

Pearl Harbor | John Mueller

Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster

Postmortems generally describe the damage inflicted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, in dramatic, almost apocalyptic, terms. The Joint Congressional Committee that investigated the event after the war labeled the attack “the greatest military and naval disaster in our Nation’s history.”¹ Leading students of the attack use similar language. John Toland has characterized Pearl Harbor as a “catastrophe” and as “the worst military disaster in [American] history,” while Samuel Eliot Morison calls the attack “devastating” and an “overwhelming disaster” for the United States.² Gordon Prange dubs the attack a “debacle,” and “one of the worst defeats the United States suffered in its 200 years.”³ Ronald Spector, Roberta Wohlstetter, and Louis Morton call it a “disaster” as well, and Spector and Wohlstetter also agree on “catastrophe.”⁴ Melvin Small finds it a “crushing blow” and “our worst military disaster.”⁵

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1. U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, *Report* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office [U.S. GPO], 1946) (hereafter *Pearl Harbor Report*), p. 65.
2. John Toland, *But Not in Shame: The Six Months After Pearl Harbor* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 38; John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936–1945* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 237; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963), pp. 68, 70.
3. Gordon W. Prange with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 534; Gordon W. Prange with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *December 7, 1941: The Day the Japanese Attacked Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), p. xiii. Similarly, see William D. Puleston, *The Influence of Sea Power in World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. 111.
4. Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Vintage, 1985), p. 93; Louis Morton, *The United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific*, Vol. 10: *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962), p. 144; Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 3, 398.
5. Melvin Small, *Was War Necessary? National Security and U.S. Entry into War* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), pp. 234, 253. Similarly, Martin V. Melosi calls it “the greatest naval defeat

This article investigates these characterizations. In the first part, I conclude that in a direct military sense the characterizations are excessive: militarily, the attack on Pearl Harbor was more of an inconvenience than a catastrophe or disaster for the United States. The destruction inflicted by the Japanese was not terribly extensive, and much of it was visited upon military equipment that was old and in many cases nearly obsolete. In addition, much of the damage was readily and quickly repaired, and its extent was soon made all but trivial by the capacity of America's remarkable wartime industry to supply superior replacements in enormous numbers. Moreover, the attack did not significantly delay the American military response to Japanese aggression, nor did it importantly change the pace of the war: the United States was unprepared to take the offensive at that time in any case, and the damage at Pearl Harbor increased this unpreparedness only marginally. I also conclude that the persistent exaggerations of damage stem more from the tendency of writers to apply dramatic terms to notable events than from the efforts of the United States government to use the incident to generate support for the war effort.

In the second part of the article, however, I conclude that in broader political and strategic ways, Pearl Harbor may well have been truly a disaster. It clearly was one for the attackers, because it triggered a conflict that eventually destroyed Imperial Japan, exacting in the process a huge price in blood and treasure. Within the United States, it utterly closed off careful thought and propelled the country heedlessly into a long, ghastly war in Asia when continued containment and harassment strategies might have rolled back the Japanese empire at lower cost to all involved. And in broadest focus, the war triggered by Pearl Harbor may have been a disaster in that the vicious international overlordship it demolished in Asia at great cost was replaced with a set of local tyrannies that in many cases, especially China, were even worse.

Pearl Harbor as a Military Inconvenience

The Japanese attacked in two waves in the early morning of December 7, 1941. Some 183 fighters, bombers, and torpedo planes participated in the first wave and 168 in the second; 28 submarines and five two-man, two-

ever suffered by the United States," in *The Shadow of Pearl Harbor: Political Controversy over the Surprise Attack, 1941–1946* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1977), p. x.

torpedo midget subs also contributed.⁶ The American targets were sitting ducks—the ships were arrayed in rows in the harbor, and the planes were bunched and lined up neatly on airfields to protect them against sabotage.

The Japanese planned carefully and achieved nearly complete surprise on the first wave. The second wave, which began an hour later, was hampered by intense anti-aircraft fire, and although many important targets remained, it accomplished little: about 90 percent of the damage was achieved by the first wave.⁷ This difference suggests how risky the Japanese venture was, even in the short term. If their luck had gone a bit sour, giving the Americans hours or even minutes of warning, the Japanese would have done far less damage, and the local U.S. commanders, who were cashiered from authority after the attack and pilloried for decades for incompetence or worse, would instead have been celebrated as heroes and saviors.

The Japanese, operating under virtually ideal attack circumstances and with enormous luck, are commonly said to have “destroyed or severely damaged” as many as 21 American ships and 339 aircraft.⁸ In addition they killed 2,403 people.⁹

6. Gordon W. Prange with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), pp. 491–492. H.P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1982), p. 134.

7. Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, pp. 59, 66–67.

8. Sometimes commentators drop the “damaged” category entirely. Thus: “the Japanese were able to destroy 18 ships”; Small, *Was War Necessary?* p. 253. Most analysts number the naval losses at 18 because they do not consider the floating drydock to be a ship and because they do not include in their count the small tugboat, *Sotoyomo*, and *Helm*, a destroyer lightly damaged by a near-miss. Others also leave out the ancient ex-battleship, *Utah*. In the attack, Japan lost 29 planes while another 72 were damaged, some beyond repair. In all, about 129 Japanese died in the attack. See Michael Slackman, *Target: Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 235. The submarine portion of the attack was a fiasco: the subs did little or no damage and all five of the midget subs were quickly sunk or captured. In addition one large submarine (accounting for half of the Japanese dead) was sunk. Willmott argues that a result was a serious loss of face for Japanese submariners and a loss in confidence in submarines by the Japanese naval command that persisted throughout the war; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, pp. 134–135.

9. This loss represents, of course, a substantial human tragedy. In assessing Pearl Harbor, perhaps rather callously, from a strictly military standpoint, however, the loss was readily manageable: within six months, the Navy alone had grown by over 250,000. Nonetheless, as David MacGregor has pointed out to the author, the casualties at Pearl Harbor were notable even by later standards: the battle at Tarawa, often considered a bloodbath, claimed some 1000 American lives, Guadalcanal claimed 1,600, Iwo Jima claimed 6,000, and Okinawa, the most costly battle of the Pacific War for the United States, claimed 12,000. When commentators refer to Pearl Harbor as the greatest military disaster in American history, however, they cannot be focusing on casualties: vastly greater losses were sustained in battles in World War I and in the Civil War, as well as in the Korean War. In all, the United States suffered some 300,000 battle deaths in World War II. Worldwide, some 30 to 50 million people perished in the conflict.

NAVAL LOSSES

Most of the major ships in the Pacific Fleet, including all three aircraft carriers, were elsewhere at the time of the attack (see Table 1). The Japanese managed to strike 20 percent of the 101 ships at Pearl Harbor.

They principally targeted the eight battleships (one other was in Puget Sound and another six were in the Atlantic), and they hit all of them. As it happened, the youngest of these had been launched twenty years earlier, and all were in substantial need of modernization. "None of the battleships at Pearl Harbor was a first-line warship," observes Thomas C. Hone. In fact, four were due to be officially declared over-age in 1942.¹⁰

Moreover, the battleship itself was rapidly declining in military significance. Admiral C.C. Bloch, the commandant of the Pearl Harbor district,

Table 1. The United States Fleet.

	The fleet on December 7, 1941			Ships added to fleet after 12/7/41
	Fleet totals	Pacific Fleet totals	At Pearl Harbor	
Aircraft carriers	7	3	0	18
Battleships	15	9	8	8
Heavy cruisers	N/A	12	2	13
Light cruisers	N/A	9	6	33
Destroyers	N/A	54	30	352
Submarines	N/A	22	4	203
	297	109	50	
Gunboats	N/A	1	1	
Minelayers	N/A	9	9	
Minesweepers	N/A	26	14	
Auxiliary ships	N/A	60	27	
	429	205	101	

SOURCES: Homer N. Wallin, *Pearl Harbor: Why, How, Fleet Salvage and Final Appraisal* (Washington, D.C.: United States Navy, Naval History Division, 1968), pp. 52–56; U.S. Congress, *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 12, pp. 345–346, 348–349; Ernest J. King, *U.S. Navy at War, 1941–1945* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Naval Operations, United States Navy Department, 1946), pp. 252–286. N/A: Not available.

10. Thomas C. Hone, "The Destruction of the Battle Line at Pearl Harbor," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 103, No. 12 (December 1977), pp. 58, 59 n. 27.

pointed out in 1962 that, “the Japanese only destroyed a lot of old hardware.” In a sense, he argues, “they did us a favor” by helping the United States to enter the modern naval age, in which carriers are at the heart of the fleet.¹¹ H.P. Willmott observes that the attack “removed from the scene some ships of rather questionable value and forced the Americans to recast the whole of their tactical doctrine.” Doctrine had already been changing, but the attack caused strategic thinkers “to jettison any lingering ideas of the battleship remaining the arbiter of sea power” and obligated them “to develop the war-winning concept of the fast carrier task force.”¹²

Furthermore, the damage inflicted on Pearl Harbor’s old boats was actually quite limited. The Japanese achieved surprise in considerable part because American intelligence had mistakenly concluded that torpedoes dropped from planes could not function in Pearl Harbor’s shallow water, which was dredged to about 40 feet in the channels and was less than 30 feet elsewhere.¹³ As it happens, it is a basic physical law that ships sunk in shallow water do not go down very far. Consequently when the attackers left, even the ships they had sunk or capsized were readily available for repair, resting accessibly, if uncomfortably, on the bottom. Moreover, alert crews were able to beach two damaged ships (the battleship *Nevada* and the repair ship *Vestal*) before they could sink.

