CHAPTER EIGHT

Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941

Japan, from its seat on the small island of Honshu, wanted to be arbiter of Asia and the Western Pacific. The wish throve in poverty and pride, finding company in thoughts which made it seem just. The Japanese people came to believe that the extension of their control over this vast region was both natural and destined.

—Herbert Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbor*

The dock had seats for twenty-eight defendants. . . . They had once been powerful, but stripped of their uniforms and titles[,] . . . they did not look awesome.

—Richard H. Minear, *Victors' Justice*

Japan's decision to bomb Pearl Harbor was a blunder of the highest order.[1] It ultimately led to the use of atomic weapons against two Japanese cities, the collapse of the existing Japanese state, the end of the Japanese empire, years of foreign occupation, and death sentences for many of its leaders. Tokyo blundered in steps. Perhaps the greatest misstep was the July 2, 1941, decision to invade southern Indochina. That decision locked into placed a confrontation between Tokyo and Washington that Tokyo should have foreseen and that would require dramatic Japanese concessions to defuse. Once that confrontation was initiated, many Japanese leaders felt as if they had no choice but to attack because the United States was preparing to "encircle Japan," cut off its oil supplies, and block the ocean trade that was vital to Japan's imperial power. Alternative paths existed but were not fully explored. Japan gambled that a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor would neutralize the American Pacific fleet for enough time to allow Japan to consolidate its victories in Asia. Japan badly miscalculated the impact of the surprise attack on America's will and capability to surge military forces in relatively short order.

Imperial Japan Colonizes China

Japan felt slighted at the Paris peace negotiations that ended World War I, cheated at the Washington Naval Conference, and resentful of the West. Western powers held colonies throughout Asia and the world, and Japan sought its own sphere of influence. By 1931, Japan had sent military forces into Manchuria after a fabricated incident and created the puppet state of Manchukuo, which it later annexed. The West protested, and Japan left the League of Nations.

Japan's industrialization, like Britain's earlier, created an economy whose production necessarily exceeded both domestic demand and domestic resources, creating the need for expanding markets and sources of raw material. A group of Japanese officers observing events in postwar Germany became obsessed with the importance of gaining economic autarky, including self-sufficiency through conquest.[2] Japan's economic welfare became dependent on ocean trade and on its navy. The Great Depression resulted in increased tariff barriers and reductions in Japanese exports. While the Depression hit Japan less hard than it did the West, Japanese gold stocks began to decline. Japan became totally reliant on imports of energy and at least thirteen key raw materials. Fearing that their industrial progress would be reversed, Japanese leaders conceived of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, dominated by Japan, as a way to deal with this challenge. They turned to overseas conquest.

By 1937, under pressure from the army, Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoye's government ordered the invasion of China. Japanese victories at Nanking, Xuzhou, Hankou, Guangzhou, Wuchang, and Hanyang did not fully suppress Chinese nationalist armies, and bitter fighting persisted. Japanese atrocities at Nanking and elsewhere shocked the world.[3]

By 1939 Japan sought to extend its conquests beyond China. The Japanese military was divided as to whether its next move would be north into Siberia or south into Indochina and the Indies. Both had resources Japan needed. The North Strike Group of the Japanese army supported the former and South Army Strike Group (along with the navy) the latter. Russia (now the Soviet Union) and Japan had been rivals since before the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and in 1936 Japan signed an anti-Communist pact with Germany. The Soviet Union in turn allied with China, furnishing financial and military aid. The North Strike Group prevailed, and limited border conflict began in May 1939. In August 1939, Japan lost a massive armored engagement on the Mongolian boarder against Soviet General Georgy Zhukov.[4] When Japan and Russia signed a cease-fire in September 1939, the Japanese drive to the north came to an end.

In June 1940, Japan made one of several decisions to turn its military attention to the south. By then it had already secured Hainan Island and other launch points for a military strike into Southeast Asia. Events in Europe facilitated this, as Germany had invaded France and the Netherlands, two countries with Asian colonies, creating new opportunities for Japan. Japan began to work with Germany and Vichy France to gain

greater access to rice, rubber, and tin from Indochina and with Dutch representatives to gain access to oil from the Indies. The Japanese sought to avoid competition for these resources and gain a dominant market position.

