For years, detractors of Franklin Roosevelt have charged that he deliberately sent the United States Pacific Fleet to Pearl Harbor so that the Japanese could attack it and give him an excuse to involve the United States in the Second World War. There are those who still make this argument. But Gordon W. Prange's studies, At Dawn We Slept (1981) and Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History (1986), and the bulk of modern scholarship exonerate Roosevelt of such a monstrous accusation. In truth, the decisions and events that led to America's entry into the war were enormously complex, involving developments in Europe as well as Asia.

When Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and plunged Europe into war, the United States, although theoretically neutral, was clearly sympathetic with the Allies, led by Britain and France. Indeed, Roosevelt was more preoccupied with the Nazi threat in Europe than with Japanese expansion in Asia. Time and again, he predicted that Hitler would eventually make war on the United States, and out of that belief flowed much of his European diplomacy: the destroyer-bases deal with Britain, Lend-Lease, and the Atlantic Charter. Still, through 1940 and 1941, as German planes bombed Britain and German armies swept into Russia, the Roosevelt administration often seemed adrift, as though the president and his advisers were confused, helplessly caught in a vortex of events over which they had no control.

Japanese intentions in the Pacific were especially perplexing. Since 1937, Japan had been laying waste to China, bombing its cities and capturing its coastal territory. Did Japan’s aggressions against China constitute an immediate threat to United States secu-
rity? Was a showdown with Japan also inevitable, as United States military leaders insisted? While the United States watched Japanese movements in Asia, Congress declared economic war against Germany with the controversial Lend-Lease Program, which gave $7 billion in military aid to embattled Britain. Soon American convoys were carrying supplies across the Atlantic. When German U-boats torpedoed several American vessels, many observers contended that war with Hitler was only a matter of time.

Meanwhile, the Japanese question had become increasingly confusing. In Tokyo, a party led by General Hideki Tojo and the military demanded that the United States be driven from the Pacific so that Japan could establish an Asian empire free of Western influence. But Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoye, a moderate, wanted to negotiate with the United States and directed his ambassador in America to present Washington with a set of proposals that might avoid war. At the same time, the war party proceeded with a top-secret plan to attack the United States Navy at Pearl Harbor if negotiations failed. By early December 1941, United States analysts knew that the Japanese were preparing to strike, but almost no one thought them capable of launching an air attack against distant Hawaii. When Japanese planes did exactly that, in a day that would “live in infamy,” Americans from Pearl Harbor to Washington were caught completely by surprise.

Like the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Pearl Harbor was one of those crises that mark the people who experience them for the rest of their lives. As Otto Friedrich says, Americans of that period would recall exactly what they were doing when they first heard the news on that fateful Sunday. In this selection, Friedrich, a distinguished author, traces the dramatic events that led to the Pearl Harbor attack; he points out that if war between Japan and the United States was inevitable, it was perhaps inevitable from the time of the first contact between the two countries in 1853. Combining erudition with lucidity of expression, Friedrich describes the rise of modern, industrial Japan, the militaristic government that came to power there, and the Japanese conquest of China, which was prompted in part by the worldwide depression. From then on, Japan and the United States were on a collision course for supremacy in the Pacific. An example of narrative history at its best, Friedrich’s article captures the mood, spirit, and rival perceptions of that momentous time; it shows how the interaction of people and events caused Japanese-American relations to deteriorate and finally convinced Japan to strike at Pearl Harbor, and it reconstructs in graphic detail the holocaust of destruction that virtually paralyzed American striking power in the Pacific and plunged the United States into a global conflict. On Monday, December 8, 1941, the United States formally declared war on Japan. Three days later, Germany and Italy—Japan’s Axis allies—declared war on the United States. Roosevelt and Congress reciprocated at once, thus placing America on the side of the Allied powers—Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China.
GLOSSARY

BRATTON, COLONEL RUFUS  United States Army intelligence officer who guessed from the final Japanese note that Japan would strike somewhere on Sunday, December 7, 1941.

CHIANG KAI-SHEK  Commander of the Nationalist forces — the Kuomintang — in embattled China.

FUCHIDA, MITSUO  Operational commander of the Japanese air force that struck Pearl Harbor.

GENDA, MINORU  One of Yamamoto's trusted lieutenants who played a key role in planning the Pearl Harbor attack.

HIROHITO  Emperor of Japan and “a figurehead ruler.”

HULL, CORDELL  FDR’s secretary of state who had “a speech difficulty” and little knowledge of Japan.

KIMMEL, ADMIRAL HUSBAND  Commander of the Pacific Fleet, with headquarters at Pearl Harbor.

MacARTHUR, GENERAL DOUGLAS  Commander of all United States Army forces in the Far East, with headquarters in the Philippines.

MAO ZEDONG (MAO TSE-TUNG)  Head of the Chinese Communists and later (1949) founder and first chairman of the People’s Republic of China.

MARSHALL, GENERAL GEORGE  United States chief of staff, stationed in Washington.

NOMURA, KICHISABURO  Japanese ambassador in Washington.

SHORT, LIEUTENANT GENERAL WALTER  Commander of United States Army forces in Hawaii.

STARK, ADMIRAL HAROLD  Chief of United States Naval Operations, stationed in Washington.

TOGO, ADMIRAL HEIHACHIRO  Japanese naval hero who annihilated the Russian fleet in the battle of Tsushima (1905) during the Russo-Japanese war; his victories established Japan’s naval superiority.

TOJO, GENERAL HIDEKI  Dominated Japan’s militarist government and succeeded Prince Konoye as Japanese prime minister in October 1941; he approved the Pearl Harbor attack.

