

PEARL HARBOR: TASK INSTRUCTIONS

The key question: Why was the USA so unprepared for the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?

Your task: Your task is to study the sources and reach an official judgement on why the US was taken so much by surprise at Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Click on the starter source for more details then open the source box.

Use this table to help plan your report.

Download a PDF of this whole investigation.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

WHY WAS THE USA SO UNPREPARED FOR THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR IN 1941?

On the morning of December 7th 1941 Japanese aircraft and submarines attacked the US Pacific fleet in its base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The fleet was devastated and it was pure luck that the most important ships in the fleet, the US aircraft carriers, were out at sea. Why was the USA taken so completely by surprise?

Your task

Your task is to study the sources and reach an official judgement on why the US was taken so much by surprise at Pearl Harbor in 1941. Your report should cover at least some of these issues:

The work of Japanese 5th columnists
Japanese military tactics and equipment
The efficiency (or inefficiency) of the American forces
General attitudes in the USA as a whole
The possibility that President Roosevelt sacrificed Pearl Harbor

Use this table to help you plan your report.

Extension question

Was Pearl Harbor a conspiracy?

Study the Pearl Harbor Conspiracy Theory in more detail [here](#).

CLIP FROM BRITISH NEWSREEL CALLED PEARL HARBOUR – FIRST PICTURES, JANUARY 1942

Catalogue ref: BP190242131817

Courtesy of [ITN/Source](#), London.

The December disaster at Pearl Harbour; this is how the great American naval base looked after waves of Japanese bombers had carried out their stab in the back raid.

The Battleship Arizona and four other warships destroyed. The Airbase on the island and large numbers of aircraft bombed and burned out in one devastating treacherous blow. Japan's vicious attempt to cripple the American Pacific fleet before any declaration of war.

Taken by surprise the fighter aircraft at Hickham Field and Wheeler Field had little chance of engaging the enemy bombers who were thus able to wreak their destruction almost unhampered.

What is this source?

This source is a British newsreel feature from January 1942. It shows the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

The actual attack took place on December 7th 1941 but it would have taken some time to get the film edited and approved for use with a British audience. There was probably a lot of discussion about how to present the news without damaging morale too much in Britain.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. The USA was neutral in the early stages of the war although it was clear that US President Roosevelt was no friend of Nazi Germany or its ally Japan. In Japan, hard line military commanders had become increasingly powerful during the 1930s. Japan had built up an empire in Asia and these leaders wanted Japan to become Asia's leading power. They knew that the USA would stand in their way and that war with America would happen some time. They decided to try and knock out the US fleet in the Pacific. The plan was to buy time to build up their resources in the Pacific so that Japan would be ready to take on the USA once it recovered from the attack at Pearl Harbor.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

By 1941 Japan was a dominating force in Asia. It invaded Manchuria in North East China in 1931 and then moved deeper into the country in 1937. By July 1941, Japan had flooded French Indochina (now Vietnam) with troops. It intended to use these territories as a platform to take control of British territories like Malaya and Singapore, the Dutch East Indies and the US dominated Philippines. After Pearl Harbor this plan worked very effectively. At one point it seemed that even Australia might be under threat from invasion.

It's worth knowing that..

The US Pacific fleet had two main bases, Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and San Diego in California. San Diego would have been out of range from Japanese attack.

Although the damage was very severe, the most important ships in the fleet, the US aircraft carriers, were out at sea. This was to prove decisive in the outcome of the Pacific War.

How will you use this source?

1. Try playing this newsreel clip without sound. Does it confirm that US forces were taken completely by surprise?
2. What aspects of the attack does the commentary focus on?
3. How are the Japanese referred to in the clip?
4. Could any parts of this source be used as evidence in your report on the key question?

Use this table to help plan your report.

