

ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR – DECEMBER 1941

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Abstract: *The Pearl Harbor attack, which occurred on December 7, 1941, had a significant impact on World War II, representing a dark page in history but also a lesson for future generations. Japan strategically decided to attack the American naval base in Hawaii, setting in motion a series of events that led to the United States entering the war. The Japanese objective was to eliminate the American fleet in the Pacific and secure access to resources in Southeast Asia. The tense relationship between the two countries, starting with Japan's expansion in the '30s, culminated in the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Japan benefited from detailed preparation and force concentration, while the unprepared United States suffered significant losses. The attack was a turning point in history, prompting the U.S. to join the war and marking the beginning of a new phase in the evolution of global conflict. In analyzing the impact, differences in military preparation and concentration are highlighted, and the words of leaders, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech, had a profound psychological impact, mobilizing the nation. It is a complex and painful chapter in history, illustrating the dramatic consequences of political-military decisions and the powerful influence of communication in major events.*

Keywords: *attack on Pearl Harbor, World War II, significant losses, mobilization of the nation, dramatic consequences.*

The Pearl Harbor attack, a major event in the course of World War II, was not just a dark chapter in history but also a school of lessons for generations to come. A profound understanding of the consequences of this tragic moment allows us to reflect not only on the losses suffered but also on how a war-torn world can evolve towards peace and understanding.

A strategic political-military decision was made by Japan for the attack on Pearl Harbor (or Operation Hawaii, as named by the Japanese Imperial General Staff) on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941. The Japanese side decided on a surprise military attack. As a result, the United States of America decided to enter World War II. The attack was carried out by the Imperial Japanese Navy against the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. These two decisions influenced the course of World War II.

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Pearl Harbor represents a bay in Hawaii, where a significant portion of the American Pacific fleet was stationed. It is located near the capital, Honolulu.

The Japanese aimed, through this preventive attack, to prevent the American Pacific fleet from influencing the war in the Southeast Asian region, which Japan intended to wage against three states: Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States of America.

Through the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan sought to annihilate the American navy, thus preventing it from hindering Japan's planned military actions in Malaysia and the Dutch East Indies to access the rich reserves of oil and rubber.

Tensions between Japan and the United States had begun in the 1930s through Japan's expansion into Manchuria and French Indochina, actions that were met with embargoes and sanctions from the U.S. and other states. Both states made war plans in the Pacific continuously refined due to the escalating tensions between them.

In the early 1930s, Japan was experiencing a period of economic and political instability. In search of the resources necessary to fuel its expanding economy and to strengthen its position in Asia, Japan initiated a series of military actions, including the occupation of Manchuria in 1931 and expansion into China in 1937. These actions drew criticism and sanctions from the international community.

Japan, aiming to expand its sphere of influence in Asia and the Pacific, became increasingly aggressive in the decade leading up to the attack. With a well-trained military force and cutting-edge technology, Japan had the advantage of initiative. On the other hand, the United States was in the process of consolidating its military resources and adapting to rapid changes in geopolitical dynamics.

In 1940, the U.S. banned the export of airplanes, aircraft parts, machinery, aviation gasoline, iron, and steel to Japan, a measure that the Japanese considered an "unfriendly" act. At the same time, the U.S. did not prohibit the export of oil to Japan at that time, as Washington considered such a sanction too extreme, given that Japan's economy depended on American oil and would likely be perceived as a challenge by the Japanese side. The export of oil to Japan was only halted in the summer of 1941 as a result of Japan's expansion into French Indochina, which in turn was a result of Germany's occupation of France.

The United States established its Pacific Fleet headquarters in Hawaii and increased its military presence in the Philippines with the aim of deterring Japanese aggression in the Far East.

