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## A Matter of Accountability: Communication and Coordination Failures Proceeding Pearl Harbor

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### Abstract

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Save for September 11, 2001, arguably no other incident in American history generates persistent and impassioned debate associated with the questions of why and on whom to affix responsibility than does the Pearl Harbor raid. For both Japan and the United States the road to December 7 (or 8<sup>th</sup> in Japan), was long and complex. Ensnared within the context of what was underway in Europe, there existed little room for diplomatic miscalculations or missteps. Thus for American civil, military, naval, and diplomatic leaders in Washington, D.C. and throughout the world, that American installations were attacked should not have been, and to varying degrees were not taken aback. Most surprising then from the American perspective was the place and how that attack happened. So again, how did the U.S. Army and Navy in Hawaii render themselves such an inviting target in the late fall of 1941?

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**A Matter of Accountability:**

**Communication and Coordination Failures Proceeding Pearl Harbor**

by

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Department of History

Abstract

Save for September 11, 2001, arguably no other incident in American history generates persistent and impassioned debate associated with the questions of why and on whom to affix responsibility than does the Pearl Harbor raid. For both Japan and the United States the road to December 7 (or 8<sup>th</sup> in Japan), was long and complex. Ensnared within the context of what was underway in Europe, there existed little room for diplomatic miscalculations or missteps. Thus for American civil, military, naval, and diplomatic leaders in Washington, D.C. and throughout the world, that American installations were attacked should not have been, and to varying degrees were not taken aback. Most surprising then from the American perspective was the place and how that attack happened. So again, how did the U.S. Army and Navy in Hawaii render themselves such an inviting target in the late fall of 1941?

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Disputation persists as to why and how the Japanese raid on U.S., military and naval installations and munitions facilities were tactically successful in December of 1941. From the American perspective, the prevailing counter-narratives are either the failure of President Franklin D. Roosevelt along with other civil and uniformed leaders in Washington, D.C. to provide essential information to commanders in the archipelago. The prominent counter conclusion is that those commanders, Rear Admiral Husband Kimmel and Lieutenant General Walter Short, were essentially oblivious to the tangible threat Japan presented and therefore derelict in having their respective commands inappropriately prepared to repeal such an external menace. The truth is more multifarious; Japanese success in raiding these Hawaiian objectives was not a result of Admiral Kimmel and General Short receiving insufficient information regarding Japanese potentialities, but because of a) Japanese audacity in plan and execution and b) failure of sufficient joint service cooperation between the United States (U.S.) Army and Navy associated with preparing for multiple potentialities.

Sown well before the harvest of December 1941, the seed of discontent between the United States and Japan blossomed with the China Incident. The nation of Japan, for various reasons sought hegemony throughout Asia, a course likely to result in conflagration with the West, particularly the U.S. This aspiration was fueled primarily by the Imperial Japanese Army, if for no other reason because they not only had the will, but more importantly the means to undertake such imperialistic adventurism. Whether the civilian government or the emperor

himself explicitly supported a national policy of expansion mattered little. The military as the emerging preeminent political power continuously imposed its will on the national government.<sup>1</sup>

The record of Japanese and Chinese conflagration began in Manchuria, circa 1931 with the Kwantung Army of Japan securing that region and establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo.<sup>2</sup> This proximity of Japanese formations to Chinese Nationalists and Communists forces, at the time engaged in civil war, presented an incendiary situation requiring the simplest of ignitors. This occurred in 1937 at the famed Marco Polo Bridge in northern China; an incident quite likely instigated by the Chinese Communists and not Japan.<sup>3</sup> Tokyo therefore essentially stumbled into the wholesale invasion of China proper with the war taking unto itself, a momentum that no one within the positions of national power, either military or civilian, understood how to cease and extricate Japan. Subsequent brutality on the part of individual Japanese soldiers resulted in condemnation by the Roosevelt Administration and the West in general.<sup>4</sup> The sinking of the USS Panay in December of 1937 by the Imperial Japanese Navy while not precipitating open hostilities between the two nations, exasperated the relational strain