In September 1940, Japan pressured Vichy France to agree to a limited Japanese right to station troops in northern Indochina. Japan needed these facilities to block the flow of arms and fuel, which were making their way to the Chinese army from Haiphong through Hanoi to Yunnan.[5] Japan immediately violated the terms of the occupation agreement, and fighting broke out with French troops, quickly resulting in a Japanese victory and limited occupation.[6]

U.S. Backlash

Despite its professed neutrality, the United States had significant interests in Asia. Aghast by Japanese atrocities, America provided material assistance to the Republic of China. In December 1937, Japan sank the U.S. gunboat *Panay*, increasing bilateral tension. By mid-1941, volunteer American pilots flying U.S. aircraft formed the Flying Tigers and saw combat over China.[7]

Meanwhile, naval competition between the United States and Japan intensified. In 1934, Japan renounced its obligations under the Washington Naval Treaty to limit the size of its navy. By 1940, the Japanese fleet had grown to 375 ships, with an emphasis on aircraft carriers. While the United States neglected most of its armed forces in the 1930s, the Navy was an exception. In 1933 the U.S. National Industrial Recovery Act authorized the construction of cruisers and other combatants. By 1940, the United States had a fleet of 478 naval combatants, including fifteen battleships and six aircraft carriers. In addition, in the 1930s, the United States forward deployed much of its Pacific fleet from California to Hawaii to dissuade Japan from further expansion. Japanese officials interpreted the growth and shift of U.S. sea power as a threat to its own sea control, trade, national well-being, and strategy. [8]

In response to Japanese expansionism, the United States also imposed economic sanctions. U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew and Admiral Harold Stark initially cautioned against excessive sanctions,[9] while Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Defense Secretary Henry Stimson, and State Department Assistant Secretary Dean Acheson pressed for tighter ones. In 1939, the United States had already terminated its Treaty of Commerce and Navigation with Japan.[10] By September 1940, Grew changed his mind in light of Japanese aggression in northern Indochina and sent what historians call his "green light" cable.[11]

That same month the United States halted its exports of scrap iron, steel, and aviation fuel to Japan on the grounds that it was needed at home. The embargo also extended to arms, ammunition, critical raw materials, aircraft parts, and machine

tools.[12] In January of 1941, the denial of war material was extended to copper, brass, bronze, zinc, nickel, and potash, causing a major impact on Japanese industry.

In September 1940, Japan had signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy pledging to "assist one another with all political, economic, and military means." While Japan hoped that this would deter the United States,[13] in fact it compounded the affect of Japan's occupation of northern Indochina and was taken in Washington as a move to counter American opposition to Japanese expansionism. Then, in April 1941, Japan signed a neutrality pact with the Soviet Union. Two months later Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The Japanese cabinet was caught by surprise and debated which way to turn. Despite German pressure, Japan maintained its neutrality with Russia and continued its move to the south. Japan thus began to shape its relationships with the major powers for a coming confrontation with the United States.

Also in April 1941, what we would now call a track II effort took place with two Catholic priests, a Japanese banker, and a Japanese colonel associated with the war ministry. They were nicknamed the "John Doe Associates" and produced what they hoped would be a potential deal to stop the downward spiral in bilateral relations. Under their proposal, Japan would resort to peaceful means in Southeast Asia and support Germany only if the United States attacked Germany first. The United States would restore normal relations with Japan and assist Japan in obtaining raw materials from Southeast Asia, and China would agree to merge governments with the Japanese-supported government in China. While their intentions were good, a thorough review of the episode by the historian R. J. C. Butow concludes that in fact they created confusion by misleading both sides with regard to the origins of various peace proposals. The result was to increase distrust between the two nations.[14] Nonetheless, the episode did demonstrate that there were creative solutions that might have been explored.

