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Why Won't They Listen?
Understanding Policy Maker Receptivity Toward Intelligence

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Abstract

After surprise attacks and other intelligence failures, the complaint is often heard that if only decision makers had listened more closely to the warnings they had received—if only they had treated intelligence more objectively, rather than letting their own beliefs and wishes interfere—disaster might have been avoided. But even though it is generally agreed that intelligence is of little use unless it is received and understood by policy makers, we actually know little about why some leaders are receptive toward intelligence, while others are not. This paper argues that the willingness of decision makers to listen to intelligence depends primarily on two factors: their belief in the seriousness of the issue or threat involved, and their trust in the utility of intelligence. It examines contrasting receptivity toward intelligence in the cases of Pearl Harbor and the Battle of Midway, and suggests that current models of intelligence-policy relations need to be revised.

Introduction

Why won't they listen? This complaint is often heard from intelligence officials and commentators after a major intelligence failure. The intelligence community had warned—they

¹ The views presented in this paper are those of the author, and they do not represent the official position of the Naval Postgraduate School, Department of the Navy, or U.S. government.

had produced memos and briefings, or even delivered urgent warnings in person—and yet their work appears to have fallen on deaf ears.²

This complaint was often heard after the 9/11 attacks, and has been seen as a puzzle: how could decision makers have received so many warnings of potential terrorist attacks, and yet not taken decisive action to prevent them? Why were they so unreceptive toward intelligence? To cite only one example of this puzzle, in early July 2001 Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet called National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and told her he needed to see her immediately with an update on the al Qaeda threat. Such a meeting was extremely unusual; Tenet writes, “I can recall no other time in my seven years as DCI that I sought such an urgent meeting at the White House.”³ Tenet and several other officials went to the White House on July 10, 2001, and a CIA analyst began the briefing for Rice by exclaiming, “There will be a significant terrorist attack in the coming weeks or months!”⁴ Yet despite this urgent warning, Rice did not apparently feel the information was significant enough to take action on, or even to remember when asked about it later.⁵

More recently, although we have seen many instances of terrorist plots and attempted attacks that have been thwarted, there still are important cases in which warnings about potential terrorist attacks appear to have been disregarded.⁶ And although the intelligence community has come under fire for having failed to anticipate the waves of unrest sweeping across much of the Middle East, we have also seen complaints that the Obama administration should have listened to warnings that had been made about potential unrest in Egypt—warnings not from the intelligence community, but from a group of academics and policy analysts who had been writing for some time about a coming crisis in that country.⁷

For many intelligence officials and other observers, the answer to this puzzle about intelligence receptivity is simple: policy makers tend to listen to intelligence that supports their policies or preconceptions, and to dismiss warnings and assessments that run counter to their beliefs. The editor of one prominent journal, for example, recently complained: “Since modern American intelligence was launched . . . analysts have been variously scoffed at, then summarily blamed, when things went wrong just as they’d predicted.”⁸ The reason for this poor treatment of intelligence, according to that editor, is that intelligence is typically ignored “by politicians

² This question is also heard in other fields. Christoph O. Meyer, et al, write recently that “‘Why do they not listen?’ and ‘why do they not act?’ are the recurrent lamentations in the conflict prevention field in response to the humanitarian tragedies unfolding in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur despite ample warning [that] seems to have been available.” Christoph O. Meyer, et al, “Recasting the Warning-Response Problem: Persuasion and Preventive Policy,” *International Studies Review* 12 (2010), 561.

³ George Tenet and Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA*, 151.

⁴ *At the Center of the Storm*, 151. This meeting is also described by Bob Woodward, evidently based largely on interviews with Tenet: Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 51-52.

⁵ “Two Months Before 9/11, an Urgent Warning to Rice,” *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2006.

⁶ Examples include the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, in which Indian as well as U.S. authorities appear to have missed warning signals; and the 2009 Christmas Day airplane bombing attempt, in which the CIA and other agencies had received warnings ahead of time about the would-be bomber.

⁷ Jackson Diehl, “Obama Administration Ignored Clear Warnings on Egypt,” *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2011.

⁸ David A. Andelman, “Whither Intelligence? Where Espionage Goes Wrong,” *World Policy Journal* 27/4 (Winter 2010/2011), 120.

with their own particular agendas into which they have invested considerable political and economic capital.”⁹

This paper argues that the question of why policy makers do or do not listen to intelligence depends less on leaders’ predispositions than on two critical factors: their belief in the seriousness of the issue or threat involved, and their trust in the utility of the intelligence they receive. If leaders do not take the threat or problem seriously, and they do not trust the intelligence they are given, they are unlikely to take action even in the face of considerable warning intelligence. In addition, policy maker receptivity is largely influenced by the level of precision of the intelligence provided: although leaders tend to ask for and say they want big-picture, strategic intelligence, they actually are much more likely to act on the basis of specific, tactical level warnings.

To make this argument and to attempt to identify the factors that can produce policy maker receptivity, this paper sets out to examine two comparative cases in which decision makers faced similar situations and similar warnings from intelligence, and yet reacted differently. This paper is only an initial step at such a comparative study, and it examines what may be the best known contrasting cases of policy maker receptivity in the history of American intelligence: the failure of warning and receptivity before Pearl Harbor, followed by the successful use of intelligence only six months later at the Battle of Midway.

The importance of policy maker receptivity has been widely noted; Ohad Leslau recently commented that “Only when decision makers are receptive can the intelligence product enjoy great influence.”¹⁰ But what do we mean by receptivity, and how do we measure it? I define receptivity—the dependent variable of this study—as *the willingness and readiness to act on the warnings from intelligence*.

Despite the title of this paper, I am not attempting to make a normative argument about whether or not policy makers *should* be receptive. It is certainly not my intention to argue that leaders and decision makers should in all cases “listen” to intelligence—if by listen we mean that they should automatically act upon the assessments produced by their intelligence staffs. In some cases, after all, intelligence might be wrong, and the result of policymaker receptivity could be the failure of policy or even disaster. Mark Lowenthal has pointed out that in some cases military leaders do well by *failing* to pay attention to intelligence (by being unreceptive). An effective leader, Lowenthal writes, may be one who “can take decisive action in the face of incomplete, minimal, or even vastly discomfoting intelligence.”¹¹ The question of whether and when policy makers should be receptive is well beyond the scope of this paper, which instead focuses on the question of what factors tend to make those leaders more or less receptive.

⁹ Andelman, “Whither Intelligence?”, 125.

¹⁰ Ohad Leslau, “The Effect of Intelligence on the Decisionmaking Process,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 23/3 (September 2010), 433.

¹¹ Mark M. Lowenthal, “Grant vs. Sherman: Paradoxes of Intelligence and Combat Leadership,” in Richard K. Betts and Thomas G. Mahnken, eds., *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence: Essays in Honor of Michael I. Handel* (NY: Routledge, 2003), 198.

