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**Marc Trachtenberg: The Craft of International History**

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## Chapter Four

### DEVELOPING AN INTERPRETATION THROUGH TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: THE 1941 CASE

**I**S REAL INSIGHT into basic historical questions beyond the reach of those who are not prepared to spend many years studying them? I don't think so. I think that scholars who are not prepared to make that kind of investment can still develop a certain level of historical understanding—a level no one would call superficial—provided they approach historical problems the right way.

How then are such problems to be approached? Not passively: you can't just read a lot of books and articles and documents, absorbing what you can and throwing everything into the hopper, and expect that something called "historical understanding" will almost automatically come out the other end. Historical problems instead need to be approached *actively*. That means that you have to put *questions* to the material you are working with. And to come up with the right questions, you are going to have to do a lot of *thinking*. This is not a particularly easy thing to do, but if you work that way, you might be surprised by how effective this method is—by how far it will take you and by how quickly it will get you where you need to go.

How in practice should you proceed? In principle, the answer is simple. You tackle an issue by identifying the most important historical works that deal with it. You then analyze that body of work using the method outlined in the previous chapter: seeing what the core arguments are, seeing how basic theses are supported by key claims, and then examining those claims, paying special attention to the evidence given to back them up. The questions thus emerge in a very natural way: are a particular author's claims correct? What's to be made of the argument that supports them? Does the evidence really prove what it's supposed to prove? And when authors disagree, as they usually do on important issues, you ask: who's right? Who makes the stronger case? Above all, you'll want to think about how different claims relate to each other, and in particular about how major arguments are related to relatively narrow claims. The more concrete the question, the more studiable it is. Your goal, therefore, is to see how broad issues of interpretation turn on relatively narrow claims. The conclusions you reach when you examine those claims in

the light of the evidence will then automatically have relatively broad implications. The big questions will gradually get answered, and an interpretation will gradually take shape in your mind.

All this is very general, and if you're to understand how this method works, you're going to have to see it in operation. So in this chapter, I want to show how it can be used to develop an interpretation of an important episode in the history of international politics, America's road to war in 1941.

#### AMERICA AND GERMANY IN 1941

Let's say that your goal is to explain how America ended up at war with both Germany and Japan in December 1941. Where do you start? You can begin by reacting to certain notions you've absorbed from the general culture. You might have been led to believe, for example, that the United States was a peace-loving country that sought to avoid foreign entanglements, that Germany and Japan were aggressor states, and that America's entry into the war was a product of Axis aggression pure and simple. You look at what scholars have had to say on the subject. A.J.P. Taylor, for example, in the very last paragraph of *The Origins of the Second World War*, says that Hitler's decision to go to war with America was "gratuitous," and that the United States was a country that "asked only to be left alone."<sup>1</sup> You perhaps note that this type of interpretation is still widely accepted and that even scholars from time to time still argue along those lines.<sup>2</sup>

Claims of that sort are a kind of springboard. You react to that sort of argument, drawing on your general sense for how international politics works. Why on earth, you wonder, would Hitler have declared war on America, involved as he was in his war with the Soviet Union, if the United States had really "asked only to be left alone"? Why on earth would he have "gratuitously" embarked on an armed conflict with a power as strong as the United States? Your whole understanding of international politics leads you to think that things just could not have been so simple, that the German decision to go to war with America almost certainly had something to do with American policy, and that America was in all probability more deeply involved in European affairs by that point than Taylor, for example, was suggesting.

<sup>1</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Note, for example, Randall Schweller's use of that passage from the Taylor book in his article "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 94-95.

This sort of thinking, however, simply defines the questions. Only the evidence can provide answers. So to find out what was going on, you begin by turning to what you identify (using the method outlined in the previous chapter and elaborated on in appendix I) as the most important accounts of U.S. policy in this period. It soon becomes clear that the American government, especially in late 1941, was anything but passive. The United States, it turns out, was fighting an undeclared war in the Atlantic against Germany at that time. One of the most important works dealing with the subject is in fact called *The Undeclared War*.<sup>3</sup> But how, you wonder, is that behavior to be understood? What was the American political leadership trying to do? Did President Roosevelt and his top advisers simply want to defend the sea lanes in order to keep Britain from falling? Perhaps they did not want to go any further if they could help it? Or maybe Roosevelt's goal actually was to bring the United States into the war on Britain's side, and maybe the naval operations are to be understood in terms of that objective?

Scholars, you note, are divided on the issue. The majority view is that Roosevelt, certainly from mid-1941 on, "steadily maneuvered the country in the direction of war."<sup>4</sup> It is commonly assumed that public opinion was a key factor here. Most Americans, it seems, wanted to keep out of the war but also supported strong action even if it meant risking war, and Roosevelt's policy was framed with an eye on that situation. The argument is that rather than present the issue of intervention to the country directly, he preferred to maneuver in a way that would allow people to believe (or at least half believe) that the country was being pushed into the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

What sort of evidence, you wonder, supports that view? Well, for one thing, Roosevelt actually *said* he wanted to go to war with Germany. Robert Dallek, author of the most important book on Roosevelt's foreign policy, supports his claim that the president by late 1941 "now wished to take the United States into the war" by citing the record of Roosevelt's meeting with the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, at the Atlantic Conference in

<sup>3</sup> William Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940–1941* (New York: Harper, 1953), esp. chap. 14, 18, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler: America's Entry into World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979; paperback edition, 1981), pp. 265, 267, 285–89. On the idea that the American people, while themselves unwilling to make the tough decisions, basically understood (and approved of) what Roosevelt was doing, see Warren Kimball's September 22, 1999, post on H-Diplo (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~diplo/>). For a detailed study of the role of public opinion during this period, see Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

August 1941. Roosevelt had explained to Churchill that he was “skating on pretty thin ice” with Congress, and that if he asked for a declaration of war Congress would spend three months debating the issue. He therefore would not go that route. He would instead “wage war, but not declare it.” “He would become more and more provocative.” His goal, he said, was to “force an ‘incident.’” He “made it clear that he would look for an ‘incident’ which would justify him in opening hostilities.”<sup>6</sup> And this, you notice, was not just an isolated remark. Roosevelt, in fact, often spoke in such terms at the time.<sup>7</sup>

But perhaps Roosevelt’s comment to Churchill is not to be taken at face value? Waldo Heinrichs, the author of another important book on the subject, says that Roosevelt at that point was not “seeking war” and that when the president had earlier talked about how American patrolling of the North Atlantic would lead to an “incident, which would not be unwelcome,” he was probably just trying “to be encouraging.”<sup>8</sup> And David Reynolds, author of an important study of Anglo-American relations in this period, quotes Roosevelt’s remarks to Churchill at length but argues that, even as late as November and early December 1941, the president did not want “to provoke hostilities” with Germany.<sup>9</sup>

Faced with these differences of opinion, how do you get to the bottom of the issue? The answer is simple. You look for evidence, when reading these historical accounts, that bears both directly and indirectly on the question. You try to understand Roosevelt’s basic thinking about what a German victory in Europe would mean, both for America and for the world as a whole, and you think about what that implied about the sort of policy America should adopt. You look at the tenor of what he and his closest advisers were saying, both in public and in private—his statement, for example, on September 1, 1941, that “we shall do everything in our power to crush Hitler and his Nazi forces,”<sup>10</sup> or the remark by his close adviser Harry Hopkins in November 1941 that it was going to take much more than a lend-lease program to defeat Hitler.<sup>11</sup> You pay special attention to what the U.S.

<sup>6</sup> Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> See David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937–41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 202, 208, and esp. 347 n. 38. See also Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler*, pp. 196, 200–202; and Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 286.

<sup>8</sup> See Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 78, 151.

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, pp. 214, 219.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, p. 743.

<sup>11</sup> Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 410. Note also Hopkins’s criticism in a note to Roosevelt of a public statement by an army general about U.S. military unpreparedness. This sort of thing, he said, was doing “a good deal of harm” because it made people reluctant “to go all the way”—a comment that reflects the implicit assumption that both men wanted the country to “go all the way.” *Ibid.*, p. 377.

government was actually doing: what sorts of military forces were being built, what kind of planning was going on, what sort of diplomacy was being practiced, what kinds of military operations, if any, were being conducted. Above all, you want to see whether all these things fall into a *pattern*—that is, whether you can make sense of what was going on by seeing how all these things fit in with each other.

