

JOHN LUKACS

NO PEARL HARBOR?

FDR Delays the War

Most of the *what ifs* of Pearl Harbor have centered around the circumstances of the day, and for Americans they run the gamut from deliverance to utter disaster. What if, for example, all three Pacific Fleet aircraft carriers had been at anchor that Sunday morning of December 7? (The *Saratoga* was being repaired and refitted on the Pacific coast, the *Enterprise* and the *Lexington* were delivering planes to Wake and Midway islands.) The loss of even one, or serious damage to all three, would have hampered U.S. strategy not just for the first months of 1942 but for the entire war. Without carriers, there could have been no victory at Midway, no landing at Guadalcanal. What if, too, the Japanese had not limited their attacks to a single morning but had hung around Hawaii for a day or two longer, time enough to strike the American submarine yards and to destroy the aboveground tank farm, with its 4.5 million barrels of oil? (Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, who took over command of the Pacific Fleet after Pearl Harbor, estimated that the loss of the oil would have added two years to the war.) Conversely, what would have happened if the United States had been better prepared—the Pearl Harbor commanders had received war warnings, after all. What if torpedo nets had been rigged around the battleships (they weren't) or if the Japanese attackers had met

serious opposition in the skies above Oahu? The result might not have been "a day that will live in infamy."

There is another possibility, which John Lukacs brings up in the chapter that follows. What if the sneak attack of December 7 had never taken place? What if America's war with both Japan and Germany had been put on hold? The prospect was, as Lukacs maintains, not out of the question. Would it have changed the outcome of the war?

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ON NOVEMBER 21, 1941—it was the Friday after Thanksgiving Day—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took up a pencil on his desk and wrote this memorandum:

6 MONTHS

1. U.S. to resume economic relations—some oil and rice—more later.
2. Japan to send no more troops to Indochina or Manchurian border or any place South (Dutch, Brit. or Siam).
3. Japan to agree not to invoke tripartite pact [the alliance signed in September 1940 by Japan, Germany, and Italy] even if U.S. gets into European war.
4. U.S. to introduce Japs to Chinese to talk things over but U.S. take no part in the conversations.

LATER ON PACIFIC AGREEMENTS.

He called this proposal a “modus vivendi,” a term that was current in Washington during those days, meaning a temporary accommodation with Japan, in view of the accumulating news of the prospect of an imminent war between Japan and the United States. The president sent this memorandum over to the secretary of state, Cordell Hull.

Up to this point, every historian accepts the statement of these facts, but more than sixty years later there is still a roiling controversy about what happened soon afterward.

Some historians—professional as well as amateur—argue that this was Franklin Roosevelt's greatest mistake. By November 21, 1941, he knew that the Japanese were about to go to war with the United States, most probably at the end of the first week in December, including an attack as far east as Pearl Harbor. By procrastinating and in effect postponing a, by and large, inevitable war with Japan, Roosevelt contributed to the great Allied crisis in May 1942 that nearly resulted in the final victory of Hitler and of his allies in the Second World War.

Other historians do not accept this thesis: they claim that the postponement of a war with Japan in late 1941 did not essentially affect the outcome of World War II.

So let us now sum up what really happened, and what were its great and grave consequences.

Throughout November 1941 there was more and more evidence of a probable Japanese attack on American and/or British possessions in the Pacific and in the Far East as well as on the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia now). American intelligence could read most of the Japanese codes, including their diplomatic ones. This was very important, since the Japanese government had sent two special envoys, Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura and Saburo Kurusu, to make a last attempt in Washington to negotiate a temporary settlement with the United States. They were entrusted with two Japanese overall proposals, A and B. Proposal B included at least a few Japanese concessions. It was communicated by these envoys on November 20, Thanksgiving Day 1941, to the secretary of state. Its contents were available to their recipients days before, due to the American decoding. The two Japanese envoys in Washington were honest men. They were emissaries of the emperor and of those conservative Japanese statesmen who, unlike most Japanese military leaders, wished to avoid war with the United States.

Thus the Japanese government, on top, could be described as divided, but, in a way, so was the American one. Like Nomura and Kurusu, President Roosevelt, however reluctantly, was willing to give a last try. So were some officials in the State Department who realized

that there were some grounds for a possible compromise between Roosevelt's "modus vivendi" and the Japanese Proposal B. Thus on November 22 they formulated the Roosevelt memorandum into a more precise and official American modus vivendi.

