The Origins of the Pacific War  “Whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad,” declared Congressman Hamilton Fish on December 8, 1941, the day after infamy. Minutes before, Franklin D. Roosevelt had asked Congress to declare war on the nation that had just launched the “unprovoked and dastardly” attack on Pearl Harbor, and Fish, an ardent isolationist, rose to support the president’s request. “The Japanese,” he said, “have gone stark, raving mad, and have, by their unprovoked attack committed military, naval, and national suicide.”1

Although others did not quote the classics, this madness theme was echoed throughout American newspapers that day: “sublime insanity” declared the New York Times; “the act of a mad dog” the Los Angeles Times announced; “an insane adventure that for fatalistic abandon is unsurpassed in the history of the world” argued the Philadelphia Inquirer. In December 1941, most observers agreed with Winston Churchill’s statement that, since American military potential vastly outweighed Japan’s, the Tokyo government’s decision to go to war was “difficult to reconcile ... with prudence, or even sanity.”2

This belief that the Japanese must have been irrational to attack the United States continues to plague our understanding of the origins of the Pacific War and the lessons that modern strategists draw from that tragic occurrence. In the Pentagon, for example, the events of 1941 have inspired the dominant scenario for nuclear war: a lingering concern that can be described as hormephobia, the fear of shock or surprise, has haunted American strategic planning since Pearl Harbor. The nuclear arsenal of the United States has long been postured to respond promptly to an unlikely, peacetime Soviet surprise nuclear attack. Moreover, the increasing dissatisfaction with the policy of deterrence today can, Scott D. Sagan is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. He is co-author of Living with Nuclear Weapons (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

1 Congressional Record, LXXXVIII, Pt. IX, 9531.
2 The newspaper editorials are reprinted in ibid, 9509–9513, 10118.
in part, be viewed as stemming from the belief that even the most stable and robust deterrent will fail if the United States is confronted with an irrational adversary. Indeed, when historical analogies are referred to by military and civilian officials in private Pentagon meetings, the "crazy" Japanese decision to go to war in 1941 is often used to support the development of strategic defenses in order to protect the American people from potentially irrational acts by the Soviet Union or other nuclear powers.

Many scholars have also succumbed to the "insanity plea" when explaining the Japanese decision to attack the United States. Among modern academic strategists, there is a widespread tendency to treat the Japanese decision as a crazy aberration: the government in Tokyo behaved irrationally and therefore was "beyond deterrence." For many, this view is perversely comforting. If deterrence fails only in the rare occasion when an adversary is irrational or suicidal, then surely nuclear deterrence between the superpowers is likely to remain stable.

The persistent theme of Japanese irrationality is highly misleading, for, using the common standard in the literature (a conscious calculation to maximize utility based on a consistent value system), the Japanese decision for war appears to have been rational. If one examines the decisions made in Tokyo in 1941 more closely, one finds not a thoughtless rush to national suicide, but rather a prolonged, agonizing debate between two repugnant alternatives.

In the months preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States had placed an embargo on oil exports to Japan and had demanded that the Japanese accept defeat in the war in China and withdraw their forces from the mainland. Although the Tokyo government believed, in the words of Nagano Osami, the navy chief of staff, that we "must never fight a war that can be avoided," by December 1941 Prime Minister Tojo Hideki could report to emperor Hirohito that "our Empire has no alternative but to begin war." In the eyes of the decision to attack the United States was so critical to operate had to be determined alone without an operation, the An operation, while it might be offer some hope of saving his li

In order to understand the draw appropriate lessons for the beyond the insanity plea and exam found itself in a desperate positie all agreed was not likely to end least repugnant alternative. The o viewed as a mutual failure of de ment wanted to expand into Sou while deterring American intere colonial powers. The United State expansion, but sought to do so in the Pacific. The basic policy of bothumber 1941. This essay traces the and 1941 in Tokyo and Washing and explains why the Japanese against an enemy whose milita vastly superior to its own.

Most deterrence theorists are of nuclear weapons and the imm arsenals are a source of strategic neither the United States nor the

ORIGINS OF THE PACIFIC WAR

but to begin war." For many, this view is perversely comforting. If deterrence fails only in the rare occasion when an adversary is irrational or suicidal, then surely nuclear deterrence between the superpowers is likely to remain stable.

The persistent theme of Japanese irrationality is highly misleading, for, using the common standard in the literature (a conscious calculation to maximize utility based on a consistent value system), the Japanese decision for war appears to have been rational. If one examines the decisions made in Tokyo in 1941 more closely, one finds not a thoughtless rush to national suicide, but rather a prolonged, agonizing debate between two repugnant alternatives.

In the months preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States had placed an embargo on oil exports to Japan and had demanded that the Japanese accept defeat in the war in China and withdraw their forces from the mainland. Although the Tokyo government believed, in the words of Nagano Osami, the navy chief of staff, that we "must never fight a war that can be avoided," by December 1941 Prime Minister Tojo Hideki could report to emperor Hirohito that "our Empire has no alternative but to begin war." In the eyes of the decision to attack the United States was so critical to operate had to be determined alone without an operation, the An operation, while it might be offer some hope of saving his life.

In order to understand the draw appropriate lessons for the beyond the insanity plea and examine found itself in a desperate positie all agreed was not likely to end least repugnant alternative. The operation was viewed as a mutual failure of decision wanted to expand into South while deterring American interference colonial powers. The United States expansion, but sought to do so in the Pacific. The basic policy of bothumber 1941. This essay traces the events in Tokyo and Washing and explains why the Japanese were against an enemy whose military vastly superior to its own.

Most deterrence theorists agree that nuclear weapons and the immense arsenals are a source of strategic concern neither the United States nor the

5 Imperial Conferences, Sept. 6, 1941; Dec. for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conference.
6 Nagano Osami's words as recalled by Prone's memoirs are translated by the Language Survey, as printed in Pearl Harbor Attack Operation: The Pearl Harbor Attack (Washington, is from 4005.)
from the belief that even the most
tail if the United States is con-
ly. Indeed, when historical anal-
and civilian officials in private
Japanese decision to go to war in
development of strategic defenses
people from potentially irrational
nuclear powers.
imumed to the “insanity plea”
sion to attack the United States.
ists, there is a widespread ten-
ision as a crazy aberration: the
ationally and therefore was “be-
view is perversely comforting.
occasion when an adversary is
nuclear deterrence between the
able.
these irrationality is highly mis-
standard in the literature (a con-
diety based on a consistent value
for war appears to have been
isions made in Tokyo in 1941
ightless rush to national suicide,
debate between two repugnant

e attack on Pearl Harbor, the
argo on oil exports to Japan and
cept defeat in the war in China
ne mainland. Although the To-
words of Nagano Osami, the
er never fight a war that can be
im Minister Tojo Hideki could
our Empire has no alternative
Assessment (Westport, 1982), 87, 180, n. 10.
agrees, the irrational nature of the Japanese
Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory,”
Robert Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception,”
A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, The
and Paul Diesing, Conflict among Nations
but to begin war.” In the eyes of the Tokyo decision-makers,
the decision to attack the United States was compared, not to an
act of suicide, but rather to a desperate but necessary operation
given to a man with a terminal disease. This was Admiral Na-
gano’s explanation to the emperor:
Japan was like a patient suffering from a serious illness. He said
the patient’s case was so critical that the question of whether or not
not to operate had to be determined without delay. Should he be let
alone without an operation, there was danger of a gradual decline.
An operation, while it might be extremely dangerous, would still
offer some hope of saving his life. 6

In order to understand the origins of the Pacific War and to
draw appropriate lessons for the modern world, one must focus
beyond the insanity plea and examine how the Tokyo government
found itself in a desperate position in which starting a war that
all agreed was not likely to end in victory was considered the
least repugnant alternative. The origins of the Pacific War are best
viewed as a mutual failure of deterrence. The Japanese govern-
ment wanted to expand into Southeast Asia, but sought to do so
while deterring American intervention in support of the European
colonial powers. The United States attempted to prevent Japanese
expansion, but sought to do so without precipitating war in the
Pacific. The basic policy of both governments failed on 7 Decem-
ber 1941. This essay traces the decision-making process in 1940
and 1941 in Tokyo and Washington which led to the Pacific War
and explains why the Japanese government chose to go to war
against an enemy whose military power and potential were so
vastly superior to its own.

