

Pearl Harbor and Hard Line Revisionism

PROFESSOR EDWARD SHAPIRO'S recent review-essay evaluating Dr. Gordon Prange's *At Dawn We Slept* (1981), John Toland's *Infamy* (1982), and, in a subsidiary way, a number of other studies on the origins of the war in the Pacific is a good example of an interpretation of the Roosevelt administration's foreign policies that has gained ground in academic circles since the 1950s.* Following the publication of the two seminal works, *American Diplomacy* (1951) by George F. Kennan and *The National Interest* (1951) by Hans Morgenthau, professional observers have increasingly regarded the American stance toward Japan during the late 1930s and early 1940s as inappropriate, rigid, and moralistic. As exponents of a "realist" conception of American statecraft, which they contrasted with unlimited interventionism and hemispheric isolationism, both Morgenthau and Kennan had argued that the power of the United States could best be applied in Europe rather than Asia. Consequently, more ground could be given by way of prudent negotiations to Asian antagonists like Japan or the Chinese Communists than to major European opponents such as Nazi Germany and—at least during the early postwar period—the Soviet Union. Kennan believed that

American insistence during the years before Pearl Harbor on upholding the territorial integrity of China and other planks of the Open Door doctrine propounded by Secretary of State John Hay at the turn of the century slighted Japan's compelling security interests on the Asian mainland. The realists' "Europe-first" strategy and their critique of American-Japanese interwar relations directly or indirectly influenced the contributions of Paul Schroeder, author of *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations* (1958), William L. Neumann, *American Encounters Japan* (1963), and the authors cited by Shapiro, as well as his own review.

Works inspired by the realist school shared a few traits with the early postwar "revisionist" library that attempted to rebut the influential favorable accounts of New Deal statecraft by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Basil Rauch, Walter Millis, and William L. Langer; in a sense, realism represented a mellowing of the revisionist indictment of the Roosevelt administration. The revisionists of the late 1940s and early 1950s—Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Beard, Charles C. Tansill, and George Morgenstern—had either authored some of the books debunking the accepted notions of Germany's responsibility for World War I and the rightness of Woodrow Wilson's "great crusade" or they had voiced a commitment to a non-interventionist foreign policy. They had soured on the world war, and they wanted no part of a second one. When Franklin Roosevelt moved toward intervention after 1937, Barnes, Beard, and others cooperated in some way with organized isolationism. After 1945 they became the "hard-line" revisionist critics of Roosevelt's road to war who enjoyed the patronage of the intellectual right, even though they were not unanimously conservative. In fact, early issues of *Modern Age* featured book reviews by Harry Elmer Barnes. The first wave of World War II revisionists agreed with the later realists in deriding the American stake in the Open Door doctrine and in according to Japan more historic leeway to expand in China than to a

United States bent on stopping such encroachments.

The early postwar revisionists differed sharply from the realists on at least two points: they held that neither Germany nor Japan posed a fundamental threat to the United States (they were not Europe-firsters but strategically at least isolationist); and they often injected a conspiratorial interpretation of Roosevelt's conduct of foreign affairs, particularly from 1937 to 1941. Roosevelt, they argued, had become increasingly aggressive toward the various fascist and militarist powers during the late 1930s—at least in part because he wanted to take the New Deal out of its economic and political doldrums. After the outbreak of war in 1939, Roosevelt, through various measures of overt and covert military assistance to Great Britain, sought an explicit declaration of war from Hitler that would make America a recognized leader in an anti-Nazi military alliance. Roosevelt, however, failed to obtain the appropriate response from Germany; he was effectively "frustrated in Europe." He therefore turned sharply against Japan after the middle of 1941. With the support of such administration figures as Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Secretary of War William L. Stimson, he ignored the advice of his service chiefs and authorized a ban on oil exports to Japan in July, spurned a meeting with a Japanese Prime minister seeking peace in October, and condoned the presentation of an American ultimatum to Japan on November 26, 1941. By goading Japan, the stage was set for American entrance into the European war through the "back-door" of the Pacific.

Many revisionists capped their accusations against Roosevelt with the charge that he and one or more members of his entourage acted to withhold vital intelligence from Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, Commander of the Pacific fleet based at Pearl Harbor, and General Walter Short, the army commander of the base. Roosevelt, in effect, co-conspired with the Japanese navy to try to ensure that Japan would achieve at least effective surprise at

Pearl Harbor. The president did not necessarily anticipate the destruction of capital ships and a large loss of life, but he wanted an incident that would put America into the war with public opinion united behind him.

The isolationist tenets and the conspiratorial flavor of the hard line school of postwar revisionism undoubtedly did much to hamper the acceptance of revisionist findings by the intellectual community. For a long period after World War II old-style non-interventionism and conspiracy theories were not respectable, and undoubtedly many with at least some revisionist leanings on the origins of American entrance into the war hastened to disassociate themselves from the type of historical writing championed by Barnes, Tansill, Morgenstern, and others. Nevertheless, conspiratorial thinking and an animus against Roosevelt expressed by some revisionists (particularly *not* by the late-comer John Toland) do not of themselves invalidate their charges. Revisionist contentions are neither "reckless" nor "eccentric," and are in fact quite plausible and deserving of calm consideration.

