

FDR AND PEARL HARBOR

Almost as soon as the attacks occurred, conspiracy theorists began claiming that President Roosevelt had prior knowledge of the assault on Pearl Harbor. Others have claimed he tricked the Japanese into starting a war with the United States as a “back door” way to go to war with Japan’s ally, Nazi Germany. However, after nearly 65 years, no document or credible witness has been discovered that prove either claim. Most scholars view Pearl Harbor as the consequence of missed clues, intelligence errors, and overconfidence.

The causes behind the Japanese attack are complex and date back to the 1930s, when Japan undertook a military/colonial expansion in China—culminating in a full-scale invasion in 1937. America opposed this expansion and used a variety of methods to try to deter Japan.

During the late 1930s, FDR began providing limited support to the Chinese government. In 1940, Roosevelt moved the Pacific fleet to the naval base at Pearl Harbor as a show of American power. He also attempted to address growing tensions with Japan through diplomacy.

When Japan seized southern French Indo-China in July 1941, Roosevelt responded by freezing Japanese assets in the United States and ending sales of oil to Japan. Japan’s military depended upon American oil. Japan then had to decide between settling the crisis through diplomacy or by striking deep into Southeast Asia to acquire alternative sources of oil, an action that was certain to meet American opposition.

Japan chose to continue its diplomatic talks with the United States while at the same time secretly preparing for a coordinated assault throughout the Pacific. Japan’s leaders hoped that a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor would destroy American resolve and cripple the American navy for at least six months, giving Japan time to consolidate its new empire.

The documents contained in this selection are from the collections of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum and are intended to reflect the many sides of this issue.

Document #1: Letter, FDR to Ambassador Joseph C. Grew, January 21, 1941:

In December 1940, United States Ambassador to Japan Joseph C. Grew wrote to President Roosevelt, "I would give a great deal to know your mind about Japan and all her work." One day after his inauguration to an unprecedented third term, Franklin Roosevelt replied to Grew in this extraordinary letter explaining his belief that the war raging in Europe and the growing Japanese threat in the Pacific were all part of a "single world conflict." This letter predates the Pearl Harbor attack by nearly a year. (President's Secretary's Files; Diplomatic Correspondence; Japan, Jan.-Sept. 1941; Box 43).

*Original sent to State for delivery by
pouch 1/21/41
hm*

*Japan
State*

January 21, 1941

Dear Joe: *x204*

I have given careful consideration to your letter of December 14. *x3575*

First, I want to say how helpful it is to have your over-all estimates and reflections--based as they are upon a rare combination of first-hand observation, long experience with our Japanese relations, and masterly judgment. I find myself in decided agreement with your conclusions.

I also want you to know how much I appreciate your kind words of congratulation on my re-election and your expression of confidence in my conduct of our foreign affairs.

As to your very natural request for an indication of my views as to certain aspects of our future attitude toward developments in the Far East, I believe that the fundamental proposition is that we must recognize that the hostilities in Europe, in Africa, and in Asia are all parts of a single world conflict. We must, consequently, recognize that our interests are menaced both in Europe and in the Far East. We are engaged in the task of defending our way of life and our vital national interests wherever they are seriously endangered. Our strategy of self-defense must be a global strategy which takes account of every front and takes advantage of every opportunity to contribute to our total security.

You suggest as one of the chief factors in the problem of our attitude toward Japan the question whether our getting into war with Japan would so handicap our help to Britain in Europe as to make the difference to Britain between victory and defeat. In this connection it seems to me that we must consider whether, if Japan should gain possession of the region of the Netherlands East Indies and the Malay Peninsula, the