PACIFIC 1939-1945: PEARL HARBOR

**WHY WAS THE USA SO UNPREPARED FOR THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR
IN 1941?**

Extract from a report by a British naval intelligence officer

Catalogue ref: WO 208/2081

In case the Japanese should endeavour to use the same technique in an attack on Singapore or any other British possession where they are present in numbers too great for internment, these notes of their methods in the attack on Pearl Harbour may be of use. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the stories, some are from eye-witnesses and they are in any case given rather as examples of the means which might be used in any future attack than as historically accurate narrative.

1). Date chosen for attack.

Saturday night and Sunday morning are Honolulu's most vulnerable times, as most social events are on Saturday nights and most officers can be expected to be away from their commands.

Advertisements appeared in the Honolulu newspapers for some time before the attack and the authorities discovered (after the attack) that by placing a mask (like a stencil) over these advertisements, the words which showed through the holes cut in this mask gave the date and hour of the attack in addition to other information.

Certain quantities of ammunition were brought out of store a week or two before the attack. A few days before it took place, orders were received "from high quarters" to replace this ammunition. These orders were carried out.

For some days before, Japanese girls had been making "dates" with sailors for that Saturday night, and most of them saw that the sailors were well filled up with liquor. This was remarkable because it is apparently unusual for Japanese girls to mix with sailors. Also a Japanese restaurant keeper near Pearl Harbour gave drinks on the house. On Friday many Japanese quit their jobs and did not turn up on Saturday.

On that particular Saturday the men of the Fleet received their Christmas bonus.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR**What is this source?**

This source is an extract from a report by a British naval officer soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The officer clearly believed that the Japanese citizens living in and around Pearl Harbor could not be trusted. He was concerned that Japanese citizens in the British possession of Singapore might act as agents for a Japanese attack there.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. The USA was neutral in the early stages of the war although it was clear that US President Roosevelt was no friend of Nazi Germany or its ally Japan. In Japan, hard line military commanders had become increasingly powerful during the 1930s. Japan had built up an empire in Asia and these leaders wanted Japan to become Asia's leading power. They knew that the USA would stand in their way and that war with America would happen some time. They decided to try and knock out the US fleet in the Pacific. The plan was to buy time to build up their resources in the Pacific so that Japan would be ready to take on the USA once it recovered from the attack at Pearl Harbor.

By 1941 Japan was a dominating force in Asia. It invaded Manchuria in 1931 and then China in 1937. By 1940 Japan controlled Korea and French Indochina (modern Vietnam). It intended to use these territories as a platform to take control of British territories like Malaya and Singapore, the Dutch East Indies and the US dominated Philippines. After Pearl Harbor this plan worked very effectively. At one point it seemed that even Australia might be under threat from invasion.

It's worth knowing that...

Hawaii had a large population of Japanese immigrants. Some were Japanese citizens but many others were American citizens as they had been born in Hawaii and grown up there.

During WW2 around 120000 Americans of Japanese descent were put into camps.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

How will you use this source?

1. Study the first paragraph of this source. Does it give you confidence in the accuracy of the rest of the information in the source?
2. Why did the Japanese attack when they did?
3. According to the source, did some Japanese in Pearl Harbor know the date? How convincing is this evidence?
4. What does the writer imply was the significance of the actions of the Japanese girls and the restaurant owner? Do you find this evidence convincing?
5. Does this source convince you that Japanese spies and infiltrators played a key role in the Pearl Harbor attack?
6. Has a big event ever happened in your school (e.g. a fire)? Did rumours travel around after the event and how accurate did they turn out to be? Does this affect your view of this source?
7. Could any parts of this source be used as evidence in your report on the key question?

Use this table to help plan your report.