The rest of this paper will proceed as follows. The next section very briefly reviews the literature on policy maker receptivity. Following that, I address the question of whether it is worthwhile to compare the uses of intelligence in the two cases of Pearl Harbor and Midway; several prominent scholars have argued that these cases are so dissimilar that there can be few valuable lessons gained from such a comparison, and I describe my counter-argument to this view. Then the major two sections are close examinations of the intelligence warnings available, and decision maker receptivity toward those warnings, in the cases of Pearl Harbor and Midway. I have chosen to go into some detail because even though these cases are well known, I argue there are still lessons to be learned from examining them. The paper concludes by reviewing those lessons, both for future study of intelligence theory and for policy today.

Existing thinking on intelligence receptivity

The question of when and why policy makers listen to intelligence is closely related to the topic of intelligence-policy relations.¹² Stephen Marrin has described what he calls the “standard model” of the intersection between intelligence analysis and decision making. According to this conventional view, intelligence provides information to decision makers that is factual and objective, and then decision makers use that information to help inform their decisions—without attempting to influence the intelligence they get.¹³ Under this model, policy makers treat intelligence officials like independent and objective experts, and they decide whether to heed that intelligence based on their own objective analysis of the facts and the situation.

But Marrin writes that there is no evidence that this standard model really works; instead, under an alternative model, decision makers tend to resist intelligence that conflicts with their pre-set beliefs.¹⁴ Robert Jervis has described this alternative model as holding true in many cases, arguing that once policymakers make up their minds about a course of action, they are unlikely to listen to contrary intelligence.¹⁵ According to Jervis, “For intelligence to be welcomed and to have an impact, it must arrive at the right time, which is after the leaders have become seized with the problem but before they have made up their minds.”¹⁶ Jervis also notes that “Perhaps intelligence can have most influence if it operates on questions that are important but not immediately pressing.”¹⁷

¹² A useful interesting article on this issue is Josh Kerbel and Anthony Olcott, “Synthesizing with Clients, Not Analyzing for Customers,” *Studies in Intelligence* 54/4 (December 2010). See also Joshua Rovner, “Pathologies of Intelligence Producer-Consumer Relations,” *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert A. Denemark (Blackwell Publishing, 2010), at www.isacompendium.com.

¹³ Stephen Marrin, “Intelligence Analysis and Decision-Making: Methodological Challenges,” in Peter Gill, Stephen Marrin, and Mark Phythian, eds., *Intelligence Theory: Key Questions and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2009), 133.

¹⁴ Marrin, “Intelligence Analysis and Decision-Making: Methodological Challenges.”

¹⁵ Robert Jervis, “Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash,” *Political Science Quarterly* 125/2 (2010), 196.

¹⁶ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 167.

¹⁷ *Why Intelligence Fails*, 168.

The question of receptivity is also similar to the question of whether, and when, does intelligence “matter” in the making of foreign or other types of government policy.¹⁸ The alternative model of intelligence-policy relations suggests that policy makers are simply not as interested in receiving intelligence as they might under the standard model. Jervis notes that, “Although decision makers call for better intelligence, under many circumstances they do not want it.”¹⁹ Joshua Rovner has written that although we would like to think that decision-makers will welcome all the insights from intelligence that they can get, “In reality, we find that policy makers are wary and even suspicious of intelligence.”²⁰

Also useful for the question of receptivity are the literatures on learning in foreign policy and other organizations,²¹ and on the so-called “warning-response gap” studied in the field of conflict prevention and elsewhere.²² But few comparative studies have been done that try to examine why policy makers do or do not listen to intelligence.²³ Marrin recommends that “a new kind of theory be developed to explain how intelligence analysis is actually used by decision-makers.”²⁴ It is a goal of this paper to help to spark development of such a theory.

Pearl Harbor and Midway: apples and oranges?

Although the military, strategic, and intelligence aspects of both Pearl Harbor and Midway continue to be studied and debated, and books and articles on each are published every year, surprisingly little work has been done by historians and intelligence scholars to compare the use of intelligence in the two events. This is largely because while both cases involve surprise attacks in the Pacific during World War II, they have been seen as very different situations that may not merit close comparison.

One of the few scholars to argue that there is merit in comparing the two cases is Ariel Levite, who holds that the differences between the cases are not as important as their similarities, notably that the same two countries are involved, in the same geographic region, and in roughly

¹⁸ For example, Richard H. Immerman, “Intelligence and Strategy: Historicizing Psychology, Policy, and Politics,” *Diplomatic History* 32/1 (January 2008), 1-23.

¹⁹ *Why Intelligence Fails*, 155.

²⁰ Rovner, “Pathologies of Intelligence Producer-Consumer Relations.”

²¹ Jack S. Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *International Organization* 48 (Spring 1994), 279-312.

²² Alexander L. George and Jane E. Holl, *The Warning-Response Problem and Missed Opportunities in Preventive Diplomacy: A Report to the Carnegie Commissions on Preventing Deadly Conflict*, 1997 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Corporation). Christoph O. Meyer, Florian Otto, John Brante, and Chiara De Franco, “Recasting the Warning-Response Problem: Persuasion and Preventive Policy,” *International Studies Review* 12/4 (December 2010), 556-578.

²³ An important recent exception is Ohad Leslau, “The Effect of Intelligence on the Decisionmaking Process,” cited above. My study differs from Leslau’s, however, in that Leslau treats policy maker receptivity as one of several variables to be considered in attempting to determine why and when intelligence will be influential in the decision making process. My study treats receptivity as the dependent variable—I am attempting to find out what factors or variables make a leader more or less receptive toward intelligence.

²⁴ Marrin, “Intelligence Analysis and Decision-Making: Methodological Challenges,” 131.

the same period of time. In fact, the similarities between the two cases are so great, he argues, as to create “what functionally approximates a controlled experiment.”²⁵

Most scholars of surprise attack and intelligence, however, do not believe there is value in making such a comparison. Richard Betts, for example, argues that comparing the two cases is like comparing “peacetime apples” with “wartime oranges.”²⁶ The stakes and risks involved in decisions about whether an enemy will go to war, Betts writes, are very different from those about where and when the enemy will strike during a war.

Despite these criticisms, I believe the similarities between the two cases are indeed striking, supporting Levite’s point that they can serve as a type of natural experiment. The same U.S. intelligence system that failed to detect and warn of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was successful, only six months later, in detecting and warning of the follow-on attack on Midway. The adversaries were the same, the geography was the same, and the intelligence organizations, sources, and methods were the same. The principal decision makers on the American side were not all the same,²⁷ but it would be difficult, I believe, to find a better comparison to use in attempting to determine the factors that make the difference between receptive and unreceptive decision making.

Pearl Harbor: A case of unreceptive decision making

Historians and other students of the Pearl Harbor disaster have pointed to a number of key pieces of intelligence and warning that were available before the attack, arguing that commanders at the time should have recognized the seriousness of these warnings and taken better precautions to prevent a Japanese assault—in short, that they should have been more receptive. This section first reviews several of the most important of these warnings, and then examines the question of why they were not heeded by decision makers in Hawaii or in Washington.

