

Strategic Insight

Trouble

by [Daniel Moran](#)

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This is comparable to Pearl Harbor and we must have the same response, and the people who did it must have the same end, as the people who attacked Pearl Harbor.

- Henry Kissinger, interviewed on CNN, 11 September 2001

There were still no words to express the emotions pent up in the silent people listening to the radios, reading the papers, taking the trains. The war we face is different from any war we have ever known. Our peril is far greater than before, but we will win with the full strength of America.

- *Time* magazine editorial, 15 December 1941

The world was on fire. Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland—gone. France, a Great Power by any reckoning eighteen months before, had been crushed by German armies in a matter of weeks. The Balkans and North Africa were ablaze. Much of China had been overrun by Japan in a war of stark barbarity that was four years old, and showed no signs of abating. Britain, assailed from the air and beset by sea, hung by a thread. The Mediterranean was impassable. In Central Asia ten million Soviet and German soldiers were locked in annihilatory combat along a thousand-mile front. It was on such a Sunday afternoon that my mother walked downstairs to my father's shop and said, "Honey, I just heard on the radio that the Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor." And then, my dad told me, he put down his tools and said, "There's going to be trouble."

Infamy

I love this story, though my father doesn't understand why I think it is so funny. The next day, when President Roosevelt declared December 7, 1941 "a date that will live in infamy," he knew what the president meant. Yet Dad's reaction had been different: outrage, certainly, but mostly sheer aggravation. My father meant no one any harm. It was just incomprehensible to him that anybody would deliberately—*deliberately*—attack America. It made no sense. I'm one hundred percent sure that, in the entire course of the Second World War, it never occurred to him that the United States might lose. But still, it was trouble for nothing. Life would not now go on as expected, everyone would suffer, and for no good reason.

The president offered no help with this problem. His advisors had urged him to prepare a lengthy speech, laying out the history of Japanese aggression in Asia over the previous ten years, by way of explaining the declaration of war he was asking from Congress. But the president, a man of acute political instincts, knew better. The thing spoke for itself, and he wasn't going to blur the image of those ships in flames with a lot of botanizing about Manchuria. Like a number of his successors, Roosevelt felt called upon to characterize those who had attacked the strongest country on earth as cowards ("dastardly attack"), but the key word in his message to congress was obviously "unprovoked." A recent survey by the National Geographic Society has revealed that fifty-eight percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and

twenty-four cannot find Japan on a map. I'd be willing to bet a whole lot more than that know that Pearl Harbor (wherever that is!) was a "sneak attack." Whatever came next, that was on the other guy. You asked for it. You got it.

Was Franklin Roosevelt surprised by Pearl Harbor? The answer is surely "Yes," though the shock was tempered by a sense of relief. For him, life had just gotten a lot simpler. He was not convinced that American economic pressure, which had become severe following the imposition of an oil embargo and the freezing of Japanese assets in July, would deter Tokyo from exploiting German success in order to seize European colonies in Asia. He had been worried for months that the Japanese would attack the outposts of the British Empire in Southeast Asia while by-passing American positions in the Pacific, confronting him with the need to come to the aid of a vital ally without the moral leverage afforded by having suffered a direct attack. On the eve of Pearl Harbor, public opinion polls showed Americans evenly divided on the question of intervening in Europe, even if failing to do so meant the Nazis would win the war. A large majority believed that, even in the wake of an American victory, they would have to work harder for less money, pay higher prices, and suffer higher unemployment. These apprehensions, along with what was left of Congressional isolationism, crumbled under the weight of the Japanese attack—though there was one House vote against war even so.

Still, despite months of thinking about it and getting ready for it, the president found it hard to accept that something so readily and frequently foreseen had actually occurred. Six days earlier, he had told his most intimate advisor, Harry Hopkins, that Japanese expansion into Indochina "[meant] war." To this Hopkins had responded that "it was too bad that we could not strike the first blow and prevent any sort of surprise"; a suggestion Roosevelt rejected on the grounds that "we are a democracy and a peaceful people." What meaning does "surprise" have for someone whose working life was full of such conversations? Logically? Hard to say. But emotionally the blow was terrible, the more so, perhaps, because the hopes thus torn to shreds were already so thread-bare. One cabinet secretary who saw the president on the night of December 7th reported that he had "actual physical difficulty in getting out the words that put him on record as knowing that the Navy was caught unawares."

Ready?

