

Pearl Harbor: Estimating Then and Now

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
22 SEPT 93

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National stereotypes and wishful thinking as they impinge on the intelligence officer's views.

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On Sunday, 7 December 1941, submarines and aircraft from a Japanese fleet whose presence was totally unsuspected by our defense establishment attacked American military installations and naval vessels in the Hawaiian Islands. Achieving complete surprise, the attack was a great success. It crippled our retaliatory powers for more than a year, while the enemy escaped all but unscathed.

The name Pearl Harbor has become a symbol of our disastrous failure to read rightly the many omens in the weeks preceding that pointed to war and even to this attack. Reviewing the events and the climate of opinion of those times, it seems clear to me that we failed to foresee the Japanese assault largely because we were influenced by a faulty stereotype of what was an adversary nation.¹ Today, progress in the arts of weaponry and technical intelligence collection make unlikely another Pearl Harbor kind of surprise attack, but the faulty stereotype that can lead to grave miscalculation of an adversary's capability and intent remain with us, almost as a human condition. This fact is one I believe every estimating intelligence officer should keep in the forefront of his consciousness.

Among the more curious aspects of human relations is this stereotype,

or "image," that one people forms of another. The assortment of stereotypes it holds about others is an integral component of a people's social myth—the collection of beliefs, however derived, by which it orders its political life, including its relationships with other national states. Some parts of a stereotype, though rarely the entire construct, are uniformly the same throughout the society holding it; some are different, even contradictory. Objectively, some parts of it are quite true, some partly true, and others totally untrue. The willful, wishful, or purposeful may hold some parts true even in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.

These stereotypes constitute the intelligence officer's greatest peril, particularly in his estimative role, because he cannot escape their influence. They form the greater part of his "input" on the problem at hand. Even though he may shut out invalid elements that he is aware of, as he reviews his materials he is bombarded by the stereotype's other elements. When he accepts a line of thought from another, say an expert in some field, he takes the risk that this opinion has been influenced by those very elements in the stereotype that he himself has rejected. He is thus inevitably and to some degree unwittingly more or less under the influence of ideas that he might consciously reject.

The Japan Stereotype

What sort of people did Americans, at the time of Pearl Harbor, believe the Japanese to be, and what did they believe about Japanese intentions toward themselves? The American view was ambiguous and shot through with inconsistencies. At the extremes it ran contrary to observed data and to common sense, but its main lines might be summarized something like this: "The Japanese people, given the conflicts of interest between us, will quite likely -- or maybe only possibly -- do us a mischief if they can; but they lack the capacity to harm us seriously, and they know that this is so. On the other hand, they are so cultivated and mannerly that it really is, after all, inconceivable that they would even try to harm us."

There was in the United States little doubt that Japan was an adversary and one of some consequence. In seizing Manchuria and invading

China, the Japanese had acted in defiance of the League of Nations. Americans cherished peace, opposed aggression, and morally supported the League as "an instrument of peace." They made clear their displeasure at Japan's aggressive acts.

The Japanese could not be deterred without the use of force from their announced course of winning domination over eastern and southeastern Asia. As they pressed on, American interests suffered. American markets were preempted and some of our sources of commodities became Japanese monopolies. American treaty rights were abridged or ignored. Our Christian missions, not only evangelical but educational and medical missions as well, were hampered and their converts harassed. Living conditions for Americans in Japanese-occupied Asia and throughout China became all but unbearable, and the American presence there was much reduced.

These acts were, of course, greatly resented throughout the United States. It was generally clear that the Japanese wanted to eliminate our power in eastern Asia. Counteraction was often spoken of in the press, but the country as a whole was generally reluctant to resort to the use of armed force, the one thing that would inhibit our adversary. Why was this so?

For one thing, the Japanese had their apologists. While there was no denying that the general trend of their strategy was damaging our interests, it was argued by many Americans that all of this was after all going on in Asia. What real business had the United States in eastern Asia, where its mere presence threatened to involve it in a conflict between two other powers? The American in the Far East should come home. If he chose to stay, he was not entitled to protection. These were the isolationists talking.

The Wishers-Well

Others dismissed as propaganda any reports of Japanese atrocities or interpretations picturing Japanese action inimical to our interests. These were partisans of the Japanese, sometimes so vigorous in their partisanship as to deny known facts. I recall one instance when a China missionary, a clergyman of some distinction, told in calm and measured

language how the Japanese had ravaged his parish and horribly abused his congregation. Another missionary, this one from Japan, after hearing out his colleague, proclaimed his disbelief. "I have worked with the Japanese for over thirty years," he said, "and I know that they simply would not act as you say they acted. Somehow you have been deceived."