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<sup>1</sup> John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-1945*, (1970; repr., New York: Modern Library, 2003), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Noriko Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 2015), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Toland, *The Rising Sun*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Cordell Hull, "Telegram MBo 2-No. 7, September 28, to Geneva," Box 35, Franklin D. Roosevelt Master Speech File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 2020, <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/resources/images/msf/msf01125>

despite Japan's expression of regret submitted on Christmas Eve with acceptance announced by the White House on Christmas Day.<sup>5</sup>

Japan may have unintentionally set upon this specific means of conquest, however imperial aspirations in fact permeated and underwrote Japanese international policy and had done so for decades.<sup>6</sup> Japan, devoid of significant amounts of resources that could fuel a modern industrial economy and feed a rapidly growing population, had to identify a resolution. Alas, the course they plotted was to be one of eventual war. Yet, it is plausible that regardless of Japan's subsequent policy decisions, war with any number of powers would result. They may have chosen a more economical or cooperative and therefore peaceful, course of action partnering with nations having those necessary resources. However, to many in positions of authority at this time and place, for Japan to behave in such a manner they believed was to remain a second-rate power and under the influence, if not de facto control of the Western powers and the Soviet Union, to name a few.

The China Incident, as Japan's incursion into that country was by then commonly known as, became a quagmire, a cauldron the Japanese refused to extricate themselves from and effectively could not in a manner offering them the opportunity to safe face even had they so desired. For the Roosevelt administration, Japan's unwillingness to seek a settlement with Chiang Kai-shek and subsequent withdraw of IJA formations, was a non-starter in American

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<sup>5</sup> Toland, *The Rising Sun*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Harold M. Vinacke, "Japanese Imperialism," *The Journal of Modern History* 5, no. 3 (September 1933): 372.

Japanese relations.<sup>7</sup> By 1941, the world was ablaze as autocratic nations overran one nation after another with Nazi Germany being the most prominent and tangible threat in the eyes of the U.S. Roosevelt, convinced that the United States must ultimately become an active participant in the fight against Hitler, was not interested in becoming entangled in a simultaneous war with Japan.<sup>8</sup> However, Japanese signing of the Tripartite Treaty with Germany and Italy not only complicated the situation, but also classified Japan, in American eyes, yet another piranha nation. As a result, the Roosevelt administration sought to curtail Japan's ability to further their expansionist incursions and deter overt hostile action through financial sanctions, material, and commodity embargos.<sup>9</sup>

This admonition by the United States effectively served as the breaking point for the hardline nationalists and imperialists in Tokyo.<sup>10</sup> The United States had been the most prominent supplier of petroleum and steel to Japan, but with sanctions in place, their need for such commodities became excruciatingly critical. To secure such, Japan now fully implemented their plan to secure such resources, by any means necessary, in Southeast Asia. Negotiations between the two nations would continue throughout 1941, but neither side invested considerable faith in an eventual mutually acceptable agreement.<sup>11</sup> Japan therefore proceeded with their intended

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Mauch, "Revisiting Nomura's Diplomacy: Ambassador Nomura's Role in the Japanese American Negotiations, 1941," *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 3 (June 2004): 367.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years, The United States Army in World War II*, CMH Pub 5-1, *The War in the Pacific*, (1962; repr., Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2000): 82.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*, in collaboration with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, with a new afterword by Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991): 167.

<sup>10</sup> Era Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013): 155.

