

# CULTURES OF WAR

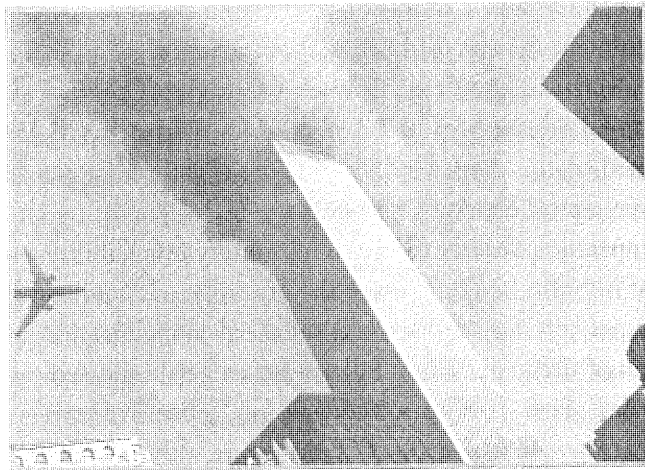
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## THE FAILURE OF IMAGINATION



*“Little yellow sons-of-bitches”*

In all the many volumes of documents, testimony, and commentary about the intelligence failure of 1941, there are no more telling words than an informal confession made by Admiral Kimmel while the congressional hearings of 1945–46 were taking place.

Although the commanders in Pearl Harbor had received a “war warning” message from Washington on November 27, ten days before the attack, when the first wave of Japanese planes swept in, General Short was caught with his air force tightly bunched on the ground, most of his ammunition locked away, and major airfields such as Hickam without

any anti-aircraft guns. Admiral Kimmel’s Pacific Fleet (except the carriers, which by sheer good fortune had put out for maneuvers) was peacefully at anchor in the harbor. These were the shocking failures that led the first post-Pearl Harbor investigation to charge the two officers with dereliction of duty, later tempered in the findings of the congressional inquiry to grave errors of judgment.

Both Short (who died in 1949) and Kimmel (who passed away in 1968, at eighty-six) argued that Washington failed to share all the information about Japanese plans it had gleaned through the still-secret Magic code-breaking operation. Never, they claimed, were they explicitly instructed to prepare for an actual attack. The two officers were given the opportunity to defend themselves in the postwar hearings, where Short read a 61-page typed statement and Kimmel’s prepared statement ran to 108 pages. The disgraced admiral’s most cryptic and persuasive explanation of why he had been caught by surprise, however, came in a lunch-break conversation with Edward Morgan, a lawyer who eventually drafted the majority report. As Morgan recalled it years later, the exchange went as follows:

*Morgan:* Why, after you received this ‘war warning’ message of November 27, did you leave the Fleet in Pearl Harbor?

*Kimmel:* All right, Morgan—I’ll give you your answer. I never thought those little yellow sons-of-bitches could pull off such an attack, so far from Japan.<sup>50</sup>

Although unvarnished language like this did not make it into the transcript of the hearings, the majority report did take care to argue that “had greater imagination and a keener awareness of the significance of intelligence existed . . . it is proper to suggest that someone should have concluded that Pearl Harbor was a likely point of Japanese attack.” Failing to think outside the box is a theme that surfaces and resurfaces in the serious general literature. Gordon Prange, for example, speaks of “psychological unpreparedness”; Roberta Wohlstetter, of “the very human tendency to pay attention to the signals that support current expectations about enemy behavior.”<sup>51</sup>

Admiral Yamamoto, like his American navy counterpart, also put the

American failure in plain language—in his case, in two personal letters written shortly after the attack. On December 19, he wrote this to a fellow admiral:

Such good luck, together with negligence on the part of the arrogant enemy, enabled us to launch a successful surprise attack.<sup>52</sup>

Two days later, writing to the student son of a personal friend, Yamamoto made a bit clearer what he had in mind in speaking of American arrogance. This letter, in its entirety, read as follows:

22 December 1941

My dear Yoshiki Takamura,

Thank you for your letter. That we could defeat the enemy at the outbreak of the war was because they were unguarded and also they made light of us. "Danger comes soonest when it is despised" and "don't despise a small enemy" are really important matters. I think they can be applied not only to wars but to routine matters.

I hope you study hard, taking good care of yourself.

Good-bye,  
Isoroku Yamamoto<sup>53</sup>

Yamamoto obviously misread American psychology disastrously when expressing hope that the surprise attack would strike a crippling blow at morale. The Americans, however, also disastrously misread and underestimated the Japanese. Can there be a more precise confirmation of Yamamoto's perception of Japan being "despised" and made light of as a "small enemy" than Kimmel's frank reference to "those little yellow sons-of-bitches"?

