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OUR AFFILIATES



OPINION

Sunday, December 7, 2003

Pearl Harbor remembered

By [HELEN THOMAS](#)
HEARST NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON -- The number 9/11 will be forever engraved on the minds of Americans, a somber reminder of the day more than two years ago when foreign terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon.

Another date is fixed in the memory of Americans who were alive on Dec. 7, 1941, the date of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Today is the 62nd anniversary of the Japanese attack.

Both attacks were world-shaking events and both led to war.

Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into World War II transformed this nation from its isolationist past and pushed the United States to superpower status and to a firm belief in collective security.

That conviction prevailed until the current administration came up with go-it-alone military interventions.

It's worth recalling the dramatic message that President Roosevelt delivered to Congress on Dec. 8, 1941: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941 -- a date which will live in infamy -- the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan." He then asked Congress to declare war on Japan, a request that was enthusiastically approved by lawmakers, with only one "nay" vote. The United States had formally joined in World War II.

Much has been written about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, both to recapture the event and to wonder whether it could have been prevented. When pieced together and with the benefit of hindsight, we now see that there were many intelligence fragments that pointed to Japanese plans to attack Pearl Harbor.

Japan was on the march in the 1930s and bent on dominating the Pacific. Tokyo flexed its military muscle by invading Manchuria and East Asia under the mantra "Asia for the Asians."

The American Embassy in Tokyo was in the hands of the imperious Ambassador Joseph Grew, who prided himself on being close to Emperor Hirohito and who was convinced that negotiations with Japan could avert war.

Former U.S. diplomat Robert Fearey, one of Grew's assistants in Tokyo, has written that Grew -- until the day he died in 1965 -- believed that the Pacific war could have been avoided if President Franklin D. Roosevelt had agreed to meet personally with Japanese Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoye in August 1941 to settle all outstanding issues.

The Japanese leader proposed Honolulu for such a meeting; the

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Americans suggested Juneau, Alaska, because it would be closer and Roosevelt wouldn't have to be away from Washington as long.

But State Department officials opposed such a meeting and persuaded the president to reject the idea.

U.S. diplomats in Tokyo, such as the late Frank Schuler, had picked up different signals around town that the Japanese were preparing for war and that the military leaders were not interested in negotiations.

Schuler was back at the State Department at the time of Pearl Harbor. During the years that followed World War II, he and his wife Olive combed the National Archives and the Harvard University library where Grew kept his personal papers.

Among the fascinating bits of information: They discovered that on Jan. 27, 1941, Ricardo Rivera Schreiber, the Peruvian ambassador to Japan, paid an urgent call on Grew to tell him that he had information that the Japanese were planning to attack Pearl Harbor.

At the time, Grew thanked Schreiber for "rendering a great service to my country" and they jointly prepared a cable to be dispatched to the State Department but it is doubtful that cable was ever sent.

Instead, Olive Schuler said, Grew sent a cable intended to tone down the information Schreiber had given him with the added comment that he gave it "no credence."

In an odd quirk of fate, both Grew and Schreiber were repatriated in 1942 -- after war had been declared -- through arrangements by the Swiss and Spanish governments and returned on the same ship, the Gripsholm. Schreiber confronted Grew on the ship and asked him why he had not warned Washington of the impending attack. Grew just walked away, Schreiber told the Schulers.

Fearey said during his internment at the embassy compound in Japan before being repatriated to the United States, Grew worked on a report to Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull expressing his views "on the mishandling of the pre-Pearl Harbor negotiations." He blamed Roosevelt for not meeting with Prince Konoye and making economic concessions to Japan.

The report outraged Hull when Grew privately presented it to him. The secretary of state threw back the document across his desk to Grew and told him to destroy it. The report never saw the light of day, though Fearey recalls it in detail.

Fast-forward to 2003: A panel is currently investigating the 9/11 catastrophe and trying to determine whether it could have been avoided. It recalls the poem: "For all the sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been.' "

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