Fateful Decision

In a fateful decision in July 1941 that set the final stage for Pearl Harbor, an Imperial Conference decided to occupy southern Indochina, declare the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and call up a million reserves.[15] The move was considered by the Japanese army as a prerequisite to any subsequent move southward.[16] And yet the historian Herbert Feis concludes that "no combination of policies could have been more certain to bring Japan to ultimate defeat."[17] Under this decision, Japan would not attack the Soviet Union despite pressure to do so from Germany; Japan would not abrogate the Tripartite Pact with Germany; and Japan would secure control over all of Indochina militarily.

From Washington, the Japanese ambassador to the United States, Kichisaburo Nomura, warned the foreign minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, that this decision would result in a major Japanese-American rupture. The United States had already embar-

goed iron, aviation fuel, and munitions a year earlier, and Japanese leaders should have had every reason to believe that the United States would expand these sanctions in response to a Japanese occupation of southern Indochina. Japan still had time to reverse its fateful July decision in response to firm messages from Washington. The home minister, Kiichiro Hiranuma, warned that war with the United States should be avoided at all cost,[18] but the Imperial Conference rejected the warnings.[19]

The minister of war, Hideki Tojo, felt that if Japan attained self-sufficient operations in the south, it could wear down China and withstand a long war with the United States and Britain.[20] There was no serious examination in Tokyo of the possibility of imposition of a total embargo by the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands.[21] They were taken by surprise.[22] Given the American reaction in 1940 to Japan's first incursion into Indochina, this lack of anticipation constitutes a massive error. The navy, which had traditionally served as a break on Japanese General Staff decision-making, forcefully supported the decision and created the consensus needed for the invasion.[23]

Franklin D. Roosevelt personally met with Nomura in a final attempt to stop Japan's incursion into southern Indochina. He suggested that if Indochina could be neutralized without a full Japanese occupation, an oil embargo might be avoided. At that critical moment, however, Vichy France conceded to the Japanese occupation of airfields and ports in southern Indochina. With the door to the rest of Indochina now opened by France, Roosevelt's warnings not to walk into that open door were disregarded.[24]

In response, the United States first froze all Japanese financial assets in the United States. But an oil embargo was postponed. In a flimsy attempt at compromise, Japan proposed to Roosevelt a deal under which Japanese occupation of Indochina could continue until the war with China was won; the United States would pressure the Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek to negotiate; and the United States would guarantee Japan's access to Dutch oil from the Indies. That unconstructive deal was rejected by Roosevelt.[25]

In August 1941, Acheson interpreted Roosevelt's earlier decision strictly and took steps to impose what amounted to a de facto oil embargo on Japan by canceling Japan's ability to pay for the oil.[26] Roosevelt did not object. Japan still depended on the United States for 80 percent of its oil; it had about two years in reserve. Meanwhile the United States began encouraging oil companies in the Dutch Indies not to cooperate with Japan. The cumulative impact of sanctions severely stressed the Japanese economy. Despite the clear warning, the Japanese government professed surprise and shock that the Americans would react this harshly.[27]

Throughout 1941, efforts to control the downward spiral were pursued in Washington with some forty or more meetings between Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Nomura. In Tokyo, Grew kept in close touch with Konoye. The United States had broken the diplomatic "Purple" code and knew Nomura's instructions in advance. This

intelligence made Nomura appear deceptive, and thus made Hull even more suspicious of Tokyo's motives. Washington's official position hardened: By midyear the United States was insisting that Japan leave both China and Indochina and give up all exclusive privileges.[28]

Revisionist historians have questioned Roosevelt's motives during the second half of 1941, arguing that he boxed Tokyo in by giving them no choice but to attack because he sought war with Japan as a back door means of declaring war on Germany.[29] The United States did take a tough line against Japanese aggression in China and Indochina, but Japanese behavior warranted that response. Japan was unwilling to make the kind of concessions that would have met Washington halfway and that might have relieved the economic sanctions the country's behavior triggered.