That the United States was surprised at Pearl Harbor, in fact, was something of a U.S. advantage. In a 1964 interview, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, who became commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet three weeks after the attack, concluded that “it was God’s mercy that our fleet was in Pearl Harbor on December 7.” If Admiral Husband Kimmel, the commander in Hawaii, had “had advance notice that the Japanese were coming, he most probably would have tried to intercept them. With the difference in speed between

11. Prange, *At Dawn*, p. 737.

12. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p. 139. In Admiral Frederick Sherman’s words, “the portion of our sea power which was put out of action was the part that was already obsolete in the new era of fighting.” Sherman, *Combat Command: The American Aircraft Carriers in the Pacific War* (New York: Dutton, 1950), pp. 41–42. For a discussion of changing naval doctrine, including the observation that well before Pearl Harbor the U.S. Navy had been giving carrier production priority over battleship production, see Stephen Peter Rosen, “New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer 1988), pp. 151–158. For a somewhat different perspective, see Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 253, 271.

13. Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*, pp. 369–370. See also U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, *Hearings* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1946) (hereafter *Pearl Harbor Hearings*), Part 39, pp. 311–312.

Kimmel's battleships and the faster Japanese carriers, the former could not have come within rifle range of the enemy's flattops. As a result, we would have lost many ships in deep water and also thousands more in lives."¹⁴

When repair and restoration are considered, the United States suffered a dead loss of only two out of the harbor fleet of over 100 (see Table 2). The two ships that were total losses were both battleships and, as it happened, they were two of the oldest in the fleet and among the four scheduled to be declared over-age in 1942.¹⁵ One was the *Arizona*, which had been launched in 1913, a year after its namesake state entered the union. It was scavenged for machinery, scrap metal, and fuel oil, and the sunken remnants rest there still, a memorial to the day. The other was the *Oklahoma*, a year newer than the *Arizona*, which was stripped and scavenged, raised, and sold for scrap. It accidentally sank again (this time in deep water) when being towed to the mainland after the war.

Another battleship, *West Virginia* (launched in 1921), was repaired, but did not rejoin the fleet until the middle of 1944. Two others, *California* (1919) and *Nevada* (1914), rejoined the fleet within two years. The other three damaged battleships were repaired and ready for action within three weeks. A Japanese torpedo also destroyed the *Utah*. This craft is sometimes listed as a battleship, which indeed it was when it was launched in 1909. But in 1941 it was serving as a target ship for American aircraft: by sinking it, the Japanese merely accomplished what the U.S. Navy had not yet managed to do itself.

Beyond this the Japanese badly damaged three of the 30 destroyers at Pearl Harbor (there were 54 in the Pacific fleet). These, however, were safely afloat again in two months or so, were disassembled and re-outfitted on new hulls, and rejoined the fleet within 10 to 18 months.¹⁶ The other ships hit by the Japanese were soon back in action, most of them by early in 1942.

The effective naval losses at Pearl Harbor should therefore not casually be reckoned as some 21 ships "destroyed or severely damaged." Rather, two

14. Gordon W. Prange with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *Miracle at Midway* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. 9. See also Homer N. Wallin, *Pearl Harbor: Why, How, Fleet Salvage and Final Appraisal* (Washington, D.C.: United States Navy, Naval History Division, 1968), p. 290.

15. Something similar happened with the light cruisers. The worst-damaged was the *Raleigh* which had been launched in 1922 and was one of the two oldest cruisers in the harbor.

16. Of the two worst-damaged destroyers, "the remarkable truth was that practically all of the electrical equipment, machinery, and armament in *Cassin* was found to be salvable, while even in *Downes* 90 per cent of her machinery and one-third of her electrical motors could be retrieved." John Alden, "Up from the Ashes—The Saga of *Cassin* and *Downes*," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (January 1961), p. 36.

Table 2. Naval Damage at Pearl Harbor.**Battleships**

Arizona (1913). Substantially destroyed and sunk. Scavenged for machinery, ordnance material, scrap metal, and fuel oil. Became part of a memorial structure.

Oklahoma (1914). Capsized. Floated on November 3, 1943, and scavenged. Sold for scrap in 1946, and sank in a storm when being towed back to the mainland in 1947.

West Virginia (1921). Sunk. Floated on May 17, 1942, and placed in drydock on June 9; sailed to Seattle for modernization and ready for action again on July 4, 1944; won five battle stars.

California (1919). Sunk. Floated and moved to drydock on April 9, 1942; sailed to Puget Sound Navy Yard for modernization on October 10, 1942; rejoined the fleet less than a year later, and won seven battle stars.

Nevada (1914). Severely damaged and beached by crew. Floated on February 12, 1942; sailed to Seattle under own power on April 22 for modernization; back in service by the end of 1942, and won seven battle stars.

Pennsylvania (1915). Considerably damaged. Repaired and back in action on December 20; sailed to mainland for overhaul.

Maryland (1920). Considerably damaged. Fully repaired by December 20.

Tennessee (1919). Some serious damage. Repaired and back in action on December 20.

Light cruisers

Raleigh (1922). Substantial destruction of machinery, serious flooding. Repaired by February 14, 1942; sailed to California for new engine parts and electrical repairs.

Helena (1939). Substantial destruction of machinery, some flooding. Repaired by December 21. Left for California on January 5, 1942, for further work.

Honolulu (1936). Considerable damage and flooding. Repaired by January 12, 1942.

Destroyers

Downes (1936). Heavily damaged. Floated on February 6, 1942. Fifty percent salvaged and installed on new hull in California; launched on May 20, 1943; won four battle stars.

Cassin (1935). Heavily damaged. Floated on February 18, 1942. Fifty percent salvaged and installed on new hull in California; launched on June 21, 1943; won seven battle stars.

Shaw (1935). Great damage. Bow replaced, able to sail to repair facility in California on February 9, 1942; returned to full duty in the fall of 1942; won 11 battle stars.

Helm (1937). Light damage. Repaired quickly after January 15, 1942.

Repair ship

Vestal (1908). Some damage, serious flooding, beached by crew. Floated in 10 days; completely repaired in drydock by February 18, 1942.

Minelayer

Oglala (1907). Capsized. Given low priority due to age; back in service in February 1944 after repairs in California; still in service in 1968.

Seaplane tender

Curtiss (1940). Serious damage. Repaired by its own crew by May 28, 1942, after replacement parts arrived.

Auxiliary

Floating drydock Number 2. Sunk. Floated on January 9, 1942; repaired and in limited use by January 26, 1942; fully repaired by May 15.

Sotoyomo, small tugboat. Burned and sunk. After long wait for parts, repaired by late summer, 1942.

Utah, former battleship (1909), had been in use as a target ship. Capsized. Scavenged for ordnance material and fuel oil.

NOTE: Dates are the years the ships were launched.

SOURCES: Homer N. Wallin, *Pearl Harbor: Why, How, Fleet Salvage and Final Appraisal* (Washington, D.C.: United States Navy, Naval History Division, 1968); Homer N. Wallin, "Rejuvenation at Pearl Harbor," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, Vol. 72, No. 12 (December 1946), pp. 1520–1547; U.S. Congress, *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 12, pp. 348–349, 354–357; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963), pp. 63–64; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific: 1931–April 1942* (Boston: Little Brown, 1948), pp. 143–146; Gordon W. Prange with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), pp. 538–539; Michael Slackman, *Target: Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), pp. 263–271; John Alden, "Up from the Ashes—The Saga of *Cassin* and *Downes*," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (January 1961), pp. 32–41.

very old battleships (and one target ship) were lost except for their salvage value, three slightly younger battleships were put out of action for between one and two-and-a-half years, and three destroyers required very extensive repairs. With only minor exceptions, the 12 other damaged ships were repaired rather quickly and soon rejoined the fleet. (The impact of this destruction on the American ability to respond immediately to Japanese advances is discussed below.) As a result, except for two battleships (and the target ship), all the ships struck at Pearl Harbor participated in the naval battles that brought defeat to Japan in 1945. Of the six U.S. battleships that helped to administer the important Japanese naval defeat at Leyte Gulf in 1944, five had been damaged at Pearl Harbor.¹⁷ If the “real objective of the Japanese was to cripple the American Fleet,”¹⁸ the mission was a spectacular failure.

