

# Teaching Pearl Harbor

## *A New Japanese Perspective*

By Daniel A. Métraux

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is one of the seminal events of American history. It forced America's entry into World War II and marked this country's emergence as a world power and dominant actor on the world scene. Until that time, the US had been an economic powerhouse, but a military midget with little interest in pursuing global conquest. Unfortunately, few Americans today have any true understanding of why Japan, a comparatively small nation already engaged in a full-scale war in China, would suddenly go to war with the US and Great Britain without any apparent provocation.

Teaching Pearl Harbor is one of my more difficult tasks as a professor of Asian Studies at a small Virginia college. All my students are well aware that wave upon wave of Japanese bombers hit the largest American naval base in the Pacific on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941. They feel a sense of outrage when they view a video of President Franklin Roosevelt's powerful "Day of Infamy" speech, but they look at me incredulously when I muse that some Japanese considered their attack an act of self-defense. I get even stranger looks when I say that one immediate issue was oil, that the US had placed an embargo on the sale of oil to Japan with the hope of forcing the Japanese to withdraw their forces from Southeast Asia and possibly China. They nod understandingly when I demonstrate Japan's goal of seizing Indonesia's oil wealth and of attacking Pearl Harbor to prevent an immediate American counterattack. But, of course, there are far more complex issues that led to the crisis, as well as the overbearing question of which nation should shoulder the blame for the attack.

One of the great challenges for teaching Pearl Harbor is finding adequate readings for both teacher and student. There are enough books on the topic to fill a small library, but in late 2011, while visiting International House in Tokyo, I discovered a very interesting new work by a Japanese scholar that has two major strengths. It is a clear, well-developed background analysis as well as a very detailed, hour-by-hour discussion concerning what took place in Tokyo and Washington during that fateful weekend in December 1941 before Japanese bombers struck Pearl Harbor. Unfortunately, this book, *Demystifying Pearl Harbor: A New Japanese Perspective* by veteran Japanese diplomat, university law professor and scholar Takeo Iguchi, was published with limited circulation in Japan and is generally not available in the US. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to discuss some of Professor Iguchi's ideas because of his incredibly deep understanding of the topic and his unique ability to fully analyze Japanese actions that led to Pearl Harbor. It is an obvious truth that no one can adequately teach Pearl Harbor without understanding what the Japanese themselves were up to.

Iguchi can even bring in some personal perspectives because he was an eleven-year-old boy living in Washington, DC at the time of Pearl Harbor. Iguchi's father was a diplomat at the Japanese Embassy in Washington at the time. Throughout the first chapter of the book, he details the evacuation of all Japanese Embassy staff and their families by the FBI, first to the Homestead Resort in western Virginia and later to the Greenbriar Resort Hotel in West Virginia, before they were sent home to Japan in 1942. At the end of the chapter, Iguchi recalls his pride in Japan's early victories and his certainty of Japan's invincibility in the war.

### The Broader Scope of Pearl Harbor

From the start, Iguchi states that one must look beyond the narrow confines of the attack on Pearl Harbor to get a clear view of what occurred. At virtually the same time that Japanese bombers and submarines were attacking Hawai'i, Japanese forces attacked British positions in Malaya and began making headway against British and American fortifications in Singapore and Manila. The Japanese goal was to clear the way to Indonesia to gain full access to its oil and other natural resources. To accomplish this, the Japanese had to remove all Western obstacles, including British and American bases in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, as well as the possibility of an American counterattack from Pearl Harbor. Unfortunately for Japan, one of its main targets at Pearl Harbor was a cluster of newly minted aircraft carriers that were out at sea at the time of the attack. The fact that these carriers played a decisive role in defeating Japan at the Battle of Midway only six months later, coupled with the fact that the Japanese failed to destroy the American oil storage depot at Honolulu, meant that the attack on Pearl Harbor was anything but a resounding military victory for Tokyo.

