



Source: Pearl Harbor: Surprise and Remembrance.



Source: Pearl Harbor: December 7th, 1941. A U.S. National Archive film image.



Source: Pearl Harbor: December 7th, 1941. A U.S. National Archive film image.

# TEACHING PEARL HARBOR FILMS, AMERICAN AND JAPANESE

By Alan Chalk

Whatever the achievements and shortcomings of the recent film, *Pearl Harbor*, it has brought our attention back to several important points. First, the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor continues to be a significant presence in American historical consciousness. Second, the wartime propaganda message of a peaceful nation and people shocked into war by a treacherous, unprovoked “sneak attack” still lingers alongside the postwar scholarly interpretations of the complex causes of the war, now from both Japanese and American points of view. Third, films continue to play a significant role in shaping national and public consciousness of historical events and issues, in this case the meaning of the Pearl Harbor attack in American history and the United States’ current world position. Fourth, while history teachers may use films and film clips to enrich history lessons, they also need to teach students how to “read” these films as historical narratives with their own interpretations.



Source: Pearl Harbor: December 7th, 1941. A U.S. National Archive film image.



Source: Pearl Harbor: December 7th, 1941. A U.S. National Archive film image.



Source: U.S. National Archives.



Captured Japanese film image. Source: *Pearl Harbor: December 7th*. 1941.



Source: Captured Japanese photo from the U.S. National Archives.



Source: Captured Japanese photo from the U.S. National Archives.

One of the ironies of Pearl Harbor films and documentaries is that their attack scenes are based on two propaganda films made during the first year of the war, one in the United States, and the other in Japan. Since neither nation had more than a few still photographs and fragmentary film footage of the attack, each had to recreate it in a film studio using scale models, crane-lift cameras, rear-screen projection, and sophisticated editing. The result was two separate propaganda films that in the postwar world became the primary visual sources and models for all documentaries and dramatic films on Pearl Harbor. While there is ample authentic footage of the aftermath devastation of the ships and planes, almost all images of the actual attack are reenactments or studio recreations. During the fiftieth and sixtieth anniversary commemorations of Pearl Harbor on both American and Japanese television, these were the images shown as the actual historic event.

For the classroom, any of these images will serve students' need to visualize and, to some degree, experience the attack. However, the same film/video sources can be used to teach students to view and analyze historical documentaries and dramas in terms of how they present and interpret history. In addition, since some Pearl Harbor films contain footage from Japanese sources, they can be used, with assignments of additional reading and research, to approach an understanding of the attack at Pearl Harbor and the causes of the Pacific War from both Japanese and American points of view.

### DECEMBER 7TH

Six days after the attack, film director John Ford sent his cinematographer, Gregg Toland, to Pearl Harbor to film a secret report for the Navy on what happened and who was to blame. In May, Ford personally went to Pearl Harbor, and then to Midway, where he was wounded filming the documentary *The Battle of Midway*. The two-hour *December 7th* film, largely the work of Toland, was shown to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in mid-1942 and immediately confiscated as damaging to the war effort. One problem was it revealed the Navy's failure to maintain adequate defenses; another, it pointed to the Japanese-American community in Hawaii as a haven for potential spies and saboteurs. A year later, the film was edited by Ford and released as a twenty-minute documentary which in 1943 won an Academy Award for both men. The final cut, an eighty-two-minute film, was never released until 1991, the fiftieth anniversary of the attack.



Source: U.S. National Archives.



Source: U.S. National Archives.



Source: *Pearl Harbor: December 7th*. 1941. A U.S. National Archive film image.



The original edited version, still available for the classroom as a thirty-five-minute video, focuses on the official war narrative of the “sneak attack” and the Navy’s ability to bounce back even stronger. Combining clips from the film with President Roosevelt’s “a date which will live in infamy” speech can help students experience and understand the patriotic fervor of the war cry “Remember Pearl Harbor.” At the same time, young students can develop a critical perspective trying to distinguish between authentic, reenacted, and studio-recreated scenes. In many cases common sense determines that there would not be cameras present recording at that moment or in that position. In others, a critical eye is necessary to distinguish between illusion and reality. However, given the challenge, even most ninth and tenth grade students can handle this. The next level is to have the students analyze the propaganda techniques and messages. If there is limited viewing time, minutes six to twenty in the thirty-five-minute version, and minutes forty-four to sixty in the longer version will allow students to understand that this supposed “documentary” is an example of recreated history with its own agenda.

