

Why Did Japan Attack Pearl Harbor?



Ronald Wintrobe

1 Introduction

Why did Japan attack pearl harbor? It was obvious they could not win a war with the US. Did they not anticipate that the US would react? Did they think they had the capacity to win the war? The most common answer is that the attack was simply not rational. In this paper I first briefly [in the next section] consider the most obvious common explanations for the attack and suggest that they are all unsatisfactory. I then [Sect. 3] advance an explanation based on the idea that Japan in the first half of the twentieth century was what I call a “quasi theocracy”—a regime where rule is divided between a religious and a civilian authority. Because decision making was divided between the religious and secular authorities, and because there was no formal separation of individual values from the state, an inversion of power occurred whereby decisions from the top were in effect led by the military, and decisions by senior military were influenced by the actions of their subordinates, in a process which was dysfunctional for the whole. The third section outlines this explanation. Some other examples of quasi theocracy may be modern Iran, or Turkey under the Ottoman Empire. Section 4 discusses these other potential applications, especially Iran, very briefly. Section 5 then describes the decision making processes leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack. Section 6 concludes the paper.

R. Wintrobe (✉)
Western University, London, Canada
e-mail: rwintrob@uwo.ca

2 Some Common Explanations for the Attack

We can begin with Roberta Wohlsetter's statement of her viewpoint, which is also the common one in the literature, in her magisterial book *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*:

The relation between this material [the facts about the relative military strengths of Japan and the US at that time] and the decision to take on the US as an opponent is simply not explicable in rational terms (p. 352).....

Or, in the words of Iguchi Takeo, in a recent book outlining the decisions leading up to the attack from a Japanese point of view "Japan's decision to go to war lacked rationality" (Takeo, (2010) p. 93).

Let's be more specific, since this question and the issues surrounding it are so important to understanding what happened then, and what may be happening again in the contemporary politics of other countries like Iran, Israel and the US. The economic theory of conflict identifies several circumstances that can lead to war (Blattman, (2022); Fearon, (1995) Jackson and Morelli (2007)). The most common of these is that each of the parties miscalculates the likelihood that it can win, either because it miscalculates its opponent's strength and mistakenly thinks its forces are superior, or underestimates its opponent's resolve (Fearon, (1995).

Did the Japanese government miscalculate the strength of US forces? Here is Wohlsetter again:

The Japanese did have the material for making long range predictions....their assessment of our war potential in aircraft manufacturing, shipbuilding, and rate of training of the necessary crews was much more accurate than our own for 1941, 1942 and 1943....

...Japanese and American estimates of the risks to the Japanese were identical for the large-scale war they had planned, as well as for the individual operations. What we miscalculated was the ability and willingness of the Japanese to accept such risks. As Ambassador Grew had said, "National sanity would dictate against such an event, but Japanese sanity cannot be measured by our standards of logic" (Wohlsetter, p.354)

Another rationality-based explanation for the attack is that there were irreconcilable conflict of interests between the US and Japan. Now, of course, there was a deep conflict, over China and particularly Manchuria. But if Japan and the US had competing interests there, why could they not just divide up the territory (the colonies), as the Western governments did in the Middle East and elsewhere after World War 1?

Another possibility, less rationalistic in tone, but still possibly satisfying in a way, is simply that the Japanese are particularly warlike. However, it is worth remembering that Japan was totally peaceful for the 250 years of the Tokugawa shogunate, which lasted until US Admiral Perry sailed to Japan and demanded they "open up".

A fourth possible explanation is simply that Japan was a dictatorship, and it is well known that dictatorships make war more frequently than democracies do. In particular, attacking the US could simply have been part of a xenophobic "greater Asia" strategy. But if Japan was a dictatorship, who was the dictator?

The Japanese political philosopher Masao Maruyama describes the wartime Japanese government as revealed by the evidence presented at the Tokyo “war crimes” trials after the war:

...during the period covered by this indictment fifteen separate cabinets rose and fell in Japan .. in the rise and fall of these many cabinets composing the government of Japan there were twenty-one prime ministers, thirty foreign ministers, twenty-eight home ministers, nineteen war ministers ... Rather than to establish an agreement or common plan or conspiracy, the purpose of which was to dominate the world or any other objective, the evidence definitely reveals the absence of leadership or of a centralized group committed to a common design or purpose of any kind (Masao Maruyama p. 86)

What about the emperor? Wasn't he a dictator? Could Japan have gone to war be a case of “leadership bias”, an argument elaborated formally in Jackson and Morelli, (2007), in which a country's leaders expect positive net gains, while this may not be so for the members of their side?

