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.*
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).
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,

(Signed) Franklin D. Roosevelt
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).
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).
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.

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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.
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).
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).
Hangars on fire and Hickam field fire is burning badly. The PBY's outside of hangars are burning. Probably heavy personnel casualties but no figures. So far as Block 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.
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.)
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)
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).
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. Connally exploded by saying: "Where are 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.