In a rational world, this should not have been the case. American perceptions of Japan as a potential foe traced back to the turn of the century, when Japan startled the world by defeating China and Tsarist Russia in quick succession (in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 and Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5), thereby joining the Western, Caucasian, and Christian expansionist nations as one of the world's few imperialist powers. Financiers in New York and London had helped finance the Russo-

Japanese War, and many Western observers expressed admiration for the doughty "Yankees (or Brits) of the Pacific," but such support and praise were hardly unalloyed. The obverse side of support and respect for Japan and its spectacular accomplishments in "Westernization" was fear of the "Yellow Peril"—fear, that is, that Asia's masses would acquire the scientific skills and war-making machinery hitherto monopolized by the West.<sup>54</sup>

From the 1890s to the eve of Pearl Harbor, influential U.S. media such as the Hearst newspapers relentlessly editorialized that Japan posed a direct threat to the United States. Concurrent with Japan's formal surrender in September 1945, the Hearst syndicate ran a two-page advertisement in *Business Week* proudly itemizing how "for more than 50 years, the Hearst Newspapers kept warning America about JAPAN." The spread reproduced "a startling prophetic cartoon" from 1905 depicting a Japanese soldier standing in Korea with the sun behind him and his shadow falling across the Pacific onto the west coast of the United States. It boasted about how "the Hearst Newspapers first pointed out the 'Yellow Peril' of Japan to U.S. aims and interests in the Pacific" in the 1890s; how in 1898 it had "urged the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands by the United States as a defense measure against growing Japanese power in the Pacific"; how in 1912 the paper had "focused national attention on Japanese attempts to colonize Lower California"; and on, and on, up to 1941, when "the Hearst Newspapers, right up to the time that bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, were still hammering for increased naval appropriations and for strengthened fortifications in the Pacific."<sup>55</sup>

Here, it would seem, was imagination and "psychological preparedness" in abundance; and the United States did, in fact, adopt strategic policies that took the rise of Japan into consideration. Hawaii was annexed in 1898, and from 1905 Navy planners identified Japan as the major hypothetical enemy in the Pacific; there was, of course, no other candidate. In the color-coded contingency plans the Navy introduced before World War I, war plans vis-à-vis Japan were coded "Orange." It has been calculated that, over ensuing decades, officers at the Naval War College tested and refined the Orange plan at least 127 times.<sup>56</sup>

In May 1940, the clarity of Japan's intent to advance into Southeast Asia and the South Pacific led to transfer of the U.S. Pacific Fleet from the west coast of the United States to Hawaii, as a more visible "deterrent."

Several months prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, this ostensible deterrent was augmented by carefully leaked plans to strengthen U.S. forces in the Philippines with advanced B-17 "Flying Fortress" bombers. (In October 1941, Secretary of War Stimson expressed hope that the threat of these bombers would suffice to keep Japan from going after Singapore "and perhaps, if we are in good luck, to shake the Japanese out of the Axis.") Three times in 1941—in June, July, and October—the army and navy in Hawaii were placed on alert during particularly tense moments in the deteriorating relationship between the two countries.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond this deep history of mistrust and fear, it might have been expected that the plain nuts-and-bolts of military developments—the huge buildup of warships, aircraft, and ground forces that took place in the years preceding Pearl Harbor—would have made it apparent that Japan would be a formidable foe. This was not the case, and as a consequence it was more than just the unexpected attack that shocked Americans. Even more unnerving was the competence of the Japanese military.

This, at least, should not have come as a surprise. Japan had been working toward a capability for waging "total war" since the early 1930s. (Such thinking dated back to lessons drawn from World War I, which stimulated military strategists everywhere to consider how to mobilize the total resources of the nation in the eventuality of another great war.)<sup>58</sup> Isolation from the world community after the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 accelerated these plans, and from 1932 on the military establishment dominated the Japanese government. The nation had been at war with China for over four years at the time Pearl Harbor was attacked; and while the interminable nature of this conflict could be taken as a sign of military shortcomings and overextension, the other side of the coin was that the China war had created an experienced fighting force and spurred major advances in military technology.

These developments were not hidden, but even the experts failed to see them clearly—or, at least, to see them whole. Thus, the list of Japan's military capabilities that caught the Americans by surprise seems quite astounding in retrospect. Their torpedoes were more advanced than those of the Americans. (It was last-minute development of an airplane-launched torpedo with fins, capable of running shallow, that made the Pearl Harbor attack so deadly.) Their sonar, which the Americans believed

inferior, was four to five times more powerful than what the U.S. military had at the time. Although the high-speed Mitsubishi "Zero," introduced to combat in China in August 1940, was more effective than any U.S. fighter plane at the time, the Americans underestimated its range, speed, and maneuverability.

