

How The Film *Tora! Tora! Tora!* May Be Utilized As A Teaching Tool About Pearl Harbor

By Daniel A. Métraux

The Essentials: *Tora! Tora! Tora!*

By RICHARD FLEISCHER, TOSHIO MASUDA, AND KINJI FUKASAKU

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX, 1970

144 MINUTES, DVD, COLOR, ENGLISH AND JAPANESE

The use of film in a history class can be an important learning tool for students. The traditional method of instruction based on pure lecturing can inform students of the basic facts, but the use of film can substantially enhance the learning experience. When I was a Professor of Asian Studies at a small women's college in Virginia, I often used films as a way of enhancing my lectures. When teaching about modern Chinese history and culture, I would show such movies as *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and the *Last Emperor* (1987), for India under British rule *Gandhi* (1982), and the Japanese film *Nana* for a course on modern East Asian women. But when teaching about the “road to Pearl Harbor,” there is no better film than *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970).

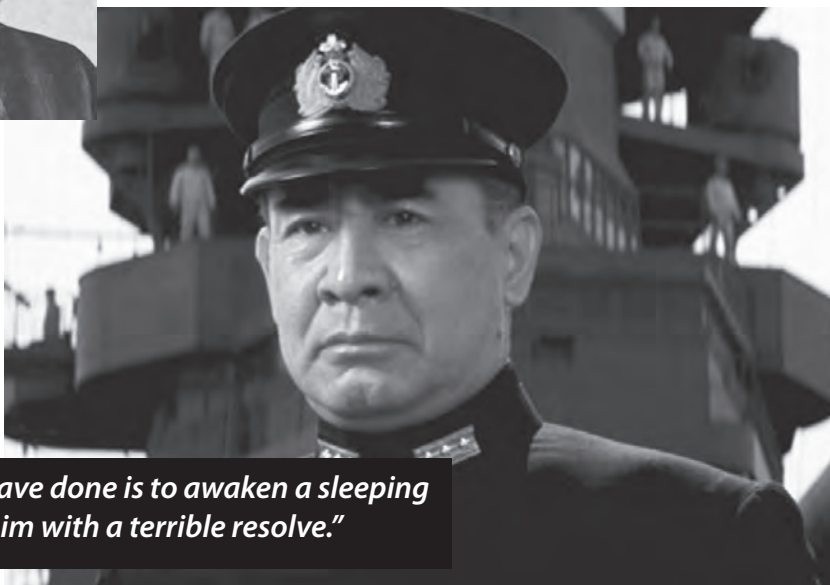
I am a baby boomer, born in 1948, and World War II was still very much alive in the minds of my father, uncle, and brother who had fought in the war. But today's college students, born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, often regard World War II as long-forgotten history. When I last taught my Modern Japan course in 2015, one of my brightest students, who had earlier traveled with me on a study trip to Japan, was jolted out of her complacency when I told

the class we were now going to study about the Pacific War: “How could the US go to war against Japan, as we are such great friends today and the Japanese are so nice to us?” This particular response is far from simply anecdotal: a 2018 poll of 1,000 American citizens indicated that 60 percent of respondents could not name the nations that the US fought in World War II; when this question and similar ones were analyzed by age group, less than 20 percent of respondents under forty-five could answer this question or similar ones in the American history survey.¹ My lectures gave her some background on what happened, but it took a careful viewing of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* to better understand the full ferocity of the violence of the Pearl Harbor attack.



Isoroku Yamamoto was a Japanese Marshal Admiral of the Imperial Japanese Navy and the Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet during World War II.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/tfbhc2h3>.



“I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.”

Sō Yamamura as Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto. Source: Images in the article are screen captures from *Tora! Tora! Tora!* except where otherwise indicated.



The attack began at 7:55 am Hawaiian time, and lasted for two hours and twenty-two minutes. Over 300 aircraft were destroyed or damaged at five air stations: Hickam, Wheeler, Ford Island, Kaneohe, and Ewa Field. Source: NPR website at <https://tinyurl.com/zwen428w>.

