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A War It Was Always Going to Lose: Why Japan Attacked America in 1941

by Jeffrey Record

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Jeffrey Record, Ph.D. Johns Hopkins, is Professor of Strategy at the United States Air War College, and the author of eight books, including *Wanting War*; *Beating Goliath*; *Dark Victory*; *Making War*; *Thinking History*; *Hollow Victory*; and *The Wrong War*. Most of these works are succinct; all of them bristle with provocative insight. The present volume is no exception.

After an introductory overview of the general question of why Japan attacked the United States, subsequent chapters examine historical sources of antagonism between the two nations: Japan's aggression in China and Indochina and the US response; assumptions behind the Japanese approach to war with the United States; why neither Japan nor the United States could deter the other; and American and Japanese miscalculations. The final chapter presents lessons from Japan's Pearl Harbor decision for today's national security decisionmakers.

Record rejects the classical realist model because it offers little allowance for the influence of fear, pride, and other emotions on the making of foreign policy, especially that of prewar Japan. On the contrary, "It is the central conclusion of this study that *the Japanese decision for war against the United States in 1941 was dictated by Japanese pride and Japan's threatened economic destruction by the United States*" (italics original). Convinced that fear and honor can motivate national actors as much as "objective" national interest, Record also insists that "Japanese racism, fatalism, imperial arrogance, and cultural ignorance" also powerfully influenced policymaking in Tokyo. At the highest ranks of the Army, "operational thinking remained essentially primitive, unscientific, complacent, narrow and simplistic." "Few Japanese leaders appreciated the limits of Japan's power." And according to constitutional arrangements, the Army could force out any cabinet it did not like simply by not permitting any serving officer to be Minister of War. That Japan's leadership would take the country, already tied down in an unwinnable war in China, into a conflict with the United States, proved its irrationality.

Record's discussion of economic sanctions, especially the famous Roosevelt oil embargo, is illuminating. The author thinks that serious economic sanctions need to be reassessed: they are not measures "short of war" but can be true acts of war in themselves. When it imposed the oil embargo against Japan in the summer of 1941, the United States was one of the world's great petroleum exporters, and Japan got most of its oil from the United States. The embargo confronted Japanese leaders with two choices: submit to America or

seize the natural riches of Southeast Asia. The American price for lifting the oil embargo was Japanese withdrawal not only from French Indochina, but from China as well, forcing Japan to write off all her conquests and their costs in wealth and blood.

This US demand may seem incredibly harsh, or even stupid, but Record cites several distinguished historians who maintain that a conciliatory attitude on the part of America would almost certainly have been interpreted in Tokyo as a sign of grave weakness. The embargo was intended to deter a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia, but Japan was, in fact, not deterred, but was instead spurred to further actions, seeing the embargo as an act of war that required a response in kind. In fact, the Japanese decision to go south, toward the British, French, and Dutch possessions, was taken before the embargo. The oil embargo was the response to, not the cause of, the decision to seize Southeast Asia. Record also points out that the American demand that Japan evacuate China was actually against US strategic interest. The United States needed as many Japanese troops tied down in China as possible so as to protect the Soviet Union, then engaged in a death struggle with the Nazis. In Record's assessment, the United States went to war with Japan over China, not over Southeast Asia.

As Record makes clear, if Japan had invaded the European colonies in Southeast Asia and not attacked US territory, it would have been close to impossible for President Roosevelt to get Congress to declare war. But viewing the American Philippines as a danger on the eastern flank of their southward drive, aware that the United States was getting stronger, the Japanese enraged the Americans with their attack on Pearl Harbor. The Japanese believed that by seizing and fortifying islands in the central and south Pacific, they would convince America that some sort of peace was preferable to all-out war. Many (not all) Japanese leaders also believed that Hitler would defeat the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Parenthetically, a Japanese occupation of Hawaii would have forced the US Navy to operate from California, adding another 3,000 miles to the distance between the home islands and America's Navy.

Among Record's major conclusions is one especially worth pondering—the story of Pearl Harbor abundantly illustrates the mistakes policymakers are prone to make when they are ignorant of the culture and history of a potential adversary.

Surprisingly, the final three pages of the book consist of a free-standing, hammer-and-tongs assault on the decision to go to war with Iraq. This reviewer is not able to understand why Record believed it was necessary to conclude his study of Japanese policy in this manner. But the infelicitous ending is a very minor blemish on a work that, like all of Record's books, is well-researched, vigorously written, intellectually challenging, and deserving of a wide readership among policymakers and indeed all students of international politics.