Moves Toward War

Jeffrey Record's 2009 study of Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor argues that it must be seen in the light of Japan's available alternatives as of fall 1941, "which were either national economic suffocation or surrender of Tokyo's empire on the Asian mainland."[30] That is indeed how Tokyo saw its decision in late 1941. But how did Tokyo find itself in that bind, and could it have been avoided? The historian Eri Hotta notes that Japanese decisionmakers "tended to ignore that such extreme choices grew directly out of their own recent decisions and actions."[31]

In this sense the Japanese blunder was not just the final decision to attack Pearl Harbor; the blunder was also to get trapped in a situation that offered no attractive alternatives. The logic of Japan's decisions to sign the Tripartite Pact, turn south and occupy southern Indochina, and force massive concessions from the Dutch East Indies would lead either to a confrontation with the United States or to a conciliatory strategy by Japan. Japan could have made milder choices earlier on, found nonmilitary means of securing resources to the south, and avoided crippling sanctions. But the Japanese did not look to their own record for an explanation of their predicament. Their decisionmaking was based on conformity, acquiescence, obedience, and intuition.[32] The Japanese leadership did not want to yield to U.S. pressure. Tokyo increasingly had a military decisionmaking culture, and the solutions to that group all appeared to be military. They thought that the solution to an American oil embargo was seizing the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies. The United States again stood in the way.

The decision for war was incremental. In January of 1941, the Japanese military began preliminary planning for war with the United States, including an attack on Pearl Harbor. After the occupation of southern Indochina and the imposition of the U.S. oil embargo, the Japanese navy shifted ground from its earlier opposition to war. The navy chief of staff, Osami Nagano, began arguing that if war with the United States was inevitable, it should start soon, while oil supplies lasted.[33]

Real operational planning started in July 1941 for combined attack on the Indies and the Philippines, and for an attack on Pearl Harbor to neutralize the American Navy—the only force that might stop such an attack to the south. An attack on the Philippines, a U.S. protectorate with sizeable U.S. forces deployed there, would in any event mean war with the United States. However, these were only contingency plans. As war became more certain, the Japanese military conducted major exercises with aircraft simulating an attack on Pearl Harbor.

On September 6, war against the United States, Britain, and France was formally proposed in the Imperial Council. Konoye secured support from the navy and the emperor for one last chance to seek peaceful solutions with Roosevelt. The army insisted on a tight deadline for Konoye's effort and on receiving in exchange Konoye's support for war should the deadline not be met. Konoye had no choice but to agree.[34] Then the Imperial Council handed Konoye a negotiating position that the United States could not possibly accept. Roosevelt initially accepted Konoye's invitation for a summit, but the meeting never materialized because Washington, Hull in particular, was convinced that the Japanese policies were fixed. They were right. Konoye had no authority to change course and thus no room to negotiate.

When Tojo declared that the deadline had passed, Konoye resigned. The emperor rejected suggestions that Prince Naruhiko Higashikuni, a moderate who had some control over the army, be made prime minister on the grounds that the royal family should stay out of politics. Instead, Tojo became prime minister.

On November 2, the emperor gave his general consent to war. Three days later he approved the war plans, including the attack on Pearl Harbor, which would have to take place before January, when weather conditions might make the Japanese fleet's transit difficult. Negotiations continued, and on November 20 Nomura handed Hull the so-called plan B, which Hull deemed clearly unacceptable.[35] Final approval for the attack came on December 1. While the Japanese aircraft carriers sailed, negotiations continued in Washington; the fleet was told not to strike if those negotiations succeeded. But negotiations made no progress, and the fleet struck before war could be declared.

Decisionmaking in Tokyo

Japan was not a dictatorship like Hitler's Germany. Decisionmaking was based on factions and efforts to reach consensus. But a decade of warfare had a massive impact on the decisionmaking culture in Tokyo. By 1940, most of Japan's leaders and ambassadors were military. The military itself had structures independent of civilian control and reported directly to the emperor. Military leaders fell into factions: The navy was generally less belligerent than its army counterparts. Both groups were needed for a policy consensus, so the navy had an effective veto. The Japanese army fighting in

China was particularly belligerent and saw operations against Indochina as a way to relieve military pressure on them. Most military leaders had little exposure to American culture and attitudes, and those who did still underestimated American resilience. Younger military officers tended to be more hawkish and were often unrestrained by senior officers who should have known better.[36] They carried an aggressive Bushido spirit and suffered from what Barbara Tuchman called "cultural ignorance."[37] And they frequently made decisions without fully exploring their possible consequences.[38]

Underlying the decisionmaking structure and mentality of Japanese decisionmakers was the shadow of assassination and coup. In 1936 a group of young right-wing officers attempted a coup and killed two former prime ministers. Thereafter the military gained much more influence over government. During his peacemaking efforts, an assassination attempt failed against Konoye.