What emerges when you do this exercise? First, how did Roosevelt approach these basic issues of foreign policy? You look at the key sources cited by writers who deal with these issues, and when you read that material, you see certain themes sounded over and over again. The United States, Roosevelt felt, could not afford to think in strictly defensive terms. America, that is, could not just sit on its hands until it was attacked. America's security was deeply affected by what was going on elsewhere in the world. If Britain went down, the Axis powers would control the resources of the entire Old World. The New World would then "be living at the point of a gun—a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military."<sup>12</sup>

The threat was particularly acute—and this was a theme that came up repeatedly in his remarks in the 1939–1941 period—because of the nature of modern warfare. The oceans might have been "reasonably adequate defensive barriers" in the past. But given the range of modern bombers and the speed with which attacks could be mounted, this was no longer the case. The United States had in effect been brought much closer to Europe, and its interests were thus more deeply bound up with what went on there. The country had to face up to the problem this posed before it was too late. One could not allow things to deteriorate to the point where the nation would be forced to fight "a last-ditch war for the preservation of American independence" sometime in the future. It would be "suicide" to wait until the enemy was "in our front yard." His basic premise was that it made sense to deal with the problem before it became unmanageable. America had to defend itself in a more "dynamic" way and not just at the borders. Implicit in this whole line of argument was the idea that Nazi power had to be broken: the Nazis could not be allowed to build up their power by consolidating their position and drawing on the resources of all of Europe; a policy of simply preventing the defeat of Britain—even assuming that Britain would fight on forever once it became clear that America would never enter the war—would not be good enough. By late 1941 what was implicit before had become explicit. Hitler had to be

<sup>12</sup> Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), p. 311; *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, comp. Samuel Rosenman, vol. 9 (for 1940) (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 2–4, 231, 324, 635–36 (for the quotation), 665–66, and vol. 10 (for 1941) (New York: Harper, 1942), pp. 183–84, 188; Roosevelt to Cudahy, March 4, 1939, *The Roosevelt Letters*, ed. Elliott Roosevelt with Joseph Lash, vol. 3 (London: Harrap, 1952), pp. 256–57.

defeated; there could be no thought of “any peace founded on a compromise with evil itself”; the Nazi threat had to be “struck down.”<sup>13</sup>

It turns out, moreover, that that was not just Roosevelt’s view. His top military advisers were thinking along similar lines. They were if anything more willing than the president to dot the i’s and explicitly accept the implications of this line of argument. Admiral Stark, the chief of naval operations, argued strongly, beginning in late 1940, for a policy of bringing the United States into the war with Germany, an approach that General Marshall, the army chief of staff, basically accepted. And the evidence strongly suggests that Roosevelt himself, very secretly, made it clear to Stark that he shared his point of view. Seeing what the thinking was in such circles helps you interpret what was actually done, especially in the area of naval operations in the North Atlantic. And as you try to make sense of that story, you pay special attention to certain key pieces of evidence. You note, for example, Admiral Stark’s comment, as early as February 1941, that “the question as to our entry into the war now seems to be when and not whether”<sup>14</sup>—a remark that is of particular importance in this context, given that Stark, as CNO, was in a good position to know what the president’s thinking on naval operations in the Atlantic actually was. As the different elements in the story gradually fall into place, a general picture takes shape.<sup>15</sup>

But before you commit yourself to a particular interpretation, you want to examine the arguments on the other side. Not everyone believes that Roosevelt, in 1941, wanted to take the country into the war, and some first-rate scholars take the opposite view. Gerhard Weinberg, for example, in his important book *A World at Arms* gives a picture of “Roosevelt trying and hoping to avoid war.” While “some of Roosevelt’s advisors did think the

<sup>13</sup> Wesley Craven and James Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 118; Roosevelt, *Public Papers*, 9:198–99, 633, 636, 665, and 10:183, 185, 189, 367–435. Roosevelt to White, December 14, 1939, *Roosevelt Letters*, 3:293.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 138, and also in Mark Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> There are a number of excellent historical works dealing with U.S. strategic thinking in this period. See especially Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, and James Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy: Anglo-American Naval Collaboration, 1937–1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977). For Roosevelt’s endorsement of Stark’s thinking, see esp. Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, pp. 202–5, 219, 296 n. 12; note also B. Mitchell Simpson, *Admiral Harold R. Stark: Architect of Victory, 1939–1945* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p. 75, and Maurice Matloff and Edwin Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1941–1942* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1999; originally published 1953), p. 28 n. 43. Note also Roosevelt’s positive reaction to an October 8, 1941, memorandum by Admiral Stark calling for the United States “to enter the war against Germany as soon as possible”; see Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 379–80.

United States should or would have to enter the war to assure the defeat of Hitler,” Weinberg says, there is “no evidence that the President himself abandoned his hope that the United States could stay out.”<sup>16</sup> The key argument he makes to support that conclusion has to do with American naval policy in 1941. Thanks to British intelligence cooperation, as Weinberg points out, from April 1941 on the Americans were able to read intercepted German naval messages. The knowledge the U.S. government acquired in this way, he writes, “was regularly and carefully utilized to *avoid* incidents, when it could very easily have been used to *provoke* them.” Roosevelt’s famous order “to shoot at German submarines on sight,” he says, “was more to frighten them off than to provoke them.” “Aware of German orders to submarines to avoid incidents,” he argues, Roosevelt “could push forward with his program of aid to Britain knowing that at worst there might be isolated incidents in the Atlantic.”<sup>17</sup> This is a point, he believes, that nearly everyone has overlooked, in spite of the fact that the “relevant records have been available for decades” and had been analyzed in an account the German scholar Jürgen Rohwer published “many years ago.”<sup>18</sup>

These specific claims about naval operations thus play a key role in supporting Weinberg’s general argument about Roosevelt’s policy and are thus worth examining closely. So to pursue the issue, you look up the footnotes for the passages in which those claims are made. You immediately notice something odd. In the key footnote Weinberg admits that his interpretation “differs somewhat” from Rohwer’s own interpretation. What then, you wonder, does Rohwer actually claim, and what exactly does he show, especially in the particular passages Weinberg cites in his footnotes?

So you look up those passages, and it turns out that Rohwer, like most historians who have studied the question, sees a gradual movement toward belligerency. He divides American policy on the European war into three periods. During the first period, which ended with the fall of France in the spring of 1940, Roosevelt wanted to keep out of the war. He was not a pure

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 240–41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Weinberg, H-Diplo post, October 5, 1999. Note also his comment about how Rohwer’s findings about how the German intercepts were used “to avoid incidents as much as possible . . . invalidates many standard readings of FDR’s policy.” Gerhard Weinberg, “World War II: Comments on the Roundtable,” *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 492. The H-Diplo post turned up in an H-Diplo search for “Pearl Harbor,” a keyword useful in searching for writings related to the origins of the Pacific War; the *Diplomatic History* article turned up in a Social Science Citation Index search for articles that cited the Rohwer article. That latter search, incidentally, also turned up a reference to a review article, which would be valuable if you wanted to pursue the issue further: J. Rohwer, “Signal Intelligence and World War II: The Unfolding Story,” *Journal of Military History* 63, no. 4 (October 1999): 939–51.



isolationist even then, but in Roosevelt's view at that time Britain and France would be able to keep Hitler from winning with only limited American support. After the fall of France in 1940, according to Rohwer, American policy entered a second phase. The Americans began to build up a strong military force, and support for Britain was greatly intensified. A third phase began in the early spring of 1941: Roosevelt was moving toward a policy of undeclared war against Germany.<sup>19</sup>

But putting all this aside, it's still fair to ask what Rohwer's evidence actually showed. To get at that issue, you need to focus on the specifics, so you read Rohwer's account closely. What emerges is a picture of a very active American policy in late 1941. In July, for example, it was decided that German warships that threatened U.S.-protected convoys were to be attacked, and according to Rohwer depth charges were dropped on real or suspected German submarines on at least eighty separate occasions.<sup>20</sup> That policy and those tactics were apparently adopted before anyone knew how Hitler would react. To be sure, the number of incidents was limited by the fact that the main task of the naval authorities, both British and American, was to get the convoys through safely, and that meant that they took full advantage of the information they acquired through their intelligence operations to steer the convoys away from German U-boats.<sup>21</sup> The Americans, however, had clearly not opted for a policy of avoiding confrontations with German warships. As Rohwer shows, it was through pure chance—in one important case, through simple mechanical problems on the German side—that attacks on major German vessels did not take place in the immediate pre-Pearl Harbor period.<sup>22</sup> It was not as though the Americans had learned from intercepted German naval communications exactly how far they could go without provoking Hitler to declare war and went that far but no further.

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Rohwer, "Die USA und die Schlacht im Atlantik 1941," in *Kriegswende Dezember 1941*, ed. Jürgen Rohwer and Eberhard Jäckel (Koblenz: Bernard and Graefe, 1984), pp. 81–89.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 97. Other accounts support Rohwer's basic point that the Americans, from mid-1941 on, were pursuing a very active policy in the Atlantic. See, for example, Douglas Norton, "The Open Secret: The U.S. Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic, April–December 1941," *Naval War College Review* 26 (January–February 1974): esp. pp. 71–73, reprinted in Walter Hixson, ed., *The United States and the Road to War in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2002). On the eve of Pearl Harbor, the German navy had in fact noted "that the Battle of the Atlantic had become so intensive that a declaration of war between Germany and the United States remained only a formality." Holger Herwig, *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889–1941* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 234. Admiral Stark, looking back a few years later, characterized the situation in much the same way. U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, *Hearings*, 79th Cong., 1st sess. 1945–46, pt. 5, p. 2292.

<sup>21</sup> Rohwer, "Die USA," pp. 97, 99, 101–2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99–101. See also Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p. 258.