The destruction of two battleships and the temporary removal from duty of several others, in fact, may have been something of a short-term advantage to the United States. At the time, suggests Willmott, “trained manpower in the U.S. Navy was in critically short supply.” After Pearl Harbor, naval personnel without ships were redeployed, which meant that “escort forces could be properly manned, and the carrier task forces could be properly constituted and balanced.”¹⁹

Moreover, in evaluating the impact of the attack, one must consider what American industry could do to replace the losses. To compensate for the two old battleships that were sunk and for the three that were badly damaged at Pearl Harbor, eight new ones, far larger and far better, joined the fleet over the next four years. Of these, three were commissioned by May 1942 while another came along in August. To compensate for the three severely damaged destroyers, no less than 352 new ones were added during the course of the war, seven of them by the end of February 1942 and three more in March. In addition, during the war the fleet grew by 18 aircraft carriers, 9 light aircraft carriers, 77 escort carriers, 2 large cruisers, 13 heavy cruisers, 33 light cruisers, 412 destroyer escorts, and 203 submarines, not to mention 55 high-speed transports and 83,219 landing craft.²⁰ Clearly, the Pearl Harbor losses

17. Homer N. Wallin, “Rejuvenation at Pearl Harbor,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 72, No. 12 (December 1946), p. 1521.

18. Wallin, “Rejuvenation at Pearl Harbor,” p. 1523.

19. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p. 139. I would like to thank Chaim Kaufmann for bringing this issue to my attention.

20. Ernest J. King, *U.S. Navy at War, 1941–1945* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Naval Operations, United States Navy Department, 1946), pp. 252–286. In addition, 37 new escort carriers and 86 new destroyer escorts were lend-leased to America’s allies. In 1942 American industry

were overwhelmingly and, particularly in the case of the destroyers, quite quickly, made up.

An illuminating comparison is provided by H.P. Willmott: "Such was the scale of American industrial power that if during the Pearl Harbor attack the Imperial Navy had been able to sink every major unit of the entire U.S. Navy and then complete its own construction programs without losing a single unit, by mid-1944 it would still not have been able to put to sea a fleet equal to the one the Americans could have assembled in the intervening thirty months."²¹

AIRCRAFT LOSSES

A somewhat similar picture emerges when one looks at aircraft losses. Some 151 American aircraft were damaged in the attack, and 188 were destroyed or soon cannibalized out of existence.²² However, many of the attacked planes, including over one-third of the destroyed Army planes, were obsolescent types, and many of the others were small scouting and patrol craft (see Tables 3 and 4).²³

Furthermore, nearly 40 percent of the Army planes were in various states of disrepair and were out of commission on December 7. After the attack, massive efforts were made not only to repair damaged planes, but also to put those that were undamaged, but out of commission, into operation. It was found that of the 120 damaged Army planes, fully 80 percent could be salvaged. In addition, 29 shiny new B-17s were rushed over from the mainland, more than replacing the four destroyed in the attack. As a result, in less than two weeks the Army had almost as many planes in operation in Hawaii as it had had before the attack.²⁴

turned out 6.75 destroyers a month (up from 1.33 in 1941), and this was raised to 10.83 in 1943; *ibid.*, p. 17.

21. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies, February to June 1942* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1983), p. 522. I would like to thank Bruce Russett for leading me to this quotation.

22. Army aircraft damaged: 120; *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 7, p. 3069. Navy aircraft damaged: 31; Morton, *Strategy and Command*, p. 133. Army aircraft destroyed or cannibalized: 96; *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 12, p. 323; Morton, *Strategy and Command*, p. 133. Navy aircraft destroyed: 92; *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 12, pp. 357–358.

23. For example, the P-26s, of which the Japanese destroyed six, were old open-cockpit planes with fixed landing gear. Many of the Navy planes, however, were fairly new.

24. *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 22, pp. 60–61; Part 7, pp. 3068, 3070; Part 24, p. 1784. Some 80 pursuit planes, 6 reconnaissance planes, and 34 bombers were damaged; *ibid.*, Part 7, pp. 3069–3070.

Table 3. Destruction and Delivery of Army Combat Aircraft.

	Aircraft in Hawaii			Aircraft delivered from 1/40 to 12/45
	Before attack	After attack	Destroyed in attack	
B-17			4	12,692
In commission	6	4		
Out of commission	6	4		
B-18*			12	
In commission	21	11		
Out of commission	12	10		
B-12*			0	
In commission	1	1		
Out of commission	2	2		
A-20			2	7,385
In commission	5	5		
Out of commission	7	5		
A-12*			0	
In commission	2	1		
Out of commission	0	1		
P-40			32	13,738
In commission	64	33		
Out of commission	35	34		
P-36*			4	
In commission	20	16		
Out of commission	19	19		
P-26*			6	
In commission	10	4		
Out of commission	4	4		
O-47			0	
In commission	5	5		
Out of commission	2	2		
O-49			1	
In commission	2	1		
Out of commission	0	0		
OA-8			0	
In commission	1	1		
Out of commission	0	0		
OA-9			2	
In commission	3	1		
Out of commission	0	0		
Totals				
In commission	140	83		
Out of commission	87	81		
Total destroyed			63	
	227	164		

* Characterized by the Army as "obsolescent types."

SOURCES: U.S. Congress, *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 12, p. 323; R. Elberton Smith, *United States Army in World War II: The War Department*, Vol. 5: *The Army and Economic Mobilization* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1959), p. 27.

Table 4. Naval and Marine Corps Aircraft on Hawaii

Total aircraft present before attack	169
Destroyed aircraft	
Fighters	13
Scout bombers	26
Patrol bombers	46
Observation/Scouts	1
Utility	3
Training	1
Transports	2
Total destroyed	92
Damaged	31

SOURCES: U.S. Congress, *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 12, pp. 357–358; Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific*, Vol. 10: *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962), p. 133; U.S. Congress, *Pearl Harbor Report*, p. 69.

In evaluating the aircraft destruction it is most important to consider, as with the ships, what the United States was able to do to replace the losses. On January 6, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt dramatically called upon American industry to produce 60,000 aircraft in 1942 and another 125,000 in 1943. His speech helped boost morale, but his targets had to be scaled back somewhat, in part because there were not yet enough landing fields, hangars, and maintenance facilities to handle that many planes. As it happened, however, the country did manage to turn out some 47,836 military aircraft in 1942 (to Japan's 8,861), another 86,000 or so in 1943 (to Japan's 16,693), and a total of 299,300 over the course of the war.²⁵ The United States lost four B-17s at Pearl Harbor, but between 1940 and 1945 American industry

25. R. Elberton Smith, *The United States Army in World War II: The War Department*, Vol. 5: *The Army and Economic Mobilization* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1959), pp. 141–142; Civilian Production Administration, *Industrial Mobilization for War*, Vol. I: *Program and Administration* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Demobilization, 1947), p. 540. Smith observes (p. 142n) that Roosevelt's ambitious 1942 and 1943 targets for merchant shipping and anti-aircraft guns were actually overfulfilled. Japanese figures from *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, Vol. 7 (New York: Garland, 1976), p. 155. See also Alan S. Milward, *War, Economy and Society, 1939–1945* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1977), p. 74. Milward notes (p. 67) that American man-hour (actually, in this case, substantially woman-hour) output was twice that of the Germans, five times that of the Japanese.

produced 12,692 new ones; it lost 32 P-40s in the attack, but built 13,738 (see Table 3). At 1942 rates of production, all the planes lost at Pearl Harbor could be replaced with aircraft that were brand new, and generally far superior, in less than three days.

AMERICAN NONLOSSES

In determining whether the Pearl Harbor attack was a “disaster” for the United States, one might also consider the many targets that were left untouched by the huge Japanese offensive. The Japanese failed even to hit half of the light cruisers, 86 percent of the destroyers, or any of the heavy cruisers or submarines in the harbor, and they missed several other major targets as well. As Homer Wallin points out, the extensive shore facilities suffered little damage, and “the tremendous oil stowage adjacent to Pearl Harbor” which was filled to capacity “was not attacked at all.”²⁶

Moreover, it happened that none of the three aircraft carriers in the Pacific Fleet was at Pearl Harbor on the day of the attack—two were at sea and one was in San Diego—and the Japanese had no idea where they were. It was the carrier, not the battleship, that was to prove to be the major naval weapon in the Pacific War, and so this absence was important.²⁷

In addition to the carrier, the submarine proved to be an especially effective naval weapon in the war. Few of the Pacific Fleet’s submarines were at Pearl Harbor, and none of these was damaged. And, as noted in Table 1, American industry was soon turning out better ones by the scores anyway.

DID PEARL HARBOR DELAY THE AMERICAN MILITARY RESPONSE?

If Samuel Eliot Morison is correct that the Japanese set out with “the double purpose of wiping out the major part of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, and

26. In addition, he observes, “the Japanese failed to drop at least a few bombs which might have started a conflagration that would have proved disastrous, especially to the mobility of the undamaged vessels of the Fleet in the days to follow December 7.” Wallin, “Rejuvenation at Pearl Harbor,” p. 1524. See also Morton, *Strategy and Command*, p. 133; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, pp. 140–141.

