Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, psychology and command failure

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Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, psychology and command failure

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the causes of the failure to defend Pearl Harbor from carrier-borne air attack in 1941. Existing literature is consulted on command failures, intelligence failures and conspiracy theories. An additional psychological explanatory factor of denial is proposed and compared to the other possible causes. Failure to activate air defence systems is found to be the direct cause of the defence failure. This article concludes that Admiral Kimmel and General Short were in a state of denial of the possibility of an attack and this was likely to have been a contributory factor in their failure to activate air defence systems. By comparison, military intelligence — which is the focus of much of the Pearl Harbor literature — is not found to have played a major role. This finding suggests that too much emphasis is placed on intelligence in the analysis of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Introduction

The Japanese carrier-borne air attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 caught US defences completely by surprise, sparking an extensive debate about responsibility for the Pearl Harbor disaster. Numerous official enquiries aimed to establish the extent to which command or intelligence failures were to be blamed, together with a public debate often based around conspiracy theories. This article proposes the prevailing mindset among American military leaders, who were in a state of denial about the possibility of a Japanese attack, as a further reason for the failure to defend Pearl Harbor.

The background section of this article covers a summary of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. The next sections assess command failures, intelligence failure, psychology, the prevailing mindset in the USA and conspiracy theories. This is followed by a conclusion suggesting that psychological factors were more significant than intelligence failures in explaining the failure to defend Pearl Harbor.

This article adds to the literature by proposing a psychological explanation for the command failures of Admiral Kimmel and General Short, based on the prevailing mindset of their day, comparing this with other possible explanations for the failure to adequately defend Pearl Harbor, and finding that this psychological explanation is significant.

Background

Japan had come to military prominence with its defeat of Imperial Russia in 1905. Japan had few natural resources and looked to establish colonies as a means to gain control of the resources its developing economy needed. Politically Japan became an increasingly militaristic society...
characterised by *Bushido*, a dysfunctional mixture of bravery, brutality, nationalism and recklessness. In 1931, Japan occupied all of Manchuria after junior officers executed existing plans to attack the Chinese, but without seeking the prior approval of the General Staff. In 1933, the League of Nations adopted a report recommending that Japan restore Manchuria to the Chinese and the Japanese delegation walked out.\(^1\) In 1937, Japan invaded China itself and captured all the main coastal areas. Chinese forces continued to resist and Japan did not achieve a complete victory. Different groups in the Japanese military debated the options of striking north against the Soviet Union in Siberia or to the south, with the army generally favouring the northern option and the navy favouring the southern option. In 1939, a border dispute in Mongolia escalated into a full-scale battle at the village of Nomonhan, in which Japanese forces attacked and were then counterattacked and defeated by Soviet forces.

The Nomonhan battle was decisive. It was a clear defeat for Japan and revealed Japanese army weaknesses, especially in armour. Japanese tanks had performed poorly and had suffered such high losses that they were withdrawn early from the battle.\(^2\) As a consequence, the army was now less enthusiastic for further northern strikes. Japan turned south and moved into French Indo-China, taking control of Hanoi and Saigon with the agreement of the Vichy French government. In 1941, Japan took over the whole country.

The United States had thus far wanted to avoid a confrontation with Japan. US intelligence had succeeded in breaking the Japanese diplomatic code and decrypted messages showed that Japan’s purpose in occupying Indo-China was further expansion across the South China Sea.\(^3\) This alarmed the USA which imposed an oil embargo on Japan on 1 August 1941. Japan had limited oil stocks and would either have to come to an agreement with the USA to lift the embargo or have to attempt to break the embargo using force. The Japanese made a peace offer to the USA with a time limit for negotiations. The USA replied with a ten-point note setting out US objectives. The Japanese chose to treat this note as an ultimatum (the note was not worded as an ultimatum, but in the context of the oil embargo neither was it a useful negotiating step towards peace). The Japanese government concluded that there was no purpose in attempting further negotiations with the USA and decided to go to war at the expiry of the time limit it had set.