If there was some wishfulness in this partisan thinking, there was more among the Far East experts in scholarly circles who believed that there was a "liberal" group in Japan that would somehow prevail over the fascistic militarists in power. These experts had a wide hearing in this country, and their argument was particularly dangerous. The Japanese liberals, they said, being a minority group and very much at the mercy of the militarists, had to act discreetly, doing nothing to arouse the military clique against them. Americans who wished the liberals well had therefore to follow suit and avoid antagonizing the militarists. If they provoked them into retaliating against the liberals it would destroy the last hope of rescuing eastern Asia from military dictatorship. This was an exceedingly comforting line of thought: non-involvement, without sacrifice or risk, was the way to attain our aims.

There was another argument that was often related to this. The militarists, if we were only patient, would have to slow down. Japan had already swallowed more than she could digest; she could not administer or profit economically from more conquests. She might even have to disgorge much that she had already seized. This argument was heard when Japan moved into Manchuria; it was repeated when she occupied vast areas of China, including those most developed economically; it was sounded again when her armies were poised to take southeast Asia. Informed observers thus erected another hypothesis based on nothing more substantial than their predilections for a pleasant world that does not exist.

The Charms of Art

Another inconsistent facet of the stereotype was the warlike-peaceful quality of the Japanese. One would have thought it well established long before Pearl Harbor that the Japanese had demonstrated a great aptitude for martial exercises and pursued them diligently, often with

relish. It should also have been clear that they were indifferent to the sufferings inflicted on their foes, combatant and noncombatant alike. That these were characteristic traits was clear enough to have been accepted automatically by all who heard the word Japanese. Yet their partisans managed to obscure this clarity, and here official organs of the Japanese government played a role.

One device used in Japan's overt international program, one that was extremely effective in countering the growing evidence that they were a cruel and barbarous people, was a beautifully produced series of publications on various aspects of Japanese art and literature. These were widely distributed and in particular made available to public schools at little or no cost. Of considerable artistic merit, they did much to foster a sentiment that people capable of producing such beauty could not have behaved so coarsely as they were being accused of acting.

Another program in the cultural field was similarly successful. For a number of years the quasi-governmental Japan Tourist Bureau had offered group tours to Japan, mainly on Japanese ships, at extremely low fares. There were six ships plying this trade from the U.S. west coast, and through the summer months they carried a large volume of American tourists. Few countries can show the foreign visitor a fairer face than Japan, and in those days probably none could give him more for his money.

In the autumn of 1938 my wife and I were exposed for several weeks to a party returning from such a visit aboard a Japanese vessel bound for Seattle. We were coming from a stay of several years in China, a year of it under Japanese military rule. The Japanese had often inconvenienced but never maltreated us, and neither of us had ever witnessed a Japanese atrocity, other than the impersonal atrocity that is an inevitable part of war. But by this time the infamous Rape of Nanking had taken place and the American river gunboat *Panay* had been sunk; and we were both deeply ashamed at the pusillanimity of our government's response to these actions. Indeed, we had taken passage on a Japanese ship only as a last resort.

We found ourselves totally unable to communicate with our fellow passengers about the Japanese aggression in Asia. All on board knew of Nanking and the *Panay*, but when we mentioned such things as these we found that the hospitality of the tour had operated to cancel any

repugnance toward them. Although we attempted no crusade, we were not popular. It was as though we had mentioned before a gracious host and his guests some matter of no real concern to us which was vastly embarrassing to him.

Thus at a time when the Japanese most needed it, literally thousands of Americans were telling their friends and neighbors that first-hand observation had showed them a civilized, cultivated, honest, and gracious folk who displayed no sign of any bent for the horrible things being charged to them. Weren't we perhaps being misinformed, even by well-meaning people like our missionary clergy in China?

Incompetent Nippon

Aside from this ambiguity in the American view of Japan's martial proclivities in general, there was disagreement on the specific question whether Japan might attack the United States; and here the consensus was largely negative. It was thought that Japan would not make war on us because of her limited military capability; she could never hope to succeed. There was some evidence, however, that bore on this point, and it was mainly to the contrary.

The Sino-Japanese war was not conducted in private. Official qualified observers from many nations were on hand, and their opportunities for observation varied from good to excellent. Large military actions took place in the environs of cities where extraterritorial privileges protected the foreigner. The hinterland was dotted with missionaries and, to a lesser extent, businessmen who could and did report to the service attaché what they had seen.

