

THE MAGIC MESSAGES AND PEARL HARBOR REVISITED

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In January 1944, former Pearl Harbor Naval Commander Admiral Husband E. Kimmel learned for the first time of the intercepted Japanese diplomatic messages. After reading these documents, Kimmel charged that MAGIC contained the best evidence of Japanese intentions and plans, and convinced that if this information had been forwarded to Pearl Harbor, he would have determined "the gravity and intensity of the crisis as December 7, 1941, approached and the probability of a Japanese attack on Hawaii."<sup>1</sup>

While controversy long has surrounded the content of these messages, the historian, like Kimmel, has not been privy to MAGIC's complete collection. A search for the unavailable materials began in 1969, when national directives did "not permit non-official access to cryptologic information for the period subsequent to September, 1939."<sup>2</sup> Not until 1974 was there official public admission that the MAGIC collection exceeded those printed in the 1945-46 Congressional Inquiry, and only after the National Security Agency had reviewed those findings "for cryptographic interest," thirteen cartons became available at the National Archives, Washington, D.C.<sup>3</sup> However, an examination of that material proved both disappointing and frustrating. Nothing new had been revealed. Thus, we are back to ground zero: What was the MAGIC operation? What did the messages report? and what questions remain unanswered?

The MAGIC Operation

As early as 1920, the Americans had broken some of the Japanese diplomatic codes, but not until August 1940 were they able to solve the problem entirely, thanks to the handmade crypto-computer built by Colonel William F. Friedman. The device simulated the PURPLE code apparatus used by the Japanese, and the feat had been considered such a high achievement, the decoded messages were termed MAGIC. For his efforts, Friedman, by a special Congressional Act, received \$100,000, because it was presumed his invention would never bring commercial reward.<sup>4</sup>

In 1941 four PURPLE machines were available: one each for the Army and Navy in Washington, one sent to Cavite in the Philippines, and the fourth sent to Britain in exchange for German codes and ciphers. A final PURPLE machine was in production, destined for Pearl Harbor, but did not arrive until after war has begun. As a result, communications between the Japanese government and its diplomatic offices in Washington, Berlin, Rome, Ankara, and other embassies throughout the world were available to specified American officials. Likewise, they were privy to reports from Japanese military attaches and secret agents in Honolulu, Panama, the Philippines, and other ports in North and South America.

While the exact details of the MAGIC operation are not known publicly, a fairly clear portrait of the operation can be pieced together from three works: Ladislav Farago, *The Broken Seal: "Operation MAGIC" and the Secret Road to Pearl Harbor*, (New York, Random House, 1967); David Kahn, *The Codebreakers* (New York, The MacMillan Company, 1967); and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1962).

Both the Army and Navy had special sections to handle the decoding of Japanese intercepts; however, there was very little duplication of effort. During 1941, within Captain T. S. Wilkinson's Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI).

Kimmel mentioned - pp. 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100  
Notes distinction and MAGIC -  
between RUCFE and (and not the latter!)  
this being machine!

Ronald Holm - MAGIC  
From: David H. Witt, et al.  
War and Diplomacy (1972)  
1976  
WILKINSON

SAFFORD

KRAMER  
F  
McCollum

Commander Laurence F. Stafford supervised the Communications Security Unit, which intercepted and decoded foreign messages and Lt. Comdr. A. D. Kramer, the translating unit. Kramer and his immediate supervisor, Comdr. A. H. McCollum made the final selection of messages circulated to specified government officials.

In the Army, decoding and translation was accomplished by the Signal Intelligence Service (SIS). Evaluation of the decoded messages had been the responsibility of the Chief of the Far Eastern Section of the Military Intelligence Division, who also determined which MAGIC messages were to be distributed.

*Time lags in translating messages*

A constant question at the Pearl Harbor Hearings concerned the length of time it took to process coded intercepts. Because translators were few and at times interceptions came in rather heavily, up to a month would pass before translation appeared, while others were available on the same day of interception. Because the PURPLE codebreaker decoded all messages, there was no way to tell in advance whether a message was of any importance. The main lag in processing rested with messages intercepted at a distant station and brought to Washington for decoding, translation, and distribution. At Hawaii, the Naval Intelligence Unit had been instructed not to intercept diplomatic messages, while the Army unit there forwarded its diplomatic intercepts to Washington. Fearing the Japanese might discover their code had been broken, telephone, telegraphy and radio were ruled out as a means of sending intercepts to Washington. Rather, air mail became the most common carrier, while at times train or ship had been the only means available. Because each service branch had only six translators, an effort to divide the work on an alternate day basis had been attempted, but when traffic was heavy, this system broke down. The two services agreed upon a list of persons who were to read intercepts, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Secretaries Cordell Hull, Frank Knox, and Henry L. Stimson, along with Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Harold R. Stark and Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall. Presidential Assistant Harry L. Hopkins had been the only nondesignated person privy to MAGIC.