The Pacific war was unlike any America had fought up to then (or since), not least because we had been planning to fight it for forty years—the only occasion on which the United States has entered a war so well-prepared intellectually. In Europe, everything had to be extemporized. Even the question of where (and whether) to send in the Army had to be worked out from first principles after the shooting started. At the Naval War College, however, no island had gone un-hopped in war games calculated to determine how best to bring the American fleet into contact with its Japanese adversary, code-named "Orange" by the Joint Army-Navy Board responsible for war planning. The conflict that followed did not conform, except in the most general way, to any of the two dozen or so major Pacific war plans generated since the conquest of the Philippines in 1898. But it was the mental exercise that mattered, the constant resifting of facts, rechecking of assumptions. Afterwards Admiral Chester Nimitz, who commanded U.S. forces in the Central Pacific, said that nothing really unexpected had happened during the whole war. It had all been worked out and thought through in advance. Nothing, that is, after the first day or so. When the U.S.S. Enterprise steamed into the desolation of Pearl Harbor twenty-four hours after the Japanese had left, its sailors were hard at work tearing up and throwing overboard the thick, highly combustible linoleum that had been used to cover its decks. Suddenly, fire had become an issue.

History can shed remarkably little light on such disconcerting moments, except to reveal that they happen all the time. The cognitive gap between peace and war is enormous, and no form of preparation or training seems fully able to bridge it. The experience of lethal violence, of mortal danger, grief, and terror, cannot be simulated, and learning from other peoples' experiences, well, it's just not that easy. When I teach my naval strategy course I usually mention that one reason the Russian fleet lost its great battle with the Japanese at Tsushima in 1905 was that the paint on its ships was flammable. The Japanese lacked armor-piercing ammunition, but their shells, bursting on hull surfaces, set superstructures ablaze, killing the crews and rendering gun turrets inoperable. Students mostly react to this little factoid with give-

me-a-break bemusement: what could you expect from Rasputin's navy, after all? But then when they find out about the linoleum on the American carriers, the response turns to one of annoyance: had people back then not learned "the lessons of the past"? Which lesson would that be, exactly? Do smart things? Don't do stupid things?

All Ships Sortie

One historian has calculated that, on the eve of Pearl Harbor, the United States Navy had accumulated fifty-six hours of combat time in its entire history. Four years later it had become one of the most successful and thoroughly battle-tested naval forces that has ever existed. Also, by far, the largest. Over the course of the Second World War total Naval tonnage afloat increased by six hundred percent. Between 1940 and 1945 the United States constructed over twelve hundred major combatant warships, along with tens of thousands of auxiliary craft of every description. Eighty-four thousand of these were landing craft, a type of vessel that did not exist when Pearl Harbor was struck—think how different the war might have been had the Japanese possessed them—and one whose tactical application cut against the grain of two generations of navalist thinking, which had identified fleet combat as the universal solvent of sea power. Not all naval construction was so perspicacious. The United States also built ten battleships during the war, whose tonnage rivaled that of the landing craft. These might as well have been dispensed with. But such wasted motion is always part of war, and in the end it made no difference. What mattered was to build more of everything. The best strategy, after all, is to be strong everywhere.

Such prodigies were possible because of the organizing power of violence in war, in which the entropic effects of friction and chance are partially offset by the gravitational pull created by a readily apparent common purpose. When all else fails, one rarely goes far wrong by marching toward the sound of the guns. The Navy knew what to do about Japan long before Pearl Harbor. U.S. Naval building authorized during 1940 alone outstripped a decade of Japanese construction; a fact that, by the usual perversities of strategic calculation, actually helped to precipitate the attack. Tokyo knew that in a matter of a few years it would stand no chance at all against the U.S. in the Pacific. They knew it. We knew it. More than that, we counted on the fact that they knew it to deter them from attacking us. Do smart things. Don't do stupid things.

The sense of having been played for a fool was most definitely part of the emotional mix after Pearl Harbor, as it was following the al-Qaeda attacks last year, which brought allusions to 1941 briefly to the surface of policy chatter. It was the only other time anybody could think of when Americans had so complacently leaned into such a ferocious sucker punch. Strategically, of course, the analogy has nothing whatever to recommend it, which is presumably why it has faded from view. Psychologically, too, the thing is all wrong, which is more interesting. "Pearl Harbor" stands for a call to arms—for everyone putting down their tools and tending to the trouble. Nothing remotely like that has followed the advent of the "war on terror," an expression one feels compelled to place within quotation marks not to disown it, but because its meaning is so plainly metaphorical: more like the war on drugs, on poverty, on cancer, than the war against Japan. Setting aside the fact that nobody knows what a mass mobilization against terrorism would entail, such a thing, were it to happen, would be widely (and reasonably) regarded as a victory for terrorism in itself. In the immediate wake of the September 11 attacks, when all American hearts beat as one, and half the teenagers in the country were setting aside their dreams of making the NBA in order to become fire-fighters, the President of the United States went on television to urge everyone to step up to this new challenge and—do what? Get on an airplane. Buy some stock. Love thy neighbor. The battle cry for the war on terror is not "Damn the Torpedoes" but "Business as Usual." Anything else would give aid and comfort to the enemy.

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