The list goes on. According to testimony introduced at the congressional hearings, the Japanese had "better material in critical areas such as flashless powder, warhead explosives, and optical equipment." Japan's monthly output of military aircraft by December 1941 was more than double what the Americans estimated it to be. Their pilots, intensively trained and also seasoned by combat in China, were among the best in the world. As noted in an authoritative history of the U.S. air forces in World War II, "the average pilot in the carrier groups which were destined to begin hostilities against the United States had over 800 hours" of flying experience. The "first-line strength" of the imperial air forces "gave them a commanding position in the Pacific."<sup>59</sup>

In Prange's emphatic estimation, on December 7, 1941, "Japan stood head and shoulders above any other nation in naval airpower." The British military historian H. P. Willmott concludes that "in December 1941 the Imperial Japanese Navy possessed clear superiority of numbers in every type of fleet unit over the US Pacific and Asiatic fleets"; that it had "superiority over its intended prey" in the crucial category of aircraft carriers; and that in tactical technique, it was "second to none" at the opening stage of the war. Willmott also observes that the land-based Betty medium bomber developed by the Japanese in the 1930s "possessed a range and speed superior to any other medium bomber in service anywhere in the world." Other sources call attention to the Imperial Navy's exceptional skill in night gunnery, and its initial advantage in launching torpedoes from cruisers. As the audacious December 7 attack made painfully obvious, the ability of Japan's naval officers to plan and execute an exceedingly bold and complex operation—particularly one involving carriers—was simply beyond imagining. Except, of course, that the Japanese had imagined it down to the last detail.<sup>60</sup>

What accounts for this American failure of imagination?

Racism is part of the answer, but only part. The Japanese were not merely "sons-of-bitches." They were "little," and they were "yellow." In

the American vernacular, the phrase "little yellow men" had become so common that it almost seemed to be a single word. To be "yellow" was to be alien as well as threatening (as in the "Yellow Peril"); but the reflexive adjective "little" was just as pejorative, for it connoted not merely people of generally shorter physical stature, but more broadly a race and culture inherently small in capability and in the accomplishments esteemed in the white Euro-American world.

Such contempt was not peculiar to Americans. It was integral to the conceit of a "white man's burden" and sneering animus of white supremacy that invariably accompanied Western expansion into Asia. When, after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese swept in and conquered their supposedly impregnable outpost in Singapore, the British also expressed disbelief (and engaged in the same sort of racial invective). Wherever and whenever objectivity overrides prejudice, it is usually the exception that proves the rule.<sup>61</sup>

Still, racial blinders alone do not adequately account for the failure to anticipate Pearl Harbor. The Americans also were unable to imagine what it was like to look at the world from Tokyo. From the Japanese perspective, the entire globe was in turbulent flux and grave crisis. The nation's situation was desperate. Its cause was just. And things had come to such a pass that there was no alternative but to take whatever risk might be necessary.<sup>62</sup>

### *Rationality, Desperation, and Risk*

The top-secret policy meetings that took place at the highest level in Japan from the spring of 1941, including "Imperial Conferences" at which diplomatic and military decisions were approved by the emperor, are provocative in retrospect because of the generic, rather than uniquely Japanese, outlook they reveal. It was unthinkable for the nation's leaders to question the assumption that China, including Manchuria, was Japan's economic lifeline, or that the war there was not merely essential to national survival but also moral and just. Indeed, with Japan having already "sacrificed hundreds of thousands of men" in invading and occupying China, it was all the more inconceivable to consider military withdrawal from the continent as the United States had demanded in pre-Pearl Harbor

negotiations. It also was taken for granted that the nation could not break the military stalemate in China without access to the strategic resources of Southeast Asia, and time was running out. "Our Empire's national power," explained the head of the Planning Board at one critical meeting, "is declining day by day." The argument that creation of a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" would ensure not only the "security and preservation of the nation" and well-being of all Asia, but ultimately "world peace," went unchallenged.<sup>63</sup>

This was not propaganda intended for domestic or international consumption. It was what these men believed—the assumptions and emotions that guided their deliberations and decisions. And so, in the end, the policy makers agreed there was no choice but to break off relations with the United States and "move South." To give in to U.S. demands would be "national suicide." "I fear," Prime Minister Tōjō stated at a critical meeting in early November, "that we would become a third-class nation after two or three years if we just sat tight."<sup>64</sup>