It seems quite clear, in fact, that the policy of using the intelligence to get the convoys through by routing them around German submarine concentrations cannot be taken as proof of a desire on Roosevelt's part to avoid war with Germany. It was the British (as Rohwer notes) who played the key role in deciding how the convoys would be routed.<sup>23</sup> If the British government, which certainly wanted America to come into the war, opted for such a policy, why should the fact that the Americans pursued that same policy be taken as proof that they wished to avoid war with Germany? So the evidence in the Rohwer article does not prove that Roosevelt was trying to keep America out of the war. If anything, it suggests exactly the opposite. Doing that exercise—seeing what Weinberg's interpretation is based on and analyzing a key text *he* cites to support that view—thus helps you develop your own understanding of the substantive issue at hand.

Let me step back a minute and make two comments about what has been going on here. Weinberg tends to interpret the story in terms of aggressors and victims, pure and simple. But you might think not just that U.S. policy was far more assertive than he makes out but also that it *had* to be more assertive, because that is the way international politics works. The Americans, you might assume, could not just remain passive in the face of what the Nazis were doing in Europe, because of its long-term effect on their own security position. The different historical interpretations might thus reflect different assumptions of a theoretical nature. But that does not mean that the theory is logically prior to the history—that one opts for a particular theoretical approach, that the history is interpreted accordingly, and that it could just as easily be interpreted the other way. You decide the historical issue by analyzing key bodies of evidence, and the way it's decided then helps you make up your mind about the theoretical assumptions you use to interpret these historical issues.

The second comment relates to the way an issue of this sort is analyzed. You look at a key claim—a claim that plays a major role in supporting one of the book's basic arguments—and you then focus on the evidence the author gives to back it up. You thus turn to the footnotes appended to the passages in which that claim is made, look up the sources cited there, and read them with some care, perhaps even examining the sources *they* cite. In unraveling the Watergate scandal, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were given a famous piece of advice: "follow the money." But if you want to get to the bottom of a historical issue, it's not the money that you should follow. It's the footnotes.

But to return now to the historical analysis: suppose you reach the conclusion, using these techniques, that Roosevelt's policy in 1941 was to take the country into the war with Germany. This conclusion is important, but in the final analysis it's just one element in the story. You're still a long way from

<sup>23</sup> Rohwer, "Die USA," pp. 97, 102.

understanding how America became involved in the Second World War. The naval operations in the Atlantic, after all, did not lead directly to war with Germany. For Hitler in late 1941, the war with Russia was the top priority and that meant that for the time being war with America was to be avoided if at all possible. The German navy (as Weinberg notes) was thus kept on a short leash. "Under no circumstances," the German naval commander noted, did the Führer "wish to cause incidents which would result in U.S. entry into the war."<sup>24</sup> And it was of course only after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that Hitler declared war on the United States.

### ROOSEVELT AND JAPAN

So you obviously have to pay attention to U.S.-Japanese relations in 1941. How does that story fit in to the larger story of global politics in this period? To get at that question, the first step is to try to learn what you can about what was going on between American and Japan in this period—to try to understand at a very rudimentary level how one thing led to another, until finally the Japanese attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Using the techniques outlined in the previous chapter, a number of books can be identified as academically respectable accounts. You read those books, and perhaps some key collections of documents as well, and you quickly get a sense for what the basic story was.

What, in brief, was the story here? In late July 1941 the Japanese moved into southern Indochina. The Americans responded by freezing Japan's assets in the United States. The freezing of assets quickly turned into a full economic embargo. In particular, deliveries of petroleum and petroleum products were suspended, and those shipments were embargoed not just by the United States but by America's friends Britain and Holland as well. But Japan was dependent on oil imports from sources controlled by those countries. Those oil imports were particularly important for military (including naval) purposes. Japan had been engaged in an undeclared war in China since 1937. Without liquid fuels, its military effort there would grind to a halt. If the effort in China was not to be abandoned, the Japanese would need to find some way to get the oil they needed. That they could do either by reaching an agreement with the United States that would allow oil shipments to resume or by seizing the oil fields in the Dutch East Indies. But it was clear enough in late 1941 that an attack on the Indies would in all probability mean war with the United States.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler*, p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> Certain explicit warnings about further Japanese expansion, and in particular a move into the Indies, were in fact issued. The most important ones were given by Roosevelt in a meeting with the Japanese ambassador on July 24, 1941, and by Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles

The Japanese-American talks in late 1941 were thus of fundamental importance. To avoid both war with America and a collapse of its position in China, Japan needed a negotiated settlement with the United States. Indeed, it needed the issue to be resolved relatively quickly. As its oil reserves dwindled, Japan felt “like a fish in a pond from which the water was gradually being drained away.”<sup>26</sup> But the Americans were unwilling to give the Japanese what they wanted. The China question turned out to be the nub of the problem. The Americans insisted on a complete Japanese withdrawal from China proper, but as the U.S. government itself realized, this was something

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in a meeting with another Japanese diplomat on August 4. These widely cited documents were published in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), Japan: 1931–1941*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1943), 2: 527, 543. Note also the final paragraph in the Oral Statement Roosevelt handed to the Japanese ambassador on August 17, 1941, in *ibid.*, p. 556. Secretary of War Henry Stimson viewed this as a “virtual ultimatum.” Henry Stimson Diaries, microfilm edition, handwritten annotation at top of entry for August 19, 1941. But even if those warnings had not been issued, the basic situation would still have been fairly clear. Given the general picture as everyone understood it, it was reasonable to assume that a Japanese attack on the Indies would probably lead to war with America. What is the thinking that that conclusion is based on? The U.S. government, first of all, was obviously calling the shots on the western side. Britain and Holland, in imposing embargoes of their own, were simply following the American lead. How then could America leave them in the lurch if they were attacked by Japan for doing precisely that—that is, for cooperating with the U.S. policy and thus for provoking Japan to attack? This, you might assume, was the sort of calculation people would have made at the time. The Japanese, you might further assume, could reasonably calculate that the Dutch and the British could pursue a tough policy on the oil issue only if they were backed by America; given the European situation, they would have had to take a much softer line if they had had to stand entirely on their own. The fact that they took a tough line could thus be taken as confirming that general point about an attack on the Indies being *casus belli* for the United States. And military arguments about the Philippines—about the importance for the Japanese of neutralizing American bases in the area if they were to attack the Indies, given the fact that there was a certain risk of war with America if they did so—would also have to be taken into account in this context, both in Tokyo and in Washington. All these things, you might calculate, would have a certain bearing on people’s estimates of the risk that a Japanese seizure of the Indies would lead to a U.S.-Japanese war. By considering these sorts of issues, you can thus begin to reach certain judgments about how people “must have” analyzed the situation at the time, even in the absence of hard empirical evidence. But this kind of analysis also helps you get a handle on the evidence. It serves as a kind of “searchlight.” It directs your attention to certain specific questions—for example, to the question of what inferences the Japanese in fact drew from what they observed about British and Dutch policy, or to questions about the role the Philippine issue played in their calculations. And that in turn helps you see things you might not otherwise have seen—and indeed helps you understand how what you see bears on the basic issues at hand. On these matters, note the evidence presented in Scott Sagan, “From Deterrence to Coercion to War: The Road to Pearl Harbor,” in *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, ed. Alexander George and William Simons (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), pp. 77–78.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 182, and Robert Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 245. The source of the metaphor is an article written after the war by Sato Kenryo, in 1941 chief of the Military Affairs Section of the War Ministry.

the Japanese found hard to accept. As U.S. under secretary of state Sumner Welles put it in November 1941, the Japanese leaders had to provide “some justification to their own people after four years of national effort and sacrifice” in China. Welles therefore “could not believe” that the Japanese would “agree to evacuate China completely.” But “nothing less,” he said, would “satisfy [the] United States.”<sup>27</sup> The Japanese had thus been backed into a corner. They were in effect forced to choose between war with the United States and capitulation on the China issue.

American policy was thus an important element in the story of the coming of the Pacific war. The U.S. oil embargo, most scholars seem to agree, had the effect of putting the United States on a collision course with Japan. Yet the scholars who have studied the subject most closely all seem to think that the last thing U.S. leaders wanted at the time was an armed conflict with that country. “No one during the fall of 1941,” Jonathan Utley says, “wanted war with Japan.”<sup>28</sup> Even those writers who believe that Roosevelt was trying to take the country into the European war think that war with Japan was not on his agenda. Indeed, in their view, the fact that Roosevelt was moving toward war with Germany made it more important than ever to avoid a second war with Japan. “From the fall of 1940 to the summer of 1941,” Dallek writes (in the first paragraph of his chapter on the subject), Roosevelt wanted to “keep things as quiet as possible in the Pacific”; in June and July 1941, the president’s “desire to avoid greater involvement in the Pacific” was “undiminished.”<sup>29</sup> But Roosevelt was pushed “toward a confrontation with Japan” by “pressures beyond his control.”<sup>30</sup> Even after the embargo was imposed, the president still sought to avoid, or at least to postpone, a conflict in the Pacific. “Scarce resources,” Roosevelt felt, needed to “be marshaled to fight Hitler.”<sup>31</sup> Waldo Heinrichs makes the same general point about American policy toward Japan at the time the embargo was imposed. The Americans, he says, “were on the point of intervening in the Battle of the Atlantic, but could not fight two wars

<sup>27</sup> Australian Minister to the United States R. G. Casey to Australian Department of External Affairs, November 14, 1941, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937–49* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1982), 5:197. See also British Ambassador Halifax to the British Foreign Office, November 12 and 15, 1941, FO 371/27911, available in the Scholarly Resources microfilm publication (Wilmington, Del., 1978), *British Foreign Office: Japan Correspondence, 1941–1945*, series for 1941, reel 7. The crucial importance of the China issue was commonly recognized very early on. As Paul Schroeder wrote in an important 1958 book: “There is no longer any real doubt that the war came about over China. Even an administration stalwart like Henry L. Stimson and a sympathetic critic like Herbert Feis concur in this.” Paul Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 200.