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the chances of England's winning in her struggle with Germany would not be decreased thereby. The British Isles, the British in those Isles, have been able to exist and to defend themselves not only because they have prepared strong local defenses but also because as the heart and the nerve center of the British Empire they have been able to draw upon vast resources for their sustenance and to bring into operation against their enemies economic, military and naval pressures on a world-wide scale. They live by importing goods from all parts of the world and by utilizing large overseas financial resources. They are defended not only by measures of defense carried out locally but also by distant and widespread economic, military, and naval activities which both contribute to the maintenance of their supplies, deny certain sources of supply to their enemies, and prevent those enemies from concentrating the full force of their armed power against the heart and the nerve center of the Empire. The British need assistance along the lines of our generally established policies at many points, assistance which in the case of the Far East is certainly well within the realm of "possibility" so far as the capacity of the United States is concerned. Their defense strategy must in the nature of things be global. Our strategy of giving them assistance toward ensuring our own security must envisage both sending of supplies to England and helping to prevent a closing of channels of communication to and from various parts of the world, so that other important sources of supply will not be denied to the British and be added to the assets of the other side.

You also suggest as chief factors in the problem the questions whether and when Britain is likely to win the European war. As I have indicated above, the conflict is world-wide, not merely a European war. I firmly believe, as I have recently declared publicly, that the British, with our help, will be victorious in this conflict. The conflict may well be long and we must bear in mind that when England is victorious she may not have left the strength that would be needed to bring about a rearrangement of such territorial changes in the western and southern Pacific as might occur

during the course of the conflict if Japan is not kept within bounds. I judge from the remarks which appear at the bottom of page 4 and at the top of page 5 of your letter that you, too, attach due importance to this aspect of the problem.

I am giving you my thoughts at this length because the problems which we face are so vast and so interrelated that any attempt even to state them compels one to think in terms of five continents and seven seas. In conclusion, I must emphasize that, our problem being one of defense, we can not lay down hard and fast plans. As each new development occurs we must, in the light of the circumstances then existing, decide when and where and how we can most effectively marshal and make use of our resources.

With warmest regards,

As ever
(Signed) Franklin D. Roosevelt

Document #2: Memorandum, Harry Dexter White to Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 4, 1941:

As Japan continued its expansion throughout Southeast Asia in early 1941, various departments of the United States Government studied the impact of Japan's inability to produce oil domestically. This April 4, 1941 memorandum from Dr. Harry Dexter White to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. reflects the tension between the Navy Department, which would have to defend the United States in a war and was concerned about Japan's growing petroleum reserves, and the State Department, which hoped that free trade in oil would prevent a war by avoiding a direct confrontation with Japan. (Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Volume 386, Page 88).

Treasury Department
Division of Monetary Research 88

Date..... April 4, 19 41

To: Secretary Morgenthau
From: Mr. White

Navy Report on Japan's Oil Situation

1. The Navy confirms our opinion that Japan is receiving all the aviation gasoline she wants from the U.S. The Navy's report is quite critical of the State Department for freely licensing this material.
2. The Navy believes Japan has large stocks of tetraethyl lead and "boosters".
3. The Navy attaches great importance to oil in Japan's intentions toward a southward move. Since Japan is not sure that we will not embargo oil and since she fears that the Netherlands East Indies' wells might be destroyed, Japan's policy necessarily is to build up stocks.
4. The Navy estimates that Japan will need 41 million barrels per year in the major war.
5. The Navy estimates Japanese stocks, December 31, at 75 million barrels. This figure is subject to the same errors as was the August estimate of 74 million barrels. (We feel that the stocks are nearer to 35 million barrels).

MR. WHITE
Branch 2058 - Room 208

Document #3, Memorandum for the President, Gen. George C. Marshall to FDR, July 15, 1941:

In late 1940, US Army cryptanalysts cracked the Japanese diplomatic code in a breakthrough known as "Magic." Through Magic, President Roosevelt, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and U.S. military leaders could read what Japanese diplomats were telling each other almost as fast as they could. In this Memorandum to the President dated July 15, 1941, U.S. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall summarizes a recent Magic intercept reflecting Japan's imminent takeover of Indo-China (Vietnam) from the French Vichy regime. Japan's movement into Indo-China would prompt FDR to impose economic sanctions on Japan and ultimately shut off all exports of oil to that country. It is important to note that Magic could only read Japan's diplomatic code, not its military code. Discussions of the military preparations for the Pearl Harbor attack were not transmitted via the diplomatic code. (President's Secretary's Files; Diplomatic Correspondence; Japan, Jan.-Sept. 1941; Box 43).

