



# THE MIGHT-HAVE-BEENS OF PEARL HARBOR

*The failures of commanders on both sides raised questions that, fifty years later, we are still trying to answer.*

*by Eliot A. Cohen*

Could Pearl Harbor have gone differently? To ask this question is to ask three others as well: Could the attack have been avoided altogether? Could the United States have done better, exacting a heavier price from the Japanese attackers and suffering less damage? Could the Japanese have been even more successful than they were?

It is hard to imagine a peaceful outcome to the diplomatic conflict between Japan and the United States. Determined to counteract Japanese expansion in China and Southeast Asia, the Roosevelt administration had steadily increased economic pressure on Japan, first cutting off shipments of scrap steel in September 1940 and then, in July 1941, embargoing the export of gasoline suitable for aviation and freezing Japanese assets in the United States. For their part, the Japanese had decided to seize a vast area in Asia to guarantee themselves economic autarky, and they were determined to maintain their hegemony in China despite U.S. opposition. The fundamental incompatibility of American and Japanese objectives made the outbreak of war only a matter of time. This may not have been

clear in mid-1941, but it was by autumn, at least to U.S. decision-makers.

Still, was a surprise attack on the U.S. fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor inevitable? Although some senior naval officers in Japan disagreed with the strategy of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of the Combined Fleet of the Imperial Navy, it was consistent with the Japanese style of operations. And it made operational sense to disable the U.S. fleet so that it could not interfere with the contemplated six-month campaign to seize the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, Malaya—the core of the new Japanese citadel.

Would the Japanese have called the attack off had they been discovered en route to Pearl Harbor? As early as January 1941, Yamamoto had declared that they might face the U.S. fleet sortieing to intercept his forces. And on November 17, he warned his officers, "You may have to fight your way in to the target." The Japanese understood the long-term dangers posed by American power and were supremely confident in their own fighting ability. The attack was virtually inevitable.

Could the United States have anticipated that attack, and could Hawaii

have been better defended? Much of the controversy surrounding the debacle at Pearl Harbor has focused on relations between Washington and Oahu, and on the processing of intelligence that might have warned of an attack. Some key information derived from code breaking was not passed from Washington to Pearl—for example, Japanese requests to their espionage operation in Hawaii for the location of U.S. warships, and a last-minute warning that war was imminent. In the aftermath of the calamity, the local commanders and their defenders were understandably bitter about these lapses.

On the other hand, no information anywhere in the American intelligence system suggested an imminent attack specifically on Pearl Harbor, and even the requests about U.S. ships could be attributed just to Japanese attention to detail in gathering intelligence. And a lot of important information was passed to Pearl. For example, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, commander of the Pacific Fleet, knew that Japanese diplomats were destroying their cipher machines on December 3. In fact, both he and the army commander on Oahu, Lieutenant General Walter C. Short, had been warned on November 27 about the prospects of war with Japan—the message to Kimmel began, "This is a war warning." Nor could any local commander claim it was inconceivable that Pearl Harbor would be attacked: The base had received generous allotments of men and matériel, and two studies by local airmen—one in March 1941, another in July—had indicated just how the Japanese might attack.

What could have been different was an immediate local warning, allowing the U.S. forces up to several hours' preparation for the fight. Rear Admiral Claude C. Bloch, the local base commander, had over seventy airplanes available on Hawaii (most, admittedly, were recent arrivals and still had maintenance problems); they could have patrolled the most dangerous avenues of approach to Oahu, which were generally known to be from the north and northwest, whence the Japanese attacked. Bloch made no such effort, later offering the specious defense that he could not have conducted recon-

naissance in an entire circumference. Further, Hawaii had some of the army's first mobile radar stations. Early on December 7, about an hour before the first wave hit Pearl, operators actually detected the Japanese planes—which were mistaken for a flight of B-17s heading to Hawaii from the mainland. Errors in communication within Hawaii, and a poor alert system, prevented this vital information from triggering early air-raid warnings at the naval base.

Could defenses have been better? Here the answer is an unequivocal yes. In June 1941 Admirals Bloch and Kimmel had been warned that the Americans and British were able to launch air-dropped torpedoes that needed less than the previous minimum of seventy-five feet of water to level out. But Kimmel rejected the use of torpedo nets around the battleships, believing that the forty-foot-deep water at Pearl was too shallow for torpedoes and that the nets would prevent a quick sortie by the fleet. Torpedoes sank four battleships, including the *Arizona* and the *Oklahoma*, the only two permanently lost to the fleet.

