

The New Dealers War

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The view of America's entry into WWII that most Americans hold to is that we were the victims of an unprovoked surprise attack by fascist's forces out to control the world. Some who have studied the war or have been blessed with first person history from members of the "*greatest generation*" harbor doubts about Pearl Harbor and Roosevelt's decision making leading up to the attack. The truth actually goes much deeper than the single event and turns around the "*Rainbow Five*" leak of the United State's war plan for Europe which was and remains the greatest leak of highly classified military information in the history of the country. How this event is viewed will determine a great deal about how the US role in the war is interpreted. Historian and author Thomas Fleming addressed this along with the interaction of American politics with war policy in his book *The New Dealers War*. His introduction to this work is cautionary and necessary in order to separate relatively recent collective memories, frequently involving close family, from real history that was purposely obscured by politics.(1 p. 1) "*But memories, hero-worship, the loyalties of youth, are the stuff of novels, not history. This book owes its existence to my painfully acquired belief that the historian's chief task is to separate history from memory. In our understanding of the cataclysm that historians call World War II, we are in the final stage of celebrating the riches of memory.*"

On December 4, 1941, the Chicago Tribune headline was "FDR WAR PLANS". Other large papers had similar headlines that day. The associated stories went on to spell out the contents of the Rainbow Five document, which was also within the War Department referred to as the Victory Plan, calling for a 10 million man army which included a 5 million man expeditionary force to invade Europe in 1943. Like Wilson in his election just prior to World War I, Roosevelt in 1940 said he would never send America's soldiers to fight another foreign war. He had said during his campaign, "*While I am talking to you mothers and fathers, I give you one more assurance. I have said this before but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars*" (1 pp. 1-2).

Congress was debating the administration's 8.24 billion arms bills, which was a key element of the President's plan. The Democrats delayed debate on the bill for two hours to come up with a strategy to deal with the leaked information while anti-war legislators, mainly Republican, protested the secret war plan. The idea of going to war was not popular with the American public, in large part due to lessons learned from World War I, and the idea of turning the debate to favor a war, especially a European war, seemed improbable. General Albert Wedemeyer, who had strong ties to America First which was the largest anti-war group in the nation with 800,000 active members, was the prime suspect in the leak (1 pp. 4-6). Many prominent people did oppose U.S involvement in the war and it is important to note that while Nazi Germany had known anti-Semitic policies, as did Stalin's Russia, it was at least a year before the Jewish Holocaust would start to take shape. After a prolonged investigation it was determined that Wedemeyer was not the leaker, he retired from the army in 1951 as a four star general, and no specific individual was ever prosecuted but (1 pp. 26-7) the leak proved to be very useful to the administration as it set off a sort of diplomatic dominos that worked better than anyone could have reasonably foreseen.

The Foreign Information Service, which was staffed by interventions, weren't embarrassed by the leak but amplified the story abroad. In a few days war with Japan would largely wipe the incident from the collective memory but the Victory Plan hardly addressed Japan which was to be handled by defensive strategies short of war (1 p. 14). In order to bring the U.S into the war, Roosevelt needed some external event that would directly or indirectly lead to Germany declaring war first and a war with Japan where Japan would make the first move provided the most likely path (2 pp. 622-5). Secretary of the Interior Ickes wrote to Roosevelt in the spring of 1941, *"To embargo oil to Japan would be as popular a move in all parts of the country as you could make. There might develop . . . a situation as would make it not only possible but easy to get into the war in an effective way"* (1 pp. 16-17). Ickes, who was also the Petroleum Coordinator, unilaterally suspended all petroleum shipments to Japan.

Several months later Ickes, still believing that starting a war with Japan was the solution to the intervention problem, wrote in his diary on October 18, 1941, *"For a long time I have believed that our best entrance into the war would be by way of Japan . . . And, of course, if we go to war against Japan, it will inevitably lead us to war against Germany"* (3 p. 589), (1 p. 17). In response to the seizure of south French Indonesia in mid-1941, Roosevelt froze all Japanese assets in the United States which had already been done to Germany and Italy. The Japanese, who were largely dependent on the U.S economically, had to obtain a license for any item that had a potential military use first to buy it and then to release the funds to pay for it. At the State Department, Dean Acheson oversaw this process and saw to it that the request processing was so slow it became an effective silent embargo starting in August of 1941. Acheson was a liberal, although not a strong Roosevelt supporter, and a committed Anglophile and interventionist. There is some question as to what Roosevelt's position on these actions really was although it certainly served his ends. Roosevelt traveled in August to Newfoundland to meet with Churchill and returned on September 5th, at which point he persuaded Secretary of State Hull not to alter Acheson's policy saying it would be a sign of weakness.(1 pp. 18-19)