Boyd

~~SECRET~~
RSE Japan

WAR DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF
WASHINGTON

July 15, 1941

MEMORANDUM for The President:

A long "magic" has just been decoded but has not yet been put in shape for distribution. It covers the following:

Japan, through Vichy, is issuing an ultimatum to Indo-China for the occupation of eight air bases and two naval ports (Cameroon and Sigon) for the avowed reason of preventing further encirclement by Britain and the United States. No time limit is stated.

The Chief of Naval Operations in Japan to the Naval Attache in Washington states that on account of the shortage of ship tonnage in the Sea of Japan, the requirements by the Army, the inability to charter ships at the present time, and the fact that many foreign ships no longer make Japan a port of call, the following re-scheduling of shipping will be effected:

Japanese ships will be removed from the run between the Philippines and the east United States coast.

The run to the east coast of South America will be continued through August but it will be impossible after September 1st. However, nine ships will serve the east coast of South America via Cape Horn. (This may signify their anticipation of inability to use the Panama Canal.)

Their shipping will continue to the west coast of South America.

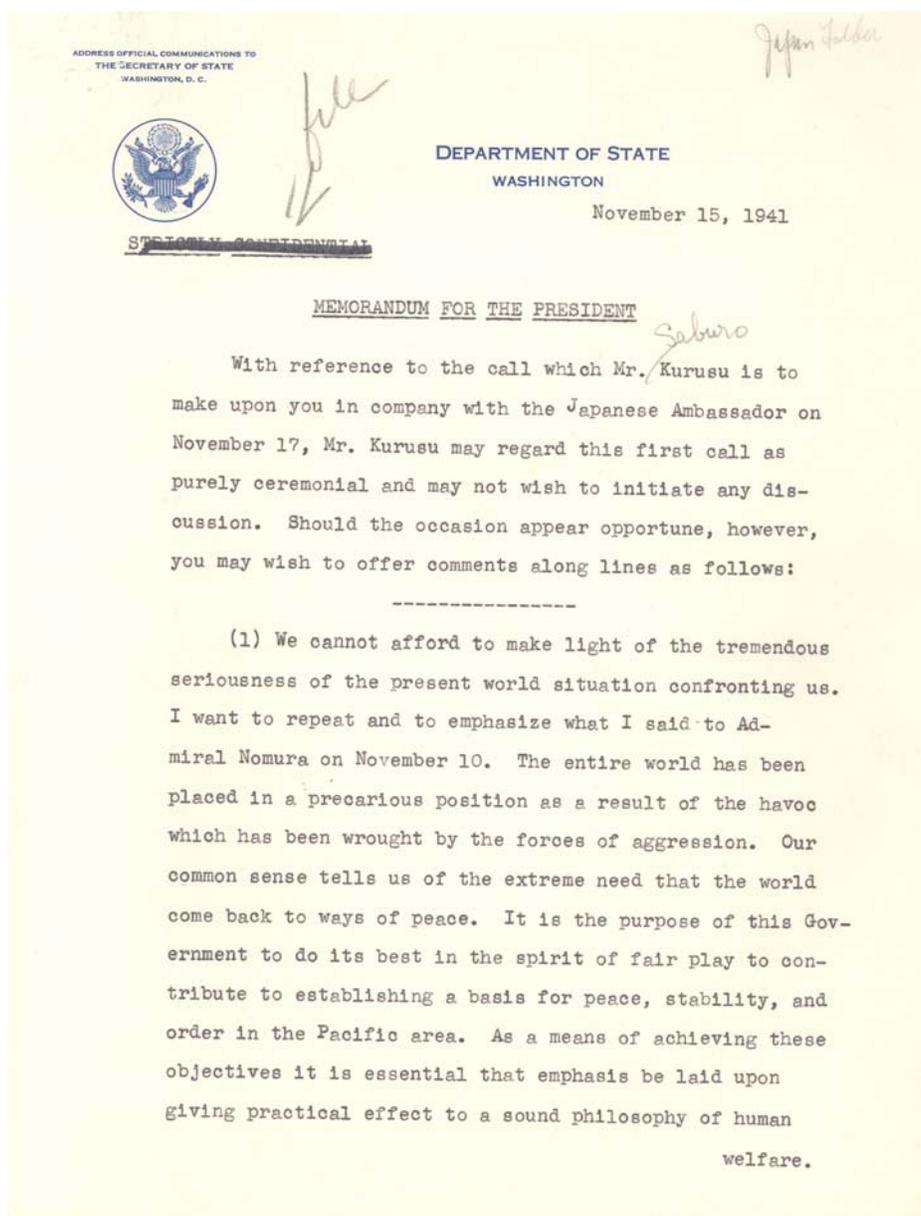
A full copy of this "magic" will be sent you as soon as it can be prepared.