Fearing Japanese interception if transmitted to operation theaters and believing Washington to be the evaluation center, MAGIC messages remained confined in the nation's capitol. Thus, Admiral Stark could only tell the Pearl Harbor Committee that he constantly endeavored "to keep Admiral Kimmel informed of significant events."<sup>5</sup> Finally, regarding evaluation, each specified person saw MAGIC messages briefly when delivered by special courier. At ONI a single copy had been filed chronologically, and no serious evaluation by region had been made.

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The preponderance of the released MAGIC messages dealt with diplomatic maneuverings, not military information. The role that consular officers and diplomatic corps play in war-making policy is remote. With this in mind, and given MAGIC's distribution and retention system, the question remains: were the clues for a Pearl Harbor attack obvious or under existing conditions impossible to recognize? Also, only those intercepts available to Washington officialdom are considered here, for after Pearl Harbor, it was too late.

Diplomatic MAGIC

Introduced at the Pearl Harbor Hearings were 223 intercepts on the Washington-Tokyo circuit. A common thread throughout had been the continued interest in Southeast Asia. For example, after the Nazi invasion of Russia, a secret Japanese Imperial Conference reaffirmed the nation's desire to establish

*obvious clue that it was to be attacked?*

the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and in partial fulfillment a decision had been made to occupy French Indo-China. In the meantime, negotiations with the United States would continue. Thus, before the fact, Washington had been aware of the subsequent Vichy agreement.<sup>6</sup> The American response, freezing Japanese assets, hopefully would create economic hardships and bring Tokyo to compromise. Kimmel, at Pearl Harbor, had been instructed to take precautionary measures against possible eventualities, but Stark added not to "anticipate immediate hostile Japanese action by the Japanese through military means."<sup>7</sup>

While FDR went off to Argentia Bay to meet privately with British Prime Minister Churchill, MAGIC reported that the Japanese Premier Fumimaro Konoye would seek a summit conference with the President in hopes of settling their Far Eastern differences. Although FDR expressed outward interest in the proposal, the State Department was to make the final judgment, and MAGIC reinforced opinion there. The economic embargo was taking its toll. Japan would not give a timetable for withdrawal from Indo-China, leaving the impression that she would not. The sense of Japanese urgency, that "another opportunity such as the present would not appear for some time to come," gave credence to the American view that Konoye could not implement any summit agreements.<sup>8</sup>

Konoye was disposed six weeks after the Americans refused to meet without some concrete assurances. War Minister Hideki Tojo became Premier and signaled that negotiations with the United States would continue.<sup>9</sup> The character of the new Japanese Cabinet caused concern in Washington, as the State Department believed that Tojo might think less of making war.<sup>10</sup> Of these events, Kimmel had been informed that Konoye's resignation created a grave situation and that a Japanese move against Russia was a good possibility, while action against Britain and the United States might also be taken. Instructions to take proper precautions and preparatory deployments were sent to Pearl Harbor, but privately Stark opined to Kimmel that Japan would not sail into the United States.<sup>11</sup>

*Kimmel warned*

MAGIC next revealed what proved to be Japan's final offer. The decision had been reached in Tokyo on November 1, 2 and 5, 1941. The first of two proposals had been presented to Secretary of State Cordell Hull on November 7th. Accordingly, economic equality was to be assured in the Pacific; upon peaceful settlement of the China Incident, Japan would withdraw her troops from China proper, and Indo-China, but her troops would remain in North China, Mongolia, and Hainan Island indefinitely. The Americans also knew a second proposal would be made, and it was presented officially to Hull on November 20. This proffer suggested lifting the American embargo and freezing order, providing equal access to raw materials in the Dutch East Indies, permit Japan to settle the China Incident herself, and a promise not to invade militarily any Southeast Asian region, except French Indo-China. MAGIC also had reported the November 25 deadline for agreement.<sup>12</sup> Japan's urgent need to meet the deadline was apparent in MAGIC.<sup>13</sup> Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo cabled Nomura that "the fate of our Empire hangs by the slender thread of a few days."<sup>14</sup> When Tokyo extended the deadline until the 29th, it was a deadline which "absolutely cannot be changed. After that things are automatically going to happen."<sup>15</sup>