Most deterrence theorists argue that the destructive potential
of nuclear weapons and the immense size of current superpower
 arsenals are a source of strategic stability, since rational leaders in
neither the United States nor the Soviet Union believe that victory

5 Imperial Conferences, Sept. 6, 1941; Dec. 1, 1941. Nobutaka Ike (ed.), Japan’s Decision
for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences (Stanford, 1967), 140, 263.
6 Nagano Osami’s words as recalled by Prime Minister Prince Konoe Fumimaro. Kon-
oe’s memoirs are translated by the Language Section G-2 of the U.S. Strategic Bombing
Survey, as printed in Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation
of the Pearl Harbor Attack (Washington, D.C., 1946), Pt. XX, 3985–4029. The quote
is from 4005.
is at all likely in a nuclear war. A historical case in which a
government launched an attack knowing that the probability of
victory was low and the costs of defeat extremely high is, there­
fore, particularly challenging to contemporary strategy. Indeed,
since it is difficult to imagine a decision to go to war in the nuclear
age which, if it escalated to a total war between the superpowers,
would seem rational in retrospect, it is what appears irrational in
the past that can best illuminate the future that we seek to avoid.

FIRST STEPS: EXPANSION AND MUTUAL DETERRENT BLUFFS

On 3 November 1938, more than a year after the war between China
and Japan had begun, the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo proclaimed
"a new order in East Asia" and announced that its goal in what
was euphemistically called the "China incident" was "to perfect
the joint defense against Communism and to create a new culture
and realize a close economic cohesion throughout East Asia." 7
The desire for Japanese hegemony in East Asia was nearly ubiq­
uitous in Tokyo in the late 1930s. But there is often a considerable
difference between an accepted political desire and an immediate
policy objective. Although the "New Order" had been announced
in 1938, it was only after Hitler had achieved his unanticipated
victories in Europe in 1940 that the Japanese government saw an
opportunity to achieve its goal. By the summer, the Dutch gov­
ernment, which controlled the oil of the Dutch East Indies, had
gone into exile; the new Vichy regime controlled French Indo­
china; and the British government was fighting for its existence
in the Battle of Britain. On June 25, Hata Shunroku, the army
minister, expressed the widespread view in Tokyo when he urged
his staff to "seize this golden opportunity! Don't let anything
stand in your way." 8 The key question for Japan was how to take
best advantage of the war in Europe to advance its goals in Asia.

In July 1940, a new government under the leadership of
Prince Konoe Fumimaro was formed explicitly to "expedite the
settlement of the China Incident" and "solve the Southern Area
problem." The Imperial Army feared that a sudden British col­
lapse might diminish its strategic opportunities. It began to make

8 As quoted in Hosoya Chihiro, "The Tripartite Pact, 1939-1940," in James W. Morley
307.
A historical case in which knowing that the probability of defeat extremely high is, there­
contemporary strategy. Indeed, decision to go to war in the nuclear
war between the superpowers, 
, it is what appears irrational in
the future that we seek to avoid.

**NUCLEAR DETERRENT BLUFFS** On 3
ar after the war between China
Ministry in Tokyo proclaimed
announced that its goal in what
China incident" was "to perfect
 Cyril in East Asia was nearly ubiq-
But there is often a considerable
political desire and an immediate
new Order" had been announced
had achieved his unanticipated
Japanese government saw an
y the summer, the Dutch gov-
ment of the Dutch East Indies, had
dominant controlled French Indo-
it was fighting for its existence
, Hata Shunroku, the army
view in Tokyo when he urged
position! Don’t let anything
for Japan was how to take
be to advance its goals in Asia.
ment under the leadership of
explicitly to “expedite the
and "solve the Southern Area
that a sudden British col-
opportunities. It began to make

1. If U.S. exports of petroleum are totally banned, it will be
impossible to continue the war unless within four months we are
able to secure oil in the Dutch East Indies and acquire the capacity
to transport it to Japan.

2. Even then, Japan would be able to continue the war for a year
at most. Should the war continue beyond a year, our chances of
winning would be nil.10

9 "The Main Principles for Coping with the Changing World Situation," July 27, 1940,
in Hattori Takushiro, *Daito Senso Zenshi* [History of the Greater East Asia War] (Tokyo,
1953). See unpub. trans., U.S. Army Center for Military History (Washington, D.C.,
Imperial Japanese Navy, Strategic Illusions 1936–1941* (Oxford, 1981), 154; Tsunoda Jun,
“The Navy’s Role in the Southern Strategy,” in Morley (ed.), *The Fateful Choice: Japan’s

With the army and navy positions so divergent, the governing Liaison Conference could only agree to a very ambiguous compromise policy: to make initial plans and preparations for both the desired attack against the European colonies alone and the undesired war against the United States. The navy, however, refused to agree to an attack against the British and Dutch territories unless it was clear that the United States would not intervene militarily. It was left to the Japanese Foreign Ministry to find a way of reducing the likelihood of American involvement in a war in Southeast Asia. 11

Which was more accurate: the view that the United States was unlikely to go to war over European colonial possessions, or the navy’s position that American intervention was too probable to make the “southward advance” an advisable policy? If one examines the available evidence, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the United States would not have gone to war in the summer of 1940 had the Japanese restricted their attack to the British and Dutch colonies. Unbeknownst to Tokyo, on 23 May 1940 the United States’ senior political and military officials reviewed strategic policy in light of the anticipated German victory against France and determined (according to General George Marshall’s notes of the meeting) that “we must not become involved with Japan, that we must not concern ourselves beyond the 180th meridian, and that we must concentrate on the South American situation.” 12

The Roosevelt administration, nonetheless, sought to prevent Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia through the use of the two diplomatic tools it had available to influence Japan: the threat of an oil embargo and the threat of military intervention. After considerable debate and confusion, the administration decided in July 1940 not to impose an oil embargo on the grounds that such a drastic step might provoke the very action—a Japanese attack on the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies—that the United States sought to deter. 13 With respect to military threats, however, the

12 As quoted in Mark S. Watson, Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations (Washington, D.C., 1974), 105–106. It cannot be known whether the United States would have reversed this agreed-upon position in the event of an actual attack against the European powers.
ORIGINS OF THE PACIFIC WAR

United States was willing to let the Japanese believe that the United States Navy was poised to interfere in any Japanese move south. In May 1940, the United States fleet was ordered to remain at Pearl Harbor rather than return to its regular, less vulnerable bases along the West Coast. The private explanation given for this action, by Admiral Harold Stark, chief of naval operations, to Admiral James O. Richardson, the commanding officer, deserves to be quoted at length:

Why are you in the Hawaiian area?

Answer: You are there because of the deterrent effect which it is thought your presence may have on the Japs going into the East Indies...

... Suppose the Japs do go into the East Indies? What are we going to do about it? My answer to that is, I don’t know, and I think there is nobody on God’s green earth who can tell you.

I would point out one thing, and that is even if the decision here were for the U.S. to take no decisive action if the Japs should decide to go into the Dutch East Indies, we must not breathe it to a soul, as by so doing we would completely nullify the reason for your presence in the Hawaiian area. Just remember that the Japs don’t know what we are going to do, and so long as they don’t know, they may hesitate or be deterred.  

KEEPING THE JAPANESE GUESSING

In September 1940, the Japanese government took two major steps toward a confrontation with the United States. First, the decision makers in Tokyo put significant pressure on the French colonial authorities in Indochina to permit the Imperial Army to station troops in Tonkin Province and use its airfields in the war against China. The Imperial Navy had agreed to this policy of limited intervention on the grounds that Japanese movement into the northern province of the French colony would be unlikely to produce an American oil embargo, but they did believe that “the probability of a strengthened embargo on Japanese shipment of oil would increase if we invaded

the whole of French Indochina." The French backed down when threatened with Japanese intervention and allowed the limited incursion to take place peacefully. The United States' response was limited to an embargo on scrap metal.

Second, on September 7, the Foreign Ministry began secret negotiations with General Heinrich Stahmer, the personal emissary of Joachim von Ribbentrop, Germany's foreign minister, to form a tripartite alliance with the Nazi and Italian Fascist regimes. Matsuoka Yosuke, the Japanese foreign minister, sought an alliance with Germany, in which all parties agreed to go to war against any nation that attacked another member of the pact, in order to reduce the likelihood of American intervention if Japan pushed southward. Stahmer agreed with this assessment. Matsuoka was unable, however, to persuade the navy to accept such a commitment, the naval officials being fearful that Germany and the United States would engage in hostilities in the Atlantic before Japanese naval power was prepared for a war in the Pacific. Naval authorities therefore agreed to the Tripartite Pact only after Matsuoka added a secret protocol (with the concurrence of Germany's Ambassador Eugen Ott, but without the knowledge of Stahmer) that allowed each party to determine independently when its ally had been attacked by an adversary. Thus, the Japanese government entered into the Tripartite Pact in late September in order to prevent the United States from supporting the British and the Dutch in the East Indies, but it was fully prepared to back away from its stated commitment to join a war if German-American hostilities began. If Washington was bluffing with the fleet at Pearl Harbor, Tokyo was bluffing with the alliance with Hitler.

