

December 7, 1941 [Remarks to Cabinet Members and Legislative Leaders] 1399a

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4675-General

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

December 13, 1941.

MEMORANDUM

Remarks of the President on  
the occasion of the meeting of his  
Cabinet at 8:30 and continuing at  
9:00 with legislative leaders, on  
December 7, 1941.

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4675-  
General

.....The conversations were interrupted for six weeks to two months. They were then resumed, with the same objective in mind. Despite the Japanese move into Indo-China, they continued until about two weeks ago, when we received indications from various sources -- Europe and Asia -- that the German government was pressing Japan for action under the tripartite pact. In other words, an effort to divert the American mind, and the British mind, from the European field, and divert American supplies from the European theatre to the defense of the East Asia theatre. About two weeks ago we began to realize that the probability of Japan being in earnest was so slim that it was time to make a final and definite effort to pin them down on the one subject that they had never ever been pinned down on, and that was that they were to agree to cease their acts of aggression, and that they would try to bring the China war to a close.

The result was that the Secretary of State sent a message on that point, to find out whether Japan would be willing to discuss or consider that point of non-aggression. That was the 26th of November. From that time on we were getting more and more definite information that Japan was headed for war, and that the reply to the Secretary of State would be in the negative.

About a week ago, in adding up some of the information..... in addition to that, moving 100,000 men in Southern Indo-China, the importance of that lies in the fact that geographically Indo-China was at a hub, from which any attack can be made in a number of directions. It is only a very short distance from there to the Philippines in the east. It is a relatively short distance from "

there down to the Dutch East Indies, which is the most industrial part -- southwest there is Singapore -- fortified. To the west there is the Malay peninsula, parts of Thailand, and parts of the Malay Straits, and slightly to the northwest is the whole of Thailand -- Siam, an independent kingdom, practically surrounded on two sides by England and France. Only a short distance from there, of course, lies Burma, and the entry -- the bottleneck to the Burma Road, a short distance from Siam. We are getting a very large proportion of our supplies -- rubber, tin, etc. -- from that whole area of southwestern Pacific, and we are getting out over the Burma Road -- two-way road -- we are getting a large amount of very important material, such as tungsten and some oil -- for the manufacture of paint.

In addition to that, of course, is the fact that if the Japanese did move to the south, to the Dutch East Indies, from Indo-China, the Philippines would be virtually surrounded. They would have the Japanese on both sides -- Indo-China -- the Mandated Islands to the west, this side of the Philippines, and the Dutch Indies, and the Japanese possessions in the South. They would be completely encircled by a military power.

And so the thing went along until we believed that under the pressure from Berlin the Japanese were about to do something..... And so yesterday I sent a final message to the Emperor.....The Japanese, we learned, were to bring the Secretary of State today a reply to his note of November 26. Actually, in point of fact (?), they telephoned to the State Department, after Hawaii had been attacked, for an appointment. They came to the State Department --

they were given an appointment within three-quarters of an hour, and they actually arrived at the State Department one hour after the terrific bombing attack on the Island of Oahu.

Which of course was an act which is almost without parallel in relationships between nations, equaled only by the Japanese episode of 1904, when two squadrons -- cruisers -- lying in the Harbor in Korea (?) and without any warning -- I think on a Sunday morning, by the way -- Japanese cruisers sank all of them. There are other parallels, of course, such as the descent on Denmark and Norway in this war, without any warning whatsoever. In fact right in the face of their treaties of non-aggression.

.....Sending that message to Congress, which is -- after you have read and studied it -- one of the most.....falsehoods that I have had.....

And finally while we were on the alert -- at eight o'clock -- half-past seven -- about a quarter past -- half-past one, a great fleet of Japanese bombers bombed our ships in Pearl Harbor, and bombed all of our airfields. Shortly thereafter this was followed -- about eleven o'clock, three hours later -- by a third attack, which was not as violent, but most of the damage had already been done. The casualties, I am sorry to say, were extremely heavy. I cannot say anything definitely in regard to the number of ships that have been sunk. It looks as if out of eight battleships, three have been sunk, and possibly a fourth. Two destroyers were blown up while they were in drydock. Two of the battleships are badly damaged. Several other smaller vessels have been sunk or destroyed. The drydock itself has been damaged. Other portions

of the fleet are at sea, moving towards what is believed to be two plane carriers, with adequate naval escort.