YAMAMOTO, ADMIRAL ISOROKU  Harvard-educated commander of Japan’s Combined Fleet who devised the Pearl Harbor attack plan with the help of trusted subordinates.
The brass band on the stern of the U.S.S. Nevada kept on playing The Star-Spangled Banner for the 8 a.m. flag raising even after a Japanese bomber roared overhead and fired a torpedo at the nearby Arizona. The torpedo missed, but the bomber sprayed machine-gun fire at the Nevada’s band and tore up its ensign.

“This is the best goddam drill the Army Air Force has ever put on,” remarked an Arizona sailor standing idly at the battleship’s rail.

“Air raid, Pearl Harbor, this is no drill,” said the radio message that went out at 7:58 a.m. from the U.S. Navy’s Ford Island command center, relayed throughout Hawaii, to Manila, to Washington. But there was an even sharper sense of imminent disaster in the words someone shouted over the public address system on another docked battleship, the Oklahoma: “Man your battle stations! This is no shit!” Across the lapping waters of the harbor, church bells tolled, summoning the faithful to worship.

Almost alongside the Oklahoma, another torpedo hurtled through the air. After releasing it, recalled Lieut. Jinichi Goto, commander of the Japanese torpedo bombers, “I saw that I was even lower than the crow’s nest of the great battleship. My observer reported a huge waterspout springing up . . . ‘Atarimashita! [It hit!] he cried.”

“I felt a very heavy shock and heard a loud explosion,” said the Oklahoma’s executive officer, Commander Jesse Kenworthy Jr., “and the ship immediately began to list to port. As I attempted to get to the conning tower over decks slippery with oil and water, I felt the shock of another very heavy explosion.” Kenworthy gave the order to abandon ship. He barely made it over the rising starboard side as the giant battleship began to keel over, trapping more than 400 crewmen below decks.

Just as the Oklahoma capsized, a tremendous explosion tore open the Arizona. “A spurt of flame came out of the guns in No. 2 turret, followed by an explosion of the forward magazine,” said a mechanic on the nearby tanker Ramapo. “The foremost leaned forward, and the whole forward part of the ship was enveloped in flame and smoke and continued to burn fiercely.”

In Commander Mitsuo Fuchida’s bomber circling overhead, antiaircraft fire knocked a hole in the fuselage and damaged the steering gear, but Fuchida couldn’t take his eyes off the fiery death throes of the Arizona. “A huge column of dark red smoke rose to 1,000 ft., and a stiff shock wave rocked the plane,” he recalled years later, when he had become a Presbyterian missionary. “It was a hateful, mean-looking red flame, the kind that powder produces, and I knew at once that a big magazine had exploded. Terrible indeed.”

As operational commander of the Japanese attackers, Fuchida watched and controlled everything. It was Fuchida who had given, exactly at 7:49 a.m. on Dec. 7, 1941, the order to attack the strongest naval base in the world: “To! [the first syllable of totsugekiseyo, meaning: Charge!] To! To! To!” It was Fuchida who sent back to Tokyo the triumphant signal that the attack had caught the Americans by surprise: “Tora! [Tiger!] Tora! Tora!”

Now Fuchida led the attack on the Maryland, another of the eight battleships berthed at the U.S. Navy’s Pacific Fleet headquarters. He saw four bombs hurtling toward their target. “In perfect pattern [they] plummeted like devils of doom. They became small as poppy seeds and finally disappeared just as tiny white flashes of smoke appeared on or near the ship.”

Pearl Harbor is peaceful now, blue waves in the winter sunshine, an occasional toot of harbor traffic. A concrete canopy shrouds the rusted wreckage of the Arizona, the remains of more than 1,000 American servicemen entombed inside. Her flag is still

raised and lowered every day on the mast emerging out of the quiet water.

The [fiftieth] anniversary of the greatest U.S. military defeat, the day President Franklin D. Roosevelt called “a date which will live in infamy,” remains a day of death and disgrace, an inglorious event, and the spirit of reconciliation still bows before gusts of rancor. When President Bush, a World War II fighter pilot, indicated that he would attend the Pearl Harbor anniversary ceremonies, White House spokesman stiffly squelched any talk of Japanese officials’ joining in. So did the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association. “We did not invite the Japanese 50 years ago, and we don’t want them now,” says the association’s president, Gerald Glaubitz.

In American mythology, Pearl Harbor still represents, even after a half-century, a classic moment of treachery and betrayal. Certainly it was a moment of historic surprise, a moment when the impossible happened, when warfare suddenly spread, for the first and only time in history, to virtually the whole world. This was the moment that changed Americans from a nation of provincial innocents, not only ignorant of the great world but proud of their ignorance, into a nation that would often have to bear the burdens of rescuing that world. The same cataclysm also changed the Japanese from a people trying to find their place on the rim of the great world into a nation that would eventually redefine that world and place itself at the very center.
The surprise, when it first exploded over Pearl Harbor, was shattering, and everyone who experienced it can still remember what was going on when the news interrupted that quiet Sunday: the Washington Redskins playing the Philadelphia Eagles, Arthur Rubinstein as soloist in the New York Philharmonic broadcast, or just a visit with friends. Trying to explain the national sense of bewilderment, the TIME of that time reflected the kind of racism that implicitly underlay the basic American attitude. “Over the U.S. and its history,” declared the weekly newsmagazine, “there was a great unanswered question: What would the people . . . say in the face of the mightiest event of their time? What they said—tens of thousands of them—was: ‘Why, the yellow bastards!’”

As often happens in surprise attacks, however, the surprise of Pearl Harbor was largely a matter of national illusions. The leaders on both sides fully expected a war, indeed considered it inevitable, even to some extent desirable, but neither side really wanted to fight unless it had to. Up to the last minute, each antagonist thought the other was bluffing.

