



## Pearl Harbor and the Imperial Presidents

So great is the deference Americans pay to the office of president of the United States that it must be a rare event when a United States senator, summoned to the White House for a conference, pounds his fist on the president's desk and demands answers. Yet such a scene was vividly described by George Victor in his 2007 book, [The Pearl Harbor Myth: Rethinking the Unthinkable](#). The encounter took place on the afternoon of December 7, 1941, the "date which will live in infamy." Franklin D. Roosevelt had met with his cabinet and was preparing the speech he would deliver the next day to a joint session of Congress, asking for a declaration of war against the empire of Japan. A bipartisan group of congressional leaders arrived and were listening respectfully to the president's account of what had happened when Sen. Tom Connally of Texas, a Democrat and a strong supporter of the president, sprang to his feet, pounded the desk with his fist and, shouting at Roosevelt, demanded to know:



How did it happen that our warships were caught like tame ducks in Pearl Harbor? How did they catch us with our pants down? Where were our patrols?

The commander in chief of the army and navy expressed a strange bewilderment.

"I don't know, Tom. I just don't know."

The questioning stopped soon after. By the time Roosevelt delivered his "date of infamy" speech the next day, the nation was united behind the president and against the "treacherous" Japanese, who had launched the "sneak attack" on Pearl Harbor. The "cowardly attack" and the "duplicity of the Japanese," were bitterly denounced in editorials across the nation, all conveying the sentiment summed up in the Augusta (Georgia) Chronicle: "Oh the dishonesty and trickery of it all!"

Few were inclined to ask at such a time, "Whose trickery?"

Roosevelt's deceptions were almost too subtle for detection and his countrymen, understandably furious at being attacked, were not in a mood to listen carefully or read between the lines. On December 7, Secretary of State Cordell Hull began his statement to the press with what appeared to be a simple summation of the obvious: "Japan has made a treacherous and utterly unprovoked attack on the United States." The following day Roosevelt, in his "date of infamy" speech to Congress, said "the Japanese Government has sought to deceive the United States by false statements and more expressions of hope for continued peace."



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Neither statement, Victor pointed out, said the attack caught the administration by surprise. But each implied so. And nearly everyone assumed it was the case. Roosevelt was a master of communication and for such an historic speech he no doubt chose each word with special care. So while few would notice the difference, he did not say the Japanese government deceived the United States. He said they “sought” to deceive the United States. Did they succeed?

The story has oft been told since of how our military intelligence had broken the Japanese military and diplomatic codes and were routinely intercepting and reading their messages; of how exposed and vulnerable our Navy was at Pearl Harbor; of how warnings of the impending attack were sent to Washington, then withheld from the commanders in Hawaii, who later were made scapegoats for the disaster; of how Roosevelt, determined to enter the European war to rescue Great Britain, harassed German ships and otherwise tried to provoke Germany into initiating hostilities; how Japan, with its mutual defense agreement with Berlin, became Roosevelt’s “back door to war” with Germany; of how the embargo against Japan was designed to force the Nipponese hand. That story is recounted thoroughly and well by James Perloff [elsewhere](#) on this site.

Yet the myth has proved remarkably resistant to the facts. Roosevelt’s defenders marched dutifully into the state of denial and many remain there to this day. “The question,” wrote Secretary of War Henry Stimson in his diary following a November 25, 1941 meeting with the president and his advisers, “was how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot without too much damage to ourselves.” Remarkably, Victor noted, “Stimson’s apparent meaning was unacceptable to generations of scholars. Most ignored his diary note. Others explained it away, saying he wrote it in haste, inadvertently making a poor choice of words.” In a word from Victor’s subtitle, the truth was simply “unthinkable.” Even when told by an historian of the stature of Charles Beard in Beard’s [Roosevelt and the Coming of the War](#), the account was dismissed as a the work of a “revisionist” historian and a “conspiracy theorist.”

The labels are interesting. The use of “revisionist” as an epithet implies an assumption that the first version always gets it right. (The “first draft of history” is a phrase often used to describe journalism, not history.) And to inveigh against a “conspiracy theorist” is to ignore the fact that most evil acts of great consequence are performed by people working together in secret. Perpetrators of dastardly deeds do not often issue press releases announcing them in advance — though we seemed to expect that courtesy from the Japanese warlords, judging by the bitter denunciations of the “sneak attack.” We have no problem believing the Japanese conspired to attack Pearl Harbor. Why is it then so hard to believe that Roosevelt, who devoutly believed in the necessity of bringing the United States into the war against the Axis powers, would conspire to do so?