In addition to that, this afternoon, in Guam -- Guam was being bombed by two squadrons of Japanese planes, and we know -- and it is entirely possible that at this moment Guam -- which was not defended except by a few Marines, without much in the way of guns -- in all probability has fallen to the Japanese.

Wake Island was also attacked, and we have no further word at the present time.

We believe that Manila was attacked, but that has not proved true, and it is possible that other ports of the Philippines -- some ports in Mindanao -- have been attacked. Those are merely reports.

.....Three or four, probably, of the landing fields were very heavily bombed, and a very large number of aircraft were destroyed in the hangars, or on the fields.

I have no word on the Navy casualties, which will undoubtedly be very heavy, and the best information is that there have been more than one hundred Army casualties and more than 300 men killed and injured.

I do not know what is happening at the present time, whether a night attack is on or not. It isn't quite dark yet in Hawaii. I suppose it's four o'clock in the afternoon, and it will probably be dark in a couple of hours.

There might be.....nothing definite on it.....if the Japanese force turns out to be a good deal larger than we expected.

The fact remains that we have lost the majority of the battle-

ships there. Of course, in the long run, probably most of them can be salvaged, or repaired, to take their place in the line of battle again. That, however, is a long process, and will last very many months, depending on the damage.

I think probably -- Oh yes -- one more thing -- Out in Shanghai the one small gunboat we have there has been taken over by the Japanese, and a British gunboat has been blown up. We still have two hundred Marines there.....and we are not certain yet whether they have been gotten out or not. Probably not.

The Japanese at the same time.....which were set for one o'clock Washington time -- the Japanese made an attack on the Malay peninsula. That is definite. And the British fleet now in Singapore is now conducting war operations against the Japanese ships in the Gulf of Siam, and on the eastern side of the Malay peninsula, at the north end -- top north end of the Malay Straits, just short of the -- we will have to look up the map -- just short of the Siamese -- Thailand part of that peninsula, short of what they call the (?) Isthmus.

The Dutch government has declared that a state of war exists between the Netherlands-Indies and the Japanese.

The British cabinet is in session. I have heard nothing from them on that -- just the fact. And at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, their time, a special session of the Parliament is being called.

The Japanese have attacked the Malay Straits.

Now I think that is all there is in the way of information, but it has been suggested that the Army and Navy losses, and the

in the Canal Zone said they were on the alert, but very quiet.

So that is literally everything I have got here. I think I have even covered the rumors as well.

Of course, it is a terrible disappointment to be President in time of war, and the circumstances.....came most unexpectedly. Well, we were attacked. There is no question about that.

I thought that tomorrow, if it was agreeable to Senator Norris (?) he would be good enough to ask me to deliver a short message. I can't tell you what is in it at this time, because of .....I will probably have.....It has been reported but not verified that Japan has done one of two things. She has sent out word that her army and navy are in a state of hostilities with the United States; and the other reports state that they have declared war on the United States.

I frankly -- I haven't any specific information whether both of those are true or not. Of course, the fact is that the -- it might be called the principal defense of the whole west coast of this country and the whole west coast of the Americas has been very seriously damaged today. That is why I thought I would ask you -- after all, there are two sides -- I would ask you if it was all right if you would let me come before you tomorrow -- I think the regular Senate session tomorrow.

Q. Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: The House ---

Q. Twelve o'clock.

Q. May I make one suggestion, Mr. President, and that is that you come as early after twelve as possible, at your convenience. Are



you going to suggest what the resolution will be before we leave?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know yet.

Q. A resolution inviting you to come?

THE PRESIDENT: A resolution asking me to come.

Q. You don't want to continue any further than that tonight?

THE PRESIDENT: No. Think what's happened in the last nine hours.