<sup>28</sup> Utley, *Going to War*, p. 157.

<sup>29</sup> Dallek, *Roosevelt*, pp. 269, 273.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 275–76.

at once. Somehow Japan must be boxed in and neutralized; East Asia must be disconnected from the central problems of war and defense.”<sup>32</sup>

American policy toward Japan is thus interpreted essentially as one of containment. The goal, it is argued, was to deter Japan from making further advances, both toward the south and toward Russia.<sup>33</sup> But knowing what the basic story was, you wonder whether it really makes sense to interpret American policy in those terms. The Americans, after all, were insisting that Japan withdraw from China, which, to use the idiom of a later period, looks more like rollback than containment. If the policy had been simply to deter the Japanese from pursuing a policy of expansion, the U.S. government would have had to make it clear to them that a continuation of their expansionist policy would lead to war with America. But if that had been American policy, U.S. officials would have also had to make it clear that if the Japanese agreed to refrain from further expansion, the two countries could live with each other as they had in the period before the embargo was imposed. The deterrent threat, after all, could carry weight only if the Japanese understood that they could avoid war if they bowed to the threat. If war would result even if they agreed to forgo further advances, what incentive would they have to pursue a moderate policy?

Your goal at this point, in other words, is simply to try to figure out what a policy of containment and deterrence would have been in this context. If the United States had threatened to impose sanctions *if* the Japanese continued their advance, then the American would have been pursuing a strategy of deterrence. If the Americans had embargoed oil shipments temporarily and then soon replaced the embargo with a licensing arrangement, then that too could be thought of as a policy of deterrence: those measures would have suggested to Japan that a full embargo could be reimposed *if* it proceeded with its expansionist policy. Even a strategy of maintaining the sanctions in full force, pending an agreement with Japan in which that country agreed to forgo *further* aggressive action, if not a deterrent strategy in the normal sense of the term, could certainly be used to support a policy of containment.

Thus *thinking* plays a fundamental role in the analysis of the issue. When you think through the issue in this way, key historical points are more likely to register in your mind. You are more likely to see the importance of some of the “dogs that didn’t bark”—of the fact, for example, that Japan was not threatened with sanctions *if* (but only if) it *continued* its advance; of the fact that the Americans decided explicitly *not* to warn the Japanese that sanctions would be imposed if they moved into southern Indochina; and of the

<sup>32</sup> Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 299; Weinberg, *World at Arms*, p. 245; Butow, *Tojo*, p. 223; Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London: Longman, 1987), p. 147; and especially Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 145 and title of chap. 5.

fact that the sanctions were not lifted when the Japanese government made it clear that it was willing to halt its advance (including a possible advance north against the USSR) rather than face war with the United States.<sup>34</sup> The significance of a couple of other key facts—the fact that the oil embargo came as a surprise to most Japanese leaders and the fact that the Japanese were told that they might not be able to avoid war simply by refraining from further acts of expansion, because actions “already undertaken” might well be the problem—also becomes clearer when you see them in this context.<sup>35</sup> In that way, the story gets fleshed out in your mind and your understanding of what was going on gradually deepens.

But the main thing to note here is the way thinking drives the research process. Just by thinking through the problem, you come to see why conventional interpretations of U.S. policy cannot be accepted uncritically. The thinking doesn’t give you the answers, but it does help bring the real historical problem into focus. The basic conclusion you reach here—that the U.S. government had *not* opted for a simple strategy of containment and deterrence—helps define the question and thus sets the stage for yet further work: if the goal was not containment, if the aim was not to prevent *further* Japanese advances, then what was it?

But what leads you to try to consider this problem in this way in the first place? This kind of thinking could be triggered in various ways. You might, for example, have noticed that some major writers seemed to be a little uncomfortable with the conventional characterization of American policy as a policy of containment and deterrence. Heinrichs, for example, seemed to think

<sup>34</sup> Two weeks before the Japanese move, Welles told the British ambassador that he had advised the president to place a “complete economic embargo on Japan as soon as the Japanese committed any overt act.” Welles, however, “was not in favour of telling the Japanese in advance that this would be the United States attitude.” Halifax to Eden, July 9, 1941, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print* [BDFAP], Part III (1940–45), Series E (Asia), vol. 4 (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1997), p. 330. See also Tsunoda Jun, *The Final Confrontation: Japan’s Negotiations with the United States, 1941*, the fifth and final volume in *Japan’s Road to the Pacific War*, ed. James Morley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 162. (Tsunoda’s name, however, is not given on the title page.) On Japan’s willingness to forgo further expansion, note especially the Japanese Government Statement handed to the president on August 28, 1941, FRUS Japan 2: 575.

<sup>35</sup> For the point that key Japanese leaders did not expect the move into southern Indochina to lead to a full embargo, see Butow, *Tojo*, p. 210; Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, pp. 162–63; Nobutaka Ike, ed., *Japan’s Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 48, 50, 107; and Takushiro Hattori, *The Complete History of the Greater East Asia War* (translated by the U.S. Army, 500th Military Intelligence Service Group, 1953), pp. 123, 130–31, 166. Hattori was chief of the Operations Sections at Japanese Army headquarters during the war, and then worked as an official historian during the postwar period; his account is based on both documentary sources and on conversations with former Japanese officers. For the point about measures “already undertaken,” see Welles memorandum of meeting with Wakasugi, August 4, 1941, FRUS Japan 2:545.

that the Americans had not just opted for a simple strategy of deterrence. The embargo, he says, “was a deterrent, or, if stringently applied, powerfully coercive,” and he makes it clear that it was applied very stringently indeed.<sup>36</sup> Or perhaps you were trying to figure out what to make of one of the key arguments found in the Heinrichs book, the claim that in opting for a “hard policy” toward Japan, Roosevelt was trying to head off a Japanese attack on the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup> If Roosevelt’s primary goal was to “keep Japan off Russia’s back,” couldn’t he, you wonder, have just threatened to take measures that would lead to war if Japan moved north? Couldn’t he have tried to reach a deal with Japan that included a Japanese promise not to attack the USSR—a deal secured by the threat that an embargo would be imposed if Japan reneged on that promise, a promise, in fact, which Japan seemed ready to make to avoid war with America?<sup>38</sup> Wouldn’t the Japanese be more likely to do what America (supposedly) wanted—that is, remain at peace with Russia, while also avoiding war with the United States—if the price of compliance were relatively low than if Japan were being pushed to the wall on the China issue? The Americans might have wanted to contain Japan in the north as well as in the south. But if that was basically all that Roosevelt wanted in this area, did he really need to run a serious risk of a Pacific war?

Or you might have been sensitized to these basic questions about U.S. policy in 1941 by some exposure to deterrence theory, especially to the works of Bernard Brodie and Thomas Schelling. You might have absorbed from that literature the idea that in policies that depend on threat making, the fears and expectations that are generated are far more important than the actions actually taken—that the actions, no matter how harsh, have no coercive or deterrent value, except insofar as they shape expectations about what might happen in the future. The two atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan, for example, did not in themselves, Brodie pointed out, have a coercive effect. What led the Japanese to surrender, in his view, was the “threat of more to come”—the threat posed by the “nonexistent additional bombs which the Japanese didn’t know we didn’t have.”<sup>39</sup> Brodie’s basic insight here was of

<sup>36</sup> Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 159–60, 179, 189, 199.

<sup>38</sup> See Japanese Government Statement handed to Roosevelt on August 28, 1941, FRUS Japan 2:575. For the Japanese decision in August not to go to war with the USSR, see Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, pp. 152–57. Concerns about how America would react if Japan did attack Russia—indeed, the U.S. reaction to preparations for war in the north—were evidently factored into that decision. Note especially the emperor’s comments on July 31 about the “bad impression” certain military measures of that sort were making in “other countries”—meaning, of course, the United States—quoted *ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard Brodie, “Changing Capabilities and War Objectives,” lecture given to Air War College, April 17, 1952, pp. 28–29, Bernard Brodie Papers, box 12, UCLA Research Library, Los Angeles.



fundamental importance, and it bears directly on the question of what a policy of deterrence would have been in 1941. In principle, of course, you can try to think the issue through on your own, simply by asking yourself what terms like “containment” and “deterrence” actually mean. But it really helps to have a prepared mind, a mind attuned to this sort of problem by exposure to the relevant body of theory.

Suppose then that in thinking through the problem of how American policy toward Japan in 1941 is to be interpreted you come to the conclusion that whatever it was, it was not a policy of containment and deterrence. You have cleared away a bit of the underbrush, and the central issue has been brought into focus: if the aim was not just containment, what then was the U.S. government trying to do? You note again that the effect of American policy was to put the United States on a collision course with Japan, but you also note that practically every serious scholar who has studied the subject thinks President Roosevelt and his top advisers wanted to avoid war with that country. That simple juxtaposition brings the problem into even sharper focus: how are these two points to be reconciled? How could such a policy have been pursued if the goal was to avoid war in the Pacific?

