

Photo # NH-13-19000 Hosing down deck near USS West Virginia, during Pearl Harbor raid



From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The beginning and the end of World War II

by John Lamperti

Remember Pearl Harbor! On December 7, 1941 Japanese forces attacked United States naval and air bases in the Hawaiian Islands and scored a major victory. Over 2300 U.S. military personnel lost their lives and the United States' Pacific fleet was devastated.ⁱ The next day President Franklin Roosevelt called for a declaration of war, and described the Japanese attack as "a date which will live in infamy."

Exactly why was Pearl Harbor "infamous"? The Japanese planes attacked strictly military targets and there were relatively few civilian casualties; it was almost a surgical strike. The battle was a terrible defeat for the American armed forces, which were taken completely by surprise. But a surprise attack is not infamous in wartime; every military commander would like to attack by surprise if possible. Nor do the bitter facts of U.S. defeat and heavy losses make the raid criminal. There is just one reason the operation was "infamous": because it was an act of aggression. Japan and the United States were not officially at war, although hostilities were threatening.

Pearl Harbor was a crime because the Japanese struck first. Over the years few Americans have disagreed with that judgment -- until now.

Sixty years later, the administration of President George W. Bush has made "preemption" an avowed part of U.S. national policy. According to this doctrine, the United States claims the right to use military force whenever its leaders believe that U.S. security or economic interests may be threatened by another nation in the future. The National Security Strategy of 2002 states that "The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction--and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively." In other words, if it is to our advantage we will strike first--begin a war--when we see a potential threat.ⁱⁱ

That is just what Japan did in 1941. Clearly the United States posed a huge threat to what Japanese leaders considered her vital national interests. The U.S. Navy was potentially a major obstacle to Japanese expansion in China and Southeast Asia. Moreover, the United States had imposed an embargo on oil and steel supplies to Japan, a nation that depended on imports and had limited oil. By November of 1941 negotiations to resolve these conflicting interests were going nowhere. The Japanese military was in full control of that country's government, and it saw armed conflict with the United States as inevitable. The top leaders decided that since war was coming, a high-risk, high-gain surprise attack, intended to disable U.S. naval power in the Pacific, would give Japan the best chance to achieve its goals. In other words, they decided on preemption.

According to the Bush doctrine, therefore, that 1941 attack at Pearl Harbor was not "infamous" aggression after all. If the world had been operating under the Bush administration's rules, what Japan did would be simply a legitimate case of "acting preemptively." That is something to ponder when we recall that tragic December 7 which brought our country into World War II.

The United States did not accept the legitimacy of Japanese or German claims of "preemption" after the end of the war. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson was chief allied prosecutor of major Axis war criminals at the various international tribunals. In August, 1945 Jackson wrote: "We must make it clear to the Germans that the wrong for which their fallen leaders are on trial is not that they lost the war, but that they started it. ... our position is that no grievances or policies will justify resort to aggressive war. It is utterly renounced and condemned as an instrument of policy."ⁱⁱⁱ During the next few years, officials and military officers of both Germany

and Japan were tried and convicted for planning and carrying out aggression committed by their countries. There was no exception for "preemptive war," although some of the accused tried to use that argument in their defense.^{iv} The Bush administration's doctrine thus represents a reversal of long-standing principles of international law, principles that the United States has championed in the past.

For President Bush and his administration colleagues, if they wished to be consistent, there would be nothing wrong in what the Japanese did on December 7, 1941. For the rest of us, that attack on Pearl Harbor remains a "day of infamy." Preemptive war was not a legitimate policy for the Japanese in 1941, and it is not a legitimate policy today. Such a strategy to promote national interests should be considered criminal, as was the attack on Pearl Harbor. Preemptive war must be completely rejected as part of U.S. policy and planning.



The outstanding feature of the end of the Pacific war in 1945 was, of course, the use of atomic bombs against two Japanese cities. Hiroshima was bombed on August 6, Nagasaki on August 9; some 200,000 people died, the USSR declared war on August 8, and Japan's surrender was signed on August 15. Many thousands of U.S. servicemen who were training for a coming invasion of the Japanese home islands breathed sighs of relief. To this day some of those men and many other Americans believe that the atomic bombings saved lives by ending the war without those final battles. But despite the plans and training, that invasion was not going to happen. The end of the

war was at hand, and the U.S. leadership knew that very well. The dramatic use of the atomic bombs was not necessary to obtain Japan's surrender.

The official reason for the use of those bombs was the need for an overwhelming and face-saving shock to persuade Japanese hard-liners to accept the U.S. demand for "unconditional surrender" and so to avoid the need for invasion. Many serious and detailed books have been written about the decision to use the atomic bombs,^v and there is not space or time to summarize that issue here. Instead here are a few brief quotations from people who were well informed about the military realities.

Admiral William Leahy, who chaired the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote after the war "It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender." Leahy held this opinion at the time, and advised President Truman against using the atomic bombs. On June 18, 1945 he recorded in his diary "It is my opinion at the present time that a surrender of Japan can be arranged [with satisfactory terms]..."

