

FDR and the Road to Pearl Harbor

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The tensions that lead to war between Japan and the United States started long before Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was elected president and the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. The U.S. and Japan had enjoyed a lessening of tensions after World War I. However, but this was quickly dissipated when the United States Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924. The legislation created a permanent quota system included a Japanese exclusion stipulation. This stipulation controlled immigration from Japan and other countries, claiming racial reason for denying entry into America. This action created a very strong reaction by the citizens of Japan. They boycotted goods from the United States and demonstrated against American culture and dances. Many in Japan considered the Act as a declaration of war against Japan by the United States. Additionally, Japan's problems of hard times and social problems at home would inevitably contribute it to conflict with the United States as it took actions not favorable to the U.S.

J. M. Roberts writes, "By 1931, half of Japan's factories were idle. The position of the Japanese peasant deteriorated as millions were ruined and many had to sell their daughters into prostitution in order to survive."ⁱ As the European markets collapsed and new trade tariffs were placed on Japanese goods, exports of Japanese goods fell by two-thirds. Many in Japan believed that Japan had no choice but to export to the Chinese mainland. Any discussion that seemed to threaten Japanese exports created extreme annoyance and public outrage throughout Japan.

The Japanese were also annoyed at the economic progress being made by the Chinese with the help of Russia. Chinese nationalism was on the rise as they began to reassert themselves in Manchuria. The Japanese had been involved in Manchuria since 1905 and this involvement was critical to their export markets.

At first the Chinese submitted to Japanese involvement in their territory but in the 1920s began to question the presence of the Japanese. Prompted by Russia, who saw a danger of Japanese influence in Inner Mongolia, China tried to operate against warlords in the North. This caused armed conflict with the Japanese in 1928. Russia and China came into conflict over the control of the railway across Manchuria. The Chinese military power during this conflict impressed the Japanese. During this time, the commanders of the Japanese troops in Manchuria had the power to do whatever they wanted. In 1931 they organized an incident designed to take over the entire province. They succeeded and created a puppet government called Manchukuo. The government in Japan had become more military and planned to increase their arguments with China. United States Secretary of State Henry Stimson crafted America's response basically stating that the U. S. would not accept any agreements between China and Japan that limited free trade in the region.

The western powers, including the United States did not know how to respond to the crisis in China. The Japanese had advanced from their original objective at Mukden, bombing the city of

Jinzhou. In the United States, there was little interest in military action as American interests were not directly involved. There was little sentiment for economic sanctions against Japan. The U.S. attended meetings of the League of Nations attempting to convince them to insist on adherence to the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, signed by both China and Japan. The Pact signatures agreed not to use armed conflict to settle differences. The appeals to the League of Nations by the Roosevelt administration were not effective. The Japanese answered a Chinese boycott of their goods in 1932 by landing military forces at Shanghai. In 1936, they crossed the Great Wall and in effect dominated a part of historic China. The Japanese tried to rally support for a secessionist movement in northern China, but failed. As an effort to take matters in their own hands in 1935 and 1936, the United States Congress passed the Neutrality Acts. These were designed to prohibit the U.S. from exporting goods to countries at war. President Roosevelt signed the legislation reluctantly. He was concerned the laws would prohibit the U.S. from supporting its allies in their time of need.

China and Japan were involved in a full-scale war by 1937. In the beginning, Roosevelt looked at the events in China with indecisiveness. Some in his administration opposed the Japanese moves in northern China because of the friendship between the U.S. and China. Others in his administration did not believe there were any U.S. interests in China worth going to war with Japan over. Popular opinion in the United States began to turn towards China as the Japanese military moved down the coast and captured the capital of Nanjing. When the U.S.S. Panay was bombed while evacuating U.S. citizens from Nanjing, tensions between the United States and Japan rose. President Roosevelt wanted to avoid confrontation and accepted compensation and an apology from the Japanese government.

Roosevelt began aid to China in 1940, extending credits for the purchase of war material and supplies. At the same time, the U.S. began slowing iron, steel and oil exports to Japan. Roosevelt believed this might convince the Japanese to stop their aggression in China. The Japanese were very resentful of these measures by the United States and blamed the U.S. on their inability to completely conquer the Chinese. The Japanese looked for a way to keep aid from reaching China and for ways to replace the commodities they could not get from the United States.