### The Failure of Diplomacy

Iguchi's early discussion of the failure of diplomacy and the road to war is critical for an understanding of what later happened. Although the US and Japan enjoyed a very close relationship up through the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, there had been a general souring of relations between the two nations ever since. However, there was little danger of war through the 1930s between the US and Japan because the Japanese worked hard not to appear too belligerent when dealing with Washington. The US strenuously opposed Japan's military forays into China in the mid- and late-1930s, but its own domestic woes during the Great Depression, the strong support for isolation among much of the public, and its small and outdated military made chances of a military confrontation with Japan rather remote. American attitudes only began slowly to change with the onset of World War II in Europe in late 1939 and Japan's decision to ally itself with Germany and Italy.

Iguchi alleges that war between the US and Japan was not inevitable and that it could have been avoided, even at the last moment. The author's careful analysis of Japanese diplomacy shows a government often at cross-purposes with itself. There was apparent confusion in the Japanese government and military as to the true nature of Japan's goals. Should Japan confront the Soviet Union over northern China? Would it be better to seek greater accommodation with the British and Americans or should Japan gamble on war? Iguchi outlines in great detail the intricate struggle for power as different factions within the nation's political and military hierarchy struggled to gain ascendancy. Iguchi notes, "In a nutshell, the foreign policy pursued by Japan in 1940 and 1941 was inconsistent, unsteady, and a bit haphazard" (51). There was even a time when the US and Japan came "tantalizingly close to a provisional agreement," only to see a further breakdown of discussions. The Japanese military was more concerned with its war in China and a potential threat from the Soviet Union until well into 1941. The idea that Japan's war was with the US and Britain did not begin to crystallize until late November 1941.

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Although Iguchi is a bona fide Japanese scholar, his conclusions are wholly objective, and he is far more critical of the Japanese than the Americans. He totally rejects the oft-quoted thesis that the Roosevelt administration deliberately provoked Japan into attacking Pearl Harbor as a backdoor method of entering the European theater to rescue Britain. Iguchi also challenges the notion that American economic sanctions and its demands for a complete Japanese withdrawal from Indochina and China and a termination of the tripartite pact with Italy and Germany directly forced Japan to attack the US and Britain. However, he does note that “[Prime Minister] Tojo asserted that if Japan were to withdraw from China, four years of blood and sacrifice” on the part of the Japanese military “would be for naught” and that such a withdrawal would have disastrous consequences for Japan’s control over Manchuria, Korea, and Taiwan. Only in late November did Japan conclude that there were no chances of an agreement with the US and UK, that US global strategy was designed to continue American “world hegemony,” and that Japan had no clear path but war. A Japanese document composed on November 29 concludes, “America as yet [was] making no preparations for war. We are truly on the verge of achieving a blitzkrieg against the US that will outdo even the German blitzkrieg against the Russians” (67).

Iguchi effectively counters the frequently made claim that the negotiations between Ambassador Nomura and Secretary of State Hull were not

serious. Many parties in Japan and the US genuinely hoped for a last-minute settlement. “The American approach was to create a *modus vivendi*,” and the intent of Hull’s sharp note of late November was a further attempt for a comprehensive settlement. By then, major military powerbrokers in Japan had decided on war but failed to inform anybody in their embassy in Washington of the impending attacks.

#### Japan’s Muffled Decision for War

Just what was going on in Tokyo and Washington during the days and hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor has long been a matter of dispute among historians. I gained some personal insights in 1984 when I interviewed retired Rear Admiral William Jackson Galbraith (1906–1994), who had been air defense officer on the USS *Houston*, a battleship based in the Philippines in late 1941. Galbraith said that, by the first week in December 1941, every American naval official in the Philippines expected war to soon break out between the US and Japan. They felt that the objective of the Japanese attack would be to secure oil reserves in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) to make up for the oil being embargoed by the US. They expected that such an attack would include aggression against American forces in the Philippines, then an American colony. In Galbraith’s words:


*We fully expected an attack on our bases in the Philippines and had been on full-scale alert since Thanksgiving, 1941. However, none of us had any idea that the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor. We were so focused on fending off an attack in the Philippines that we gave no thought to a hit against Hawaii. That came as a total surprise.*

The latter part of Iguchi’s *Demistifying Pearl Harbor* focuses on the timing and transmission of Japan’s final memorandum to the Japanese Embassy in Washington from Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on December 7. The timing here is important because it suggests whether or not Japan intended a sneak attack against the US and whether Tokyo actually planned to deliver its declaration of war after the commencement of hostilities. President Roosevelt, in his declaration of war speech on December 8, denounced Japan for its unprovoked attack on Hawai’i, but Tokyo vehemently denied that it intended the delay in its transmission that it was no longer going to engage in any further negotiations with Washington over this matter.