Further decryption of Japanese messages indicated to the USA that war was imminent and a warning of probable hostilities was sent to the commanders at Pearl Harbor, Admiral Kimmel and General Short, on 27 November. The USA’s success in decryption brought with it its own problems. The number of signals spiralled in the run up to war, and there were not enough security-cleared Japanese speakers to translate them, leading to delays in disseminating the information. There was also the problem of who to share the information with and how to use it. To these questions, there was no right answer; too narrow dissemination of information would miss opportunities where the information might have been usefully utilised and too broad dissemination increased the risk of a security breach. Acting too directly on the information risked alerting the enemy to the fact that signals were being decrypted and not acting was a lost opportunity. The British code breakers working on Enigma had very nearly compromised their success in June 1941, when seven out of eight German ships sent into the Atlantic to supply the Bismarck had been found and sunk using Enigma information. This intelligence success resulted in a German investigation which fortunately failed to consider code breaking as a possible factor.\(^4\) In the immediate days before 7 December, these issues resulted in Pearl Harbor not receiving all available intelligence.

Japanese admiral Yamamoto insisted that Japan’s strategy should be to commence hostilities with a carrier-borne air attack on the US Pacific Fleet. 7 December, Sunday, was the date chosen for the

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attack and the Japanese planes approached Pearl Harbor shortly after 7:00 am. Japanese submarines also approached Pearl Harbor and one was detected and depth charges were dropped by a US destroyer. The radar defences around Pearl Harbor were due to be switched off at 7:00 am for breakfast, but the vehicle bringing breakfast to the radar operators was late that day and the screens were left on. This allowed the operators to see first one small signal and then a very large signal. The radar operators telephoned headquarters and spoke to a junior officer who assured them that some American planes were expected and that there was no need to worry.

Despite the previous warning that war was imminent, the depth charging of a suspected submarine and the findings of the radar operators, no alarm was raised before the incoming Japanese planes began to bomb Pearl Harbor and airfields on Oahu. “The most premonitored surprise attack in history” as Tuchman described it.5

Command failures

The immediate conclusion was that Kimmel and Short should have been prepared to defend against a carrier-borne air attack and they were promptly relieved of their commands. A subsequent enquiry found them negligent but not guilty of dereliction of duty.

A good military defence needs to achieve two things: to be prepared for any possible attack and to prioritise the most likely attacks. Pearl Harbor was clearly not prepared for a carrier-borne air attack on 7 December. There are therefore three questions concerning the performance of the two commanders: Was a carrier-borne air attack considered possible? Did Kimmel and Short have the means to defend against such an attack? And, should they have prioritized that threat?

The possibility of fighting a war across the Pacific was first analysed by Hector Bywater. Bywater had worked as a spy in the First World War and had developed an extraordinary network of contacts in navies and shipyards, making him Britain’s leading international naval expert in the interwar period.6 Bywater suggested that Japan could pursue a strategy of defeating the US Pacific Fleet and occupying a defensive position across islands in the Pacific, but that the United States would ultimately win by recapturing individual islands and invading Japan. Bywater incorporated this strategic thinking into a popular novel “The Great Pacific War” which was published in 1925.7 The book was widely read by Japanese military leaders and also notably by Franklin Roosevelt, who entered into correspondence with Bywater. Bywater’s analysis showed that Japan needed to eliminate the threat posed by the US Pacific Fleet. In the build-up of tension between Japan and the USA, President Roosevelt had ordered the US Pacific Fleet to move from its permanent base in California to a forward position at Pearl Harbor, with the objective of putting pressure on Japan. This led to a dispute with the US Navy Admiral Richardson, who objected that Pearl Harbor was inadequately defended and that the fleet would become a target for Japanese attack. Richardson’s concern clearly lay with attack by aircraft flying from aircraft carriers. Richardson was relieved of command in October 1940 and Kimmel was appointed Admiral of the Pacific Fleet. Richardson’s concern was validated the following month when the British Navy carried out a carrier-borne air attack on the Italian Navy at Taranto. The answer to the first question is simple: Kimmel and Short were clearly aware that a carrier-borne air attack on Pearl Harbor was possible.

Despite Richardson’s dismissal, his concerns had not been ignored. To strengthen defences, coastal radar units were installed around the island of Oahu and linked to a control centre. The radar management system was modelled on the approach developed by Hugh Dowding for Fighter Command in the UK. Dowding’s method was to bring together the information from several radar installations into a single control room which could then make decisions on deployment of

defensive aircraft. The “Dowding System” as it would become known had proved successful in The Battle of Britain.\(^8\) General Short was appointed army commander in Hawaii with the protection of the fleet as the primary purpose of his force. In the months before war broke out, exercises in detecting and intercepting incoming air attacks had been carried out successfully and it seemed that the issue raised by Richardson had been solved. In addition to radar, Kimmel had flying boats available for long-range reconnaissance and Short had planes suitable for in-shore reconnaissance. Pearl Harbor clearly possessed the means to defend against carrier-borne air attack.

