

December 7th, 1941

At about four o'clock on the afternoon of December 7 I received a call from the White House saying that there would be a special meeting of the Cabinet in the President's study in the White House proper at 8:30 that evening. I had been writing all afternoon and Louise had been busy so we had not listened to the radio, but I immediately concluded that the Japanese situation had taken a turn for the worse. Within a few minutes after the White House call we were able to get from radio reports that Honolulu and perhaps Manila had been attacked. Later the announcers said that Manila had not been attacked but that three or four hundred lives had been lost in attacks on Hawaii.

The Cabinet members were ushered into the President's study at 8:40. Harry Hopkins was present. The President began by saying that this was the most important Cabinet meeting since 1861. He then told of the attack today in Hawaii. He said the attack was a serious one which he would describe later. He continued by saying that there was no question but that the Japanese had been told by the Germans a few weeks ago that they were winning the war and that they would soon dominate Africa as well as Europe. They were going to isolate England and were also going to completely dominate the situation in the Far East. The Japs had been told if they wanted to be cut in on the spoils they would have to come in the war now.

The President said that it would have been necessary to start making plans for today's attack at least three weeks ago. He then related how the Japanese Envoys, even today, had asked for a conference with Secretary Hull at the hour when the attack was being made in Hawaii. He said that the Japanese had started a war while carrying on peace negotiations.

The President said that Guam and Wake Islands were also under attack. He said these Islands were poorly fortified and that they would soon be in Japanese hands. He then read a message which he said he was going to read tomorrow at a joint session of Congress. He said that the message was subject to revision as later events might warrant. The message was short and merely stated how Japan had attacked while still carrying on peace negotiations. It ended by stating that he was asking Congress to declare that a state of war had existed since Japan's attack. He indicated that he did not know whether Japan had declared war or not. He also said there was a chance that the Germans would also declare war. There was considerable discussion of the proposed message. Secretary Hull said he thought that there should be a complete statement on the events leading up to the attack. The President disagreed but Hull said he thought the most important war in 500 years deserved more than a short statement. Secretary Stimson said that Germany had inspired and planned this whole affair and that the President should so state in his message. The President disagreed with this suggestion.

The President went into the confidential reports of the attack which he said must be kept in strict secrecy. He first indicated that aircraft had been destroyed in large numbers in the attack. He then revealed that six out of seven of the battleships in Pearl Harbor had been damaged — some very severely. I was shocked at this news; so were other members of the Cabinet. The Secretary of the Navy had lost his air of bravado. Secretary Stimson was very sober.

The President said that the Japanese were hoping to bring about the transfer of American naval vessels from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He said he wanted to avoid this if at all possible. He said that he didn't want to tell the Congressional leaders (of both parties — including Senators Barkley, Johnson, Austin and Connally, Speaker Rayburn, and Congressmen Jere Cooper, Martin, Bloom and Doxey) who were waiting to come in to his study all the things he had told us.

When they came in he said that it was very unpleasant to be a War President and then he recounted the series of events leading up to the attacks of today. He said that he wanted to deliver a message to a joint session of Congress tomorrow. After a short discussion it was decided to have him address the session at 12:30. Some of the Congressmen wanted to know if he were going to ask for a declaration of war. The President said he didn't know yet what he was going to say because the events of the next fourteen hours would be numerous and all important. The President revealed that at least battleships were damaged. This caused considerable consternation among the Congressional leaders. Connally asked what damage we had inflicted on the Japs. The President indicated he didn't know but went on to say we had no information to indicate that we had severely damaged the Japs. Connolly exploded by saying: "Where were our forces — asleep? How can we go to war without anything to fight with?" The President told how the Germans might have been five hundred miles away at dark last night since they had twelve hours of sailing in the long darkness.

The President went on to say that the distance to Japan made it very difficult for us to attack Japan. He said that each thousand miles from base cut the efficiency of the Navy five percent. He pointed out that it would be necessary to strangle Japan rather than whip her and that it took longer. He once spoke about two or three years being required.