The modus vivendi was then shown to America's allies and friends: the Chinese, Dutch, and British. The last two, including Winston Churchill, accepted it, though with some reluctance. The Chinese lobby argued against it vehemently. Secretary of State Hull, too, was inclined not to present the modus vivendi to the Japanese; instead he drafted a ten-point proposal requiring, among other things, a Japanese withdrawal from China, which he knew the Japanese would not accept.

There is no disagreement among historians about these events and their circumstances. However—even after a long telephone conversation with Churchill, who said, "Isn't this too thin a diet for the Chinese?"—Roosevelt overruled Hull. "It is worth a try: unless the Japs fire the first shot," he said, "and we will not maneuver them into doing so."

So it happened. He called Kurusu and Nomura to the White House on November 25. He charmed them with his customary bonhomie. He gave them the American modus vivendi proposals and said, "Let us not argue now about its details. Transmit it to your Emperor with my sincere good wishes."

So it was. The Japanese grand fleet was about to sail forth the next day from Hitokappu Bay, ready to drive east across the North Pacific, to a point about 275 miles north of Pearl Harbor. Twelve hours before sailing its mission was canceled—through the influence of the Japanese emperor and his conservative chamberlains. Thousands of Japanese officers and sailors climbed over its armaments and hawsers, clambering ashore. Their bitterness spread wide among the Japanese people, especially their high military officers, many of whom were eager and ready to go to war against the United States and Britain.

Winston Churchill, who for months had hoped that perhaps the United States would finally join in the war against Hitler by getting into a war with Japan, was disappointed but not bitter; he kept on wag-

ing his war during that dark and gloomy winter of 1941. His new ally Stalin had mixed feelings. On the one hand, he knew by early December 1941 that Moscow would not fall to the Germans—in part because of the large contingent of Russian troops that he had transferred to the central front, denuding his Siberian borders across Japanese-occupied Manchuria. On the other hand, he could not be sure that the Japanese military, frustrated because of the temporary *modus vivendi* with the United States, would not soon attack Russia in accord with their German ally.

Adolf Hitler, too, was of two minds. He had thought, and planned, that a Japanese war with the Americans and the British in the Pacific would tie down the bulk of the American navy there, diminishing its support of the British in the Atlantic. At the same time he was angry at the temporary ascendancy of Emperor Hirohito and of his conservative chamberlains over the militarists. “Just like the King of Italy!” he said to Ribbentrop and Goebbels. (In one of his table conversations he praised the German Social Democrats, who at least had gotten rid of the Hohenzollern monarchy in 1918.)

During the winter months of early 1942, the war in the Atlantic went on. There were a few incidents between German submarines and American ships—the latter shadowing and supporting British ones—but, still, not enough for Roosevelt to call for a declaration of war against Germany. Hitler repeatedly confirmed, ever more stringently, his June 21, 1941, directive to his naval forces: avoid any kind of incident with the Americans, even if the latter commence firing. American journalists, such as William Shirer, were permitted to stay in Germany and file their dispatches (though they were shadowed by police); the deportation of Jews eastward had begun, but those few Jews who were American citizens remained untouched; Hitler also decided to postpone the deportations of Jews from Berlin. Meanwhile, the building of the American war economy and armaments went on and on, though accompanied by increasing criticism from Republicans, some of them

lamenting publicly that much of the American production of arms was going to Britain, and some of it even to the Russians.

And for Britain and Russia the skies were darkening. Both Stalin and Churchill, in their different ways, were beginning to doubt whether the United States would, or indeed could, enter the war. Hitler's armies, unlike Napoléon's, survived the cruel Russian winter after a few temporary retreats, remaining largely intact. In May 1942 they resumed their invasion of southern and central Russia, driving rapidly toward the Don and Volga, approaching the Caucasus. Stalin was deeply depressed, since the flow of equipment that was reaching him from British and American ports narrowed down to a trickle. At the same time the brilliant "Desert Fox," Field Marshal Rommel, beat the British out of Libya, corralled more than 30,000 British and Empire prisoners in Tobruk, and was about to march almost unhindered toward the Suez Canal when things were suddenly changing on the other side of the world.

On May 25, the six-month *modus vivendi* would expire. There were desultory negotiations about its possible prolongation in the spring. But neither the American nor Japanese negotiations were able to offer more reciprocal concessions. On the American side, President Roosevelt's situation was difficult, since the terms of the original *modus vivendi*, essentially a secret document, had leaked out throughout the winter. One group of Republicans, "Asia Firsters," accused the president of selling out China; another group, led by Senator Robert Taft (and supported by Charles Lindbergh), accused Roosevelt of trying to get the United States into a war with Germany "through the back door," that is, provoking war with Japan. Yet the fatal chain of events occurred not in Washington but in Tokyo.