The plan for Operation Pearl Harbor was initiated in early 1941 by Admiral Yamamoto, the commander of the Japanese fleet at that time. The admiral's plan was approved by the Japanese Navy General Headquarters after several conflicts, including a threat to resign from fleet command. The plan received unofficial approval from Emperor Hirohito on November 5th, at the third of four imperial conferences held on the subject of the attack. Officially, the plan was approved on December 1st.

Although the attack began before an official declaration of war from Japan, Admiral Yamamoto ordered the military actions to take place 30 minutes after the notification made by Japan. In this way, Japan suggested on the one hand that it respected international conventions, but on the other hand, it aimed to have the advantage of total surprise. The notification for the declaration was very lengthy, containing approximately 5000 words, and was first dispatched from Tokyo to the Japanese embassy in Washington. However, transcribing it took the embassy too much time to be forwarded before the attack. This delay was intentional. On the other hand, the Americans managed to decipher and translate a significant portion of the notification several hours before the scheduled time for the Japanese embassy to officially transmit it to the American government. This notification is also called a "declaration of war," but in fact, it "neither declared war nor severed diplomatic ties." The declaration of war appeared on the front page of Japanese newspapers on December 8, the day after the attack was launched.

Japanese submarines left the Kure naval district on November 25, 1941, and reached an area approximately 19 kilometers from the entrance of Pearl Harbor, from where they launched the midget submarines around 1:00 a.m. on December 7. They began reconnaissance and mutual observation actions, and at 6:37 a.m., it is believed that the first shots of World War II were fired by the Americans.

On November 26, 1941, a fleet consisting of 6 aircraft carriers set out for an area northwest of Hawaii, from where the attack was to begin. The plan called for the participation of 405 aircraft: 360 for the two waves of attack, 48 for defensive aerial patrols, including 9 attack planes from the first wave. The first wave was intended to be the primary assault, while the second wave was to complete any unfinished actions from the first wave.

According to the plan, prior to the actual attack, two reconnaissance planes were to take off from cruisers, fly over the island of Oahu (where Pearl Harbor was located), and thoroughly identify the composition and location of the American fleet. Another four reconnaissance planes were to fly over the area between the Japanese fleet and Niihau, so that the operational group would be the subject of a surprise counterattack by the Americans.

As planned, the Japanese attacked in two waves. The first wave was detected by the Americans, but they believed they were 6 American B-17 bombers coming from the continental United States, a very serious mistake.

In the first wave, the necessary weapons (especially torpedoes) for attacking the most important vessels were present, and the crews were prepared to target the most valuable objectives, especially battleships and aircraft carriers. If these were not identified, they were to attack cruisers and destroyers. Dive bombers were to attack ground targets, specifically parked aircraft, to prevent them from taking off and counterattacking. When their fuel was depleted, the plan was for them to return to the aircraft carriers and then, after refueling, re-engage in combat.

The attack from the first wave, consisting of 180 aircraft, was launched from the north of the island of Oahu. Aerial strikes on Pearl Harbor began at 7:48 AM local time with the attack on Kaneohe. Initially, there were torpedo planes, heavy, vulnerable aircraft, which took advantage of the element of surprise to attack the military airfields at Hickam Field and Wheeler Field. A total of 171 aircraft from the second wave attacked Bellows Field near Kaneohe and Ford Island.

The result of the attack was devastating for the Americans. As a result, 4 U.S. battleships were sunk (two of which were later salvaged and returned to service towards the end of the war), and another 4 were damaged. The Japanese also destroyed 3 cruisers, 3 destroyers, 1 minelayer, and 188 aircraft. They killed 2,402 people and injured another 1,282. Out of the 402 American aircraft at the beginning of the war in Hawaii, 188 were destroyed and 159 were damaged, with 155 of these being on the ground (thus not in aerial combat).

Since the attack was well-prepared, the losses suffered by the Japanese side were minimal, namely: 29 aircraft shot down, 4 mini-submarines sunk, and 65 people killed or wounded. A huge difference in losses between the two sides is noticeable. Out of the 414 Japanese aircraft, 29 were destroyed in combat (9 in the first wave and 20 in the second wave), and 74 were damaged.