No one would ever claim that a historical interpretation concerning someone's motivations would require either a soul-searching diary from the person under scrutiny if he never kept one or one's signed confession. When the hard line revisionists argued that Roosevelt goaded Japan to war, they fused constructive speculation with an analysis of the historical record as any historian would do. They noted that the nation's highest military planners including Admiral Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations, and General George C. Marshall, Army Chief-of-Staff, had warned against the imposition of economic sanctions and the delivery of an ultimatum to Japan. Convinced that Roosevelt was increasingly anxious to get into the European war in 1941—to judge by his mounting support for Great Britain—the revisionists concluded that he made a fundamental decision to get into the war by the back door of Japan. That would explain why

American policy was not congruent with the very realistic recommendations of the service chiefs and why Roosevelt endorsed an oil cut-off and later allowed Hull to "wash his hands" of a truce arrangement with the Japanese by delivering them a completely unacceptable final statement of American terms. Doing justice to the revisionist contentions concerning the goading of Japan and to all the factors governing U.S.-Japanese relations in 1941 is worthy of a short essay; suffice it to say that the revisionist "back door" interpretation may well be wrong, but it is hardly bizarre or irresponsible.

Similarly, the revisionist accusation that the president and his immediate entourage effected an intelligence "black-out" on Pearl Harbor before the Japanese struck is derived from an estimate of Roosevelt's predicament in late 1941 and from the knowledge that various kinds of information that should have predicted the time and place of Japan's initial attack were available in Washington but not made available to Admiral Kimmel and General Short in Hawaii. Of all the hard liners, Barnes drew the most compelling sketch of the president's situation. In the last few days before December 7th, Roosevelt had become captive to a dilemma greatly of his own making. He had publicly stated that he would not send American soldiers into foreign wars, but he had authorized multilateral staff conferences planning for precisely that eventuality with the Canadians and the English and, in the Pacific theater, with the English and the Dutch. The latter arrangements turned out to have particularly ominous implications by early December 1941. Having cut the Japanese off from their crucial oil supplies and a large share of their foreign trade, Roosevelt faced the prospect of a Japanese onslaught against the oil-rich Dutch East Indies and the Southeast Asian resources area controlled by Great Britain. The secret military conferences with the English and the Dutch projected possible American armed support for the other parties even without an attack on U.S. territory; and on December 1, 1941, the

British were requesting precisely this kind of support.

Barnes likened the American-British-Dutch (ABD) arrangements to a political sword of Damocles hanging over Roosevelt's head. To agree to British or Dutch requests meant going back on public declarations against sending Americans to die abroad; to renege on them meant leaving allies in the lurch in a critical situation and ultimately facing their vindictive disclosure of the ABD plans for blackmail purposes. The record establishes that Roosevelt assented to the English appeal, informing the English ambassador that American armed support would be forthcoming. Prange was unable to treat this crucial issue in the body of his text, and this omission is a grave weakness in an otherwise detailed book. His literary executors did touch on the subject in an appendix essay criticizing the revisionists, but they suggest that the armed support Roosevelt envisioned would have been like the submarine spotting and limited convoying going on in the Atlantic. This is highly unlikely: the Japanese were moving surface battle fleets into a far-flung war zone where English and Dutch resources were quite limited. Actually the revisionists make a good case when they argue that the distinct possibility that significant U.S. support would be needed made Roosevelt anxious to secure some Japanese violation of American territory that would leave him politically free to help the English and the Dutch.

Of course it cannot be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the president and a few others decided on Pearl Harbor as the place where the Japanese would strike first, thereby removing the Damocles sword. The historian is unable to perform an autopsy on Roosevelt's mind. However the revisionists have demonstrated that the president and the highest echelons of the executive branch and the armed forces had access to material of various kinds that demonstrated that Pearl Harbor was in serious danger and that an attack would be coming around December 7th, when Japanese envoys would be presenting a

statement breaking off diplomatic negotiations. Much of this information was in the form of intercepted Japanese diplomatic and consular codes. It has been argued that some of this material was never properly evaluated. While this contention may be correct, those who make the charge overlook the fact that there were other kinds of warnings, the cumulative impact of which would have pointed to an assault on Pearl Harbor. Joseph Grew warned Washington of the possibility of a Pearl Harbor attack in January 1941. Lord Louis Mountbatten alerted Admiral Stark to the danger of a Japanese strike on Hawaii when he visited the United States in October. Finally recent disclosures by the FBI indicate that a detailed outline of an Axis intelligence mission to gather information about the disposition of forces at Pearl Harbor was received by the bureau in late September and shared with a high ranking officer in Army intelligence and with a lieutenant in naval intelligence, who had the authorization of a commander. This information could have been pigeon-holed, but it is more likely that it reached the highest levels of the Roosevelt administration.

The easy conclusion to reach is that too many people had material pinpointing Pearl Harbor as a target and that consequently a conspiracy to black out the base would have been unwieldy. This view is a hasty one because only a small number of people would be in a position to coordinate information from the diplomatic codes disclosing the collapse of the American-Japanese negotiations with the various warnings about the impending attack on Pearl Harbor. The diplomatic codes which Roosevelt read and understood had to be analyzed with the warnings indicated above in order to arrive at an estimate of the timing of the attack. Therefore the number of presumed conspirators could have included the president, General Marshall, whose whereabouts on the eve of the attack have been hard to trace, and Admiral Stark. In any case, should the two service chiefs have been involved, it is doubtful that they were instigators of the

plot since they had urged caution in dealing with Japan. How long this hypothetical conspiracy was in operation is open to debate; it might have lasted for only a few days before the attack and not the several weeks or even several months postulated by some of the early "hard liners."

The aim of this conjecture is not to offer the conspiracy thesis as the only explanation of the appalling intelligence failures in Washington, but to argue that it deserves serious consideration and that it may be eventually accepted by historians, whatever their ideological and strategic preconceptions. To ignore the basic tenets of the hard liners, because they are not respectable, and to laud alternative hypotheses, even when they are demonstrably deficient, represents the spurning of the challenges and opportunities of history.

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