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Reassessing the Intelligence Failure at Pearl Harbor

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Abstract

The intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor is perhaps the most widely studied intelligence failure in American history. The lessons of that failure included the belief that warnings are invariably available before such a disaster, but missed, and that a major part of the solution is to improve the ability of analysis to find the key signals amid the background noise. These lessons have become conventional wisdom, and have been often reaffirmed since then, including after the 9/11 attacks and the Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing attempt. But this paper argues that the conventional wisdom about what went wrong with intelligence prior to Pearl Harbor is incorrect, and that this misconception has contributed to continuing intelligence failures today. This paper proposes a new model that better explains the failure of Pearl Harbor, and which can help improve intelligence performance today.

This paper examines what has been considered—at least until September 11, 2001—to be the greatest intelligence failure in American history, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It challenges the conventional wisdom about that intelligence failure, and by extension it challenges one of the most widely accepted understandings in the intelligence studies literature:

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. A precursor to this paper was presented at the Princeton University Center for International Security Studies in April 2011.

that in cases of failure, sufficient intelligence is virtually always present, and the primary failure lies in improper analysis of that intelligence.

Pearl Harbor remains important today not only because of its historical significance, but also because it has been widely seen as exemplifying a type of intelligence failure that still remains with us. Many intelligence professionals and scholars argued after the 9/11 attacks, for example, that the two situations were eerily similar: despite years of warnings of a growing threat, in both 2001 and in 1941 the most capable intelligence community in the world failed to properly understand the danger and prevent a surprise attack that many saw coming.

The case of Pearl Harbor, especially since Roberta Wohlstetter published her classic book in 1962,² has been the paradigmatic example that helped to establish the conventional wisdom about how such intelligence failures can happen. That conventional view typically sees intelligence failure as occurring when important warning signals are available, but are lost amidst a background of extraneous noise. But as Jack Levy has noted, this was not always believed to be the case:

Prior to the 1960s, it was widely believed that the primary source of strategic surprise was insufficient information. Had the United States possessed ample information, it would have anticipated (and possibly avoided) the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That hypothesis was seriously weakened by Wohlstetter's (1962) single case study of the American intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor. She demonstrated that the United States had ample information of the impending attack but that the information was lost in a noisy international environment and blocked by parochial bureaucratic interests.³

A reassessment of the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor, however, indicates that the conventional wisdom about the role of intelligence in that disaster is mistaken. This paper argues that the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor did not succeed despite the existence of sufficient

² Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

³ Jack S. Levy, "Qualitative Methods and Cross-Method Dialogue in Political Science," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 2007), 201. See also Uri Bar-Joseph and Jack S. Levy, "Conscious Action and Intelligence Failure," *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 3 (2009), 463.

warning; instead, the failure occurred because of a lack of two key factors: precise, tactical level warning, and decision makers who were receptive to that warning.

This new assessment is significant because arguments over how and why intelligence fails have played a critical role in determining how American intelligence and national security organizations have responded to terrorist threats and other challenges today. Efforts at reforming the U.S. intelligence since 9/11, for example, have focused on improving the ability of analysts and agencies to “connect the dots” and detect signals amid noise. If our understanding of why intelligence fails is incorrect, and if the primary problem is not that of analyzing and understanding available warnings and signals, then our efforts to improve intelligence and prevent future failures are likely misguided.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. It begins with a review of the conventional explanations that have been put forward for why America was so thoroughly surprised on December 7, 1941, despite the abundance of warnings of approaching hostilities in the Pacific. Next is an overview of the types of intelligence information that had been available to American decision makers leading up to the attack, followed by a detailed examination of the various strategic and tactical indications and warnings that had been received prior to the attack. The next section reviews how receptive American decision makers were toward that intelligence, first at the strategic level, and then the tactical and operational level. The paper concludes by discussing the importance of this analysis today.

Explanations for the Failure at Pearl Harbor

What went wrong at Pearl Harbor? More than half a century after the event, and nearly 50 years since Roberta Wohlstetter published what remains the primary academic study of the failure, it is remarkable how little on which historians, intelligence experts, and others can

actually agree concerning the reasons behind the disaster. Even among mainstream scholars, who generally reject the most extreme revisionist and conspiracy-minded theories, no single overall explanation has been completely accepted. Although most experts believe a failure of intelligence on the American side was to blame, they disagree on whether the roots of that failure were organizational, psychological, or analytical. Others argue the real problem lay not with the intelligence community, but with the military commanders who were unprepared for the Japanese attack; or with the American policy makers who pushed the nation to war; or with the Japanese enemy who devised a brilliant plan of deception and surprise.⁴

No less than eight official boards and commissions investigated Pearl Harbor in the five years following the attack, culminating in the Joint Congressional Committee that conducted the most comprehensive study in 1946.⁵ That committee's 39-volume report included the texts of the previous investigations,⁶ and determined that the disaster resulted from "supervisory, administrative, and organizational deficiencies which existed in our Military and Naval establishments in the days before Pearl Harbor."⁷

⁴ Debates over operational and strategic aspects of Pearl Harbor are beyond the scope of this paper, but as an illustration of the continuing vitality of these broader debates, one of the most recent books on Pearl Harbor argues that the Japanese planning and execution of the attack was much more flawed than is described in most accounts. See Alan D. Zimm, *Attack on Pearl Harbor: Strategy, Combat, Myths, Deceptions* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2011).

⁵ U.S. Congress, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 253. This is the one-volume final report by the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, and will be further cited as *Pearl Harbor Report*. The 39 volumes of hearings and documents were published separately as U.S. Congress, *Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946). This larger set of documents—which is much more useful for students of the attack—will be further cited as *Pearl Harbor Hearings*. A useful summary of the Joint Committee's conclusions concerning the use of intelligence in connection with the attack on Pearl Harbor was conducted by Walter Pforzheimer for the Director of Central Intelligence in 1946; Walter L. Pforzheimer, "Intelligence at Pearl Harbor" (Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, 1946).

⁶ Some lists of the Pearl Harbor investigations also include a ninth study, a brief on-scene investigation by Navy Secretary Frank Knox immediately after the attack. In addition, a later tenth study was conducted by Under Secretary of Defense Edwin Dorn in 1995-96 on the question of responsibility, to determine whether Admiral Kimmel and General Short, who had both been retired at their permanent two-star rank, should be posthumously advanced to the higher ranks they held at the time of the attack. A useful summary of the various Pearl Harbor investigations is James J. Wirtz, "Responding to Surprise," *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006), 46-51.

⁷ *Pearl Harbor Report*, 253.

The underlying assumption that runs through the Joint Committee’s report is that there had been sufficient intelligence and warning of impending Japanese hostilities, but those in charge—principally the military commanders in Hawaii—failed to take the proper actions. The Committee’s strongest language came in finding that errors by Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and Lt. General Walter C. Short, the senior Navy and Army officers in Hawaii, had contributed significantly to the disaster: “they failed to defend the fortress they commanded.”⁸ Its list of recommended reforms, on the other hand, is not so sharply worded, and reminds the reader of the recommendations made in the *9/11 Commission Report*. It begins with an organizational change—a call for greater centralization of authority of American intelligence—but is mostly filled with rather common-place advice such as warnings against complacency and procrastination, and encouragement for the greater use of imagination.⁹

The Joint Committee’s recommendations for greater intelligence community centralization served as impetus for the formation of the Central Intelligence Agency as part of the National Security Act of 1947.¹⁰ But it was not until Roberta Wohlstetter published her book in 1962 that an over-arching theoretical understanding of the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor became accepted widely enough to be considered conventional wisdom. Her study, based largely on the Joint Committee report, found that the problem wasn’t that the military commanders were incompetent, or that their intelligence staffs failed in their duties to collect intelligence about the threat from Japan.

⁸ *Pearl Harbor Report*, 238.