With the likelihood of war increasing, steps were taken to prepare Pearl Harbor for war. Hawaii had a large ethnic Japanese community and US intelligence was monitoring messages from the local Japanese consulate to and from Japan. The most significant threat that was expected by Kimmel and Short in the event of war was sabotage by local Japanese agents; as a consequence, they focused on preparation for defence against sabotage. Facilities were secured and aircraft were grouped together so that they could be better guarded. This prioritization was an error and should have been seen as such. On the basis of simple strategic thinking, war with Japan would make the US fleet at Pearl Harbor a target and Admiral Richardson had already pointed this out.

The commanders were aware of the risk of carrier-borne air attack and had at their disposal suitable countermeasures; however, they chose to prioritise the threat of sabotage as war approached. This choice of priority was a poor one, but it was a matter of judgement and not wrong per se. The key failing of Kimmel and Short was then to ignore or deactivate air defences once they had made their choice to prioritise sabotage. On 7 December, none of the possible air countermeasures was fully operational. Worse still some defences had actually been disabled: fighter aircraft had had their guns removed for cleaning, pilots were on 4 h readiness and ammunition had been removed from its boxes for inspections. Kimmel and Short were prepared for the attack they considered most likely, but they had failed to maintain readiness against other possible attacks. This was a clear dereliction of duty.\(^9\)

### Intelligence failure

Intelligence issues have been at the centre of controversies over Pearl Harbor. There are three questions that need to be considered: What information was passed to Pearl Harbor and how useful was it? What further information was there and how useful might it have been had it been received at Pearl Harbor? Should the intelligence services have been able to predict the Pearl Harbor attack from the intelligence at their disposal?

There are three contributions that military intelligence could have provided that would have been helpful to the commanders at Pearl Harbor: information on general level of danger, information on prioritisation of threats, and specific threat information. The general level of danger had been communicated through the warning that hostilities were imminent which had been received on 27 November. However, none of the information received by Pearl Harbor offered any clear help in prioritising threats and there was no specific threat information.

The Defense Department’s Dorn Report of 1995 concluded that there was information that had not been passed on the Kimmel and Short, which might have helped avoiding the Pearl Harbor disaster.\(^10\) Specifically, there were two pieces of information that were not passed on: a request from Japan to the consulate in Hawaii to report on exact positions of ships at Pearl Harbor and information that the Japanese were about to present an ultimatum, thus implying imminent war. The first one would have conveyed new information to Kimmel and Short. That the Japanese were plotting the location of Kimmel’s ships could, however, be equally relevant to either air attack or unexplained losses.

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sabotage, so it is unclear how this might have improved any decisions. The second piece of information merely confirmed what had already been communicated on 27 November, so again it is unclear what difference it might have made.

The area of most controversy is whether the Pearl Harbor attack should have been predicted from the intelligence available. Wohlstetter thought that it should and diagnosed intelligence failure due to four issues: no one person had a full picture of all the intelligence, people tended to pay more attention to information that supported their existing view, there was prejudice in the US military against intellectuals (such as intelligence officers), and there was a low budget for intelligence. This has become the “accepted view” on Pearl Harbor.

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

After an analysis of several intelligence successes and failures, Dahl disagrees with Wohlstetter. Dahl’s view is that the problem does not lie with better analysis and more imagination, or “joining the dots” as it is frequently referred to. Dahl sees the solution in obtaining precise enough warnings and having decision makers who are prepared to heed those warnings.

The first (critical factor) is that it must provide very precise warning about the threat at a level of specificity that many experts might reflexively dismiss as “tactical-level intelligence” [...] This leads to the second critical factor that the policy makers must be receptive to the intelligence.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to piece together the intelligence and show that it pointed to Pearl Harbor as a target, as suggested by Wohlstetter, but it seems unlikely that this could have been done at the time. Taking Dahl’s approach, the rather general intelligence available was unlikely to be helpful or as Hughes-Wilson puts it:

In retrospect the intelligence picture seems blindingly obvious, but then most disasters are only really obvious after they have happened.