The objective here is not to diminish the patriotic, propaganda message but merely to place it in its historical perspective. During the war, audiences saw this as a record of the actual attack. The problem for students is to understand the racist, anti-Japanese view as a contributing factor in the “Remember Pearl Harbor” mobilization program and eventually the U.S. Pacific War campaign. The use of *December 7th* along with readings and the wartime cartoons from John Dower’s *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* can provide a provocative alternative view of the war to the narratives presented in many textbooks.



### THE WAR AT SEA FROM HAWAII TO MALAYA

Although this 1942 Japanese film is generally not available outside of Japan, it is included here because it has been used as a source for Japanese images and scenes of the attack in many Pearl Harbor documentaries. The studio-recreated attack sequence is an early example of miniaturization. Pearl Harbor, Ford Island, and battleship row were recreated in convincing detail. One of the frequently used shots places the viewer in the cockpit of an attacking plane skimming the bay to launch a torpedo toward a battleship. The explosions along battleship row shot from the side and above suggest that the film was also used as a model for similar scenes in the feature films *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and the recent *Pearl Harbor*.

The purpose of *The War at Sea*, directed by Yamamoto Kajiro, was to celebrate Japan’s early victories and to praise the heroism of the young naval fliers. Similar to *Pearl Harbor*, the two main characters are farm boys who rise to the needs of the nation and times. Although a wartime propaganda film, in contrast to Ford’s *December 7th*, the enemy is not demonized. Instead, most of this film deals with the young pilots’ training and the home support of their families. The theme running throughout emphasizes the supreme sacrifice all must make to support the Imperial war effort.

I have used the images from this film to teach students to distinguish between the Japanese and American Pearl Harbor narratives. For example, the 1952 *Victory at Sea* episode, “The Pacific Boils Over,” which is still available in some library collections, uses sequences made up of images from both *December 7th* and *The War at Sea* along with actual footage of the attack and aftermath. The challenge for students is not only to distinguish between the sources but also to interpret the implicit mixed narratives.

Some of the documentaries using sequences from *The War at Sea* and *December 7th* are: *Japan: A Proper Place in the World*, 1985; *Pearl Harbor: Surprise and Remembrance*, 1991; and the recent *National Geographic* release, *Pearl Harbor, Beyond the Movie*.





Another 1960 Japanese film, *I Bombed Pearl Harbor*, offers in the opening nineteen minutes a colorized attack sequence based on *The War at Sea*. Although this is not by any means a first-rate Pearl Harbor film, as edited and dubbed into English it is an interesting resource for teaching about the continuing conflict of national narratives related to the Pearl Harbor attack and the Pacific War.



Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku  
© U.S. Navy, © National Archives



### **TORA! TORA! TORA!**

Of all the Pearl Harbor films, the 1970 *Tora! Tora! Tora!* remains the most historically authentic and the most teachable. Although it was a commercial failure, it was and still is a new kind of history film: a co-production by the former belligerents dramatizing in documentary form the carefully researched and recreated events leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack and the opening of the war from each nation's point of view. Its only serious limitation is that, in the need for complete U.S.-Japan cooperation (by the government, the military, and the film production company of each country), it avoided deeply controversial issues. For example, there is no mention of Japanese aggression and atrocities in Asia. On the other hand, there is no mention of U.S. economic and military support of China in its war against Japan. Nevertheless, for the classroom, it is a



Vice Admiral Nagumo Chuichi  
© U.S. Navy, © National Archives

model and visual text on how the war can and should be studied as binational history.

