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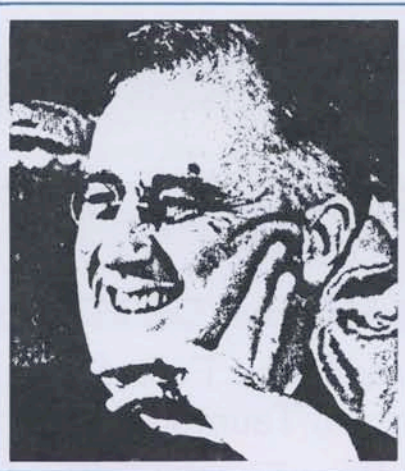
Pearl Harbor: Did FDR Know?

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PEARL HARBOR:



DID FDR KNOW?

By David M. Culver

At precisely 7:55 a.m., Sunday, December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched a devastating air attack on Hawaii, leaving 2403 Americans dead, eight battleships crippled or destroyed, and 188 planes demolished. "The worse disaster in the military annals of the United States," in the words of a noted historian, plunged America into a global war and permanently changed the country. Isolationism was dead. Americans were united to win the war, and they were resolved never again to be caught by surprise. At the same time, they wanted to know why the Army and Navy were caught napping. Thus began a years-long search for scapegoats, a search which would lead to much confusion, bitter controversy, and the sensational charge that President Franklin Roosevelt had prior knowledge of the Japanese attack.

* * *

When news of the massive Japanese strike was received, Americans reeled with anger, shock and humiliation. They were furious because the Japanese had launched a sneak attack under the cover of negotiations to settle differences between the two countries. Editorials rang with denunciations of Japanese deceit. Cried one Georgia newspaper, "Oh, the dishonesty and trickery of it all."

Behind the nation's fury was the nagging question asked by public officials and private citizens alike. With war so obviously ready to break out in the Pacific, why did the attack catch us by surprise? Henry Morgenthau, Secretary of the Treasury, following a meeting with President Roosevelt after the attack, told his associates, "It is just unexplainable." They caught us unprepared, he said, all the planes in one place and the battleships lined up in perfect rows. "They can never explain this. They never will be able to explain it."

Senator Tom Connolly of Texas was equally baffled. Meeting with President Roosevelt the evening of the attack, the Senator pounded a desk and shouted,

"Pearl Harbor never dies and no living person has seen the end of it."

*Counsel for Admiral Husband Kimmel,
Hawaiian Naval Commander*

"How did they catch us with our pants down, Mr. President?"

Many Americans wanted an answer to that question and the smoke had hardly cleared when there were outraged calls for an investigation. Within weeks of the tragedy, President Roosevelt appointed a blue-ribbon committee, headed by Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts, to investigate the attack. The Roberts Commission placed the blame on the Hawaiian commanders, Admiral Husband Kimmel and Lt. General Walter Short.

But the search for villains had only begun, the public's interest only whetted. Even as the war was being waged, no fewer than six more official investigations sought answers to the Pearl Harbor mystery, in the midst of a welter of discord and charges of whitewash. By 1945, critics of President Roosevelt were suggesting that he had maneuvered the country into war and knew in advance of the Japanese attack. That was the charge made by the rabidly anti-Roosevelt *Chicago Tribune* in a September 1945 editorial. In the same month, John Chamberlain asserted in *Life* that "... Roosevelt ... knew in advance that the Japanese were going to attack us. There is even ground for suspicion that he elected to bring the crisis to a head when it came." While Pearl Harbor had united Americans in a determination to defeat the Japanese, it divided them, often bitterly, in assessing blame for the disaster.

With the war over and Pearl Harbor still a mystery, Congress, with much fanfare, launched its own investigation. One of its objectives was to clarify President Roosevelt's role in the Pearl Harbor story. For eight months (November 1945 - July 1946), the committee scrutinized Roosevelt's policy, military preparations, and intelligence information.

For the first time the public learned of *Magic*, the code name of the disclosures obtained by American intelligence. In 1940 and 1941, American cryptanalysts had broken several Japanese diplomatic codes and throughout 1941 the United States had been reading virtually all messages between Japanese embassies and the Foreign Office in Tokyo. The hearings revealed that through *Magic* the United States knew of Japan's planned move into Southeast Asia and the deadline it set for successful negotiations with America. If diplomatic success was not achieved by November 29, 1941, *Magic* read, "things are automatically going to happen." It was on the basis of such intelligence that the government sent out a war warning to Pacific commanders on November 27.

The long legislative inquiry, often rancorous and partisan, was the most extensive ever undertaken by Congress, and the record of its hearings is an incomparable source of information. As expected, the Committee was not unanimous in allocating responsibility for the debacle, noting mistakes in both Hawaii and Washington. But it found no evidence that Washington knew in advance or that the government "tricked, provoked, incited, cajoled, or coerced Japan into attacking this nation ..."