The steps that led to the oil embargo were themselves complex and full of intrigue and clear insubordination. In late 1938, Harry Price, who was the founder of a China Lobby committee with a collection of high profile people, asked the original wise man, Henry Stimson to join his committee and he accepted (4 p. 188). The committee, known as the American Committee for American nonparticipation in Japanese Aggression, over the next two years would convince the American public that oil exports to Japan could be embargoed with no reprisals. Harry Price gave the group an American missionary face and Stimson was made honorary chairman which was a huge coup for the Soong's and Chiang (4 p. 188). They were not only embedded in the Roosevelt administration but had as a figurehead leader one of the most influential people in the country. The committee cranked out a continual stream of press releases that weren't only spread in the media but by churches and church affiliated organizations across the country. Morgenthau fully bought into the idea of embargoing oil and other materials to the Japanese but FDR rightfully feared that doing so would force the conflict south into Indonesia.

Chiang wanted money to fight Mao while FDR believed Chiang needed money to fight the Japanese. American funding was especially important in that Stalin's Russia had been providing support for Chiang in the form of low interest loans, all forms of military equipment, and advisors in order to protect

Russia's eastern flank from Japan but with a German conflict in the west becoming more likely, they could no longer afford this. The Treasury Dept proposed a loan of \$35 million dollars that Hull solidly opposed having determined that Chiang was incompetent and corrupt (4 pp. 191-2). Morgenthau contested Hull's position saying, *"I am taking the liberty of pleading China's cause so earnestly because you have three times told me to proceed with the proposals for assistance to China. All my efforts have proved of no avail against Secretary Hull's adamant policy of doing nothing which could possibly be objected to by an aggressor nation."*(5) Morgenthau arranged a meeting with Roosevelt that Hull could not attend because he was at sea and got the loan proposal approved. Hull learned of this four days later. (4 pp. 193-4) Roosevelt's new direction in China policy would now guide events and it wasn't just not debated; it was also unannounced. The China lobby saw the loan as only the beginning in an anticipated chain of cash infusions. The China Lobby had taken over FDR's own household with Sara Delano Roosevelt being chairwoman of both the China Aid Council and American Committee for Chinese War Orphans and Eleanor Roosevelt being honorary chairwoman of Pearl Buck's China Emergency Relief Committee.

Roosevelt came to believe there was a real chance of Japan controlling China and that the loss of China would free Japanese troop strength to go after Indonesia and Southeast Asia so the Chinese conflict came to take on strategic as well as political implications. The US transferred its Pacific fleet from California to Hawaii to convey a message of deterrence to Japan. Admiral James Richardson argued against this saying that this would only provoke the Japanese. Roosevelt's response was. *"Despite what you believe, I know that the presence of the fleet in the Hawaiian area has had, and is now having, a restraining influence on the actions of Japan."* (4 p. 201)(6 pp. 38-9) Japanese admiral Isoroku Yamamoto interpreted this a bit differently. He told a colleague, *"The fact that the United States has brought a great fleet to Hawaii to show us that it's within striking distance of Japan means, conversely, that we're within striking distance too."* (4 p. 201)(7)

Roosevelt increasingly became caught in a political trap largely of his own doing. The Republican candidate running against him in 1940 was Wendell Willkie who took an isolationist position portraying FDR as a warmonger and making claims like *"You may expect war by April of 1941 if [Roosevelt] is elected"*(8 p. 254) and Willkie was gaining in the polls. Democratic leadership was concerned enough about this that they urged Roosevelt to take a strong and definitive non-intervention stance. Contouring this Roosevelt appointed two interventionist Republicans more in the mold of the eastern establishment or Rockefeller wing of the party, Henry Stimson and Frank Knox, as Secretary of War and Secretary of the Navy. These nominations were made on the eve of the Republican convention and were politically expedient but in doing this he created a cabinet where both the right wing and the left wing, led by Morgenthau, were aligned against him specifically on the issue of China. (4 p. 202) The Soong's and Chiang were completely aware at this point that FDR and Secretary of State Hull had no intention of supporting them either directly or indirectly but they were now in a position to work around that by effectively controlling FDR's cabinet which was increasingly anti-Japan. The China Lobby and the Stimson committee led the passage of the National Defense Act signed on July 2nd, 1940 which gave the administration control of valuable natural resources. Stimson saw this as a potential measure to be used against Japan while FDR still had no intention of cutting Japan's oil. (4 pp. 201-2) Meanwhile the

American public was strongly in support of the Chinese, which they equated with Chiang, and still opposed intervention believing that they could have one without the other.