The Emperor of Japan, the core repository of Japanese spiritual values, was not merely God's representative, as in other theocracies like the Papacy or Calvin's Geneva, he himself *was* divine, in theory the direct descendant of Jimmu, the first emperor and the son of the Goddess Ameratsu (in fact he could only trace his lineage back to the fourteenth century).

Bix (2000) describes Hirohito's upbringing. He observes that Hirohito's Ethics teacher Sugiura was an ultranationalist. Sugiura taught Hirohito that in foreign countries the relationship was determined by power but in Japan “the emperor rules the people without power. Benevolence has been planted so deeply in the minds of the people that ...the people joyfully submit themselves to the emperor “.... for the emperor to lay burdens on his subjects was entirely natural because they existed to sacrifice themselves for him, not the other way round” (Bix, (2000), p. 65).

But the emperor did not *rule*; a civilian administration ruled in his name. So Japan over this period was not a true theocracy, like the Papacy during the era of the Papal States where the Pope was God's representative and ruled directly. There were two areas where the Japanese emperor had sole authority: the military, and education. But this was not written in stone, and sometimes the military during this period thought that they should be completely autonomous, with no authority over them. In fact, it seems that the powers of the emperor waxed and waned, depending on individual force of personality and on circumstances. Hirohito's father Taisho was very weak, for example, and his powers accordingly became circumscribed. As Bix (2000) notes: “(As a child) Hirohito witnessed the practise of reducing the sphere of imperial court assent to the smallest possible extent, so that neither his father the emperor nor he himself would need to express the “imperial will (Bix (2000) p.130)”. Even Hirohito's grandfather, the illustrious Meiji, never made a military decision. But later, sometimes Hirohito became powerful behind the scene, as discussed later. His precise role in the Pearl Harbor attack is complex and is discussed in detailed in Sect. 5.

3 The Argument Here: Quasi Theocracy

(i) The concept of quasi theocracy

A quasi theocracy is a regime where rule is divided between a civilian administration and a religious authority. Japan after the Meiji restoration is the most obvious case, but there are others: modern Iran, and possibly Ottoman Turkey.

What might be called *the quasi - theocrat's quandary* is that, on the one hand, the quasi theocrat may grow bored with a limited ceremonial role and want more power. But if he does that, he risks undermining other political authorities and emboldening bureaucrats to act in his name. Most important, his position is not inviolable and if he tries to augment his power he could be removed. To try to rule openly and directly may result in not ruling at all.

To put it differently, the emperor is divine, but only if he is the right emperor! So, for example, Hirohito had a brother, Prince Chichibu, who appeared much more charismatic than he did. Chichibu was next in line to the throne, and Hirohito received secret reports about his activities from his steward (Bix p.179).

So if the emperor does try to augment his power it has to be in secret so that.

- (a) if things go wrong, he can't be blamed, and
- (b) he is not accused of usurping his role

In Hirohito's case, on the one hand while his official role was a that of a kind of shrine, as Buruma (2004) puts it, ¹ a robot, or a mouse, on the other hand sometimes he appeared to be powerful, and made and unmade cabinets and prime ministers behind the scenes. This dual role led to a psychological dilemma. Of course, from the economic point of view one could suggest that the quasi theocrat can solve his quandary by simply accumulating power to the point where the marginal benefit of more power is equal to its marginal cost, but what a formulation like that would miss is that the choice question involved implies a dual identity: ruler, or shrine? As a ruler he may maximize power, as a shrine he merely presides over ceremonial occasions and the like and should not be, or even appear to be interested in power.

The next step in understanding the working of a regime where the leadership is divided, and the two leaders compete for power, one religious and one secular, is to see the implications of this divided leadership for the position of the bureaucracy.

The basic implication is simple: Because the leadership is divided, the bureaucracy has more power. Agencies can use this power to advance their interests. As a consequence our basic and central prediction about a quasi theocracy is that it tends to result in an inversion of power, with the bottom (the bureaucracy) controlling the top (the civilian and religious leadership). The most obvious beneficiary of the division of authority is the military.

¹ The emperor could not be held responsible for the war because he was a mere shrine.