The significantly disproportionate impact of the attack on Japan and the U.S. was due to the fact that the assault was launched without a formal declaration of war and before the last of the 14 parts of a message sent by the Japanese Foreign Ministry to the U.S. had reached its destination. The Japanese embassy in the U.S. had been instructed to deliver the message directly before the planned time of the attack.

In these confrontations, it was observed that the Americans were unprepared for such an attack: ammunition lockers were locked, airplanes were parked wingtip to wingtip in the open air (to protect them against sabotage), guns were not equipped for combat, etc. A total of 353 aircraft participated in the two waves of aerial attacks, launched from 6 aircraft carriers. The two waves of attacks took place over a total duration of 90 minutes.

Japan's forces were concentrated, with a well-elaborated plan for the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. On the other hand, American forces were spread out across the Pacific and were not fully prepared for such an imminent threat. This disparity in preparedness and concentration played a crucial role in the success of the Japanese initiative. Analyzing this difference from a military perspective, several factors contributing to this and, implicitly, to Japanese success can be identified. A crucial aspect is the detailed planning and precise coordination of Japanese operations. Studies in the field of military strategy indicate that careful planning, including detailed analysis of the opponent and identification of their vulnerabilities, can provide a significant advantage during a conflict. At the same time, the higher level of concentration of Japanese forces, contrasted with the dispersal of American resources in the Pacific, amplified the impact of the Japanese initiative. Logistic aspects, innovative military tactics, and the ability to rapidly adapt to changes were also subjects of research highlighting the essential role of preparation and concentration in military successes. Thus, from a military perspective, this difference had a significant influence on the unfolding events at Pearl Harbor.

The dynamics of the attack were characterized by surprise and operational efficiency on the part of Japan. Their meticulous plan involved coordinating air and naval attachments to strike at a moment when the United States was vulnerable. This surprise generated confusion and panic among American ranks, once again solidifying the advantage of the Japanese initiative.

Moreover, the dynamics also included psychological aspects. The surprise attack had a strong impact on the morale of American soldiers and society as a whole. This confrontation highlighted the vulnerability and the necessity for a more robust and coordinated defense approach.

At the political level, the discrepancy lay in how the two countries managed conflicts of interest and differences of opinion. Japan's expansionist policy in China and Indochina was perceived as a threat to American interests in the Pacific. While diplomacy was attempted, communication between the two countries was not always efficient, and deep divergences persisted. This political difference was exacerbated by the interpretation of signals and warnings. For example, despite the warning signals received, the attack on Pearl Harbor was largely perceived as a complete surprise by the United States. This difference in perception and interpretation had major consequences on how the United States militarily and politically responded to the attack. Overall, the political discrepancy between the two countries contributed to escalating tensions and triggering the conflict, underscoring the

importance of appropriate political approaches to prevent major confrontations in international relations.

Shortly after the attack, the United States entered the war and became an essential pillar of the anti-Axis coalition. The sacrifice of those fallen at Pearl Harbor was rewarded by the courage of those who fought under the American flag and its allies. Thus, in the memory of the departed, the light of understanding began to shine even in the midst of the darkest period of the 20th century.

In the case of the Pearl Harbor confrontations, decisions can be observed at the highest level (strategic), as well as some at the operational and tactical levels adopted in the dynamics of military actions by both Japan and the USA, but with different effectiveness from one side to the other.

The surprising manner of the attack was an important element that contributed to changing the American public opinion from the isolationism of the country's foreign policy in the 1930s to direct participation in the war.

Japan, planning to expand its control in the Pacific, saw the elimination of the American fleet at Pearl Harbor as a crucial move. The attack was well-orchestrated, and Japan capitalized on the fact that American forces were not fully prepared for such aggression. This tragic event was a turning point in history, driven by the complexity of international relations and geopolitical rivalries, simultaneously altering the course of World War II and having painful consequences, contributing to the United States' determination to actively engage in the global conflict.