<sup>11</sup> Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 171.



occupation and subjugation of Southeast Asia, while the United States continued to primarily focus on the calamitous situation in Europe. Conventional thought, particularly within the upper echelons of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), is that for the southern push to be successful, the threat of the United States' Pacific Fleet, now ensconced at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, must be neutralized.<sup>12</sup>

IJN Combined Fleet Commander, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto proposed the concept of an aerial raid on U.S. naval and military objectives in the Hawaiian archipelago to secure Japanese freedom of maneuver throughout the Pacific and Asian region, at least for the near term.<sup>13</sup> The primary objective of this raid were the capital ships of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the battleships, and aircraft carriers.<sup>14</sup> Prior to 1940, the Pacific Fleet posted at Pearl Harbor a detachment sized element, while the main body of the fleet operated from California. In response to the growing Japanese threat, Roosevelt ordered the fleet while in Hawaiian waters for maneuvers, to remain in Hawaii indefinitely.<sup>15</sup> For the Japanese this decision represented an overt threat to their policies and security, from their perspective the United States essentially had a spear oriented in their direction.

From the United States' vantage, relocating the Pacific Fleet and fortifying the Army's Hawaiian Department Command appeared both prudent and a demonstration of force that they

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<sup>12</sup> Reports of General MacArthur, *Japanese Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area 2*, part 1, CMH Pub 13-1, Compiled from Japanese Demobilization Bureau Records, (1966; repr., Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1994): 37.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Lord, *Day of Infamy*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1957): 10.

<sup>14</sup> Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 37.

aimed to serve as a deterrent to Japanese aggression, allowing them (U.S.) to maintain a strategic policy of Germany first.<sup>16</sup> Admiral Yamamoto and his planners derived an audacious operational design that they believed offered them the greatest probability of tactical surprise.<sup>17</sup> It was a concept so audacious that despite many U.S. military, naval, and civilian leaders acknowledging the vulnerability of the fleet and other assets to air attack (bomb and torpedo), that many if not most of these same individuals apparently dismissed such a raid because it did appear so unfathomable.<sup>18</sup> In reality, the Pacific Fleet was not the U.S. Navy's spear tip but more akin to a boxer's exposed chin about to be violently struck by the opponent. Yamamoto, his staff, and subordinate commanders would throughout 1941 prepare the IJN's Kido Butai, (the strike force consisting of six carriers their escorts, and logistical support vessels) for war. Meanwhile Admiral Kimmel and General Short also focused on training but devoted greater effort to enhancing Hawaiian military and naval facilities, most notably that of anti-aircraft defense capabilities or at least that was the intent.<sup>19</sup> The War and Navy Departments also had to account for the defenses of garrisons in the Philippines and several other Pacific outposts meaning that Hawaii, or one service, could not expect to receive a greater share at the expense of these other considerations.

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<sup>16</sup> Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Toland, *The Rising Sun*, 150.

<sup>18</sup> Congress of the United States, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*, 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1946, S. Doc. 244, pt. 3, 83-84 and 114.

<sup>19</sup> Congress of the United States, Joint Committee. *Pearl Harbor Attack: Hearings Before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, Part 27: Proceedings of the Army Pearl Harbor Board, Testimony of General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff, War Department, Washington, D.C., 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1946, 17.*

Possible air attack was of concern enough to General Short and the Army overall that various means of defending against such were identified for Hawaii.<sup>20</sup> Identified for Hawaii were new technological means such as radar along with more anti-aircraft weapons or “guns”, and additional reconnaissance aircraft all for enhancing the Army’s ability to identify, locate, and interdict incoming air assaults.<sup>21</sup> However beyond simply having the tools by which this effectively could be planned for and implemented operationally, was the most critical component of an effective defense and that was the consistent communication and coordination between the local U.S. Army and Navy garrisons. Permeating each of the investigations and testimonies completed in the wake of the raid is the acknowledgement that such cooperation was significantly lacking.