When the oil exports stopped it was clear to the Japanese that they weren't getting any oil and it was fairly apparent to not just the main players, but the public in general saw that we were on a fast track to war. During this time most or all Japanese communications were intercepted (these were referred to as the purple intercepts) so it's hard to believe that Roosevelt wasn't fully aware of the Japanese policy debates and decisions (1 pp. 19-21). The Purple intercepts, code-named "Magic," revealed that Japan was internally torn between an expansionist army, a cautious navy (led by Nomura), and moderate politicians who lived in constant fear of assassination by military extremists (1 p. 16). Roosevelt's unwillingness to realistically negotiate with civilian politicians significantly weakened their position relative to the military (9 p. 180)

Back and forth negotiations didn't bring about any realistic possibilities for resolution until Hull allowed the peacemakers to put together a final proposal that had some potential. It offered Japan a \$2 Billion loan and renewal of shipments of oil and other minerals and metals if China agreed to end the war in China on neutral negotiated terms. Interventionists in the State Department and War Department weakened the proposal to the point where it became feeble (1 p. 21). What negotiations were taking place were led by Secretary Hull and Roosevelt remained distant from the process.

On December 7th, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and a lingering question is what did Roosevelt or the administration or military know and when did they know it? Was the fleet put in this vulnerable position to bait an attack? Roosevelt was clearly responsible for placing the ships at Pearl Harbor having ignored a strong warning from the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet Admiral James O. Richardson who wanted to keep the ships in San Diego. Roosevelt referred to the placement of warships in Pearl Harbor as a "restraining influence" (1 p. 42). Richardson was replaced by Admiral Kimmel who maintained throughout his life that he never received adequate warning. Kimmel's 113 page battle plan, which was approved by the Chief of Naval Operation Harold Stark and remained an unused historical artifact for decades, was focused entirely on offensive strategy. The fleet was to go to sea on the following Monday in search of a decisive battle. (10), (1 p. 43)

While it is clear that Roosevelt wanted and expected an attack somewhere, there is more evidence that he didn't anticipate an attack in Hawaii although its entirely plausible that the administration and/or the military knew or should have known that an attack was in progress well before it became obvious. On December 1st, FDR summoned British Ambassador Halifax where he warned of a Japanese attack in the South China Sea and concluded that "*we all need to stick together*" (11 pp. 217-8)(1 pp. 23-24). Instead of searching the South China Sea with aircraft, Roosevelt cabled Manila to outfit a ship called the Lanikai and two smaller ships to search the South China Sea for Japanese warships and transports. The ship could do only 17 knots and had no real communication capability. Was this supposed to create the incident to start the war? (12 p. 46), (1 p. 24). The idea of attacking Pearl Harbor by air was originally developed by American Admiral Harry Ervin Yarnell, who commanded America's first two aircraft carriers, while on fleet maneuvers off Hawaii in 1932. Roosevelt's determination not to take this as a serious possibility could well relate to his belief that Japanese were inherently inferior to Anglo culture

and intellect and were incapable of executing such an attack with the skill of the Americans or British (1 pp. 44-5). The administration was shocked at the capability of the Japanese weapon systems and their ability to execute such a complex plan. The shallow water torpedoes were particularly impressive.

The news of the attack on Pearl Harbor came down during a large anti-war rally and this and subsequent events effectively crushed and scattered the anti-interventionist forces. Still this was only the first step and what would have to happen next was beyond the ability of the Roosevelt administration to directly control. Germany and Japan had no real alliance or significant military or economic linkage. Had Japan been willing to engage Russia from the east and open some level of a second front they would have but after Russia obliterated Japan's 6th Army in Mongolia in 1936, Japan seemed to have absolutely no interest in doing this. In the orders to deploy the Lanikai it was clear the President was fearful that a small incident in the China Sea may not be enough to cause Congress to declare war on Japan and he would use up all his political capital on the first move. With the large-scale attack on Pearl Harbor, however, that was no longer a problem. (1 pp. 25-6)