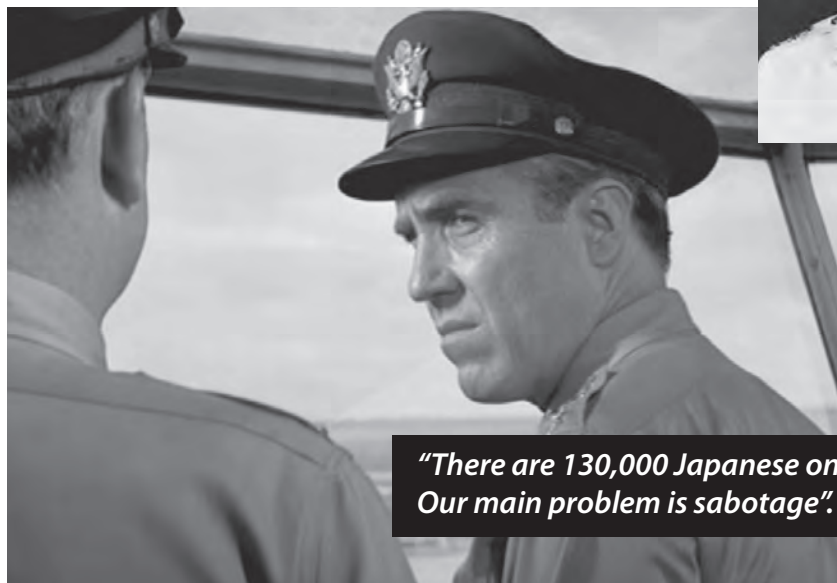
The movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (directed by American Richard Fleischer and Japanese Kinji Fukasaku and Toshio Masuda, and including well-known actors from both countries) is important as a learning tool because it shows both sides prepare for war without glorifying one side and condemning the other. We see the earnest debates that occurred on both sides: hotheads in Japan claim that Americans are too fat and lazy to fight wars both in Europe and the Pacific, while Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the highly accomplished Imperial Navy strategist who had spent extensive time in the US, cautions against waking up the “sleeping tiger.” American military leaders discount the audacity of a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

“*Tora Tora Tora*” was the Japanese code expression for the signal to begin the attack on Pearl Harbor. “Tora” is a Japanese word that means “tiger,” but the full phrase is considered an abbreviation for *totsugeki raigeki*, which implies “lightning attack.”

The movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!* very meticulously covers the actual attack at Pearl Harbor and the many events and missteps leading up to the outbreak of war on December 7, 1941. The movie starts with the year 1939, as some officials in both Japan and the United States come to realize that war between the two was possible. Japan was bogged down with a massive invasion of China that was not going well. Japanese leaders were genuinely concerned over the decision by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to embargo the sale of oil and other goods that were essential to the Japanese war machine. Tensions between the two nations grew when Japan joined the Axis powers in the 1940 Tripartite Pact. The Japanese quickly developed plans to attack Pearl Harbor, the major American naval base in the Pacific. Their goal was to destroy every American aircraft carrier and battleship to free up the Pacific for Japanese domination.

American complacency mystified the Japanese when they began finalizing their plans for an attack on Pearl Harbor. When Japanese decided on the actual date of their strike, they sent detailed messages to their military leaders stationed all over Asia and to their embassy staff in Washington. The film graphically shows how American intelligence had cracked the Japanese codes and could monitor every message sent out by Japanese leaders in Tokyo. American military leaders knew something was up, and a few American military officials began to speculate on the possibility that the Japanese were planning an attack. Sadly, they eventually came to ignore the implications of these messages, and their concerns never reached President Roosevelt’s desk.

One scene in the movie that symbolizes the seemingly absurd lack of concern



“There are 130,000 Japanese on this island. Our main problem is sabotage.”—General Short

Jason Robards as Lt. General Walter C. Short.



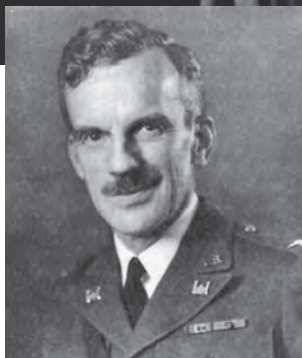
Lt. General Walter C. Short, Commander-in-Chief of the Army in Hawaii. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/s9634khh>.



Just hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Chief Intelligence Officer Colonel Rufus Bratton finally has the attention of the Washington high command—including Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War.

E. G. Marshall as Colonel Rufus Sumter Bratton.

Joseph Cotton as Henry L. Stimson.



Colonel Rufus Sumter Bratton, Chief of the Far Eastern Section of the Intelligence Branch of the Military Intelligence Division (G-2) in the War Department in December 1941.

Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, 1911–1913 and 1940–1945. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/ycx337f9>.

Source: *Alchetron* website at <https://tinyurl.com/24b6yhj3>.



Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, Commander in Chief of the United States Pacific Fleet.

Source: *Naval History and Heritage Command* at <https://tinyurl.com/yba4a9k4>.

on the part of some, if not most, US officers stationed in Hawai'i about a potential Japanese attack comes when the US military installs a highly effective radar post in rural Hawai'i. A junior officer manning the post complains to his superior officer that there was no telephone at the radar station to connect him with military headquarters at Pearl Harbor. The superior rebuked him by noting that there was a gas station a mile down the road that must have a telephone. Later, we learn that soon before the attack, the US Navy had trapped and destroyed a Japanese submarine lingering just outside Pearl Harbor. It never occurred to American military brass that the submarine incident was a prelude to a Japanese attack.