Examining the balance of power and the dynamics of the confrontation, differences in preparation are observed, which played a crucial role in the success of the Japanese initiative. These disparities indicate how both political and military factors contributed to the vulnerability and unpreparedness of the United States in the face of the surprise attack. It is well known that this attack was defined by a complex balance of power between Japan and the United States, illustrating an intense dynamic that shaped the event and its subsequent consequences.

Regarding the interpretation of leaders' words, analyzing Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech on the day of the attack, in which he characterized the events as "a date which will live in infamy," provides a clear perspective on the emotional and political impact of the moment. These powerful words were uttered in an intensely emotional context, marked by the significant losses suffered as a result of the attack. Roosevelt spoke about the moment when

Japanese forces attacked the American military base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, emphasizing the betrayal and implicit aggression in this act. His speech had a profound impact on public opinion and stirred a wave of patriotism and determination in the United States. Additionally, the subsequent words of leaders from both Japan and the United States in the context of the war highlighted the complexity of international relations during that period. Japan and the United States exchanged declarations, threats, and negotiated in an attempt to achieve their objectives.

In the heart of a historical period full of tumult and crucial decisions, Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack stands as a beacon of words, illuminating the path to a resolute national response to the Japanese challenge. This defining moment, inscribed in the dark pages of World War II, was not just an event but also a turning point in the American consciousness.

Roosevelt elicited a strong and mobilizing response among Americans, solidifying national identity in the face of adversity.

The choice of words such as "infamy" added a note of moral condemnation, shaping the speech into a coherent narrative that highlighted the betrayal and the need for a decisive response.

The psychological impact of the speech was substantial, transforming initial shock and anger into determination and national unity. In the political and social context of the time, the speech addressed the specific needs of the moment, providing clear direction for the nation's action.

Throughout the war, Roosevelt's speech continued to influence public opinion, contributing to massive mobilization and recruitment, as well as shaping a coherent view of the enemy and justifying the necessity of the war. Thus, Roosevelt's speech remains an eloquent example of how effective communication can shape history and influence the destiny of a nation.¹

In the light of the steadfast words of the great Winston Churchill, at that time the British Prime Minister, we see a tableau of resilience and collaboration in the face of the storm of war. As a proponent of alliance unity, Churchill viewed the attack on Pearl Harbor not only as a dark page but also as a new chapter in the picture of global cooperation.

At that crucial moment, Churchill was not just a prime minister but also an architect of the future, shaping words that became incentives for

¹ President Franklin D. Roosevelt Declares War on Japan (Full Speech) | War Archives – Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IK8gYGg0dkE>, accessed on 13.06.2024.

spirits burdened by uncertainty. In his remarkable speech, he brought together Britain and the United States in a unity of resolve, advocating for a solidarity to confront the frightening Axis with collective strength.

"We shall never surrender" - these words are not just a promise but also a declaration of the human will to resist any trials. Through Churchill's prism, the attack on Pearl Harbor was a call to arms for unity, an opportunity to turn tragedy into a mobilizing force, with the common purpose of bringing light into the darkest hour. Thus, in the spirit of Churchill, his words become milestones that manage to guide us through the chaos of history, reminding us that even in times of storm, humanity has the power to build bridges over adversity. However deep the darkness of that day, the light Churchill ignited continues to shine as a pillar of hope and resilience in the face of imminent challenges.

In the realm of words spoken by Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Japanese Combined Fleet, we discover an unexpected wisdom, a cold wind blowing over the turbulent waters of war. As an architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Yamamoto was not just a military commander but also a perceptive observer of the forces he unleashed.

With the intriguing metaphor of a "sleeping giant," Yamamoto clearly illustrated the brutal reality of the decision to attack the United States. In these words, he suggests not only an anticipated understanding of the colossal potential of the American response but also a profound understanding of the challenge Japan posed by awakening this "giant."