Japan’s navy had already begun planning and training for the attack on Pearl Harbor when Emperor Hirohito startled his assembled advisers on Sept. 6 by asking an imperial question. In the midst of a fervent debate over when and how to go to war, the Emperor, who traditionally never spoke during such gatherings, suddenly pulled out and read in his high-pitched voice a poem by his revered grandfather Emperor Meiji:

All the seas, in every quarter,
are as brothers to one another.
Why, then, do the winds and waves of strife
rage so turbulently throughout the world?

Roosevelt, re-elected to a third term in 1940 after pledging that “your boys are not going to be sent to any foreign wars,” knew that Hirohito was just a figurehead ruler over a militarist government dominated by the flinty General Hideki Tojo. Still, Roosevelt staked his hopes for peace on a last-minute message to the Emperor. “Both of us,” Roosevelt said, “have a sacred duty to restore traditional amity and prevent further death and destruction in the world.”

Japanese military censors delayed that message for 10 hours, so it was almost midnight on Dec. 7 in Tokyo when U.S. Ambassador Joseph Grew sped with it to the Foreign Ministry. It was past 3 a.m. — and Fuchida’s bombers were within sight of Pearl Harbor — when Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo, in full diplomatic regalia, reached the Imperial Palace. He found the Emperor listening to his shortwave radio. Togo read him the message and then the response that the government had already written for him. It said that peace was the Emperor’s “cherished desire.” This would “do well,” Hirohito told Togo. The Foreign Minister bowed low.

If war between the U.S. and Japan was inevitable, it had probably been inevitable for a long time, perhaps as long ago as July 8, 1853. That was the day when Commodore Matthew Perry sailed his black-hulled steam frigate Susquehanna into Edo Bay (now Tokyo Bay) and “opened” Japan at gunpoint, after more than two centuries of self-imposed isolation, to American merchants and missionaries. Humiliated, the Japanese decided to modernize their feudal regime by imitating the barbarian invaders. They hired French officers to retrain their soldiers and British shipbuilders to create their navy. From the Germans they learned the secrets of modern science and from the Americans the secrets of modern commerce.

But as Japanese commerce and Japanese emigration increased, so did Western talk of a “yellow peril.” In 1922 the Supreme Court ruled that Japanese immigrants were ineligible to become U.S. citizens. The following year it ruled that they could be barred from owning American land — Japanese farmers were then growing 10% of California’s agricultural produce on 1% of its land. In 1924, when
Congress imposed national immigration quotas, the figure for Japanese was zero.

The deepest conflict between the U.S. and Japan, though, was over the future of China, which had been in turmoil ever since the collapse of the Manchu Empire in 1911. Though Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek claimed that his Canton-based Kuomintang represented the entire republic, local warlords ruled much of the country, notably the huge northern territory of Manchuria. The Japanese, who had blocked a number of Russian incursions into Manchuria, were moving in to gain control of the region’s plentiful coal and iron, which Japan sorely lacked.

The explosive force in the midst of this ferment was Japan’s fractious Kwantung Army, originally sent to the Kwantung Peninsula just east of Beijing to protect Japanese rail and shipping interests in Manchuria. After ultranationalist Kwantung officers murdered the Chinese [overlord] of Manchuria, Tokyo installed a puppet regime in 1932 and proclaimed the independence of what it called Manchukuo. Despite calls for sanctions against Japan, outgoing President Herbert Hoover had no enthusiasm for a crisis, and the incoming President Roosevelt was preoccupied with the onrushing Great Depression.

That left Chiang and his Chinese Nationalists to fight on against the Japanese, the growing communist guerrilla forces of Mao Zedong and a clutch of surviving warlords. On the night of July 7, 1937, came the murky events that constituted the long-expected “incident.” A Japanese soldier apparently wandered off to relieve himself near the Marco Polo Bridge, outside Beijing. His comrades, who later claimed they feared he had been kidnapped, got into a gunfight with a nearby Chinese Nationalist unit, and the fighting soon spread.

The worldwide depression, which partly inspired Japan’s move into China, left most Americans unable to deal with anything beyond their own breadlines and Hoovervilles and, Brother, can you spare a dime? To the extent that they worried about foreign problems at all, they worried mainly about Adolf Hitler, who had seized Austria and the Czech Sudentenland in 1938, then demanded western Poland in 1939.

Americans did hear horror stories—of civilians massacred in Japanese air raids on undefended Shanghai and of the Rape of Nanking, a month of slaughter that cut down more than 200,000 civilians. Roosevelt talked of “quarantining” Japan, but American ships went on supplying Tokyo with American oil and steel. Times were hard, and business was business.

What came to dominate Japan’s overall strategy was the impact of Hitler’s stunning victories over the Western Allies in the spring of 1940. The Dutch army was crushed within a week, and Queen Wilhelmina fled to London, leaving the immense wealth of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) in the charge of a few colonial bureaucrats. France collapsed in a month, and Marshal Pétain’s feeble puppet regime, based in the French resort of Vichy, had other worries than French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). Britain, threatened by a Nazi invasion, could devote little more than some Churchillian rhetoric to the defense of Singapore, Malaya, Hong Kong and Burma.

Japan’s Prince Fumimaro Konoye, a serpentine conservative who had twice been Premier since 1937, realized the way was now clear “to include the British, French, Dutch and Portuguese islands of the Orient” in a Japanese commercial empire that Tokyo called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. On Sept. 27, 1940, Konoye joined the Axis powers, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, in a formal alliance known as the Tripartite Pact. He demanded that Britain shut down the Burma Road, supply route for aid to Chiang, and that Vichy accept Japanese bases in Indochina for a southern attack on Chiang.

The U.S., the only Western power strong enough to retaliate, banned all iron and steel shipments to
Japan. “It seems inevitable,” said Asahi Shimbun, then Japan’s largest daily, “that a collision should occur between Japan, determined to establish a sphere of interest in East Asia . . . and the United States, which is determined to meddle in affairs on the other side of a vast ocean.” Added Yomiuri, another giant newspaper: “Asia is the territory of the Asians.”