27. If the two Honolulu-based carriers had been at their berths, they would have been the primary targets for the Japanese; Slackman, *Target: Pearl Harbor*, p. 12; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, pp. 131–133. Admiral Sherman argues that “there is little doubt” that the carriers “would have been totally destroyed”; Sherman, *Combat Command*, p. 41. Carriers are more fragile than battleships, but even if the carriers had been sunk in the shallow harbor, they might well eventually have been recoverable. And, of course, fewer bombs would have been targeted at other ships. During the war, incidentally, it took some 32 months to build a battleship, but aircraft carriers could be built twice as fast; King, *U.S. Navy at War*, p. 13.

destroying all military aircraft on Oahu," then the attackers failed miserably. Admiral Frederick Sherman suggests, however, that Japan's mission was more modest: "The purpose of the raid was to immobilize our Pacific Fleet in order to gain time and ensure freedom of action for the Japanese invasions of the Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies."²⁸

The attack did delay America's ability to respond quickly to early Japanese aggressions in the Pacific. As Prange notes, "Any hope of reinforcing the Philippines or Singapore vanished in the smoke of the Hawaiian debacle."²⁹ But the Japanese carried out these attacks at such lightning speed and with such total success that in all probability the ships based at Pearl Harbor, insufficient in number and slow of speed, would not have been able to get there in time, would scarcely have made much difference to the outcome even if they had been able to, and might well have been sunk—this time in deep water—if they had tried.³⁰ (Indeed, a dash to the South Seas would have played into the hands of the Japanese whose war plans specifically proposed that they should "endeavor by various means to lure the main fleet of the United States [to the Far East] and destroy it.")³¹

Morison makes American unpreparedness quite clear: "The Pacific Fleet was too weak in many types, especially destroyers and auxiliaries, too deficient in anti-aircraft protection, to go tearing into waters covered by enemy land-based air power." There was a plan for the relief of the Philippines if they were attacked, but it would have taken six to nine months to accomplish this even assuming the Pearl Harbor fleet remained intact. Thus, "even at the most optimistic the Japanese could have conquered everything they wanted in the Philippines and Malaya by leaving Pearl Harbor alone and relying on submarines and aircraft in the Mandates to deal with our Pacific Fleet."³²

28. Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, p. 46; Sherman, *Combat Command*, p. 33.

29. Prange, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 534.

30. The three badly damaged destroyers, *Shaw*, *Downes*, and *Cassin*, were in drydock on December 7 undergoing major repairs and alterations; Alden, "Up from Ashes," p. 33. Thus they would not have been immediately available for such a venture in any case.

31. Nobutaka Ike, *Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 248. As Scott Sagan points out, the traditional strategy for the Japanese navy involved "forcing the American fleet to cross the Pacific, attriting the fleet through submarine attacks during its voyages, and attempting to win what was expected to be the decisive battle near Japan." Scott Sagan, "Origins of the Pacific War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 913.

32. "Thus," Morison concludes, "the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, far from being a 'strategic

Actually, things were even worse than that for the United States. The U.S. plan depended upon a military buildup in the Philippines that would have allowed the forces there to hold out for at least six months. That buildup was underway, but at the time of Pearl Harbor it was still at least two months from completion.³³ Thus, the military premise upon which the plan was based was not fulfilled when the war began, and the operation could not have been put into action, at least according to plan, whether Pearl Harbor had been attacked or not.

In fact, one of the reasons the Americans were surprised at Pearl Harbor was that they realized the fleet there would never have been able to cramp Japan's style in a southward thrust. As one war plans officer recalled, "I did not think they would attack at Pearl Harbor because I did not think it was necessary for them to do so." Because of many deficiencies, "we could not have materially affected their control of the waters they wanted to control whether or not the battleships were sunk at Pearl Harbor."³⁴

The officer's anticipation seems to have been correct. In early January 1942, Army planners advised that in order to relieve the Philippines they would need at least 1,500 aircraft, seven to nine battleships, five to seven carriers, fifty destroyers, sixty submarines, and a full complement of auxiliary ships.³⁵ Regardless of the destruction at Pearl Harbor, the United States probably would not have been able to gather such a huge armada in time.

Moreover, even this force might not have been enough. Admiral Sherman argues that "the Pearl Harbor attack knocked [our] plans into a cocked hat" and forced a defensive war in the Pacific. This, he says, is because the United States had a total of only seven aircraft carriers (three in the Pacific, four in the Atlantic) to Japan's ten: "We had short-sightedly allowed the Japanese to . . . achieve superiority in this paramount class of warships."³⁶ But by this account it was the carrier imbalance that knocked things into that cocked hat—an imbalance that was in no way affected by Pearl Harbor. As Spector notes, "the loss of so many aging battleships did not delay the start of an

necessity,' as the Japanese claimed even after the war, was a strategic imbecility." Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific: 1931–April 1942* (Boston: Little Brown, 1948), p. 132.

33. Sherman, *Combat Command*, p. 44. Notes Sherman, "This was one reason why the military and naval leaders had urged the President and State Department to delay a showdown with Japan until we were more nearly ready."

34. *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 26, p. 207.

35. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 114.

36. Sherman, *Combat Command*, p. 45.

American offensive nearly so much as did the shortage of aircraft carriers (of which never more than four were available in the Pacific at any time before late 1943), amphibious shipping, and destroyers.³⁷

An additional consideration is that Germany declared war on the United States four days after war began in the Pacific. Even if there had been no losses at Pearl Harbor, the United States could not have launched a viable offensive to the South Seas without unacceptably diverting forces from what was now clearly the primary theater of war: the Atlantic.³⁸

The central issue here is that the Americans were substantially unprepared at the end of 1941 for the massive, two-theater (or multi-theater) war into which they plunged; the destruction at Pearl Harbor reduced this preparedness only marginally.³⁹ In the summer of 1940, the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral James O. Richardson, observed that the Navy simply wasn't ready for war because it lacked advanced bases, was too small, and had substantial shortages of ammunition, fuel, spare parts, and essential supplies. Because of this, he concluded that a war would take four years: two years of buildup and two years of hard fighting.⁴⁰ This was the broad, grim reality, and it was not significantly altered by Pearl Harbor: militarily, the damage inflicted was more of an inconvenience than a disaster.

THE ORIGINS AND PERSISTENCE OF THE DISASTER IMAGE

It is not entirely clear why the attack on Pearl Harbor has been so persistently labeled a military catastrophe, an overwhelming disaster, a crushing blow.

37. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, pp. 83–84.

38. See also Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 114. Malcolm Muir argues, "Pearl Harbor immediately ended any possibility of a cross-Pacific offensive by the battle line. This setback, coupled with the entry of Germany and Italy into the conflict, confronted American naval planners with an unprecedented challenge: to fight major wars in two oceans at once—and with a fleet crippled on the opening day." Malcolm Muir, "The United States Navy in World War II: An Assessment," in James J. Sadkovich, ed., *Reevaluating Major Naval Combatants of World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1990), p. 4. It seems rather that given the size of the American Navy, it was the challenge attendant on fighting a two-ocean war that would have "ended any possibility of a cross-Pacific offensive," quite apart from any losses at Pearl Harbor.

39. "In no material respect were they ready for war," as Willmott has put it; *Empires in the Balance*, p. 115.

40. Robert B. Carney, "The Navy Was Not Ready for War," in Paul Stillwell, ed., *Air Raid: Pearl Harbor! Reflections on a Day of Infamy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1981), p. 49. Richardson strongly opposed basing so much of the fleet at Pearl Harbor because it could not be quickly sent off to war from that base. As he put it in a September 1940 memo, "In case of war [it would be] necessary for Fleet to return to mobilization ports on West Coast or accept partial and unorganized mobilization measures resulting in confusion and a net loss of time." James O. Richardson, *On the Treadmill to Pearl Harbor* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, Naval History Division, 1973), pp. 325–326; see also *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, Part 1, p. 264; Part 14, p. 956.

Since the attack propelled the United States into a long and costly war, there may have been some psychological need at the time to maximize the justification for the war by exaggerating the damage suffered in the triggering event. Perhaps those exaggerations simply became embedded in later discussions and descriptions.

