

Japan, Pearl Harbor, and the War



While most Americans anxiously watched the course of the European war, tension mounted in Asia. Taking advantage of an opportunity to improve its strategic position, Japan boldly announced a “new order” in which it would exercise hegemony over all of the Pacific. Battling for survival against Nazi Germany, Britain was unable to resist, abandoning its concession in Shanghai and temporarily closing the Chinese supply route from Burma. In the summer of 1940, Japan won permission from the weak Vichy government in France to use airfields in northern French Indochina (North Vietnam). That September, the Japanese formally joined the Rome-Berlin Axis. The United States countered with an embargo on the export of scrap iron to Japan.

In July 1941, the Japanese occupied southern French Indochina (South Vietnam), signaling a probable move southward toward the oil, tin, and rubber of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The United States, in response, froze Japanese assets and initiated an embargo on the one commodity Japan needed above all others—oil.

General Hideki Tojo became prime minister of Japan that October. In mid-November, he sent a special envoy to the United States to meet with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Among other things, Japan demanded that the United States

release Japanese assets and stop U.S. naval expansion in the Pacific. Hull countered with a proposal for Japanese withdrawal from all its conquests. The swift Japanese rejection on December 1 left the talks stalemated.

On the morning of December 7, Japanese carrier-based planes executed a devastating surprise attack against the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Twenty-one U.S. ships were destroyed or temporarily disabled. Three hundred twenty-three aircraft were destroyed or damaged. 2,388 soldiers, sailors, and civilians were killed. However, the U.S. aircraft carriers that would play such a critical role in the ensuing naval war in the Pacific were at sea and not anchored at Pearl Harbor. On that day, the Japanese also attacked U.S. and British bases in the Philippines, Hong Kong, and throughout the Pacific.

American opinion, still divided about the war in Europe, was unified overnight by what President Roosevelt called “a day that will live in infamy.” On December 8, Congress declared a state of war with Japan. Three days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States.