That question serves as a kind of searchlight. It points you in a certain direction. It tells you what to look for when you go back and read the main historical texts on the subject. How exactly do their authors deal with the problem? With that question in mind, you notice that the answers fall into two categories. Some scholars argue that Roosevelt did not understand the implications of the embargo. The claim is that he did not think the embargo would lead to war, because no matter how severe the economic sanctions were, the Japanese would not dare to attack the western powers. Other scholars, however, make a very different sort of argument. In their view, the political leadership had lost control of policy. The embargo, they say, was imposed without Roosevelt’s knowledge or consent, and that by the time he found out what was going on, it was too late to do anything about it.

Both of these arguments purport to explain how the U.S. government could have adopted a policy that led directly to a war Roosevelt very much wanted to avoid. But when you think about how these arguments relate to each other, it gradually dawns on you that those are the only two possible explanations. For suppose Roosevelt *had* in fact been calling the shots from July 1941 on. Given that the embargo had in effect put the United States on a collision course with Japan, how then could you defend the idea that the president wanted to avoid war with Japan? In one and only one way: you’d have to argue that Roosevelt had miscalculated. You’d have to make the case that the president just did not understand what effect the embargo would have. For if Roosevelt *had* understood that the embargo would put the United States on a collision course with Japan, and if he *had* been in effective control of policy, then U.S. policy toward Japan in late 1941 would have to

be seen as deliberate. You'd have to conclude, in that case, that the American political leadership had opted for a policy that led directly to war with Japan knowing full well what it was doing. So to deny that U.S. policy is to be understood in such terms, you therefore have to argue *either* that the president did not understand the implications of his actions *or* that he was not in effective control of his own government. Both of these claims could then be examined in the light of the evidence. If both were rejected, the implications would be far-reaching. What that would mean is that the American government had deliberately adopted a policy which its leaders knew might well lead to a U.S.-Japanese war.<sup>40</sup>

You thus come to have a sense for the architecture of this particular historical problem. You come to see how you can reach conclusions on important historical issues by breaking them down into problems that are more concrete and thus more studiable. But you develop that sense not by trying to work out the structure of the problem entirely on your own. Instead, you try to understand how specific claims that you see historians making relate both to each other and to the larger historical issue at hand. Getting a sense for the architecture of a problem is of fundamental importance, but in practice developing that sense is generally more a "bottom-up" than a "top-down" process.

When you have broken a major historical problem down into its component parts, you are in a position to study those specific issues one by one. In this case, you can begin with the claim that the U.S. political leadership did not understand the implications of the embargo and, in particular, that it did not believe it would lead to a U.S.-Japanese war. The president, one scholar writes, "was convinced that Japan would not fight the United States and the British empire simultaneously. This judgment was fundamental to his decisions after July 1941."<sup>41</sup> "The United States government," another scholar says, "did not believe that the Japanese reaction to the freezing order against their trade would go as far as an attack on British or Dutch possessions."<sup>42</sup> You understand the importance of those claims—that is, how they relate to a more general historical problem—but you now have to zero in on the question of whether they are in fact correct.

What, you thus wonder, did the U.S. political leadership think the effect of the embargo would actually be? That question again tells you what to

<sup>40</sup> For another example of how a major issue can be analyzed in this way, see my "The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment," in my book *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 72–95.

<sup>41</sup> Norman Graebner, "Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Japanese," in *Pearl Harbor as History: Japanese-American Relations, 1931–1941*, ed. Dorothy Borg and Shumpei Okamoto (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 49. See also Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War against Japan, 1941–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 83.

<sup>42</sup> Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, 5 vols. (London: HMSO, 1970–), 2:140.

search for and which passages to focus on. And it turns out, perhaps to your surprise, that Roosevelt and his closest advisers understood that an oil embargo would in all probability lead to a Japanese attack on the Indies and thus to war. As the president himself said, an embargo “would simply drive the Japanese down to the Dutch East Indies, and it would mean war in the Pacific.”<sup>43</sup> In 1940 and 1941, he repeatedly made the point that an embargo would lead to a Japanese attack on the Indies, both in public and in private.<sup>44</sup> And by late 1941 it had become increasingly clear that an attack on the Indies would mean war with the United States. By that point, top U.S. officials had come to the conclusion that tough economic sanctions would, as Welles put it on July 9, “provoke Japan to war” with America “before long.”<sup>45</sup>

Roosevelt thus knew that an oil embargo would probably lead to war with Japan. If, as is generally assumed, his goal was to avoid war with that country, why then did the United States pursue the embargo policy? Given the way your thinking has developed so far, you understand that there can now be only one answer to that question. The argument has to be that Roosevelt had lost control of policy, and in fact a number of scholars argue that this was in fact the case. Jonathan Utley’s *Going to War with Japan*, for example, develops this sort of argument, and you note that various other scholars either explicitly endorse Utley’s argument or themselves argue along similar lines.<sup>46</sup> The Utley argument is thus worth analyzing closely.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler*, p. 211. See also Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 274, and John Morton Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries: Years of Urgency, 1938–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 377.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Dallek, *Roosevelt*, pp. 271, 273. Note also Roosevelt’s well-known confrontation with Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes on the issue in June 1941. The documents were published in *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, 3 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954–55), 3:553–60. On that episode, see Utley, *Going to War*, p. 131; Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler*, p. 210; and Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 273. The president made the point in public on July 25, 1941; see FRUS Japan 2:265.

<sup>45</sup> Casey to Menzies and Stewart, July 9, 1941, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937–49*, 5:6.

<sup>46</sup> The argument was laid out independently by Utley and Irvine Anderson. See Utley, *Going to War*, pp. 153–56, 180; Jonathan Utley, “Upstairs, Downstairs at Foggy Bottom: Oil Exports and Japan, 1940–41,” *Prologue* 8 (Spring 1976): 17–28; Irvine Anderson, “The 1941 *De Facto* Embargo on Oil to Japan: A Bureaucratic Reflex,” *Pacific Historical Review* 44 (1975): 201–31; and Irvine Anderson, *The Standard Vacuum Oil Company and United States East Asian Policy, 1933–1941* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). The Utley-Anderson argument has been accepted by a number of major scholars. See, for example, Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, pp. 235–36; Iriye, *Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, p. 150; and Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 275. The bureaucratic politics theorists naturally also accept this general interpretation. See, for example, Graham Allison and Morton Halperin, “Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications,” in “Theory and Policy in International Relations,” ed. Raymond Tanter and Richard Ullman, *World Politics* 24, Supplement (Spring 1972): 67.

Utley's goal is to "explain why a nation that never wanted to fight Japan ended up doing so."<sup>47</sup> Even during the fall of 1941, he says, no one "wanted war with Japan," but war broke out because the bureaucracy could not be kept in line.<sup>48</sup> Neither Secretary of State Cordell Hull nor President Roosevelt, he writes, "managed to maintain control over the constantly growing and increasingly complex foreign policy bureaucracy. By losing control over the execution of policy, they lost control over the direction the nation moved."<sup>49</sup> The actions actually taken did not necessarily reflect "high-level policy decision"; effective policy was the result of what the bureaucrats did. "Rather than a smoothly functioning, harmonious machine, the foreign policy establishment in the Roosevelt administration" was, in Utley's view, "a snake pit of influential leaders and faceless bureaucrats working at cross-purposes, striking deals, and not infrequently employing sleight of hand in order to move the nation in the direction each thought most appropriate."<sup>50</sup>

The oil embargo is by far the most important case in point. Roosevelt and Hull, according to Utley, did not want a total halt to oil deliveries, but an embargo was nonetheless engineered by midlevel officials—above all, by Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson—who had their own ideas "about what should be done with Japan."<sup>51</sup> When Japan's assets were frozen in late July, the president's idea was that the freeze would simply lay the basis for a licensing arrangement. The deliveries were to resume as licenses were issued. But without anyone quite realizing what was going on, Acheson saw to it that the funds the Japanese needed to pay for the oil were not released. In that way, Utley writes, "the policy that was supposed to avoid provoking Japan was transformed into full-scale economic warfare that led to the attack four months later on Pearl Harbor."<sup>52</sup> It was only on September 4, he says, that Hull discovered how complete the embargo was, "but by then it was too late" to do anything about it: "To have reopened the flow of oil after a month's cut-off would have sent the wrong message to Tokyo and reinforced the position of the Japanese hard-liners, who claimed that the United States would give in."<sup>53</sup> Acheson had arrogantly "alter[ed] presidential orders" on his own and had "got away with it."<sup>54</sup> The results were disastrous. America went to war with Japan, not because of policy choices made by the nation's political leadership, but because irresponsible officials like Acheson had been able to hijack the policy process and, in effect, to make policy on their own.