PACIFIC 1939-1945: PEARL HARBOR

**WHY WAS THE USA SO UNPREPARED FOR THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR
IN 1941?**

Extract from an interview with a Japanese officer at Pearl Harbor

Catalogue ref: AIR 20/605

TRANSCRIPT

Q. Were you a pilot or an observer during the PEARL HARBOR attack?

A. I was an observer.

Q. How many aircraft used in the attack?

A. A total of 350.

Q. What types were employed?

A. In the first wave:	50 High Level	KATES
	40 UTB	KATES
	50 Dive Bombers	VALS
	50 VF	ZEKES

In the second wave:	50 High Level	KATES
	80 Dive Bombers	VALS
	40 VF	ZEKES

Q. How many aircraft were lost. (Failed to return to their carriers)?

A. 29 in all. 9 VF in the first wave and 15 dive bombers and 5 VTB in the second wave.

Q. Which units of the fleet participated in the PEARL HARBOR attack?

A. BBs	KIYE, KIRISHIMA
CVs	AKAGI, KAGA, SORYU, HIRYU, SHOKAKU, ZUIKAKU.
CAs	TONE CHIKUMA.
CL	NAGARA.
DDs	20 (large type).

Q. How many Air Craft were employed as CAP over the Pearl Harbor attack force?

A. 50 VF from CVs plus 12 float planes from the BBs, CAs and CL.

Q. Were they in addition to the 350 planes used in the actual attack at PEARL HARBOR?

A. Yes.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

What is this source?

This source is an extract from an interview with Captain Mitsuo Fuchida of the Japanese navy that took place after the war had ended.

After Japan surrendered in September 1945 intelligence officers went through Japanese records and interviewed Japanese officers about key events in the war to see what lessons they could learn.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. The USA was neutral in the early stages of the war although it was clear that US President Roosevelt was no friend of Nazi Germany or its ally Japan. In Japan, hard line military commanders had become increasingly powerful during the 1930s. Japan had built up an empire in Asia and these leaders wanted Japan to become Asia's leading power. They knew that the USA would stand in their way and that war with America would happen some time. They decided to try and knock out the US fleet in the Pacific. The plan was to buy time to build up their resources in the Pacific so that Japan would be ready to take on the USA once it recovered from the attack at Pearl Harbor.

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PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

It's worth knowing that...

By the time the war ended Fuchida was a senior officer in the Japanese navy. He led Japanese attacks on Darwin (Australia) and also Sri Lanka. By 1944 he was a staff officer, helping to plan strategy for the whole Japanese navy.

Fuchida was also interviewed about the Japanese use of Kamikaze (suicide) attacks later in the war. Kamikaze pilots flew aircraft loaded with explosives and crashed them into enemy ships.

How will you use this source?

1. Does this source suggest the attack on Pearl Harbor was well planned?
2. Would you regard this source as a reliable source of information about the Japanese attack?
3. Could any parts of this source be used as evidence in your report on the key question?

Use this table to help plan your report.

PACIFIC 1939-1945: PEARL HARBOR

**WHY WAS THE USA SO UNPREPARED FOR THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR
IN 1941?**

**Extracts from an American report on the attack on Pearl Harbor
in 1941**

Catalogue ref: WO 208/2081

The underlying cause of this error of judgment was General Short's confidence that Japan would not then attack Pearl Harbor. In fairness to him it must be borne in mind that this belief was shared in by almost everyone concerned including his superior officers in the War Department in Washington. He was undoubtedly influenced in such a belief by the then prevailing psychology which completely underestimated the Japanese military capabilities and particularly the advance which they had made in the use of aircraft. General Short also knew that the Naval command at Hawaii, which he regarded as being better informed than he because of their facilities and the widespread nature of their operations, was confident that an air attack on Pearl Harbor was most unlikely.

To sum up the situation tersely, General Short was warned by Washington that there was immediate danger both of an attack from without by Japan and of an attack from within by sabotage. This warning required him to be alert against both forms of danger. He chose to concentrate himself so entirely upon a defense against sabotage as to leave himself more completely exposed to an attack from without than if there had been no alert at all. He so concentrated his planes as not only to make them an easy target for an attack from without but to require several hours to get any substantial number of them into the air for defense.

