1. Day of Infamy: Japanese Expansionism and the Attack on Pearl Harbor

In May 1940, British prime minister Winston Churchill sent Franklin D. Roosevelt a lengthy telegram analyzing the war in Europe and detailing the supplies Britain needed to fight off the Nazis.

“I am looking to you,” Churchill added, “to keep that Japanese dog quiet in the Pacific.”

The island nation of Japan, though ruled by an emperor considered semidivine, was increasingly controlled by its military. By the time of Churchill’s cable, Japan already had invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria, set up a puppet regime there, then driven relentlessly into China proper, committing, along the way, shockingly sadistic atrocities that Americans could read about in publications like Reader’s Digest.

FDR had done little to check or penalize Japan’s aggression. He and Churchill both were far more concerned about Nazi Germany. And the American public, with its broad and influential isolationist streak, was reluctant to go to war even against Hitler, whose expansionist plundering in Europe was already well advanced and seemed to strike closer to home.

In fact, Japan and Germany were driven by similar passions. Just as Germany sought additional lebensraum (living space) in the east, Japan, heavily populated and poor in natural resources, wanted space, markets for its industrial products, and raw materials like rubber, oil, and metals. It sought to corral these resources by uniting and dominating Asia, first in a “New Order” including Manchuria and China, and then, by June 1940, in a “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” that would take in Southeast Asia—including colonies held by the British, French, and Dutch, as well as the U.S.-controlled Philippines.

Japan’s bellicose ideology, like Germany’s, contained a strong racial element. Japanese leaders believed their country’s ascent to the status of world power depended on driving from its backyard Western nations that had helped themselves to Asian territories while promulgating racist theories of Asian inferiority. Japan deeply resented the West’s rejection of a racial-equality clause it had proposed for the peace treaty that closed World War I, as well as America’s policy of rigidly and specifically barring Japanese and other Asian immigrants from its shores. When the United States refused to acknowledge Japan’s takeover of Manchuria, a Japanese diplomat bitterly observed, “The Western powers taught Japan the game of poker, but after it acquired most of the chips they pronounced the game immoral and took up contract bridge.”

Of course, other Asian peoples soon learned that Japan did not mean to share power with them—in fact, it regarded them as inferior.
Already feverishly building its navy against the threat of war in two vast oceans, America first took forceful action against Japanese aggression with economic sanctions. After the fall of France in the summer of 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact pledging cooperation with Italy and Germany, and moved into northern French Indochina, prompting the United States to ban the sale of aviation fuel, iron, and steel scrap to Japan. After Hitler invaded Russia in 1941, Japan, relieved of the Soviet threat that had long troubled its northern frontier, invaded southern Indochina. Now the United States froze Japanese assets in America, effectively banning the sale of American oil to Japan. And so the dominoes fell.

FDR had been reluctant to test Japan with an oil embargo. Japan was highly dependent on the United States for iron, scrap steel, and especially oil, all vital to military operations. Deprived of these resources, Japanese leaders might be forced to abandon their deeply held expansionist aspirations.

As many had feared, Japan instead resolved to seek its raw materials by advancing further south in East Asia. But first, it had to cripple American naval power in the Pacific. On December 7, 1941, a few minutes before eight in the morning Hawaiian time, the attack began.
The “China Incident”

Just as the United States and other Western powers were distracted from the Japanese threat by their preoccupation with Hitler, the Chinese, in the 1930s, were absorbed by internal strife that pitted Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government against Communist Party fighters and local warlords.

But after July 1937, when a skirmish at the Marco Polo Bridge outside Peking (now Beijing) quickly escalated into full-scale combat, the Chinese began to mount fierce resistance to Japanese domination.

By early September, having bombed civilians and destroyed villages, the invaders controlled most of northern China. Japan intended to “thoroughly chastise the anti-Japanese elements in China” and “compel China to mend her ways,” its prime minister announced. Through the autumn, the combatants clashed over Shanghai. When that city finally fell, the Japanese moved inland to Nanking (now Nanjing), capturing the Chinese capital in mid-December. There followed a six-week paroxysm of looting, slaughter, and rape that left the streets of Nanking “littered with dead,” the New York Times reported. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives. By the end of 1938, the Japanese had taken southern port cities, but Chiang had moved the Chinese capital to Chungking (now Chongqing) deep in southwest China.

Despite their technological superiority, the Japanese lacked the resources to subdue China, an enormous land whose people refused to yield. Japan had referred to its undeclared war as the “China Incident,” in part to avert foreign intervention and embargoes under U.S. neutrality laws. But in the summer of 1940, frustrated over the Chinese stalemate and convinced a U.S. oil embargo was imminent, a new government in Japan determined to seal off friendly supply routes to China and move into Southeast Asia—French Indochina, British Malaya, and the oil-rich Dutch East Indies.
On December 12, 1937, in the midst of Japan’s attack on Nanking (Nanjing), Japanese fighters bombed and machine-gunned the gunboat USS *Panay* and sank three American oil tankers as they lay at anchor in the Yangtze River just outside the city.

“We are all deeply concerned over the news from China and the loss of life on the Yangtze River boats,” Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her My Day column a few days later. “One’s own personal worries sink into insignificance when one realizes the magnitude of the sorrows that war can bring not only to the nations who are actively engaged in conflict, but to the innocent bystanders going about their daily rounds.”

The gunboat had been on the Yangtze to protect Americans and their commercial interests in China. This was the sort of incident that, Franklin D. Roosevelt well knew, could start a war. But thinking the navy ill equipped and the American public ill prepared for such a confrontation, he resisted the pressure to strike back with military force. Instead, he ordered army and navy commanders to update their plans for defense in the Pacific—and directed Secretary of State Cordell Hull to extract an apology and full reparations from Japan.