Impersonally though the tides of history may seem to flow, they now waited on one man, a remarkably squat and broad-shouldered man, no more than 5 ft. 3 in. tall. He had been born Isoroku Takano, the first name meaning 56, because that was the age at which his proud father had been presented with his sixth and last son. Later adopted, according to an old custom, into a richer family, he acquired a new name: Yamamoto.

Trained as a naval cadet, Yamamoto proudly bore the scars he got at 21, when he lost the second and third fingers on his left hand during Admiral Togo’s great victory over the Russian navy at the Strait of Tsushima in 1905. Yamamoto had come to know the U.S. as a graduate student at Harvard and as naval attaché in Washington. And as executive officer of Japan’s naval flight school, he had learned the new religion of air power. He loved poker, bridge and shogi, the Japanese version of chess. Said one of his top aides: “He had a gambler’s heart.”

Now 57, with a gray crew cut, Admiral Yamamoto commanded Japan’s Combined Fleet, but he disliked the imperial navy’s cautious strategy. In case of war, its plan was to fall back and try to lure the U.S. Pacific Fleet into the Inland Sea between the Japanese home islands of Honshu and Kyushu. But as early as spring 1940, Yamamoto remarked to one of his officers: “I wonder if an aerial attack can’t be made on Pearl Harbor.”

Others had suggested such a strategy but it had always been rejected as too dangerous. Pearl Harbor was too far away, too inaccessible, too well defended. Besides, the overall strategy of striking south toward Malaya and the Dutch East Indies now required all the navy’s resources. Yamamoto nonetheless began in early 1941 to assemble some trusted lieutenants to make plans for Operation Hawaii, which he also named Operation Z, after Admiral Togo’s historic banner at the battle of Tsushima.

One of Yamamoto’s key planners was Commander Minoru Genda, still only 36, still a hot pilot at heart, first in his class at the Etajima naval academy, combat ace over China, leader of a daredevil stunt team called Genda’s Flying Circus. Genda contributed several key ideas: that every available Japanese carrier should be assigned to the attack, that it should combine dive-bombing, high-level bombing and torpedoes, that the attackers should strike at dawn.

Not the least important of his ideas was to recruit a cadet classmate named Mitsuo Fuchida, who could train all of Yamamoto’s pilots and lead them into battle. Fuchida, grandson of a famous samurai, was born in 1902, a Year of the Tiger (“Tora! Tora!”), so he was 39 when summoned to his mission. An ardent admirer of Hitler, he had grown a toothbrush mustache.

The techniques of dive-bombing and torpedo bombing were still relatively new, and aerial torpedoes were almost impossible to use in water as shallow as Pearl Harbor. Filching an idea from a recent British torpedo raid against the Italian naval base of Taranto, Genda had technicians create auxiliary wooden tail fins that would keep torpedoes closer to the surface; others converted armor-piercing shells into bombs. But drilling was Fuchida’s main task, and all summer his planes staged trial runs over Kagoshima Bay in Kyushu, chosen for its physical resemblance to Pearl. Only in September did Genda tell him, “In case of war, Yamamoto plans to attack Pearl Harbor.”

Ironically, Yamamoto didn’t want to carry out his own plan. But if Japan was going to be forced to fight, he believed it should strike first and strike hard, in the hope that a demoralized U.S. would then ac-
cept a negotiated peace. If he was deluded in that hope, he was not deluded about U.S. power. “If I am told to fight regardless of the consequences, I shall run wild for the first six months or a year,” he presciently told Prince Konoye in the fall of 1940, “but I have utterly no confidence for the second or third year.”

By 1940 Japan had installed a pro-Japanese regime in Nanking, but U.S. aid enabled Chiang to fight on. Konoye began wondering about mediators to end the exasperating war that Tokyo insisted on calling the Chinese Incident. Where angels fear to tread, in rushed the missionary fathers of the Maryknoll Society, who guilelessly assured each side that the other seemed ready to talk. And so talks began in Washington in the spring of 1941.

Talks is hardly the word. Tokyo’s goal was to negotiate a victory in China, Washington’s goal to negotiate a Japanese withdrawal. U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, nearly 70, a longtime power on Capitol Hill, was a log-cabin-born Tennessee mountaineer who knew little of the Japanese and disliked what he knew. He once referred to Tokyo’s envoys as “pissants.” Japan’s ambassador, Kichisaburo Nomura, 64, a one-eyed retired admiral and former Foreign Minister, was considered a moderate and so was mistrusted in Tokyo. It did not help that Hull had a speech difficulty, while Nomura was partially deaf.

Hardly had the talks begun when the Japanese, having already seized a number of bases in northern Vietnam, suddenly occupied the south in July 1941. That threatened not only the back route to China but British control of Malaya and Burma (now Myanmar). Roosevelt retaliated by freezing all Japanese assets and placing an embargo on all trade in oil, steel, chemicals, machinery and other strategic goods. (The British and Dutch soon announced similar embargoes.) At the same time, he announced that General Douglas MacArthur, the retired Chief of Staff now luxuriating in the Philippines, was being recalled to active military duty and financed in mobilizing 120,000 Filipino soldiers. (Roosevelt had made another significant move that spring, when he shifted the Pacific Fleet’s headquarters from San Diego to Pearl Harbor.)

Roosevelt’s embargo was a devastating blow, for Japan bought more than half its imports from the U.S. The Japanese military leaders were determined to fight. When they met with the Cabinet on Sept. 3, they insisted on an October deadline for Konoye’s diplomatic efforts. The Prince asked for a meeting with Roosevelt, but Hull was opposed, and Roosevelt, preoccupied with the increasing likelihood of war with Hitler, never answered. Konoye resigned on Oct. 16. Tojo, a Kwantung Army veteran who was then War Minister, became Premier.

