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Déjà Vu?

Comparing Pearl Harbor and September 11

During my first trip to Hawaii, I made my way to a place considered sacred by most US citizens, the USS Arizona memorial at Pearl Harbor. Survivors often greet visitors to the memorial, answering questions and retelling their memories of the day that the Japanese attacked the US Pacific Fleet. When it came my turn, I asked what the weather was like that fateful morning. The answer was “like today.” A few puffy clouds dotted the blue

J A M E S J . W I R T Z

Hawaiian skies, a light breeze pushed ripples across the turquoise water of the harbor, stirring the warm tropical air to create one of the most idyllic anchorages on earth. September 11 also dawned clear and blue over New York City, the kind of late summer day that highlights perfectly the United States' front door, the spectacular edifice of promise and prosperity that is lower Manhattan. Given the setting, it is no wonder that the events of both Pearl Harbor and September 11 came as a complete shock to eyewitnesses. Neither could have happened on a more pleasant morning.

We now know, however, that initial eyewitness interpretations of both of these surprise attacks, as bolts out of the blue, were incorrect. Indications of what was about to happen were available before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In fact, one of the accepted tenets of the literature on surprise attacks is that in all cases of so-called intelligence failure, accurate information concerning what is about to transpire can be found in the intelligence system after the fact.

It is thus to be expected that revelations will continue about the signals that were in the intelligence pipeline prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11. And as in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the US government will hold a series of investigations to discover how organizational shortcomings or mistakes made by specific officials were responsible for the intelligence failure that paved the way for the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon.

It is not surprising that similarities exist between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks of September 11 because both events are examples of a more general international phenomenon—the surprise attack. Despite the fact that they occurred over 50 years apart and involve different kinds of international actors with highly different motivations, a pattern exists in the events leading up to surprise and its consequences. Exploring these similarities can help cast the tragedy of September 11 in a broader context, an important

initial step in reducing the likelihood of mass-casualty terrorism in the future.

Warning Signs

Although Pearl Harbor and the September 11 attacks are sometimes depicted as totally unanticipated events, both incidents were preceded by clear indications that the United States faced an imminent threat. Prior to Pearl Harbor, US-Japanese relations had reached a nadir. By the summer of 1941, the administration of US President Franklin Roosevelt had placed economic sanctions on the Japanese to force them to end their war against China. These sanctions were the proximate cause of the Japanese attack. Japanese officials believed that the US embargo against them would ruin their economy, while destruction of the US fleet would provide them with some maneuvering room. They intended to quickly seize resource-rich lands in the Far East, fortify their newly conquered lands, and then reach some sort of negotiated settlement with the United States.

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The Roosevelt administration recognized that it faced a crisis with Japan, although senior officials in Washington did not realize that Oahu was in danger until it was too late. In their minds, it made no sense for the Japanese to attack the United States because they simply lacked the economic resources or military capability to defeat the US military in a long war. In an ironic twist, the Roosevelt administration was ultimately proven correct in this estimate. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor eliminated the possibility of US acquiescence to the creation of a Japanese empire in the Pacific as well as the eventual peace arrangement Japan hoped to achieve.

The situation that faced the United States was even more clear cut, if not quite as grave, prior to September 11. Various studies and commissions (such as the government's Gilmore commission) described the ongoing struggle against terrorism and predicted that a significant terrorist attack on the continental United States was a virtual certainty. The United States was actually