⁹ Of note, the committee report also included contrary views on the part of the Republican minority members who argued that a larger share of the responsibility belonged with the (Democratic) leaders in Washington, who prevented vital intelligence from reaching Hawaii at the same time they were acting provocatively toward Japan. See the “additional views” of Frank B. Keefe, at p. 266, and the minority report signed by Homer Ferguson and Owen Brewster, p. 493.

¹⁰ On the impact of Pearl Harbor on the formation of the CIA, see for example William M. Leary, ed., *The Central Intelligence Agency, History and Documents* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 19.

Instead, Wohlstetter wrote that if anything, American intelligence collection had been *too* good: “Never before have we had so complete an intelligence picture of the enemy.”¹¹ The problem was rather in the *analysis* of that intelligence. Wohlstetter argued that the vital signals that could have alerted the American forces to the danger were lost amid the far larger quantity of noise—of contradictory and otherwise confusing intelligence that indicated, for example, that Japan was preparing to attack toward the South China Sea. “In short, we failed to anticipate Pearl Harbor not for want of the relevant materials, but because of a plethora of irrelevant ones.”¹²

Wohlstetter’s view—that an excess of noise had drowned out the pertinent intelligence signals and warnings—has since become commonplace, and most major studies of surprise attack and intelligence failure employ the concepts of signals and noise to at least partly explain why intelligence so often fails, and surprise attacks succeed.¹³ Bruce Berkowitz writes “this problem of signal-to-noise ratio is so fundamental in the intelligence business that today, if one refers to the ‘Roberta Wohlstetter problem,’ almost everyone knows exactly what you are talking about.”¹⁴

But not all writers have accepted the Wohlstetter explanation of the Pearl Harbor intelligence failure. Much of the literature that continues to be published about the disaster focuses on the question of who was to blame, and argues either to indict or to clear someone or some group from guilt. Most prominent here are the revisionists, many of whom make an argument that has not been accepted by most mainstream scholars: that American leaders knew

¹¹ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 382.

¹² Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 387.

¹³ Major studies of surprise attack which cite Wohlstetter include Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1982), and Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim’s Perspective*, with a new preface (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). More recent works building on Wohlstetter include Uri Bar-Joseph and Jack S. Levy, “Conscious Action and Intelligence Failure,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124/3 (2009), pp. 461- 488.

¹⁴ Bruce D. Berkowitz, “Spying in the Post-September 11 World,” *Hoover Digest* no. 4, 2003.

about the imminent attack, but let it happen in order to bring America into the war.¹⁵ Another group makes the less sensational argument that sufficient intelligence on the Japanese threat was available in Washington, but through neglect and incompetence it was not forwarded to Hawaii. These authors, including Edwin Layton and Edward Beach, write in part with the goal of clearing the reputations of Kimmel and Short.¹⁶ A final argument in this category holds that America's pre-war leaders—FDR in particular—are responsible for having neglected intelligence and thus becoming blind to the growing Japanese threat.¹⁷

Most scholarly critics of the Wohlstetter thesis, however, avoid blaming individuals. Eliot Cohen and John Gooch do find that the primary problem was a failure on the part of the operational commanders to take reasonable defensive precautions that would have mitigated the effect of the attack; it was “an operational failure, not solely or even primarily an intelligence failure.”¹⁸ But they do not assign guilt to any specific individuals involved, finding rather that

¹⁵ See for example Robert B. Stinnett, *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (New York: Free Press, 2000). Most historians and Pearl Harbor scholars dismiss such claims; Marc Trachtenberg, for example, has termed “absurd and baseless” the charge that FDR knew of the Japanese plans and let the attack happen: Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 123. These works tend to rely on flimsy evidence or tenuous assumptions. A useful critique of the revisionist view is John C. Zimmerman, “Pearl Harbor Revisionism: Robert Stinnett's Day of Deceit,” *Intelligence and National Security* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 127-146. For a defense of the revisionists, see Brian Villa and Timothy Wilford, “Signals Intelligence and Pearl Harbor: The State of the Question,” *Intelligence and National Security* 21, no. 4 (August 2006), 520-556.

¹⁶ Edwin T. Layton, Roger Pineau and John Costello, *And I Was There: Pearl Harbor and Midway--Breaking the Secrets* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 217. See also Edward L. Beach, *Scapegoats: A Defense of Kimmel and Short at Pearl Harbor* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995). Thomas K. Kimmel Jr., grandson of Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, has worked to restore his grandfather's reputation and rank; see Thomas K. Kimmel Jr. and J. A. Williams, “Why Did the Attack on Pearl Harbor Occur? An Intelligence Failure? FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover Thought He Knew,” *Intelligencer*, journal of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2009), 53-59.

¹⁷ This is the argument of Lyman B. Kirkpatrick Jr., *Captains without Eyes: Intelligence Failures in World War II* (London: Macmillan, 1969). Christopher Andrew takes a slightly different tack, arguing that the failure was largely due to FDR's preference for information from spies and other covert sources, rather than from signals intelligence, which turned out to be the key source of information. “Had he shared Winston Churchill's passion for, and understanding of, signals intelligence (SIGINT), the outcome of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor might have been very different.” Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 3.

¹⁸ Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 49.

the roots of the operational failure can be found in organizational problems—especially a lack of coordination between the Army and Navy in Hawaii.

Irving Janis argues that even when one takes into account the ambiguous nature of the intelligence available prior to December 7, 1941, it is puzzling why the American military commanders failed to consider at least the *possibility* of Japanese attack: “After all, military leaders are supposed to be constantly vigilant and to have contingency plans ready in order to cope with low probability events.”¹⁹ He finds that the concept of “groupthink,” in which a small group of officials in Hawaii developed a set of firmly shared beliefs, helps to account for the lack of vigilance among the Navy commanders at Pearl Harbor.

Although these various explanations differ on the reasons for failure, most agree that someone failed to understand or make proper use of the intelligence that was available. Intelligence *collection* prior to Pearl Harbor, by most accounts, was a relative success.²⁰ But a few authors challenge this view, including intelligence historian and journalist David Kahn. Kahn argues that Wohlstetter was wrong—the failure was not one of analysis, but of collection, for there was not enough data for anyone to conclude that the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor. “Sufficient indications of an attack simply did not exist within the mass of American intelligence data. Not one intercept, not one datum of intelligence ever said anything about an attack on Pearl Harbor or on any other possession.”²¹

¹⁹ Irving Lester Janis, *Groupthink : Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 81-82.

²⁰ Mark Lowenthal takes this approach, writing that although “virtually everything” went wrong at Pearl Harbor, “Collection was the one bright spot.” Mark M. Lowenthal, “The Burdensome Concept of Failure,” in *Intelligence: Policy and Process*, eds. Alfred C. Maurer, Marion D. Tunstall and James M. Keagle (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 44.

²¹ David Kahn, “The United States Views of Germany and Japan in 1941,” in *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars*, ed. Ernest R. May (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 500-501. Kahn also makes this argument in David Kahn, “The Intelligence Failure at Pearl Harbor,” *Foreign Affairs* (Winter, 1991/92). This is also the position taken in Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*; and by Alex Roberto Hybel, *The Logic of Surprise in International Conflict* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986).

Another prominent critic of the conventional view is Ariel Levite, who writes that Wohlstetter—and just about everyone who has studied Pearl Harbor since her work—is mistaken in believing that the U.S. had sufficient warning of attack. He argues that “prior to December 7, 1941, the United States did not possess anything even remotely resembling hard evidence to suggest that Japan was actually set to attack any American target, let alone Pearl Harbor.”²² He adds that “In view of the paucity of signals, in important respects even their complete absence, the abundance of noise was immaterial.”²³

The contrarian views of Kahn and Levite have not made much impact on the conventional wisdom, however, and Levite’s book received largely negative reviews from other scholars of surprise attack.²⁴ The most widely accepted explanation for the American failure to anticipate Pearl Harbor continues to be that first described by Wohlstetter: the intelligence was available, but not understood or believed. This is the conclusion of Gordon Prange, the author of perhaps the most careful and even-handed study of Pearl Harbor since Wohlstetter. He argues that in 1941 the future course of Japanese action had been made clear to American leaders from

²² Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 78. Making a similar argument is Alex Roberto Hybel, *The Logic of Surprise in International Conflict* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986).