The dominant military leader in Tokyo was Tojo, a career army officer who had served in Switzerland and briefly visited the United States early in his profession.[39] His nickname was "razor brain" for his analytical skills and his ability to make quick decisions. But he was said to be without breadth or feeling.[40] Hull said that Tojo was a typical Japanese officer with a "small-bore, straight-laced, one-track mind." He exhibited an appalling lack of knowledge about events in Europe.[41] Tojo accused Konoye of having a weak character because Konoye foresaw difficulties resulting from Japanese policies. Once Tojo replaced Konoye, war was a near certainty.

Konoye, a prince, led what might be thought of as the peace faction in Tokyo. He was trained as a lawyer and studied Western philosophy. He sent his son to study in the United States.[42] But he also published an essay earlier in his career titled "Reject the Anglo-American Centered Peace."[43] He had some liberal tendencies and supported "universal male" suffrage. But he relied heavily on the military for political support, and while he would seek compromise, he would not override the military. Throughout the crisis building toward Pearl Harbor, he sought diplomatic solutions to avoid conflict, but his negotiating hand never held adequate compromises.[44]

Tuchman concludes that most civilian leaders akin to Konoye wanted to keep America quiescent while they moved forward with Japan's Asian designs. They thought that this could be managed by bluster, outlandish demands, and intimidation.[45] They failed to realize that this would be counterproductive and stiffen U.S. policies.[46] Japanese officials did not learn the lesson of the embargoes but rather took them as "a challenge."[47] To a great extent, Japanese pride and the threat of economic destruction dictated Japanese policies. The Japanese believed that they were racially and spiritually superior to the effete Americans.[48]

Matsuoka was a career diplomat who received his law degree from the University of Oregon and at one point converted to Christianity. Yet he was enthralled with Hitler, advocated joining the Tripartite Pact as a way to balance the United States,[49] and sought to declare war on the Soviet Union after Hitler invaded.[50] Matsuoka initially opposed the July 2, 1941, decision to invade southern Indochina because he

felt that it would undermine Tokyo's ability to declare war on Russia, but he finally joined the consensus decision.[51] Matsuoka also distrusted Nomura, which cast doubt on Nomura's ongoing conversations with Hull. Matsuoka similarly purged the Foreign Ministry of pro–Anglo-American diplomats.[52] According to Feis, "Matsuoka and the men he served showed themselves most clearly as they were: displaced villains out of a 19th century American melodrama who advanced upon their obstinate objective of their affection with white words and black hearts."[53]

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto played a critical and somewhat enigmatic role in the final decision to attack Pearl Harbor. He had perhaps the deciding vote. He had studied at Harvard and served as a naval attaché in Washington. So he knew the United States as well as any senior Japanese officer. His prestige and personality had the potential to sway the final decision on Pearl Harbor either way. The historian Gordon Prange concludes that had Yamamoto put his prestige behind Japan's moderate faction, diplomacy might have had a better chance. Similarly, Eri Hotta determines that "the great irony in Japan's decision to go to war is that its leaders could not have ever conceived of taking such a grand gamble had it not been for Admiral Yamamoto, who was fundamentally against the war." Strategically he argued against the war but operationally he planned for and encouraged the operation.[54] If there were to be war, he wanted to be in charge of it.[55] Once Yamamoto sided with the army in favor of war, the Konoye faction was incapable of stopping the momentum.