Though Japan’s military leaders had decided on war, they had not yet agreed to a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Yamamoto was adamant: “Japan must deal the U.S. Navy a fatal blow at the outset of the war. It is the only way she can fight with any reasonable prospect of success.” But war games suggested that an attacking fleet would be spotted and badly mauled. As late as October, Yamamoto learned that the staff admirals, determined to concentrate on the drive into Southeast Asia, wanted to take away two or three of his six carriers. The First Air Fleet’s own commander, Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, supported that decision. “The success of our surprise attack on Pearl Harbor,” Nagumo predicted dolefully, “will prove to be the Waterloo of the war to follow.” Yamamoto sent an aide to inform the navy’s high command that if his Pearl Harbor plan was rejected, “he will have no alternative but to resign, and with him his entire staff.” Yamamoto got his way.

The military set a new target date of Dec. 8 (Dec. 7 in Hawaii), and the Emperor and his military chiefs formally approved Yamamoto’s attack plan on Nov. 3. But the Foreign Ministry instructed Ambassador Nomura and Special Envoy Saburo Kurusu to make “a final effort” in Washington.

On Nov. 17, Yamamoto visited his training base in Saeki Bay to bid his men farewell. “Japan has
faced many worthy opponents in her glorious history—Mongols, Chinese, Russians,” Yamamoto said, “but in this operation we will meet the strongest opponent of all. I expect this operation to be a success.” Genda, Fuchida and other officers joined him in eating surume (dried cuttlefish) for happiness and kachiguri (walnuts) for victory. Near portable Shinto shrines, they toasted the Emperor with sake and shouted, “Banzai!”

It took Nagumo’s fleet five days to reach the rendezvous point at Hitokappu Bay in the Kuriles just north of Japan’s main islands. Fog swirled over the desolate outpost, and snow fell intermittently as the fleet steamed eastward at dawn on Nov. 26.

The armada boasted six carriers, led by Nagumo’s flagship, the Akagi, 400 warplanes, two battleships, two cruisers, nine destroyers and a dozen other surface ships. At an average 13 knots, refueling daily, the attack fleet pursued a course 3,500 miles through the empty expanse of the North Pacific. Its orders provided that “in the event an agreement is reached in the negotiations with the United States, the task force will immediately return to Japan,” but nobody expected that to happen.

The envoys made their “final effort” on Nov. 20, presenting to Hull an unyielding proposal on which Foreign Minister Togo said “no further concessions” could be made. Nomura noted that this was an inauspicious day—”They call it Thanksgiving”—but he dutifully delivered the message. It said the U.S. must restore trade to pre-embargo levels, provide oil from the Dutch East Indies and not interfere with Japan’s “efforts for peace” in China.

Hull’s answer, just as forceful, said the U.S. oil embargo would continue, and demanded that Japan “withdraw all military, naval, air and police forces from China and from Indochina.” He handed it to the envoys on Nov. 26, the day Nagumo’s fleet left Hitokappu Bay for Pearl Harbor. Hull did not know that, since the fleet was under total radio silence, but he did know from intercepted messages that another Japanese war fleet had passed Formosa on its way toward Indochina or Malaya. “We must all prepare for real trouble, possibly soon,” Roosevelt cabled Churchill.

The War Department then sent Hawaii and other outposts an important but significantly ambiguous “war warning.” “Negotiations with Japan appear to be terminated to all practical purposes,” said this Nov. 27 message over the signature of Chief of Staff George Marshall. “Japanese future action unpredictable but hostile action possible at any moment . . . You are directed to undertake such reconnaissance and other measures as you deem necessary, but these measures should be carried out so as not repeat not to alarm civil population or disclose intent. Report measures taken.” Hawaii’s commander, Lieut. General Walter Short, not a man of broad vision, reported back that he was taking measures to avert sabotage—parking his aircraft close together and keeping all ammunition safely locked up. Since Washington did not specify a threat to Pearl Harbor, Short felt he had done his duty, just as Marshall felt he had done his.

The Navy Department sent an even stronger message to its top commanders, specifically including the Pacific Fleet chief in Pearl Harbor, Admiral Husband Kimmel: “This dispatch is to be considered a war warning. Negotiations with Japan . . . have ceased, and an aggressive move by Japan is expected within the next few days.” Kimmel, 60, a hard-driving disciplinarian who had held his command less than a year, took the warning as “no more than saying that Japan was going to attack someplace.”

Kimmel and Short were only too aware that Washington was concentrating on Hitler’s victories in Russia and his submarines’ ravages of Atlantic shipping. Though Chief of Naval Operations Harold Stark acknowledged to Kimmel that his Pacific Fleet was weaker than the Japanese forces arrayed against it, he not only turned aside Kimmel’s request for two new battleships but took away three he had, plus one of his four carriers, to help fight the Battle of the Atlantic.
Roosevelt’s assertive strategy against Japan was largely a bluff, backed by inadequate armed forces and inadequate funds. Washington theoreticians saw the Philippines as a check to any Japanese move southward. MacArthur overconfidently promised that he would soon have 200,000 Filipinos ready for combat, and the War Department began in the summer of 1941 to ship him the first of a promised 128 new B-17 Flying Fortresses. By April 1942, said Marshall, that would represent “the greatest concentration of heavy-bomber strength anywhere in the world,” able to interdict any Japanese assault on Southeast Asia and mount “incendiary attacks to burn up the wood and paper structures of the densely populated Japanese cities.”

Perhaps the greatest single cause of American complacency in the Pacific was the fact that the U.S. military’s Operation Magic had deciphered Japan’s sophisticated Purple diplomatic code in 1940. But that triumph had its drawbacks. U.S. intelligence officials had to sift through so much trivia that they failed to react to some important messages, such as a Tokyo request to its Hawaiian consulate for the exact location of all ships in Pearl Harbor. Also, the code breaking was kept secret even from some key officials. While the British were plugged into Magic, and MacArthur too, Kimmel and Short were not.