*Japan - 25 Nov 1941 'date' reaction*

Throughout November, MAGIC continually informed Washington officials that Japan would remain a partner in the Axis, her interests in China and Southeast Asia could not be compromised, and that economically Japan was hurting.<sup>16</sup> Tokyo also informed its Hong Kong station that if negotiations failed, American

and British power in China would be destroyed.<sup>17</sup> On November 15, all Japanese outposts were instructed to destroy code machines if an emergency session arose.<sup>18</sup> Against this backdrop, Roosevelt's cabinet assembled on November 25 to formulate its response, which was handed to Nomura the next day. The counterproposal was considered humiliating in Tokyo. Head of the American Division of the Japanese Foreign Office Kumaicho Yamamoto remarked, "I had expected it, but wished to exert every effort up to the final moment in the hope that something might be accomplished."<sup>19</sup> Tokyo instructed its staff to continue negotiations, although recognizing little could be gained.

The details of these negotiations were kept from Kimmel. However, on November 27, Stark cabled his field commanders:

"This dispatch is to be considered a war warning. Negotiations with Japan looking toward stabilization of conditions in the Pacific have closed and an aggressive move by Japanese is expected within the next few days. The number and equipment of Japanese troops and the organization of naval task forces indicate an amphibious expedition against either the Philippines, Thai, or Kra Peninsula or possibly Borneo. Execute an appropriate defensive deployment."<sup>20</sup>

Marshall and Stark further advised Roosevelt that, based upon available information, Japan would most likely move south, and that the Philippine garrison should be strengthened.<sup>21</sup> Stark wrote Kimmel privately that an attack upon the Philippines was most probable to be coupled with military movements into Southeast Asia, but the Chief of Naval Operations could not venture what the American response might be.<sup>22</sup> On Hawaii, Kimmel held a staff conference which concluded that a Japanese advance southward was most probable and Stark's war message meant little to Pearl Harbor.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the first week of December, Nomura and Kurusu made their daily treks to the State Department. The futility of their talks appeared evident in a December 3 MAGIC intercept which indicated that Tokyo had made its last offer. Other MAGIC reports relayed Tokyo's instructions to prepare for destruction of diplomatic files, codes, and code machines, along with personnel shifts not only in Washington, but London, Ottawa, Panama, Bangkok, Manila, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> As before, none of this information had been passed to Kimmel.

Much attention has been given to the final messages of December 6-7. The first, or "pilot message," indicated an important communique was forthcoming.<sup>25</sup> Next, labeled the 13 Part message, was available the afternoon of the 6th, but was not distributed immediately by ONI because this lengthy review of American-Japanese relations was not considered important.<sup>26</sup> By 5 a.m. on the 7th, the 14th Part arrived in Washington indicating an upcoming severance of relations.<sup>27</sup> Sandwiched between was the fourth signal or code destruction message.<sup>28</sup> The story surrounding America's final actions, or lack thereof, has been well told. Roosevelt at the White House, Stark enjoying the "Student Prince," Marshall unavailable, and Hull at home working. By noon, December 7, Stark and Marshall decided to notify Pearl Harbor to be on alert, but gave no significance to the 1 p.m. meeting scheduled between the Japanese envoys in Washington and Hull. War had begun.<sup>29</sup>

What did these diplomatic MAGIC intercepts reveal? That Japan intended to establish her Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, that she had little intention of abandoning China and Indo-China, and that the United States was obstructing these goals. MAGIC also revealed that Japan had negotiated in bad faith after November 1. There was nothing in these diplomatic intercepts which indicated a Pearl Harbor attack. On the contrary, these MAGIC

*Japan moving south, not east*

*"Things kept from Kimmel"*

*Nov 27th warning*

*Early Dec MAGIC info*  
*Dec 6-7 messages*

*What did the messages reveal?!*

*Nothing indicated a PH attack*

messages presented a picture of Japan moving south, not east:

*Military MAGIC*

In addition to the diplomatic knowledge gained from MAGIC, Washington officials came to learn that Tokyo had been seeking military information from Hawaii, the Panama Canal, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and the Netherlands' East Indies. However, these messages constituted the smallest amount of MAGIC introduced at the Pearl Harbor Hearings.

