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Introduction

James J. Wirtz

When I first encountered David Sherman's article describing William F. Friedman's initial reaction to and slightly belated explanation of the American intelligence failure surrounding the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, I saw an opportunity for a bit of intelligence archeology, so to speak. Here were the reminiscences and considered assessment of a man who not only played a leading role in breaking the Japanese diplomatic ('Purple') code, but who also had a ringside seat when it came to the workings of the US Secret Intelligence Service in the years leading up to World War II.¹ While there is no 'smoking gun' in Sherman's manuscript, it does chronicle the observations of an informed observer who lacked the benefit and context provided by today's voluminous literature on Pearl Harbor and intelligence analysis. Friedman's reflections might be considered as a sort of mile marker, allowing us to estimate the progress made by both the Intelligence Community and intelligence studies in understanding why governments suffer intelligence failure and fall victim to surprise attack.

Two elements in Sherman's narrative were immediately noteworthy. The first is his depiction of how Purple decrypts were handled inside the American government. Instead of being subjected to any sort of analysis, messages were quickly whisked away to the White House, making Franklin Delano Roosevelt the de facto, intelligence, warning and operations officer for the United States. Friedman and his colleagues clearly saw war as a distinct possibility as they worked to decrypt and translate intercepted messages in late 1941, but it also is clear that there was no ready mechanism to turn that insight into 'actionable' intelligence that could immediately benefit commanders in the field. There was no way to couple situational awareness about the status of US forces in the Pacific with indications that political relations between the United States and Japan were rapidly deteriorating. Circulation of information derived from Purple was so limited, that it had virtually no constructive impact on the alert status of US forces. Nevertheless, secrecy and compartmentalization might have just been symptomatic of the non-existent intelligence-policy-military nexus in the United States in 1941, which Friedman described as a counterproductive intelligence culture.

The second element is Friedman's lingering regret about not providing Army and Navy commanders in Hawaii with Purple decrypts, offering us a series of counterfactuals that have reverberated over the years. On the one hand, warning might have led to constructive action. The psychological principle of availability, to say nothing of common sense, might have activated Hawaii's defenses against air attack following news that H-hour for some nefarious Japanese initiative was going to unfold the morning of 7 December, about the time the sun was coming up over Pearl Harbor. Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, the commander of the US Pacific Fleet, for instance, knew that his predecessor, Admiral James O. Richardson, was removed from command for protesting too vigorously that deploying the Fleet to Pearl Harbor would leave it vulnerable, and that Kimmel recognized this vulnerability. On the other hand, in the wake of deteriorating Japanese-American relations, defenders on Hawaii took steps against sabotage, which proved to be counterproductive. Moreover, as Sherman notes, a timely sortie of the US Pacific Fleet might have led to its permanent loss at sea, along with destruction of the valuable

logistical infrastructure and POL storage at Pearl Harbor. In the end, we are left with the history that has transpired, which includes Friedman's observation that providing Purple to commanders in Hawaii was one act that might have made a difference.

What follows is David Sherman's article that provides a flavor of the state of affairs inside US intelligence circles in the period surrounding the Pearl Harbor attack and Friedman's reaction to that history. Several brief essays, written by leading scholars in the field of intelligence studies, then offer commentary on the archeological find chronicled by David Sherman.

Note

1. For a biographical sketch and a description of William F. Friedman's achievements in the field of cryptology see David Sherman, "The National Security Agency and the William F. Friedman Collection," 195.

Bibliography

Sherman, David. "The National Security Agency and the William F. Friedman Collection." *Cryptologia* 41, no. 3 (2017): 195–238.