Many of these pieces of intelligence can be categorized as strategic warning: reports that were either long-range, big picture analyses of the growing tensions between Japan and the U.S., or that were derived from strategic-level communications systems that were processed and analyzed mostly in Washington. Several of these strategic warnings were plans and reports derived from war games and exercises conducted during the years before the attack. Beginning

²⁵ Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 129.

²⁶ Richard K. Betts, "Surprise, Scholasticism, and Strategy: A Review of Ariel Levite's *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises*," *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September, 1989), 336. In a more recent work, Betts describes Levite’s argument as “thoroughly wrong.” See Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 27. James Wirtz is also critical of Levite’s book: James J. Wirtz, "The Intelligence Paradigm," *Intelligence and National Security* 4, no. 4 (October, 1989), 829-837.

²⁷ The starkest contrast in leadership is the change of senior officials in Hawaii from Admiral Kimmel and General Short prior to December 7, to Admiral Nimitz in the position of overall command prior to the Battle of Midway. Another difference in terms of the decision makers involved is that FDR and other senior officials in Washington were much less involved in the decision making for Midway than they had been concerning American policy in the Pacific prior to Pearl Harbor.

at least as early as 1936, war games in Hawaii had been planned on the basis of war with Japan (which was referred to as “Orange”). In many scenarios the conflict began with a Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and several documents written by senior American military officers during these years read today as eerily prescient.²⁸ Although these reports were not intelligence products, they were likely inspired by intelligence estimates of the situation, and they have been frequently cited as crucial warnings missed in the period prior to the attack.

One such report was the “Bloch memo,” prepared by Rear Admiral Claude Bloch, commandant of the 14th Naval District, which included Hawaii. On December 30, 1940, Bloch sent a memo to the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, via Admiral James Richardson, who preceded Admiral Husband Kimmel as Commander of the U.S. Fleet in Hawaii, on the subject of the security of the fleet. Bloch wrote, “Aircraft attacking the base at Pearl Harbor will undoubtedly be brought by carriers.”²⁹ This memo received Admiral Richardson’s endorsement, and inspired Rear Admiral Turner, the Navy’s war plans chief in Washington, to prepare a letter for Navy Secretary Knox’s signature that Gordon Prange describes as “one of the most historic Knox ever signed.” That letter—sent to Hawaii in January 1941 after Kimmel had taken command—warned that “If war eventuates with Japan, it is believed easily possible that hostilities would be initiated by a surprise attack upon the Fleet or the Naval Base at Pearl Harbor.”³⁰

A second document, which has become known as the “Martin-Bellinger Report,” was a study by the Army and Navy air chiefs in Hawaii on military planning in the event of an attack. This report, dated March 31, 1941, stated that an Orange (meaning Japanese) attack force could arrive without warning from intelligence, and “It appears that the most likely and dangerous form of attack on Oahu would be an air attack. It is believed that at present such an attack would most likely be launched from one or more carriers which would probably approach inside of three hundred miles.”³¹

Other strategic warnings appeared—at least after the fact—to indicate that Japan was preparing for war against the United States. One of the most intriguing of these reports is a

²⁸ Gordon Prange writes, “Defense against an attack on Pearl Harbor had been the basis of plans, maneuvers, blackouts, and reports for years.” Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*, 253. In addition to the three documents described in this section, General Matthew Ridgway describes another episode in which a Pearl Harbor-type scenario was imagined before the war, but not believed. In his memoirs, Ridgway writes that in 1939, when he was stationed in San Francisco, he put on a command post exercise based on the assumption that the Pacific fleet had been neutralized or destroyed. But his scenario was loudly criticized, and he was told that such an assumption “was a possibility so improbable it did not constitute a proper basis for a maneuver.” It appears that even he did not take such a threat very seriously; he notes that later when Pearl Harbor was attacked, he was stationed at the Army War Plans Division in Washington, and he and the rest of the division “were taken as much by surprise as were the officers and men of the ships that were attacked.” Matthew B. Ridgway and Harold H. Martin, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway, as Told to Harold H. Martin*. (New York: Harper, 1956), 46-48.

²⁹ *At Dawn We Slept*, 41.

³⁰ *At Dawn We Slept*, 45.

³¹ “Joint Estimate Covering Joint Army and Navy Air Action in the Event of Sudden hostile Action Against Oahu or Fleet Units in the Hawaiian Area,” *Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), vol. 24, 349. (Hereafter cited as *Pearl Harbor Hearings*.)

telegram sent by Joseph Grew, the American ambassador in Tokyo, on January 27, 1941. He reported that the Peruvian Minister to Japan had heard a report that seemed “fantastic,” that should trouble break out between Japan and the U.S., the Japanese intended to make a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor “using all of their military equipment.”³² Grew himself discounted the report at the time, and the consensus of historians who have studied it is that while it turned out to be prescient, it had no basis in fact. The source of the rumor has never been confirmed.³³ If the rumor was just someone’s lucky guess, it was an extraordinarily timely one, as the rumor originated at nearly the same time that the lead Japanese planner, Admiral Yamamoto, was completing his original plan for the Pearl Harbor attack.³⁴ Richard Betts has described it as “a curious example of a ‘perfect’ warning that was really unjustified.”³⁵

Another strategic intelligence warning, derived from communications intercept, was the “bomb plot message.” On September 14, 1941, the Japanese Foreign Ministry sent a message to its Honolulu consulate asking for detailed reporting on the ships at Pearl Harbor. The message was translated by U.S. Army intelligence on October 9, and delivered to the Office of Naval Intelligence with a mark indicating it was of interest.³⁶ A later message, on November 15, directed that these reports were to be made twice a week, and were to divide the waters of Pearl Harbor into five sub areas and report on warships and carriers at anchor.³⁷ Washington intelligence agencies did not inform the military commanders in Hawaii about this November 15 message, and after the Pearl Harbor attack it became known as the “bomb plot” message, and was cited by the Congressional investigations into Pearl Harbor as an important missed warning.³⁸

Just before the attack on Pearl Harbor the Japanese government sent several last-minute cables to its embassy in Washington, and these have been considered crucial missed warning signals. These messages were sent from Tokyo on December 6, 1941; they were decrypted by a Navy intercept station on Bainbridge Island near Seattle, and forwarded to Washington by teletype as they came in throughout the day on December 6 and into the early morning of December 7. The final Japanese instructions, telling the Japanese ambassador to submit the reply to the U.S. government at 1pm Washington time on December 7, was intercepted at 4:30 am Washington time at Bainbridge. It was followed by the last message of the series—a message ordering the Japanese embassy to destroy its code machines and secret documents after deciphering the incoming messages.³⁹

³² *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol.14, 1042.

³³ Possible sources for the rumor have been reported to include a Japanese cook at the Peruvian embassy who had been reading a novel about an attack on Pearl Harbor, a drunken Japanese diplomat at a party, and the Peruvian minister’s Japanese translator-secretary.

³⁴ Prange offers the most complete discussion of this incident, but even his research could not determine the source with any confidence. *At Dawn We Slept*, 31-35.

³⁵ Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1982), 45.

³⁶ Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 211-213; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 249.

³⁷ The text of this message is in *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 12, 261.