I don't know what's going to happen by twelve o'clock tomorrow.

Q. My suggestion was made for this reason -- after the prayer and the reading of the Journal, we stopped the long speeches, but it is the habit now to ask unanimous consent (?) I would like to introduce this resolution as soon as the Journal is read. Then you could come in at an early enough hour.

THE PRESIDENT: Half-past twelve?

Q. Yes, I think ---

THE PRESIDENT: In the Senate?

Q. Five minutes to get there. We have to get that resolution ---

THE PRESIDENT: The concurrent resolution?

Q. Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, if that's all right with you, I will come any time --- roughly half-past twelve is all right with me. Is that all right?

Q. Yes, yes. Sam and I discussed that.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it is an awfully serious situation. There is a rumor that two of the planes -- Japanese planes have a rising sun painted on them -- but two of the planes were seen with swastikas on them. Now whether that is true or not, I don't know. It was a rumor, and therefore news until something a little more definite

comes in. But that is a rumor.

Q. I can't help wondering what can we do to do anything ---

THE PRESIDENT: The only specific thing to do....our ships -- we don't know what ships -- are out trying to get the Japs at this moment.....They can't send for fear of disclosing their position.

Q. There are two airplane carriers of the Japanese navy over there.

THE PRESIDENT: Probably -- in other words, if you take the timing out, those planes -- carriers and their attending cruisers, and probably battleships -- I don't know -- at sundown last night, at about dark, were roughly twelve hours of darkness -- standing in the dark, away from where they launched their planes. Now, let us assume that they launched those planes at a distance of a hundred miles at daylight. That means that they had twelve hours to get to that point in the dark, and running at perhaps 25 knots, that would be three hundred miles further away. In other words, at dark, last night, they might very well have been four hundred to five hundred miles away from the Island, and therefore out of what might be called a good patrol distance. Patrol out of a given point -- 300 miles under normal conditions, but 500 miles is a long way for reconnaissance patrol. The planes run all through the night. At dawn they were one hundred miles away from their Island -- they launched their planes -- they steamed this way and that way, or reversed their course. The planes dropped their bombs and went back.

Q. Well, they were supposed to be on the alert, and if they had been on the alert.....I am amazed at the attack by Japan, but I am still more astounded at what happened to our Navy. They were all asleep. Where were our patrols? They knew these negotiations were

going on.

THE PRESIDENT: .....Here is a dispatch from General MacArthur in the Philippines. All possible action being taken here to speed defense. Pursuit planes are now reporting that by a counter-attack about fifteen enemy planes north of the Far (?) in Central (?) .....which means that those Japs are over the Island of Oahu (?). Report has been received that bombing attack.....far end of the Island of Mindanao..... In all probability.....attack may come from the Japanese Mandated Islands, which lie to the west of the Philippines. The only damage caused, said the report, is a hangar of a civilian airport. A report has just been received of a bombing attack on Camp John Hayes at Baguio.

That message was sent twenty minutes ago, and it is just about dawn in the Philippines at this moment -- tomorrow of Monday.

Two hundred Marines are in Northern China (?). They have been asked by the Japanese army to disarm, to turn in all arms and ammunition, to assemble..... The reply accepts the demands as of two o'clock today. That takes care of that. You have got the rest of it.

Q. That means two hundred of our Marines are now prisoners of the Japanese?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Well, any of you good people got any questions?

Q. I didn't hear you say anything about sinkings between Hawaii and Oahu.

THE PRESIDENT: Those are two reports. One was an armed transport supposed to be carrying a load of lumber. Is that right Harry?

Mr. Harry (Hopkins)?: Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: And the other one is -- that was 1500 miles off San Francisco -- the other report which might release the same -- that an American merchant ship had been sunk 700 miles. But they are just flabby (??)

Q. If that report is true, it is pretty close to California, is that right, Harry?

Q. Mr. President, you said you don't know what you are going to say tomorrow. Are you going to detail to Congress all the facts you have at that time, assuming they don't get any better you might..... so far as the Japanese ---

THE PRESIDENT: Active hostilities, yes.