The Japanese militarists, fretting against the *modus vivendi* and the conservatives of the Imperial Court, took matters into their hands. They were encouraged by the German victories. They were convinced that Japan's hour of decision must no longer be postponed. On May 20

they assassinated Kurusu, the peacemaking Japanese envoy, who had just been called back from Washington. They made the emperor move away from his chamberlains and advisers, to Sansushi Palace, where a crown council was convoked on May 25. The army chiefs argued that Japan must no longer refrain from fulfilling her commitments to the Tripartite Pact with Germany: this was a matter of Japanese honor. The alternative was going to war with the Anglo-Saxon imperialists in the Far East and western Pacific. Another alternative was (the 1941 Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Treaty notwithstanding) to attack the Soviet Union from the East, in concert with the Germans advancing across European Russia. The third alternative, that of prolonging the *modus vivendi*, involving more concessions to the Americans, had the fewest supporters.

The session went on into the night. In the end, the emperor felt forced to compromise. There would be no declaration of war against the United States, but one against Britain (and the Netherlands), effective at once, with coordinated invasions of Hong Kong, Malaya, Siam, and the East Indies. The militarists hoped (and many of them thought) that with the dismal situation of Britain and Russia in mind, the Americans might not choose to go to war, at least not at that time.

They were wrong. President Roosevelt immediately demanded that the Japanese halt their attacks against the British and Dutch possessions within twenty-four hours. There was no response from Tokyo, and on May 28 Japanese planes attacked and sank five ships in Hong Kong harbor, including an American passenger vessel and a destroyer. Four hundred Americans lost their lives. This melted much of congressional opposition away. Roosevelt declared May 28 "a day of infamy," and Congress declared war on Japan the next day, with only six senators and fifty congressmen abstaining (the same number as on April 6, 1917).

That same day the president authorized the transport of three hundred Sherman tanks to Africa for the beleaguered British. They would arrive there just in time. Churchill's newly appointed Field Marshal Montgomery was able to halt Rommel's advance only sixty miles west of

the Nile. Three months later Montgomery felt strong enough to attack the German-Italian army at El Alamein, leading to the first considerable British victory in the field.

Churchill had planned to come to Washington at the end of May, but once he heard of the Kurusu murder and a new Japanese government and of the imminent Japanese attack on Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, etc., he chose to remain in London. (He also thought it best not to give any ammunition to isolationist Republicans.) He waited for a month and arrived in Washington on the last day of June. Addressing Congress, he cited Cromwell: "The Lord hath delivered our enemies to us." Yet, Roosevelt told him that he was still not able to go to Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, since there were too few incidents in the Atlantic between the German and American navies. But they agreed on a master plan.

American naval forces and Marines would occupy the Azores, Madeira, and the Cape Verde Islands in October 1942. (There would be no trouble with the Portuguese: Churchill would attend to that). Then in early November American forces would invade and liberate French North Africa without officially declaring war on Germany. Churchill was elated. He and Roosevelt coordinated the American invasion of North Africa with the British offensive across Libya. And so it happened, sometime between October 24 and November 8. A week later a Russian counteroffensive encircled the German Sixth Army west of Stalingrad. The turning point of World War II had come.

During these months in the Far East the Japanese had forced the British to surrender Singapore ignominiously. But the U.S. Navy, unlike in 1941, was no longer concentrated at or near Hawaii. Two task forces had been moved to the Philippines in the spring of 1942, and in the Battle of Wake Island in October 1942 (aided by the decoding of Japanese radio signals) Admirals Spruance and Oldendorf destroyed half of Japan's aircraft carriers. Pressed by Tokyo's insistent demands, Hitler did not precisely declare war but asserted "a state of defensive warfare" with the United States on November 10, 1942, a day after Americans had

landed in Morocco and Algiers. (The president proclaimed that this amounted to a German declaration of war, which even his bitterest critics found difficult to deny.) The stage was set for an invasion of Europe by the Americans and British.

The rest we know. The Japanese fought bitterly in the Far East and on the seas, on one occasion coming close to northwestern Australia, but eventually they were conquered. Hitler killed himself in his underground bunker in Berlin. After two atom bombs were cast on Japan and Stalin entered the war against the Japanese, they surrendered.