Generally speaking, the Japanese armies showed their competence wherever their performance was observable. While their Chinese opposition was inferior to most Western armies and not well supplied, some Chinese formations as large as army groups fought creditably, providing a fair test. Although there were some instances of faulty Japanese generalship, foreign attaches were greatly impressed by Japanese skill in retrieving victory from near-disaster in the campaigns around Shanghai. They were impressed by the Japanese ability to move large bodies of troops over difficult terrain where transportation facilities

were primitive at best. They were struck by the power of the Japanese Army Air Force and by what little they saw of Japan's naval air arm. The morale, physical endurance, and the courage and state of training of the individual Japanese infantryman were noted and often admired. Japanese weapons were seen to be serviceable, if lacking the polish of comparable pieces used in Western armies. Japanese artillery was observed to be accurate in aim and surprisingly heavy in its destructive power.

The Japanese navy remained something of an enigma. It was involved in no fleet actions. It was observed only in convoy work, in the bombardment of shore targets, and, more rarely, in exercises by larger groups of ships. It was known, however, that the Japanese were a maritime people whose merchant shipping could be seen throughout the Seven Seas. They built and operated their own merchant marine, and in this activity they were a match for any country. Against the evidence of this performance, together with the little that could be discovered about their fighting ships, it would not be prudent to count their navy less capable than their ground and air forces.

Thus what the professional and other observers saw of the Japanese military, and presumably reported to the appropriate offices, did not square with the prevailing stereotype. Here the gap between image and reality was enormous. Three separate facets of the former come to mind. One was the often repeated statement that the Japanese people lacked inventive powers. They could imitate but not innovate. Their arms were no more than copies of Western models. An often told, widely believed tale had it that the latest Japanese capital ships were built from plans stolen from British naval shipbuilders, but British intelligence had learned of the theft plot in advance and substituted faulty blueprints. The Japanese followed these meticulously, so when the new ships were launched they turned turtle and sank, just as MI-6 had planned.

Another widespread belief was that Japan's industry could not turn out a durable product. It did turn out shoddy ones wherever the world market would absorb them, and these were cited, despite plainly visible evidence to the contrary, as showing the best it could do. It was, for example, the cheap Made-in-Japan light bulb which burned out after a few hours that found a place in the stereotype, not the magnificent hydroelectric systems which Japanese talent designed and built for the home islands, Korea, and Formosa.

The third fable entering the stereotype was that the anatomy of the Japanese was deficient. He was not physically able to use the weapons of modern war, particularly aircraft. His vision was so poor that he could not see to fly or bomb. His nervous reactions were faulty, limiting him to the most elementary aerobatics. Airborne, he was bound to be a total failure. On the day of Pearl Harbor we were often offered this comforting thought by the radio announcers who told us over and over again that this was going to be a short and easy war.

Some Estimates

On the evening of 5 December, an American university professor making a public address asserted, in response to questions, that he believed Japan would attack the United States, probably that weekend, and that the attack would almost certainly include a diversionary naval raid against Hawaii to deter us from reinforcing the Philippines, where the main weight of the assault would fall. The speaker had no formal military training nor access to classified information. He had lived in eastern Asia and had seen the Japanese army in action. He drew these conclusions from what he saw in the daily press, relating it to his current courses on the politics of the Pacific.

But on that same weekend a number of well-known figures in private and official life -- both civil and military, area experts, journalists, businessmen, diplomats, and so on -- were holding a colloquium sponsored by one of the leading journals of a Midwestern city. The announced subject was "Peace in the Pacific," and there was general agreement among the speakers that for the United States there was little or no likelihood of military involvement in the Pacific.

A military intelligence appreciation of about the same time prognosticated concerning what would transpire in the event of Japanese-American hostilities. The omens, as the oracle read them, pointed to gigantic fleet actions here or there in the Pacific. There was a reference to the possibility of Japanese cruisers raiding our merchant shipping in the Gulf of Panama. There was none to the possibility of Japanese surface ships approaching the Hawaiian Islands.

What chance was there that the professional intelligence officer

assigned to estimative duties could predict the Japanese assault on Hawaii, hampered as he was by the weight of public opinion and "expert" opinion voiced loudly in public? As I see it, only a little chance. The stereotype overcame him in the end. Since that time the practice of intelligence in the United States has improved greatly, but the opportunities for self-deception are at least as great as ever. Machinery has been built up where there was almost none before. Its effectiveness, however, still depends on the human element. No one has yet found a cure for our tendency to believe what we find most congenial and reject what seems repugnant.