The United States' reactions to the Tripartite Pact and Japanese actions in French Indochina were constrained by three factors. First, American public opinion would risk war in the Pacific, and election campaign, was under isolationist sentiment. The second continued to be the fear that actions of expansion might backfire and provoke the third constraint was a ten civilian authorities supported to sit and preparation for future combi- nations. Throughout this period, the ton feared that actions to support stationing the fleet at Pearl Harbor would reduce combat effectiveness.

For example, on October urgent telegram requesting that an urge bigger the better," be sent to eight upon a Japanese declaration of Ambassador Joseph Grew in To- retary of war in Washington and General Marshall stro- On October 8, Admiral Richard be sent back to the continental stationing ships at Pearl Harbor wa full training and provisioning of Coast bases. Roosevelt, confo compromised. The fleet was ke to Singapore were approved.

In response to the signing of Harold Ickes, and Henry Mor tougher United States economic Cordell Hull, as well as Gene continued to oppose such action Morgenthau for pressuring hin reminding the secretary of the
The French backed down whenation and allowed the limited
allowed the limited
Foreign Ministry began secret
begin secret
German's foreign minister, Nazi and Italian Fascist regimes.

did with this assessment.

persuade the navy to accept
persuade the navy to accept

Japanese declaration of war upon us." Although both
Japanese declaration of war upon us." Although both

Ambassador Joseph Grew in Tokyo and Henry L. Stimson, secretary of war in Washington supported such a move, Admiral Stark and General Marshall strongly opposed it as provocative.

On October 8, Admiral Richardson even requested that the fleet be sent back to the continental United States, arguing that stationing ships at Pearl Harbor was "just window dressing," since full training and provisioning could take place only at the Pacific Coast bases. Roosevelt, confronted with contradictory advice, compromised. The fleet was kept at Pearl Harbor, but no visits to Singapore were approved. 18

In response to the signing of the Tripartite Pact, Stimson, Harold Ickes, and Henry Morgenthau renewed their push for tougher United States economic sanctions against Japan. Secretary Cordell Hull, as well as General Marshall and Admiral Stark, continued to oppose such actions and Roosevelt strongly criticized Morgenthau for pressuring him on the embargo issue, sharply reminding the secretary of the treasury that the president and

In response to the signing of the Tripartite Pact, Stimson, Harold Ickes, and Henry Morgenthau renewed their push for tougher United States economic sanctions against Japan. Secretary Cordell Hull, as well as General Marshall and Admiral Stark, continued to oppose such actions and Roosevelt strongly criticized Morgenthau for pressuring him on the embargo issue, sharply reminding the secretary of the treasury that the president and

secretary of state were “handling foreign affairs.” Roosevelt’s concerns about provoking Japan continued to make him follow a very cautious policy of limited sanctions:

The President’s position [according to Breckinridge Long’s account] was that we were not to shut off oil from Japan or machine tools from Japan and thereby force her into a military expedition against the Dutch East Indies but that we were to withhold from Japan only such things as high test gas and certain machine tools and certain machinery which we now absolutely needed ourselves; that there was to be no prodding of Japan and that we were not going to get into any war by forcing Japan into a position where she was going to fight for some reason or another.20

This cautious policy continued until the November elections, but, following Roosevelt’s victory, the British pressured Washington to make it clear to Japan that the United States would react to any further Japanese aggression. Roosevelt informed Lord Halifax, the new British ambassador, on February 8, 1941 that he was “through with bluffing” Japan and promised to warn Ambassador Nomura Kichisaburo that the southward advance might lead to war with the United States. At the same time, however, he told Halifax that he did not think that the country would, in reality, approve of entering the war if the Japanese attacked only British or Dutch possessions.21

Despite this belief, the United States government began a concerted effort to persuade the Japanese government that America would intervene in such a contingency. “On February 14, Roosevelt was, he told Adolf Berle, ‘really emotional’ when he warned Nomura [against further aggression:] while everybody here was doing their best to keep things quiet, . . . should the dikes ever break (three sobs), civilization would end.” On the same day, apparently on his own authority, Eugene H. Dooman, consul of the American embassy in Tokyo, directly warned the Japanese that an attack on Singapore might bring the United States into the war. Perhaps most important, the United States entered
foreign affairs." Roosevelt's continued to make him follow actions:

...to Breckinridge Long's ac­
hit off oil from Japan or machine
force her into a military expedition
that we were to withhold from
west gas and certain machine tools
now absolutely needed ourselves;
ning of Japan and that we were not
rcing Japan into a position where
reason or another.

until the November elections,
, the British pressured Wash­
that the United States would
. Roosevelt informed Lord
, on February 8, 1941 that he
m and promised to warn Am­
. At the same time, however,
ink that the country would, in
or if the Japanese attacked only

States government began a
anese government that Amer­
ingency. “On February 14,
ue, ‘really emotional’ when he
aggression:] while everybody
ings quiet, . . . should the
lization would end.” On the
uthority, Eugene H. Dooman,
 Tokyo, directly warned the
might bring the United States

THE SUMMER OF 1941: NORTH OR SOUTH? In April 1941, Matsuoka signed a neutrality pact with the Soviet Union, thereby enhancing his own prestige and his ability to persuade the Japanese military to support military action in Southeast Asia. Before a decision could be made, however, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, surprising the Tokyo government and producing a pro­
longed reassessment of the southern advance policy. Should Japan take advantage of Barbarossa and, following German advice, at­
tack the Soviet Union immediately? Or should Japan continue the slow but steady preparations to expand into Southeast Asia?

Throughout the summer of 1941, the Japanese leaders were involved in what Roosevelt (who followed the debate through Magic decrypts) described as “a real drag-down and knock out fight among themselves . . . to decide which way they are going to jump.” Matsuoka called for an immediate attack on the Soviet Union, but the army and navy commands favored a policy of waiting to see how the German-Soviet war progressed. Under this “principle of the ripe persimmon,” the Japanese military preferred to prepare for both the southern and northern advances and to postpone deciding when to attack until they knew which front presented the most ripe fruit for the picking. In the mean­

time, however, the Tokyo government decided that moving troops into southern Indochina was a safe initial step, which increased their ability to attack the British and Dutch colonies later if necessary.

The Imperial Navy's greatest concern continued to be the possibility of an American oil embargo. Japan imported approximately 80 percent of its fuel supplies from the United States and efforts to develop alternative sources of supply—from both domestic synthetic fuel programs and other minor oil producers—had been a failure. The navy authorities accepted the decision to move into southern Indochina, however, because they believed it would not result in an American oil embargo, since Washington "knew well enough" that such an embargo would force Japan to attack the Dutch East Indies. On 2 July 1941, the Imperial Conference approved the decision to prepare for either a northern or southern contingency and to take the limited incursion into southern French Indochina, Matsuoka reporting to the emperor that "a war against Great Britain and the United States is unlikely to occur if we proceed with great caution."24 This claim was, however, a severe miscalculation.

THE AMERICAN EMBARGO "DECISION" Due to the Magic code-breakers, senior officials in the United States knew about the impending Japanese occupation of southern Indochina, and the ensuing debate within the administration about how to respond to this aggression once again revolved around whether an oil embargo would provoke a Japanese attack on the European colonies. The United States Navy strongly advised the president against a full embargo; the Japanese made an explicit warning that such an act would force Japan to attack the Dutch East Indies. On 2 July 1941, the Imperial Conference approved the decision to prepare for either a northern or southern contingency and to take the limited incursion into southern French Indochina, Matsuoka reporting to the emperor that "a war against Great Britain and the United States is unlikely to occur if we proceed with great caution."24 Yet, despite these misgivings, Roosevelt left on August 3 to


ORIGINS OF THE PACIFIC WAR

by the end of July the United States oil to Japan. Why?