²³ Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises*, 84.

²⁴ Richard Betts and James Wirtz both criticized Levite’s methodology, especially his comparison of the use of intelligence at Pearl Harbor (an attack before war) and at the Battle of Midway (an attack conducted during wartime). 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), 329-343; and Levite’s response, “*Intelligence and Strategic Surprises* Revisited: A Response to Richard K. Betts’s ‘Surprise, Scholasticism, and Strategy,’” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September 1989), 345-349. See also James J. Wirtz, “Review of Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises*,” *Survival* 30, no. 5 (September/October 1988), 478-479. 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.

sensitive code-breaking intelligence, known as Magic: “Make no mistake about it, Japan was going to war, and those with access to Magic knew it.”²⁵

Wohlstetter’s thinking continues to influence our understanding of intelligence today, and following the 9/11 attacks scholars and intelligence practitioners frequently cited Wohlstetter in attempting to explain how the U.S. intelligence community could have missed what after the fact appear to have been clear warnings.²⁶ James Wirtz writes, “That accurate information on what is about to transpire can always be found within the intelligence pipeline is an important insight that has withstood the test of time and critical scrutiny . . . in fact, it should be considered as the first law of intelligence failure.”²⁷ Terrorism expert Jessica Stern puts it this way: “surprise attacks do not arise from too little information too late, but from too much information, too soon.”²⁸

Recent analyses of failures and disasters appear to support the conventional view, finding that the events could have been prevented if only we had paid better attention to the information and warnings that were available. This was the conclusion of the White House review after the Christmas Day 2009 attempt to blow up an airliner as it approached Detroit.²⁹ More recently, after U.S. Army Major Nidal Hasan killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas, Senators Joseph Lieberman and Susan Collins argued the deaths could have been prevented. The Department of Defense and FBI, they wrote, “Collectively had sufficient information to have detected Hasan’s

²⁵ Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 372. Magic was a key product of American codebreaking, and I will discuss it in the next section.

²⁶ For example Daniel Byman, “Strategic Surprise and the September 11 Attacks,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), p. 147, and Charles F. Parker and Eric K. Stern, “Bolt from the Blue or Avoidable Failure? Revisiting September 11 and the Origins of Strategic Surprise,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1 (2005), pp. 301-331.

²⁷ James J. Wirtz, “Responding to Surprise,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006), 51.

²⁸ Jessica Stern, “Review of Peter Bergen’s ‘The Longest War,’” *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2011.

²⁹ “Remarks by the President on Strengthening Intelligence and Aviation Security,” January 7, 2010, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-strengthening-intelligence-and-aviation-security>.

radicalization to violent Islamist extremism but failed both to understand and to act on it.”³⁰

Even the turmoil and unrest that has rocked much of the Middle East, it has been claimed, could have been foreseen if only the warnings from some experts had been listened to.³¹

Despite the strength of conventional wisdom, the persistence of the basic phenomenon—the inability to prevent bad things from happening despite the presence of apparently sufficient warning—suggests there may be value in reexamining the case of Pearl Harbor to determine whether there might be some other factor at work in producing intelligence failure. The following sections build on the work of David Kahn and Ariel Levite, taking advantage of additional sources and scholarship that have become available since they first challenged the Wohlstetter view.

Sources of Intelligence before Pearl Harbor: a Primer

Before we examine the specific pieces of information that were available to American intelligence agencies and decision makers prior to Pearl Harbor, it may be useful to briefly review where this information came from: what were the principal sources and types of intelligence available on the Japanese threat in 1941?³²

The most important source of tactical and operational level intelligence—intelligence of use to military commanders, focusing on the locations and actions of Japanese forces—was intelligence derived from the intercept of Japanese communications (known as communications intelligence, or “COMINT”). Most famously, this included codebreaking, or what is more

³⁰ Joseph I. Lieberman and Susan M. Collins, “We Could Have Stopped the Terror at Fort Hood,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2011.

³¹ Jackson Diehl, “Obama Administration Ignored Clear Warnings on Egypt,” *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2011.

³² This section focuses on intelligence concerning the Japanese naval threat. For a review of intelligence available on the Japanese Army, see Douglas Ford, ““The Best Equipped Army in Asia”?: US Military Intelligence and the Imperial Japanese Army before the Pacific War, 1919–1941,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 21, no. 1 (2008), 86-121.

technically known as cryptanalysis or cryptology.³³ The most secret Japanese code was used primarily for Japanese diplomatic dispatches, and was known by the Americans as Purple. In what David Kahn has called “the greatest feat of cryptanalysis the world had yet known,” U.S. Army codebreakers led by William F. Friedman had cracked the code, by actually constructing a copy of the machine used by the Japanese to encipher their messages—known as the Purple machine.³⁴

Prior to outbreak of war, U.S. Navy communications intelligence processing for the Pacific was conducted in three main centers. Central coordination as well as a share of the actual processing work was done out of Washington, from the Navy staff office known as OP-20-G, which was also referred to as Station Negat. The Pacific Fleet’s communications intelligence unit was at Pearl Harbor, and was commanded by LCDR Joseph Rochefort. It was code-named Station Hypo, although it was later renamed the Fleet Radio Unit Pacific, or Frupac. A third center at Corregidor in the Philippines, primarily supporting the small Asiatic Fleet, was known as Cast.³⁵ Each office was responsible for supporting different sets of operational commanders, and they did not all work on the same Japanese code systems, but cryptanalysts at different

³³ On the importance of COMINT, see Layton, *“And I Was There,”* 55-56. On the preeminence of codebreaking over other sources of intelligence, see David Kahn, “Pearl Harbor and the Inadequacy of Cryptanalysis,” in *Selections from Cryptologia: History, People, and Technology*, ed. Cipher A. Deavours, et al (Boston: Artech House, 1998), 35. *Cryptanalysis* means breaking codes and ciphers, while *cryptography* refers to encoding one’s own messages. *Cryptology* is a term usually intended to include both cryptanalysis and cryptography; communications intelligence is a broader term including codebreaking, direction-finding, and traffic analysis; while signals intelligence is even broader, encompassing both communications intelligence and electronic intelligence (which deals mostly with radar). For a useful summary of these terms and more, see David Kahn, *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing*, Revised ed. (New York: Scribner, 1996), xiii-xvi.

³⁴ Kahn, *The Codebreakers*, 18.

³⁵ Robert Louis Benson, *A History of U.S. Communications Intelligence during World War II: Policy and Administration (CCH-S54-97-01)* (Washington, DC: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 1997), 6-7. In addition to these three primary cryptanalysis centers there were a number of subordinate radio intercept facilities and direction finder stations; in 1944, a classified study reported there were 40 such stations. See National Security Agency, *Special Research History (SRH) 152, Historical Review of OP-20-G* (Washington, DC: NSA, 1944), 7. The picture of U.S. radio intelligence in the Pacific in WWII is also complicated by the fact that a number of these centers changed names and even locations at different times; Cast, at Corregidor, for example, had earlier been located at Cavite Naval Base in Manila Bay; and later after the Japanese captured the Philippines, Cast was evacuated to Melbourne, Australia, and became known as the Fleet Radio Unit, Melbourne, or FRUMEL, as well as by the code-name Belconnen.

centers who were working on the same codes were able to coordinate their efforts and share their results with each other. The American codebreakers also coordinated with the British codebreaking office in Singapore, the Far East Combined Bureau.³⁶

The intelligence derived from the Purple code was known as Magic, and was one of the most closely guarded secrets of the time; in January 1941 the Army and Navy intelligence chiefs drew up a list of those cleared to see Magic, and only ten men were on it, including the President, the secretaries of State, War, and Navy, the Army Chief of Staff and the Chief of Naval Operations.³⁷ The Army and Navy commanders in Hawaii were not on the list, although Washington did send them intelligence they were believed to require, without identifying it as coming from codebreaking and usually attributing it to “highly reliable sources.”³⁸

Magic intercepts, however, revealed only what Japanese diplomats were being told by Tokyo, and this included little about actual military and strategic planning. For that, U.S. intelligence attempted to break the Japanese military codes, but here they had less success than with the diplomatic Purple code. Hypo in Hawaii focused on the Japanese Navy’s “flag officers system,” which Kahn has described as “the Japanese Navy’s most difficult and the one in which it encased its most secret information.”³⁹ This code had provided most of the U.S. Navy’s information on the Japanese fleet from 1926 until late 1940, but in early December 1940 a new version had been introduced that was proving difficult to break.⁴⁰

³⁶ Peter Elphick, *Far Eastern File: The Intelligence War in the Far East, 1930-1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 183.