The Japanese sequence was originally to be directed by Akira Kurosawa. But conflicts between the famous director and the American producers led to his dismissal and replacement by Fukusaku Kinji and Matsuda Toshio. Unfortunately, there is no way to determine Kurosawa's earlier input in the work or to know how much of the work of Matsuda and Fukusaku was influenced by the American producers and director. The American director, Richard Fleischer, did have authority over the final editing for the entire film. However, even with these qualifications, it is possible to draw from the Japanese sequence some authoritative sense of the Japanese Pearl Harbor narratives for both 1941 and 1970. A number of scenes as well as the characterizations of the major figures, including the airmen, are drawn directly from the Japanese wartime film, *The War at Sea*. Further, a close study of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* reveals that both the American and Japanese narratives are based on Gordon W. Prange's *At Dawn We Slept*, the first of the Pearl Harbor books to come out of his thirty-seven years of postwar research and interviews of the participants on both sides. This balanced, authentic representation enables the students to observe closely and empathize with both Japanese and Americans heading toward the inevitable confrontation.



Commander Genda Minoru  
Photo source: LAW BUZZ, *The Story Place of The Web*  
<http://staff.killingly.k12ct.us/~cmarco/te/images/victor3.jpg>

One of the achievements of this film is that there is no enemy, no propagandizing of wartime values and beliefs. The Japanese are human beings, like the Americans, swept toward and finally into a war which seems unavoidable. The students meet and get to know these men: Mitsuo Fuchida, the young, idealistic leader of the air attack on Pearl Harbor (a man who after the war becomes a Christian minister traveling between Japan and the United States); Genda Minoru, the brilliant young strategist of Yamamoto's daring Pearl Harbor plan; Admiral Nagumo, commander of the entire Pearl Harbor task force, who makes a major strategic mistake when he fails to follow up on the success of the initial raids; and Admiral Yamamoto, the "Reluctant Admiral," who wants to avoid war with the United States, but who is forced by Japanese politics and the army to plan and execute the Pearl Harbor attack knowing that Japan cannot win a prolonged war against the United States. If there is any unifying tone and theme to the Japanese segment of this film, it is that of a Greek tragedy in which the heroes struggle heroically but futilely against what they know must be their fate.



Lt. Commander Fuchida Mitsuo  
© U.S. Navy, © National Archives

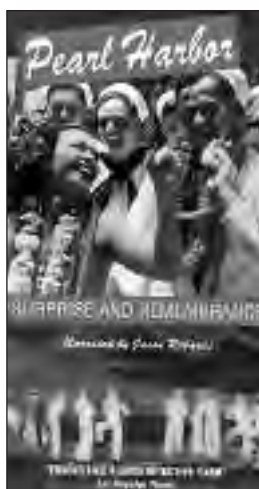


In the American segment the tone and theme are those of a tragic comedy of errors, an incredible series of mistakes and missed warnings, which lead the American forces to the greatest defeat in American military history. Here we follow the high level negotiations between the Secretaries of State and War, Cordell Hull and Henry Stimson, and the Japanese ambassadors who are trying to head off the coming war. At the same time in the Washington headquarters of Naval Intelligence, two dedicated officers, Commander Kramer and Colonel Bratton, in charge of Operation Magic which intercepts and decodes secret Japanese diplomatic messages, are trying to anticipate and warn the Administration about Japanese plans. In Hawaii at Pearl Harbor we follow, with post-attack hindsight, the uncertainties of Admiral Kimmel and General Short, the commanders of the naval and army forces at Pearl Harbor, who were later singled out as being responsible for the calamity. Yet the film reveals that what happened at Pearl Harbor was a systemic failure with responsibility shared also by authorities in Washington, D.C.

A problem in using *Tora! Tora! Tora!* in the classroom is its length, two hours and twenty-two minutes. I have taught the entire film in semester Japanese studies courses at the high school, college, and adult education levels. In these courses it was the centerpiece in the study of U.S.-Japan relations during the period 1841—1941, tracing the historic paths to Pearl Harbor. However, I have also used clips in U.S. and World History courses to introduce the approach of a binational understanding of the causes of the Pacific War.