Previous studies of 1941 as a treated the embargo as simply the card, and many traditional historians have done likewise.26 This an critical aspects of the events of 1941 States did not originally want a embargo of oil but unintended action to come into being.27

On July 24, the cabinet meeting freeze all Japanese assets in the question as to whether this act further moves, Roosevelt answ require only that a license for oil by case basis by the United S "inclined" to grant such licenses flexibility, since the amount of directly controlled by the administration was recorded, with bitter Ickes' private diary:

Notwithstanding that Japan was the President on Thursday we tight. He thought that it might Japan's neck and give it a jerk

Despite the president's app censes be issued to Japan up to

26 Hosoya Chihiro, "Miscalculations in (1968), 110; Russett, "Pearl Harbor," 97. A New Enemies, 166; Robert J. C. Butow, T 223; Gordon W. Prange, At Dawn We Step 27 Two recent works have emphasized d Anderson, Standard-Vacuum Oil Com 151-156. See also idem, "Upstairs, Downs 17-28. For a contrary perspective, see Wa Roosevelt and American Entry into World War 28 Blum (ed.), Morgenthau Diaries, II, 376
The government decided that moving was a safe initial step, which the British and Dutch colonies of concern continued to be the concern. Japan imported approximately from the United States and other minor oil producers—authorities accepted the decision to however, because they believed an embargo would force On July 24, the Imperial to prepare for either a northern to make the limited incursion into reporting to the emperor and the United States is unlikely to caution. This claim was, Due to the Magic code-Unites States knew about the of southern Indochina, and the about how to respond solved around whether an oil the attack on the European strongly advised the president made an explicit warning that obtain oil elsewhere; and the, maintained his earlier position, would simply drive the Japanese Yet, despite these misgivings, "The Japanese Navy and the United (eds.), Pearl Harbor as History (New From the Morgenthau Diaries: II, Years of explained this position publicly on the For Japanese warnings see ibid., 501, East 1941, IV, 836–841; James H. Herzog, Origins of the Pacific War | 335

by the end of July the United States had stopped all shipments of oil to Japan. Why?

Previous studies of 1941 as a case of deterrence failure have treated the embargo as simply the United States playing its trump card, and many traditional histories of the origins of the Pacific War have done likewise. This argument ignores one of the most critical aspects of the events of 1941. The President of the United States did not originally want a total embargo to be placed on oil exports to Japan but unintentionally allowed this provocative action to come into being. On July 24, the cabinet met in Washington and decided to freeze all Japanese assets in the United States. In response to a question as to whether this action might force Japan to make further moves, Roosevelt answered that the freeze order would require only that a license for oil exports be approved on a case by case basis by the United States Treasury and that he was “inclined” to grant such licenses. The benefit, he explained, was flexibility, since the amount of oil going to Japan could now be directly controlled by the administration. The president’s calculation was recorded, with bitterness but considerable insight, in Ickes’ private diary:

Notwithstanding that Japan was boldly making this hostile move, the President on Thursday was still unwilling to draw the noose tight. He thought that it might be better to slip the noose around Japan’s neck and give it a jerk now and then. Despite the president’s approval on July 31, that export licenses be issued to Japan up to the 1935/36 oil export level, after Roosevelt left on August 3 to meet with Churchill off Argentina,

26 Hosoya Chihiro, "Miscalculations in Deterrent Policy," Journal of Peace Research, V (1968), 110; Russett, “Pearl Harbor,” 97. Among the historians, see Marder, Old Friends, New Enemies, 166; Robert J. C. Butow, Tojo and the Coming of the War (Stanford, 1961), 223; Gordon W. Prange, At Dawn We Slept (New York, 1981), 169.
27 Two recent works have emphasized the “unintentional” nature of the embargo decision: Anderson, Standard-Vacuum Oil Company, 158–192; Utley, Going to War with Japan, 151–156. See also ibid., “Upstairs, Downstairs at Foggy Bottom,” Prologue, VIII (1976), 17–28. For a contrary perspective, see Waldo Heinrichs, The Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II, forthcoming.
Newfoundland, the self-proclaimed hawks in the administration were able to ensure that no further oil was exported to Japan.29 Acheson, assistant secretary of state and head of the Foreign Funds Committee (FFC), which had sole authority to release frozen funds, strongly favored a full embargo of oil: such an action could not provoke a war in the Pacific, he maintained, since “no rational Japanese could believe that an attack on us could result in anything but disaster for his country.” Despite protests from the State Department’s Far Eastern Division and the Treasury Department, Acheson therefore refused to release FFC controlled funds in early August and, when Roosevelt returned from Argentia, the noose that he had put around Japan’s neck had been pulled so tight that he could not loosen it.30

Evidence on precisely when Hull and Roosevelt found out about the de facto embargo or on why they accepted the policy is not available in the records. One can speculate, however, on a possible factor that may have played an important role in the president’s acceptance of Acheson’s actions. Once a provocative move is taken, it may appear more dangerous to change course than to stick to the unintended policy. It is probable that by the time Roosevelt returned from the Argentia conference, any retreat from what was by that time widely believed, in both Japan and the United States, to be a full oil embargo would have been perceived as appeasement—as giving in to Japanese aggression. Roosevelt had in 1940 opposed moving the fleet from Pearl Harbor to the West Coast, because to the American people and the Japanese government it might appear that the United States was “stepping backward.”31 It is possible that similar fears overcame Roosevelt’s earlier concerns about provocation in the waning days of the summer of 1941.

30 Dean Acheson, Present at the Creation (New York, 1970), 43, 46, 52. Acheson explained his motives in his memoirs: “But if President Roosevelt lacked decisiveness in the degree his successor possessed it, he had a sense of direction in which he constantly advanced. It seemed to those in government that our most useful function was to increase, so far as we could, the rate of that advance.”
31 It is clear that Hull did not believe that an embargo was in place on Aug. 2, 1941. On Aug. 27 and 28, Roosevelt told Nomura that the Japanese could still purchase oil, and Hull admitted that he “had not checked fully into the matter.” It is possible that both men were, at that point, trying to reduce the provocative nature of the action. FRUS, The Far East 1941, IV, 155; FRUS, Japan 1931–1941, II, 567, 572; Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, Pt. I, 265–266.
Tokyo's Reaction

Prior to August 1941, the Japanese government did not face the necessity of choice: military preparations for the southern advance and the war against the Soviet Union could take place simultaneously without a decision on what direction, if any, future Japanese expansion would take. The American oil embargo, intentional or not, changed the calculus and added immense time pressures on Tokyo. Japan produced only 10 percent of its fuel supply and, most important from the military perspective, was without a secure source of oil for the Imperial Navy; estimates suggested that the entire Japanese fleet could not operate for more than one to one and a half years in wartime conditions. Each day that passed meant that Japan's limited oil reserves were being depleted and Admiral Nagano was privately brought before the emperor at the end of July to explain the predicament. Nagano reported that, given the oil situation and the growing American military buildup, the navy was in an increasingly disadvantageous military position. Yet even if Japan began the war immediately, Nagano reported, "it was doubtful whether or not we would even win, to say nothing of a great victory as in the Russo-Japanese War."32

This deep sense of desperation hung over the Liaison Conference meetings in Tokyo in August and September. Even the most slender hope of a naval victory over the United States would dissipate if war were not begun soon. Naval officers argued that, without fuel supplies, their battleships would soon be mere "scarecrows" and, in September, Nagano compared Japan to a critically ill patient: a desperate operation offered the only hope of saving his life.33 Two alternatives to this risky operation existed: the possibility that negotiations with the United States would produce the life blood that the patient needed (that is, a resumption of oil exports); or the acceptance of the risk of what Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro called "gradual exhaustion" (that is, living with the military danger Nagano sought to avoid).

In the Liaison Conference meetings, only Kido Koichi and Konoe appear to have been willing to consider acceptance of the latter alternative: accepting a desperate peace rather than fighting.

32 Kido Diary, IMTFE, transcript, 10,185-10,200; 30,940-30,941.
33 Marder, Old Friends, New Enemies, 167; Konoe's memoirs, in Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, Pt. XX, 4005.
a desperate war. Although other decision-makers called for continued negotiations with the United States, they warned that Japan would eventually be defenseless if the embargo continued. The nation was like a fish in a pond from which the water was gradually being drained away: Japan would “finally be reduced to a crippled condition” without oil. Therefore the two critical questions in the eyes of most of the Liaison Conference members were: first, what would Japan be willing to give up in order to end the unbearable oil embargo; and second, how long could Japan negotiate without endangering her survival?