[Signature]
Chief of Staff.

~~SECRET~~

Document #4: Memorandum for the President, Secretary of State Cordell Hull to FDR, November 15, 1941:

As American-Japanese relations neared collapse, Tokyo dispatched a special envoy to the United States, Saburo Kurusu, to assist its Ambassador in Washington, Kichisaburo Nomura, in presenting one final peace proposal to the United States government. Two days prior to Kurusu's first meeting with FDR, Secretary of State Cordell Hull prepared this November 15, 1941 Memorandum for the President recommending certain issues to be addressed. The meeting took place as scheduled, with little positive result. Subsequent meetings between Hull and the Japanese diplomats proved equally fruitless. On November 26, 1941, Hull presented to Kurusu and Nomura a restatement of the US position that in the interests of peace Japan should withdraw from China and abandon its Southeast Asian expansion. That same day, Admiral Yamamoto directed the Japanese fleet to weigh anchor and proceed to Pearl Harbor. (President's Secretary's Files; Diplomatic Correspondence; Japan, Oct.-Dec. 1941; Box 43).



welfare. We have often and quite recently made clear publicly what we have in mind in this regard.

(2) We are fully aware that it may require time for Japan to turn to courses of peace. The American people and Government, especially the President and the Secretary of State, have been very patient. We are ready and willing to continue to be patient, to endeavor to work out a broad-gauge peaceful settlement, and to afford every practicable opportunity to Japan to turn to courses of peace.

(3) It is tremendously important that no statesman and no country miscalculate the attitude and the position of the American people and Government. The American people and Government are fully alive to the sinister menace which all peace-loving countries are facing from Hitlerism and courses of aggression. This country has been slow in arousing itself to the dangers of Hitlerism. Today we are fully aware of those dangers and are thoroughly aroused. Our national effort is primarily and in ever-increasing measure being devoted toward defeat of Hitlerism. We are determined to protect and preserve our national security against Hitlerism.

(4) A victorious Hitler would constitute a menace to all other nations, including Japan. Our opposition to courses of aggression and to the program of Hitlerism stands firm. We are entirely convinced that Hitlerism

will

will be defeated.

(5) We hope that our exploratory conversations will achieve favorable results in the way of providing a basis for negotiations. We shall continue to do our best to expedite the conversations just as we understand that the Japanese Government is anxious to do. We hope that the Japanese Government will make it clear that it intends to pursue peaceful courses instead of opposite courses, as such clarification should afford a way for arriving at the results which we seek.

In view of the general character of these suggested comments no need is perceived of giving the Ambassador a written record of what you say to him.