Ironically, the Nazis warned the Japanese that their codes might have been broken, but Tokyo refused to believe the Americans were smart enough
for such a feat. Just as ironically, while U.S. code breakers knew of the Japanese warships heading for Southeast Asia, Nagumo’s radio silence meant that his carriers heading for Pearl Harbor simply disappeared. On Dec. 2, Kimmel’s intelligence officer confessed that nothing had been heard from the Japanese carriers for about two weeks.

“What!” said Kimmel. “You don’t know where [they] are?”

“No, sir, I do not. I think they are in home waters, but I do not know where they are.”

“Do you mean to say that they could be rounding Diamond Head, and you wouldn’t know it?”

“I hope they would be sighted before now.”

And the Americans could intercept but not understand a message Yamamoto sent his fleet on Dec. 2: “Climb Mount Niitaka.” That meant “Proceed with the attack.”

One thing that the code breaking did tell Washington was Tokyo’s answer to Hull’s last proposal. Before the original even reached the Japanese envoys, a messenger brought an intercepted version to Roosevelt in his White House study after dinner on Dec. 6. The President read it carefully for about 10 minutes, then said to his closest aide, Harry Hopkins, “This means war.”

Roosevelt tried to call Admiral Stark, but he was at a revival of Sigmund Romberg’s Student Prince; the President didn’t want him paged at the theater lest that cause “undue alarm.” When Roosevelt did finally reach him shortly before midnight, the Navy chief said, according to his later recollection, that the message was not “something that required action.”

After all, Stark testified, warnings had already gone out that Japan was “likely to attack at any time in any direction.”

That same Saturday night was the standard party night in Pearl Harbor, not orgiastic but convivial. Hundreds of soldiers and sailors from Schofield Barracks and Hickam and Kaneohe converged as usual on Waikiki Beach to see what was going on at Bill Leader’s bar, the Two Jacks or the Mint. Tantalizing Tootsies was the name of the variety show at the Princess.

Kimmel attended a staid dinner party at the Halekulani Hotel and left early. He had a golf date the next morning with General Short, who went to a charity dance at the Schofield Barracks and also left early. As he rode along the coast highway, Short admired the lights of Pearl Harbor glowing below him.

“Isn’t that a beautiful sight?” he said. “And what a target it would make!”

Though the final Japanese note said nothing about war or Pearl Harbor, it was not quite complete—it contained 13 parts and said another would soon follow. The 14th and last part reached Washington the morning of Dec. 7. It notified the U.S. that “it is impossible to reach an agreement through further negotiations.” An accompanying message instructed Nomura to deliver the note “at 1 p.m. on the 7th, your time.”

Nobody in Washington knew Hirohito had asked that the warning be delivered before the attack—1 p.m. in Washington was 7:30 a.m. in Hawaii—but an Army intelligence officer, Colonel Rufus Bratton, guessed as much. Bratton telephoned Marshall at his quarters at Fort Myers, Va., but he was out riding. More than an hour later, about 10:30 a.m., Marshall called back and said he was coming to his office shortly. About the same time, Hull was meeting with War Secretary Henry L. Stimson and Navy Secretary Frank Knox. “Hull is very certain that the Japs are planning some deviltry,” Stimson recorded in his diary, “and we are all wondering when the blow will strike.”

Fuchida woke at 5 a.m. As he told American military historian Gordon Prange, he put on red underwear and a red shirt so that if he was wounded, his men would not be distracted by the sight of his blood. At breakfast, one of his lieutenants said, “Honolulu sleeps.”

“How do you know?” asked Fuchida.

“The Honolulu radio plays soft music. Everything is fine.”
At 5:50 a.m. Nagumo’s fleet reached the takeoff point, about 220 miles north of Pearl Harbor. The six carriers turned east into a brisk wind and increased speed to 24 knots. Nagumo’s flagship was flying the celebrated Z pennant that Admiral Togo had flown at Tsushima in 1905. The flight decks tilted more than 10°, and the wind whipped spray over them.

“We could hear the waves splashing against the ship with a thunderous noise,” Fuchida recalled later. “Under normal circumstances, no plane would be permitted to take off in such weather... There were loud cheers as each plane rose into the air.”

Once up, the pilots circled overhead until all 183 planes assigned to the first wave were airborne. At 6:15 Fuchida gave a signal, then led the way south.

At almost that very hour — around 11:30 a.m. in Washington — Marshall arrived at his office and read the ominous words Bratton had brought him. He asked the officers assembled there what they thought it meant. All expected an imminent Japanese attack — somewhere. Marshall recalled that every major U.S. base had been warned of that more than a week earlier. Bratton and others urged a new warning. Marshall scrawled a message reporting the 1 p.m. meeting and added, “Just what significance the hour set may have we do not know, but be on alert accordingly.”

Bratton rushed the message to the War Department signal center, where Marshall’s scrawl had to be retyped for legibility. The message went to several points within a few minutes, but because of atmospheric difficulties, the copy for Hawaii went by commercial wireless. It reached Honolulu at 7:33 a.m. and ended in a pigeon hole, awaiting a motor-cycle messenger to deliver it.

Fuchida’s bombers had to fly blind over dense banks of clouds, so they homed on the Honolulu commercial radio station KGMB. Over his receiver, Fuchida heard soothing music, then a weather report: “Partly cloudy... over the mountains. Cloud base at 3,500 ft. Visibility good.” Fuchida flew on.

To save money and fuel and manpower, the Pearl Harbor authorities had recently canceled weekend reconnaissance flights. But they had acquired some new radar equipment, though the National Park Service strongly objected to towers being installed on scenic mountaintops.

