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War Message to Congress
Washington, D.C., December 8, 1941

Roosevelt received news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor at 1:50 P.M. on Sunday, December 7, 1941, while lunching at the White House with political advisor, Harry Hopkins. It came in the form of a telephone call from the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox. Within a few hours the dimensions of the disaster were clear: 2,403 killed, over 1,000 more wounded, nineteen ships damaged or sunk, almost 200 airplanes destroyed— mostly on the ground. Although a great deal of Japanese military activity had been monitored in the weeks leading up to Pearl Harbor—codes had been broken and messages intercepted—American military commanders on the scene had obviously been caught by surprise as the attacking Japanese task force had penetrated undetected to within a few hundred miles of Honolulu.

The diplomatic background to the attack centered on the oil embargo then in force by America against Japan in retaliation for Japanese aggression in Indochina. The oil embargo was part of a total suspension of trade between America and Japan, and the freezing of Japanese economic assets in America which had been enforced earlier in the year. Diplomatic talks to ease the tensions between America and Japan were ongoing at the time of Pearl Harbor, but were not in a productive mode at the decisive moment. While the diplomats were talking, the Japanese military was considering many factors which spurred them to attack when they did. Weather patterns seemed to give the Japanese the choice of attacking in December or waiting until spring. In December, 1941, they still had oil, enough for another year and a half of war, and they knew that months later their oil situation would probably be worse. An American naval buildup authorized by Congress after the fall of France in June, 1940 had not yet produced much effect, and in December, 1941, the Japanese fleet still dominated the Pacific. The Japanese naval commanders knew that a year or so later, that might no longer be true.

After receiving news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, FDR spoke on the telephone with Winston Churchill, and then met with his cabinet and Vice-President Henry Wallace in the same room of the White House where Lincoln had met with his cabinet when the Civil War began. FDR decided to deliver a concise War Message to Congress the following day, and drafted the seven-minute speech himself with some suggestions from Hopkins. The compelling phrase, "a date which will live in infamy," was an afterthought, penciled in by Roosevelt just before he spoke on December 8th. Although isolationists would still complain about his handling of events, the Pearl Harbor speech to a packed joint session of Congress was punctuated by great applause; and the Congress which had kept Woodrow Wilson hanging for a week in 1917 took only thirty-three minutes to pass the resolution declaring war on Japan in 1941. The vote was 88-0 in the Senate and 388-1 in the House, the only negative vote coming from Jeannette Rankin, Republican of Montana who—as a pacifist—had also voted against war in 1917. On December 11th, Germany and Italy as Japan's allies, declared war on America, and Congress promptly reciprocated. The long and bitter debate over isolationism and America's role on the world stage had finally been overtaken by events.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation, and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its Emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in the American island of Oahu, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. And, while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time the Japanese Government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very

many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday the Japanese Government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Wake Island.

And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has therefore undertaken a surprise offensive extending through the Pacific Area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense, that always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people, in their righteous might, will win through absolute victory.

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph. So help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.