Both services recognized the Army as having primary responsibility for protecting the harbor facilities and fleet while in port. This was reinforced to General Short by Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall in the months prior to the raid.<sup>22</sup> Reconnaissance was not however solely the Army’s charge as the Navy, in accordance with the agreed to Joint Coastal Frontier Defense Plan, would provide aircraft for and conduct distant aerial reconnaissance as warranted.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly enough to posterity, throughout the winter and spring of 1941, both

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Congress of the United States, Senate. *Attack Upon Pearl Harbor by Japanese Armed Forces: Report of the Commission Appointed by the President of the United States to Investigate and Report the Facts Relating to the Attack Made by Japanese Armed Forces Upon Pearl Harbor in the Territory of Hawaii on December 7, 1941*. 77<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., January 23, 1942, S. Doc., 159, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Congress of the United States, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 83.

Kimmel and Short as well as superiors in Washington, D.C. conversed in multiple missives the possibility of a Japanese attack of Hawaii and specifically via air. Yet as time progressed, the potentiality of this threat appears to have diminished in these minds even as relations between the two nations deteriorated.

The Hawaiian defense plan was a product devised and agreed to by the local commanders and not a product of joint service doctrine by department level collaboration. The inherent flaw in this process was that as an agreement, this defense plan could be effective only when and if both the local Army and Navy commanders agreed to the situation at hand. There were no doctrinal stipulations that influenced or required certain security and reconnaissance actions to be undertaken. By fall, both commanders had seemingly moved on from theoretical Japanese attack to fifth column sabotage (primarily the concern of Short) and buttressing Pacific outpost capabilities against anticipated offensive action by Japan (Kimmel's primary concern).<sup>24</sup>

In the months and weeks leading up to 7 December 1941, Kimmel and Short essentially proceeded with parallel operations absent coordination. Exasperating this was that there was little communication between the principals or their staffs. Even though both commanders generally received the same alerts or shared messages from Washington, D.C. keeping them abreast of the status of negotiations, such shared information did not result in the Army and Navy coordinating subsequent operations and activities. This led to the respective services simply assuming that the other was conducting appropriate operations associated with security. For Kimmel this was more inexcusable considering that the Army had primacy for protection

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<sup>24</sup> Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 173.

and thus should have resulted in Pacific Fleet staff obtaining U.S. Army operational plans as it relates to security.

Thus, the situation on 7 December was that the IJN having successfully achieved tactical surprise in that the Kido Butai had sailed across the northern Pacific undetected found the U.S. Hawaii garrisons completely unprepared for the unexpected raid. Prior coordination in and of itself likely would not have resulted in early detection of the IJN planes. However, it may have led to the respective American commanders better coordinating the initial American response. How precisely, a different state of preparedness would have affected initial American reactions to the raid is difficult if not impossible to surmise. Kimmel and Short have been ostracized in the years since for the IJN's successful raid, arguably to a degree that is excessive. Nevertheless, that should not result in the conclusion that their respective removal from command incorrect and therefore largely absolved of culpability. Civilian and department leaders in Washington, D.C. had no more definitive knowledge of the time, place, and means of Japan's initial strikes than did the Hawaiian commanders and had provided Kimmel and Short with consistent and current situational updates. Ultimately commanders are responsible for everything, good or bad, that occurs to and within their commands, an unavoidable inherent responsibility of military and naval leadership per doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Kimmel and Short were not oblivious to the international situation and credit should be afforded the IJN for its execution of the raid more than what Kimmel and Short did or did not do prior to. Nevertheless, in the end, the failure of Kimmel and Short to consistently communicate and coordinate regarding the defense of Hawaiian facilities

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<sup>25</sup> United States War Department, *Field Manual 100-5: Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: 1941): 24, [www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/ref/FM/FM100-5/FM-100-5-4.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/ref/FM/FM100-5/FM-100-5-4.html).

and assets rendered the response to attack in any form to be initially slow and ineffective at the outset. In the end, Kimmel and Short's greatest miscalculation and dereliction was to not work together in strengthening reconnaissance and other preparedness requirements associated with U.S. Army and Navy forces on that fateful December morning in 1941.

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