Regarding Hawaii, the Congressional Committee had been presented with 36 intercepts covering December, 1940 through December 6, 1941, twelve of which had been translated after the Pearl Harbor attack. The early messages indicated a reporting of ships in port, by class and type and length of time they may have been out of Pearl.<sup>30</sup> However, the "Bomb Plot" intercept of September 24 revealed Tokyo's appetite for more specific information. Pearl Harbor had been divided into 5 sub-areas, with detailed information about ships tied to wharves, bouys, and in docks.<sup>31</sup> Moving closer to December 7, Tokyo instructed that reports be made twice weekly, but on an irregular basis; and expand observations, so as to include the military reservation.<sup>32</sup> Kimmel would later single out the "Bomb Plot" message as most significant, but Stark would only concede later that the September 24 message indicating the possibility of an attack "or at least the groundwork for a Japanese air raid."<sup>33</sup>

*Sept 24, 1941 "Bomb Plot" message and Kimmel - Stark*

A greater number of intercepts, 46, dealing with the Philippines from August 2 to November 28, 1941 were presented to the inquiry. Until November, Tokyo learned about air defenses built or under construction, progress of coastal defense construction, and the number of ships in and out of Manila.<sup>34</sup> After November 1, reports on the size and location of troop buildups, construction of army barracks and highways, types and number of planes at various airfields and intensified ship information went back to Tokyo.<sup>35</sup> The information sought went beyond purely naval data, as at Pearl Harbor, to include the number of army personnel, air strength, and military construction.

The Pearl Harbor Committee received 20 MAGIC messages on the Tokyo-Panama circuit covering August 2 through December 5, 1941. Most of these intercepts reported on ship movement through the Canal, but others included accounts of military warehouse construction, additional piers and wharves, airplane hangers and runways, and troop deployment. The Japanese in Panama also supplied the Italian embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina with maps and charts of the Canal Zone.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, seven messages dealing with Southeast Asia and the NEI were made available to the Congressional Committee. These few intercepts reveal that Tokyo wanted to know (a) the number of seacraft in the region, their size and speed; and (b) the number and size of aircraft, along with their formation both on the ground and in the air.<sup>37</sup>

At the Committee hearings, only the Pearl Harbor messages received attention. Yet, all the intercepts were not presented. Chief of Military Intelligence Brig. Gen. Sherman Miles testified that Tokyo sent 24 messages to Hawaii seeking naval information during December's first week, and, incidentally, on a 20 to 5 ratio for Panama.<sup>38</sup> But given the breadth of Tokyo's demands, a fair judgment of the military information obtained, at least through available MAGIC, would at best place equal emphasis on the Philippines and Hawaii. And, since Pearl Harbor had been victimized, it is possible that the Congressional Committee, like the historian, has placed his emphasis there, too.

*Conclusion*

Four years after the Pearl Harbor attack, Admiral Kimmel concluded that,

taken together, the diplomatic and military intercepts "would have pointed to Pearl Harbor as a probable objective."<sup>39</sup> The admiral, looking back, believed he would have made such a judgment. A close associate of Kimmel, Captain Robert A. Theobald, shared this view, and further charged that Roosevelt appreciated the importance of Pearl Harbor, and despite the MAGIC warnings ordered the fleet to remain there.<sup>40</sup> Revisionist historian George Morgenstern had been even more critical, stating that MAGIC clearly indicated only a Pearl Harbor attack.<sup>41</sup>

Traditional "court" historians like Herbert Feis, Basil Rausch, and more recently Leonard Baker<sup>42</sup> were busy portraying Japanese aggression and defending American democracy, giving little attention to MAGIC's importance. Robert J. C. Butow and David John Lu<sup>43</sup> have written important accounts of the movement toward war from the Japanese side, and as such are not concerned with MAGIC. The three works which have dealt with MAGIC itself—Farago, Kahn, and Wohlstetter—have made the most important contributions. Each has found the intelligence lacking and has been critical of it. Each has maintained there was evidence of Japanese aggression, and a possible attack on Pearl Harbor. But in failing to synthesize and analyze all intelligence reports, not just MAGIC, the Americans had blundered in not perceiving the real danger. However, each had the advantage of hindsight.