³⁷ Kahn, *The Codebreakers*, 24.

³⁸ Kahn, *The Codebreakers*, 24-25. Some Magic did reach Hawaii, occasionally relayed from other intelligence units such as Station Cast. For example, see Layton, *And I Was There*, 237.

³⁹ Kahn, *The Codebreakers*, 7.

⁴⁰ In fact, the U.S. was never able to break the flag officers code, and the Japanese themselves later abandoned it, possibly because of its slowness and complexity. Laurance F. Safford, *National Security Agency Special Research History (SRH) 149, A Brief History of Communications Intelligence in the United States* (Washington, DC: 1952), 15, <http://www.fas.org/irp/nsa/safford.pdf>. One of the cryptologists at Hypo, Thomas Dyer, later said that they had felt the flag officers code was likely to hold more secret traffic than JN-25, but they had no luck with it: “I batted my

The other major Japanese Navy system was called JN-25 by U.S. intelligence. OP-20-G in Washington and Cast in the Philippines worked on it, as did the British Far East Combined Bureau. This code had come into use in 1939, and the cryptanalysts at OP-20-G were beginning to make progress in late 1940, but then on December 1, 1940, the first JN-25 version was superseded by a new version, dubbed JN-25B, and from that point on little progress was made prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁴¹

Although code-breaking has received the bulk of attention in accounts of intelligence before Pearl Harbor, most of the U.S. Navy's day to day communications intelligence effort was actually devoted to two other endeavors: direction-finding and traffic analysis. *Direction-finding* is a method used to locate radio transmitters; two or more receivers take bearings on the same radio signal, and the point at which their lines of direction cross marks the position of the transmitter. Because ship call signs are often transmitted in the clear, or can otherwise easily be determined, "DF'ng" was a very useful way to keep track of the location of Japanese ships. In 1941 the Navy used a string of direction-finding stations throughout the Pacific and East Asia to keep track of Japanese naval and merchant shipping. The second technique is *traffic analysis*: by analyzing the "external" features of a message such as the call signs of the sender and receiver to

head against a stone wall with very little to work on, I suppose, for about a year." Thomas H. Dyer, *Oral History of Captain Thomas H. Dyer* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1986), 197.

⁴¹ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol 36, 61-62; Frederick D. Parker, *Pearl Harbor Revisited: United States Navy Communications Intelligence, 1924-1941 (H-E32-94-01)* (Fort George G. Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 1994); Layton, "And I Was There," 78; Donald M. Gish, "A Cryptologic Analysis," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1993), 363-388. Controversy has continued over how much of JN-25B had been broken prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, but evidence from declassified files in the National Archives examined by intelligence scholars suggests that few JN-25B messages had been read and understood prior to December 7, 1941. Frederick D. Parker, *Pearl Harbor Revisited: United States Navy Communications Intelligence, 1924-1941 (H-E32-94-01)*; Stephen Budiansky, "Closing the Book on Pearl Harbor," *Cryptologia* 24, no. 2 (April 2000), 119-130; Stephen Budiansky, "Too Late for Pearl Harbor," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (December 1999), 47-51; Philip H. Jacobsen, "Foreknowledge of Pearl Harbor? No! The Story of the U.S. Navy's Efforts on JN-25B," *Cryptologia* 27, no. 3 (July 2003), 193-205. For a detailed argument supporting the revisionist view that at least some JN-25B traffic had been read before the attack, see Timothy Wilford, "Decoding Pearl Harbor: USN Cryptanalysis and the Challenge of JN-25B in 1941," *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* XII, No. 1 (January 2002), 17-37.

determine who is talking to whom, and by studying how much radio traffic is being transmitted, a trained operator can develop a fairly good picture of naval and military operations.⁴²

Other intelligence on the Japanese fleet was gained from reports gathered from coastal observers in Asia, naval attaches, and captains of merchant fleets.⁴³ In Hawaii, both the FBI and military intelligence spied on the Japanese consulate. Once war had begun, additional sources of intelligence would be gathered from the interrogation of prisoners of war and from captured documents, and American leaders also could benefit from press reporting about Japanese political and diplomatic affairs.⁴⁴

Strategic Level Intelligence and Warning

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 surprise attack. Many of these pieces of intelligence can be categorized as strategic warning, often derived from high-level communications systems that were processed and analyzed mostly in Washington. This section divides these warnings into

⁴² Kahn, *The Codebreakers*, 7-8. On the importance of traffic analysis in the early days of the war with Japan, see Duane L. Whitlock, "The Silent War Against the Japanese Navy," *Naval War College Review* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1995), 43-52.

⁴³ Captain Edwin T. Layton later testified that the most important sources of intelligence in the months prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor were attaché and observer reports, traffic analysis, and reports from the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington. Layton testimony to the Hewitt inquiry, *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, 36, 112. On the intelligence produced by U.S. naval attaches in Japan, see Thomas G. Mahnken, *Uncovering Ways of War: U.S. Intelligence and Foreign Military Innovation, 1918-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 31-40. For useful overviews of U.S. intelligence sources in the Pacific War, see Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), chapter 20; Ralph Lee Defalco III, "Blind to the Sun: US Intelligence Failures before the War with Japan," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 95-107.

⁴⁴ The Office of Naval Intelligence had a section dedicated to monitoring domestic and foreign press reporting, and American military attaches in Japan routinely collected information from local newspapers. See Thomas G. Mahnken, "Gazing at the Sun: The Office of Naval Intelligence and Japanese Naval Innovation, 1918-1941," *Intelligence and National Security* 11, no. 3 (July 1996), 426. But Kahn notes that press reporting on Japan was less useful for American leaders than press reporting on Germany. Kahn, "The United States Views of Germany and Japan in 1941," 476-501.

three general types: assessments resulting from military planning and exercises, some of which were extraordinarily prescient; specific reports from strategic-level intelligence sources; and general assessments produced by key intelligence organizations and individuals.

Military Plans and Exercises

Beginning at least as early as 1936, war games and military exercises 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 three documents written by senior military officers during these years read today as eerily prescient.⁴⁵ 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.

The first 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 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.”⁴⁶ This memo received Admiral Richardson’s endorsement, and inspired

⁴⁵ Prange writes, “Defense against an attack on Pearl Harbor had been the basis of plans, maneuvers, blackouts, and reports for years.” Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 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.

⁴⁶ Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 41.