Yamamoto was the chief architect of Operation Hawaii and was responsible for convincing the Japanese Naval General Staff to adopt it.[56] He ultimately commanded the carriers that made the attack. Yamamoto's thinking was complex. He calculated that a Japanese attack to the south against Dutch and British possessions would require most of Tokyo's naval and air assets and would thereby leave Japan itself vulnerable to direct attack by the U.S. Navy. Thus, he wrote, "the only way is to have a powerful air force strike deeply at the enemy's heart at the very beginning of the war and thus to deal a blow, material and moral, from which it will not be able to recover for some time."[57]

Yamamoto's assessment of the impact of an attack on Pearl Harbor was also ambivalent. On the one hand, he told Konoye he had "utterly no confidence" in the outcome of war with the United States if it lasted two years or more. On the other hand, he also predicted that a surprise knockout blow could sink U.S. confidence so it could not be recovered.[58] Like many in the Japanese leadership, he bet that America would have limited staying power and that Japan could hold on long enough so that America would tire of the struggle and "agree to some sort of arrangement."[59] Despite his familiarity with American culture, he too miscalculated America's stamina.

The final decision within the navy to pursue Operation Hawaii was made by Admiral Osami Nagano, chief of the Naval General Staff. Like other naval officers, he had a fatalistic attitude, described as being like a "man in a canoe speeding down

rapids leading to Niagara Falls." He approved Yamamoto's plans "to settle a bitter contest in the Navy."[60]

Emperor Hirohito sat on the pinnacle of this decisionmaking structure, but his power was limited.[61] He relied on the military to maintain the throne and him on it. He was personally very concerned about the impact of war with the United States and criticized some officers for being too optimistic about the outcome of a conflict. Tojo wrote in his diary that "whatever the Emperor said it should be so."[62] But Hirohito did not exercise his authority adequately in accordance with his stated concerns about the affect of war with the United States.

In a series of conferences in October, economic ministers and other officials finally began to weigh in with economic arguments against war, and even Tojo seemed to have second thoughts. A suggestion was made to delay the attack on Pearl Harbor until 1942. But it was too late. Senior military officers opposed further delay on operational grounds. A decision was made on November 2 to continue negotiating with the United States and prepare for war at the same time.[63] This appeared to be a less belligerent alternative than immediate war, but it had the same effect. An emissary, Saburo Kurusu, was sent to Washington in a final effort to negotiate peace, but his efforts fell short as Tokyo's deadline approached.

In the months before the emperor's November 2 decision, Tokyo had put itself in a very difficult position, but it in fact had three different alternatives:[64]

- The first was the diplomatic path. Bluster had failed. To be successful on this path, Tokyo would have to reverse course and end its occupation of Indochina, hoping that the United States would loosen its economic embargoes in exchange. The failed John Doe Associates initiative is an example of a compromise that might have worked given more trust. But compromise was inconsistent with Japan's military culture. And by then, diplomatic channels were clogged with distrust.
- Second, Tokyo could proceed with an attack on Dutch and British possessions but spare Pearl Harbor and the Philippines on the bet that U.S. neutrality would limit an American response. Historians look back at this as perhaps Tokyo's most feasible option given its unwillingness to make concessions on Indochina. But the option was not given serious consideration. It remains unclear how the United States would have responded.
- Third, Tokyo could follow the advice of Yamamoto to strike deeply at the enemy's heart and hope that the United States would tire of war in time for Tokyo to consolidate its victories.

Konoye and the navy had resisted the army's more aggressive policies in the past. But Konoye's and then Kurusu's diplomacy had failed in large measure because of Japan's inflexible positions. Yamamoto's logic convinced the navy to support a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The restraints were gone, and the third alternative was chosen.

Pyrrhic Victory

On December 7, 1941, Yamamoto, commander of the carrier task force north of Hawaii, ordered the attack. Two waves of Japanese aircraft, 353 in total, damaged all eight battleships in Pearl Harbor. Four were sunk, two of which were raised eventually. Six of the eight returned to service later in the war. American aircraft were clustered together to prevent sabotage, creating an inviting target; 188 aircraft were destroyed. Significantly, the three U.S. aircraft carriers were at sea on routine maneuvers and escaped attack. Japanese intelligence was unaware of these maneuvers. No U.S. submarines were destroyed. A third wave of attack was not ordered by Yamamoto due to fuel shortage; consequently, facilities such as dry docks, ammunition dumps, power stations, and fuel storage facilities were not destroyed. Had the third wave been ordered to strike, the damage might have been more permanent. Despite the tragic losses, Pearl Harbor and most of its fleet were able to recover fairly quickly.[65]

The attack took place before Japan could formally declare war, creating the "day of infamy." America instantly took a war footing. Six months later, at Midway, Japan sought to finish off the American carriers. Instead, aided by code breaking and some luck, planes from three U.S. carriers sank four of the six Japanese carriers that had struck Pearl Harbor. Midway is seen by military historians as one of the most decisive battles in naval warfare—for America it was what Japan hoped Pearl Harbor would be.