The fateful decision to secure their nation's position in Asia by pursuing a war of choice against the United States and other Allied powers was reinforced by a number of seemingly sane and rational projections. These included German victory in Europe, particularly against England and the Soviet Union; U.S. difficulties in fighting a two-front war; the strength of isolationist sentiment in the United States, and consequently probable domestic opposition to a protracted war in the Pacific; and the fact that there was a current of thinking in U.S. ruling circles, exemplified by Joseph Grew, that saw a constructive role for Japan as a "stabilizing force" against "chaos and communism" in China. Additionally, it was argued that while Japan lacked the industrial potential of the United States, its army and navy were huge; its forces, including air forces, were seasoned by combat in China; and the esprit de corps of the emperor's loyal soldiers and sailors was superior to whatever fighting spirit the Americans could hope to marshal. (In a casual conversation a few months after arriving in defeated Japan, General MacArthur told a British diplomat he "would have given his eyeballs to have such men" as the Japanese forces he encountered in the Philippines.) Given such considerations, it did not seem unreasonable to hope that the war would end in some sort of negotiated settlement with the United States, with both sides cooperating in maintaining peace in Asia.<sup>65</sup>

Counterfactual rumination (the "what if" school of history) also helps illuminate the misplaced optimism of Japan's war planners. That Japan was able to drag out the war for over three and a half years after Pearl Harbor was due in considerable part to the priority the United States gave to the European theater. At the same time, with a little more luck and operational shrewdness Japan might have prolonged the war even longer. For example, *what if*: (1) Germany had not attacked the Soviet Union while the Japanese were descending their slippery slope to war, thus leaving resistance to U.S. and British forces stronger on the European front; (2) the U.S. carriers had been berthed at Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack, and had not been by sheer chance at sea; (3) the Pearl Harbor attack force had launched a third wave of strikes and destroyed repair facilities and critical fuel sources; (4) the Japanese had changed their military code in 1942, thus thwarting major post-Pearl Harbor U.S. breakthroughs in cryptanalysis that proved critical not only in decisive battles such as Midway but also in the ongoing decimation of Japanese warships and merchant vessels by American submarines; (5) Japanese naval commanders had been less timid at decisive battles such as Midway and the Solomons? (The counterfactual question that trumps all others is *what if* Japan had excluded Pearl Harbor and the Philippines from the December 1941 offensive? This would have eliminated the "Remember Pearl Harbor" rage that solidified the nation behind retaliation, and forced the Roosevelt administration to decide whether or not to declare war in the face of continuing isolationist opposition.)

There is almost no end to the "what ifs" of history, and perhaps military history in particular. (Hitler's folly in deciding to attack the Soviet Union is the great strategic *what if* where the war in the West is concerned.) Be that as it may, Japan's desperation and consequent willingness to take extreme risks also enter the strategic equation. It was irrational to miscalculate the psychological impact the Pearl Harbor attack would have among Americans, and hope instead that demoralization would be the result. By the same measure, however, the U.S. leadership was grievously negligent in ignoring the possibility of direct attack once it became clear the Japanese had concluded they could not retreat in China and, unless the Western powers lifted their embargoes on strategic exports, had no alternative but to move into Southeast Asia.

Military men, like politicians, cherish cherry-picked history and the symbolism and rhetoric of past challenges and glories. When MacArthur took the Japanese surrender on the *Missouri* in September 1945, the flag raised at Morning Colors was the same Stars and Stripes that had flown over the Capitol in Washington on December 7, 1941, while the bulkhead overlooking the ceremony displayed the thirty-one-star flag Commodore Matthew Perry had flown on his flagship in 1853, when he initiated the gunboat diplomacy that forced Japan to abandon its feudal seclusion. In the surprise attack of December 7, the Japanese engaged in similar symbolism. As the attack force approached Pearl Harbor, the flagship *Akagi* ran up the "Z" flag signal that had been hoisted more than thirty-five years earlier by Admiral Heihachirō Tōgō in the decisive 1905 Battle of Tsushima, in which Tōgō's modern warships destroyed a huge Russian armada that had sailed all the way from the Baltic, thereby assuring Japan's emergence as a great power. The signal read, "The rise and fall of the Empire depends upon this battle; everyone will do his duty with utmost efforts."

Shortly before this, the commander of the Pearl Harbor attack fleet read an "imperial rescript" to his men that had been prepared earlier by the emperor. "The responsibility assigned to the Combined Fleet is so grave that the rise and fall of the Empire depends upon what it is going to accomplish," the message said. Japan's sovereign placed his trust in the fleet to accomplish what it had long been training for, "thus destroying the enemy and demonstrating its brilliant deed throughout the whole world."<sup>66</sup>

One side's infamy was the other's brilliant deed, on which the very fate of the empire depended.