If this is the case, however, it was not because of propaganda efforts by the U.S. government which, in fact, went out of its way to downplay the damage, not to exaggerate it. Startled and enraged by the attack, many Americans initially assumed the worst, and rumors quickly spread that the entire Pacific Fleet had been sunk, that more than 1000 planes had been destroyed on the ground, that more than 10,000 men had been killed, and that shiploads of corpses were quietly being transported to New York to be dumped into a common grave. Fearing that such rumors might hurt morale, Franklin Roosevelt went on the radio in February 1942 to denounce "the rumor-mongers and the poison peddlers in our midst," and to announce that only 2,340 had been killed, that only three combatant ships had been put permanently out of commission, that most damaged ships were under repair or had already rejoined the fleet, that the repairs would make them "more efficient fighting machines," and that Japanese gains in the Philippines had been made possible not by success at Pearl Harbor, but because "even if the attack had not been made, your map will show that it would have been a hopeless operation for us to send the fleet to the Philippines through thousands of miles of ocean, while all those island bases were under the sole control of the Japanese."⁴¹

Similarly, in late 1942, the Navy Department issued an evaluation of the attack that is a model of descriptive restraint: "On the morning of December 7, 1941, Japanese aircraft temporarily disabled every battleship and most of the aircraft in the Hawaiian area. Other naval vessels, both combat and auxiliary, were put out of action and certain shore facilities . . . were damaged. Most of these ships are now back with the fleet. The aircraft were all replaced within a few days and interference with the facilities was generally limited to a matter of hours."⁴² But despite such early, authoritative, and

41. *New York Times*, February 24, 1942, p. 4. At the time, the president was pushing things a bit. His estimates of ship damage proved accurate, but that is not the way it seemed to the people engaged in the repair work in Hawaii: "When the president gave . . . the list of ships which were lost, it seemed highly improbable that the list would work out to be that short. . . . [But] within four or five months the salvage work had proceeded so favorably that it was clear that the president's list of losses could not only be met but considerably shortened." Wallin, "Rejuvenation at Pearl Harbor," p. 1526.

42. H.G. Thursfield, ed., *Brassey's Naval Annual 1943* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p. 128.

basically accurate debunking, words like “catastrophe” and “disaster” continued, and continue, to be applied.

In 1941, as Willmott notes, the world “was still accustomed to measuring sea power in terms of battleships.”⁴³ The war proved that to be a faulty measure, but from that perspective it was easy to exaggerate the importance of the attack.

In addition, the attack itself was dramatic and spectacular, and perhaps such events tend to inspire equally highly charged rhetoric in some military writers. Moreover, in the writing of military history over the ages there has been a strong tendency—presumably for dramatic effect—to exaggerate the extent of damage in wars. For example, for centuries a legend prevailed that Germany had suffered a 75 percent decline in population during the Thirty Years War, when the correct figure was probably more like 20 percent.⁴⁴

In this case, it may be that writers, impressed or mesmerized by the sheer drama of the event and by its historic importance, simply found their fingers tapping out the words, “Disaster at Pearl Harbor.” The more nearly accurate “Inconvenience at Pearl Harbor” simply does not get the juices flowing. It is difficult, otherwise, to explain why thoughtful writers like Morison, Prange, Spector, Toland, and the Congressional investigators of the attack use words like “disaster” and “catastrophe” when their own works provide extensive information detailing how limited the damage was, how quickly it was repaired, and how irrelevant it was to the later war effort. In a generally valuable book on the event published in 1990, Michael Slackman furnishes an extensive discussion of the success of the naval salvage and repair operation. Yet he says at one point, “The *destruction* of the battle line at Pearl Harbor *eradicated* the mainstay of U.S. surface forces in the Pacific.”⁴⁵ It is difficult to see from the evidence in his own book how such extreme verbiage is justified.

Photography may also have played a role. The most dramatic, and therefore most often shown, pictures of the attack depict damaged ships spewing

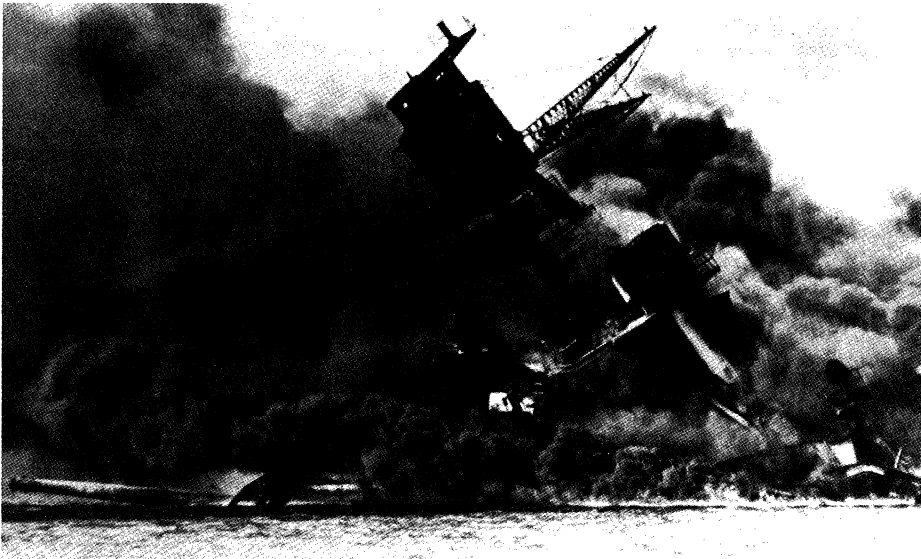
43. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p. 137.

44. Compare the legend reported in C.V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), p. 516, with the estimate of 20 percent in Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years War* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 211. On the issue of exaggerated casualty claims, see John Mueller, “Changing Attitudes Towards War: The Impact of the First World War,” *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 1991), pp. 6–7.

45. Slackman, *Target: Pearl Harbor*, p. 263 (emphasis added). Similarly, in a recent book John Dower casually refers in passing to “the destruction of the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor”; Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p. 101.

out huge volumes of smoke, and the general impression is one of total devastation. (See Figure 1.) Pictures of facilities being reconstructed and of ships being floated, repaired, and relaunched simply don't have the same dramatic appeal and thus were not as widely circulated. (See Figure 2.)⁴⁶

Figure 1. Typical Pearl Harbor photograph: smoke and fire.



SOURCE: Paul Stillwell, ed., *Air Raid: Pearl Harbor! Recollections of a Day of Infamy*, p. 137 (from U.S. Naval Institute Collection).

NOTE: The popularity of this particular photograph is undiminished as an icon of the day; it has recently appeared frequently in the U.S. press, illustrating reviews and advertisements for books published in anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of December 7, 1941.

46. Everyone has seen the pictures of the devastation at Hiroshima, but few have seen pictures of Tokyo, which was firebombed with less newsworthy, but similarly devastating, conventional ordnance. Nor can one find pictures from Hiroshima showing that electrical service was restored within one day, railroad and trolley service within two, and telephone service within seven. U.S. Army, Manhattan Engineer District, *The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (Washington, D.C., 1946), p. 13. See also John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 89–90.

Figure 2. Atypical Pearl Harbor photograph: substantial reconstruction four days after the attack.



SOURCE: Office of the Chief of Military History, *The U.S. Army in World War II. Pictorial Record: The War Against Japan* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1952), p. 17 (from U.S. Army files, Department of Defense). The caption reads: "Construction work at Wheeler Field, 11 December 1941. After the Japanese raid, many destroyed or damaged buildings were rebuilt."

Whatever the reason, the misguided use of such words as “disaster” and “catastrophe” to describe the Pearl Harbor attack has helped to exaggerate the perceived (or anticipated) effectiveness of conventional bombing—an exaggeration, however, that antedates the war.⁴⁷ People still use words like *destroyed*, *annihilated*, *knocked out*, *devastated*, *eradicated*, *demolished*—words that strongly imply permanent disablement—to describe the results of an air attack on a target when “put out of commission for a few weeks, days, or hours” would be far more accurate.⁴⁸ For example, a report in the *New York Times* from the Vietnam era noted that American bombers had “crippled anew” a North Vietnamese power plant that was “extensively damaged in a raid two months ago and subsequently rebuilt.”⁴⁹ “Crippled,” a word that implies a permanent, not a temporary, condition, hardly seems the right term to describe damage that puts a target out of operation for two months. “Temporarily disabled,” a phrase used in the 1942 Navy report on Pearl Harbor, seems more apt. Or there is the picture in *Aviation Week* showing four craters in a North Vietnamese airstrip, “effectively blocking its use,” according to the caption.⁵⁰ Since the North Vietnamese, often using battalions of little old ladies,⁵¹ were routinely able to fill such holes very quickly, the phrase, “for a few hours,” might appropriately have been appended to the description.

Pearl Harbor as a Strategic and Political Disaster

While the Pearl Harbor attack was far from a disaster in strict military terms for the United States, nevertheless the term *disaster* may still apply in a broader sense, certainly for Japan, and perhaps for the United States and Asia as well.

DISASTER FOR JAPAN

The Japanese were at least as interested in inflicting psychological shock as material damage. Their war plans emphasized that they must “endeavor to

47. See for example, Uri Bialer, *Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932–1939* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).

48. However, if the war is short (as the Japanese hoped in 1941), temporary disablement could be militarily sufficient.

49. *New York Times*, August 17, 1972, p. 3.

50. *Aviation Week*, July 3, 1972, p. 13.