By the time of Congress' investigation, two schools of thought had coalesced to continue the Pearl Harbor debate. One school, the orthodox, while recognizing mistakes in Washington, assigned much of the blame to Kimmel and Short. The Hawaiian commanders had been warned that war with Japan was imminent, but did



Admiral Husband Kimmel

not take adequate precautions. Their job had been to protect the fleet and they failed.

The other school, the revisionist, armed with knowledge of *Magic*, blamed President Roosevelt, certain Cabinet officials, and the top military leaders in Washington for the Pearl Harbor tragedy. Revisionists lambasted the whole course of Roosevelt's diplomacy, arguing variously that he lied to the American people, that he withheld intelligence from his Pacific commanders, that he knew the attack was coming, and that he had even schemed the whole thing so that the United States could enter the war.

This last charge formed the basis of the back-door thesis. According to revisionists, Roosevelt was bent on taking the United States into war against Germany and did his best to provoke Adolf Hitler. But the German dictator would not oblige the American President, so the scheming Roosevelt provoked Japan into attacking the United States. Because Germany and Japan were allies, war with one meant war with the other. Roosevelt would then have his war against Germany, the real enemy, through the back door.

While the revisionists raised important questions, their case was marred by ill-disguised personal hatred of President Roosevelt. More significantly, their thesis was based largely on innuendo, for no clear-cut proof exists to support it. Most historians have rejected the revisionist position, but the legend endures. Each year students, whose knowledge of history is slight, ask whether Roosevelt knew of the Japanese attack, and many Americans, not just Roosevelt-haters, accept this view.

Last year the old argument of how much Washington knew about Pearl Harbor was renewed with the publication of Gordon W.

Prange's *At Dawn We Slept*, and John Toland's *Infamy*. Prange, who spent more than 30 years on his monumental tome, belongs to the orthodox school. During the occupation of Japan after the war, Prange was chief of the Army Intelligence Historical Section and used his position to interview virtually every Japanese officer who had a part in the attack. He also interviewed numerous Americans who were involved, and he seems to have read everything that has been published on the subject. Following his untimely death in May 1980, two former students completed his work. The result is a comprehensive account written from both the American and Japanese points of view. Prange's conclusion: there was no conspiracy and he assigns much of the blame for Pearl Harbor to Admiral Kimmel and General Short.

John Toland, on the other hand, a Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Rising Sun*, fans the conspiratorial flames by charging that Roosevelt knew in advance of the Japanese attack, indeed welcomed it, but withheld this information from Kimmel and Short. As Toland concludes, "The comedy of errors on the sixth and seventh (of December 1941) appears incredible. It only makes sense if it were a charade, and Roosevelt and the inner circle had known about the attack." Roosevelt's motive, according to Toland, was to get the United States into the war against Germany. Later, the Hawaiian commanders were made scapegoats, victims of a vast FDR-led cover-up of the plot.

Like other revisionists, Toland emphasizes the "winds execute" message. In late November 1941, *Magic* revealed that the words "East wind rain" inserted in daily news broadcasts would be Tokyo's signal to Japanese embassies that a break in diplomatic relations with the United States was imminent. According to Toland's two witnesses, the message was received in code, but was not forwarded to United States commanders. Whether the message was ever received, though, is doubtful, for nearly all the other witnesses who testified during the official investigation deny that such a message was ever received. Japanese sources deny any such message was sent. And the message, according to Toland, was received in Morse code, though it was supposed to be broadcast in plain language.

It is difficult to determine why Toland places such emphasis on the winds-execute code. As Congress concluded in 1946, even if it had been sent and intercepted it would have added nothing to what the United States already knew from other intelligence sources; and it in no way indicated an attack on Pearl Harbor.

Another prop in the Toland thesis deals with radio traffic picked up in early December 1941, by two Americans who, according to Toland, separately located the Japanese strike force heading toward Pearl Harbor. One listener, a mysterious Seaman First Class Z--whose name will be disclosed one day--tracked the Japanese carrier force to a position 400 miles north-northwest of Hawaii. The other American was a radio man aboard the liner *Lurline* who located radio signals coming from a Japanese force "north and west of Honolulu." Both handed their information to superiors in naval intelligence who apparently did nothing about it.

The problem with this sensational bit of information is that the Japanese task force heading for Pearl Harbor maintained complete radio silence. Surviving members of the Japanese staff who planned the attack deny Toland's allegation, and maintain that the ships communicated with one another only by blinker or flag. Toland, in the end, asks tantalizing questions, which underscore the mysteries in the Pearl Harbor story, but he does not convincingly supply the answers. He demonstrates neither conspiracy nor cover-up.

Beyond his failure to prove his points, his theory, and revisionism in general, is full of holes. If Roosevelt wanted war, why would he risk a good part of the Pacific fleet -- the very forces he would need in a Pacific war -- at the very beginning? It makes no sense to enter a war that Roosevelt presumably wanted to win with a stunning defeat.