³⁸ Layton writes that if they had seen this information in Hawaii they would have taken increased defensive precautions. He calls the failure to notify Hawaii “blind stupidity at the least, and gross neglect at best.” Edwin T. Layton, Roger Pineau and John Costello, *“And I Was There”: Pearl Harbor and Midway--Breaking the Secrets*, 160, 167.

³⁹ *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 221-226; *At Dawn We Slept*, 406.

Although most of the intelligence and warning available prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor was of the long-range, strategic kind, there were also a number of more specific, tactical warnings of the potential for hostile action on the part of the Japanese Navy. These included call signs changes: On November 1 and again on December 1, 1941, the Japanese changed their 20,000 radio call signs, making it much harder for U.S. intelligence to read their message traffic. Then, partly because of the call sign changes, and partly because the Japanese fleet engaged in radio silence while other elements of the Japanese Navy transmitted deceptive radio traffic, American analysts lost track of the Japanese aircraft carriers in mid November, and disagreed on where they were likely to be located.⁴⁰

Finally, the U.S. Army operated an Aircraft Warning Service (AWS) on Oahu, with mobile, truck-mounted radars set up at various points around the island. One position was on the northern tip of Oahu, at Kahuku Point, which was also called Opana. On December 7 the radars were to be manned from 4am to 7am., but the operators at Opana decided to remain on duty past 7am. At 7:02am they began seeing something unusual on their screen: a group of aircraft that first appeared 137 miles north of Oahu. They called the AWS information center at Fort Shafter, Hawaii, and after several minutes spent trying to reach anyone in charge, they were able to speak to Lt. Kermit Tyler, an Army Air Corps officer in training who had the 4am to 8am shift. He thought the aircraft were probably a flight of American B-17 bombers due back from the mainland that morning, and told the two privates to forget about it.⁴¹

Why didn't they listen before Pearl Harbor?

Despite the history of war games and drills focusing on the threat of a Japanese surprise attack, neither of the senior American commanders in Hawaii—Admiral Kimmel and Army General Walter Short—considered the threat of attack on Hawaii to be serious. Instead, they focused their energies on preparing the Fleet for offensive action when war broke out (Kimmel), and defending against the threat of sabotage (Short). Kimmel appeared to reflect the confidence that his war plans officer, Captain Charles “Soc” McMorris, expressed on November 27 when Kimmel turned to McMorris and asked, “What do you think about the prospects of a Japanese air attack?” McMorris replied, “None, absolutely none.”⁴²

Most senior staff and operations officers in Hawaii appear to have shared this confidence, and were dismissive toward anyone who expressed greater concern. This view was captured in an incident described by the Pacific Fleet Intelligence Officer, LCDR Edwin Layton. On Saturday, November 29, a week before the Pearl Harbor attack, Layton arrived late at the wardroom mess for lunch. When someone asked his opinion of the situation, he replied that he

⁴⁰ One of the continuing controversies concerning intelligence and Pearl Harbor is whether the Japanese fleet did in fact maintain radio silence up until December 7. Although revisionists argue there may have been radio traffic from the fleet (meaning the intercepts of those messages were covered up), most researchers have concluded the fleet was silent. Philip Jacobsen has written extensively on this question, including: Philip H. Jacobsen, "No RDF on the Japanese Strike Force: No Conspiracy!" *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 18, no. 1 (December, 2004), 142-149, and Philip H. Jacobsen, "Radio Silence of the Pearl Harbor Strike Force Confirmed again: The Saga of Secret Message Serial (SMS) Numbers," *Cryptologia* 31, no. 3 (July, 2007), 223-232.

⁴¹ *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 6-12 (quoting Tyler on 12); *At Dawn We Slept*, 499-501.

⁴² *At Dawn We Slept*, 401.

thought he would be back in his office the next day, Sunday—clearly suggesting that he expected a crisis was about to occur. That Sunday passed peacefully, and on the following Monday he was greeted with jeers and cries of “What happened to your crisis, Layton? Layton and his Sunday crisis.”⁴³ Kimmel and his senior advisors were so confident in disregarding the possibility of surprise attack that, in Wohlstetter’s words, “the only signal that could and did spell ‘hostile action’ to them was the bombing itself.”⁴⁴

Even the senior Navy intelligence officers in Hawaii—such as Layton, who as we have seen was criticized for worrying too much—did not actually believe the Japanese Navy was capable of launching an attack against Pearl Harbor. This disbelief was most poignantly expressed in a famous exchange between Kimmel and Layton. On December 1 Kimmel told Layton to prepare a report setting out the locations of the Japanese fleet units. This was a difficult task, Layton later stated, because the Japanese Navy had just changed its call signs, and especially because for the previous several days there had been no radio transmissions noted coming to or from the Japanese carriers. Most analysts believed the carriers were probably in home waters, but with nothing specific to report, Layton wrote down for the carriers “Unknown—home waters?”

Layton took the report to Kimmel on December 2, and he later described Kimmel’s reaction: “He read it through, very carefully, then said, ‘What! You don’t know where the carriers are?’ And I said, ‘No, Sir.’ ...”

“He said, ‘You mean to say that you are the Intelligence officer of the Pacific Fleet and you don’t know where the carriers are?’ And I said, ‘No, sir, I don’t.’ He said, ‘For all you know, they could be coming around Diamond Head, and you wouldn’t know it?’ I said, ‘Yes, sir. But I hope they’d have been sighted by now.’ He kind of smiled and said, ‘Yes, I understand.’”⁴⁵ Layton later testified, “I did not at any time suggest that the Japanese carriers were under radio silence approaching Oahu. I wish I had. I did not so consider at the time.”⁴⁶

Army and Navy commanders in Washington were no more receptive to warnings about a threat to Hawaii. This may seem surprising, because some senior military officials in Washington clearly had thought about and imagined the possibility of a Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. We saw above that Navy Secretary Knox had warned Admiral Kimmel in January 1941 about the danger of a surprise attack. Only a short time later, on February 7, 1941, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall wrote to General Short upon his taking command in Hawaii, cautioning him that “The risk of sabotage and the risk involved in a surprise raid by Air and by submarine, constitute the real perils of the situation.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Edwin T. Layton, *Oral History of Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1975), 74. A slightly different version of this story is told in Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 471.

⁴⁴ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 68.

⁴⁵ Edwin T. Layton, *Oral History of Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton*, 88. Layton also describes the story in “*And I Was There*”, 243-244.

⁴⁶ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 10, 4840.

⁴⁷ Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*, 52 (citing *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, vol II, 413).

But even as Knox and Marshall were warning of the possibility of a surprise attack on Hawaii, other military leaders were discounting the threat. For example, on February 1, 1941, Admiral Harold Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations, wrote a memo to the Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, entitled “Rumored Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.” Stark passed on the information reported by Ambassador Grew in Tokyo (described above), and then wrote, “the Division of Naval Intelligence places no credence in these rumors. . . . No move against Pearl Harbor appears imminent or planned for in the foreseeable future.”⁴⁸

It was against this background—the expectation of war in the Pacific, but no expectation of a threat to Hawaii—that the Navy and Army sent out a series of warning dispatches on November 24, 27, and 28. The middle dispatch of this series was sent by the Navy and began with the famous phrase, “This dispatch is to be considered a war warning.”⁴⁹ In these messages the chiefs warned of a possible Japanese “surprise aggressive movement in any direction.” But despite their ominous wording, these messages were actually quite ambiguous, and did not suggest the possibility of attack against Pearl Harbor.