Iguchi examines in great depth the Japanese framing of Japan’s final memorandum to the US and its delayed transmission to the Japanese Embassy and thus to the US Department of State. He clearly states that Japan did not comply with international law, which stipulates that “a prior delivery of ultimatum in clear wording to bring about a state of war which ipso facto terminates diplomatic relations.” No such ultimatum was ever delivered. Japan’s “Final Memorandum” contains no specific wording regarding the use of armed forces. The expedited delivery of the “Final Memorandum” was “thwarted” by officials in the Japanese military and possibly some officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs because it jeopardized their military plan for a successful operation. Iguchi also alleges that Japanese military officials intercepted an urgent telegram from President Roosevelt to the emperor of Japan that arrived just before the Pearl Harbor attack was set to begin. The telegram, which called for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, was only delivered after the fighting began.

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*Iguchi, a highly trained legal scholar, builds a case that while both sides must share some of the blame for the Pearl Harbor tragedy, the preponderance of guilt lies with Tokyo.*

Iguchi also discounts the sincerity of Japan's stated goals for launching the war in the Pacific. Japanese war propaganda proclaimed its attack on British and American positions across the Pacific to be a stroke for the liberation of Asia from Western colonial dominance—"Asia for the Asians," a genuine "Asian co-prosperity sphere" where Japan would direct the birth of a new free Asia. Iguchi notes that this propaganda was launched only after the war in the Pacific began as a way of justifying what Japan had already done.

#### Pearl Harbor and the Pacific War in Broader Perspective

The most logical conclusion one gets from reading Iguchi's *Demystifying Pearl Harbor* is that Pearl Harbor and the subsequent Pacific War were not inevitable. It might have been avoided or at least postponed for a while longer. The primary concerns of the US focused on the war in Europe and the fate of Great Britain. Hitler had just made the awful miscalculation of attacking the Soviet Union, but by late November 1941, it was still unclear whether the Russians could hold out against Hitler's invasion. The tide was beginning to turn in Europe, but the Axis powers still held the advantage. The US was endeavoring to avoid war with Japan while at the same time attempting to contain Japanese expansion. The oil embargo and other restrictions imposed by the US were designed to accomplish this difficult feat, but it backfired when Japan felt itself cornered with no way out but a flagrant attack against its alleged oppressors.

Iguchi, a highly trained legal scholar, builds a case that while both sides must share some of the blame for the Pearl Harbor tragedy, the preponderance of guilt lies with Tokyo. The US was certainly aware of the possibility of war, but even though Americans had cracked the Japanese code used to connect Tokyo with its embassy in Washington, there is no indication that the US was prepared for an attack at Pearl Harbor. The start of the war came as a surprise to the Roosevelt administration, the State Department, and its military. The

Japanese, however, made the situation worse for themselves by actively masking its warlike activities until after the commencement of hostilities.

Iguchi also correctly infers that the decision-making process in Japan may have been hijacked by a small group working within the Foreign Ministry and the military. There was ultimately no effort to inform the Japanese Embassy in Washington or Japan's negotiators there about the planned attack, although there was an attempt by factions in the Japanese government to blame its embassy for the delay in decoding the final war memorandum from Tokyo. Although the long-term planning for the Pearl Harbor attack was in place, it was ultimately a dysfunctional government grasping at straws that led Japan into a disastrous war in the Pacific.

Iguchi's book is certainly not the final word on Pearl Harbor, and there is no guarantee that his research brought out the whole truth, but it does provide a broader picture of the crisis and does answer the question as to why Japan's "Final Memorandum" was delivered only after the inauguration of hostilities. His findings here will, I hope, solve one of the enduring questions of the Pearl Harbor crisis. ■

#### NOTES

1. Takeo Iguchi, *Demystifying Pearl Harbor: A New Japanese Perspective*, trans. David Noble (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2010).

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