(ii) The military

In Japan in particular the military had more power than is typical of other types of regimes because after Meiji it was formally subordinate only to the emperor, not to the civilian authorities. So the most obvious beneficiary of this division was the military. What did they want? More power, and a bigger budget. What is the best way to get that? Prepare for war.

Now, I have argued elsewhere (Breton and Wintrobe, (1975), Wintrobe (1997)) that, in general, the Niskanen (1968) model is not a good theory of bureaucracy because:

- (1) Bureaucrats generally are mobile, and therefore need not budget maximize to get more income, prestige, or power
- (2) The information distortions that they use to accumulate power can be controlled in various ways. For example, governing politicians can utilize redundant bureaus, external data checks, “spies” within the bureau,² and so on to do this.

But the military are a special case: they are neither mobile nor easily controlled. So budget maximization may indeed be a good theory in this particular case. Indeed, Niskanen himself worked for an organization that tried to control the defense department and it was from that experience that he formulated his theories (see Niskanen (1975)).

The problem of controlling bureaucratic maneuvering in the defense department continues in the United States today: in particular Bob Woodward’s book on the Obama administration *Obama’s War*, (2010) provides fascinating material on the difficulties Obama had. For example, the US military insisted they had to have 40,000 more troops in Afghanistan, that a “war game” showed that 20,000 would not do. But no war game was ever conducted, as the current President, then Vice- President Biden found out and reported to the president. Nevertheless the military continued to insist that there were only three options: 40,000 troops, 40,000 troops and 40,000 troops.....(Woodward, 2010).

It is interesting that in Obama’s own account of his presidency (Obama, 2020), Biden emerges as the strongest opponent of the military’s demands for more resources. That opposition seems to have continued under his own presidency, and led to his abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan. One could speculate that this well known opposition on Biden’s part may have led to him being deceived into misunderstanding the consequences of the disastrously precipitous nature of the withdrawal.

Returning to Japan, it is important to emphasize that the military there was not a monopoly. The Army and the Navy competed for funds and their leaders did not necessarily share the same views. Lower levels also tried to make policy, especially by taking action in their own hands (as in the Manchurian incident, described shortly).

But they all schemed and clamored for bigger budgets (Bix, (2000), Buruma (2004), Prange and Goldstein and Goldstein (1981), Finer, (2002).

² See Breton and Wintrobe (1975) or my survey of bureaucracy (Wintrobe (1997) for details of these criticisms of the Niskanen model.

This thesis—that control passed from the top to the bottom in Japan in the 1930's³—is common in the historical literature (e.g., [Finer, \(2002\)](#), [Maruyama, \(1969\)](#), [Bix, \(2000\)](#), [Buruma \(2004\)](#), [Takeo, \(2010\)](#), [Wohlsetter \(1962\)](#)). But those same sources often suggest that what drove Japan to war was the “concern for the preservation of Japan as a whole —” the *kokutai* (the Japanese body politic—see, for example [Buruma \(2004\)](#) or [Wohlsetter \(1962\)](#)).

For example Wohlsetter (1962) summarizes her argument on this point as follows:...”the decision for war with the US was not chosen. The decision for war was rather forced by the desire to avoid the more terrible alternatives of losing status or abandoning the national objectives (Wohlsetter (1962), pp. 352–353).”

Now, the argument here is exactly the reverse of this proposition: it is because no one had the responsibility and the power to make decisions on behalf of the whole that each party made decisions which served its own interests and the result was disastrous for the whole.

(iii) Japanese spiritual values

There were no wars of religion in Japan to result in the separation of church and state as in Europe. As a result morality was defined by the *kokutai*, i.e., whatever pleases the Emperor, or whatever helps the state. It was not separate from the state.

In any theocracy, there is the idea that individual values and morality are not separate from the state, but embodied in it. This gives individuals a basis for thinking that their actions should embody the values of the state, that is, spiritual values which embody the “mission” of the nation.

In a *quasi* theocracy, the fact that spirituality is part of the state aids the lower level bureaucrats in using their own “morality” to act on their own—in effect it gives them more power. The military, whose duties are always especially in need of a moral justification, is particularly vulnerable to this incentive. In turn the judges who judge their actions are also free to disregard the law if they feel it conflicts with morality. So the propaganda of *hakku ichio*, (holy war) in spiritualizing the state, led further to the inversion of power. Consider, for example, the remarks by General Tojo. He stated that *if Japan were to compromise on withdrawal from China, he would never again be able to sleep facing the Yasakuni shrine* (quoted in [Maruyama, \(1969\)](#) pp.134–5).

