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WORLD WAR II

PEARL HARBOR: Warning and Decision. By Roberta Wohl-
stetter. (Stanford University Press. 1962. Pp. 426. \$7.50.)

"If our intelligence systems and all our other channels of information failed to produce an accurate image of Japanese intentions and capabilities, it was not for want of the relevant materials. Never before have we had so complete an intelligence picture of the enemy."

Thus does Roberta Wohlstetter start the seventh and last chapter of her magnificent analysis of the circumstances leading to the disaster of 7 December 1941. Winner of the Bancroft Prize for 1963 and now in its third printing, her book is the most objective examination of the intelligence failure culminated at Pearl Harbor yet published.¹ She makes extensive

¹The chief previously published works that deal significantly with the intelligence aspects of the Pearl Harbor disaster are the following: *The Road to Pearl Harbor* (Princeton University Press, 1950) by Herbert Feis, who had been a State Department officer at the time of the attack and in writing the book at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study had access to official U.S. documents and the papers of several of the participants; *Admiral Kimmel's Story* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955), the naval commander's own apologia; G. E. Morgenstern's *Pearl Harbor* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1947), a journalist's portrayal of the attack as the result of a deliberate plot engineered by President Roosevelt; *The Final Secret of Pearl Harbor* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1954) by R. A. Theobald, a subordinate commander of Kimmel's at the time of the attack and his assistant during the investigations, who argues that a good share of the blame should have gone to the top officers, military and civilian, in Washington; *What Happened at Pearl Harbor?* (New York: Twayne, 1958), a compilation of documents bearing on the event, including extracts from the congressional investigation, edited by H. L. Trefousse; and the *Report* of the congressional Joint Committee itself (USGPO, 1946). The 39 volumes of this *Report* include not only the testimony (Parts 1-11) and exhibits (Parts 12-21) placed before the Joint Committee but also the evidence developed in the earlier investigations by the (Supreme Court Justice) Roberts Commission (Parts 22-25), by Admiral Thomas C. Hart for the Secretary of the Navy (Part 26), by the Army Pearl Harbor

use of the 39-volume *Report* of the congressional Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack as basic source material, but works out her own exceptionally fine study of the intelligence reporting, processing, and estimating.

After her sweeping initial statement in Chapter Seven, Mrs. Wohlstetter qualifies it. She points out that "no single person or agency ever had at any given moment all the signals existing." And while the decision-makers had at hand an impressive amount of information on the enemy, "they did not have the complete list of targets [estimated to be the objectives of an evidently imminent seaborne attack], since none of the last-minute estimates included Pearl Harbor. They did not know the exact hour and date for opening the attack. They did not have an accurate knowledge of Japanese capabilities or of Japanese ability to accept very high risks. . . . If we could enumerate accurately the British and Dutch targets . . . [of] a Japanese attack . . . either on November 30 or December 7, why were we not expecting a specific danger to *ourselves*?"

Several reasons are offered. "It is much easier after the event to sort the relevant from the irrelevant signals . . . Before the event [a signal] is obscure and pregnant with conflicting meanings . . . In Washington, Pearl Harbor signals were competing with a vast number of signals from the European theater . . . In short, we failed to anticipate Pearl Harbor not for want of the relevant materials, but because of a plethora of irrelevant ones."

Board (Parts 27-31), by the Navy Court of Inquiry (Parts 32-33), by Colonel Carter W. Clarke for the Army Chief of Staff (Part 34), by Lt. Col. Henry C. Clausen supplementing the Army Pearl Harbor Board investigation (Part 35), and by Admiral H. Kent Hewitt supplementing the Navy Court of Inquiry results (Parts 36-38). Part 39 contains the summary reports of the Roberts Commission, the Army Pearl Harbor Board, the Navy Court of Inquiry, and the Hewitt Inquiry. A study of the intelligence aspects of the Joint Committee's findings, in the form of a memorandum written for the Director of Central Intelligence under date of 22 August 1946 by Walter L. Pforzheimer, is available in the CIA Historical Intelligence Collection.

Examples are cited which "illustrate . . . the very human tendency to pay attention to signals that support current expectations about enemy behavior." There were other problems for the analysts: there had been previous alert situations and false alarms; the enemy tried to keep relevant signals quiet and conducted an elaborate deception program; there was such careful control over the most important information that "only a very few key individuals saw these secret [MAGIC] messages, and they saw them only briefly. They had no opportunity or time to make a critical review of the material, and each one assumed that others who had seen it would arrive at identical interpretations."

There were intraservice and interservice rivalries and a general disregard for intelligence. "The most glaring example of rivalry in the Pearl Harbor case was that between Naval War Plans and Naval Intelligence. A general prejudice against intellectuals and specialists, not confined to the military but unfortunately widely held in America, also made it difficult for intelligence experts to be heard . . . Low budgets for American intelligence departments reflected the low prestige of this activity, whereas in England, Germany, and Japan, 1941 budgets reached a height that was regarded by the American Congress as quite beyond reason."

The doctrinal conclusions the author arrives at in her study are not optimistic. These include:

"The fact that intelligence predictions must be based on moves that are almost always reversible makes understandable the reluctance of the intelligence analyst to make bold assertions."

"In spite of the vast increase in expenditures for collecting and analyzing intelligence data and in spite of advances in the art of machine decoding and machine translation, the balance of the advantage seems clearly to have shifted since Pearl Harbor in favor of a surprise attacker. The benefits to be expected from achieving surprise have increased enormously and the penalties for losing the initiative in an all-out war have grown correspondingly."

"If the study of Pearl Harbor has anything to offer for the future, it is this: We have to accept the fact of uncertainty

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and learn to live with it. No magic, in code or otherwise, will provide certainty. Our plans must work without it."

While such disturbing conclusions are justified by the history of the Pearl Harbor catastrophe, in which the lack of any capability for systematic analysis and unified estimates loomed large, they are perhaps less fully applicable today than Mrs. Wohlstetter believes. Nothing, to be sure, will "provide certainty," but the postwar development of the U.S. intelligence effort has substantially eliminated many of the problems and weaknesses, horrendous to contemplate in the brilliance of our 20-20 hindsight, which she describes.

The preceding chapters of the book make a careful analysis of the intelligence organization at Pearl Harbor and a much more penetrating study of Washington intelligence. Particular attention is devoted to signals intelligence, notably to MAGIC intercepts, the "Winds" messages, Japanese espionage reporting, and frequency analysis. There is a look at the three earlier alerts in 1941—June 17, July 25, and October 16—and the effect these had on reactions in December, and careful consideration is given both to diplomatic reporting and to the able press coverage of the deterioration of Japanese-American relations. Finally there is a good study of the Japanese planning which highlights the fact that the Pearl Harbor attack was not finally settled upon until the last minute, a circumstance that did not make the problem any easier for U.S. intelligence.

This is a required textbook for intelligence officers—a little slow-going in spots, but on the whole exceedingly well done.

—L. B. Kirkpatrick