51. Peter Arnett, “Close-Up of North Vietnam at War: Everything Moves by Night,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1972, p. 4.

destroy the will of the United States to fight” and to use “strategic propaganda” to point out “the uselessness of a Japanese-American war” while directing American public opinion “toward opposition to war.”⁵² As Roberta Wohlstetter puts it, they assumed “that the United States, with ten times the military potential . . . would after a short struggle simply accept the annihilation of a considerable part of its air and naval forces and the whole of its power in the Far East.”⁵³ Or as Prange suggests, Japan presumed “that in the face of this type of attack the American people might think the Japanese such a unique and fearless race that it would be useless to fight them.”⁵⁴

This proved, of course, to be one of the greatest miscalculations in military history, but a thoughtful caveat by Scott Sagan ought to be kept in mind: “Anyone who has lived through the war in Vietnam cannot easily dismiss the possibility that the United States public and elite opinion might have decided that the costs of continuing a war in Asia were greater than any possible gains to be made.”⁵⁵ Indeed, in the next section I will argue that such a calculation of the costs might have led to the wisest policy in World War II for the United States and for Asia. Be that as it may, the attack on Pearl Harbor was phenomenally successful in its shock effect, but the shock was exactly the opposite of the one the Japanese hoped for. As Prange observes, “The American people reeled with a mind-staggering mixture of surprise, awe, mystification, grief, humiliation, and, above, all cataclysmic fury.”⁵⁶ Ten years after the war a Japanese admiral who participated in the Pearl Harbor attack was asked if he had received any medals from the Emperor. “On the contrary,” the admiral responded, “I should have received medals from the American side rather than from the Emperor,” since, “but for the Pearl Harbor attack, the United States would not have been united

52. Ike, *Japan's Decision*, p. 248; see also p. 153.

53. Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 355.

54. Prange, *At Dawn*, p. 21. The Japanese “gave virtually no serious thought to how the conflict might be terminated. Somehow, before too long, they hoped, the Allies would tire of the struggle and agree to a compromise settlement”; Dower, *War Without Mercy*, p. 293. See also Bruce Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of the United States Entry into World War II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 55.

55. Sagan, “Origins of the Pacific War,” p. 916.

56. Prange, *At Dawn*, p. 582. Walter Lord also identifies fury as the dominant emotion in the reaction; Walter Lord, *Day of Infamy* (New York: Holt, 1957), p. 216.

as one people for war."⁵⁷ As it turned out, then, Pearl Harbor was indeed a "disaster"—for the attackers.⁵⁸

Pearl Harbor was a disaster for the Japanese in another way as well. Together with their other amazing successes in the opening weeks of the war, Pearl Harbor contributed substantially to a dangerous overconfidence, the "victory disease" as the Japanese dubbed it after the war.⁵⁹ Flushed to euphoria with their remarkable military triumphs and increasingly of the belief that the Americans "lack the will to fight,"⁶⁰ the Japanese launched themselves carelessly into a vast and overly ambitious adventure in which they sought to "annihilate" the Pacific Fleet of their new American enemy, and to establish dominance over the Solomons, the Coral Sea, Midway Island, Samoa, New Caledonia, the Fijis, and the Western Aleutians.⁶¹ Many Japanese, in fact, anticipated that they could even conquer the Hawaiian Islands.⁶²

At a time when the Japanese should have been changing their tactics to confront enemies who were getting stronger and becoming better prepared, they continued to follow their old modes of operation and committed themselves to a widespread and fragmented effort not only against the Americans in the central Pacific, but into the southwest Pacific and the Indian Ocean as well.⁶³ Unlike the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese, now venturing forward,

57. Prange, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 540. Until Pearl Harbor, the United States had, as Willmott puts it, "no clear idea what Japanese action, if any, could constitute sufficient aggression to involve the United States in war." The Japanese attack instantly resolved that conundrum. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p. 120. One should not, however, assume there was absolutely no puzzlement in the American population: six months after Pearl Harbor only 53 percent of the population said it had a clear idea of what the war was about (comparable to responses found during the Vietnam War), although this percentage grew later. See John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), p. 63.

58. "One can search military history in vain for an operation more fatal to the aggressor," observes Morison. "On the tactical level, the Pearl Harbor attack was wrongly concentrated on the ships rather than permanent installations and oil tanks. On the strategic level it was idiotic. On the political level it was disastrous." Morison, *Rising Sun in the Pacific*, p. 132.

59. John J. Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun: Japan's Plans for Conquest After Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), p. 124. As Morton points out, "their successes in the opening weeks of the war exceeded the expectations of even the most optimistic Japanese leaders"; Morton, *Strategy and Command*, p. 139. See also Slackman, *Target: Pearl Harbor*, p. 248; Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, p. 140; Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. 370; Dower, *War Without Mercy*, p. 114.

60. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 166.

61. Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, p. 140.

62. See Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun*.

63. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, pp. 34, 78–79. In fact, Willmott concludes, Japan

in Prange's words, with "overconfidence, careless planning, slipshod training, and contempt for the enemy," soon propelled themselves into the battle of Midway, in which they sustained massive losses from which they were never able to recover—an experience that can justifiably be categorized as a "disaster."⁶⁴

DISASTER FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ASIA: HOT WAR, RATHER THAN COLD

If Pearl Harbor was a disaster for Japan, perhaps there is a sense in which it was one for the rest of Asia and for the United States as well. Morison contends that "the Japanese high command, by their idiotic act, had made a strategic present of the first order to the United States: they had united the country in grim determination to win victory in the Pacific."⁶⁵ It may be useful to consider how valuable this "present of the first order" actually was.

Before Pearl Harbor, American policy toward Japanese expansion was essentially one of containment—although, as Paul Schroeder observes, after the summer of 1941 American policy became more dynamic, demanding that Japan not merely stop its expansion, but that it withdraw from China.⁶⁶ American tactics stressed economic pressure, a military buildup designed to threaten and deter, and assistance to anti-Japanese combatants, especially to China where the Japanese had become painfully bogged down (although Japan's problems there were due far more to Chinese resistance than to U.S. aid, which was actually quite modest).⁶⁷ Should Japan abandon its expansionary imperial policy, the United States stood ready to help it peacefully to gain "all of the desiderata for which she allegedly started fighting—

"managed to pick what was arguably the wrong course of action every time it was confronted with a choice."

64. Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, p. xii; see chap. 40 for a catalogue of Japan's many mistakes in the crucial battle of Midway. At Midway, notes Willmott, "for reasons that will always defy rational analysis [Japanese commander] Yamamoto insisted upon a tactical deployment that incorporated every possible risk and weakness and left his forces inferior to the enemy at the point of contact, despite their having what should have been an irresistible numerical and qualitative superiority." Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, p. 515. As for the Japanese army, he observes, "One cannot ignore the simple fact that not a single operation planned after the start of the war met with success." Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p. 91.

65. Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, p. 69.

66. Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), chap. 8. Schroeder points out, however, that many felt (or hoped) that this would not lead to war. *Ibid.*, pp. 192–194.

67. Jonathan G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 135–136. Utley notes that U.S. aid authorizations in July 1941 were 821,000 tons for Britain, 16,000 for China. See also Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger*, p. 46.

strategic, economic, financial, and social security," as the American ambassador put it at the time.⁶⁸ (After the war the United States had a chance to carry out this promise and did so in full measure.)

This American concern with Asia has had its critics. Melvin Small observes that "the defense of China was an unquestioned axiom of American policy taken in along with mother's milk and the Monroe Doctrine. . . . One looks in vain through the official papers of the 1930s for some prominent leader to say, 'Wait a second, just why is China so essential to our security?'"⁶⁹ Jonathan Utley has a different perspective, but he comes to a similar conclusion: "It was not through a careful review of national policy or the stakes involved in Asia that the United States would place itself in the path of Japanese expansion, but incrementally, without long-range planning, and as often as not as a stopgap measure necessitated, or so the planners thought, by the events in Europe."⁷⁰ And Warner Schilling observes crisply that: "At the summit of foreign policy one always finds simplicity and spook"; he suggests that "the American opposition to Japan rested on the dubious proposition that the loss of Southeast Asia could prove disastrous for Britain's war effort and for the commitment to maintain the territorial integrity of China—a commitment as mysterious in its logic as anything the Japanese ever conceived."⁷¹

But until Pearl Harbor this policy, however spooky, was comparatively inexpensive. After the attack, however, it no longer became possible even to consider the question, as Schilling phrases it, of "just how much American blood and treasure the defense of China and Southeast Asia was worth." Americans were enraged, threatened, humiliated, and challenged by what Roosevelt called the "unprovoked and dastardly" blow that had come without warning or a declaration of war, at a time when Japanese officials were in Washington, deceptively seeming to be working for a peaceful settlement. With the attack, virtually all remaining reservations vanished as everyone united behind a concerted effort to lash back at the treacherous Japanese, to

68. Robert J.C. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 341.

69. Small, *Was War Necessary?* pp. 238–39.

70. Utley, *Going to War*, p. 58.

71. Warner R. Schilling, "Surprise Attack, Death, and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 1965), p. 389. By contrast, at the time of major escalation in the Vietnam War, American decision-makers carefully assessed, reassessed, and debated the policy premises of the American commitment there. See Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, pp. 168–176.

exact revenge, and to kick butt.⁷² After suffering the loss of some 2,500 people at Pearl Harbor, the Americans, without thinking about it any further, launched themselves furiously and impetuously into a war in which they lost hundreds of thousands more.