With respect to the first question, the Tokyo government decided that it would demand that the United States and Great Britain cease to support the Chiang Kai-shek regime in China and resume oil supplies in return for a Japanese promise not to advance further south and to withdraw forces from French Indochina “after a just peace has been established in the Far East.” With respect to China, the government’s position was that it would “insist on stationing our troops [in China] under a new agreement between Japan and China. However, we have no objection to affirming that we are in principle prepared to withdraw our troops following the settlement of the incident.” In short, Japan would abandon the southern advance, but would insist on reaping the minimum rewards of the “China incident,” by having a puppet regime come to power on the mainland.

With respect to the second question, Japanese leaders, especially in the navy, were concerned that the United States would deliberately prolong negotiations in order to improve its military preparations and, in early September, the Liaison Conference members agreed that a decision for war had to come by October 10 if there were “no prospect” of Japanese demands being met through diplomatic negotiations. The materials prepared for answering the emperor’s questions, however, display the desperate character of Japanese military strategy if war were chosen:

A war with the United States and Great Britain will be long, and will become a war of endurance. It is very difficult to predict the termination of war, but it would be well-nigh impossible to expect

34 The fish metaphor appears in Butow, Tojo, 245. The “crippled condition” statement is by Nagano at the Sept. 6, 1941 Imperial Conference: Ike, Japan’s Decision, 138–139.
The surrender of the United States. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the war may end because of a great change in American public opinion, which may result from such factors as the remarkable success of our military operations in the South or the surrender of Great Britain. 36

The emperor, at the Imperial Conference on September 6, broke with tradition and spoke in favor of peace. Admiral Nagano responded by promising that “diplomacy would be stressed; war would be chosen only as an unavoidable last resort.” The hopes for peace were placed on the possibility of a meeting between Konoe and Roosevelt to negotiate a settlement. 37

Despite knowledge from the Magic decrypts that the Tokyo government had decided to “pin our last hopes on an interview between the Premier and the President,” the American government decided in early October that no such meeting would take place. Two factors determined this negative response. First, Hull feared that the Japanese negotiators would simply try to find “a formula that would satisfy [the American] desire and determination in principle, while still giving [the Japanese] an outlet for their ambitions” and therefore insisted that the Japanese present concrete proposals before the summit. 38

Second, this view was strengthened by the knowledge, again gained through Magic decrypts, that any agreement to withdraw Japanese troops from the mainland after the “China incident” was resolved, had been interpreted in Tokyo to mean after the Chiang Kai-shek regime was eliminated. The United States, however, strongly supported Chiang Kai-shek and wanted a complete withdrawal of Japanese troops from China. Although Konoe had planned to have the emperor intervene in order to ensure that the

36 Ibid., 135, 153.
37 Ibid., 151; Butow, Tojo, 259.

...decision-makers called for con-

sequent. States, they warned that Japan

the embargo continued. The

t from which the water was

an would “finally be reduced

il.

Therefore the two critical

Liason Conference members

willing to give up in order to

and second, how long could

g her survival?

ion, the Tokyo government

the United States and Great

Kai-shek regime in China and

apanese promise not to advance

ces from French Indochina

ished in the Far East.” With

position was that it would

China] under a new agreement

ber, we have no objection to

pared to withdraw our troops

ident.”36 In short, Japan would

would insist on reaping the

incident,” by having a puppet

ian. Japanese leaders, espe-

the United States would

order to improve its military

ber, the Liaison Conference

war had to come by October

apanese demands being met

the materials prepared for an-

ever, display the desperate

Great Britain will be long, and

it is very difficult to predict the

well-nigh impossible to expect
army would agree to an unconditional withdrawal from China, Americans in Washington did not anticipate this plan and when Nomura admitted that the Army leadership was the stumbling block to an agreement, Hull only asked “why the Japanese Government could not educate the generals.”

THE “CLEAN SLATE” DEBATE As the mid-October deadline approached with no prospect of a diplomatic breakthrough in sight, Konoe despaired and met privately with Oikawa Koshiro, minister of the Imperial Navy, to seek a solution to the domestic crisis. The navy leadership agreed that negotiations in Washington should continue and that, given the prospects of a desperate war, Japan “in principle” should accept the American demand for a complete withdrawal from China. The navy refused in the Liaison Conference, however, to go further than to state that the prime minister alone must decide whether Japan should continue negotiations or go to war. Oikawa was unwilling to state publicly that the navy lacked the strength to attack the United States Navy, because (as he stated after the war) “if we were to say that we were not able to carry out operations against the United States, it would have meant we had been lying to the Emperor when presenting operational plans for war.” In addition, Oikawa felt that “the Navy could not solve the problem that even the Prime Minister could not solve,” apparently fearing an army coup d’etat attempt. Army Minister Tojo had insisted that withdrawal from China “would not be in keeping with the dignity of the Army” and that, in any case, backing down to Washington’s demands would only cause the United States to be “more arrogant and more overbearing.” Konoe, faced with strong army opposition to continued negotiations and only equivocal navy support, resigned on October 16 rather than take responsibility for leading Japan into a desperate war against a militarily superior enemy.

39 Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, Pt. XVII, 2791; Konoe to Max Bishop, Nov. 7, 1945, as quoted in Langer and Gleason, Undeclared War, 707. Konoe had told this plan to Grew, but there is no record of Grew reporting the information to Washington. Grew, Turbulent Era, II, 1329; FRUS, Japan 1931-1941, II, 651.


41 Butow, Tojo, 243, 289-309; Togo Shiho, 54-55; Detwiler and Burdick (eds.), War in

42 See Hosoya, “Twenty-Five Years after Pearl Harbor,” in Grant Goodman, Imperial Japan 58-59; Schroeder, Axis Alliance, 175-176. For a biography of Tojo, see 326.
The emperor appointed General Tojo to lead the next government but, again intervening without precedent, requested that Tojo accept the position without being bound to earlier agreed upon decisions and deadlines. There was to be what was called a “clean slate” debate: all policy issues were to be decided anew. Yet, although the new government may have had a clean slate, the same clock on the wall relentlessly ticked away. For each day that passed without petroleum imports, Japan consumed an estimated 12,000 tons of oil and each month an estimated 4,000 allied soldiers reinforced British and American garrisons in the Far East. The military services, the Foreign Ministry, and the Imperial General Headquarters agreed that war, if it could not be avoided through negotiations, had to come in early December if Japan were to have even the slightest hope of victory.41

Three questions were paramount in the clean slate discussions: first, should Japan accept the American demand for complete troop withdrawals from China? Second, could British and Dutch territories be attacked to acquire the needed oil supplies, without American intervention? Third, how could Japan win a war against the United States?

The Imperial Army maintained throughout the clean slate debate that a complete withdrawal from China was unacceptable. Historians disagree on the causes of the army’s insistence on maintaining troops in China and not allowing the “China incident” to end in complete defeat. Some emphasize the Japanese military officers’ code of honor: to back down or surrender was worse than death and, thus, a humiliating end to the “China incident” was simply psychologically impossible. Others have been less charitable, arguing that the Japanese army used the old jargon of honor and defensive intentions in China to cover their aggressive ambitions.42 Both views accurately represent the views of many army officers, but it is important to note that many naval officers and civilian officials agreed with a third argument against total withdrawal made by the Imperial Army: agreement to end

---

42 See Hosoya, “Twenty-Five Years after Pearl Harbor: A New Look at Japan’s Decision for War,” in Grant Goodman, Imperial Japan and Asia: A Reassessment (New York, 1967), 58; Schroeder, Axis Alliance, 175–176. For a less charitable view, see, for example, Butow, Tojo, 326.
the “China incident” might not bring a lasting peace. Indeed, it might merely delay a war against the United States to a later date, which would be more disadvantageous to Japan.

Admiral Nagano, for example, had earlier argued against accepting a false peace like that after “the Winter Battle of Osaka Castle,” the Japanese equivalent of “a Munich Settlement.” The Liaison Conference under Konoe had accepted a similar position:

Even if we should make concessions to the United States by giving up part of our national policy for the sake of a temporary peace, the United States, its military position strengthened, is sure to demand more and more concessions on our part; and ultimately our empire will lie prostrate at the feet of the United States.43

Thus, the Japanese government did not view the troop withdrawal issue in isolation. Given the prevailing belief of American hostility and the massive American arms buildup, many naval and army leaders felt that conflict was inevitable in the long run and that it was better to go to war now than in the future.44 Under the threat of the foreign minister’s resignation, however, the military agreed that the United States would be told that troops in China would be withdrawn after a period of approximately twenty-five years. No further concessions were to be made at the Washington negotiations.