Document #5: Draft Memorandum, FDR to Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles, December 1, 1941:

In the days immediately preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt grew acutely concerned about apparent Japanese preparations for some type of military offensive in the Pacific. Through Magic and other sources, the President had learned of massive troop buildups in Indo-China far above what had been agreed to by the Vichy French government. In this memorandum dated December 1, 1941, Roosevelt instructs his top diplomats to immediately learn the intentions behind the Japanese Government's latest move, and he discusses the obvious parallels between Japan's actions in the Pacific and Germany's actions in Europe. The revisions are in President's Roosevelt's handwriting. (President's Secretary's Files; Diplomatic Correspondence; Japan, Oct.-December 1941; Box 43).

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

December 1, 1941.

MEMORANDUM FOR

THE SECRETARY OF STATE
THE UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE.

I have received reports during the past days of continuing Japanese troop movements to southern Indo-China. These reports indicate a very rapid and material increase in the force of all kinds stationed by Japan in Indo-China.

It was my clear understanding that by the terms of the agreement -- and there is no present need to discuss the nature of that agreement -- between Japan and the French Government at Vichy that the total number of Japanese forces permitted by the terms of that agreement to be stationed in Indo-China was very considerably less than the total amount of the forces already there.

The stationing of these increased Japanese forces in Indo-China would seem to imply the utilization of these forces by Japan for purposes of further aggression, since no such number of forces could possibly be required for the policing of that region. Such aggression could conceivably be against the Philippine Islands; against Burma; against Malaya or either ^{through} coercion or through the actual use of force for the purpose of undertaking the ~~actual~~ occupation of Thailand.

against the many islands of the East Indies;

Please be good enough to request the Japanese Ambassador and Ambassador Kurusu to inquire at once of the Japanese Government what the actual reasons may be for the steps already taken, and what I am to consider is the policy of the Japanese Government as demonstrated by this recent and rapid concentration of troops in Indo-China. This Government has seen in the last few years in Europe a policy on the part of the German Government which has involved a constant and steady encroachment upon the territory and rights of free and independent peoples through the utilization of military steps of the same character. It is for that reason ~~primarily that I am concerned to ascertain the views of the Japanese Government with regard to the inquiries I have above set forth~~

And because of the broad problem of American defense that I should like to know the intention of the Japanese government.

F. D. R.

Document #6: Memorandum for the President, December 7, 1941:

On the afternoon of December 7, 1941, President Roosevelt was in his Oval Study in the White House having lunch with his close friend and aide Harry L. Hopkins. The lunch was interrupted at 1:40 p.m. by a telephone call from Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox who told him that the Navy Department had received a radio report from Honolulu stating that Pearl Harbor was under attack and that the military command had emphasized that this was "no drill." This Memorandum (presumably prepared by the Navy Department) was one of the first written damage assessments presented to the President that afternoon. In his own hand, Roosevelt has indicated the date and time he received it. (President's Official File 4675: World War II, 1941; Box 1).

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War History

Dec 7 1941

3:50 p.m.

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

The Japs attacked Honolulu time about eight o'clock this morning. The first warning was from a submarine that was outside the harbor which was attacked by a destroyer with depth bombs. Result unknown. Another submarine was sunk by aircraft. They attacked with aircraft, with bombs and torpedoes. At least two aircraft were known to have a swastika sign on them. The attacks were in two divisions; first on the air fields and then on the navy yard. Severe damage. The Oklahoma has capsized in Pearl Harbor. The Tennessee is on fire with a bad list., and the Navy Yard is attempting to drydock her.

4675-
General

No. 1 drydock was hit by bombs. The Pennsylvania was in dock and apparently undamaged. There were two destroyers hit in drydock, one of them blew up. There was one destroyer in a floating drydock which is on fire and the dock is being flooded. Two torpedoes hit the sea wall between the Helena, which is 10,000 tons - 6 in. cruiser, and the Oglala. The Oglala is heavily listed and can probably not be saved. She is on fire and is an old mine layer. The power house at Pearl Harbor was hit but is still operating. The Honolulu power house was presumably hit because there is no power on it. The air fields at Ford Island, ~~Hickam~~ Hickam, Wheeler and Kaneohe were attacked.