Some revisionists respond that Roosevelt was willing to sacrifice obsolescent battleships. But Roosevelt had no way of knowing that the Japanese would only attack battleships and not the more important, both strategically and logistically,



Lieutenant General Walter C. Short



Planes and hangars at the Ford Island Naval Air Station go up in flames and smoke as the attack continues. (U.S. Navy Photo)

intelligence said it was, it could not be elsewhere.

And so on that fateful day in early December, the Japanese launched one of the most brilliant, daring and surprising naval operations in history. Even though a war warning went out, reconnaissance planes stayed put and there was no change in a relaxed weekend routine. Americans never really accepted the possibility that Japan would attack Pearl Harbor. As one naval officer put it, "Americans did not believe," and it was this improbability that was the essential element of Japanese success.

Pearl Harbor was the result of numerous related and complicated factors: Japanese military skill and uncommon luck, false American assumptions, inadequate American intelligence, and numerous blunders, such as the one by an American officer who told a radar operator "don't worry about it" when the operator reported seeing planes on his screen two minutes after seven o'clock Sunday morning. But these errors were of the human kind, the kind that all nations make. There was no conspiracy, no cover-up.

More than 40 years after the event there are still many unanswered questions about the attack and Pearl Harbor remains, in Prange's words, "the eternal enigma." The attack has been exhaustively studied and millions of words have been recorded in trying to explain it. Perhaps because it is so baffling and incomprehensible, a conspiracy theory will continue to enjoy acceptance and Toland's mischief will keep it alive for a while yet. But on the basis of all the information we have now, President Roosevelt did not know and was as surprised by the tragedy as any American.

fuel tanks and repair facilities. Had the vital fuel supply been destroyed, what was left of the Pacific fleet would have had to pull back to West Coast ports, abandoning the Pacific to the Japanese. As it was, Pearl Harbor was quickly resurrected and the fleet rebuilt.

As for the back-door thesis, which the revisionists rely upon to prove conspiracy, that, too, makes no sense. The revisionists assume that Roosevelt welcomed the attack so that the United States could ultimately enter the war against Hitler. But the Axis alliance was defensive; and just as Japan was under no obligation to go to war against the Soviet Union when Germany attacked in June 1941, Germany was under no obligation if Japan attacked the United States. Roosevelt, then, could not know that a Pacific war could serve as a back door to the European war.

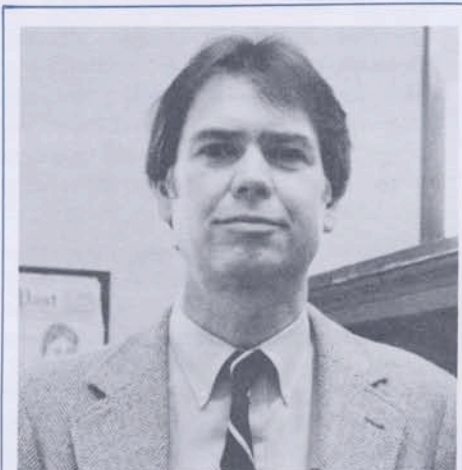
If revisionist theory founders on evidence and common sense, why then was America caught by surprise? One explanation lies in American racism, which led the United States to underestimate greatly the "little yellow people" with buck-teeth and silly grins. Americans viewed Japan as backward, its pilots nearsighted, its planes inferior. The oriental, with "feet of clay", would have neither the audacity nor the ability to attack a bastion of western defense like Pearl Harbor. "The Japanese are not going to risk a fight with a first-class nation," proclaimed Congressman Charles I. Faddis of Pennsylvania, in February 1941, and that was the general view of both the American military and the general public. Indeed, after the attack, some Americans thought that

Germans must have been flying those planes.

Of course, the United States knew by late November - early December 1941 that the Japanese were ready to strike, but American leaders were virtually hypnotized by Japan's drive toward Southeast Asia. There were plenty of reports to indicate war. For example, on December 1, 1941, *Magic* revealed that Japan had told Germany that there is "extreme danger" of war between Japan and America and "the start of this war may be quicker than anyone dreams." Two days later, America learned that Japanese embassies had been instructed to burn diplomatic codes, a sure sign of war. On December 6, intelligence reported two large Japanese fleets rounding the tip of Southern Indo-China, and on the same day an intercept indicated a break in diplomatic relations. Indeed, when President Roosevelt read this last message, he said, "This means war."

While the American government glumly awaited the attack, its attention was centered almost exclusively on Southeast Asia, where intelligence reports indicated the blow would come and where, in fact, the principal Japanese strike occurred. Not one intercept specifically mentioned an attack on Pearl Harbor, which was thousands of miles east and presumably of little value to the Japanese.

American naval leaders were also blinded to the possibility of an attack on Pearl Harbor by standard naval doctrine, which said that you did not divide your fleet. If the Japanese fleet were in Southeast Asia, as



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