Speaking as a maker of destiny, Yamamoto emphasized not only the tactical consequences of the attack but also the United States' unquenchable desire to develop and defend itself.

These words now resonate as an echo of strategic complexity, highlighting how a Japanese military leader came to realize that war not only had to be won on the battlefield but also could unleash a force not easily controlled.

Thus, through the light of Yamamoto's words, we witness a subsequent and sometimes painful understanding of the strategic implications of one's actions, a human element in a context of war that adds shades of gray to the black-and-white picture of history.

In commemorating the attack on Pearl Harbor, Harry S. Truman, the future President of the United States, opened a window into the complexity

and depth of the impact of this historic event. His semantic analysis reveals a meticulous discourse, in which every word carries a deep story.

When Truman emphasized the "tragic impact," it was not just a reference to material and human losses; it was also a plunge into the depths of suffering, meaning not just numbers and statistics, but also a glimpse into the hearts of those affected. Here, semantically, "tragic" transcends military tragedy to touch the emotional chord of compassion and sensitivity.

With the mention of "the nation's resolve", Truman added a layer of meaning that goes beyond mere military resistance. "Resolve" becomes a key word, highlighting not only the will to respond militarily but also the collective determination to face adversity, a semantic aspect indicating the nation's evolution in the face of challenge.

"Unity of people beyond differences" brings to the forefront the human aspect of the event. Here, semantically, "unity" is not just an abstract term but a reflection of national solidarity. Truman captures the moment when differences were blurred, and the nation became a unified whole.

Through the phrase "turning a tragedy into a catalyst for collective action," Truman gives the event a dynamic dimension. The word "catalyst" indicates a force that generated active and mobilizing change, highlighting how the nation managed to rise from its own suffering and transform into an active force for change.

This period was marked by tensions and complex diplomatic calculations, often reflecting a lack of understanding and mutual trust between the two parties. The events that followed Roosevelt's speech shaped a turbulent period in world history, and a detailed analysis of the speeches and communications of that time offers a fascinating insight into the political dynamics and how leaders reacted to a moment that changed the course of history.

Looking to the future, with hope and determination, we remember that understanding and dialogue are the keys to avoiding similar tragedies. Today, the lessons learned from the history of the Pearl Harbor Attack urge us to promote peace and strive for a more harmonious world.

Looking at contemporary conflicts, especially the one in Ukraine, we cannot help but wonder if humanity has truly learned from the painful lessons of the past. We hope that such a tragic and defining event as the Pearl Harbor Attack would be a catalyst for a world where dialogue and diplomacy prevail over violence.

However, the reality of current conflicts reminds us that we are still far from achieving the ideal of a peaceful world. It is our duty, as citizens of the world, to continue to advocate for peace and understanding, to promote dialogue instead of confrontation, and to honor the memory of those who fell at Pearl Harbor and in all conflicts that have marked history.

With a strong desire for peace deeply rooted in our analysis, the conclusion becomes a meeting point between past and present. We are faced with a world still marked by conflicts, but history reminds us that dialogue and understanding have the power to transform the darkness of tragedy into the light of knowledge. Today, more than ever, we have the responsibility to weave these lessons into the fabric of our reality, to build a world where peace and harmony are not just aspirations but achievable goals for all humanity. In analyzing Roosevelt's speech, we find not only a chronicle of the past but also a guiding beacon to a future where the words "peace" and "understanding" resonate more powerfully than any echo of past violence.

Sources of inspiration for this article include historical documentaries, testimonies of survivors, speeches of leaders of the time, as well as analyses and opinions of contemporary historians. Works such as "At Dawn We Slept" by Gordon W. Prange and "Day of Deceit" by Robert Stinnett have shed light on essential details about the planning and execution of the attack. Additionally, much information has been sourced from Wikipedia.



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