Many deny the truth because they see it (rightly) as a stain on Roosevelt’s character. “However, nothing in his history suggests that this man could plot to sink American ships and kill thousands of American soldiers and sailors,” came the indignant response of Gordon Prange in *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History*. Stimson’s biographer, Elting E. Morison, made the interesting argument that the Pearl Harbor disaster was so bad, no one on our side could have planned it. “Not even a system schemed out in total depravity to produce all the wrong things at all the wrong times could have organized such compounding error and misfortune,” he wrote.

No, Roosevelt did not plot all the “error and misfortune” of that day. The now-famous entry in Stimson’s diary speaks of getting Japan to fire the first shot “without too much damage to ourselves.” How much damage would be “too much”? Anything beyond a minor skirmish would likely be sufficient to pull



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America into the war. It's possible Roosevelt and his military advisors underestimated both the strength of the Japanese navy and air force and the vulnerability of our defenses at Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt may have calculated the loss of lives, planes, and ships would be far less than it turned out to be. In his calculations, the loss of lives may have been greater later on if we did not enter the war when we did. We can only speculate on how many deaths and injuries to what number of soldiers and sailors at Pearl Harbor Roosevelt might have thought acceptable in justifying his duplicity.

Yet even historians who have recounted that duplicity have rationalized the deceptions, half-truths, and outright lies that brought a reluctant America into a world conflagration for the second time in less than a quarter of a century. Roosevelt, it appears, had to deceive us for our and the world's own good. "As heinous as it seems to families and veterans of World War II, of which this author is one," wrote Robert B. Stinnet in [Day of Deceit: The Truth About Pearl Harbor](#), "the Pearl harbor attack was, from the White House perspective, something to be endured in order to stop a greater evil — the Nazi invaders in Europe who had begun the Holocaust and were poised to invade England."

In fact, Hitler had abandoned the goal of invading England and had instead invaded Russia in June 1941. Most Americans were willing to let the two enemies of freedom destroy one another without our help. "Despite his pleadings and persuasions," Stinnet wrote, "powerful isolationist forces prevented Roosevelt from getting into the European war."

The "isolationist" label is still used today to discredit anyone who believes in a Constitution that ordains a government to "provide for the common defense," but nowhere authorizes that government to settle all the world's disputes and to, as John Quincy Adams [put it](#), go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy." Nor does it authorize the executive branch to decide for the American people whether or when to go to war.

It is often recalled that World War II was the last time Congress formally declared war, despite the number of conflicts we have entered since then. But in reality, the decision was not made by Congress. Once Roosevelt had maneuvered the Japanese into firing the first shot, Congress had virtually no choice but to grant the president's request for a declaration of war against an enemy that had attacked us. The decision for war had been made months earlier in the White House.

Since then, Harry Truman committed the nation to a war (a United Nations "police action") in Korea without so much as a "by your leave" to Congress. America went to war in Vietnam, twice with Iraq, and into our longest war in Afghanistan, with vaguely worded, open-ended resolutions that basically let the president decide. Even that was conceding too much to Congress, thought former Vice President Dick Cheney, who was Secretary of Defense in 1990 when President George H.W. Bush sought a resolution from Congress authorizing the use of military force to drive Iraq's army out of Kuwait. In his memoir, [In My Time](#), Cheney recalled why he opposed putting the question to Congress.

"I told Garrick Utley [on *Meet the Press*] that I loved Congress," wrote Cheney, a former Republican congressman from Wyoming. "But I also had a sense of its limitations." As an example of those "limitations," he cited the fact that in September 1941, just three months before Pearl Harbor, Congress had decided by only one vote to extend the military draft. "I also emphasized that putting the nation's security in the hands of 535 members of the U.S. Congress could be a risky proposition," he wrote. "And I cautioned that a drawn-out debate in Congress could convey a sense to our allies and to Saddam [Hussein] that we weren't resolute in our commitment to liberate Kuwait."

Cheney may have loved Congress, but he obviously didn't have much respect for it. The question of



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putting the question of war or peace in the hands of the Congress had already been decided by our [Constitution](#), regardless of what our allies or some distant dictator might think of congressional debate. The idea that the decision had already been made prompted one member of Congress to challenge the argument that the lawmakers should “support American policy.”

“What are we,” asked Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), “the Canadian consulate?”

Congress did debate and finally approve the resolution, but President Bush made it clear he considered that a needless formality: “I didn’t have to get permission from some old goat in Congress,” Bush [boasted](#) when campaigning (unsuccessfully) for reelection in 1992.

At least Roosevelt recognized his need for the Congress, if only to validate a decision for war he had made long before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

*Photo of USS Arizona sinking at Pearl Harbor*



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