In all cases the two narrative strands leading to the attack are the most important parts. If time is limited, the forty-minute attack scenes, although brilliantly recreated, can be reduced to a few clips or eliminated entirely. The approach is to divide the class into two groups, one representing Japan, the other, the United States. If the students have not studied the imperial periods of U.S. and Japanese expansion in Asia and the Pacific, then a map and time-line exercise with each group charting and dating the other nation's acquisitions of territory may help them understand how each nation might perceive the other's intentions in the region. The students' task then is to view and analyze both narrative strands from their nation's point of view. They should note where communications break down, where cultural misperceptions or misunderstandings of the other country's needs or intentions may be involved, and what in the other nation's policies or motives may contribute to war tension or threaten their nation's interests. Finally, with additional reading, they should be prepared to discuss the main causes of the war from each nation's point of view. The opening thirty-eight minutes of the film reveal some of these causes and lead the viewer to Admiral Yamamoto's attack plans. The next twelve minutes cover the failure of negotiations and the Japanese decision for war.

An excellent document for the study of the causes and legacies for both sides is the 1991 *Pearl Harbor: Surprise and Remembrance*. The third section, "Beyond Paradise," minutes eighteen to thirty-one, deals with the causes of the war from the Japanese point of view. The last section, "Remembering Pearl Harbor," minutes seventy to eighty-three, provides the background of the making and censorship of Ford's *December 7th* and also a discussion of the legacies of Pearl Harbor. For teachers interested in detailed lessons on teaching *December 7th* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, two resources are listed at the end of this article. Another helpful resource, with lesson plans for studying the causes of the war, may be found in Jeffrey Hackler's "Japan's Motives for Bombing Pearl Harbor, 1941" in the Spring 2001 edition of *Education About Asia*.





### PEARL HARBOR (2001)

In spite of its massive promotional campaign, the latest Pearl Harbor film was, like *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, a critical and commercial failure. But the failure this time was not because of a serious attempt to recreate in film an authentic study of a historical event. Most of the current three-hour film deals with a clichéd love story between the two hero-pilots and a nurse. Loosely tied to the plot are the episodes of the war in Britain and Doolittle’s raid on Tokyo. The actual attack on Pearl Harbor takes up only about thirty minutes of the film, the pre-and post-attack coverage, about twenty minutes more. Evaluated in the History Channel’s “History or Hollywood” format, this film is Hollywood.

Nevertheless, my concern here is not with the historical authenticity of the film but rather with its use in the classroom. It will be for some time an inexpensive and readily available resource in video and DVD formats. The attack scene alone is worth showing for its computer-enhanced recreation not only of the violence and chaos of the attack but also of the experience of war. Here the viewer is no longer an observer of history but a participant in it, and with only a sixteen-minute clip (from the Japanese planes approaching Pearl Harbor to the capsizing of the battleship) students may come away with unforgettable images representing the historical Pearl Harbor. The problem is that the depiction of the attack along with the Japanese scenes tend to reinforce the earlier wartime American narrative. Although this film attempts to imitate *Tora! Tora! Tora!*’s binational approach to history, it portrays the Japanese as stereotypical warriors and their mission as the violation of American “innocence.”

*Pearl Harbor* returns to the wartime and continuing narrative, that the unprovoked, unexpected attack ended America’s “age of innocence and isolation,” thrusting us into World War II and the realm of world leadership. In the novel *Pearl Harbor*, written in conjunction with the film script, Book One is entitled “Innocence.” This apparently refers to the two eleven-year-old Tennessee farm boys in 1929, but also to our nation and people through the 1930s up to December 7th, 1941. Book Two is entitled “Infamy.” A provocative question is, what constitutes our perception and understanding of “innocence” in these characters, the American people, and the nation prior to Pearl Harbor and the “day of infamy”?

Two brief clips from the film can be used as a basis for discussion. The first occurs about thirty-four minutes into the film. Admiral Yamamoto’s remarks that “War is inevitable” and Japan “will annihilate their Pacific fleet in a single attack at Pearl Harbor” are presented in contrast with the arrival of the American nurses and the new pilots at Pearl Harbor. Although surrounded by the machinery of war, they are innocent, naïve Americans thinking only of dating, surfing, and lying in the sun in this Hawaiian paradise. The second clip, at eighty-six minutes, marks the beginning of the Japanese attack. In an interesting two-minute sequence, this film presents a series of images of “innocent” Americans (a woman hanging wash, children playing, military personnel fishing or just rising, our heroes asleep) all totally unaware of the threat of war and death.