Another example is General Matsui, who argued against making concessions to the Americans and British along the following lines:

If we were now to settle the [China] Incident by compromising with England and America and co-operating with the Americans, how would we be able to face the myriad spirits of the war dead? Ultimately, it is for the sake of the myriad spirits of the war dead that we are so adamantly opposed to any compromise with America. (quoted in [Maruyama, \(1969\)](#) p.134)

Lest the reader think this reflects a particularly Japanese point of view, it is worth pointing out that Bob Woodward has made the same argument with respect to American involvement in Afghanistan ([Woodward, \(2010\)](#)). He argues that since many

³ In the 1920's, military budgets fell, democracy gained ground, policy towards China was conciliatory, and in 1930, the Japanese Prime Minister signed the Treaty of London without the consent of the Army. It was only after this that the senior military officers in the army began their drive for power ([Finer, The Man on Horseback, p. 45](#)).

American soldiers have fought bravely and lost their lives in that war, the Americans have to stay in to win, otherwise they dishonor that memory.

(iv) Agenda transformation

The concept of agenda control is familiar in Public Choice theory, especially since the work of Mckelvey, (1976). Here we advance a different version, based on the Japanese experience, of “agenda transformation”, in which the bottom can exert control over the decisions of the top. The theory is best illustrated with a simple example. A military official takes an aggressive action which promotes war where no war has been declared. This action changes the government’s choice space from.

$X_0, x_1, \text{ and } x_2$ to $x_0 - L, x_1 \text{ and } x_2$.

Where L is the loss of retreating to the original status quo position, which has been changed from x_0 to $x_0 - L$.

So the decision space for the government is changed from

Make War if

$$(1) U(SQ) < p U(SQ + G) + (1 - p) U(SQ - LW) - C$$

To:

$$(2) U(SQ - L) < p U(SQ + G) + (1 - p) U(SQ - LW) - C$$

Where

SQ = status quo

G = the gains from war if victorious, neglecting the costs of conflict

LW = the losses from war if defeated, not including the costs of conflict

C = the costs of conflict

L = the losses if the government backs down

As is apparent from inspecting the equations, the left hand side of (2) is less than that in (1), so with the new choice space available to the government in (2), the government is more likely to go to war. In this way, lower level military personnel can take control of the government’s decision making and possibly get the government to do what they want it to do. An illustration from the Japanese experience follows.

(v) Illustration: the Manchurian Incident

On September 18, 1931, near Mukden (now Shenyang) in southern Manchuria, a section of railroad owned by Japan’s South Manchuria Railway was dynamited. The Imperial Japanese Army, accusing Chinese dissidents of the act, responded with the invasion of Manchuria, leading to the establishment of Manchukuo the following year. While the responsibility for this act of sabotage remains a subject of controversy, the prevailing view is that Japanese militarists staged the explosion in order to provide a pretext for war.

It is widely felt (see Takeo, (2010) in particular) that the establishment of Manchukuo was crucial in leading the Japanese to first make war against China, and later the United States. In Sect. 5 we will see how the occupation of Manchuria played into the decision to attack Pearl Harbor.

(vi) Summary

1. In a quasi theocracy like Japan the bureaucracy has more power.
2. The military are the most important beneficiaries of this inversion of power, because their peculiar structure allows and incentivizes them to use it to increase their budgets through information distortion, agenda control and agenda transformation.
3. “Spiritual values” enhance the autonomy and power of the military.
4. But senior levels within the military or other bureaucracy are themselves vulnerable to pressure from below.

4 Other Examples? Ottoman Empire, Iran

Two other possible examples of quasi theocracy are the Ottoman Empire and contemporary Iran. We discuss them here, beginning with a very brief discussion of the Ottoman case.

The early sultans of the Empire were powerful but the later ones, according to Samuel Finer’s *History of Government*...were as “incompetent as the first 10 were magnificent”. What kept the Empire going? “The bureaucracy” he says. He also points out that the empire was at war 7 years out of 10, indeed, he asserts that “the empire lived by war and off war” (Finer (1997), p. 1165). But he does not advance the argument made here that the regime was so warlike *because* the bureaucracy was so competent and powerful.