Alone, the available MAGIC messages did not indicate that Japan would strike at Hawaii. Given the definition of her "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere," her diplomatic steadfast position regarding Southeast Asia, and the direction of her army and navy, one might anticipate a southern offensive. Possibly the shock of Pearl Harbor has diminished the importance of information from the Philippines. Thus, the Hawaiian and Panama communiques might have been interpreted in Washington as Japanese efforts to estimate America's Pacific strength. Without the remaining MAGIC messages, the Pearl Harbor story remains incomplete.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Husband E. Kimmel. *Admiral Kimmel's Story*. Henry Regency, Co., 1955, pp. 38-39.
2. Col. John A. Smith, III, Director of Cryptology, Department of the Army, to Thomas M. Leonard, December 22, 1969.
3. S. J. Pomrenze, Chief Army Records Management Division to Thomas M. Leonard, February 5, 1974; and William H. Cunliffe, Chief of the Modern Military Branch Records Division of the National Archives, to Thomas M. Leonard, February 22, 1974.
4. *Newsweek*. May 14, 1956. p. 119.
5. United States Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack. *Hearings Before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*. Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1945-46. Part 5, p. 2108. Hereafter referred to as *Hearings*.
6. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 1-5. For a fuller discussion see: David John Lu *From the Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor*. Washington, Public Affairs Press, 1961. pp. 141-144.
7. *Hearings*. Part 6, p. 2513; Kimmel, *Story*, p. 13.
8. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 10-13; 15-16; 19-22; 23-45; 51. For a fuller discussion of the proposed summit conference, see: Robert J. C. Butow, "Back Door Diplomacy in the Pacific: The Proposal for a Roosevelt-Konoye Meeting 1941," *Journal of American History*, June 1972, pp. 48-72; and Thomas M. Leonard, "Stanley K. Hornbeck: Major Deterrent to American-Japanese Summitry, 1941," *Towson State Journal of International Affairs*, Spring 1974, pp. 113-121.
9. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 76.
10. Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States: Japan 1931-1941*. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1943. Vol. II, p. 704. Hereafter referred to as *Foreign Relations*.

11. *Hearings*. Part 6, p. 2516.
12. For complete text of proposals see: *Hearings*, Part 12, pp. 94-97 and *Foreign Relations*, Japan II, pp. 715-17; 755-56.
13. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 97-98, 109, 116, 129-130, 137-138 and 405.
14. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 137-38.
15. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 165.
16. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 45, 113, 115, 122-132. 141. 152, 154.
17. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 126.
18. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 137.
19. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 180.
20. *Hearings*. Part 6, p. 2518; Part 7, p. 3362.
21. *Hearings*. Part 3, p. 1056.
22. *Hearings*. Part 6, p. 2517.
23. *Hearings*. Part 7, p. 3362.
24. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 208-209; 215-216; 234; 252.
25. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 238; Part 8, p. 3555.
26. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 239-245.
27. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 245.
28. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 249.
29. For a fuller discussion of these events, see: Ladislav Farago. *The Broken Seal*, pp. 329-382.
30. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 254-260.
31. *Hearings*. Part 12, p. 261.
32. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 260-261.
33. *Hearings*. Part 5, p. 2173.
34. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 280-292.
35. *Hearings*. Part 12, 292-303.
36. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 270-277.
37. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 303-307.
38. *Hearings*. Part 12, pp. 794-95.
39. Kimmel, *Story*. p. 98.
40. Robert Theobald. *The Final Secret of Pearl Harbor*. New York, Devin-Adair Co., 1954, pp. 56-58.
41. George Morgenstern. *Pearl Harbor: The Story of the Secret War*. New York, Devin-Adair Co., 1947.
42. Herbert Feis. *The Road to Pearl Harbor*. New York, Atheneum Press, 1963; Basil Rausch. *Roosevelt: From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, New York, Creative Age Press, 1950; and Leonard Baker, *Roosevelt and Pearl Harbor*, New York, The MacMillan Co., 1970.
43. Robert J. C. Butow. *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961; and David John Lu. *From the Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor*, Washington, Public Affairs Press, 1961.

Kimmel & Revisionist supporters

"Court" Historians

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