The most impressive part of the movie is the actual attack on Pearl Harbor. The film very deservedly



Jason Robards as Lt. General Walter C. Short.

won an Academy Award for special effects. The viewer sees a very vivid view of the violent fighting that is Pearl Harbor. Japanese bombers had the benefit of total surprise, which gave them a huge advantage as they sank and badly destroyed battleship after battleship. We see American pilots rushing to their planes, only to have the planes blown to bits by Japanese bombers before they could get off the ground. The film ends as the Japanese planes return to their mother ships. Admiral Yamamoto worries that the war has just begun and laments that the US had sent their new aircraft carriers, the main target of the Japanese, back to California before the attack.

Another effective medium is the hybrid nature of parts of the film, especially at the time of the attack itself. Most of the



Just hours before the attack, Admiral Stark is briefed by intelligence officer Kramer. It is suggested that he call Admiral Kimmel in Hawaii —he calls the President instead.

Westly Addy as Lieutenant Commander Alvin D. Kramer, a cryptographer from the intelligence wing of the Navy.

Edward Andrews as Admiral Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations.



Admiral Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations.
Source: *Naval History and Heritage Command* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y22wze4>.

movie portrays events in a fictional context played by actors both in Japan and the United States, but footage from films taken at the time of the attack gives a visual veracity to the movie itself.

Many years ago, I interviewed the late American Admiral Jackson Galbraith, who was the commander of an American battleship at Manila in the Philippines at the time of Pearl Harbor and who spent the entire war as a prisoner of war in Japan. Galbraith told me that the US Navy based in Manila went on full battle alert in late November 1941: “We knew that war was coming, and we expected a full Japanese assault on Manila in early December, but it just never dawned on us that the Japanese would also attack on Pearl Harbor. We were stunned by the audacity of the attack.”

The film *Tora! Tora! Tora!* does a superb job in telling *how* the attack happened, but not *why* it occurred. Except for a few cursory comments at the start of the film, we are never told why tensions grew between Tokyo and Washington. Past relations between Japan and the United States during the Meiji Era (1868–1912) had been favorable and close, but relations began to sour in the 1920s and 1930s. We are never told why. We hear that Japanese were terribly upset when the United States placed an embargo on the sale of petroleum in 1940, but the movie fails to tell us why Roosevelt decided on this action.

I learned something about Japanese strategic thinking from some elderly retired Japanese Navy officials when I was an exchange student at Waseda University in Tokyo in the late 1960s. They reminded me that Japan produced little or no oil on its own. Petroleum was something that Japanese had to purchase from foreign sources, especially the United States. FDR was quite concerned by the Japanese invasion of China and gambled that the cessation of oil sales to Japan would force the Japanese to curtail their attack in China.