There are two fundamental errors which are frequently made in assessing intelligence at Pearl Harbor. The first error is to assume that accurate intelligence was a necessary condition for an effective defence against surprise air attack. This is false because the air defence systems at Pearl Harbor were capable of defending without any prior intelligence warning, as similar systems demonstrated in the Battle of Britain. Accurate prior warning would have been a huge advantage to the defenders of Pearl Harbor on 7 December, but it was not a necessary condition. As one former Pearl Harbor airman put it, “We would have given a damn good account of ourselves.” The second fundamental error is to assume that commanders only need to activate defences in response to known specific threats. This is essentially the defence that Kimmel and Short used to justify their actions during the various enquiries into the disaster. The fact that there was no specific intelligence about carrier-borne air attack did not justify Kimmel and Short’s failure to activate air defence systems. The system should have been in operation at all times regardless of the anticipated level of threat. When Kimmel and Short chose to prioritise sabotage over air defence, air defence should still have remained activated.

12 Wohlstetter, Pearl Harbor.
14 Dahl, Intelligence and Surprise Attack.
16 Lambert and Polmar, Defenseless, Command failure at Pearl Harbor.
We search for an intelligence explanation because the United States happened to have a lot of intelligence and because there is a temptation to think that it might have saved the day. In reality, the available intelligence was a peripheral factor at Pearl Harbor.

Psychology

A further possible explanation for the defence failure at Pearl Harbor is psychological. There are two questions to ask: Was the behaviour of the commanders rational given the situation? What was the background mindset in their environment?

Kimmel and Short were experienced officers and their failure to take a known treat seriously could have been psychological, albeit there is no way retrospectively to establish why these commanders behaved in the ways they did. However, one plausible explanation is that they were in denial about the possibility of an attack on the USA, denial being an unconscious psychological defence mechanism where reality is simply not acknowledged to prevent challenges to an existing understanding of the world. Borch and Martinez cite two incidents which support this proposition for Kimmel:

On 2 December Lt. Cdr. Edwin T. Layton, Kimmel’s intelligence officer, informed his boss that, as there had been no radio traffic from four Japanese carriers “for fully 15 and possibly 25 days,” their location was unknown. Kimmel responded: “Do you mean that they could be rounding Diamond Head (a hill at the entrance to Pearl Harbor) and you wouldn’t know it?” While this quip haunted Kimmel for many years, it reflects more than just ill-timed humor or bad luck. On the contrary, that Kimmel made this statement reflects that he simply did not believe that the Japanese were capable of attacking his command.

On 6th December [...] Joseph C. Harsch, the well-known correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor, met with Admiral Kimmel. Harsch asked Admiral Kimmel if he would “please explain why you seem so confident that there won’t be a war.” Kimmel Answered: “Yes. You probably do not know that the Germans have announced that they are going into winter quarters in front of Moscow. That means that Moscow is not going to fall this winter. That means that the Russians will be in the war in the spring. That means that the Japanese cannot attack us in the Pacific without running the risk of a two-front war. The Japanese are too smart for that.

Harsh: “Admiral, now that the Japanese have moved into Indochina [...] what do you think they will do next?” Kimmel: “I don’t know. What do you think they will attack us?” Kimmel: “No, young man, I don’t think they’d be such damned fools.”

Denial about the possibility of an attack on the USA does seem to fit these examples of Kimmel’s behaviour. In particular, Kimmel’s logic that Japan could not attack because the Russians were still in the war does not reflect rational thinking. The Russians were fighting a life-and-death struggle on the outskirts of Moscow and clearly were in no position to threaten Japan’s rear. Warren gives a more realistic assessment “With the Russians occupied fending off the Nazis, Japan was now free to consider a more aggressive penetration of South-East Asia.” Kimmel’s logic seems more like an attempt to justify his own beliefs.

Something clearly psychological also happened on the same day as the Pearl Harbor attack in the Philippines. General MacArthur was informed of the Pearl Harbor attack at 03:30 am but was seemingly too shocked to give his air force any orders until 11:20 am, by which time it was too late and half of his planes were destroyed on the ground by a Japanese attack before they could take off.