Hangars on fire and Hickam field fire is burning badly. The
PBYS outside of hangars are burning. Probably heavy ~~personnel~~
personnel casualties but no figures. So far as Bleck knows
Honolulu was not hit. He does not know how many aircraft
were brought down but he knows personally of two. They have
both been so busy he has not contacted Kimmel. There are
two task forces at sea, each one of them with a carrier.
He knows nothing further on that except that they are at sea.
This came over the telephone and we are getting nothing out
here whatever. Mr. Vincent called but I have given out
nothing, pending further word from you. The Japanese have
no details of the damage which they have wrought.

Document #7: Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between FDR and Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., December 7, 1941:

As part of his meticulous record-keeping, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., routinely had his telephone conversations transcribed by a stenographer. This practice was well-known to President Roosevelt, who prohibited Morgenthau from doing so with his calls. In the confusion of December 7, though, this prohibition was either forgotten or ignored. As Treasury Secretary, Morgenthau oversaw the United States Secret Service, and this transcription of a telephone conversation between Roosevelt and Morgenthau that took place at 6:40 pm on December 7, 1941, discusses increased protection of the White House in a time of war. Mentioned in the conversation are Secret Service Chief Frank J. Wilson, Treasury official Herbert Gaston, and Secretary to the President Stephen T. Early. (Henry Morgenthau, Jr. Papers; Presidential Diaries, August-December 1941; Box 515).

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December 7, 1941

HM Jr spoke to the President at approximately 6:40 this evening and the following is their conversation:

The President: Hello, Henry. Cabinet at 8:30.

HM Jr: Yes, sir.

I have some orders which we are getting out. I cleared all of them with Welles.

The President: Fine.

HM Jr: We are freezing all Japanese funds.

The President: Yes.

HM Jr: We are not going to let any Japanese leave the country or to carry on any communications.

The President: I see.

HM Jr: Well, our responsibility is the border.

The President: Yes, yes. That's right.

HM Jr: And we're putting people into all the Japanese banks and business houses tonight and we're not going to let the Japanese get in there at all.

The President: That's good.

HM Jr: Now the other thing I would like - Chief Wilson and Gaston are here.

The President: Yes.

HM Jr: We would like permission to put a detail of soldiers on the White House grounds.

The President: Well, wait just a second. Steve Early said something about that. (Slight pause while President talks aside.)

1039-A

The President: Well, the thing has been suggested by the War Department but I don't think - my idea is that. Suppose you get some additional White House guards?

HM Jr: We've done that. We've already doubled the guard force.

The President: You've doubled the guard. That's all you need. As long as you have one about every hundred feet around the fence, it's all right.

HM Jr: But you think that's enough?

The President: That's fine.

HM Jr: Well, the guards have already been doubled.

The President: What you could do is this: Block off both Executive Avenues. In other words, the one on the East and the one on the West. Put up barricades between the White House and the Treasury and also on the one between the White House and State Department.

HM Jr: We will do that tonight. All right, sir.

(End of conversation with the President.)

HM Jr: He said Steve Early had suggested it but he said we should close the traffic on both Executive Avenues.

(Above conversation is included as part of the meeting held in HM Jr's office at 6:35 on 12/7/41)

Document #8: Diary Entry of Agriculture Secretary Claude R. Wickard, December 7, 1941:

Because he liked a free and open exchange of ideas, President Roosevelt discouraged his Cabinet members from taking notes during Cabinet meetings. As a result, Cabinet officers often made diary entries of their recollections immediately following significant meetings. This entry from December 7, 1941 by Agriculture Secretary Claude R. Wickard recounts in detail the events and discussions that took place in the Cabinet meeting following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Of particular note are the confrontation between the President and Secretary of State Cordell Hull over the length of Roosevelt's proposed address to Congress, which would become known as the Day of Infamy Speech, and the explosive meeting with Congressional leaders that followed. (Claude R. Wickard Papers; Department of Agriculture Files; Cabinet Meetings, 1941-1942; Box 13).

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.