Q. Yes, that is what I mean.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let me get a little more time on it.

Q. Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: In other words, at my Press Conference, they start off with the question "If". It's a little bit of "if" -- what I will say tomorrow at half-past twelve.

Q. Have you any report of a mass meeting in Tokyo to be held at 7.30, in which Togo and Tojo and some other officials were to make speeches?

THE PRESIDENT: I heard that the Prime Minister is going to make a statement, or a declaration, or speech, in Parliament at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

Q. The radio inferred about eleven o'clock.

Q. That would be about 7.30 our time. That's another rumor. It isn't confirmed.

Q. ....make a formal declaration of war? They are so tangled up in the Axis that a declaration of war by Germany on us.....

THE PRESIDENT: We have reason to believe that the Germans have told the Japanese that if Japan declares war, they will too. In other words, a declaration of war by Japan automatically brings .....

Q. You haven't made any declaration yet?

THE PRESIDENT: It is awfully difficult to know.

Q. Well, Mr. President, this nation has got a job ahead of it, and what we have got to do is roll up our sleeves and win this war.

THE PRESIDENT: Doc (?) I am glad you said that because there are a lot of people all over the country who have been saying for the past few weeks -- saying, well let's go in and clean up -- blank -- blank -- blank. But of course that popular feeling -- you can't do it -- just wade in and clean them up.

Back in 1922--1923, I wrote an article for the Asiatic Magazine, and I pointed out at that time that from what I had seen of the Navy Department, war between the United States and Japan would be won by us; but that it would be won primarily by the starvation and exhaustion of Japan -- starvation or exhaustion. And always remember that they have no naval bases -- they have nothing. And the old axiom used to be that a fleet loses five percent of its efficiency for every thousand miles it gets away from base. That is a rule of thumb. We saw our fleet at Hawaii, three thousand miles away to Japan itself..... If anything happens to the ship, there is one thing in particular. If you are in home waters you can get it back to drydock or Navy Yard, but if you are in enemy waters

you have an awfully tough time getting back home. And therefore a fleet attack over in Japanese waters is almost an impossibility. And they are going to go through. We will have to, to prolong our national existence, but it makes this treacherous attack impossible in the future. We may have some very heavy losses. And the Japanese know perfectly well that the answer to her attack is proper strangulation of Japan -- strangulation altogether.

Q. How big is the Russian Army now?

THE PRESIDENT: .....The greater part of it is there. From our best information there will be no offensive on land from now on until the end of April.

Q. Not much danger in Siberia.....?

Q. Try to play this down, Mr. President, but I presume that we think of this problem -- we probably have varied interpretations to place on the situation, so that we will probably have a declaration against Japan. Whether it goes any further will depend on conditions from now to then.

THE PRESIDENT: I think we ought not to say anything about it -- what action will be asked for, or what action will be taken by the Congress tonight.

Q. About all you can tell them is about the Messege?

THE PRESIDENT: But lots of things may happen.

Q. I was trying to get it from our points of view.

THE PRESIDENT: The fact is that a shooting war is going on today in the Pacific. We are in it.

Q. By twelve o'clock tomorrow you will know whether Japan's formality has taken a declaration of war on us, or a state of war

exists.

Q. ....Japan had stated that a state of war existed between us, or that war existed. That does not necessary mean a declaration of war. That comes from some authority that has power to declare war.

THE PRESIDENT: Bill, this is the only thing that we have -- from Shanghai. Who is Stanton? Is he our Consul there?

Q. Consul of China.

THE PRESIDENT: Captain Smith of the U.S.S. ? received a telephone call at 4.15 this morning. Japanese naval officers stated over the telephone that a state of war exists between my country and yours. I am taking control over the U.S.S. ? . That's the nearest official thing I have got, and that's a telephone message. I think we had better not say anything about it. Remember that out there it is nearly just about dawn. They are doing things, and saying things during the daytime out there, while we are all in bed.

Q. We are in bed too much.

Q. Well, if that's -- well, that's all we can say.

THE PRESIDENT: What?

Q. That is all we can say.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

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December 7, 1941