Japan lost 2.3 million people in the war. Many major cities were firebombed. Okinawa was invaded. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were leveled by atomic bombs. After the war, some five thousand Japanese were tried as war criminals throughout Asia; nine hundred were executed. Tojo failed at a suicide attempt and was executed after a trial in Tokyo. Konoye took his own life after hearing that he would be tried as a war criminal. The emperor and his throne were spared to facilitate the occupation.

Japan's Flawed Model of Success

The decisionmaking process that led Tokyo to attack Pearl Harbor had layers of flaws. At the top of the list was the culture that emerged in Tokyo after years of warfare in China. The information they had was filtered through a prism of militarism, extreme nationalism, arrogance, the urge to conform, a pull toward groupthink, and do-or-die spirit. This affected the ability of Japanese leaders to analyze objectively. Japanese leadership had in the 1930s created a strong consensus on the need to create a new order in Asia and Japan's dominant role in it. There was some disagreement on how to define and achieve this. But the decisions about how to shape and implement that vision were increasingly being made by military officers with little understanding of or patience for nonmilitary options.

To this military-dominated culture, sanctions were not reasons to change policies; sanctions were hurdles to overcome. Diplomatic concessions were viewed as weak and a sign of flawed character. Alternative analysis was not prominent and not accepted by the top military leadership. It would have been hard for new knowledge to penetrate or analysis to change the outlook of the military and the plans that flowed from it. Consensus was too strong, and the price of major dissent was too high.

The second flaw was Tokyo's strategic concept itself. Japan felt that it had both a requirement and a right to become the colonial power in China and Indochina. Again, its economy needed guaranteed access to raw materials and export markets. China seemed weak. Europeans had benefited from colonialism in Asia, so why shouldn't an Asian power? The Japanese even thought that they would be seen by the people of Asia as liberating them from European yokes. If they met resistance, they would trample it. International public opinion did not matter.

Nearly every part of this strategic concept proved to be wrong. Japan could have explored alternative means to secure needed raw materials and export markets—for example, in exchange for ending its military occupations in Asia, it could have had preferential trade agreements. The Chinese saw the Japanese as invaders, not liberators. The resulting atrocities set American opinion strongly against Japan and produced a hardening of U.S. policy, including sanctions.

The third flaw was to misread American strength and policies. Japan saw the United States as having weak will and capability. The U.S. military had been allowed to deteriorate over a twenty-year period; isolationism and neutrality reflected America's interwar mood. Japanese leaders appreciated that the American economy was much stronger than theirs and that over time America's military could dominate theirs. But they took a short-term view, believing that a quick victory could solidify their control in Southeast Asia, while it would take a year or more for the United States to recover fully and reconstitute its power.

Further, the Japanese saw the United States as trying to encircle them economically and militarily, without recognizing that Japan brought this upon itself and could reverse it. The United States took actions in response to Japanese aggression—for example, by providing volunteers and military aid to China; by seeking to strengthen its position in the Philippines; by working with Australia, New Zealand, the British in Singapore, and the Dutch in the East Indies; and by increasing economic sanctions. This so-called encirclement was reactive and partial. But the Japanese saw it as eventually cutting off their economic lifeline.