In Turkey, as in Japan and Iran, the Wars are “holy wars” -*ghazi* (Turkish). In Japanese, the most common concept was *hakku ichiu* or “eight corners of the world under one roof” - usually interpreted as the benign rule of the Emperor. The structure of decision making at the upper levels appeared similar in all of the cases of the emperor, the sultan and the ayatollah. Thus:

The emperor attended meetings of the civilian cabinet but normally he did not speak.

The sultan hid behind the curtain while his cabinet deliberated. He observed the proceedings but he did not speak.

The ayatollah is thought to have more power than this -for example, it was Khomeini himself who made the decision to use the Guardian of the Jurist as a constitutional model. But the ayatollah’s position is not inviolable:

the overlapping and complicated power structure of the Islamic Republic was intentionally designed in 1979 to obfuscate lines of authority and ensure no single entity became powerful enough to bend to foreign pressure, resulting in a myriad of power centres, *none with supreme authority*. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has the most power...but..he may not act in isolation like Iran’s last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.. (Tarzai (2009) p. 2) italics added).

Indeed, perhaps the most well known of American scholars of the Iran revolution, Nikki Keddie, in her book *Roots and Results of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, (1981) insists that “Iran is “not a dictatorship”. It has never been

clear to me what she meant by this, but I think we can understand a bit more if we recognize the competition for power between the religious and secular branches of government.

Perhaps enough has been said on the subject of Iran to provide some support for looking at that regime as a quasi theocracy, i.e., a regime where there is competition between the religious and secular arms of the government, and that the main beneficiary of this competition is the military. Let us now return to the case of Japan and see how this competition played out in that case.

5 Pearl Harbor

(i) The approach to pearl harbor: after the Manchurian incident

After the Manchurian Incident, Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyosh attempted to revive amicable relations with the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai Shek and keep a tight rein on the insubordinate Japanese military. However, it proved to be his undoing, and on 15 May 1932 he was assassinated by fanatic military officers. (Takeo, (2010), p. 44).

The sentences passed to those responsible for these and other acts were often absurdly light, their acts of terrorism justified by “patriotic motives” (Morton and Olenik 181, Takeo, pp. 44–5). On February 26, 1936, junior Imperial Way officers tried to take over central Tokyo, assassinating the finance minister and attempting to assassinate the Prime Minister (but killing his brother in law by mistake). The Navy was called in to restore order, and they did, but the price was that the military demanded that new cabinet officers be approved by the army and navy ministers, themselves serving officers.

After the assassination, the new Prime Minister was Hirota, who raised the military budget as the army demanded. But neither he nor his successors could control the troops in China. No war with China was ever declared but war began anyway with the China Incident of July 7, 1937, a small and accidental battle which seems to have served as the precursor for the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. War continued but it was inconclusive, and the United States demanded that the Japanese cease the aggression against China. A crucial resolution was agreed to at the imperial conference of 6 sept 1941, which stated:

If by the early part of October there is no reasonable hope of having our demands agreed to...we will immediately make up our minds to get ready for war against America and England and Holland

In October 1941 a meeting was held to discuss this resolution between Prince Konoe, PM General Tojo, the ministers of War and the Navy, the Foreign Minister, and Lieut Gen Suzuki, Director of the Planning Board. General.

Suzuki recalled the meeting at the Tokyo trials (from Maruyama p. 88, see also Bix, Buruma):

It became quite clear as the result of this conference where the thorny question lay. The Navy really thought that the war with America was impossible but did not desire openly to say so. The Army did not necessarily desire war, but vigorously objected to the withdrawal of troops from China. The Foreign Minister was firmly of the opinion that without consenting to the withdrawal of the Armed Forces from China the negotiations with America offered no prospect of success. The only way for the Prime Minister to avoid war was, therefore, either to make the Navy declare its real intentions, or to make the Army understand the unexpressed intentions of the Navy and agree to the withdrawal of the armed forces. I saw that the Prime Minister was in a predicament because personally he felt himself unequal to the task of persuading the Navy or the Army (IMTFE, no. 333, p. 35206, 12 Dec 1947, quoted in Maruyama, (1969), p. 88)

Did the (senior) military want war with the west? Admiral Yamamoto (the planner of The Pearl Harbor attack) told PM Konoe: “Japan can successfully challenge the US for a year at most” (Buruma, (2004) p.115). Americans stopped selling aviation fuel and scrap metal to Japan in January 1940, oil in 1941. Then there was the Hull note: in November 1941 US foreign minister Cordell Hull wrote to General Tojo (the new Prime Minister) demanding withdrawal from Indochina and China but he made no mention of Manchuria. General Tojo presented this to the government as an ultimatum, which it was not (Bix, (2000), Buruma, (2004)), and insisted that the Japanese could not yield.