Rear Admiral Turner, the Navy's war plans chief in Washington, to prepare a letter for Navy Secretary Knox's signature that 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."⁴⁷

The 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."⁴⁸

A third report, "Study of the Air Situation in Hawaii," was signed by Major General Martin, head of the Hawaiian Army Air Corps, but Prange writes that it was largely the work of Colonel William E. Farthing, commander of the 5th Bombardment Group at Hickam. Prange refers to this as the **Farthing Report**, and it was even more accurate in its forecast, stating that "our most likely enemy, Orange," could probably employ a maximum of six carriers against Oahu, and an early morning attack was the best plan for the enemy. The report argued against complacency: "It has been said, and it is a popular belief, that Hawaii is the strongest outlying naval base in the world and could, therefore, withstand indefinitely attacks and attempted

⁴⁷ Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 45. The Joint Congressional Committee (*Pearl Harbor Report*, 76) cited this letter by Knox as a key warning neglected by the commanders in Hawaii.

⁴⁸ "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," *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol 24, 349.

invasions. Plans based on such convictions are inherently weak and tend to create a false sense of security with the consequent unpreparedness for offensive action.”⁴⁹

Strategic Intelligence Indicators

Japanese 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 the U.S. intelligence to read their message traffic. Rochefort said that two changes in such rapid succession had never happened before, and they made identification of Japanese ships very difficult.⁵⁰ The change was also seen as an indicator of preparations for hostile activity: the 14th Naval District daily intelligence summary for December 1 reported that “The fact that service calls lasted only one month indicate (sic) an additional progressive step in preparing for active operations on a large scale.”⁵¹

Loss of contact on carriers. 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.⁵² Some believed they

⁴⁹ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1024, 1026, 1031. Prange discusses this report in *At Dawn We Slept*, p. 185.

⁵⁰ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 40-41; Kahn, *The Codebreakers*, 39; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 439-441; *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 10, 4680 (quoting Rochefort).

⁵¹ National Security Agency, *Special Research History (SRH) 147, Communications Intelligence Summaries, 1 November - 6 December 1941, Commandant, 14th Naval District, United States Navy* (Washington, DC: NSA, nd), 38.

⁵² One of the continuing controversies about intelligence and Pearl Harbor concerns 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. A recent review of the debate, critical of the revisionists, is Robert J. Hanyok, “‘Catching the Fox Unaware’: Japanese Radio Denial and Deception and the Attack on Pearl Harbor,” *Naval War College Review* vol. 61, No. 4 (Autumn 2008), 99-124. Philip Jacobsen has written extensively on this question: Philip H. Jacobsen, “Radio Silence and Radio Deception: Secrecy Insurance for the Pearl Harbor Strike Force,” *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2004), 695-718; 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; 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.

were all still near Japan, while others thought one division was near the Marshalls.⁵³ The 14th Naval District summary for December 2, 1941, reported, “Almost a complete blank of information on the Carriers today.”⁵⁴

The “winds” messages. In November 1941 Tokyo sent dispatches to its Washington embassy establishing a code to be used on the daily Japanese language short wave news broadcast if Japan’s diplomatic relations were becoming dangerous. The coded signals would be inserted at the end of the daily weather forecast, and the code to indicate that Japan-U.S. relations were in a state of emergency was “east wind rain.” American cryptanalysts translated the dispatches establishing this code, and on November 28 Naval Communications in Washington directed Hawaii to monitor all Japanese shortwave broadcasts 24 hours a day for the coded signal (which became known as a “winds execute” message).⁵⁵

There has been a continuing controversy over whether the Japanese ever sent such an “execute” message. Captain Laurence F. Safford, head of the Navy Department’s Communications Security unit in Washington, later testified he had seen a winds execute message, but no other key personnel remembered seeing one.⁵⁶ Rochefort testified that his unit had never intercepted such a message, and Prange believed it unlikely that one was ever sent. Even if it had been sent, it would not have been a warning of an attack on Pearl Harbor; but as

⁵³ Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 353; Layton, *And I Was There*, 184-185.

⁵⁴ National Security Agency, *Special Research History (SRH) 147, Communications Intelligence Summaries, 1 November - 6 December 1941, Commandant, 14th Naval District, United States Navy*, 40.

⁵⁵ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 51-52, 214-219; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 360-361; *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 12, 154-155. The most extensive study of the issue is Robert J. Hanyok and David P. Mowry, *West Wind Clear: Cryptology and the Winds Message Controversy—A Documentary History*, United States Cryptologic History Series IV: World War II Volume X, National Security Agency Center for Cryptologic History, 2008.

⁵⁶ Safford’s testimony is in *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 8, 3579.

Wohlstetter notes, the mere fact that the Japanese had set up such a system of coded messages was a warning that they thought a breakdown in diplomatic relations was possible.⁵⁷

Deadline messages. Another set of warnings that were later described as missed signals of war were six messages sent by Tokyo to its embassy in Washington in November 1941. These reports, intercepted and translated through Magic, warned Japanese diplomats that a deadline had been set of November 25 (later extended to November 29) for the conclusion of negotiations with the U.S. Tokyo reported ominously that after this deadline, “things are automatically going to happen.”⁵⁸

Japanese code burning. On December 1 and 2, Tokyo ordered a number of its diplomatic posts in Asia and those in Washington and London to destroy most of their codes and code machines. Information about these messages was sent to Hawaii on December 3. Intelligence officials in Hawaii also learned on December 6 from the FBI that the local Japanese consulate had been burning papers for the last two days.⁵⁹

Last minute Japanese signals. Just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese government sent four last-minute cables to its embassy in Washington, and these have been considered crucial missed warning signals. The first, known as the “pilot message,” was sent on December 6 alerting the embassy that Tokyo would be sending a reply to the latest American proposal in fourteen parts. This pilot message was intercepted by the Navy early in the morning of December 6. The first of the fourteen parts of the actual message began coming in to the

⁵⁷ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 219. Layton discusses Safford’s claim in a detailed author’s note: Layton, “*And I Was There*,” 517-523. See also Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 312-330; and Robert J. Hanyok, “The Pearl Harbor Warning that Never Was,” *Naval History* Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 2009). A Navy radio intercept operator, Ralph T. Briggs, later claimed that he intercepted the winds execute message on December 4, 1941, while on duty at the Navy Communications Station, Cheltenham, Maryland, but that the record of his report was later found to be missing from Navy files. There are numerous discrepancies between the Safford and Briggs claims, however, and most who have studied the issue have concluded both men likely had mistakenly remembered events.

⁵⁸ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 190.

⁵⁹ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 49-50; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 447-450.

Navy intercept station on Bainbridge Island near Seattle that same morning, and the various parts were forwarded to Washington by teletype as they came in, mostly in order, throughout the morning and into the afternoon. Part 14 did not come in to Bainbridge until 3:00 a.m. Washington time on December 7. Then came what has later been dubbed the “one o’clock message,” telling the Japanese ambassador to submit the reply to the U.S. government at 1:00 p.m. Washington time on December 7. This was intercepted at 4:30 a.m., Washington time, at Bainbridge, and 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.⁶⁰

Strategic Level Intelligence Assessments

Senior Army and Navy intelligence officials in Washington, who had the benefit of all the available reporting, saw clearly that war was coming in the Pacific—but they did not expect it would come against the U.S. They expected Japan to attack either to the south, such as against Thailand, or to the north against Russia. As an example of such assessments, on November 2, 1941, the Army’s Military Intelligence Division (MID) stated that Japan wished to avoid military conflict with the American, British, and Dutch powers, and that although she might make military moves she would not “at present” attack U.S. territories such as the Philippines.⁶¹ On November 27 the MID issued a more alarming report that Japan had “completed plans for further aggressive moves in Southeastern Area,” but still there was no hint of aggression against Hawaii.⁶² Then on December 5 the MID issued a prophetic report that described Japan as being

⁶⁰ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 221-226; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 406.

⁶¹ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1363; Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 293.