This approach might help students examine the premises of the wartime Pearl Harbor narrative. Further, students might pursue how this concept of prewar innocence is related to the Pacific War narrative and its goal of Japan’s unconditional surrender, the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war, and the use of the atomic bombs to end the war. These are, of course, difficult and potentially controversial questions, but they lead to a deeper re-examination of the causes and legacies of the war. Richard H. Minear’s essay-review “*Pearl Harbor*, Pearl Harbor, and American Innocence” in the Fall 2001 edition of *Education About Asia* addresses these questions and issues. ■



Still photos from *Pearl Harbor*. © 2001 Touchstone Pictures.

## SELECTED RESOURCES

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### FEATURE FILMS/VIDEOS:

#### *Pearl Harbor*

Directed by Michael Bay  
2001. Color. 183 Minutes. VHS  
Touchstone Pictures and Home Video  
<http://www.amazon.com>

#### *Tora! Tora! Tora!*

Directed by Richard Fleischer, Kinji Fukusaku and Toshio Masuda  
1970. Color. 149 Minutes. VHS  
Twentieth Century Fox. Reissued in 2001  
<http://www.amazon.com>

#### *I Bombed Pearl Harbor*

Directed by Shue Matsubayashi. American Director Hugo Grimaldi  
1960. Color. 98 Minutes. VHS  
A Parade Release, Tōhō Company Production, Ivy Video, 1997

Facets Video

1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197

<http://www.facets.org>

This was available through Kinokuniya.

### DOCUMENTARIES/VIDEOS:

#### *Attack and Reprisal* "December 7th"

Directed by Toland and Ford  
1942-3. B&W. 35 Minute version. VHS  
Mpi Home Video

16101 S. 108th Avenue  
Orland Park, IL 60467  
800-777-2223

<http://www.mpimedia.com>

#### *December 7th: The Movie*

Directed by Toland and Ford  
1942-3. Released 1991. 82 Minute Version. VHS.  
Original war-confiscated version.

Facets Video

1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197

<http://www.facets.org>

#### *Japan: A Proper Place in the World*

1987. Color. 60 Minutes. VHS

Mpi Home Video

16101 S. 108th Avenue  
Orland Park, IL 60467  
800-777-2223

<http://www.mpimedia.com>

#### *Pearl Harbor, Beyond the Movie*

National Geographic  
2001. Color. 60 Minutes. VHS

Facets Video

1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197

<http://www.facets.org>

#### *Pearl Harbor: Surprise and Remembrance*

Directed by Crowley, Bird and Johnson

1993. Color. 88 Minutes. VHS

Facets Video

1517 West Fullerton Avenue

Chicago, IL 60614

800-331-6197

<http://www.facets.org>

#### *Victory at Sea*, "The Pacific Boils Over"

Directed by Clay Adams

1952. National Broadcasting Company

New Line Cinema

888 7th Avenue

New York, NY 10106

<http://shop.newline.com>

#### *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya*

Directed by Kajiro Yamamoto

Not available in English or this country.

### BOOKS:

Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*.

Tokyo and New York: Kodansha, 1990.

Conroy, Hilary and Harry Wray, eds. *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1990 (for both American and Japanese viewpoints).

Dower, John. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1986.

Goldstein, Donald M. and Katherine V. Dillon, eds. *The Pearl Harbor Papers: Inside the Japanese Plans*. London: Brassey's, Inc., 1999.

Prange, Goldstein and Dillon. *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1981.

Wallace, Randall. *Pearl Harbor* (novel based on film script), Hyperion, N.Y., 2001.

### CURRICULUM:

Chalk, Alan. Chapter 3, in *Hidden Messages* (the study of *Tora! Tora! Tora!*). Intercultural Press, Inc., Yarmouth, Maine, 1998.

Chalk, Alan. Teaching the Pacific War Through Film: *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and the Reexamination of the Pearl Harbor Narrative: A teaching Unit, 1992, 1995, available on loan from the Five College Center for East Asian Studies, Smith College, and from the Mid Atlantic Regional Japan in the Schools Program (MARJIS), Japan in the Schools, University of Maryland.

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