What about receptivity at the highest levels in Washington? What did FDR and his key advisors know, and what did they believe was possible, in the months before the Pearl Harbor attack? Although FDR never made his innermost thoughts and intentions clear even to his closest aides, the available evidence suggests that while he and his inner circle felt war with Japan was likely, they did not consider an attack on Pearl Harbor to be a realistic threat.⁵⁰ FDR and his advisors appear to have drawn their clues from the same communications intercepts and other intelligence sources that the Washington military leadership was seeing, which indicated that the only question was, in which direction would Japan make its first move when the war began—to the north, toward Russia, or south, toward Indochina?

With the ample assistance of hindsight, we can see that two factors combined to make senior officials unreceptive toward warning of a possible attack on Pearl Harbor. The first factor was that few officials—even intelligence officials responsible for warning—felt there was a serious threat of a Japanese attack on Hawaii. But there was also a second factor at work: a general lack of trust in intelligence on the part of many senior leaders. Frederick Parker, for example, has written that intelligence from cryptography and traffic analysis, which was particularly important in determining Japanese intentions, was not trusted by military commanders:

The lack of confidence in such intelligence made traffic intelligence from the Pacific during the last half of 1941 more an elaborate rumor than trustworthy source material. Commanders at the theater level and in Washington, through lack of early training or

⁴⁸ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1044.

⁴⁹ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 45.

⁵⁰ Ambassador Grew’s report in particular was discounted and does not appear to have influenced Roosevelt. John K. Emmerson, a Foreign Service officer in Tokyo, later wrote that an attack on Hawaii was considered out of the bounds of possibility. A Japanese move into Southeast Asia was considered possible at the time, according to Emmerson: “In our minds, however, a direct assault on American territory was insane and therefore unthinkable.” John K. Emmerson, “Principles Versus Realities: U.S. Prewar Foreign Policy Toward Japan,” in *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War*, eds. Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 40.

insight, were not prepared to exploit the intelligence provided by this source, particularly when the messages themselves could not be read.⁵¹

Midway: A case of receptive decision making

Historians and scholars of intelligence are nearly unanimous in describing the Battle of Midway as a great success for American intelligence. James Wirtz, for example, has described Midway as one of the rare cases in which decision makers are able to get what he calls “the Holy Grail of intelligence: accurate and timely indications of exactly when, where, how, and why an opponent will strike.”⁵² The conventional understanding is that American intelligence organizations, inspired by their failure to anticipate the attack on Pearl Harbor, were able to break the Japanese codes and predict exactly when and where the next major attack would come. Admiral Nimitz then used this information to expertly position his fleet to meet the Japanese attack, and while ultimate victory required a combination of luck and valor on the American side, the victory could not have been obtained had it not been for the initial advantage assured by intelligence.⁵³

Because the story of intelligence success is so well known, we might expect there to be little mystery about why and how decision makers were receptive toward intelligence before the battle. Midway should be a strong case for Marrin’s “standard model” of the intersection between policy makers and intelligence, as military commanders would be expected to pay more attention in early 1942 to warnings of Japanese actions than they had before the attack on Pearl Harbor. But this section argues that the story of intelligence success at Midway is more complicated than it is traditionally portrayed. Even in the months following Pearl Harbor, it was very difficult for intelligence officials to get decision makers to pay attention to specific warnings about potential Japanese attacks—including warnings that accurately predicted the attack against Midway.

Warnings before Midway

Although the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had answered many questions for American strategic planners—such as when the war they were expecting would come—it told them little about where and when they should prepare to meet the next Japanese assault. In the immediate weeks and months after the attack the Japanese effort was devoted to expanding their area of control in the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia. But where, American officials needed to know, would the Japanese turn next?

⁵¹ Frederick D. Parker, *Pearl Harbor Revisited: United States Navy Communications Intelligence, 1924–1941 (H-E32-94-01)*, 2.

⁵² James J. Wirtz, “Responding to Surprise,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006), 63.

⁵³ Standard accounts include Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *Miracle at Midway* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), and Samuel Eliot Morison, *Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions May 1942–August 1942*, vol. IV in *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962).

The traditional sources of strategic level intelligence on Japan, such as diplomatic communications, were of little help in answering questions about the country's future military plans. But that did not mean there was a lack of predictions and estimates for what the Japanese would do. During the early months of 1942, Navy intelligence officials in Washington at times predicted a Japanese assault on the Aleutians. Admiral King, the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet, sometimes suspected Hawaii might be the target for a repeat attack, but at other times he believed the Japanese would continue to focus on the South Pacific. Meanwhile, the Army Air Force worried about the chance of an air raid on San Francisco, while Secretary of War Stimson was more concerned about an attack on the Panama Canal than a new attack on Hawaii.⁵⁴

In the immediate days and weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, morale was low among the intelligence staff in Hawaii. The Naval intelligence unit, known as Hypo, lapsed into what Frederick Parker has called "an eclipse that lasted until late January 1942."⁵⁵ Hypo personnel felt they had failed, and for a time they were hesitant to offer analysis and assessments in their intelligence reporting, sticking instead to the bare facts. Decision makers also had lost confidence in intelligence. As Levite has noted, the intelligence failure of Pearl Harbor had a negative effect on receptivity: "The immediate impact of the Pearl Harbor debacle was to shatter confidence in intelligence and discredit intelligence organizations and products. Under these circumstances, the receptivity of policymakers at all levels to intelligence warning was lower than before."⁵⁶ According to National Security Agency (NSA) historian Henry Schorreck, senior officials were especially doubtful about communications intelligence, both because it was new, and because it had failed to warn of the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁵⁷

After the attack on Pearl Harbor it might be expected that American decision makers would be primed to respond to further warnings of Japanese attacks, but even so, good intelligence was not always listened to. An example that illustrated how unreceptive the military leadership in Hawaii was toward the warnings from intelligence was an operation that Japan called Operation K, which has since been described as the "second attack on Pearl Harbor." On the night of March 3-4, 1942, two Japanese long-range flying boats made a night-time armed reconnaissance flight over Oahu. The pilots apparently intended to drop four bombs on Pearl Harbor—for what Prange has described as "strictly for terrorist purposes," and which the standard Japanese account says was for "psychological effect"—but because of overcast conditions they mistakenly dropped them into the Punch Bowl crater near Honolulu, causing public commotion but no injuries.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ John Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1995), 317; Walter Lord, *Incredible Victory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 21. On Stimson, see Karl G. Larew, "December 7, 1941: The Day no One Bombed Panama," *The Historian* 66, no. 2 (June, 2004), 291.