The meeting broke up about 10 o'clock. Everyone was very sober. The President began to dictate a statement for the press. Some of us stayed around for nearly an hour. I talked to the Vice President who said many times that it was all for the best. I reminded him that he had made a similar statement when we were at the Convention at Chicago last year when it seemed that everything was crashing around us.

Through it all the President was calm and deliberate. I could not help but admire his clear statements of the situation. He evidently realizes the seriousness of the situation and perhaps gets much comfort out of the fact that today's action will unite the American people. I don't know anybody in the United States who can come close to measuring up to his foresight and acumen in this critical hour.

As I drove home I could not refrain from wondering at the fates that caused me to be present at one of the most important conferences in the history of this nation.

December 8th, 1941

I called in Mr. Bledsoe, my Chief Assistant, this morning and told him how serious the situation was. It was evident he was entirely unaware of the Japanese success in their attack on Hawaii. Some of my other assistants agreed that it was going to be inadvisable for me to go to Chicago tomorrow for an address to the American Farm Bureau. It was finally decided that I should talk over the Farm and Home hour, and if possible, make it also a broadcast to the Chicago Convention. Mr. Mehl of CEA came in to say that the markets had opened rather quietly, everything considered. He also said that he had some evidence that a Southern Senator had friends and relatives who were in the Futures market for cotton and cottonseed oil. We held a council to see what we should do and we agreed that this information should be closely held.

At 12 o'clock noon I left to go to the Capitol. The President arrived in the Speaker's room at 12:15. His son, James, accompanied him. He looked as serious as I have ever seen him, yet he showed no signs of nervousness. All Cabinet members were present as we filed our way into the House Chamber and took our places in the front row to the left of the Speaker's stand, the Supreme Court being on the right. When the President came in on the arm of his son he was given a tremendous ovation. The usual announcement: "The President of the United States" was almost unheard. As the President faced the audience I saw tears well in his eyes. Without question he was not only struck by the ovation but impressed by the seriousness of the task before him. He read slowly and distinctly the same message, with only slight change, which he had read to us last evening. The only change that I noticed was the sentence suggested by the Vice President last night, which was very similar in thought to the one read today, as follows: "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteousness will win through to absolute victory." I looked at the Vice President as the great cheer for the speech arose and saw tears in the eyes of the Vice President for the first time since I had known him.

There was a tremendous cheer at the end, as the President left. I saw Louise in the gallery seated with other Cabinet wives. The Senate remained seated until after the Cabinet had gone. When we returned to the Speaker's Chambers we all congratulated the President. He was still serious, but calm. Someone brought him a drink. He exchanged a few pleasantries and left.

I found Louise waiting at my car when I reached the outside. We drove down Constitution Avenue behind the President. Before I reached my office the radio was broadcasting the speeches in favor of the declaration of a state of war, as requested by the President. Within a few minutes it was announced that the Senate had unanimously approved the Declaration and that there was only one dissenting vote in the House. Louise lunched with me at the office.

I spent an hour or so preparing a short talk for all the Bureau Chiefs at 4 o'clock. I tried to tell them that we were in a very serious situation without letting them know about our disaster in Hawaii. I told them I needed their help and guidance in the troublesome and difficult times that lay ahead. I said each one should think how his Bureau could best contribute to the defense effort. Although my talk only lasted ten minutes, the group stayed on. Yet I know despite all my statements they did grasp that we had suffered severe losses and that exceedingly great military obstacles would have to be overcome.

My trip to Chicago to address the National meeting the following day was cancelled and we started to draft a talk on the Farm and Home Hour for the following day to more or less replace my talk in Chicago. The draft which had been prepared was not to my liking and after some time I was pretty explicit as to why I thought the situation was serious and why the draft would have to be changed accordingly. These men were publicity men yet they could not visualize how our fleet in the Pacific could be crippled. Later in our conversation I became worried because I was afraid I might have divulged military information and I pledged my assistants to silence. When I arrived home I found on the inside pages Tokyo dispatches which indicated that the Japanese knew pretty well the extent of our losses. So it seems our people are the only ones who don't realize just what has happened. Perhaps it is just too incredible.