Two trainees operating a mobile radar unit at Opana, on Oahu’s northern coast, were about to shut down when their watch ended at 7 a.m. Suddenly, Private Joseph Lockard noticed a large blip — “probably more than 50” planes — approaching southward from about 130 miles away. On the phone to Fort Shafter, Lockard reported to Lieut. Kermit Tyler “the largest [flight] I have ever seen on the equipment.” The inexperienced Tyler figured that the planes must be a flight of the new B-17s expected from California. He told Lockard, “Don’t worry about it.”

As Fuchida’s bombers neared Oahu, the defenders of Pearl Harbor got the last of their many warnings. Just outside the harbor, the U.S. destroyer Ward spotted an intruding submarine at 6:30 a.m. and opened fire from 50 yds. away. As the sub began diving, the Ward finished it off with depth charges. Lieut. William Outerbridge’s report of his action was still ricocheting around headquarters when Fuchida arrived overhead.

“What a majestic sight,” he said to himself as he counted the vessels lined up in Battleship Row in the dawn’s early light. He pulled the trigger on his flare gun. That was supposed to signal the slow-moving torpedo bombers to take advantage of the surprise and strike first. But Fuchida’s fighter pilots missed his signal to provide cover, so he fired again for the dive bombers to begin, and then the Japanese all attacked at once. Even when they made mistakes, it seemed that nothing could go wrong.

Within minutes, Pearl Harbor was pandemonium: explosions, screams, tearing steel, the rattle of machine guns, smoke, fire, bugles sounding, the whine of diving airplanes, more explosions, more screams. With Battleship Row afire, Fuchida’s bombers circled over the maze of Pearl Harbor’s docks and piers,
striking again and again at the cruisers and destroyers and supply ships harbored there.

Other Japanese bombers swarmed over Hawaii’s military airfields, Hickam and Wheeler, Kaneohe and Ewa. Dive-bombing and strafing the American planes neatly parked on the runways, they quickly won control of the sky. They wrecked hangars, warehouses, barracks—as well as the Hickam Field chapel and the enlisted men’s new beer hall, the Snake Ranch. And in the midst of all this, a rainbow appeared over Ford Island.

To many of the Americans, the whole morning had a dreamlike unreality. Disbelief had been the overwhelming first reaction—this couldn’t be happening, it was a trick, a drill, a silly rumor, a prank—disbelief and then pain and then anger, and still disbelief.

Admiral Kimmel was preparing for his golf game with General Short when an officer phoned him with the news that Japanese planes were attacking his fleet. The admiral was still buttoning his white uniform as he ran out of his house and onto the neighboring lawn of his chief of staff, Captain John Earle, which had a fine view of Battleship Row. Mrs. Earle said later that the admiral’s face was “as white as the uniform he wore.”

“The sky was full of the enemy,” Kimmel recalled. He saw the Arizona “lift out of the water, then sink back down—way down.” Mrs. Earle saw a battleship capsize.

“Looks like they’ve got the Oklahoma,” she said.

“Yes, I can see they have,” the admiral numbly responded.

General Short, who couldn’t see the explosions, bumped into an intelligence officer and asked, “What’s going on out there?”

“I’m not sure, general,” said Lieut. Colonel George Bicknell, “but I just saw two battleships sunk.”

“That’s ridiculous!” said Short.

Down on Battleship Row, Fuchida’s bombers kept pounding the helpless battlewagons. The West Virginia took six torpedoes, then two bombs. One large piece of shrapnel smashed into the starboard side of the bridge and tore open the stomach of the skipper, Captain Mervyn Bennion. A medic patched up the dying man’s wound, and a husky black mess steward, Doris Miller, who had once boxed as the ship’s heavyweight champion, helped move the stricken captain to a sheltered spot.

Fire and smoke swirled around the bridge. Bennion told his men to leave him; they ignored him. He asked them how the battle was going; they told him all was well. After Bennion died, an officer told Miller to feed ammunition into a nearby machine gun. Like other blacks in the Navy of 1941, Miller had not been trained for anything but domestic chores, but he soon took charge of the machine gun and started firing away. A young ensign recalled later that it was the first time he had seen Miller smile since he last fought in the ring.

Caught by surprise, and then often finding all ammunition neatly locked away, the defenders hacked away the locks and fought back with any weapons at hand—machine guns, rifles, pistols. This usually achieved nothing, but there were some surprises. At Kaneohe Naval Air Station on the east coast of Oahu, a flight of Mitsubishi Zeroes was strafing the hangars when a sailor named Sands darted out of an armory and fired a burst with a Browning automatic rifle.

“Hand me another BAR!” shouted Sands. “I swear I hit that yellow bastard!”

Japanese Lieut. Fusata Iida turned to strafe Sands, but the sailor fired another BAR clip, then ducked the bullets that pocked the armory’s wall. As Iida’s Zero climbed again, gasoline began streaming from his fuel tank. Before takeoff, Iida had said that any pilot whose engine failed should crash his plane into the enemy, so now he turned for a last attack. For one incredible minute, the two enemies faced and fired at each other, Iida from his crippled Zero, Sands with his BAR. Then the Zero nosed into a highway and smashed into pieces.
As Admiral Kimmel stood near a window, a spent machine-gun bullet smashed the glass and hit him lightly in the chest. Kimmel—who would soon, like General Short, be dismissed from his command—picked up the bullet. To an aide, he observed, "It would have been merciful had it killed me."

In Washington the disbelief was just as overwhelming. "My God, this can’t be true, this must mean the Philippines," said Secretary Knox on hearing the news. "No, sir," said Admiral Stark, "this is Pearl."