The second issue—could a war be limited to an attack on the European colonies—was critical, since the key target for Japanese expansion was the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies. The government in Tokyo was not the only group debating this issue. In Washington, the American military was split on the question of whether operational considerations would allow the Japanese to bypass the Philippines if they attacked to the south. The German Embassy in Tokyo also urged precisely such a policy so that “the United States can be saddled with... this difficult decision about entering the war.”45

\[\text{References:}\]

43 Ike, Japan’s Decision, 140, 152.
44 For example, Nagano argued on Nov. 1 that “we might avoid war now, but go to war three years later; or we might go to war now and plan for what the situation will be three years hence. I think it would be easier to go to war now.” Ibid., 201-202.
45 In July 1941 a naval study argued that “if Japan should take military action against the British and the Dutch, she would also include military action against the Philippines.” As quoted in Herzog, “Influence of the United States Navy,” 327. In Oct. 1941, General
ing a lasting peace. Indeed, it
the United States to a later date, 
ous to Japan.

e, had earlier argued against
he United States
eous to Japan.

that defending the United States by giving
the sake of a temporary peace, position strengthened, is sure to
onsions on our part, and ultimately
feet of the United States.

t did not view the troop with­
prevailing belief of American
r poly in the long run
er now than in the future. Admi-
Minister’s resignation, however,
ed States would be told that
own after a period of approxi-
concessions were to be made

be limited to an attack on the
ce the key target for Japanese
Dutch East Indies. The gov-
group debating this issue, In
was split on the question of
would allow the Japanese to
to the south. The German
ually such a policy so that “the
. difficult decision about

In the Imperial Navy, strong disagreements arose between
the leading members of the Navy General Staff and Admiral
Yamamoto Isoroku, Commander in Chief of the combined fleet,
who created a new operational plan for a surprise attack on
the Pearl Harbor fleet. Vice Admiral Kondo Nobutake, for ex-
ample, maintained that Japan should attack Malaya and the Dutch
East Indies only, and numerous high-ranking officers opposed the
Pearl Harbor plan. The traditional navy strategy had been de-
defensive: forcing the American fleet to cross the Pacific; attriting
the fleet through submarine attacks during its voyages, and attempt-
ing to win what was expected to be the decisive battle near Japan.
Yamamoto, who favored concessions to avoid war, nonetheless
argued that a surprise attack against the United States in Hawaii
and the Philippines was preferable to awaiting American actions
because “we cannot rule out the possibility that the enemy would
dare to launch an attack upon our homeland to burn down our
capital and other cities.”

Under the threat of Yamamoto’s resignation, the navy leadership agreed to his secret Pearl Harbor attack plan. All naval
presentations in the Liaison Conference, however, stressed the
need to avoid exposing the Japanese flank to an attack from the
Philippines only, and the army concluded at the Liaison Confer-
ence on October 28 that “if it is impossible [to separate the United
States from Great Britain and the Netherlands] from the point of
view of Naval strategy, then it would be the same for the Army.”
The Foreign Ministry prepared a paper for the Liaison Conference
which reinforced this position. The conclusion was that there was
a Western “Anti-Japanese Joint Encirclement” policy and that
secret agents had learned “from American sources” that the West-
ern allies had agreed “to declare war against the aggressor in case
the aggressor invades Dutch East Indies or Burma.”

Leonard Gerow, Acting Assistant Chief of Staff, reported to General Marshall that is was
not clear whether the Japanese would include the Philippines in an attack southward.
Operations Division, War Department, General Staff, Box 14, 3251-3251, RG 165 Modern
Military Branch, National Archives; Documents in German Foreign Policy, XIII, 399, 544,
784, 950.

46 Prange, At Dawn We Slept, 17, 284-285.
47 Ike, Japan’s Decision, 193; “On the Formation of the Anti-Japanese Joint Encirclement
by Great Britain, United States and the Netherlands,” IMTFE exhibit No. 3566; “The
Anglo-American Policy of Encirclement against Japan in the South Pacific Ocean,” IMTFE
exhibit No. 3567; Togo, Cause of Japan, 215.
On 1 November 1941, the Liaison Conference meeting lasted for a record seventeen hours, frequently erupting into angry arguments, but eventually a decision was made. Togo and Finance Minister Kaya Okinori voiced their support for continued negotiations to reach a peaceful settlement; the army called for an immediate decision for war; and the navy argued that, because British and American defenses were improving and the number of enemy warships increasing, “the time for war will not come later.” By the early morning of November 2, the majority opinion was clear: Japan should make preparations for an attack which would take place in the first week of December, unless last-minute negotiations were successful. Togo and Kaya, the dissenters, eventually agreed to accept the majority opinion. The negotiators in Washington had less than a month to reach a settlement, while the Japanese military prepared for war.

HOW COULD JAPAN WIN? On November 15, the Liaison Conference approved a statement spelling out Japan’s plan to “destroy the will of the United States” to fight a prolonged war (Box 1). The Tokyo leadership accepted that complete victory over the United States was not possible, but sought, by a series of quick victories in the Pacific, to set up a defensive barrier and persuade the United States that a painful war of attrition was simply not worth fighting. Efforts were to be started, the document stated, to point out “the uselessness of a Japanese-American war . . . [and] American public opinion will be directed toward opposition to war.” Japanese agents in the United States had already been instructed to make contact with individuals and organizations whom the Japanese government believed would hinder “unity in the United States”: labor unions, the Communist and Socialist parties, “influential Negroes,” “German and Italian Fifth Columns,” and “other anti-Roosevelt movements.” The Japanese government had also already explored the possibility of the Vatican playing a role in negotiating peace. The limited war strategy, given the overwhelming military power of the United States, was the only way in which Japan could win a Pacific war.49

Box 1 How Japan Planned to

Japan, Germany, and Italy will
with Great Britain, and at the same
time with the United States to fight.
(a) The Empire will adopt the
policy of the Philippines, for the time
being, and the South Sea with the
United States. (b) An all-out atten­t
merce to the United States. (c) To
the Far East, persuading Americans
policy, and pointing out the use
war; American public opinion will
to war. (d) Attempts will be made
t to United States and Australia.

While paying full attention
the international situation, and
we will endeavor to seize the fol-
bring the war to a close: (a) co-
operations in the South; (b) co-
operations in China, especially e-
gine; (c) favorable development
especially the conquest of the I
between Germany and the Sovi-
 policy vis-a-vis India.

For this purpose we will str-
ganda activities directed against
tugal, and the Vatican.

The three countries—Japan
to sign a separate peace agree-
make peace with Great
but will endeavor to use Great
States. In the planning to prom-
attention will be paid to supple-
Pacific region, and to the trea


48 Ike, Japan’s Decision, 198-202.
son Conference meeting lasted frequently erupting into angry argument; the army called for an armistice; the navy argued that, because the war was improving and the number of casualties was diminishing, the time for war was not yet ripe. On November 2, the majority opinion was made. Togo and Finance Minister Inouye expressed the support for continued negotiations; the army called for an armistice; the navy argued that, because the war was improving and the number of casualties was diminishing, the time for war will not come until December, unless last-minute changes could be made in Japan's decision to continue the war. The dissenters, led by Chiba and Kaya, the dissenter, argued that the majority opinion. The negotiators were in a difficult position: they had to reach a settlement, while the army and navy were calling for an armistice.

November 15, the Liaison Conference discussed Japan's plan to "destroy the United States" and fight a prolonged war (Box 1). In the following months, the plan was modified, but the underlying desire for complete victory over the United States remained. The limited war strategy, starting in November 15, 1941, the document stated, was directed toward opposition to war. In the planning to promote peace with the United States, attention will be paid to supplies of tin and rubber in the South Pacific region, and to the treatment of the Philippines.

**Box 1** How Japan Planned to Win a Limited War

Japan, Germany, and Italy will cooperate and endeavor to deal with Great Britain, and at the same time endeavor to destroy the will of the United States to fight.

(a) The Empire will adopt the following policies: (1) In dealing with the Philippines, for the time being the present policy will be continued, and thought will be given to how it can hasten the end of the war. (2) An all-out attempt will be made to disrupt commerce to the United States. (3) The flow of materials from China and the South Seas to the United States will be cut off. (4) Strategic propaganda against the United States will be stepped up; emphasis will be placed on enticing the American main fleet to come to the Far East, persuading Americans to reconsider their Far Eastern policy, and pointing out the uselessness of a Japanese-American war; American public opinion will be directed toward opposition to war. (5) Attempts will be made to break the ties between the United States and Australia.