New Stereotypes

In today's world, the catastrophic consequences of unbridled war make it unlikely that one great power will launch a massive surprise assault on another. The condition that gave rise to Pearl Harbor, however, remains unchanged or, if anything, exacerbated. This is the system of national states, under which the globe is partitioned among sovereign political entities, each dedicated to the principle of self-interest, seeking to expand its power at the expense of others and willing to resort to force to protect its position, prospects, or prestige. The struggle among these rival entities is carried on by means short of all-out war, and the political clash has become a more intricate and sophisticated battle than ever before. The main battlefield is now the new, needy, underdeveloped nations.

In the postwar struggle for power the Communists are the aggressors. They make no secret of their intent to number the new nations, along with the rest of the world, among their adherents. Their campaign employs every weapon in the arsenal of politics, including force or threat of force when they assess as small the risk of escalation into a conflict where the new weapon will be used. This renunciation of the ultimate force for political purposes is an historical novelty, a kind of warfare to which we are only gradually becoming accustomed. Some Communist tactics and elements of strategy we have probably not yet discerned, at least not clearly enough to devise countermeasures, and for others we have found no adequate defense.

One of their current successes reminiscent of Japanese strategy in the years before Pearl Harbor is the promotion of their own stereotype of the newly emerged nations. In part it is the familiar Aesopian language of Communist discourse, the use of nomenclature that reverses accepted definitions and the persistent perversion of truth in the face of objective evidence. With this particular perversion their success has been phenomenal. The stereotype pictures a land that has been thoroughly victimized by a ruthless imperial power whose only motive in its relations with the colony was greed for gain. And this picture is imposed regardless of whether the colonial relationship ever really existed in fact. The "colony" may be a sovereign state, and the "imperialist power" need not hold or even desire hegemony over it.

Further, the Communist stereotype justifies behavior on the part of the so-called colony, or Communist-affiliated political elements within it, that they would call intolerable in an "imperialist" power or in a political party independent of their control. Any politically organized fragment affiliated with the Communists is hailed as a force for "national liberation," while its native political opponents are no better than the foreign colonizers, creatures of the imperialists dedicated to the suppression of freedom. The Communist bloc has as its historic mission and trust the support of wars and other efforts of liberation.

It is true that this stereotype is not wholly accepted in the non-Communist world, particularly the Communists' nobility in promoting wars of national liberation, but much of it is evident in the more "liberal" writings on underdeveloped countries. English and American writers about these countries have tended automatically to explain their great tribulations in independence as simply the result of their colonial experience. This attribution, often of dubious validity, leads them to refuse any credit -- if they do not explicitly deny it, they omit to mention it -- to colonial powers for actions beneficial to colonial populations. And their acceptance of this part of the Communist stereotype tends to lend credence to the rest.

In other matters one can see terminology creeping into our studies, or being excluded from them, in a way that suggests we are being influenced to think in concepts the Communists would like us to use. Our own writers, non-Communists, criticize a monarchical government as inappropriate to the times and cite its neighbor, a "people's democracy" that is in fact a repressive autocracy, as one the United States should cultivate. We use the word "capitalist" only as a technical

term in economics, not to describe ourselves: the pejorative flavor imparted to it by the Communists has taken hold. Similarly, the Communists have given the word "bloc" an unpleasant connotation in its meaning of a political combination against a common adversary. Thus the term "capitalist bloc," the consolidation of which is certainly an American policy objective, we seldom use except in quoting a Communist document. These two examples of Communist tactical victories in our home field may not bring any tangible gain to the adversary, but they do tend to confuse and obfuscate the analyst, whether man in the street or intelligence officer.

As we pointed out, the intelligence officer now operates in a world of interstate relations immensely more complicated than anything he has known before. His guideposts are few and often misleading, and his experience tables are of little use to him. At the same time, his mistakes have a potential for damage undreamed of hitherto by man.

1 Of the extensive literature on Pearl Harbor, the most valuable single book is *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, 1962), by Roberta Wohlstetter. In studying the circumstances of the intelligence failure she puts most emphasis on the fact that our intelligence community was confused by a multiplicity of irrelevant signals -- noise that corrupted our data input. Certainly this is a valid point, and in a sense my "stereotype" constitutes a particular kind of noise. But my thesis is more closely related to the view, which Wohlstetter also treats, of Joseph C. Grew, Ambassador to Japan at the time, who said, "National sanity would dictate against such an event, but Japanese sanity cannot be measured by our own standards of logic."

Posted: May 08, 2007 08:03 AM