Beginning in January 1940, the Roosevelt administration increased aid to China by making larger credits available and slowly moved to an embargo of all items that could be used by the Japanese military. Based on these actions of the United States, the Japanese government looked to creating more security by creating the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.' It said that it was Japan's intent to drive out western influence from Asia. Japan fortified the Marshall Islands, which lie between the Philippines and Hawaii in early 1940. President Roosevelt viewed this action as a threat to communications between the Philippines and Hawaii. In June 1940, he ordered the U.S. Pacific fleet to relocate its base to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii from California. Roosevelt believed this move would display U.S. naval power and act as a deterrent to Japan. FDR knew this was a risky move as it positioned the U.S. Pacific fleet within striking distance of Japan's increasingly powerful navy.

FDR responded to the growing Japanese threat by stopping negotiations with the Japanese temporarily, implementing a complete embargo on all exports to Japan, freezing Japanese bank assets and sending supplies to China along the Burma Road. While negotiations with Japanese diplomats were restarted no meaningful agreements were reached. Pro-Chinese attitudes in America insisted that Japan withdraw from China. This condition was totally unacceptable to the Japanese leadership. The Japanese viewed the successes of Germany in Europe to be an answer to their problems. Netherlands, England and France controlled territories in Southeast Asia. To Japan, these territories seemed indefensible by the countries of interest who were involved in war with Germany. The Japanese thought that if these territories could be in their hands, much of their supply problem would be solved. In July 1940, Japan signed a pact with Germany and then pressured France to permit them to station troops in northern Indochina. Within a year, Japan occupied all of French Indochina.

The Roosevelt administration met Japan's actions with a progressively increasing of economic sanctions. By the late summer of 1941, Japan was no longer receiving goods from the United States. The most damaging effect of the U.S. policy was that Japan could no longer import oil from the United States. Japan realized that without oil, they could no longer pursue their policies in China. This would be totally unacceptable humiliation to the Japanese leadership.

The Japanese government continued to negotiate with the United States just in case the oil embargo would come to an end. However, when U.S. Secretary of State Hull handed the Japanese ambassador a note in Washington D.C, any hope by the Japanese ended. The note said that the U.S. would lift the oil embargo only if Japan completely pulled out of China and Indochina and ended its pact with Germany. Given the positions of the military leadership in Japan, the term could not be accepted. As Secretary Hull was delivering his note to the Japanese ambassador, Japanese war ships were already sailing for the Pearl Harbor.

Looking at the issue from the Japanese perspective, they felt they had good reason to feel humiliated prior to the Pearl Harbor attack. The U.S. had used gunboat diplomacy in the mid-19th century to open up Japan and to force unequal treaties on her. During the Great Depression, Japan was left out of trade deals that served only the most powerful nations. Racial prejudice preventing Japanese immigration to the United States did not sit well with the Japanese people. Japan felt humiliated and excluded from the world stage. Faced with severe shortages as a result of the perceived inflexible policies of the Roosevelt administration and unable to give in, they had no choice but war. Further, Japanese leaders felt they had to move quickly and decisively against the growing U.S. presence in what they believed to be their sphere of influence.

From the perspective of the United States government, they had not given up on negotiation. The U.S. was slow to react to Japanese aggression. FDR looked at the initial events in China with indifference. He slowly came to the conclusion that Japan presented a more formidable threat to American interest in Asia. Additionally, there was a strong anti-war sentiment in the United States prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. The horrors of World War I were fresh in many people's minds. President Roosevelt was very aware of this sentiment and realized that

Congress was not ready to declare war on Japan for actions so far away from the shores of the United States. Some in the Roosevelt administration believed that the Japanese were not strong enough to attack the U.S. Pacific fleet. Therefore, the people of the United States were astonished when Japanese planes bombed the United States Pacific fleet on December 7, 1941 sinking 21 ships and killing over 2,000 Americans.

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