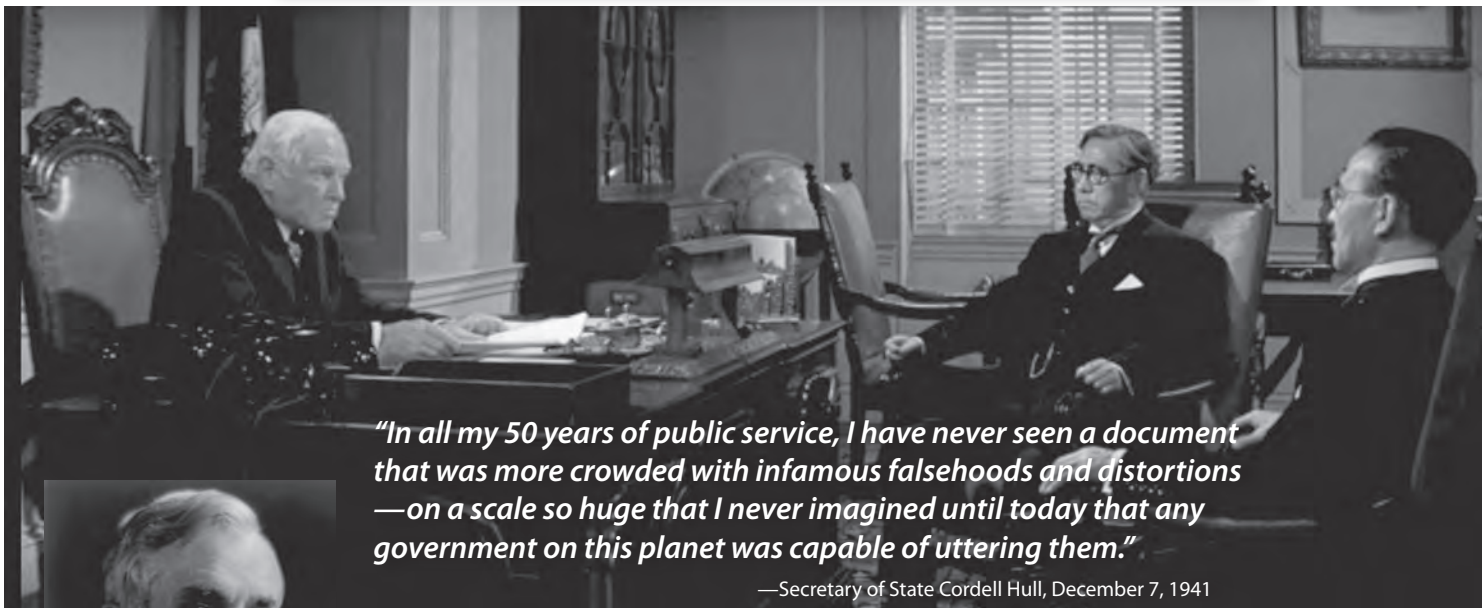


Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, Commander-in-Chief of the First Air Fleet, Japan's main aircraft carrier force.
Source: *Alchetron* website at <https://tinyurl.com/8piph592>.



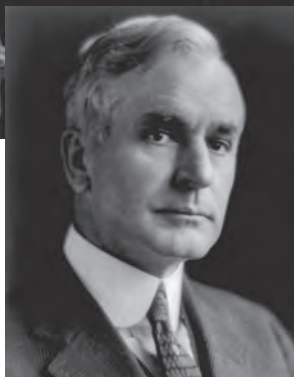
Admiral Nagumo refuses to launch the second attack wave. “Our mission has been completely accomplished.”

Eijiro Tohno as Admiral Chuichi Nagumo.



"In all my 50 years of public service, I have never seen a document that was more crowded with infamous falsehoods and distortions —on a scale so huge that I never imagined until today that any government on this planet was capable of uttering them."

—Secretary of State Cordell Hull, December 7, 1941



Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/2majctwj>.



Ambassador Kichisaburō Nomura. Source: Detail from a photo on *Google Arts & Culture* at <https://tinyurl.com/8at7e2n4>. Photo by John Phillips. © Time Inc.



Saburō Kurusu was sent to the US in November 1941 as a "special envoy" to help Ambassador Nomura in negotiations with Secretary of State Hull. Source: *Warfare History Network* at <https://tinyurl.com/am2ajbh8>.

George Macready as Secretary of State Cordell Hull; Shogo Shimada as Ambassador Nomura, and Hisao Toake and Ambassador Kurusu. On November 26, 1941, Secretary Hull presented the Japanese ambassadors with the document known as the "Hull note" that among its conditions called for the withdrawal of Japanese troops from China and French Indochina. Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo viewed the note as an ultimatum (a claim sharply criticized by Secretary Hull) leading to the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7.

Japanese officials were horrified by FDR's oil embargo and set their sights on oil-producing areas of Southeast Asia, especially in what became the modern nation of Indonesia. The goal, according to one of my informants, was to seize control of oil production in Southeast Asia while destroying the American fleet at Pearl Harbor so that the US could not come to the rescue of these British, French, and Dutch colonies. One Japanese informant went so far as to say that while Japan lost the war militarily, its goal of liberating the rest of Asia from Western rule had indeed been achieved.

One person conspicuously missing entirely in this film is Roosevelt himself. The implied message in the film is that FDR never heard the concerns of the ranking American officials who appear in the movie. This cannot be completely true. The president was very much aware of the deterioration of US–Japanese relations, and his embargo on certain goods sold to Japan shows his determination to rein in the Japanese in China. There is no evidence at all that FDR knew that an attack was coming, but he certainly knew the danger of a possible war.

Tora! Tora! Tora! provides a powerful visual image of the Pearl Harbor crisis. We are given a highly unique presence in Tokyo as the Japanese plan their mode of attack, but unfortunately, the movie's attention is focused almost exclusively on the attack on Pearl Harbor. The greater truth is that Pearl Harbor was only one part of a coordinated Japanese attack not only on Hawai'i, but also on Manila, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Dutch East Indies, and elsewhere. Oddly, the film makes no mention at all of the military operations in Southeast Asia and never tells us why these attacks occurred. In this sense, the movie's focus is too narrow and fails to tell us about the attacks on the French, Dutch, and British who still dominated Southeast Asia. Still, despite these faults, the film does a most memorable job in portraying the whole Pearl Harbor experience.

NOTE

1. See "National Survey Finds Just 1 in 3 Americans Would Pass Citizenship Test," *The Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation*, last modified October 3, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/5cy6xsah>.

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