⁵⁵ Frederick D. Parker, *A Priceless Advantage: U.S. Navy Communications Intelligence and the Battles of Coral Sea, Midway, and the Aleutians, CH-E32-93-01*.

⁵⁶ Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises*, 134.

⁵⁷ Henry F. Schorreck, *National Security Agency Special Research History (SRH) 230, Battle of Midway, 4-7 June 1942: The Role of COMINT in the Battle of Midway* [Originally published in *Cryptologic Spectrum*, the National Security Agency, 1975] (Washington, DC: , nd), <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/srh230.htm>, 4.

⁵⁸ Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, 32; Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan*, 88. See also Steve Horn, *The Second Attack on Pearl Harbor: Operation K and Other Japanese Attempts to Bomb America in World War II* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 72-103; Morison, *Coral Sea, Midway*

The senior Navy cryptologic officer in Hawaii, Joe Rochefort, had warned that the Japanese might attempt a seaplane reconnaissance, but his warnings hadn't been taken seriously. Rochefort was bitter about the episode later, saying, "the next morning Com 14 [the Navy's regional commander] sent for me and was quite irritated because these people had appeared and had flown more or less unmolested over the island of Oahu. It was actually incredible."⁵⁹

In early April, intelligence began to indicate that the Japanese were planning a push toward Port Moresby, an Australian base on the southeastern coast of New Guinea.⁶⁰ By April 29 Admiral Nimitz had enough intelligence to commit his forces to defend in that area, and on that date he dispatched the carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown* to the Coral Sea under Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher to meet the Japanese fleet. The resulting Battle of the Coral Sea from May 4-8 was tactically a draw, but strategically it was the first setback for the Japanese in the war; and it was a significant triumph for U.S. communications intelligence. As NSA historian Schorreck later wrote: "Comint [communications intelligence] passed its first test under fire and proved it could provide accurate, timely intelligence."⁶¹

Ronald Lewin has written that after the failure of intelligence at Pearl Harbor, the intelligence officials in Hawaii "urgently needed . . . a manifest and credible success."⁶² The Battle of the Coral Sea turned out to be just such a success. It was an important victory for intelligence, according to Layton, especially "because it persuaded Nimitz to trust Rochefort over and above the often conflicting assessments being made by naval intelligence in Washington."⁶³

and Submarine Actions May 1942-August 1942, 69-70. This bombing took place in the early morning hours of March 4; some authors describe it as occurring on March 5, but this is probably because March 4 Hawaii time was March 5 in Japan.

⁵⁹ Joseph J. Rochefort, *Oral History of Captain Joseph J. Rochefort* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1983), 205. Pete Azzole has written a series of articles based on Rochefort's oral history for *Cryptolog*, a journal of the U.S. Naval Cryptologic Veterans Association, and these articles are available on line at <http://www.usncva.org/clog/index.html>. See also Layton, "And I Was There", 373. Of note, a later Japanese reconnaissance flight over Midway on the night of March 9/10, was shot down, which could indicate greater willingness to listen to intelligence warnings, better defensive precautions, or both; see Horn, *The Second Attack on Pearl Harbor*, 117-128.

⁶⁰ Schorreck, *National Security Agency Special Research History (SRH) 230*. The intercepted message is also reproduced in John V. Connorton, *National Security Agency Special Research History (SRH) 012, the Role of Radio Intelligence in the American - Japanese Naval War (August, 1941 - June, 1942), Vol I* (Washington, DC: 1942), 211.

⁶¹ Schorreck, *National Security Agency Special Research History (SRH) 230*, 7. For a general overview of the Battle of the Coral Sea and the role played by intelligence, see Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan*, 156-163. For a largely contrary view, however, see John B. Lundstrom, "A Failure of Radio Intelligence: An Episode in the Battle of the Coral Sea," *Cryptologia* 7, no. 2 (April, 1983), 97-118. Lundstrom describes in detail the tactical intelligence available to Fletcher, and argues convincingly that while the intelligence provided by codebreaking had been very useful in giving the Americans the strategic picture of Japanese intentions, at the tactical level it proved wrong or misleading in many respects.

⁶² Ronald Lewin, *The American Magic: Codes, Ciphers and the Defeat of Japan* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), 91.

⁶³ Layton, "And I Was There," 405. Lewin calls the Battle of the Coral Sea a turning point for intelligence; *The American Magic*, 95-96.

Nimitz and intelligence receptivity

Admiral Chester Nimitz was a strong supporter of intelligence from the moment he first arrived in Hawaii after the attack on Pearl Harbor to relieve Admiral Kimmel as the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific (Cincpac). An indicator of that support was the fact that he kept Edwin Layton on as his intelligence officer—even though Layton had been Kimmel’s senior intelligence officer. Layton, fact, was the only officer besides Nimitz himself who remained attached to Cincpac headquarters throughout the war.⁶⁴ Layton has written that once Nimitz took command, he encouraged Layton to come to his office at any time with new information. “Apart from his flag secretary, I was the only one accorded this privilege. Nimitz clearly appreciated and understood that good intelligence is essential to sound strategic decisions.”⁶⁵

But that didn’t mean Nimitz believed everything he was told by his intelligence staff. According to Gordon Prange, “In his early days at Pearl Harbor, Nimitz had not been too much impressed with Hypo and was quite skeptical of its value. If radio intelligence was all that efficient, how had the attack of December 7, 1941, been possible?”⁶⁶ When the admiral took his first tour of the Hypo facility soon after arriving, he asked only a few questions and left, giving the impression that he had not been impressed.⁶⁷

Nimitz was not easily convinced to trust the intelligence he received from Layton and Rochefort that indicated the Japanese were planning to attack Midway. Even the successful use of intelligence at the Battle of the Coral Sea was not enough to convince Nimitz to put too much stock in the intelligence he was receiving. As the intelligence reporting on the Japanese plans became more specific as the battle drew nearer, Nimitz was only partially convinced that Midway was going to be the next target. Nimitz “had not rushed to buy the whole package as Layton and Rochefort saw it,” thinking it could be a trap set by the Japanese, Prange writes.⁶⁸ On approximately May 8, 1942, Layton went to Nimitz to warn him about the growing evidence pointing toward Midway as the target. As Layton later related the story, he told the admiral it was important enough that he needed to see the various pieces of intelligence at first hand: he needed to come down to the Combat Intelligence Unit for a personal, in-depth briefing. Nimitz said he was too busy, and would believe what Layton was telling him. Layton countered: “It isn’t that. I want you to see it and be as convinced as I am.”⁶⁹

Nimitz agreed to send Captain Lynde D. McCormick, his war plans officer, to review the raw data. McCormick also told Layton that he was too busy to come to the intelligence unit, but he finally agreed to set aside two hours. When McCormick arrived in the Hypo offices, Rochefort had spread his intercepts of Japanese communications out on a makeshift table of planks and sawhorses. He carefully showed McCormick how the different pieces of intelligence fit together. According to Walter Lord, “McCormick was fascinated. In the end, he spent not two but three and a half hours poking around, flipping the material, asking a thousand tough,

⁶⁴ E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 21.