<sup>47</sup> Utley, *Going to War*, p. xiii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

If valid, these conclusions would be extraordinarily important for all kinds of reasons. But can it really be, you wonder, that American policy in late 1941 was shaped in such a haphazard way? Could Roosevelt really have been so out of touch with what was going on, given his understanding of what was at stake? The president, after all, had earlier made it quite clear that he considered this a very delicate area of policy, an area in which he intended to exercise control.<sup>55</sup> Why would he change his mind and suddenly become *less* involved, now that the situation had become even *more* serious? And could he possibly *not* have known until September that the Japanese were getting no oil? Even if Acheson was not reporting what he was doing, given the seriousness of this business, wouldn't Roosevelt have found out in some other way—for example, through the Japanese diplomatic correspondence, which the Americans had been able to intercept and decipher?

But even if he did not find out until September that his policy had been subverted from within his own government, was it really too late at that point to loosen the embargo and allow some oil shipments to resume? His attitude at the time Japanese assets had been frozen in late July was that licenses would be granted and the flow of oil would continue, but that policy, he said, “might change any day and from there on we would refuse any and all licenses.”<sup>56</sup> His feeling at that point was that, rather than drawing “the noose tight,” it was better “to slip the noose around Japan’s neck and give it a jerk now and then.”<sup>57</sup> To relax the embargo after six weeks would have been in line with that policy: a temporary cutoff would have given the Japanese a very strong “jerk” without actually driving them to war. And if for some reason Roosevelt in September felt unable to relax the sanctions—if he felt trapped by the actions that officials like Acheson had taken, ignoring the policy guidelines he had laid down—you would expect some evidence of that. If Acheson had behaved that way, you would expect Roosevelt and Hull to have been furious when they found out what he had done. These expectations are again a kind of searchlight. They help you focus in on evidence that might help resolve the issue. But when you find nothing, that makes you wonder about whether Roosevelt and Hull had really lost control of policy and about whether the embargo had been imposed contrary to their wishes.

The absence of evidence to that effect might make you wonder, but it is in no sense conclusive. Indeed, all these musings are in no sense conclusive. But they are important because they help you assess the inherent plausibility of the Utley argument and thus give you a sense for how high the evidentiary bar has to be. And this sort of thinking also gives you a sense for the specific questions you would like the evidence to answer. It thus helps you figure out

<sup>55</sup> See especially the June 1941 Roosevelt-Ickes correspondence, in Ickes, *Secret Diary*, 3:553–60.

<sup>56</sup> In cabinet meeting, July 24, 1941, quoted in Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, p. 649.

<sup>57</sup> Ickes, *Secret Diary*, 3:588, a passage quoted in many accounts.

which issues, which passages, and even which bodies of source materials you need to focus in on.

What in particular, you might wonder, does the evidence show about how the political leadership really felt about a full embargo at that point? The freezing of assets was originally supposed to lay the basis for a licensing system that would allow the flow of oil to continue. That was the policy the president had decided upon in late July. But one of the basic points to emerge, as you search for evidence bearing on this issue, is that the political leadership was probably not nearly as committed to that policy in that period as the standard accounts might lead you to believe. In early July, for example, U.S. leaders were apparently thinking in terms of imposing a full embargo in the event Japan moved into southern Indochina. The British ambassador reported Roosevelt's attitude on July 18, a few days before Japanese forces moved into that area: "President personally definitely contemplates a full embargo on all oil products."<sup>58</sup> A few days earlier, Welles had also made it clear that he favored imposing a "complete economic embargo" on Japan, and Welles, as many scholars point out, was very close to Roosevelt at this time.<sup>59</sup> The idea that the president at this point was determined to avoid extreme action—the sort of action which, by his own account, "would mean war in the Pacific"—is thus very much open to question.

Is that all that can be said, or can you get any evidence that bears directly on the question of whether Acheson was making policy on his own? With that very specific question in mind, you can go back and look specifically at what scholars have to say on this subject. It turns out that Heinrichs, in his account of this episode, gives the impression that Roosevelt was calling the shots. He shows in particular that Acheson was taking orders from Welles.<sup>60</sup> He in fact has a long footnote appended to the passage in which he discussed the question which explicitly takes issue with the Utley argument. (This footnote, buried in the back of the book, might well have escaped your attention, unless you were zeroing in on this subject.) In that footnote, Heinrichs cites a number of documents showing that Acheson had been instructed to grant no licenses for the next week or two—that is, until Roosevelt and Welles had a chance to discuss this issue with Churchill and other British officials at the Atlantic Conference in early August. "Given the close association of Welles and Roosevelt, the fact that Welles was currently Acting Secretary of State, and the vital importance of the issue," Heinrichs concludes, "it seems inconceivable that Welles did not secure the president's approval for this course of action, or inaction."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Halifax to Eden, July 18, 1941, BDFA, Part III, Series E, vol. 4, no. 3361, p. 337 (p. 41 in original print).

<sup>59</sup> Halifax to Eden, July 9, 1941, *ibid.*, p. 330 (p. 34 in original print).

<sup>60</sup> Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, pp. 141–42.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 246–47.

The reference to the meeting with Churchill, moreover, suggests that British sources might shed some light on the issue. Some key British documents relating to the period have been published, others are readily available on microfilm, and those document collections are so well organized that highly targeted research in these records is very easy to do. When you go through those sources, you learn that the British wanted to take a tough line on the issue and were worried that the U.S. position might be softening.<sup>62</sup> They wanted to make sure that “the economic measures [were] kept up and screwed up.”<sup>63</sup> On August 11, at the Atlantic Conference, Churchill brought the issue up with Roosevelt. “It would be essential,” Churchill said, “to maintain the full pressure of economic measures which the U.S. Government had already adopted in regard to Japan.” Roosevelt’s response was clear enough: “The President declared that he had every intention of maintaining economic measures in full force.”<sup>64</sup> Welles was even more explicit. His British counterpart pressed him “on the subject of the application of the American freezing orders against Japan.” Welles assured him “that the application was very strict.” In the case of oil, Welles said, “no licenses were being granted except for crude oil up to an amount corresponding with that exported in 1935. This quantity had already been reached and therefore no more crude oil would be allowed except sufficient to take Japanese ships from American ports home to Japan. No licenses were being given for the export of aviation gasoline, ordinary gasoline or lubricating oil.”<sup>65</sup> All this shows rather conclusively that the key decisions were being made by Roosevelt himself.

You’ve reached the point now where you can put two and two together. Roosevelt knew what a total oil embargo would mean. He knew that an embargo would put America and Japan on a collision course. He nonetheless opted to impose the embargo. That policy was his doing and had not been engineered by midlevel officials like Acheson acting without his knowledge or consent. Roosevelt had therefore deliberately opted for a policy which he knew would in all probability lead to war with Japan.

This is an important conclusion but it does not solve the more basic problem of explaining why the U.S. government pursued the policy it did. Quite the reverse: the effect of the analysis was to rule out two candidate explanations,

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, the extract from the War Cabinet Conclusions for July 31, 1941, in FO 371/27974, *British Foreign Office: Japan Correspondence, 1941–1945*, series for 1941, reel 15, and also the minutes by key officials on Halifax’s telegram 3849 of August 18, 1941, in FO 371/27909, series for 1941, reel 7.

<sup>63</sup> David Dilks, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, O.M., 1938–1945* (London: Cassell, 1971), entry for August 11, 1941, p. 399.

<sup>64</sup> Extract from record of a meeting between the Prime Minister and President Roosevelt on August 11th, 1941, FO 371/27909, *British Foreign Office Japan Correspondence, 1941–1945*, series for 1941, reel 7.

<sup>65</sup> Cadogan minute, August 20, 1941, FO 371/27977, *ibid.*

the idea that Roosevelt did not understand what he was doing and the idea that he had lost control of policy making, but it does not in itself provide any real answer to the fundamental question of how American policy toward Japan in this period is to be interpreted. And the key issue here, it dawns on you as you think about it, has to do with whether U.S. policy toward Japan is to be understood basically in relatively narrow Asia-specific terms or is instead to be viewed essentially in the broader context of America's global policy, and especially in the context of what was going on in Europe. Was America just so fed up with Japan's aggressive behavior that U.S. leaders had essentially decided that the time had come to bring matters to a head with that country and that what was going on in the rest of the world had relatively little to do with that decision? Or was the decision to pursue that policy toward Japan to be understood in much broader global terms, as related in some fundamental way to Roosevelt's desire to take the United States into the war with Germany?

#### THE JAPANESE WINDOW

How do you go about answering those questions about American policy toward Japan? To deepen your sense for what was going on in U.S.-Japanese relations, you obviously have to try to understand what Japanese policy was. And indeed a study of *Japanese* policy is bound to throw some light on the question of how *American* policy is to be interpreted. For if it turns out that Japan was highly aggressive and determined to expand even if that meant war with the United States, then you could reasonably argue that the particular policy the U.S. government adopted scarcely mattered—that war between Japan and America was virtually inevitable since the United States had to draw the line somewhere. That view of Japanese policy thus goes hand in hand with a relatively moderate view of American policy, the view that Roosevelt's basic goal throughout that period was “to check Japan without going to war” and that America was simply trying to “find ways to hold off Japan.”<sup>66</sup> From that point of view, war came because Japan refused to be “held off.” If, on the other hand, you conclude that the Japanese very much wanted to avoid war with America in late 1941, and if in fact your study of Japanese policy convinces you that the Japanese were ready to put an end to their policy of expansion in order to head off a war with the United States, then that would lead you to view U.S. policy in a rather different light. All the key elements of the story are bound up with each other: to understand American policy, you really need to understand what the Japanese were willing to agree to at the time.