As for air defense, the army's nearly 100 P-40s never had a chance to fight en masse over Oahu; the dozen or so marine Wildcats were also caught on the ground. Had the Japanese been forced to fight their way into the base, it is hardly likely they would have been able to launch their torpedoes, bomb, and strafe with anything like the accuracy they achieved. In fact, when their second wave of aircraft hit Pearl Harbor, it took twice as many losses as the first, even though the Americans were reeling from the initial attack.

Furthermore, had General Short not configured his forces primarily for an alert against sabotage, and had he taken the problem of air attack (rather than a purely naval invasion) more seriously, he might have deployed his anti-aircraft batteries and kept his ammunition at hand, not locked away. Only four of the army's thirty-one batteries got into action at all, while navy batteries on the warships in harbor were firing within five minutes of the attack. Short's emphasis on the threat of sabotage also increased the damage, because planes were lined up wingtip to wingtip—and little provision

(air-raid shelters, slit trenches, and the like) had been made for passive defense against air attack.

Had Short, Kimmel, and Bloch been more imaginative and flexible, or had Washington monitored their actions more closely, it is fairly easy to imagine a real battle taking place over Oahu. As it was, the Japanese lost twenty-nine aircraft, and another seventy-four planes were damaged—more than one-quarter of their force rendered hors de combat. A fierce defense might easily have doubled or trebled those losses.

More to the point, the American battleships (all eight of which were sunk or badly damaged) might have been largely saved, not only from torpedoes but from the high-level attacks (conducted at 10,000 feet) by Japanese bombers. Then the U.S. Navy might have attempted a more vigorous defense of Southeast Asia than it could under the circumstances. Rather than turning into a series of carrier engagements, the early battles of the war might have involved mixed forces tangling with each other.

Moreover, if Japanese self-confidence had been shaken by an abortive raid on Pearl Harbor, it is at least conceivable that the pace and audacity of their offensive in 1941–42 would have been curtailed. Ironically, this might have paved the way for bloody clashes at sea—leaving the United States *less* well off than it would be after the smashing victory of Midway in the summer of 1942.

Pearl Harbor could have been a draw, or even a marginal Japanese defeat. But it also might have been a considerably more dramatic Japanese victory. None of the American carriers in the Pacific—the *Lexington*, the *Enterprise*, and the *Saratoga*—were in harbor; the loss or crippling of even one would have altered U.S. strategy in the war. The *Lexington* played a crucial role in the Battle of the Coral Sea, in which she was lost but the Japanese carrier force was weakened in advance of Midway. The *Enterprise* was a key element of the U.S. carrier force at Midway. Had all three been badly damaged, it becomes hard to imagine the Solomon Islands campaign of 1942, which was necessary to protect the

lines of communication to Australia and begin the process of grinding down Japanese air power.

The Japanese could not have determined whether the American carriers would be at Pearl Harbor; that was a matter of luck. But they could have thought through their strategy in the event of success; that was a matter of operational art, and here they failed. Had the Japanese wished, they could have stayed in the neighborhood of Hawaii for a couple of days, pummeling the submarine yard and setting ablaze the aboveground tank farm containing 4.5 million barrels of precious oil. Admiral Chester Nimitz, Kimmel's relief, would later argue that had the Japanese done so, the war might have gone on for another two years. But fearful of American carriers, not attuned to thinking about logistic targets (as opposed to the enemy's main force), and above all convinced that they had achieved their main goal, the Japanese steamed back west.

In the wake of Pearl Harbor, some writers have spun conspiracy theories to explain the surprise attack: The most durable—and least plausible—of these concerns President Roosevelt and his alleged desire to lure the Japanese into an attack on Oahu. Other people have suggested that Japanese success was inevitable—that there was no way of anticipating an attack on the morning of December 7, or even doing much to mitigate its effects. It's clear this isn't so. There was nothing inevitable about how Pearl Harbor turned out. The failures of the American commanders on the scene to provide for a plausible, if unlikely, blow resulted in the destruction that the United States suffered; the failures of Japanese planners and commanders to follow up their spectacular success allowed the United States, in a series of brilliant counterblows, to restore a balance in the Pacific within half a year of this debacle.

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