General, later President, Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs that when Secretary of War Stimson told him that the bomb would be used "I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives." In a 1963 interview he said more simply, "...it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

Almost all top U.S. military leaders, including General Douglas MacArthur, Admiral Lewis Strauss, Army Air Force commander General "Hap" Arnold, and, perhaps surprisingly, General Curtis LeMay, also stated at the time that there was no military necessity for the use of the atomic bombs in order to end the war. A month after the war's end Lemay told a press conference that the atomic bomb "had nothing to do with the end of the war." He added that the war would have been over in two weeks without the use of the atomic bomb or the USSR's entry into the conflict.

Finally, President Roosevelt late in 1944 had ordered the Secretary of War, as that Cabinet post was then more honestly named, to establish the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey to evaluate the effects of the air war on both Germany and Japan. The Survey sent a study group of some 1150 people to Japan in September 1945, where they had

access to relevant records and interviewed "over 700 military, government and industrial officials." Their report was issued in July 1946^{vi} and ends with this conclusion:

Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.

To appreciate the situation, several points should be clarified. First, Japanese leaders knew their nation was defeated and were exploring surrender terms. The United States, which had broken the codes they used, was able to follow those moves as they happened. In April the Japanese government ordered a study of the nation's ability to continue the war; the report stated that it was not possible to go on. Soon after that, Premier Suzuki began trying to use the Soviet Union as an intermediary with the United States to arrange surrender terms. The Japanese hoped to negotiate the least onerous possible conditions given their hopeless position, and in particular they sought to ensure the life and dignity of their emperor. The U.S. insistence on "unconditional surrender" was a serious obstacle to an early end to the war.

Second, Soviet Premier Stalin had assured President Truman at Yalta that the USSR would enter the war against Japan 90 days after the fall of Germany, which came on May 9. Thus the Soviet declaration of war was expected by early August, long before the earliest invasion date. If a major shock could induce Japan to surrender, this one was on the way. But although previously the United States had eagerly sought Soviet help in the war against Japan, by June 1945 this attitude had shifted and ending the war without the USSR's participation looked more attractive.

Finally, the first stage of the invasion of the Japanese islands was scheduled for November 1945 at the earliest, with the main assault to follow in 1946. There was time to negotiate surrender terms before that date arrived.

There were clearly alternatives to the immediate use of the atomic bombs, which, however, were actually dropped as soon as they were ready. The United States could have tried to negotiate Japanese surrender by assuring them that it would preserve the position of the emperor--which it planned to do in any case. It could have waited to assess the impact of the Soviet entry, in the belief that such a shock might induce

surrender. It did neither. No one can be certain these steps would have ended the war, although the experts considered that highly probable. The fact is that they were not tried.

In his memoirs, Secretary of War Henry Stimson says it was "an error made by critics after the war" to think that "American policy was, or should have been, controlled or at least influenced by a desire to avoid the use of the atomic bomb. ... no effort was made, and none was seriously considered, to achieve surrender merely in order not to have to use the bomb." I would like to be able to ask him "Why not?" Stimson was also coauthor in 1947 of an influential article which promoted the myth that the bomb saved lives.^{vii} The evaluations to the contrary by the military leaders were to be forgotten.

It may seem unnecessary to repeat these things today. Many readers may be thinking "Of course! We've known all that for many years." But opinion surveys, and the controversy a few years ago about the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit featuring the "Enola Gay" (the B-29 aircraft which carried the atomic bomb to Hiroshima), show that a great many Americans still firmly believe that the bombs were a military necessity to shorten the war and even to save lives, and so that the bombings were a legitimate, honorable part of World War II. Such a belief supports the dangerous idea that nuclear weapons can be a useful part of foreign policy.

Belief in the usefulness of nuclear weapons goes far beyond the hope to deter a nuclear attack, and has had dangerous and undesirable consequences. Nuclear threats were made on various occasions during the Cold War years, although fortunately they were never carried out. The United States has never adopted a "no first use" policy, and has certainly done far less than it could have to free the world from the continuing danger of nuclear war. A few years ago, putting partisan politics above the national--and indeed, the world's--interest, the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The current U.S. administration seems especially keen to make nuclear weapons "useful" as an instrument of its foreign policy, and is seeking the design and construction of new types of weapons and, probably, a return to weapons testing.

I am not a professional historian, so I have a faith, possibly naïve, that history matters. Understanding what Pearl Harbor illustrates about "preemptive action," and knowing that using the atomic bomb in 1945 was not a military necessity to end the war, are still extremely important. The point is not to blame the men who made the decisions at that time, but to discover how we can do better in the future. It is essential that we and our leaders do our best to learn those lessons.

i Almost half the dead were crew of the battleship Arizona. The battleship Oklahoma was also lost, three others were sunk or beached but later salvaged, and three more were damaged. In all 18 ships were sunk or seriously damaged, 188 U.S. aircraft were destroyed, and 158 other planes were damaged. The Japanese lost 29 planes in the raid. (From Walter Lord, *Day of Infamy*, first edition 1957.)

ii The text of the National Security Strategy of 2002 can be found on the internet at this address: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>. The quotation is from Section V.

iii Department of State Bulletin, June 10, 1945

iv Nazi leaders claimed, for example, that the 1940 German invasion of neutral Denmark and Norway was preemption needed to "protect" them from an imminent British attack and occupation.

v For example, see Gar Alperowitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 1995 (847 pages). The following quotations from military leaders can be found in this book, with their sources.

vi *Japan's Struggle to End the War*, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Chairman's Office, July 1, 1946.

vii Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, Volume II, 1948, page 629. The article, also written together with Bundy, was published in *Harper's*, February 1947