Knox called Roosevelt, and Roosevelt called Hull, who was supposed to meet Nomura and Kurusu at 1 p.m. But the envoys had trouble getting the message from Tokyo decoded and retyped and asked for a delay, so it was 2:05 before they seated themselves, all unkowning, in Hull’s antechamber. Hull, who had already read their message and knew about the raid on Pearl Harbor as well, made a pretense of reading the document, then lashed out at the luckless envoys. "In all my 50 years of public service," he declared, "I have never seen a document that was more crowded with infamous falsehoods and distortions." When Nomura tried to answer, Hull raised a hand to cut him off, then showed him to the door.

Fuchida’s surprise attack lasted only about half an hour. Then, after a short lull, a second wave of 171 more planes roared in. By now the Americans were on the alert and firing at anything in sight. Twenty planes flying in from maneuvers with the Enterprise came under heavy American fire; two were shot down.

The battered Nevada (its band having finished The Star-Spangled Banner) managed to get up enough steam to proceed majestically out into the channel to the sea. Despite a gaping hole in its bow, its guns were firing, and its torn flag flew high. As it edged past the burning Arizona, three of that doomed ship’s crewmen swam over, clambered aboard and manned a starboard gun.

"Ah, good!" the watching Fuchida said to himself as he saw the slow-moving Nevada. At his signal, all available bombers attacked in an effort to sink it and block the channel to the sea. Bombs ignited huge fires in the ship’s bow. It escaped total destruction only by deliberately running aground.

More fortunate—indeed kissed by fortune—were Army pilots George Welch and Kenneth Taylor, who had gone from a dance at the Wheeler Officers’ Club to an all-night poker game. They were still in formal dress at 8 a.m. when they saw the first Japanese planes open fire overhead. Under strafing fire, Taylor’s car careened back to the P-40 fighters at Haleiwa Field. Taking off, the two went looking for Japanese planes and soon found them over Wheeler.

"I got in a string of six or eight planes," Taylor recalled. "I was on one’s tail as we went over Waialua . . . and there was one following firing at me . . . Lieut. Welch, I think, shot the other man down.” Welch’s version: “We took off directly into them and shot some down. I shot down one right on Lieut. Taylor’s tail.”

Landing only for more fuel and ammunition, the two sleepless lieutenants set off for the Marine base at Barber’s Point. “We went down and got in the traffic pattern and shot down several planes there,” said Taylor, who suffered a severe arm wound. “I know for certain I shot down two planes or perhaps more; I don’t know.” Official records credited the two of them with downing seven planes, almost one-quarter of all Japanese losses.

The great attack was really fairly short. The first bombers returned to their carriers just after 10 a.m., scarcely two hours after they descended on Battleship Row. Fuchida lingered to observe and photograph the damage and was the last to return to Nagumo’s fleet. It was still only noon.

Fuchida and Genda argued fiercely for renewing the attack. The oil-storage tanks had not been hit, and the raiders had not found any of Kimmel’s three carriers (the Lexington and Enterprise were at sea, the Saratoga undergoing repairs). But Admiral Nagumo,
who had mistrusted the plan from the start, felt he had accomplished his mission and saw no reason to risk his fleet any further. Back in Japan, Yamamoto strongly disapproved of Nagumo’s decision to withdraw but accepted the tradition that such decisions are left to the combat commander on the scene.

Long after the Japanese had left, Pearl Harbor reverberated with reports of enemy invasions, parachute landings and other nightmares. Jittery defenders fired wildly at anything that moved. A fishing boat returning with the day’s catch was shot to pieces.

On the capsized hull of the Oklahoma, Commander Kenworthy strode up and down for hours listening for raps and banging from the men trapped inside. Some survivors were finally pulled to safety through holes cut in the hull, but others drowned in the water rushing through the openings. Kenworthy wouldn’t leave until the last of 32 survivors had been saved. By then it was Monday afternoon. Six sailors caught inside the West Virginia died just before Christmas — after two weeks of incarceration.

In terms of casualties and destruction, this was one of the most one-sided battles in history. The U.S. lost 2,433 killed (about half of them on the Arizona) and 1,178 wounded. The Japanese, who had expected to sacrifice as much as one-third of their force, lost 55 airmen, nine crewmen aboard five minisubs and approximately 65 on one sunken submarine. The U.S. lost 18 surface warships, sunk or seriously damaged; the Japanese none. The U.S. lost 188 planes destroyed and 159 damaged; the Japanese lost 29. Yet three of the five wrecked U.S. battleships (the California, Nevada and West Virginia) were eventually restored to service, and all the lost warplanes were eventually replaced — more than replaced — by the bombers that struck Tokyo and Hiroshima.

If Pearl Harbor seemed an American disaster, it proved a Japanese disaster as well. Churchill knew that when he gloated at the news: “So we had won after all!” So did Stimson, who felt “relief . . . that a crisis had come in a way which would unite all our people.” So did Admiral Yamamoto, when he predicted that he would run wild for only a year. Pearl Harbor united Americans in rage and hatred, and thus united, powerful and determined, they would prove invincible.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways was the attack on Pearl Harbor a surprise, and in what ways was it not? What does this say about American hopes, preparedness, and history?

2. Explain the main lines of the history of American-Japanese relations. What were the purpose and consequences of the manner in which they started? Describe the conflict over China. What were Japan’s intentions in going into China? Why did the United States not react more? Can you see examples of racism in the reactions of both the United States and Japan?

3. Describe Admiral Yamamoto’s background and personality, as well as his plan for Pearl Harbor and its purpose. How did the Japanese government react to this plan? What finally made Japanese officials adopt it?

4. How did the United States react to the possibility of an attack from Japan, and how did Hawaii respond in particular? Should or could the United States have been better prepared?

5. Why does Otto Friedrich conclude that “if Pearl Harbor seemed an American disaster, it proved a Japanese disaster as well”? Could Japan have done anything to avert this disaster? What were the longer-term effects on the positions of the United States and Japan in the world community?