To such an error of judgment it is no excuse that he relied upon assurances from another service, even though he thought that that service was better informed than he was as to the disposition of the Japanese fleet. He was the responsible defender of the outpost of Hawaii. He had no right entirely to subordinate his duty to be prepared against what he knew to be the most dangerous form of attack on that outpost to the opinion of another service.

What is this source?

These extracts come from an American report produced in 1945 on what happened at Pearl Harbor and who was responsible.

An American officer had produced an earlier report in 1944 but saw no evidence in 1945 to change his mind.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR**What's the background to this source?**

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There were large numbers of Japanese settlers in Hawaii in 1941. Some were Japanese immigrants but far more were descendants of immigrants and were therefore American citizens. Even so, around 120000 Japanese Americans were placed in camps during the war.

It's worth knowing that...

General Short was the overall commander in charge of the base at Pearl Harbor. The other senior commander was Admiral Kimmel. In the enquiry after Pearl Harbor these two men got most of the blame for the US being unprepared for the attack.

After Japan surrendered in September 1945 intelligence officers went through Japanese records and interviewed Japanese officers about key events in the war. This led to demands for re-opening the enquiry into Pearl Harbor. This did happen but it was found that no new evidence came to light that changed the verdict. General Short and Admiral Kimmel were held responsible.

How will you use this source?

1. What was the biggest misjudgement that General Short made?
2. Was he the only person who thought this way?
3. Why did General Short think this way?
4. What factors could be used to defend General Short?
5. What points are used against him?
6. Do you think it was fair that Short got most of the blame?
7. Could any parts of this source be used as evidence in your report on the key question?

Use this table to help plan your report.

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/>

PACIFIC 1939-1945: PEARL HARBOR

WHY WAS THE USA SO UNPREPARED FOR THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR IN 1941?

A statement by US President Truman on the outcome of the
enquiry into Pearl Harbor, August 1945

Catalogue ref: ADM 199/1363

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AUGUST 30, 1945

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT
at his press and radio conference
August 30, 1945.

"I have read it (the Pearl Harbor reports) very carefully, and I came to the conclusion that the whole thing is the result of the policy which the country itself pursued. The country was not ready for preparedness. Every time the President made an effort to get a preparedness program through the Congress, it was stifled. Whenever the President made a statement about the necessity of preparedness, he was vilified for doing it. I think the country is as much to blame as any individual in this final situation that developed in Pearl Harbor."

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR**What is this source?**

This source is a press statement made by US President Truman in August 1945. When he mentions the President in his statement he is referring to the previous President, Franklin D Roosevelt.

Truman became President in April 1945 after the death of President Roosevelt.

What's the background to this source?

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There were large numbers of Japanese settlers in Hawaii in 1941. Some were Japanese immigrants but far more were descendants of immigrants and were therefore American citizens. Even so, around 120000 Japanese Americans were interned in camps during the war.

It's worth knowing that...

As soon as war broke out in 1939 President Roosevelt was very concerned. He feared that if Nazi Germany won the war in Europe it would be a threat to the security of the USA. However, most Americans were totally opposed to involvement in the war.

Roosevelt sent vast amounts of vital war equipment and medical supplies to Britain and her allies in what was called the Lend Lease scheme. There is not much doubt that Roosevelt and his chief advisers felt war was inevitable with both Japan and Germany.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

How will you use this source?

1. According to this source, who or what was to blame for Pearl Harbor?
2. In what ways does this view contradict or support other sources in this investigation?
3. Could any parts of this source be used as evidence in your report on the key question?