While paying full attention to changes in the war situation, the international situation, and popular feelings in enemy countries, we will endeavor to seize the following opportunities in order to bring the war to a close: (a) conclusion of the principal military operations in the South; (b) conclusion of the principal military operations in China, especially the capitulation of the Chiang regime; (c) favorable developments in the war situation in Europe, especially the conquest of the British Isles, the end of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, and the success of the policy vis-a-vis India.

For this purpose we will step up our diplomatic and propaganda activities directed against Latin America, Switzerland, Portugal, and the Vatican.

The three countries—Japan, Germany, and Italy—agree not to sign a separate peace agreement; at the same time, they will not immediately make peace with Great Britain when she surrenders, but will endeavor to use Great Britain to persuade the United States. In the planning to promote peace with the United States, attention will be paid to supplies of tin and rubber in the South Pacific region, and to the treatment of the Philippines.

*Source:* Ike, *Japan's Decision*, 248-249. Note that this approved document does not include the Pearl Harbor attack plan.
It has been argued that this vision of a limited victory and a negotiated settlement was the result of wishful thinking on the part of desperate leaders. Yet, anyone who has lived through the war in Vietnam cannot easily dismiss the possibility that the United States public and elite opinion might have decided that the costs of continuing a war in Asia were greater than any possible gains to be made. Moreover, the American military leadership believed, before December 7, 1941, that such a limited Japanese victory in the Pacific was likely if deterrence failed. For example, on September 11, General Marshall and Admiral Stark reported to the president that it was "probable that Japan could be forced to give up much of her territorial gains [in a war], unless she had already firmly established herself in such strength that the United States and its Associates could not afford the energy to continue the war against her."

What neither the British nor the Americans had anticipated, when making their predictions of a limited Japanese victory, was the galvanizing effect that the surprise Pearl Harbor attack would have on American public support for the war effort. Thinking that the war would most likely begin through a limited Japanese attack in Southeast Asia, probably including the Philippines, the allied officers had not foreseen the critical effect of the "day of infamy." This same blind spot also existed within the Japanese government. Contrary to the common assumption that the Pearl Harbor attack was caused by the Tokyo leadership's ethnocentric misperceptions of the American people, the available evidence suggests that the root cause of this problem was that the full Liaison Conference was never informed of the Pearl Harbor plan. The strategic contradiction at the center of Japan's war plan—a war dependent on a negotiated settlement was to begin with a surprise Sunday morning attack on the American fleet—was never resolved, be-

---

50 Lebow has argued that Japanese leaders "convinced themselves, for no other reason than their need to, that the United States would fight such a [limited] war." Richard Ned Lebow, Between Peace and War (Baltimore, 1981), 274. See also, Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat," in Jervis, Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, Psychology and Deterrence (Baltimore, 1985), 26.

51 Sept. 11, 1941. Joint Board Estimate, quoted in Robert Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins (New York, 1948), 415 (emphasis added). British naval authorities shared this view, arguing in early 1941 that, even if Germany were defeated in a global war, it was "at least highly problematical" that the status quo could be restored in the Far East. See Marder, Old Friends, New Enemies, 193.

52 This interpretation does not mean that of the American people, but only that informed of the Pearl Harbor plan and the response to the attack. The Nov. 15 states will be placed on enticing the American Togo, Cause of Japan, 197-198.

53 Agawa, Reluctant Admiral, 229.

54 Nagano USSBS Interrogation, Mar. collection.
mission of a limited victory and a
result of wishful thinking on the
anyone who has lived through
 dismiss the possibility that the
union might have decided that
Asia were greater than any
other, the American military lead-
7, 1941, that such a limited
likely if deterrence failed. For
Marshall and Admiral Stark
as "probable that Japan could
territorial gains [in a war], unless
in such strength that the United
energy to continue the war

the Americans had anticipated,
limited Japanese victory, was
raise Pearl Harbor attack would
for the war effort. Thinking
in through a limited Japanese
including the Philippines, the
critical effect of the "day of
assumption that the Pearl
Tokyo leadership's ethnocentric
people, the available evidence
Problem was that the full Liaison
Pearl Harbor plan. The strategic
was war— a war dependent
begin with a surprise Sunday
fleet— was never resolved, be-
convincing themselves, for no other reason
ight such a [limited] war." Richard Ned
, 274. See also, Jervis, "Perceiving and
Gross Stein, Psychology and Deterrence
ated in Robert Sherwood, Roosevelt and
3d). British naval authorities shared this
1f they were defeated in a global war, it was
could be restored in the Far East. See

cause it was never raised at the highest levels of the Tokyo gov-
erment.52

Discussions of the strategic and political implications of the
Pearl Harbor attack were limited to the inner circles of the Japan-
ese navy. Naval officers who opposed the plan did stress that
it would have a disastrous effect:

It would be impossible [argued Onishi Takijiro] in any war with
the U.S. for Japan to bring the other side to its knees. Going to
war with America without this ability means that we must consider
ways to bring it to an early end, which means in turn that at some
time we'll have to reach a compromise. For that reason, whether
we land in the Philippines or anywhere else, we should avoid
anything like the Hawaiian operation that would put America's
back up too badly.53

Admiral Yamamoto overruled such arguments, however, and
the navy's desire for strict operational secrecy meant that many members of the Liaison Conference believed that the De-
ember 7 attacks would be limited to the Philippines and Euro-
pean colonial territories. "There was no necessity to talk of the
attack on Pearl Harbor," Admiral Nagano explained after the war,
since "it was only a naval operation and did not involve strategy
but tactics."54 Thus, although the Pearl Harbor attack destroyed
part of the American fleet, the Imperial Navy's secrecy also en-
sured that the Liaison Conference never discussed whether such
an attack was strategically wise. The attack on Pearl Harbor was
a two-way surprise.

FINAL MOVES There was little room for maneuver in the Wash-
ington negotiations after the Japanese decisions of early Novem-
ber. The United States government had, without being fully
aware of the consequences, moved from a policy of deterring the

52 This interpretation does not mean that all Japanese officials understood the psychology
of the American people, but only that the central decision-making body never
was informed of the Pearl Harbor plan and therefore never debated the dilemma of the U.S.
response to the attack. The Nov. 15 statement (Box 1) specifically stated that "emphasis
will be placed on enticing the American main fleet to come to the Far East." See also,
Togo, Cause of Japan, 197-198.
53 Agawa, Reluctant Admiral, 229.
54 Nagano USSBS Interrogation, Mar. 29, 1946, 5, Library of Congress microfilm
collection.
southward advance to a policy seeking to gain a complete withdrawal from China in exchange for a return of oil exports. The Japanese government was unwilling to agree to such humiliating terms that might merely result in an even more disadvantageous war in 1942 or 1943.

The Roosevelt administration attempted, nonetheless, to stave off what appeared to be an imminent Pacific conflict in November 1941. If peace could be maintained until February or March 1942, the Joint Board of the Army and Navy reported to the president on November 5, a large force of B-17 flying fortresses could be deployed in the Philippines "to the point where it might well be a deciding factor in deterring Japan in operations in the area south and west of the Philippines." Although Roosevelt and Hull immediately rejected Tokyo's comprehensive proposal on the China issue, believing that it would leave Chiang Kai-shek at the mercy of Japanese aggression, the president agreed to an alternative Japanese proposal for a modus vivendi, in which, in return for resumed United States exports ("some oil and rice—more later"), Tokyo would pledge not to send further troops into Southeast Asia, not to invoke the Tripartite Pact if the United States entered the European war, and, in Roosevelt's words, to "talk things over" with the Chinese.55

Although Roosevelt, Stimson, Stark, and Marshall all believed on November 25 that such a modus vivendi would be offered to the Japanese, later that night Secretary Hull, without consulting the military, decided to "kick the whole thing over," scuttling the temporary agreement and substituting a statement of United States "principles" to give to the Japanese ambassador. Chinese and British opposition to the modus vivendi, as well as the fear of adverse public reaction in the United States, tipped the scales against such an agreement in Hull's opinion. Roosevelt approved Hull's decision the next morning, apparently after having received intelligence that a Japanese naval squadron was moving into the South China Sea, and believing that this "was evidence of bad faith on the part of the Japanese." On December 6, the president issued a final direct message to the emperor, calling for a withdrawal of forces from Indochina was "a keg of dynamite." The emperor at 3 a.m. on December 7 attack force was in the air over O.