17 Borch and Martinez, Kimmel, Short, and Pearl Harbor.
This article suggests that there was a general mindset at the time denying the possibility of an attack on the US. This could be a consequence of the particular history of the United States. The founding of the US was quite different from other countries; the states had fought together to defeat the British and had then taken the unprecedented step of remaining together. The result was a country that was both huge and powerful from its very inception. Isolated from Europe, America’s wars were of its own choosing. Even the civil war was a choice: the Northern states chose not to allow the Southern states to secede, and the Southern states chose to enter into armed rebellion. The experience of American history was that war had always been a matter of US choice and that the US had itself never been attacked. It is entirely possible that this would give rise to a general feeling of denial of the possibility that America might be attacked.

The proposition that there was a mindset of denial of the possibility of being attacked fits reasonably well with the events leading up to Pearl Harbor. The US negotiations with Japan were heavy handed. Intelligence on Japanese requests for berthing details at Pearl Harbor was not passed on to Kimmel and Short. Kimmel and Short did not prepare for possible air attack. That unpreparedness is summed up by Spector:

Despite repeated fleet exercises, war games, studies, plans and discussions concerning the danger of surprise air attack, despite repeated surprise alerts and drills, the fact remained that American army and navy leaders at the highest levels simply could not really believe that a surprise air attack on the fleet would actually take place.  

Denial also fits with the subsequent behaviour of MacArthur in the Philippines. In a slightly different way America remains today in denial about Pearl Harbor, unable to accept the simple explanation that the officers-in-charge failed to take adequate defensive measures.

Conspiracy theories

Over the years, a number of conspiracy theories have been developed and there are two underlying approaches: either that Pearl Harbor was deliberately made weak to lure a Japanese attack or that Pearl Harbor was not alerted to a known attack to ensure an American defeat. In each case, the purpose of the conspiracy being that America would join Britain in fighting the Second World War and the method being the withholding of vital intelligence from the local commanders.

The conspiracy of luring the Japanese suggests that Pearl Harbor was kept poorly defended to tempt the Japanese to attack it. In reality, the Japanese had very little information and were not in a position to judge the strength of defences at Pearl Harbor; thus any changes in those defences would have made no difference to their decision to attack.

The American defeat conspiracy suggests that only a major US defeat would have been enough to get the US to go to war; this is summed up by Griffith:

[...] a strong case that FDR and certain other high officials were specifically, explicitly warned that Pearl Harbor would be attacked and that they deliberately withheld this and other critical information from the commanders at Pearl Harbor because they wanted an “incident” severe enough to galvanize the American people to support entering the war.

This conspiracy is frankly absurd; any attempt by Japan to assault Pearl Harbor would have resulted in war regardless of its severity.

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20 Spector, *Eagle against the Sun*.
Conclusion

Kimmel and Short had good intelligence that war was imminent and good equipment with which to defend Pearl Harbor. Intelligence was not the cause of the failure of defence on 7th December.

The truth is that few citadels in modern history were better equipped to meet an anticipated attack or more sufficiently warned of impending peril.\(^\text{22}\)

The defence of Pearl Harbor failed because the radar control room was not properly manned and fighter aircraft were not ready. Pearl Harbor is the case of a military base caught by surprise with defence systems un-activated. The defence at Pearl Harbor was not un-activated as a consequence of intelligence failure or conspiracy, it was un-activated as a result of the complacency bordering on denial of its commanders.

Admiral Kimmel and General Short had no track record of incompetence and yet behaved very incompetently in their preparations for war at Pearl Harbor. The best explanation for this discrepancy is psychological. This article argues that there was a prevailing belief in the USA that war was a matter of US choice, and thus at a psychological level, America was in denial about the possibility of being attacked. The behaviour of Kimmel and Short is consistent with this proposition that they were in denial, as is the behaviour of others at that time. However, this explanation of Kimmel and Short’s behaviour does not relieve them of their responsibility as military leaders for the events that took place.

In the navy the officer on the bridge is the one in charge. It may not be fair, but that is the way it is in the military, and in the final analysis both Kimmel and Short were caught sleeping.\(^\text{23}\)

The decision by the US Senate to exonerate Kimmel and Short in 1999 and restore their ranks suggests that America remains in denial over Pearl Harbor as does the preference to consider 7 December as the day of infamy rather than the day of denial.

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Declaration of interest

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22 Lambert and Polmar, *Defenseless, Command failure at Pearl Harbor*.