

The Attack on Pearl Harbor ~ December 7, 1941



The attack on Pearl Harbor was the culmination of a decade of deteriorating relations between Japan and the United States over the status of China and the security of Southeast Asia. This breakdown began in 1931 when Japanese army extremists, in defiance of government policy, invaded and overran the northern-most Chinese province of Manchuria. Japan ignored American protests, and in the summer of 1937, they launched a full-scale attack on the rest of China. Although alarmed by this action, neither the United States nor any other nation with interests in the Far East was willing to use military force to halt Japanese expansion.

Over the next three years, war broke out in Europe, and Japan joined Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in the Axis Alliance. The United States applied both diplomatic and economic pressures to try to resolve the Sino-Japanese conflict. The Japanese government viewed these measures, especially an embargo on oil, as threats to their national security. By the summer of 1941, both the U.S. and Japan had taken positions from which they could not retreat without a serious loss of national prestige. Although both governments continued to negotiate their differences, Japan had already decided on war. The attack on Pearl Harbor was part of a grand strategy of conquest in the western Pacific. The objective was to immobilize the Pacific Fleet so that the United States could not interfere with invasion plans. The principal architect of the attack was Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet. Though personally opposed to war with America, Yamamoto knew that Japan's only hope of success in such a war was to achieve a quick and decisive victory. If there were a prolonged conflict, America's superior economic and industrial power would likely tip the scales in her favor.

On November 26, the Japanese attack fleet of 33 warships and auxiliary craft, including six aircraft carriers, sailed from northern Japan for the Hawaiian Islands. It followed a route that took it far to the north of the normal shipping lanes. By early morning, December 7, 1941, the ships had reached their launch position, 230 miles north of Oahu. At 6 a.m., the first wave of fighters, bombers, and torpedo planes took off. The night before, some 10 miles outside the entrance to Pearl Harbor, five midget submarines carrying two crewmen and two torpedoes each, were launched from larger "mother" subs. Their mission was to enter Pearl Harbor before the air strike, remain submerged until the attack got underway, and then cause as much damage as possible.

The attack was a great, but not total, success. Although the U.S. Pacific Fleet was shattered, its aircraft carriers (not in port at the time of the attack) were still afloat and Pearl Harbor was surprisingly intact. The shipyards, fuel storage areas, and submarine base suffered no more than slight damage. More importantly, the American people, previously divided over the issue of U.S. involvement in World War II, rallied together with a total commitment to victory over Japan and her Axis partners.

Background Questions on Pearl Harbor

Reading Questions

1. In a brief paragraph, describe what the U.S. - Japan relationship (include China and Europe relations) was like prior to the events of Pearl Harbor.
2. According to the Japanese, what was the main purpose of their attack on Pearl Harbor?
3. Why was the success of the attack on Pearl Harbor considered "great, but not total"?

Video Analysis Questions

4. List at least three reasons why the attack on Pearl Harbor caught the Americans by surprise.
5. Why did the Japanese choose to bomb Pearl Harbor?

First Hand Account:

On a sheet of notebook paper, write a first hand account from the perspective of someone who was at Pearl Harbor on the day it was attacked in December of 1941.

1. Choose to write from the eyes of one of the following people:
 - U.S. Sailor
 - Japanese Fighter Pilot,
 - Oahu resident
 - U.S. Nurse/Doctor
2. Write a 2 paragraph account of what you experienced at Pearl Harbor. Include the following items:
 - The date and time
 - what you were doing when the attack started
 - what you do for a living (your occupation)
 - what you saw and experienced (use info from reading)

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Infamy Speech Analysis



Step 1: Pre-listening

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| A. | Whose voices will you hear on the recording? |
| B. | What is the date of this recording? |
| C. | Where was this recording made? |
| D. | Type of sound recording: |

Step 2: Listening

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| A. | What is the tone (the author's/speaker's feelings) of this recording? |
| B. | What is the mood (the reader's/listener's feelings) of this recording? |

Step 3: Post-listening

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| A. | We heard President Roosevelt describe the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as "a day that will live in infamy...." Infamy means disgrace, dishonor, or great wickedness. What do you think were the various emotions of Americans in the first hours and days after they heard the news of the attack? |
| B. | How do you think young Americans your age reacted to the news of Pearl Harbor? In what ways did the coming of WWII to the United States affect students your age? |
| C. | After the attack on Pearl Harbor, life in America changed in many ways. Food and clothing were rationed, some travel was restricted, more men were drafted into the military, and more volunteered for military service. Even entertainment—movies, music, comic books—changed, reflecting wartime moods and subjects. What attitude do you most people in America had towards the war? What mood do you think entertainment portrayed during this time? |
| D. | What do you think were the biggest concerns of Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor? |
| E. | The U.S. government, seeking internal security, responded to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor by interning 110,000 Japanese Americans in relocation camps across the country for the duration of the war. The U.S. government recently admitted that it had violated those individuals' human rights and compensated those still living with \$20,000 each. Can the United States today maintain its security while ensuring its citizens their constitutional rights? Were these actions justified? |