

## Japan and the United States at War: Pearl Harbor, August 1941

Today Japan and the United States are close allies. But between 1941 and 1945, they fought a bitter and bloody war, which many people remember well today. Why did they fight this war?

The answer on the American side is simple: the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Americans were angry at the Japanese for their invasions of first Manchuria (1931), then China (1937), and later French Indochina (1940). After the Japanese moved into Indochina, President Roosevelt ordered a trade embargo on American scrap steel and oil, on which the Japanese military depended. But the American people felt that Asia was far away, and a large majority of voters did not want to go to war to stop Japan. The surprise attack on the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 changed this, outraging the whole U.S. nation and convincing it that it must stop the Japanese army and navy.

Why did Japan attack the United States? This is a more complicated question. Japan knew the United States was economically and military powerful, but it was not afraid of any American attack on its islands. Japan did worry however, that the Americans might help the Chinese resist the Japanese invasion of their country. When President Roosevelt stopped U.S. shipments of steel and oil to Japan, he was doing exactly this: the Japanese are dependent on other countries for raw materials, for they have almost none on their own islands. Without imports of steel and oil, the Japanese military could not fight for long. Without oil, the navy would not be able to move after it had exhausted its six-month reserve. Roosevelt hoped that this economic pressure would force Japan to end its military expansion in East Asia.

The Japanese military saw another solution to the problem: if it could quickly conquer the British and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia and gain complete control of the oil, rubber, and other raw materials it needed, then it could defend its interests in China and Indochina against those Europeans who were now busy fighting a major war in Europe against the Germans and Italians. The only force that could stop the Japanese was the American Pacific fleet--which was conveniently gathered close to Japan at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. Knowing that many Americans did not want to fight a war against Japan, the military thought that if it suddenly destroyed the U.S. fleet, America would simply give up and allow Japan to consolidate its grasp on East Asia.

Japan was not militarily or economically powerful enough to fight a long war against the United States, and the Japanese military knew this. Its attack on Pearl Harbor was a tremendous gamble--and though the short-run gamble was successful, the long-run gamble was lost because the Japanese were wrong about the American reaction.

But behind this mistake was another, earlier miscalculation. Ever since Commodore Perry's fleet opened Japan in 1853, in an era of great colonial expansion, the Japanese had watched the European powers dominate East Asia and establish colonies and trading privileges. China, Japan's neighbor, was carved up like a melon as Western powers established their spheres of influence on Chinese territory. After an amazingly short time, Japan was able to develop the economic and military strength to join this competition for dominance of the Asian mainland. Japan defeated China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, in battles over who should dominate Korea. Japan joined the allies against Germany in 1914-18 in a struggle to control a portion of China and then conquered Manchuria in 1931 in an effort to secure a land area rich in raw materials. The Japanese nation and its military, which controlled the government by the 1930s, felt that it then could, and should, control all of East Asia by military force.

Japan's military invasions of other Asian countries, however, brought resistance from not only the European colonial powers, but also the Asian people themselves, and finally, the United States. The Japanese military tried to convince the Japanese people that complete loyalty and obedience would make Japan invincible. Japan's early victories seemed to prove this, but the U.S. victory at Midway Island in June 1942 led to the steady encirclement of the Japanese islands, cutting them off from needed supplies of raw materials. The Japanese navy was destroyed. When this was followed by massive bombardment from the air and the final blow of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japanese invincibility was proven to be a myth. At the end of the war, the Japanese nation was not only starving and devastated by the bombing, but bewildered and shocked by the defeat.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Was Japan the first country to try to dominate other countries in Asia? Explain.
2. Why did it seem logical to the Japanese that they, rather than the European powers, should be dominant in Asia?
3. Explain the economic reasons for establishing colonies. What in particular did Japan hope to gain from its colonies?
4. Locate Pearl Harbor on a map.
5. Why did Japan attack the United States at Pearl Harbor?
6. In what ways was the Japanese attack a tactical miscalculation?
7. In what sense could you say that Japan actually defeated itself? Explain.