<sup>66</sup> Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 299, and Weinberg, *World at Arms*, p. 245.



How then is Japanese policy in late 1941 to be understood? That's the issue you now have to focus on, and you proceed as usual by looking at how major authors flesh out their arguments— how they support them with specific claims. Those claims, being narrow enough to be studiable, can then be examined. The analysis having been set up in this way, the conclusions you reach on these specific issues are bound to have general implications—implications, that is, that will throw some light on the fundamental question you are concerned with.

What specific claims then support the idea that Japan was determined “to reach its goals even at the risk of war” with America?<sup>67</sup> That claim rests in part on the interpretation of a specific historical event, the July 2 Imperial Conference decision to expand toward the south, even if that meant war with the United States.<sup>68</sup> The assumption is that that decision can be taken at face value, but that assumption can itself be examined in the light of the evidence. Other specific claims are also testable. “In October 1941,” Richard Overy writes, “the new Prime Minister, General Tojo, put Japanese demands to the United States for a free hand in Asia. It was agreed in secret that if America should refuse, which was likely, war would be started on 8 December.”<sup>69</sup> One can look at the U.S. documents for that month (or actually the part of that month after Tojo took over as prime minister) and see if such a demand for a “free hand in Asia” was actually put to the Americans at that time. Overy also says that “not even the more conciliatory Japanese leaders were prepared at the time to consider forgoing any of the gains they had already made.”<sup>70</sup> Other scholars claim that the Japanese government in November 1941 actually “wanted war” with America, and for that reason totally rejected the idea of a return to the status quo ante—that is, to the situation that had prevailed prior to the Japanese move into southern Indochina.<sup>71</sup> Again, these assertions can be examined in the light of the evidence, especially the evidence (if any) those authors cite to support those specific claims.

The general view that Japan was willing to go to war with America rather than abandon its expansionist program, you note, is often supported by a particular view of the role of the military in Japanese policy making. Control of Japanese policy, it is often claimed, was in the hands of the army and navy. Indeed, real power supposedly lay in the hands of “little-known general staff

<sup>67</sup> Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, pp. 661–62. See also Weinberg, *World at Arms*, pp. 186, 247. Butow also frequently argues along these lines. See Butow, *Tojo*, pp. 203, 221, 242–43, 255–56, 283, 334.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, p. 631.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Overy, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 2d ed. (London: Longman, 1999), p. 93.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>71</sup> Weinberg, *World at Arms*, p. 257.

officers serving in the army and navy divisions of imperial headquarters.”<sup>72</sup> The senior officers—the army and navy chiefs of staff and the war and navy ministers—were allegedly the “robots of their subordinates.”<sup>73</sup> Those staff officers, the argument runs, took a very aggressive line, and the policy they pursued made war with America inevitable.

None of this, of course, has to be taken on faith. You can always ask what evidence supports such claims. But perhaps the key thing to note here is that you would only raise that question in the first place if at least some of these claims struck you as problematic for one reason or another. On the question of the role of the staff officers, for example, you might question the claim that the senior commanders were “robots of their subordinates.” It might be hard to believe that as people rose in rank, they became less powerful. Indeed, it might be hard to believe that in any organization, anywhere in the world, things would work that way. Or in trying to learn about Japanese foreign policy before the war, you might have read James Crowley’s remarkable study of Japanese policy making in 1937.<sup>74</sup> What Crowley shows is that the army general staff wanted to take a moderate line on the China question but was outmaneuvered by the prime minister, Prince Konoye. It was Konoye who played the key role in taking Japan into the war with China; the army was not in effective control of policy at the time. That in itself might suggest that the claim about the military controlling policy in 1941 is not to be accepted uncritically.

You might feel, moreover, that the basic idea that Japan was intent on expansion regardless of consequence is simply hard to accept on very general grounds. If you have spent any time studying international politics, you develop a certain sense for how things work, and in particular for the role of power considerations in shaping policy. When you look at that view of an uncontrollable and undeterrable Japan, part of you says, “it just can’t be, states just don’t behave that way”—a reaction that shows that a certain theory of international politics has come into play. Everyone knew that in terms of mobilizable war potential, the United States was a vastly stronger country than Japan. The figures for steel production, for example, were common knowledge at the time. So why, you say to yourself, would a country like

<sup>72</sup> Butow, *Tojo*, p. 240, and also pp. 86, 251, 255–56, 276.

<sup>73</sup> Butow, *Tojo*, pp. 171, 308. See also Yale Maxon, *Control of Japanese Foreign Policy: A Study of Civil-Military Rivalry, 1930–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 28, 46–47, 104–15, 216, and Masao Maruyama, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics*, exp. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), esp. pp. 107–14 (the term “robots” is used on pp. 92 and 107). For a remark in passing that cites both Butow and Maruyama and also shows that this is something like a consensus view, see Ike, *Japan’s Decision for War*, p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> James Crowley, *Japan’s Quest for Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930–1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

Japan, already bogged down in a war with China, insist on pursuing a policy of expansion knowing full well that there was a very good chance that it would lead directly to war with America? It's hard to believe that the Japanese government—or any government, for that matter—would behave that way, no matter what a series of distinguished scholars say. Of course, you are not certain on those general grounds that that view of an uncontainable Japan is wrong. There is no guarantee that countries will behave rationally. But your sense for how international politics works makes you reluctant to accept that argument on faith. You're puzzled, and you know you can resolve the puzzle only by looking at the empirical evidence—the evidence that bears directly on the specific claims about Japan that people make, claims that support that general view of an uncontainable and undeterrable Japan. You have, in other words, found a loose thread in the fabric of received interpretation, and it is a certain theoretical perspective that enabled you to find it. Maybe if you pull on it, that whole fabric will begin to unravel, and you might be able to replace it with a rather different understanding of what was going on.

Your approach to this whole set of problems is also affected by the fact (which you soon note as you get into the subject) that not everyone who has written on the topic accepts the view that Japan was uncontainable in 1941. What this means is that you are not just pitting your own general theoretical sense for how things work against the view that everyone with an empirical grasp of the subject has reached. If that were the case, it would be hard to avoid feeling a little intimidated by the historiographical consensus. But when serious commentators are divided, you feel less intimidated by the weight of authority and more able to proceed by weighing arguments against each other.

It turns out that two of the writers who rejected the idea of an uncontainable Japan (and thus of an inevitable war) were the American and British ambassadors to Japan before the war, Joseph Grew and Sir Robert Craigie. Given the positions they held, each was in a position to comment knowledgeably on what had happened, and both men were quite critical of the policies their own governments had pursued toward Japan before Pearl Harbor. And you note that their general arguments turned on claims about specific episodes.

Grew focused on the U.S. government's handling of the Japanese proposal for a meeting between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Konoye. When the embargo was imposed, Konoye, according to Grew, "for the first time began to see the handwriting on the wall." He understood his country "was heading for disaster." Konoye had been largely responsible for the position Japan now found itself in, Grew wrote, "but he was the only Japanese statesman capable of reversing the engine, and this, prompted by dire necessity, he did his best to accomplish." His plan was to meet with Roosevelt on

American territory. He made it clear to Grew that “he was prepared at that meeting to accept the American terms whatever they might be.”<sup>75</sup> Japan, it seemed, was even willing to withdraw from China.<sup>76</sup> Grew was convinced that Konoye meant what he said, that he was prepared to follow through with this policy, and that with the emperor’s support would be able to get the agreement with Roosevelt accepted at home.<sup>77</sup> For a prime minister of Japan, Grew wrote, “to offer to come, hat-in-hand so to speak, to meet with the President of the United States on American soil seemed to us in the Embassy a gauge of the determination of the then Japanese Government to undo the vast harm already accomplished in alienating our powerful and progressively angry country,” and indeed the proposal for a meeting seemed pointless “unless the Japanese Government were ready to make far-reaching concessions.”<sup>78</sup> The problem, according to Grew, was the “uncompromising attitude of our Government.” “So far as we in the Embassy could perceive,” he wrote, “the policy of the Administration during this critical time was almost completely inflexible.”<sup>79</sup> The State Department showed little interest in the Konoye proposal and the plan for a leaders’ conference eventually collapsed. Grew’s conclusion was that a chance for peace—indeed, for a settlement on American terms—had tragically been allowed to slip away.

Craigie’s account focused on a different episode, but his bottom line was much the same.<sup>80</sup> Like Grew, Craigie emphasized the shock effect of the economic sanctions imposed in late July: “The very effectiveness of these economic measures imposed on Japan a time-limit within which she must

<sup>75</sup> Grew to Roosevelt, August 14, 1942 (unsent), pp. 2, 4, and 8, Joseph Grew Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; available by mail from Houghton Library. See also the account in Joseph Grew, *Turbulent Era: A Diplomatic Record of Forty Years, 1904–1945*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), 2:1301–75, which quotes from key documents (also published in FRUS) and on occasion uses much the same language. On this point, see especially the italicized passage on p. 1359.

