Introduction for the Japanese Reader

In writing the book you now hold in your hands I had a fairly modest goal in mind. I basically wanted to help "pass the baton" to the younger generation of scholars interested in international politics, both historians and political scientists. I wanted to show them, in as practical and as "user-friendly" a way as I could, how to go about doing historical work in this area. Over the years, as a simple by-product of just doing my own work, I had acquired certain skills which I wanted to pass on to younger people. Those skills were for the most part rather prosaic in nature: how to figure out what the main historical works dealing with a particular subject were, how to identify the various sources you needed to go through, how to work in the archives, and so on. But beyond that there was a certain element of craft involved. The sources had to be approached in a particular way, and a good deal of thought needed to be put into the project. So I wanted to explain how that thought process worked. On that level too certain skills are involved, but they are not particularly difficult to acquire. And I thought the best way to help people acquire them was by showing how that process works in practice.

The most important case in point—and the case that is bound to be of greatest interest to the Japanese reader—is the one covered in Chapter Four of the book. I was concerned there with the origins of the Pacific War. For me, this was essentially an exercise. Given that the purpose of this chapter was to show how you can go about tackling a new topic, I did not want it to deal with something I already knew a lot about. I wanted to see how far I could go in making sense of a historical episode I had not studied in any depth just by using the skills outlined in the previous chapter. And I chose the 1941 case because whenever I had to deal with the origins of the Pacific War in my diplomatic history lecture course, I felt I didn't really understand what had happened. The whole episode, in fact, did not make much sense to me at all. Why would Japan, bogged down as she was in an unwinnable war in China, decide to attack the United States of America, by far the strongest country in the world in terms of mobilizable war potential? Why on earth would Japan choose to do that if, as one famous historian put it, the United States was a country that "asked only to be left alone"? Standard arguments about the attack on Pearl Harbor being a case of aggression pure and simple were very hard to

accept. And that reaction, of course, had a good deal to do with how my general understanding of international politics had developed over time. Countries, I had come to feel, just did not behave that way; that's just not the way international politics works; there *had* to be a whole lot more to the story than that.

And sure enough, as you'll see for yourself when you read that chapter, I did reach certain conclusions about the origins of the Pacific War—conclusions that are at odds with the conventional wisdom in this area. I think, first of all, that the United States played a very active role in this story, and that U.S. policy in the run-up to the war has to be understood, above all, in the context of U.S. policy toward Germany at the time. I think President Roosevelt took a hard line toward Japan, beginning in late July 1941 with the oil embargo, essentially with a view to bringing the United States into the war with Germany. The idea that his goal was to take America into the European war through the "back door" was, of course, by no means new. It had been made, mainly by right-wing critics of the Roosevelt policy, in the immediate post-World War II period, and it tended to be associated in America with conspiracy theories about the Pearl Harbor attack. Roosevelt, it was sometimes claimed, had known about the attack in advance, but deliberately did nothing to head it off, since he wanted an aroused and vindictive country to rally around him and his war policy. Those conspiracy theories I view as absurd and baseless. Roosevelt certainly knew in December 1941 that war was imminent, but he probably thought the attack would come in the Philippines and not in Hawaii—if, indeed, Japan attacked American territory at all. And, unlike his right-wing critics, I personally wouldn't condemn the president for pursuing a "back door" policy, if that in fact was what it was. I see him as doing the best he could to deal with a very difficult situation. My friend John Mearsheimer wrote a book a few years ago called *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, and in choosing that title Mearsheimer had put his finger on a very important point. There is something about the way great power politics works that does lead to tragic outcomes, and the story of the origins of the war between the United States and Japan is a good case in point.

The fact that because the back door theory was linked to the anti-Roosevelt right wing and to the various crackpot Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories had a certain impact on the way the war origins issue was handled by mainstream American scholars. It was, I think, largely because of those associations that they tended to dismiss the back door theory out of hand, and most American scholars are still very reluctant to take

that theory seriously. The conclusions I reached in Chapter Four have certainly not been widely accepted. What was striking to me, however, was not that other historians had come to different conclusions (which, after all, is only to be expected), but rather that it was so hard to get a real debate going. In that chapter I had laid out out in some detail the thought-and-research process that led me to the conclusions I reached. But while few scholars seemed willing to accept those conclusions, no one really tried to show that there was anything wrong with the arguments they were based on—except for one scholar, Dan Reiter, with whom I did have an interesting exchange.[1] But the general response struck me as quite odd. American scholars can be quite critical of U.S. foreign policy, but for some reason which I don't really understand a rethinking of 1941 seems to be off-limits. And I sense that the same sort of thing seems to be going on within the Japanese historical profession. Any attempt to play down or relativize Japanese aggressiveness in the pre-Pearl Harbor period is viewed with distaste, because no one wants to give aid and comfort to the nationalist right within Japan—or to risk alienating Japan's American protector.[2]

But we are talking about events that took place over three-quarters of a century ago, and we historians by now should have reached the point where our only goal should be to understand the origins of the war in as open-minded a way as we can. The whole idea of breaking away from the "Tokyo Trials view of history" is to be embraced—not condemned (as, I gather, is often the case in Japan) as evidence of right-wing nationalist bias. The judgment of the Tokyo tribunal that "the attacks which Japan launched on 7th December 1941 against Britain, the United States of America, and the Netherlands were wars of aggression"—that they "were