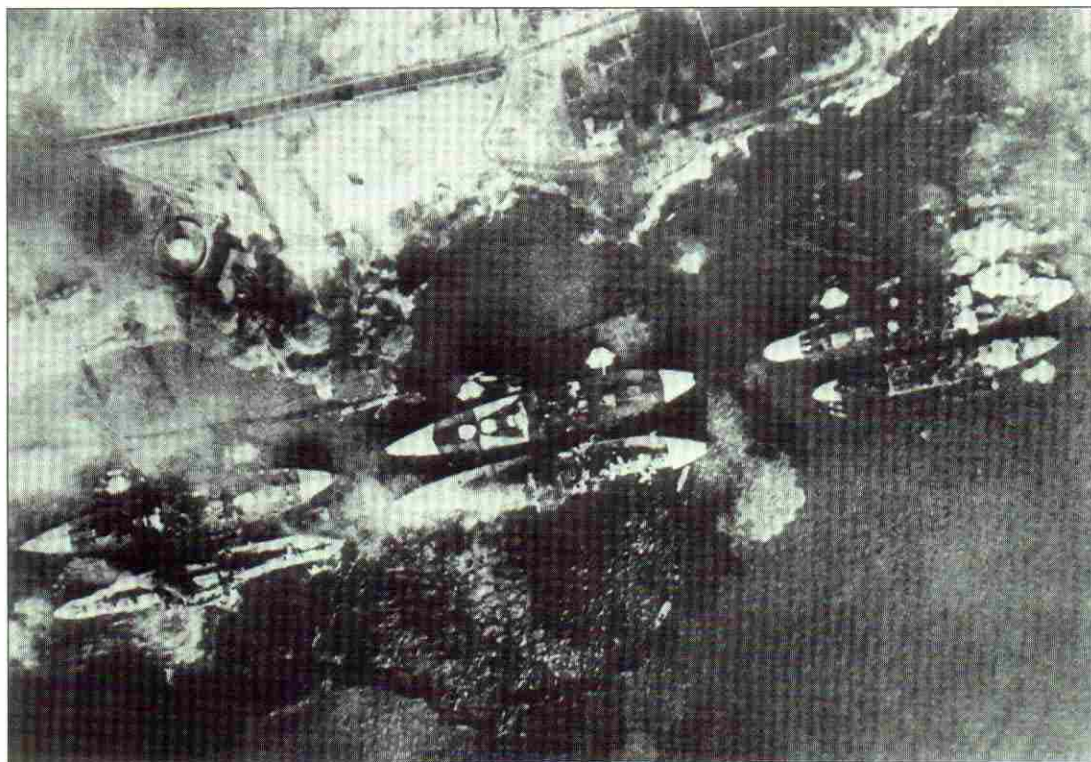
engaged in a war with Al Qaeda, an international network of terrorist groups, throughout the 1990s. Al Qaeda may have been loosely linked to the militias that battled US Ranger units in Somalia in 1993. Al Qaeda also was involved in the bombing of the office of the program manager for the Saudi Arabian National Guard in Riyadh in November 1995 and in the attack on the Khobar Towers complex in Dahrhan in July 1996.

These attacks on US interests in 1995 and 1996 changed the way forward deployed US forces operated within the Arabian Peninsula. New "force protection" regulations were promulgated to protect US military personnel, requiring commanders to observe stringent requirements to ensure their safety. In Saudi Arabia, US operational units were consolidated at Prince Sultan Air Base and advisory components were moved to Eskan Village, a housing complex south of Riyadh. Intelligence collection efforts also concentrated on the new threat, providing forces throughout the region with improved tactical and op-

erational warning. At times, US forces were placed at "Threatcon Delta" in expectation of an immediate attack. The hardening of the "target" on the Arabian Peninsula forced Al Qaeda to look for vulnerabilities elsewhere.

Any lingering doubts about the ongoing threat were dispelled by Al Qaeda's bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 and the attack against the USS Cole in October 2000. The United States even returned fire following the 1998 embassy attacks by launching cruise missile strikes against suspected terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan that was believed to have links to Al Qaeda. US government agencies had a clear idea that Osama bin Laden was committed to attacking US interests globally. Bin Laden's 1998 *fatwa* represented a declaration of war on the United States and called upon supporters to kill US officials, soldiers, and civilians everywhere around the world. This assessment of bin Laden's intentions was reflected in a

The US Pacific Fleet is consumed by flames at Pearl Harbor after the Japanese surprise attack on December 7, 1941.



variety of publicly available sources. The US Congressional Research Service published a compelling warning about bin Laden's campaign of terror entitled "Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors" on September 10, 2001. A compelling description of bin Laden's alliance with the Taliban and his political agenda was even published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1999.

Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks on September 11 were not bolts out of the blue. But because they were generally perceived to have occurred without warning, they both have changed attitudes and produced policies that have reduced the likelihood and consequences of surprise attack. Pearl Harbor focused strategists' attention on the need to avoid the consequences of surprise attack, especially when it came to US nuclear deterrent threats. The fear of a surprise attack made the nuclear balance of terror appear delicate. As a result, enormous efforts were undertaken to guarantee that US strategic forces could survive a Soviet nuclear

fense of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. This division of responsibilities helped to create the conditions for surprise. When Washington issued a war warning to its forces in Hawaii, Army officers took steps to safeguard against sabotage, locking up ammunition and concentrating aircraft on the center of runways so they could be more easily guarded. In contrast, Navy officers thought that the war warning would prompt a vigorous effort on the part of the Army to use long-range aircraft to patrol the waters around Oahu. Army officers thought that Naval intelligence had been keeping tabs on the whereabouts of the Japanese fleet; they did not realize that Navy analysts had lost track of Japanese aircraft carriers in the weeks leading up to Pearl Harbor. Further, the Army and Navy staffs on Oahu never confirmed their expectations about what each other was doing to safeguard the islands from attack. Even perfect liaison between the services, however, might not have been enough to prevent disaster because no mechanism existed

largely diverged at the water's edge. The Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) focus on foreign threats and intelligence collection, while the Federal Bureau of Investigation focuses on internal security and investigating crime.