And if the Americans and the British refused to back down? General Tojo:

sometimes people have to shut their eyes and take the plunge”. (quoted in Buruma, (2004), p. 119).

But there is still the question of Hirohito, the Emperor. If he didn’t support the attack, it is not obvious that the military could have decided it without him, or at least, over his formal opposition, since he was, after all, their commander.

(ii) the decision to attack pearl harbor

On the actual decision to attack, and Hirohito’s role in it, there is a famous and startling account which is told both in Bix and in Gordon Prange and Goldstein’s *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*. I quote from the latter:

Hirohito was not bent on war and informed Premier Konoye on Sept 5, that “he wished to question the chiefs of the Army and Navy General Staffs at the forthcoming imperial conference—an unprecedented step” (Prange and Goldstein (1981), 208). Konoye, who “may have been genuinely horrified at the idea of the Emperor’s taking an active role at an imperial conference” (Prange and Goldstein (1981) 209) suggested that he summon the chiefs for a private audience instead. At that meeting, the night before the imperial conference, Hirohito told the two officers that he wished diplomacy to be emphasized and was unconvinced by their assurances that it was. . . . Hirohito then asked Sugiyama “how long he thought hostilities would last in case Japan and the United States went to war. The general estimated that operations in the South Pacific could be disposed of in about three months. Thereupon the blood rose in Hirohito’s face and he answered Sugiyama in an unusually loud tone: “As War Minister at the outbreak of the China Incident, you asked me to approve sending Army troops there, saying that the Incident would be settled in a short time. But has it yet ended

after more than four years? Are you trying to sell me the same thing again?" (Prange and Goldstein and Goldstein (1981), p. 209, italics added; see also Bix, (2000)

At the imperial conference the next day, "the real question was not, Shall we fight? but When shall we fight?" (Prange and Goldstein and Goldstein (1981), p.210) and Hirohito decided to speak up, reading a short poem by his grandfather Meiji, "The Four Sides of the Sea".

Methinks all the people of the world are brethren, then

"Why are waves and winds so unsettled nowadays?"

explaining that he was "striving to introduce into the present the emperor Meiji's ideal of international peace" (Prange and Goldstein (1981) p. 211). The Prime Minister Konoye recorded that "Everyone present was struck with awe" (Prange and Goldstein (1981), p. 211). But after this incident Hirohito appeared to drop his opposition, and at the next meeting he didn't raise any further objections (Prange and Goldstein, Bix).

Was Hirohito's behavior irrational? It is true that after the war Hirohito was forced to renounce his divinity. "I am not divine" he said in a radio address which was the first time many people heard him speak. He was not indicted as a war criminal (at MacArthur's insistence) and reigned until 1992.

(iii) Why did the U.S not anticipate the attack on Pearl Harbor?

This is the subject that more than anything else has engaged American scholars and produced bi, important books such as those by Prange and Goldstein and Goldstein (1981) and Wohlsetter (1962). Again, it may be useful to quote Roberta Wohlsetter:

The fact of surprise at Pearl Harbor has never been persuasively explained by accusing the participants, individually or in groups, of conspiracy or negligence or stupidity. What these examples illustrate is rather the very human tendency to pay attention to the signals that support current expectations about enemy behavior (Wohlsetter (1962), p.392)

Some interesting examples of these are worth mentioning:

1. Even after the war, the judges at the Tokyo trials could not grasp the nature of the Japanese regime, they looked for a single dictator and chain of command, as in Germany (see Maruyama, (1969)).
2. The Japanese conducted a war game to see what would happen after Pearl Harbor. America was modelled as a single entity, Germany and Italy as one, but they modelled the Japanese as several entities, the Army, Navy, etc. and looked to see what would happen depending on who got the upper hand. (Wohlsetter)
3. There were errors. For example, the message sent on the morning of Dec 7 by the Japanese, and intercepted by the US Navy, as many were by the US' codebreaking system known as "MAGIC", and which referred to the final rupture of negotiations with the Americans, was translated as

Relations between Japan and England are not in accordance with expectations

However the message actually said:

Relations between Japan and England and the United States are on the brink of catastrophe

Since the Japanese are normally inclined to understatement, it might have been useful to have had the correct translation.