Another Japanese flaw relating to U.S. policies was that Tokyo saw the United States as likely to go to war anyway if Japan attacked the Dutch East Indies to secure the oil fields. Japan was correct that the only thing standing in their way of its conquest of Southeast Asia was the U.S. Navy. But the U.S. Navy was probably not yet ready for such a mission, and much of it was in the Atlantic. Despite Britain's plight, the United States had not declared war in Europe. Even if the United States declared war

on Germany, it might have wished to avoid a Pacific war. Roosevelt felt that an active campaign in the Pacific against Japan would be a "dangerous diversion of forces and material" from the main theater in Europe.[66] Tuchman assessed that the United States was still committed to neutrality at the time of the attack and probably would not have declared war in response to a Japanese attack on the Dutch Indies. She considers this a major Japanese miscalculation.[67]

Throughout the crucial years of 1940–1941, Japan had ample and continuous high-level access to American decisionmakers and thus knew that U.S. positions were toughening. Despite warnings from Nomura, which they tended to ignore or discount, the leadership in Tokyo seemed surprised by the American decision to implement an oil embargo after the Japanese occupation of southern Indochina. The Japanese may have misread contending views in the U.S. administration for lack of U.S. resolve.

By mid-1941, Japan thought that it was in a predicament with no good exit and under severe time pressure due to economic sanctions, a limited supply of oil, and the beginning of a U.S. military buildup. So Japan did the one thing that would assure war with the United States. Japan misjudged the unifying effect on the American people that a surprise attack had.

A fourth flaw was that Japan felt that it had strategically prepared for a confrontation with the United States by covering its flanks. It had signed an alliance with Germany and Italy and a neutrality agreement with Russia. The remaining major European powers were either under German occupation or at war with Germany. Japan assumed that its war in China would be over soon. Much of this was true but did not spare Japan in the end. After Japan joined the Tripartite Pact, the United States began to see Japan as a potential enemy. Washington pressured Tokyo to leave the pact, but Tokyo refused, further straining relations. The Japanese were disappointed to get no credit in Washington for not attacking the Soviet Union when Hitler did. As it turned out, while Japan came under heavy German pressure to attack the Soviet Union, it received practically no support from Germany.

Finally, Japan's theory of military victory, which underpinned its decision to attack Pearl Harbor, was flawed. America's principal capability to affect events in Asia lay in its Navy, so Japan's logic went. A surprise attack and a debilitating blow could remove that capability for perhaps a year or more, allowing Japan time to consolidate its victory. The successful November 1940 British carrier attack on Italian battleships harbored at Taranto served as the model for the Japanese plan. Japan's own successful surprise attack on the Russians four decades earlier at Port Arthur was also an important element in its thinking.[68] And Hitler's surprise attack on Stalin in Operation Barbarossa seemed to be working at the time.

Japan was right about the importance of the U.S. Navy to America's military capabilities in Asia. But the benefit from surprise can be short-lived. Hitler's surprise attack on the Soviet Union grounded to a halt just as Tokyo launched its attack on Hawaii. In the case of Taranto, one British carrier and a handful of biplanes damaged

two battleships and a cruiser, but the Italians then retreated to the north with their navy. In the American case, the U.S. Navy moved forward to Midway six months later. And given American code breaking, it was the United States that had surprise on its side for most of the war. The attack on Pearl Harbor was only partially successful. The Japanese gamble failed.

Conclusion

The Japanese leaders were, in Tuchman's words, "prisoners of their outsized ambitions."[69] After 1936, Japanese decisionmaking was increasingly influenced by the military, which took a narrow-minded view of Japan's options and approached problems merely as challenges. Few in the military had much experience with their American adversary. Japan's army was in general more aggressive than the navy. By 1941, most in the navy had concluded that a long war with the United States would be disastrous but that a short war might be successful. Time pressure, including limited oil supplies, swung the navy in favor of military action. Its assessment that war might be short was flawed.

A group of civilians around Prime Minister Konoye did analyze the situation differently from the military and sought a peaceful exit from the growing conflict, but by the time this process had started, positions had hardened on both sides. By September 1941, the emperor was probably the only figure who might have challenged this solidifying Japanese consensus and thus changed the course of history, but by mid-1941 he was under the heavy influence of the military.

The fundamental flaw in the Japanese model of reality that lead to Pearl Harbor was underestimation of America—its willingness to take a tough diplomatic stand, its ability to recover from attack and respond, and its willpower. While Japanese military leaders had access to solid evidence that contradicted this assessment, their arrogance blinded them from it.