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Samuel Eliot Morison

THE RISING SUN IN THE PACIFIC¹

On 6 December President Roosevelt played his last card for peace—a personal message to Emperor Hirohito, begging him for the sake of humanity to withdraw the military and naval forces from southern Indochina which threatened the Philippines, Malaya, Thailand and “the hundreds of islands of the East Indies.” Hirohito did not want war with the United States, but he wanted still less to lose his throne. Showa Restoration would have been turned into Showa Deposition if he had refused to go along with Tojo at this point. So he said nothing.

On Sunday morning, 7 December 1941—the “day that will live in infamy”—the Japanese ambassadors, as instructed by their government, asked for an interview with Mr. Hull at 1300 in order to read Tojo’s reply to the proposals of 26 November. That time had been selected because it was just twenty minutes before the scheduled hours (0750 Honolulu time) of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Owing, it seems, to a delay by the embassy staff in deciphering and translating this note, the interview was postponed until 1400. Mr. Hull had already been handed a copy of Admiral Kimmel’s message, “Air attack on Pearl Harbor. This is not a drill,” but he thought it might be a mistake; and having no official word of war he believed he should hear what Nomura and Kurusu had to say. So he received them at 1420.

It was now 0900 December 7 in Hawaii. The first sad and bloody hour was over. The burned and shattered bodies of more than a thousand Americans lay strewn along airfields, on charred decks, or trapped beneath the waters of Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was but a part, and in their estimate not the most important part, of a comprehensive plan for the Greater East Asia War. Formulated bit by bit, this plan was finally brought together at a Supreme War Council on 6 September 1941. Not Pearl, but pearls of greater price were the objective: populous islands fabulously rich in natural resources and strategic materials, possession of which would enable the Japanese to dominate East Asia and, finally, the world. As Admiral Yamamoto put it in his “Top Secret Operation Order No. 1” issued to the Combined

¹Excerpted from *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol. III. Reprinted by permission of Little, Brown and Company.

Fleet on 1 November 1941, Japan intended “to drive Britain and America from Greater East Asia, and to hasten the settlement of the China Incident. . . . When Britain and America have been driven from the Netherlands Indies and the Philippines, an independent, self-supporting economic entity will be firmly established. The vast and far-reaching fundamental principle, the goal of our nation—*Hakko Ichiu*—will be demonstrated to the world.”

The comprehensive war plan was this: first, without a declaration of war, to invade Thailand [Thailand had been infiltrated and the government suborned in advance; it issued an order to its troops to cease firing about three hours after the attack began on 8 December], destroy the United States Pacific Fleet and deliver air strikes on the Malay Peninsula and Luzon. After the initial surprise, to effect conquest of the Philippines, Borneo, British Malaya (including Singapore) and Sumatra. When these were secure, Japanese amphibious forces would converge on the richest prize, Java, and mop up the rest of the Dutch islands. Intensive development of Netherlands East Indies resources would begin at once, and to secure these new possessions a “ribbon defense” or defensive perimeter would be established, running from the Kurile Islands through Wake, the Marshalls and around the southern and western edges of the Malay Barrier to the Burmese-Indian border.

Although the Japanese knew that America had ample resources to stage a comeback, they expected that, with Australia and New Zealand isolated, and the Japanese Navy operating from interior lines, any attempt of the British and American Navies to break through the defensive perimeter could be beaten back for eighteen months or two years. By that time, it was hoped, the English-speaking powers would be so stricken by fighting a two-ocean war as to be ready to make peace on the basis of Japan’s retaining most of her conquests. She could then proceed at leisure to complete subjugation of China. Over half the world’s population would then be under the economic, political and military control of the Son of Heaven. If not eight corners of the world, five at least would be under “one roof” as Emperor Jimmu once predicted.

No such vast plan of quick conquest had ever been formulated in modern history. Apparently it never occurred to the average Japanese that there was anything morally wrong with it. Japan’s divine mission to realize *Hakko Ichiu* was taken for granted, and so all means to that end were proper. Surprise attacks, regardless of plighted word, were part of *Bushido*, the code of the warrior. The earlier wars of Japan on Russia and China had begun that way and both had been successful; Heaven obviously approved.

The place of the Pearl Harbor attack in this comprehensive scheme was purely and simply to eliminate the United States Pacific Fleet so that it could not interfere with the numerous amphibious

operations necessary to conquer the "Southern Strategic Area." It was "a strategic necessity," said Admiral Nagano.

Up to about 1940 the Japanese planned in the event of war with the United States to keep their Combined Fleet in home waters. The high command either knew or guessed correctly that the United States naval plan was to fight its way across the Pacific via the Marshalls and Carolines, taking Truk en route, in order to relieve the Philippines. The Japanese proposed to make this voyage very unpleasant for the United States Fleet, by submarine attacks and land-based or tender-based air attacks mounted from sundry airfields and lagoons in the Marshalls and Carolines. Whatever ships survived would be pounced upon by an overwhelmingly superior Combined Fleet in the Philippine Sea, and there annihilated. That was sound strategy; fortunately for us, the Japanese abandoned it for something more spectacular and less effective.