6 Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on the decision by the Japanese government to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941. But the argument made here is more general than that, as I have also emphasized, and in this conclusion let me stress three more general points:

1. Just because it's irrational for a country as a whole to make war doesn't mean it won't happen. War could occur because although it is irrational from the point of view of the country as a whole, it may be rational from the point of view of individual decision makers within that country whose interests are more narrow and who can force a decision to go to war through agenda transformation or through other means. In particular this may be true of quasi theocracy, and this leads me to my second conclusion.
2. The type of regime that I have labeled quasi theocracy in this paper may be more dangerous to international stability than democracy or dictatorship
3. Finally, the paper points to a flaw in models of bureaucracy which assume monopoly bureaus. The various military bureaus in Japan competed fiercely leading up to the war, and their behavior was extremely destructive for the polity. So one implication of the Japanese experience in World War II is that competing bureaus cannot be counted on to check each other and expose the information distortions of their competitors. The opposite might occur, i.e., competition might produce more dysfunctional behavior rather than reduce or eliminate it. So competition among bureaus may be worse than monopoly from the point of view of the welfare of the polity. Clearly, more research needs to be done on the theory of competitive budget maximization.

References

- Arendt, H. (1951). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harcourt Brace.
- Arendt, H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Viking Press.
- Bix, H. (2000). *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. Harper Collins.
- Blattman, C. (2022). *Why We Fight*. Viking Press.
- Breton, A., & Ronald, W. (1975). The equilibrium size of a budget maximizing bureau: A note on Niskanen's theory of bureaucracy. *Journal of Political Economy*, 83.
- Breton, A., & Wintrobe, R. (1986). The bureaucracy of murder revisited. *Journal of Political Economy*
- Buruma, I. (2004). *Inventing Japan 1853-1964*. New York: Modern Library
- Fearon, J. D. (1995). Rationalist explanations for war. *International Organization*
- Ferrero, Mario, & Wintrobe, Ronald (Eds.). (2009). *The Political Economy of Theocracy*. Palgrave.

- Finer, S. (2002). *The Man On Horseback*. Transaction Publishers
- Finer, Samuel. (1997). *The History of Government from the Earliest Times*. Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, M. O., & Morelli, M. (2007). Political bias and war. *American Economic Review*, 97, 1353–1373
- Keddie, N. (1981). *Roots and Results of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*. Yale University Press
- Mackay, Robert, & Weaver, Carolyn. (1981). Agenda control by bureaucrats in a multi-bureau setting. *Public Choice*, 37, 447–472.
- Mckelvey, Richard. (1976). Intransitivities in multidimensional voting models and some implications for agenda control. *Journal of Economic Theory*, 12, 472–482.
- Maruyama, Masao. (1969). *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Morton and Olenik, 1970 Morton & Olenik. (1970). *Japan: Its History and Culture*. New York: McGraw Hill
- Niskanen, W. (1975). Bureaucrats and Politicians. *Journal of Law and Economics*, 18(3).
- Niskanen, W. (1968). The peculiar economics of bureaucracy. *American Economic Review*
- Niskanen, W. (2007). *Bureaucracy and Representative Government*. Aldine Transaction
- Obama, Barack. (2020). *A Promised Land*. Crown.
- Prange and Goldstein, Gordon W., & Goldstein, D. M. (1981). *At Dawn We Slept: the Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*. New York: Penguin
- Romer, T., & Rosenthal, H. (1979). Bureaucrats versus voters: On the political economy of resource allocation by direct democracy. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 93(4), 563-587
- Takeo, I. (2010). *Demystifying Pearl Harbor: A New Perspective from Japan*. Translated by David Noble. Tokyo: International House of Japan
- Tarzai and Piece, 2009 Tarzai, A. (2009). *The Iranian Puzzle Piece: Understanding Iran in the Global Context*. Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University Press
- Wintrobe, R. (1997). Modern Bureaucratic Theory. In D. Mueller (Ed), *Public Choice: A Handbook*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Wintrobe, R. (1998). *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wohlsetter, R., & Harbor, P. (1962). *Warning and Decision*. Stanford University Press.
- Woodward, B. (2010). *Obama's Wars*. Simon and Schuster.