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[1] H-Diplo published a roundtable on the *Craft* book in December 2007; much of the discussion there focused on the chapter on 1941. I also devoted a whole section to the 1941 case in my article "Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy," which came out in *Security Studies* in 2007; that article was republished in 2012 in my *Cold War and After* book, and some of the participants in the H-Diplo roundtable on that book also focused on that argument about 1941. In 2010, the political scientist John Schuessler published an article called "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War" (in the journal *International Security*) in which he basically accepted the "back door" argument, and I did a review of that article for H-Diplo/ISSF in April of that year. That led to a lively discussion in H-Diplo in which I participated. Perhaps the most important contribution to the debate triggered by the Schuessler article was the article which the political scientist Dan Reiter published in *Security Studies* in November 2012. I then responded with an article of my own, "Dan Reiter and America's Road to War in 1941," which, together with various other contributions to the debate (including a response by Reiter), was published as an H-Diplo/ISSF roundtable in May 2013. For the full references and direct links to much of this material, see my curriculum vitae (http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/cv.html).

[2] On that latter point, see Yoshida Yutaka, "Debates over Historical Consciousness," in Sven Saaler and Christopher W. A. Szpilman, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 411, 417, citing Ōhara Yasuo, *Iwayuru "A-kyū senpan" gōshi to Yasukuni mondai ni tsuite*, Morarojii Kenkyūkai (2008), and Reizei Akihiko, *'Hanbei' Nihon no shōtai*, Bungei Shunjū (2015).

unprovoked attacks, prompted by the desire to seize the possessions of these nations"—is simplistic, to say the least. And it was absurd for the 1951 U.S.-Japanese peace treaty (in its Article 11) to demand that Japan accept that judgment. Historical judgments of this sort, if they are to have any validity at all, can only be made by professional historians, trained to look at these issues objectively, in the light of all the available sources on all sides.

But maybe I should step back a bit from that point, because there's actually a deeper problem here. The real issue, I think, is not who should make these judgments, but whether it even makes sense to focus on the whole question of whether Japan was to blame for the war. When I was growing up, the general view I absorbed from the larger culture was that wars were the product of aggression, so to understand what caused a war all you had to do was figure out who the aggressor was. That view was very widely shared in the United States at the time. The strategy of deterrence, for example—the fundamental U.S. strategy during the whole Cold War period—was based on that notion, since it was aggression, and only aggression, that one sought to deter. And that basic approach to the problem—what I call the "aggressor theory of war"—is still very common. But the most important insight you get from studying the history of international relations is that things are never that simple and, indeed, that it makes more sense as a general rule to view armed conflict as the outcome of a *political* process—a process unfolding over time, with its own internal logic, and about which moral judgments are often quite problematic.

And that means that the scholar's main goal should be to bring out the *political* core of the process culminating in war. That means getting away from the idea that historical analysis should be an exercise in finger-pointing. It means being sensitive to the role that relatively mundane concerns, and above all concerns about power (as opposed, for example, to grandiose ideological objectives), played in shaping policy. It means that it's important to try to look at things through the eyes of all parties to the conflict—and to understand the constraints under which all sides were forced to operate. If you want to understand something like the origins of the Pacific War, that, I think, is the approach you have to take—if only to inoculate yourself against the very natural tendency of historians to sit in judgment on the past. But that approach, if it rings true in terms of what the evidence shows, can also deepen your understanding of how international politics works. For if purely

political factors play the key role in a number of major conflicts, then that suggests that in international relations more generally the core dynamic is *bound* to be political in nature—that this is the way international politics *has to* work. And if you reach those very general conclusions, then that in turn will affect the way you deal with foreign policy issues even today. It will lead you to approach international political problems in a less moralistic, less self-righteous, way—an approach more sensitive to the views of people on the other side.

That, in any case, is the sort of sensibility that both served as the point of departure for the exercise described in Chapter Four and which that kind of exercise tends to develop. But the shaping of that kind of sensibility through historical work is a journey that never quite reaches an end. You often find yourself groping for answers; even when you finish a project the conclusions you reach are often somewhat tentative. The chapter on 1941 is again a good case in point: I certainly would never claim that I myself have written the last word on the subject. How could I, if I don't even read Japanese? In fact, I haven't even done any real archival work in this area even with English-language sources. The one thing I am sure of is that further historical work, especially work with as yet untapped sources, will yield important insights—and that much of this work will be done with Japanese sources, and by Japanese scholars. And my hope is that those scholars will take the analysis wherever those sources lead them. That's the whole glory of our field. If we use the right method, we really can see beyond our own preconceptions. We can reach important conclusions—important because, especially when they are at odds with the conventional wisdom, they can shed real light on the fundamental problems of war and peace.

Let me end by thanking those responsible for this Japanese translation of my methods book, especially Nakatani Tadashi, Murata Koji, and Yamaguchi Wataru. One of the greatest honors a scholar can receive is to have his work appreciated outside his own country, and I was especially gratified that this particular book has been translated into Japanese. And I very much hope you will find it worth reading.