Local and State police forces operate in their own jurisdictions and US airport security, until recently, was largely the responsibility of private firms. Additionally, the definition of terrorism was not without organizational consequences. Was it a form of war or a type of natural disaster that would fall under the jurisdiction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency? Was it a homegrown threat involving high explosives (e.g. the destruction of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in April 1995) or a new type of threat involving weapons of mass destruction (e.g. the Aum Shinrikyo attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995)? And as this debate about the likelihood and form of mass-casualty terrorism unfolded in the years leading up to Sep-

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attack and still be able to assure destruction of the Soviet Union. Today, the administration of US President George Bush is trying to minimize the effects of a potential terrorist incident by improving homeland defenses and consequence management, spending US\$35 billion on homeland defense programs. US military forces also are pre-empting attacks by taking the battle to the terrorists and by training foreign militaries to deal with the threat.

Structural Vulnerabilities

Despite common misperceptions, it was the US Army, and not the US Navy, that was responsible for the de-

to collect and disseminate all-source intelligence to the operational commanders who could put it to good use. There is little evidence to suggest that the Japanese knew about these organizational weaknesses in Hawaii's defenses, but organizational shortcomings facilitated their effort to catch the US fleet unprepared.

Al Qaeda might have understood the organizational weakness that reduced the likelihood that its operatives would be detected before they struck. While there was a unified command structure in the Persian Gulf to address the local terrorist threat, organizational responsibilities in the US government

tember 11, front-line government agencies in the war against domestic terrorism were allowed to atrophy. US Customs and Immigration agents now find themselves unprepared for their new role in combating domestic terrorism.

US citizens tend to focus on technological solutions to problems, often forgetting that organization shapes the ability to respond to emerging challenges. Strong organization—the ability to orchestrate the efforts of a vast array of individuals and bureaucratic actors—is imperative if the United States is to effectively spend its resources in the war on terrorism. Despite interservice rivalry and bureaucratic prefer-

ences, the organizational shortcomings that existed prior to Pearl Harbor were relatively easy to minimize compared to the bureaucratic and legal challenge created by today's war. After Pearl Harbor, clearer lines of responsibility were drawn between the services. By contrast, legal questions and scores of jurisdictional issues presently complicate official efforts to create the governmental structures and relationships needed to generate a comprehensive response to terrorism.

Technological Surprise

The ability to utilize technology creatively played an important role in both the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks of September 11. When historians write about technical surprise, they focus on the unexpected introduction of hardware or weapons that cannot be quickly countered by an opponent. The attack on Pearl Harbor, for example, was made possible when the Japanese developed an aerial torpedo that could function in the shallow waters of Pearl Harbor. But the Japanese success at Pearl Harbor was made possible by a broader inte-

Al Qaeda also achieved a technological surprise on September 11. Again, there was nothing particularly novel about the use of aircraft to conduct a suicide mission—ironically it was the Japanese who introduced the kamikaze during the October 1944 US invasion of the Philippines. But by using a host of modern technologies produced by the information revolution and globalization, Al Qaeda operatives were able to plan, orchestrate, and execute a major “special operations” attack without the hardware, training, or infrastructure generally associated with conducting a precision strike at intercontinental ranges. Al Qaeda used the Internet, satellite telephones, and cell phones to coordinate their international operations, especially to communicate with operatives in the United States. They also used the international banking system to fund cells in the United States without drawing undue attention. Al Qaeda operatives rode the rails of the information revolution, harnessing international communication and financial networks to carry out their nefarious scheme.

In both instances of surprise, the

to underestimate opponents' willingness to find ways to circumvent defenses to gain the element of surprise.