Focusing then on the real objective, the Germans were within 18 miles of Moscow and Roosevelt had concluded that the Russians had lost although that wasn't necessarily a highly analytical assessment. In Egypt, the British were more than matched by Germany's Afrika Korps under General Erwin Rommel. The Tripartite Pact did not obligate Germany to join in war with Japan anymore than it obligated Japan to fight Russia. Hitler had issued orders to his U-boats and Ari Force to avoid attacks on Americans despite numerous provocations (2 p. 605) (1 p. 26), including Roosevelt issuing an order on October 8 to shoot German submarines on sight. Hitler and his primary staff, which included Raeder, Keitel, and Goering, had to analyze the Rainbow Five file and determine whether to declare war against the US and how to develop a broader strategic response. On December 9th, Roosevelt made a national radio address where accused Hitler of urging Japan to attack the United States saying, "*We know that Germany and Japan are conducting their military and naval operations with a joint plan*" (1 p. 34). As previously addressed, there was no significant substance to this accusation. In addition to not wanting to engage the Russians in the east, Japan had no plans of attacking the west coast of America and really lacked the capability to do this even if they had the intent. The war was being fought on two distinct theatres. Also on December 9th, Hitler concurred with Raeder's recommendation to launch a U-Boat offensive against American shipping to supply England but this was not a declaration of war. On December 10, when Hitler conferred with Raeder, Keitel, and Goering, his mind was made up. He considered the speech a de facto declaration of war. On December 11th Hitler announced at the Reichstag that Germany and Italy had been provoked "*by circumstances brought about by President Roosevelt*" to declare war on the United States (1 pp. 35-6).

To this point, the leak worked perfectly in terms of getting Hitler to move first but there was one more hand to be played that again went Roosevelt's way. Contrary to Roosevelt's belief that Germany was on the verge of defeating Russia, the offensive against Moscow and Leningrad was faltering. The German generals had studied the Rainbow Five War Plan and observed that the U.S would not be able to initiate and invasion of the European mainland until sometime in 1943 at the earliest and recommended to Hitler to pull back to selected defensive positions and terminate the Russian campaign. This would allow them to regroup and stop the massive losses of personnel and equipment that were occurring on the

Eastern Front in favor of a defensible “Fortress Europe”. They concluded that the “*objective of greatest value*” should be the “*clearing of all British and allied forces out of the Mediterranean and the Axis occupation of the whole of the northern coast of Africa and the Suez Canal*” (1 pp. 36-7). Admiral Raeder and Reich Marshal Goering fully concurred with and supported this recommendation. They told Hitler that in 1942 Germany and Italy would have “*their last opportunity to seize and hold control of the whole Mediterranean area and of the near and Middle East.*” It was an opportunity that “*will probably never come again.*” Hitler initially agreed to these proposals which were a major relief for the German military leadership (1 p. 37). A few days later, however this was all to change when Hitler returned from the Russian front where he saw his forces reeling against additional Soviet units the Germans were apparently unaware of. In an interview from around this time period with a Finish journalist that was partially recorded without his knowledge, Hitler was clearly unaware of or misinformed about both the personnel and material strength of the Red Army. He summoned Col. Gen. Franz Halder, the chief of staff of the German army, and Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander in chief, and flew into a rage berating them. He then reversed his earlier position saying, “*general withdrawal is out of the question.*” General Halder wrote later in his diary, “*fanatical rage against the idea of withdrawing to a winter line*” (1 pp. 37-8).

With that, Germany’s fate was sealed well before the Americans ever entered the war. If Hitler had stuck to his original decision he would have freed 100 divisions from the Russian Front while creating a defensible position to fend off any attack from the East. Against this the Allies including the Americans could produce not more than 20 divisions (1 p. 38). Rommel was more than matching the British and Australians in North Africa with only nine divisions. It is very likely that the Germans could have effectively turned the Mediterranean into a “lake” while also securing North Africa. They also would have established alliances and treaties with other European countries that were somewhat aligned with them already. This is why American strategists like General Wedemeyer, were so shocked by the leak in the first place realizing its potential strategic significance. The allies were rescued from Roosevelt’s political gamble by the “*emotional instability of another amateur strategist, Adolf Hitler*” (1 p. 38).

Extreme confidence or lack of doubt was a characteristic of Roosevelt and his administration as was presenting their positions as moral imperatives which was a pattern of progressive politics and religion from the founding of the country. The Japanese attack was the incident of moral outrage necessary to sell the war to the public. As Frances Perkins said later, “*the Japanese had solved Roosevelt’s moral problem*” (1 pp. 441-42).

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