⁶² *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1368; Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 297.

pushed toward war as a result of economic crisis—although it mistakenly stated that Japan would most likely move first to occupy Thailand.⁶³

Navy intelligence reached largely the same conclusions as the Army: war was coming, but it would likely begin with a Japanese attack to the south toward Thailand. On December 1 the Office of Naval Intelligence reported, “Deployment of naval forces to the southward has indicated clearly that extensive preparations are underway for hostilities.”⁶⁴ Also on that date CDR Arthur McCollum, the chief of ONI’s Far Eastern Section, sent a memo to the Director of Naval Intelligence assessing that Japanese army, navy, and diplomatic activity over the previous two months indicated the “principal preparatory effort” by the Japanese was directed toward control or occupation of Thailand, followed almost immediately by an attack against British possessions, possibly in Burma and Singapore.⁶⁵ McCollum felt so strongly about the growing threat that he met with the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Stark, and others in Stark’s office on December 1 and warned that in his opinion either war or a rupture of diplomatic relations was imminent. He asked whether the Fleets had been alerted, and he even prepared a warning dispatch of his own, but it was not sent—evidently because his superiors felt that the warnings that had been sent in previous days were sufficient.⁶⁶

Tactical Level Intelligence and Warning

Although most of the intelligence and warning available prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor was of a long-range, strategic nature, there were also a number of more specific, tactical

⁶³ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1377-1382; Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 297-298. Wohlstetter does not see this memo as particularly alarming; she describes it as arguing primarily that Japan wanted to avoid a general war in the Pacific, but I take it to be much more ominous than that.

⁶⁴ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 15, 1783.

⁶⁵ Arthur H. McCollum, *Oral History of Rear Admiral Arthur H. McCollum* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1973), appendix.

⁶⁶ On McCollum’s meeting with Stark, *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 8, 3384; Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 331.

warnings of the potential for hostile action on the part of the Japanese Navy against Pearl Harbor. This section reviews first the specific tactical level intelligence indicators, and then the assessments that intelligence officials in Hawaii drew from those indicators.

Tactical Level Indicators

Ambassador Grew's report. One of the most intriguing reports of the Pearl Harbor story is the 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.”⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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 Admiral Yamamoto was finishing up his original plan for the Pearl Harbor attack.⁶⁹ Richard Betts has described it as “a curious example of a ‘perfect’ warning that was really unjustified.”⁷⁰

“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.⁷¹ A later message, on November

⁶⁷ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol.14, 1042.

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ Prange offers the most complete discussion of this incident, but even his research could not determine the source with any confidence. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 31-35.

⁷⁰ Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1982), 45.

⁷¹ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 211-213; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 249.

15, directed that these reports were to be made twice a week, and were to divide the waters of Pearl Harbor into five smaller areas and report on warships and carriers at anchor.⁷² Washington intelligence agencies did not inform the military commanders in Hawaii about this November 15 message. After the Pearl Harbor attack it became known as the “bomb plot” message, and was cited by the congressional investigations as an important missed warning.⁷³

Opana radar plot. The 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 4:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m., but the operators at Opana decided to remain on duty past 7:00 a.m. At 7:02 a.m. 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, and after several minutes spent trying to reach anyone in charge, they were able to speak to Lt. Kermit Tyler, an Air Corps officer in training who had the 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. 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. They decided to keep tracking the contact anyway, continuing until 7:30 a.m. At about 7:55 a.m., Tyler stepped outside his office to see what he thought was “Navy bombers in bombing practice over at Pearl Harbor.”⁷⁴

USS Ward contact. At about 4:55 a.m. on the morning of December 7 the USS Ward, a destroyer patrolling off the entrance to Pearl Harbor, was notified by one of two minesweepers

⁷² The text of this message is in *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 12, 261.

⁷³ 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.” Layton, *And I Was There*,” 160, 167.

⁷⁴ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 6-12 (quoting Tyler on 12); Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 499-501.

operating in the area that it had spotted a submerged submarine. The Ward was unable to get a contact, and neither ship reported the incident. Then at 6:45 a.m. the Ward reported it had spotted the conning tower of a submarine, and it had opened fire. The information was reported up the chain of command to the Commandant of the 14th Naval District, Admiral Bloch, and above him to Admiral Kimmel. But none of the senior officers saw any immediate threat, either because they understood that Captain Outerbridge, the commanding officer of the Ward, believed he had sunk the submarine, or because they wanted confirmation that it had actually been a submarine.⁷⁵

Tactical Level Intelligence Assessments

The senior Navy intelligence officers in Hawaii felt confident that war would come soon with Japan, but much like their Washington level counterparts they did not suspect the Japanese Navy was capable of launching an attack against Pearl Harbor. This disbelief was most poignantly expressed in an exchange between Admiral Kimmel and his Fleet Intelligence Officer, LCDR Edwin Layton, which has since been frequently quoted. On December 1 Kimmel had 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 to or from the Japanese carriers. Most analysts believed the carriers were probably in home waters, but with nothing specific to report, he wrote down for the carriers “Unknown—home waters?”

⁷⁵ Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 484-485, 495-498. On the timing, Borch writes that the sub was sunk at 6:40 A.M., but Prange reports that Outerbridge ordered the Ward to General Quarters at that time, which fits the rest of the timeline better. Fred L. Borch, "Comparing Pearl Harbor and '9/11': Intelligence Failure? American Unpreparedness? Military Responsibility?" *Journal of Military History* 67, no. 3 (July 2003), 849.

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.'"⁷⁶

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."⁷⁷

Rocheftort, who commanded the Pacific signals intelligence unit, was no better informed, and estimated in November that the missing Japanese ships were headed south, not east toward Hawaii.⁷⁸ Nor did the Army's intelligence organization in Hawaii (known as G2) suspect that an attack on Pearl Harbor was likely. In October, however, the G2 office provided an "Estimate of International (Japanese) Situation" that at least left the door open for a surprise somewhere. The assessment, signed by Lt. Col. George Bicknell, the assistant G2, advised that "it is highly probable that Japan will, in the near future, take military action in new areas of the Far East." The assessment stated that attacks would most likely be against Russia, French Indochina, Thailand, or British possessions, but a simultaneous attack on America and its allies in the Pacific "cannot be ruled out." The assessment warned, "there remains the possibility that Japan

⁷⁶ Edwin T. Layton, *Oral History of Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1975), 88. Layton also describes the story in Layton, "And I Was There," 243-244.

⁷⁷ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 10, 4840.

⁷⁸ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 43-44.

may strike at the most opportune time, and at whatever points might gain for her the most strategic, tactical, or economic advantages over her opponents.”⁷⁹

Receptivity toward Intelligence Warning

What did military and government decision makers think of these intelligence indicators and assessments? What messages did they take from the warnings of impending conflict with Japan? In this section we will examine, first, what military leaders in Washington, who had access to all of the available intelligence (including Magic), thought about the Japanese threat; next, the views of President Roosevelt and his closest advisors; and finally, the views of American military commanders on the scene in Hawaii.

What did Military Commanders in Washington Think?

It is clear that some senior military officials in Washington 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.”⁸⁰

But even as Knox and Marshall were warning of the possibility of a surprise attack on Hawaii, other military leaders were discounting the threat. On February 1, 1941, Admiral Harold

⁷⁹ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 10, 3196, 3198. This document was dated 17 October 1941. I find this document to be more significant than does Wohlstetter, who reads it to mean that Japan was expected to not attack U.S. possessions: Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 134. Instead, I believe it clearly suggests U.S. possessions were at risk, but it did not specify Pearl Harbor.

⁸⁰ Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*, 52 (citing *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, vol II, p. 413).

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, 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.”⁸¹

By the fall of 1941 it appears that concern over a possible surprise attack had faded completely. The senior leaders of the Army and Navy knew that war with Japan was likely to come soon, and they were concerned that their forces needed more time to prepare.⁸² But they did not expect the first Japanese attacks would come against U.S. possessions, either in Hawaii or farther west. General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, and Admiral Harold Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations, sent a memo to the president on November 27, 1941, that estimated Japan would most likely move against either the Burma Road or Thailand—but it would be deterred from attacking the Philippines by the strength of U.S. forces there, and from attacking Russia because of Russian strength. They did not mention a risk to Hawaii.⁸³

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.”⁸⁴ In these messages the chiefs warned of a possible Japanese “surprise aggressive movement in any direction” (November 24), of an amphibious expedition against “either the Philippines, Thai or Kra

⁸¹ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1044.