⁶⁵ Layton, “*And I Was There*,” 356-357.

⁶⁶ Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, 20.

⁶⁷ E. B. Potter, *Nimitz*, 64.

⁶⁸ Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, 37. Lord writes that at this time, Nimitz was “half convinced, but no more,” that Midway was to be the next target. Walter Lord, *Incredible Victory*, 22.

⁶⁹ Layton, *Oral History of Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton*, 122-123.

show-me questions.” Ultimately, “McCormick came away completely convinced, and to sell McCormick was to sell Nimitz. From that day on, the Admiral was the staunchest ally Rochefort and Layton could hope to have.”⁷⁰

Although the senior intelligence officials in Hawaii were certain by the middle of May 1942 that the Japanese were planning a major attack on Midway, not everyone was convinced. Codebreaking had indicated that the Japanese were planning a major operation against some place they called “AF.” But was “AF” necessarily Midway? The Navy’s cryptologic headquarters in Washington, OP-20-G, did not think so, and the Navy’s War Plans department also had its doubts.⁷¹ In order to convince the doubters—especially those in Washington—intelligence officials in Hawaii came up with a plan for what was to become one of the most famous incidents in American intelligence history.

In order to confirm that “AF” really did refer to Midway, a message was sent to the U.S. garrison on the island via an undersea cable (which could not be intercepted by Japan). The message directed Midway to report in an *uncoded* radio transmission that they were having trouble with their desalination plant, and were running short on water. Sure enough, within a few days after Midway sent such a report, a Japanese message was intercepted and decrypted that reported that “AF” was running low on water.⁷²

Although the “AF ruse” has become an important part of American intelligence lore, the two principal actors in the drama have both downplayed its importance. Both Layton and Rochefort have argued that the ruse wasn’t intended to confirm that the Japanese were planning to attack Midway, because they had already become convinced of that fact. Nor was it to persuade Nimitz of the threat, because he, too, had become a believer by then. Instead, the reason for the ruse was to prove the doubters in Washington wrong—to try to overcome their lack of receptivity—and even then, it didn’t convince everyone.⁷³

By the middle of May, Nimitz was becoming more and more convinced of the threat to Midway. But many dissenting voices continued to be raised, both in Washington and in Hawaii. Lt. Gen. Delos C. Emmons, the Commanding General of the Army’s Hawaiian Department, was concerned for the threat to Hawaii, rather than Midway. He forwarded to Nimitz a letter prepared by Army intelligence that argued it was more prudent to plan on the basis of everything the enemy was capable of doing—and after all, the Army warned, Japan had proven itself capable of attacking Hawaii.⁷⁴ In addition, Op-20-G in Washington continued to disagree with the assessments from Layton and Rochefort, arguing that the invasion might be aimed at Johnston Island instead.⁷⁵

In response to these complaints, Nimitz assigned another member of his staff, Captain James Steele, the task of reassessing the intelligence and playing the role of devil’s advocate,

⁷⁰ Lord, *Incredible Victory*, 22-23.

⁷¹ Parker, *A Priceless Advantage*, 50.

⁷² The story of the ruse is told in most accounts of Midway. Most useful are Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, 45-46, and Layton, “*And I Was There*,” 421-422.

⁷³ Rochefort, *Oral History of Captain Joseph J. Rochefort*, 198. See also Layton, “*And I Was There*,” 421.

⁷⁴ Potter, *Nimitz*, 79; Lord, *Incredible Victory*, 24-25.

⁷⁵ Layton, “*And I Was There*,” 413.

challenging the data and making Rochefort and Layton back up every point of their argument. According to Lord, “Steele really threw himself into the job. Layton rued the day it ever happened, but from Nimitz’s point of view the assignment served two very useful purposes.” First, it was a response to Emmons’ letter, and second, it was a check just in case they were all wrong.⁷⁶

The end result of all these developments—the intelligence success at Coral Sea, the careful investigations by McCormick and Steele, and the close relationship that Nimitz had with his intelligence officers—was that Nimitz had become a believer both in the value of intelligence and in the warnings that Midway was the target of the next Japanese offensive. But even then, he was careful not to express too much confidence in the intelligence picture. On May 16, Nimitz’s Command Summary assessed that the Japanese would attack Midway and raid Oahu in the first part of June, adding cautiously that, “unless the enemy is using radio deception on a grand scale, we have a fairly good idea of his intentions.”⁷⁷

Convincing the military’s leadership in Washington of the threat to Midway continued to be a harder task than convincing Nimitz. Forrest Biard, who was a member of the Hypo intelligence team, later complained that in mid-May the leadership in Washington hadn’t been listening to them down in what they referred to as the “dungeon.” Biard wrote, “While the Dungeon (Rochefort, Finnegan, Lasswell, and Layton) were crying ‘Midway! Midway!’ Washington was stoutly maintaining that we were ‘Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!’”⁷⁸ According to Donald M. Showers, a young naval officer assigned to Hypo in February 1942, “Washington was assuming that the target was bigger than a small atoll in the mid Pacific.”⁷⁹

On 14 May Admiral King, not yet convinced that the target was Midway, directed Nimitz to declare a state of “Fleet Opposed Invasion.” He cited four possible enemy actions that needed to be planned for: an attack on Midway-Oahu, on the Aleutians, on Nauru, or to the southeast of New Guinea.⁸⁰ Within a few days, however, King had come around to Hawaii’s assessment that the Japanese were planning to attack Midway and the Aleutians, and he sent a message to Nimitz saying he agreed.⁸¹ But still OP-20-G and the Navy War Plans staff under Admiral Richmond K. Turner saw it differently, and a 15 May message, apparently from Turner, argued that an offensive was pending against northeast Australia, New Caledonia, and Fiji, starting in mid June.⁸²

Amid receptivity and success, a lack of receptivity and failure

⁷⁶ Lord, *Incredible Victory*, 25.

⁷⁷ Parker, *A Priceless Advantage*, 48.

⁷⁸ Forrest R. Biard, “Breaking of Japanese Naval Codes: Pre-Pearl Harbor to Midway,” *Cryptologia* 30, no. 2 (April, 2006), 156-157.

⁷⁹ *At the Interface: The WWII Recollections of Donald M. Showers* (DVD produced by Shoestring Educational Productions, 1007). Showers later rose to the rank of Rear Admiral.

⁸⁰ Parker, *A Priceless Advantage*, 46.

⁸¹ Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded*, 318.

⁸² Parker, *A Priceless Advantage*, 47, 50. OP-20-G and the War Plans staff could not themselves agree; they were engaged in a series of bitter disputes, including over Japanese intentions.

Ultimately the assessments of the intelligence staff in Hawaii proved to be correct, and the Japanese advance came as predicted against Midway. But amid the general picture of successful use of intelligence by the Americans at Midway there is one glaring exception that demonstrates that even very good intelligence can be dismissed and failure result, if the decision maker is not receptive.

