinced that Roosevelt





was secretly a Communist and wanted to drag the U.S. into a war with Germany in order to save the Soviet Union from defeat. This accusation sometimes gets tangled up with the even weirder charge that the American president was spearheading a plot by Freemasons to establish a sinister world government.

Leaving aside such wild charges against President Roosevelt, the question of what he did or did not know on the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor must remain an open question. What is not in doubt is that, for whatever reason, the Americans were not on the alert for a Japanese attack. Perhaps they should have recalled that Japan had begun its war against Russia in 1904 with just such an attack—the devastating surprise strike against the key Russian base of Port Arthur. The consequences of Pearl Harbor, though, were clear-cut. The entry of the U.S. into World War II made the defeat of the Axis powers inevitable.