⁸² For example, in a memo to the president on November 5, Marshall and Stark said that the U.S. Fleet was not ready for war with Japan. *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1061. See also Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 246-247.

⁸³ *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 14, 1083.

⁸⁴ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 45.

Peninsula or possibly Borneo” (November 27), and that “Japanese future action unpredictable but hostile action possible at any moment” (November 28).⁸⁵ But despite their ominous wording, these messages were actually quite ambiguous, and did not suggest the possibility of attack against Pearl Harbor.

Receptivity at the Diplomatic and Political Levels

There is little evidence to support the conspiracy theorists’ charge that the president knew about the Japanese plans or was willing to provoke such a disaster in order to bring America into the war. Alvin Coox, for example, has provided a useful debunking of these arguments as they pertain to FDR and his senior advisors.⁸⁶ But 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.⁸⁷ It appears FDR was following a policy of attempting to contain or restrain Japanese expansionism, understanding the risk of war but hoping to delay it until America was ready. As Waldo Heinrichs has described, Roosevelt intended in particular to drain Japan’s oil supply and thus its capacity for war, while building up America’s own military capability in the region. But he did not want to take abrupt action that would push Japan toward war: “he wanted a drying up of

⁸⁵ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 44, 45, 46.

⁸⁶ Alvin D. Coox, "Repulsing the Pearl Harbor Revisionists: The State of Present Literature on the Debacle," in *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War*, eds. Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 119-125.

⁸⁷ 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 confirmed 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.

Japanese oil supplies rather than a formal severance of trade, a sobering realization not a sudden shock.”⁸⁸

The president’s desire for a middle policy between overt confrontation and outright appeasement may explain the awkward and confusing way in which the U.S. oil embargo was placed on Japan. In July 1941 Japanese military moves in southern Indochina, and perhaps more importantly, Magic intercepts of Japanese offensive plans, convinced Roosevelt and his advisors that further action would be necessary to deter Japan. FDR issued an executive order freezing all Japanese funds and assets in the U.S.; under the order, a limited amount of oil and gas would be allowed to be exported, but would require an export license. Roosevelt left Washington for the secret meeting with Churchill that would be known as the Argentia Conference, and while he was absent government officials rejected all applications for gas and oil export licenses—implementing what was in effect a total ban. Roosevelt later approved (or at least decided not to overturn) this decision, and the ban stood. Although scholars have debated whether this sequence of events was planned by FDR or was the work of overzealous junior officials, its effect was clearly to help convince Japan that conflict with the U.S. was becoming inevitable.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 154.

⁸⁹ Ronald Spector writes, “Roosevelt did not intend, with this order, to back Japan into a corner but that was its ultimate effect.” Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 68. Spector argues that FDR had failed to make his intentions clear, and U.S. officials rejected license applications in the belief that was his intent; by the time he learned what had happened, it was too late to back down. Scott Sagan finds it more likely that Dean Acheson, the official in charge of the interdepartmental Foreign Funds Committee that made such license decisions, made the decision on his own to block all exports, and that Roosevelt later decided not to overturn the policy either because he simply didn’t want to seem to be backing down, or because he did not believe Japan would actually go to war with the U.S. Scott D. Sagan, “From Deterrence to Coercion to War: The Road to Pearl Harbor,” in *The Limits to Coercive Diplomacy*, eds. Alexander L. George and William E. Simons, 2d ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 69-70. Waldo Heinrichs, on the other hand, argues the evidence suggests that FDR had indicated to acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles that he wanted shipments stopped until he had discussed the issue with Churchill, and Welles passed along those instructions to Acheson. “Acheson was under orders to stall and found ways to comply.” Waldo Heinrichs, “The Russian Factor in Japanese-American Relations, 1941,” in *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War*, eds. Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 163-177.

FDR and his advisors appear to have drawn their clues from the same Magic 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—to the north, or south? During the summer of 1941, reports from southern Indochina had suggested an attack would most likely be directed south. Then in October intelligence from Chinese military sources predicted an imminent attack against Russia, and FDR wrote Churchill on October 15 that he thought the Japanese were “headed North.”⁹⁰

By November the consensus of opinion shifted once more, as widespread reporting of Japanese troop buildups in Indochina convinced most decision makers that the Japanese move would indeed come in the south. This was the situation when on November 26 FDR and Secretary of State Cordell Hull decided that efforts to establish a *modus vivendi* with Japan had failed. Hull presented the Japanese with a comprehensive proposal that called for a total Japanese withdrawal from Indochina—not likely to be accepted—and wrote the next day to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, “I have washed my hands of it and [the situation] is now in the hands of you and Knox, the Army and Navy.”⁹¹

What did the Operational Commanders in Hawaii Think?

Despite the history of war games and drills focusing on the threat of a Japanese surprise attack, neither Kimmel nor 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). As we saw with Kimmel’s exchange with Layton about the “missing” Japanese carriers, Kimmel was aware of at least the

⁹⁰ Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, 191.

⁹¹ Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 85. For another view of this episode, not entirely favorable toward Hull, see Jonathan G. Utley, “Cordell Hull and the Diplomacy of Inflexibility,” in *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War*, eds. Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 75-84.

remote possibility of a Japanese attack. But he 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.”⁹²

Most senior staff and operations officers appear to have shared this confidence, and were dismissive toward anyone who expressed greater concern. This view was captured in an incident described by 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 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.”⁹³ 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.”⁹⁴

Explaining Pearl Harbor

The problem prior to Pearl Harbor was not a lack of imagination, for as we have seen a number of American military leaders, including the Secretary of the Navy and the Chief of Staff of the Army, did consider the possibility of a Japanese surprise attack on Hawaii and warned their subordinates about it. Nor was the problem a failure of long-range, strategic intelligence on the Japanese threat, for leaders both in Washington (where they had access to all available

⁹² Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 401.

⁹³ Layton, *Oral History of Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton*, 74. A slightly different version of this story is told in Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 471.

⁹⁴ Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 68.

intelligence including from Magic) and in Hawaii (where they did not) understood that war was coming between Japan and the U.S.

What was lacking prior to December 7, 1941, was specific, tactical intelligence that indicated the Japanese Navy was planning a surprise attack against Hawaii. While a Japanese attack had been envisioned by a number of planners and strategists, there was no hard evidence to suggest such a thing was likely or even possible. Intelligence officials charged with estimating the threat—with the occasional exception such as the after the fact testimony of Captain Wilkinson, the Director of Naval Intelligence—did not believe the Japanese would be capable of launching such a long-distance attack.⁹⁵ And when the experts scoffed, those responsible for protecting the Fleet in Hawaii, and for making national policy in Washington, focused their attention elsewhere.

Edwin Layton and Frederick Parker, among others, have argued that American intelligence could have produced specific indicators of the attack on Pearl Harbor if they had been given more support from Washington.⁹⁶ In particular, Layton and Parker have written that if the codebreakers in Hawaii had been allowed to work on the Japanese operational code JN-25, they might have been able to break enough of it to anticipate the attack.⁹⁷ Although this argument

⁹⁵ Captain Theodore Wilkinson, the Director of Naval Intelligence, later testified that he had expected an attack on either Siam or the Kra Peninsula of Thailand. But he added that Hawaii was possible, “in that the Japanese Navy’s steaming radius and their capabilities, as the intelligence people say, and I am learning to say, and their probable capabilities indicated that they could come here. It was possible. So in fact was Seattle possible.” *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 4, 1754.

⁹⁶ Frederick Parker writes: “If the Japanese navy messages had enjoyed a higher priority and were assigned more analytic resources, could the U.S. Navy have predicted the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor from Japanese radio communications? Most emphatically yes!” Frederick D. Parker, “The Unsolved Messages of Pearl Harbor,” *Cryptologia* 15, no. 4 (October 1991), 312. See also Layton, “*And I Was There*,” 297-298.