There was almost no possibility after the failure of the modus vivendi the statement of principles. The principles were tantamount to United States "knowing full well what Tojo even feared that the United States would strike Japan first. The emperor was the hardening American position of our Empire and made it important of the China Incident, but also important of our Empire." Hara Yoshimichi, speaking for the emperor, appr."At the moment," Tojo concluded "stands at the threshold of glory" begun.57

LESSONS FROM THE ORIGINS OF THE PACIFIC WAR

The events of 1941 should caution of how a policy of deterrence capabilities are robust and the levels of destruction expected


56 Ibid., 665-666; Hull, Memoirs, II, 1081; to statement of Henry Stimson, Pearl Harbor, the Navy Department, Record Group 40, 57 Detwiler and Burdick (eds.) War in A 3655, 185; Hc, Japan's Decision, 263, 283.
...cording to gain a complete with- turn of oil exports. The ing to agree to such humiliating even more disadvantageous 

...attempted, nonetheless, to imminent Pacific conflict in maintained until February or Army and Navy reported to rge force of B-17 flying for-

...ippines "to the point where deterring Japan in operations Sippines." Although Roosevelt yo's comprehensive proposal would leave Chiang Kai-shek 1, the president agreed to an modus vivendi, in which, in exports (“some oil and rice— not to send further troops into Tripartite Pact if the United end, in Roosevelt's words, to 

...Stark, and Marshall all be- modus vivendi would be offered tary Hull, without consulting hole thing over," scuttling the statement of United Japanese ambassador. Chinese modus vivendi, as well as the fear of United States, tipped the scales opinion. Roosevelt approved lparently after having received squadron was moving into the at this “was evidence of bad. On December 6, the president emperor, calling for a with-

...drawal of forces from Indochina and warning that the situation was “a keg of dynamite.” The message was received by the emperor at 3 a.m. on December 8 (Japanese time), when their attack force was in the air over Oahu.56

There was almost no possibility of avoiding war, however, after the failure of the modus vivendi effort and Hull’s issuance of the statement of principles. The Tokyo leadership believed that the principles were tantamount to an ultimatum issued by the United States “knowing full well that they were unacceptable.” Tojo even feared that the United States might be planning to strike Japan first. The emperor was informed on December 1 that the hardening American position “not only belittled the dignity of our Empire and made it impossible for us to harvest the fruits of the China Incident, but also threatened the very existence of our Empire.” Hara Yoshimichi, president of the Privy Council, speaking for the emperor, approved the decision to go to war. “At the moment,” Tojo concluded the meeting, “our Empire stands at the threshold of glory or oblivion.” The Pacific War had begun.57

LESSONS FROM THE ORIGINS OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Deterrence theory emphasizes the twin requirements of capability and credibility for successful deterrence. Military capabilities must be sufficient, even under the most adverse conditions of having been struck first, to threaten to inflict unacceptable costs on an enemy. Such threats must also have sufficient credibility; execution of that threat must appear probable enough to make the risks of attacking unacceptable. Most deterrence theorists assume that if the potential costs of war are extremely high and the probability of having to pay those costs is high (or, in traditional terms, the probability of victory is low), then deterrence ought to be secure.

The events of 1941 should serve, however, as a demonstration of how a policy of deterrence can fail even if the force capabilities are robust and the threats are credible. The potential levels of destruction expected by the government in Tokyo may

56 Ibid., 665-666; Hull, Memoirs, II, 1081-1082; Stimson Diary, Nov. 26, 1941, appendix to statement of Henry Stimson, Pearl Harbor Liaison Office, Box 30, General Record of the Navy Department, Record Group 80, Modern Military Branch, National Archives.

57 Detwiler and Burdick (eds.) War in Asia, II, app. 3; Tojo testimony, IMTFE, exhibit 3655, 185; Ike, Japan's Decision, 263, 283.
not have been the same as those faced by statesman in the nuclear age, but they were nevertheless apocalyptic. Japanese newspapers, for example, predicted that a war against the United States would be a “holocaust,” and Admiral Yamamoto envisioned the possibility of Tokyo being “completely destroyed by fire three or four times” by American bombers. With respect to credibility, the Tokyo government believed that the United States might be persuaded to accept a negotiated settlement rather than fight a total war. But this assessment was more a hope than an expectation, and Japanese leaders chose to attack the United States despite being highly pessimistic about the prospects of victory.

Deterrence failed in 1941, despite the anticipated “unacceptable” costs of war to Japan, because the costs of not going to war were considered even higher. The possibility of a similar occurrence today—the inadvertent provocation of a nuclear adversary to execute a desperate attack—is often given inadequate attention by political scientists and defense analysts. Among advocates of an “assured destruction” nuclear deterrent posture, this tendency is most strikingly seen in Waltz’s tenet of deterrent faith that “no country will goad a nuclear adversary that finds itself in sad straits.” Among more hawkish strategists, the denigration of the possibility of provocation can be seen in Gray’s arguments that the United States’ possession of a “theoretical first strike threat” against the Soviet Union would not increase the likelihood that the Moscow leadership would strike first, out of fear of being attacked, in a crisis. As Gray puts it, “Why the Soviet Union would be interested in starting a war that it would stand little, if any, prospect of winning is, to say the least, obscure.” Yet although it may be true that no statesmen will intentionally goad a nuclear adversary into attacking, it is possible that one could unintentionally do so. And, although the capability to deny the Soviet Union an ability to achieve even costly victories is critical for deterrence, avoiding forces and operations that could be perceived as provocative is nonetheless necessary.

58 Quoted in Prange, At Dawn We Slept, 13, 279.

The nature of the process by which Japan took place in 1941—the and the intense American press could easily be repeated under a nuclear age. First, just as Roosevelt democracy to impose a complete embargo, inadequately in control, in a crisis, could allow provocations which lead the Soviet leadership and unavoidable could undercut deterrence. In a crisis, if the Soviet choice was between preemptive preemption might appear to be certain, it is critical that the United forces and operational plans to it is also critical that the United States in a crisis that could increase would believe a nuclear first strike reconnaissance missions near a nuclear alerting measures must authorities to ensure that unit cur.

Second, the temptation to will not lead to war, simply be war would be “unacceptable” to the nuclear age. It may be true that nuclear escalation has engendered Soviet and American leaders with the prospect of direct reciprocity if success in managing the past should lead to overconfidence in both governments believed that because the other side would be.

In 1941, the complacency the attitude of Stanley Hornbeck, Asian expert, who dismissed a might risk a disastrous war,
The nature of the process by which unintentional provocation of Japan took place in 1941—through the de facto oil embargo and the intense American pressure to withdraw from China—could easily be repeated under different circumstances in the nuclear age. First, just as Roosevelt allowed an unguided bureaucracy to impose a complete embargo against his wishes, a future president, inadequately in control of complex military operations in a crisis, could allow provocative missions to take place. Actions which lead the Soviet leadership to believe that war is imminent and unavoidable could undercut even the most overwhelming deterrent. In a crisis, if the Soviets came to believe that their only choice was between preemptively striking first or retaliating, preemption might appear to be the least unattractive option. Certainly, it is critical that the United States maintain adequate nuclear forces and operational plans to provide robust deterrence. But it is also critical that the United States avoid taking military measures in a crisis that could increase the probability that the Soviets would believe a nuclear first strike to be imminent. In particular, reconnaissance missions near the Soviet Union and dangerous nuclear alerting measures must be carefully controlled by central authorities to ensure that unintentional provocations do not occur.

Second, the temptation to believe that strong coercive actions will not lead to war, simply because the consequences of such a war would be “unacceptable” to an enemy, is especially strong in the nuclear age. It may be true that the horrifying prospect of nuclear escalation has engendered considerable caution among Soviet and American leaders when they have been confronted with the prospect of direct armed conflict. Yet it would be a tragic irony if success in managing the dangerous superpower crises of the past should lead to overconfidence in crises in the future. If both governments believed that they could safely escalate a crisis because the other side would back down, both would be wrong.

In 1941, the complacency of power was poignantly seen in the attitude of Stanley Hornbeck, the State Department’s leading Asian expert, who dismissed a younger colleague’s fears that Japan might risk a disastrous war, one that it was unlikely to win,

because of its desperate situation after the oil embargo. "Tell me," Hornbeck asked, "of one case in history when a nation went to war out of desperation."61 The young foreign service officer was speechless; the question went unanswered.

The origins of the Pacific War should serve as a constant reminder to future strategists that a nation, if provoked sufficiently can launch a dangerous, even disastrous war, out of desperation. A repetition of the tragic events of 1941 is by no means the only path by which a nuclear war could begin. But it is an important one which we ignore at our peril.