CONTAINING JAPAN. The war killed millions people in Asia, and it finally forced the Japanese out of their imperial possessions. But the United States could have pursued a continued policy of cold war rather than hot—that is, of harassment and containment, economic pressure, arming to deter and to threaten, assistance to anti-Japanese combatants, and perhaps limited warfare on the peripheries. The goal of a continued containment policy would have been limited. It would have sought only to compel Japan to retreat from its empire, not, like the war, to force the country to submit to occupation. Such a policy might well eventually have impelled Japan to withdraw from its empire at far lower cost to the United States, to Japan, and to the imperialized peoples.

Although the strategy of containment is associated with postwar U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union, it was also basically the initial policy of the British and French in response to the German invasion of Poland in 1939. The allies did not launch direct war, but instead harassed the Germans in places like Norway, put on economic pressure, built up their forces behind defensive barriers, looked for opportunities to aid resistance movements and to exploit fissures in the German empire, and sat back patiently. It was cold war, though it was called “phoney war.”⁷³ The crucial defect in the containment policy directed at Germany was that Germany was (obviously) capable of invading and defeating France. By contrast, Japan could not invade and defeat the United States. Furthermore, Germany did not at the time present a ripe opportunity for punishing harassment because it was not entangled in a continental war the way Japan was in China, nor could it as readily be economically strained. Thus a policy that failed against Germany had a far greater chance of success against Japan, had it been tried.

72. As Morison observes, “isolationism and pacifism now ceased to be valid forces in American politics”; Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, p. 69. Or, in Toland’s words, “With almost no exceptions 130,000,000 Americans instantly accepted total war”; Toland, *But Not in Shame*, p. 37. As Morison points out, it was Pearl Harbor, not the subsequent, more costly and more important attack on the Philippines that moved American opinion; *ibid.*, pp. 77–78. Wohlstetter agrees: “For some reason the damage done to these other American outposts in the Pacific is not considered in the same category of crime”; Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 340.

73. For a discussion, see George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: Wiley, 1977), pp. 135–138.

That containment can work under the right conditions has of course now been demonstrated. After the war the United States and its allies were confronted with another expanding and threatening empire, this one based in Moscow and directed by Josef Stalin, one of history's greatest monsters. A major war against that empire at that time—perhaps with the Germans and Japanese as allies and with American industry similarly cranked up for maximum military effort—might very well have been successful, and the costs might have been no higher than those incurred in defeating the Japanese empire. With victory in this war, the gains of 1989–91, including the toppling of Soviet Communism, might have been achieved forty years earlier. However, although the Soviets may have been expansionary and even more murderous than the Japanese, and although they may ultimately have presented a more visceral and wide-ranging threat to American values than the comparatively localized Japanese, the Soviets, unlike the Japanese, were not so foolhardy in the course of expansion as to attack American property directly.⁷⁴ Accordingly, the United States adopted and maintained a patient policy of containment, economic pressure, arms buildup, peripheral war, and harassment against its new enemy. It took a long time—some 45 years—for the Soviet empire to disintegrate,⁷⁵ but it is difficult to find people who think that fighting a war like World War II (even one without nuclear weapons) to speed that process up would have been worthwhile.

A similar firm, patient policy of cold war rather than hot war might well have worked with the Japanese after Pearl Harbor, and probably much more quickly. They were already vastly overextended by their intervention in China, begun in 1937. Their army there of a million and a half had made many initial gains but, as Willmott notes, it "was bogged down in a war it could not win. It did not have the strength to advance, and in any case there were no worthwhile objectives it could hope to secure. It could not force the 'final battle' that would end the war. It could not properly pacify the areas it held. It was tied to the railways and major lines of communication, and was draining the industrial and financial resources of Japan without adequate

74. Curiously, when American troops were being sent to Saudi Arabia in 1990 to deter a possible Iraqi attack on that country, American leaders were greatly concerned that their as yet outnumbered forces might be attacked at any moment. No one, it appears, considered that a would-be aggressor might find the example of the American reaction to the Pearl Harbor attack to be sobering. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 274, 304.

75. Unlike the Soviets, the Japanese may not have been planning a permanent empire. They said they were willing to promise in 1941 that after peace was established in China, they would remove their troops in 25 years. Ike, *Japan's Decision for War*, p. 210.

compensation. The army had impaled itself in an impossible position, and had produced a disastrous situation for Japan herself."⁷⁶

The economic drain on Japan was considerable. Military expenditures skyrocketed from 9 percent of gross national expenditures to 38 percent,⁷⁷ and the difference was made up by the Japanese consumer: by 1941 real consumption per capita had dropped almost 20 percent from 1937 levels.⁷⁸ As early as 1938 Japan's export industries had become paralyzed, and its ability to import needed materials had plummeted. Production of almost all commodities, including steel, either fell or else rose much more slowly than the military required, and shortages of labor, especially skilled labor, developed.⁷⁹

Unable to bring themselves to retreat from China, and under severe economic pressure from the United States and from their own misguided economic policies, the Japanese leaders accused members of the Planning Board (which had been spewing out dire analyses and predictions) of communist activity and arrested them. Then in late 1941, although already stretched thin militarily, Japan lashed out, going to war, as Michael Barnhart notes, "on a shoestring—and a ragged one at that."⁸⁰ Besides attacking Pearl Harbor, Japan conquered huge areas in Southeast Asia, including some vital oil fields in the Dutch East Indies, which they hoped would provide them with adequate resources to maintain their farflung ventures.

Although these advances began with some impressive and famous victories, they hardly resolved Japan's problems. The Chinese continued to fight, and the Japanese now found themselves in charge of an empire that was even larger and even more unwieldy than before. Among the difficulties was their inability to become effective colonists, and the brutal conquerors mainly inspired an intense hatred among the imperialized peoples which in many cases still persists, and which at the time guaranteed resistance and hostility and exacted enormous occupation costs.⁸¹

76. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p. 55. See also Fujiwara Akira, "The Road to Pearl Harbor," in Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray, eds., *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 155; Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, p. 129.

77. Takafusa Nakamura, *Economic Growth in Prewar Japan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 39.

78. Alan H. Gleason, "Economic Growth and Consumption in Japan," in William W. Lockwood, ed., *The State and Economic Enterprise in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 436.

79. Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 91, 96, 200–201.

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 200, 238, 269.

81. As Willmott observes, "the very morale that sustained the Japanese in the advance gave

Moreover, the advance by no means solved Japan's oil problem. In principle, there was enough oil in the newly conquered areas to supply Japan's needs, but the country did not have a tanker fleet big enough to transport all the oil it required. In addition it took time and effort to get the new oil fields into production, and in the meantime it was necessary to draw on the dwindling reserves. As a result, two prewar Japanese studies calculated that even assuming there were no major naval engagements for three full years, the Japanese would be faced with a major oil crisis, or worse, by 1944.⁸²

Somewhat related was the problem of merchant shipping upon which the island empire depended. Before the war 40 percent of Japan's imports were delivered on foreign ships. In its attacks Japan was able to capture some merchant ships, but it was still confronted with a 25 percent drop in shipping. It could build new ships and refit old ones, but this was a slow and agonizing process at best because its shipyards were small and inefficient and because of the huge demands the military was making on the industrial sector. In its conquests Japan gained the resources of Southeast Asia, but because of these shipping reductions, its own resources actually declined.⁸³

Thus Imperial Japan was an auspicious target for a policy of containment. It was far more so, it would seem, than the postwar Soviet Union. The Soviets expanded their empire only marginally and in contiguous areas, and they did not have to rely on lengthy and vulnerable seas lanes for survival. Moreover, the people they conquered had little fight left in them and in many cases initially welcomed the conquerors. Even without direct American military efforts, Japan's huge, costly, unwieldy empire in Asia might in time have become as debilitating, as obsolete, and as pointless as the British, French, or Dutch ones there.⁸⁴ And eventually Japan might have come to realize this.

rise to a casual and blind cruelty at almost every turn, and these actions ensured a lasting enmity on the part of subject peoples who might have been won over with decent treatment"; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p. 91.

82. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–70.

83. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89, 451.

84. On this issue, see also Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger*, pp. 44–62. For another critique of American entry into the war, see Small, *Was War Necessary?* pp. 215–267. See also John Mueller, *Deterrence, Numbers, and History* (Los Angeles: University of California, Security Studies Project, 1968), p. 30; and Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, p. 45. It may not be completely whimsical in this regard to suggest that Japan over the last century and a half has always been some 15 to 25 years out of date. In 1853 it set out to catch up with the West in military technology. After doing so, it decided to become a late entrant into the Great Power club by the accepted means of defeating an established Great Power—Russia—in a war in 1904–05. It then sought to add

It is true that at the time of Pearl Harbor, Japan was in the control of a fanatical, militaristic group, and it is true that there was a considerable war fever among many elements in the population (although no one was anxious to have a war with the United States if it could be avoided).⁸⁵ But the grip of the romantic, imperial militarists in Japan was neither complete nor necessarily permanent. Substantial misgivings about the enervating, even disastrous, expansionary policy and about the "holy war" in China were being felt not only by some top Japanese civilians, but also by some important military leaders and by the Emperor. It seems entirely conceivable that these critics would have been able to moderate, and in time quietly to dismember, the frustratingly costly imperial policy.