Japan, also intent on avoiding war with the United States, made its official apology on Christmas Eve. The following spring, it paid $2,214,007.36 in damages to the United States.
“Preparations for War”

In early June 1941, the Japanese cabinet and military high command invited their emperor to an imperial conference where they would brief the leader on a plan to seize Indochina (a French colony encompassing today’s Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). The imperial government, the conference agreed, would continue its efforts to “effect a settlement of the China Incident” while seeking security for Japan through “an advance into the Southern Regions.” “In case the diplomatic negotiations break down,” it concluded, “preparations for war with England and America will also be carried forward.”

By intercepting Japanese diplomatic cables, Franklin D. Roosevelt and other U.S. officials learned of these troubling designs. But even after Japan pressed south into Indochina, FDR remained unwilling to “draw the noose tight,” as Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes put it. “It is terribly important for the control of the Atlantic for us to keep peace in the Pacific,” he told Ickes. “I simply have not got enough Navy to go around.”

When FDR froze Japanese assets on July 26, it’s not clear he intended to bar the country from buying any American oil, an interpretation of the policy implemented by senior officials. But that action, coupled with similar moves by the British and Dutch, drew “the noose” tight enough, eliminating 90 percent of the oil supplies Japan required to run the machinery of civilian life and military operations—indeed halting 75 percent of its international trade.

The next months saw increasingly strained negotiations, often carried out by Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Japanese ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura, who met more than fifty times in 1941. On November 5, Americans intercepted a cable to Nomura giving him a deadline of November 25 to conclude talks—a message they interpreted as a deadline for war. Through Nomura, the Japanese now proposed a six-month break from hostilities, with Japan withdrawing from southern Indochina if the United States would relax its oil embargo. As Japan offered no relief for China, Hull dismissed the proposal.

On November 20, though, FDR himself handed Hull a counterproposal for a provisional truce. The United States would resume economic relations with Japan, shipping “some oil and rice now”; Japan would stop sending troops to Indochina, Manchuria, “or any place South”; Japan would not declare war on America under the Tripartite Pact “even if the U.S. gets into European war”; and the United States would initiate—but not mediate—talks between Japan and China.

Hull never delivered the proposal to Nomura. On November 26, the president got word that five Japanese naval divisions had apparently headed to Indochina. Infuriated at this evidence of Japan’s bad faith, FDR instructed Hull to again insist on complete Japanese withdrawal from Indochina and China.

That very day, a strike force of unprecedented scale and sophistication—it included hundreds of bombers on six aircraft carriers—left the Kuril Islands northeast of Japan for its three-thousand-mile journey across the Pacific.

An Agriculture Department fabric technician examining cotton stockings in a photo issued July 26, 1941, the day Franklin D. Roosevelt froze Japanese assets. The Agriculture Department predicted the damage to trade with the Japanese would help in its attempt to popularize cotton stockings, since the Japanese were major suppliers of silk. Indeed, the move all but paralyzed Japan’s international trade, an important prelude to its decision to secure raw materials by conquest. LOC
“A Date Which Will Live in Infamy”

Just before 8 a.m. on December 7, 1941, scores of Japanese attack planes came winging over the Hawaiian island of Oahu, setting off a bedlam of explosions, fire, and death. In the first wave of assault, more than 180 planes simultaneously attacked U.S. ships in Pearl Harbor and targeted nearby airfields to disable a potential American defense. A second wave of dive-bombers was in the air before 9.

In little more than two hours, the deed was done: some 2,400 Americans were dead, more than a thousand wounded, and some twenty ships and more than three hundred planes damaged or destroyed.

Franklin D. Roosevelt and his advisors had expected an attack, given the deteriorating tone of negotiations with the Japanese over the previous weeks. They had repeatedly warned commanders in the Pacific to be on their guard. They had even decided to await a first strike from the Japanese “so that there should remain no doubt in anyone’s mind as to who were the aggressors,” as Secretary of War Henry Stimson later put it.

But no one had imagined the Japanese could carry out an operation so far from their homeland—and so crushing in its impact. An unprepared Pearl Harbor had scarcely mounted a defense.

FDR received word of the attack around 2 p.m., and within the hour he was briefed on the extent of the damage. The president was aghast. Called to describe the devastation to cabinet members, FDR, who took enormous pride in the U.S. Navy, seemed to have “actual physical difficulty in getting out the words,” Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins would recall. Late that night, over a sandwich, he would finally release the day’s emotions, pounding the table and exclaiming that American planes had been destroyed “on the ground, by God, on the ground.”

However, FDR spent most of December 7 in the sober work of planning and leading.
Around 5 p.m., he dictated a five-hundred-word address to his secretary Grace Tully, uttering each word “incisively and slowly,” as Tully remembered, “carefully specifying each little punctuation mark and each paragraph.”

The address, given the next day in Congress to roaring assent, would condemn the Japanese “treachery,” vow the United States would “win through to absolute victory,” and ask for a declaration of war.

December 7, 1941, was a day of infamy, as FDR would say in his speech; it was a day of anguish and alarm that led in a matter of days to open war with all the Axis powers. But the mood around the White House was resolute. While the president met with his cabinet and military brass, Eleanor Roosevelt carried this determination to the public. “Whatever is asked of us, I am sure we can accomplish it,” she assured her fellow citizens in an impromptu addition to her scheduled radio address. “We are the free and unconquerable people of the United States of America.”