The Interest-Threat Mismatch

During the 1990s, the debate about the United States' role in world affairs revolved around concerns about the interest-threat mismatch. In the aftermath of the Cold War, low-level, nagging threats—ethnic violence, terrorism, or just instability and unrest—permeated parts of the world. Some observers suggested that these threats had little effect on US national interests. People who suggested that the United States become involved in places like Rwanda or even Kosovo, for instance, were really thinking with their hearts and not their heads. The issue was not whether the United States should work to stop genocide. Instead, the concern was that intervention meant an open-ended US commitment to social engineering that realistically had little prospect of success. Intervention was an option available to the United States, but it was not without opportunity costs and significant risks. Intervening in far away places like Afghanistan to stop Taliban human

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gration of technology with a new concept of operations that brought the full capability of carrier aviation to bear in a decisive way. This demonstration of professional military prowess combined new technology, tactics, and strategy in a surprisingly devastating way. Carrier aviation itself was not a secret, but the Japanese exploited this new technology with so much daring and skill that it was impossible even for those who understood the threat posed by Japan to recognize that they faced such grave and immediate danger.

opponent used technology in an innovative way to launch a devastating over-the-horizon attack. And prior to both attacks, the technology employed was actually well known to US officials and officers. Indeed, in the case of the September 11 attacks, US citizens, as the major beneficiaries and supporters of globalization, were probably the world's leading experts when it came to harnessing new instruments of communication and commerce. However, they lacked a keen awareness of the desperation and creativity of their enemies, leading them

rights abuses or to deny Al Qaeda a secure base of operations was never even considered. Bush ran his 2000 presidential campaign on reducing the United States' international “over-commitments” abroad. The United States' “casualty aversion” seemed to be a major factor in limiting US intervention to stop ethnic violence and other forms of carnage. Anti-democratic and anti-market forces, specifically a fundamentalist backlash against the way globalization spreads Western culture, was not deemed of sufficient strength to pose a

significant security threat.

In the late 1930s, the US intelligence community also perceived a mismatch between US interests and the desirability of responding to the threats that were emerging across the globe. This perception is difficult to explain in hindsight, given the genocidal and aggressive policies of the Nazi regime and Japan's imperial ambitions. On the eve of Pearl Harbor, the Nazis had overrun virtually all of Europe and Japan had been engaged in a war in China for nearly a decade. Still, the United States seemed to believe that they could somehow escape the wave of fascism and violence that was sweeping the globe.

Both Al Qaeda and Imperial Japan attacked the United States in an effort to limit US influence and to stop the spread of free markets, democracy, and liberal ideas into the Middle East and East Asia. Japan believed that US officials would not have the will to challenge their initiatives in Asia; Japanese leaders felt US "casualty aversion" would lead to a negotiated settlement in Asia. Bin Laden apparently expected a relatively ineffectual US military response (again driven by US concerns about casualties) that would in the end spark a revolution in moderate Arab regimes, if not a full blown clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Bin Laden and the Japanese, however, underestimated how surprise attacks would alter the political balance within the United States and the way US citizens perceived foreign threats. Both also failed to recognize how quickly US military power could be brought to bear against them.

Aftershock

Many more points of comparison are possible between Pearl Harbor and September 11. At Pearl Harbor, the US military stopped about 8 percent of the attacking force from either reaching its target or returning home. On September 11, airline passengers actually stopped 25 percent of the attacking force

Four days after the September 11 attacks, dust and debris are all that remain of the two 1,350-foot World Trade Center towers.



from reaching its target, saving a US landmark from severe damage or total destruction. US intelligence analysts issued a war warning before the Pearl Harbor attack, and the US military managed to engage the enemy. On September 11, intelligence reports of possible terrorist threats had not yet been translated into a compelling warning, and the US military failed to interfere with Al Qaeda's suicide mission.

It also is too early to make a full comparison between the two events. Japan's experience after Pearl Harbor was so unpleasant that the war inoculated Japan's leaders and public alike against aggression and armed conflict. By contrast, Al Qaeda faces extermination. Pearl Harbor had a generation effect on young people in the United States, serving as a warning that the possibility of aggression and surprise can never be eliminated in international relations. However, it remains unclear what lessons the young will draw from witnessing the destruction of the World

Trade Center on live television.

Pearl Harbor and September 11 are similar in at least one more important respect. Both surprise attacks renewed US interest in world affairs, creating a popular conviction that suffering and oppression in distant places can only be ignored at the expense of US security. Both attacks halted a creeping isolationism and both prompted changes in US government and a renewed commitment to the defense of democracy and economic liberty. The origins of the Department of Defense, the CIA, and a host of intelligence agencies and programs can be tied to that fateful morning over 60 years ago. One can only wonder how the United States will change as the effects of September 11 begin to ripple across governmental institutions and popular culture. We can hope that these changes will not only reduce US vulnerability to mass-casualty terrorist attacks but also eliminate the incentives for others to carry out terrorist acts in the future. ■