⁹⁷ The Navy had originally planned for Pearl Harbor to begin working on JN-25 in July 1941, but instead Cavite was given the task after the British told their Singapore intelligence personnel to share what they had on JN-25 with Cavite. John Costello has described this as a “poisonous gift,” because although it was well-intended, the end result was that if Pearl Harbor had worked on it, with more expertise and more personnel available, they may well have been able to make more progress, and possibly could have anticipated the Japanese attack. John E. Costello, “MacArthur, Magic, Black Jumbos and the Dogs that Didn’t Bark: New Intelligence on the Pearl Harbor Attack,” in

amounts to a counterfactual that can never be proven, there is evidence supporting it: American intelligence did in fact intercept thousands of messages in JN-25 during the months leading up to the attack, but could not read them. Those messages were finally decrypted and translated in 1945 and 1946, and still later this collection was declassified and made available to scholars. A total of 188 were found to have pertained to December 7, and while none specifically referred to Pearl Harbor there were references to shallow-running torpedoes and training in conducting aerial attacks, which might have been enough to alert Hawaii.⁹⁸

But there was a second factor missing prior to Pearl Harbor that helps to explain the disaster and also suggests that even additional intelligence might not have been enough to change the course of history. That factor was a lack of belief in the seriousness of the threat on the part of key American decision makers. James Forrestal, Secretary of the Navy later in the war, noted the problem of the fundamental disbelief:

...although the imminence of hostile action by the Japanese was known, and the capabilities of the Japanese Fleet and Air Arm were recognized in war plans made to meet just such hostile action, these factors did not reach the state of conviction in the minds of the responsible officers . . . to an extent sufficient to impel them to bring about that implementation of the plans that was necessary if the initial hostile action was to be repelled or at least mitigated.⁹⁹

In part, this lack of belief and conviction in the threat appears to have occurred because of the lack of specific, tactical warning. But there appears to have been more at work: a general lack of

In the Name of Intelligence: Essays in Honor of Walter Pforzheimer, eds. Hayden B. Peake and Samuel Halpern (Washington, DC: NIBC Press, 1994), 235.

⁹⁸ Frederick D. Parker, *Pearl Harbor Revisited: United States Navy Communications Intelligence, 1924–1941 (H-E32-94-01)*; Parker, “The Unsolved Messages of Pearl Harbor,” 295-313. A message dated 28 October from the Chief of Staff, 1st Air Fleet, referred to “near surface (?) torpedoes,” while another from November 4 mentioned torpedoes to be fired “against anchored capital ships on the morning in question.” The American communications intelligence system had even intercepted the message sent to the Japanese fleet on December 2 that established the attack date as December 8 (Japan time, indicated as 1208): A message intercepted on December 2, 1941, from CinC Combined Fleet read in part, “Climb NIITAKAYAMA 1208, repeat 1208.” National Security Agency, *Special Research History (SRH) 406, Pre-Pearl Harbor Japanese Naval Despatches* (Washington, DC: NSA, nd), 63, 12, 114. See also *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, vol. 1, 185; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 445.

⁹⁹ Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 736. Forrestal was endorsing the Navy and Hewitt investigations into Pearl Harbor.

receptivity toward 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 insight, were not prepared to exploit the intelligence provided by this source, particularly when the messages themselves could not be read.¹⁰⁰

The conventional explanation for Pearl Harbor is that sufficient intelligence indicators had been available, but they were misunderstood or ignored as a result of faulty analysis. But this examination of the intelligence picture prior to the attack supports the views of Kahn and Levite that the principal intelligence failure was one of collection, not analysis. The problem, however, was not just a lack of specific, tactical intelligence on the Japanese threat; there was also a failure of receptivity toward intelligence on the part of key decision makers. That lack of receptivity made it unlikely that even better intelligence would have convinced policy makers to take the actions that would have been needed to prevent the Japanese attack. At Pearl Harbor a lack of tactical intelligence and poor receptivity toward intelligence on the part of decision makers combined to allow the Japanese Navy to carry out a disastrous surprise attack that the American military had spent years planning for, and which American strategists had warned might happen.

Significance of this Reassessment

¹⁰⁰ Frederick D. Parker, *Pearl Harbor Revisited: United States Navy Communications Intelligence, 1924–1941 (H-E32-94-01)*, 2.

Nearly half a century after Roberta Wohlstetter established the conventional wisdom about Pearl Harbor, this reassessment offers implications both for our theoretical understanding of intelligence failure, and for our practical efforts today in preventing surprise attacks from both conventional and unconventional adversaries.

In terms of theory, this new understanding of the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor suggests we need to reassess the significance of long-range, strategic intelligence. Before the attack on Pearl Harbor there was indeed a great deal of intelligence available that warned about the possibility of Japanese aggression in the Pacific. Some of these warnings—such as the Farthing Report and Ambassador Grew’s warning—were in fact remarkably accurate, but they were largely conjectures, based on strategic level intelligence.

This reassessment indicates that strategic warning is not enough to prevent surprise attacks and other types of strategic surprise. The American intelligence and national security communities, in fact, face what might be called the *paradox of strategic warning*.¹⁰¹ Strategic-level intelligence and warning is highly sought after by decision makers, and as we have seen in the case of Pearl Harbor, it is often available prior to major surprise attacks. We might, therefore, assume that such warning would be used to prevent attacks. But strategic intelligence and warning is in fact unlikely to be accepted by decision makers, and is rarely useful in preventing those attacks. Tactical intelligence, on the other hand, is much harder to acquire, but when available it is much more likely to be useful and actionable.

The paradox of strategic warning means that the American intelligence community and American policy makers are frequently stuck in a cycle of misplaced warning. Intelligence agencies typically produce numerous strategic-level documents, briefings, and other warnings of

¹⁰¹ My concept is different from the well-known “paradox of warning,” which recognizes that if warnings are given of a potential attack, those warnings may inspire authorities to take countermeasures that may result in the enemy calling off the attack, leading to the impression that the warning was unnecessary.

growing threats, often in response to requests from policy makers. These intelligence assessments are often quite forward-looking and perceptive, but they are not specific enough to attract decision-maker attention and contribute to actions that prevent surprises. When a disaster occurs, scholars, intelligence experts, and senior officials assume that because the threat is long-term and vital to the national interest—in a word, strategic—the solution must be found in the production of more and better strategic analysis. The intelligence community tries to respond, devoting more assets to producing wide-ranging strategic assessments. But this paper suggests that instead, two factors are needed to produce actionable intelligence that can actually be used to prevent surprise attacks or other disasters: precise, tactical level warning, and decision makers who are receptive to that warning.

In terms of practical concerns today, this study suggests that more effort should be placed, first, on the problem of receptivity: the intelligence community needs to foster close linkages with senior officials so that when intelligence is developed and warnings are given, policy makers will listen. Second, greater effort needs to be placed on intelligence collection, and less on attempts to improve analysis. This in turn indicates that U.S. efforts to improve intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities in recent years have been misplaced. Those efforts have been largely focused on improving intelligence analysis, and making sure that available intelligence is routed to the correct agencies so that intelligence watch lists and other data bases can be kept up to date. All this is based on the assumption—challenged by this reassessment—that the necessary intelligence warnings had been there, but were not understood.

To prevent future attacks, U.S. officials and the American public seem to believe that all we need to do is “connect the dots,” but the argument of this paper suggests that counterterrorism and homeland security intelligence requires an extraordinary intensive effort to “collect the dots”

first. And because intelligence collection, especially in a domestic context, typically raises many more concerns about civil liberties than does analysis, this suggests that a greater emphasis on collection is likely to be controversial, but it may be needed in order to prevent domestic and homegrown terrorist attacks.