It is also true that the war thoroughly and (we hope) permanently destroyed the militaristic group in Japan and its values. The postwar experience with the Soviet Union suggests (though of course it does not guarantee) that favorable results could have been achieved eventually through a policy of containment rather than war. The Soviet Union at the outset of the Cold War was similarly controlled by a set of dangerous, expansionary ideologues, but minds eventually changed as Soviet policies proved hopelessly unproductive.⁸⁶ This experience suggests, then, that the United States might well have been able to impel Japan to retreat from its empire with far less misery and bloodshed by using containment rather than war.⁸⁷

the accoutrements of Power by collecting an empire in the 1930s, even as the other Great Powers were tiring of theirs. In World War II it learned, as almost all Europeans had learned in World War I, that getting into big wars is a really terrible idea. Noticing in the postwar period that Greatness was now being associated with economic prosperity, it set about to achieve that. Now, having prospered, it is seeking to become a political leader, an international good citizen, and a paternalistic guide to less fortunate peoples, rather in the manner of the United States in the 1940s and 1950s.

85. Fujiwara Akira, "Road to Pearl Harbor," pp. 157–159. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, pp. 167, 251–252, 332–333.

86. Much of this came about not because the Communists were successfully contained, but because in the late 1970s containment essentially lapsed as the Soviet Union (capitalizing on a favorable "correlation of forces") gleefully picked up some ten new dominoes, all of which almost instantly became political and economic basket cases and turned to the alarmed Soviet Union for maternal comfort and sustenance. For a development of this argument, see John Mueller, "Enough Rope: The Cold War Was Lost, Not Won," *New Republic*, July 3, 1989, pp. 14–16; and Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, chap. 9. See also John Mueller, "Quiet Cataclysm: Some Afterthoughts about World War III," *Diplomatic History*, forthcoming.

87. Although the Japanese expansion in Asia cut the United States off from the sources of some important raw materials, these supplies were not crucial, as Roosevelt had publicly pointed out in 1940 (and as was to be demonstrated during the war), since the United States could produce synthetic rubber, acquire tin from Bolivia, and produce more manganese at home. See Utley, *Going to War*, p. 85.

THE QUESTIONABLE GAINS OF THE PACIFIC WAR. What, after all, was gained by using hot rather than cold war to cause the Japanese to abandon their empire? Ronald Spector notes that the United States managed to acquire “a strong democratic ally in the new Japan.”⁸⁸ This can, I suppose, be accounted a gain, but it cannot be entirely irrelevant to point out that in order to achieve the liberalization of Japan it was necessary to depopulate the country by some two million souls. Moreover, there had long been a substantial impetus toward liberalism in Japan, and in calmer times this might well have revived, as eventually it revived (after a long period of dedicated suppression) in Russia.

In defending the Pacific War, Spector also argues that because of it the region became “more safe and stable than the older system in which Japan, the Soviet Union, and the European powers struggled for supremacy in a weak and divided China.” Things are generally looking up in much of Asia today, but for the first few decades of the postwar era most of the area did not experience much in the way of safety and stability. Rather it was the scene of bloody civil and international war, economic and social mismanagement often of spectacular proportions, and occasionally outright genocide. And he would not want to trade, he says, “the vibrant, rapidly growing new nations of Asia—like Singapore, Taiwan, India, and Malaysia—for the stagnant, impoverished, and exploited colonies of the 1930s.”⁸⁹ But would those colonies have remained stagnant without the war? And would Spector or anyone else similarly prefer present-day North Korea, Vietnam, Burma, or Cambodia?

Above all, there is the issue of China, where most of the population of the former Japanese empire lived. A major reason the United States fought the Pacific War was to keep the heroic, persecuted, war-racked Chinese from being dominated by a vicious regime. As Schroeder puts it, “There is no longer any real doubt that the war came about over China”; and Morison observes, “The fundamental reason for America’s going to war with Japan was our insistence on the integrity of China.”⁹⁰ In discussing the drive toward war, Bruce Russett also stresses the importance of China in the perceptions of Roosevelt and his advisers. They had become convinced that “Japanese ambitions in China posed a long-term threat to American interests”; they

88. *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 561.

89. *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 561.

90. Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, p. 209; Morison, *Two-Ocean War*, p. 45.

were affected by the “sentimental American attitude toward China as a ‘ward’”; and they may have seen China as a significant economic partner—although “by embargoing Japan in 1941 the United States was giving up an export trade at least four times that with China.”⁹¹

In the war the United States devastated Japan and saved China—for Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communists. The imperial Japanese occupiers were often cruel and murderous, but Mao seems to have surpassed them substantially in callousness, incompetence, and sheer viciousness (as well as in hostility toward the United States). In the war from 1937 to 1945, the Chinese may have lost three million people or more.⁹² But in its first three years alone, the Communist regime probably executed two million.⁹³ Then, in the four years after the start of the Great Leap Forward of 1958, the regime inflicted on the Chinese people the greatest famine in history, one that is now estimated to have taken 30 million lives.⁹⁴ It seems difficult to escape the conclusion that China could hardly have been worse off in Japanese hands. Or, to put it another way, even if the containment policy retrospectively proposed here had not been successful eventually in forcing Japan out of China, it is not at all clear that China would have been less fortunate under that fate than it was under the one supplied by the liberating war.

91. *No Clear and Present Danger*, pp. 58–60. Utley sees the China issue as less central, but he agrees that it triggered the war: “it was the issue of China that in the final hours stood as an insurmountable obstacle between Japan and the United States.” Utley, *Going to War with Japan*, p. 177. “The final point of disagreement between the two countries was on the withdrawal of Japanese forces from China. If war was to be prevented, Japan had to yield on this point”; Akira, “Road to Pearl Harbor,” p. 154. “The chief issue between Japan and the United States was the future of China,” wrote Small, in *Was War Necessary?* p. 238.

92. An estimate of three million military and civilian deaths is given by Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures 1987–88* (Washington, D.C.: World Priorities, 1987), p. 30; while Charles Messenger estimates 2,500,000 in *The Chronological Atlas of World War Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 243. Battle deaths for the Nationalist Chinese are estimated at 1,310,224; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1991 edition, Vol. 29, p. 1023. Some put total Chinese battle deaths as high as 2,200,000; Louis L. Snyder’s *Historical Guide to World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1982), p. 126. *Encyclopedia Americana* accepts this higher estimate and then observes that “Chinese civilian losses are unknown but probably numbered several million”; 1988 ed., Vol. 29, p. 530.

93. Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After* (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 81. Demographer John S. Aird notes that, while estimates generally range from one to three million, some are much higher: one Hong Kong source puts the death toll at 10 million and quotes a 1981 Chinese journal that claims 20 million people were executed or died of unnatural causes during what it calls the “anti-rightist” and “people’s communication” periods. Aird, *Slaughter of the Innocents* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1990), pp. 2, 111 n. 3.

94. Basil Ashton, Kenneth Hill, Alan Piazza, and Robin Zeitz, “Famine in China,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (December 1984), pp. 613–645.

And it should also be pointed out that, having saved Asia from Japanese imperialism at great cost, the United States was soon back in the area centrally participating in the two bloodiest wars of the postwar era. In Korea—where it now found itself killing, rather than aiding, the Chinese—around three million civilian and military lives were lost. In Vietnam, some two million perished.⁹⁵ And insofar as the United States entered the war to preserve China as a trading partner or opportunity, the war proved to be an utter waste.

CONCLUSION. The argument here deals with the Pacific War, not the European one, and it obviously relies heavily on hindsight. After Pearl Harbor, American decision-makers probably had no viable political option but to go to war in the Pacific (although they made no effort to search for an alternative, either), nor could they possibly have been able to anticipate the postwar horrors. Moreover, I am not arguing that American participation in the Pacific War was necessary for the various horrors in Asia to have taken place—they might well have happened in any case.

But, given what we now know, was it wise to pursue war after Pearl Harbor? Was the vicious and gruesome Pacific War worth it? If the point of the war was to force Japan to retreat from its empire and to encourage it to return to more liberal ways, a policy of cold war might well eventually have had the same result at a far lower overall cost. If the point of the war was to prevent further horrors and somehow to bring peace, justice, freedom, and stability to the rest of Asia, the war was a substantial failure. From that perspective it certainly seems that Pearl Harbor, which propelled the United States into that terrible war, was a disaster after all.

95. These estimates of military and civilian deaths are from Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures, 1987–88*, p. 31. Battle deaths alone have been estimated at 2 million for Korea and 1.2 million for Vietnam: see J. David Singer, "Peace in the Global System: Displacement, Interregnum, or Transformation?" in Charles W. Kegley, Jr., ed., *The Long Postwar Peace: Contending Explanations and Projections* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 60–61.