Because the intercepted Japanese plans indicated the Midway assault would include a feint toward Alaska, Nimitz in late May sent Rear Admiral Robert Theobald to the Aleutians in command of a small task force of ships. Theobald was told—but without being given details about where the information came from—that intelligence indicated the Japanese intended to invade Attu and Kiska, at the far western end of the Aleutian chain. The Japanese were also considering, he was told, mounting an air strike strictly as a diversion against the more significant American air field at Dutch Harbor, farther to the east and closer to the mainland.

Theobald was skeptical: what possible reason could the Japanese have for invading such distant and desolate spots as Attu and Kiska? He concluded the intelligence reports were likely the result of Japanese deception, and Japan instead intended to attack in strength against Dutch Harbor, the more significant target. He then deployed his forces far to the east—where they were of little use in countering the main brunt of the Japanese attack, when it came as predicted against the outer Aleutians well to the west.⁸³

Explaining the difference between Pearl Harbor and Midway

Before Pearl Harbor was attacked, neither decision makers nor senior intelligence officials truly believed that the Japanese Navy was capable of mounting an attack on Hawaii. The intelligence that was most useful in giving indications of Japanese intentions was primarily derived from the new, still relatively little understood field of code-breaking, and few senior leaders had yet learned to trust it. In addition, the warnings that were obtained from this intelligence were generally strategic, long-range in nature, and could be interpreted as proving little more than that Japan was collecting intelligence for a war that everyone knew was coming.

In contrast to the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor, the American victory at the Battle of Midway was to a great extent the result of outstanding intelligence. But the successful use of intelligence preceding Midway was more complex and difficult than conventional accounts suggest. The failure at Pearl Harbor, far from encouraging military commanders to pay more attention to intelligence, had the effect of making them more likely to dismiss the products of their intelligence staffs. Even Admiral Nimitz, who was inclined to listen to his intelligence officer, needed to be carefully and repeatedly convinced—especially when the intelligence came from the obscure world of code breaking, and he was receiving assessments from Washington that conflicted with those of his own staff in Hawaii. Only when early successes at the Battle of the Coral Sea showed what intelligence could do did Nimitz and others begin to put their trust in the work of the cryptologists. And only when Rochefort and Layton were willing and able to give Nimitz the precise predictions of Japanese actions he needed, did he commit U.S. forces to meet the coming threat.

⁸³ Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, 155-159; Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises*, 121-122.

Layton demonstrated this lingering uncertainty—this continuing lack of receptivity toward intelligence—in commenting on the relief both he and Nimitz felt when the Japanese fleet was finally sighted on the morning of the battle, almost exactly where he had predicted they would be:

So we were very glad indeed to see them at the point where they were sighted. There had been those who did not profess to believe Midway to be the objective; some even thought the Japanese ‘AF’ operation to be a huge deception for an attack on Oahu or the West Coast of the U.S. He [Nimitz] said, ‘This will clear up all the doubters now. They just have to see this to know that what I told them is correct.’⁸⁴

The comparison between the receptivity of intelligence in the two cases of Pearl Harbor and Midway demonstrates that the key factors are a belief in the threat, and trust in intelligence. In addition, this comparison shows how the more precise and tactical the intelligence is, the more likely it is to be believed and acted upon. In the months before Pearl Harbor, there was a great deal of long-range, strategic intelligence on the Japanese threat, but no specific information on a planned attack on Hawaii. Even if such intelligence had been developed, it is not clear that the military commanders on the scene or in Washington would have acted on it, because they were united in their belief that such an attack was impossible.

After Pearl Harbor the strategic threat from Japan was of course clear. But strategic warning was not enough to defend against another surprise Japanese attack, this time against Midway. American commanders had only limited naval assets, and needed tactical level intelligence to know where best to station their forces. American intelligence officers—primarily in Hawaii—were able to obtain that intelligence by breaking the Japanese codes and learning the specific details of the Japanese assault plan. But even after that code was broken, American commanders had to be convinced that the intelligence could be trusted, and that the U.S. fleet should be stationed in position to meet an attack on Midway, at the possible expense of leaving undefended Hawaii, areas of the Southwest Pacific, or even the American West Coast. Admiral Nimitz ultimately was convinced, but only after intelligence proved its worth at the Battle of Coral Sea.

Conclusion and implications

As Arthur Hulnick has noted, “even the best intelligence is not worth much if policy makers refuse to take action.”⁸⁵ This paper helps advance our understanding of why, at least in some cases, they refuse to take that action. The comparison of how intelligence was received in the failure of Pearl Harbor and the success of Midway suggests that neither the standard model of intelligence-policy relations, nor the alternative model that privileges the role of decision maker predetermined beliefs, can satisfactorily explain why and when leaders listen to the intelligence they receive. When leaders don’t really believe in a threat, or when they don’t understand

⁸⁴ Layton, *Oral History of Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton*, 48.

⁸⁵ Arthur S. Hulnick, “Indications and Warning for Homeland Security: Seeking a New Paradigm,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 18/4 (2005), 598.

intelligence enough to trust it, they are rarely likely to listen to even the best and most vivid warnings.

These findings suggest several avenues for further research. For example, the two factors—belief in the threat, and trust in intelligence—do not necessarily accompany each other. Leaders may believe strongly in a certain threat or issue, and yet distrust intelligence; a frequently cited example is President George Bush in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. On the other hand, they may have a good relationship with their intelligence advisors, and yet not believe in a certain type of threat that intelligence is advocating. An example here might be the first President Bush, who despite his long experience with intelligence was unreceptive toward warnings of Iraqi aggression before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. How often and why do these factors align?

Another area for further research is the question of how important proximity is in determining intelligence receptiveness. Marrin has also examined the role that proximity plays, and found that it is not as powerful an explanation as some have speculated.⁸⁶ The two cases studied here suggest that geographical proximity may in fact play an important role: before Midway, the intelligence personnel and military commanders in Hawaii were considerably more receptive to the possibility of a Japanese attack on Midway than were their counterparts in Washington. A similar case might be that of Vietnam in the period before the Tet Offensive in 1968; Alexander Ovodenko has recently described the U.S. analysts and commanders in Vietnam as being considerably more receptive toward warnings of an impending enemy offensive than were their counterparts in Washington.⁸⁷

Finally, this paper suggests there may be value in examining the role that strategic level intelligence and warning can play in influencing receptivity, as opposed to intelligence that is more tactical and more specific. Policy makers often say they want long-term, strategic level intelligence, and yet the two cases examined here suggest that what they may really need is tactical warning of specific events. This finding indicates that much of the problem with recent cases of unreceptive policy makers—such as before the Christmas Day bombing attempt—may be that the warnings were simply too strategic, too broad, for policy makers to act upon, and for that reason they were unreceptive. Similarly, recent warnings about the potential for unrest in Egypt may resemble warnings before Pearl Harbor: they may have sounded reasonable, and ultimately they may have been proved correct, but policy makers weren't ready to listen.

⁸⁶ Stephen Marrin, "At Arm's Length or At the Elbow?: Explaining the Distance between Analysts and Decisionmakers," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 20/3 (2007), 401-414.

⁸⁷ Alexander Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 34/1 (February 2011), 119-144.