Use this table to help plan your report.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

**WHY WAS THE USA SO UNPREPARED FOR THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR
IN 1941?**

Extract from an interview with journalist and author Robert B Stinnett, 2002

By courtesy of The [Independent Institute](http://www.independentinstitute.org/)

The screenshot shows the website of The Independent Institute. The header includes the logo and the tagline "Enlightening ideas for public policy." Below the header is a navigation menu with links: HOME, ABOUT US, BLOG, ISSUES, NEWSROOM, EVENTS, PUBLICATIONS, CENTERS, FOR STUDENTS, STORE, and MEMBERSHIP. The main content area is titled "NEWSROOM" and features a list of links: Experts, In The News, News Releases, and Commentary Articles. A sidebar on the left contains "Media Inquiries" information for Wendy Hunsell, Publicity Manager, with a phone number and a "Send Email" link. The main article is titled "Do Freedom of Information Act Files Prove FDR Had Foreknowledge of Pearl Harbor?" and is dated March 11, 2002. The author is Robert B. Stinnett and Douglas Cirigliano. The article is an interview with Robert B. Stinnett by Douglas Cirigliano. The text of the article discusses the attack on Pearl Harbor and the role of the United States Navy. It mentions that on November 25, 1941, Japan's Admiral Yamamoto sent a radio message to the group of Japanese warships that would attack Pearl Harbor on December 7. Newly released naval records prove that from November 17 to 25 the United States Navy intercepted eighty-three messages that Yamamoto sent to his carriers. Part of the November 25 message read: "...the task force, keeping its movements strictly secret and maintaining close guard against submarines and aircraft, shall advance into Hawaiian waters, and upon the very opening of hostilities shall attack the main force of the United States fleet in Hawaii and deal it a mortal blow..." The article also mentions that one might wonder if the theory that President Franklin Roosevelt had a foreknowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack would have been alluded to in this summer's movie, Pearl Harbor. Since World War II many people have suspected that Washington knew the attack was coming. When Thomas Dewey was running for president against Roosevelt in 1944 he found out about America's ability to intercept Japan's radio messages, and thought this knowledge would enable him to defeat the popular FDR. In the fall of that year, Dewey planned a series of speeches charging FDR with foreknowledge of the attack. Ultimately, General George Marshall, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, persuaded Dewey not to make the speeches. Japan's naval leaders did not realize America had cracked their codes, and Dewey's speeches could have sacrificed America's code-breaking advantage. So, Dewey said nothing, and in November FDR was elected president for the fourth time.

What is this source?

This extract comes from an interview given by the US author Robert B Stinnett in 2002.

Stinnett was being interviewed about a book he wrote called Day of Deceit.

What's the background to this source?

When war broke out in Europe US President Roosevelt feared that a Nazi victory would threaten the USA. He tried to get the US people to accept the idea of joining the war but they were heavily opposed. In his book, Stinnett's main argument was the US President Franklin D Roosevelt knew the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor. However, he did nothing because he wanted the

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

USA to join the war and that the attack would make the American people support him.

Stinnett's book was based on documents he got from the US Navy intelligence service from the time. These showed that the US Navy was intercepting all Japanese transmissions and had cracked their codes. He claimed to have proof that signals about the attack on Pearl Harbor had been intercepted and sent to Washington.

It's worth knowing that...

Stinnett's view is very controversial and is certainly not accepted by all historians. However, his work was based on documents from the US Navy intelligence service that he obtained under the US Freedom of Information Laws. At the time his book was written not all historians had seen these documents.

A great place to study this controversy is on the Internet. However, be careful to read critically what you see. Many of the comments on this subject are highly emotional and some are very biased indeed.

How will you use this source?

1. Why has the author received a lot of criticism?
2. Is this criticism relevant?
3. Does the author himself seem to be a critic of Roosevelt?
4. Does this source support or contradict any other sources in this investigation?
5. Could any parts of this source be used as evidence in your report on the key question?

Use this table to help plan your report.

PACIFIC 1939–1945: PEARL HARBOR

The key question: Why was the USA so unprepared for the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?

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The work of Japanese 5 th columnists	
Japanese military tactics and equipment	
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