<sup>76</sup> Grew to Roosevelt, August 14, 1942 (unsent), p. 5, Grew Papers, Houghton Library; Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 2:1356–57, 1373–74; Robert Fearey, “Tokyo 1941: Diplomacy’s Final Round,” *Foreign Service Journal*, December 1991, pp. 22–30.

<sup>77</sup> Grew to Roosevelt, August 14, 1942 (unsent), Grew Papers, Houghton Library; Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 2:1316n, 1327–28, 1332–33.

<sup>78</sup> Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 2:1302, 1311.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1333–34.

<sup>80</sup> Final Report by Sir R. Craigie on Conclusion of His Mission to Japan, February 4, 1943, FO 371/35957, Public Record Office, Kew, and published in BDF, Part III, Series E, vol. 6, in the section “Further Correspondence respecting Far Eastern Affairs, Part 22,” pp. 127–53 in the original *Confidential Print* pagination, equivalent to pp. 407–33 in the pagination introduced in that published volume. The general line Craigie took in that report has been noted in a number of historical accounts, for example, Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, pp. 74–75, and Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, 2:177–78. Craigie also argued along these lines, albeit in somewhat milder form, in his published memoir, *Behind the Japanese Mask* (New York: Hutchinson, 1945).

decide either for or against war with the United States. The issue for Japan was no longer how far southwards in Eastern Asia she could expand without provoking America to war, but by what means—whether by negotiation or by war—she could remove an economic stranglehold which was rapidly becoming intolerable.<sup>81</sup> Japan, he argued, was willing to go quite far to achieve that goal. The key thing here, for Craigie, was the Japanese proposal of November 20, 1941, for a “modus vivendi.” In exchange for a resumption of oil deliveries, the Japanese actually offered to *withdraw* from southern Indochina. The basic goal, Craigie thought, was the “virtual restoration of the *status quo ante*”: the aim, that is, was to turn back the clock and return to the situation that had existed prior to the Japanese move into southern Indochina in late July.<sup>82</sup> To be sure, the Japanese plan also seemed to call on America to suspend aid to China, but Craigie did not think this was as great a real stumbling block as it appeared to be. “According to my information at the time,” he later wrote, it was “doubtful” that the Japanese would have insisted on this condition if the Americans had accepted the rest of the plan.<sup>83</sup> The modus vivendi proposal, in his view, was of fundamental importance.<sup>84</sup> The western powers’ failure to respond positively to that proposal, he argued, had led to a war that certainly could have been postponed and quite possibly could have been avoided entirely.<sup>85</sup>

It is also important to note that diplomats like Grew and Craigie are not the only ones to argue along these lines. Some very able scholars took much the same view. Paul Schroeder’s *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* endorses Grew’s basic point of view and essentially shares Craigie’s assessment of the modus vivendi proposal.<sup>86</sup> The Japanese, Schroeder writes, were “realistic about their position throughout; they did not suddenly go insane. The attack [on Pearl Harbor] was an act of desperation, not madness. Japan fought only when she had her back to the wall as a result of America’s diplomatic and economic offensive.”<sup>87</sup> Prior to the embargo, according to Schroeder, America’s goal had been basically defensive, but after July U.S. policy shifted. The Americans were no longer interested in simply “holding the line against Japanese advances and of inducing Japan to draw away from an alliance [with Germany] which the United States considered menacing.” “The chief objective of American policy now,” he argued, “was to

<sup>81</sup> Craigie Report, para. 65 (on p. 153 in the *Confidential Print* version).

<sup>82</sup> Craigie to Eden, February 4, 1953 (covering letter for his report), para. 15 (p. 131 in the *Confidential Print*), and para. 42 in the report (p. 146 in the *Confidential Print*).

<sup>83</sup> Craigie, *Behind the Japanese Mask*, p. 130.

<sup>84</sup> Craigie Report, para. 45 (p. 147 in the *Confidential Print*).

<sup>85</sup> Craigie Report, para. 66 (p. 153 in the *Confidential Print*).

<sup>86</sup> Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, pp. 76–85, 203–08, 215–16. Schroeder does, however, think that Grew was “over-optimistic about Konoye’s capacity to carry through a peaceful policy” (pp. 205–6).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200–201.

push Japan back, to compel her to withdraw from her conquests.”<sup>88</sup> The original goals—the containment of Japan and the breaking of Japan’s alliance with Germany—were both reasonable and attainable. But with both goals within reach, the Americans shifted course and focused now on a third goal, the liberation of China. The result, he concluded, was “an unnecessary and avoidable war.”<sup>89</sup>

The fact that serious writers differ among themselves on this key issue—the question of how containable Japan was and how avoidable war was—simply underscores the point that to get to the bottom of the question, you have to look in a very targeted way at the empirical evidence. These writers differ among themselves not just on basic issues; they also interpret specific episodes differently, and those specific interpretations play a key role in supporting their larger arguments. Those are the issues you therefore want to focus on. It is worth emphasizing yet again that the specific claims you find in the literature, claims that play a key role in supporting larger arguments, determine what to focus on when you go through works that contain empirical evidence on the subject. If the *modus vivendi* affair is of central importance, you zero in on what various writers have had to say on that issue, noting in particular the evidence they give to support their claims. The same point applies to claims about the “irreversibility” of the July 2 decision, or about the Konoye proposal for a leaders’ conference, or about the role of the military in Japan in late 1941.

But where do you find the evidence? All the books you read present some empirical evidence, but to answer the questions you have in mind, you would like to find some books that are loaded with detail, replete with references to, and quotations from, the original sources, something equivalent to Luigi Albertini’s extraordinary account of the immediate origins of the First World War.<sup>90</sup> Unfortunately, nothing of the sort exists, but it turns out that there is one English-language book that makes ample use of Japanese sources: Tsunoda Jun’s *The Final Confrontation*.<sup>91</sup>

So a number of questions have taken shape in your mind as a result of your reading so far of the historical literature in this area. What emerges when you look at the evidence presented in works like the Tsunoda book with those questions in mind? It quickly becomes clear that the idea that the armed services were a unified bloc, intent on expansion even if it meant war with

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>90</sup> Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952–57). The second and third volumes deal basically with the crisis of July 1914.

<sup>91</sup> The standard reference for this work is: James W. Morley, ed., *The Final Confrontation: Japan’s Negotiations with the United States, 1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Although he was the author of this volume, Tsunoda’s name (as noted above) does not appear on the title page; the book is also unusual in that it contains a long introduction by the translator, David Titus, criticizing Tsunoda’s argument.

the United States, does not hold up in the light of the evidence. To be sure, certain officers were quite warlike, but given what you had been led to believe about the Japanese military, evidence that points in the opposite direction is most striking. Many leading admirals, for example, knew that Japan had little chance of winning such a war. Practically everyone who studies the subject knows that Admiral Yamamoto, commander in chief of the Combined Fleet, thought that a war with America would end in the defeat of Japan: “[I]n the end, we shall not be able to stand up to them.”<sup>92</sup> This, however, is often treated as an isolated case. But as Yamamoto himself pointed out, four other fleet commanders shared his view, and Admiral Inouye, chief of naval aviation, was also quite pessimistic.<sup>93</sup> On October 5, naval operations division chief Fukudome made what Tsunoda calls a “statement of great importance”: at a meeting of army and navy bureau and division chiefs, he announced that he had “no confidence” in the outcome of naval operations.<sup>94</sup> This is of particular interest because Fukudome was identified as one of a handful of key staff officers who were supposedly calling the shots in Japanese military circles before the war.<sup>95</sup> Naval affairs bureau chief Oka, another key staff officer, and navy minister Oikawa, took the same general view.<sup>96</sup> On October 7, Oikawa told War Minister Tojo directly: “I am not confident.” But Oikawa was unwilling to take that position officially. It was “not possible,” he said, “for the navy to state clearly and openly that we are opposed to this war from a navy standpoint.”<sup>97</sup>

The army, however, understood well enough how those top naval officers felt. Could war, it wondered, still be contemplated if the navy was in no position to fight such a war successfully? Wouldn't the whole issue of the southern advance and of war with the United States have to be reconsidered? As one high official explained on October 17, “even the army fully understands that it is impossible for Japan to plunge into a war with the United States without genuine resolve on the part of the navy.”<sup>98</sup> General Tojo, the war

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 286–87; see also pp. 107, 225, 273, 288.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 114, 287.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 212–13. Fukudome had earlier in the year taken a tougher line, but up to the time of the oil embargo, warlike words might have had a purely instrumental purpose: as the army suspected at the time, and as some historians have later argued, those positions may have been adopted as a way of helping the navy fight its budgetary battles with the army. See Butow, *Tojo*, p. 221, and Michael Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 140, 168–69, 174–75, 210, 244.

<sup>95</sup> See Maxon, *Control of Japanese Foreign Policy*, pp. 46–47.

<sup>96</sup> Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, pp. 213, 216, 221–22, 225. See also Barnhart, *Japan Prepares*, p. 244.

<sup>97</sup> Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, pp. 216, 221–22, 228. See also Arthur Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies: The Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy*, vol. 1, *Strategic Illusions, 1936–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 175–78, 252–61.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 221; see also p. 214.

minister, agreed with that official's view that "so long as the navy is not confident and determined, the utmost caution must be taken before plunging into a great war that will put the nation's destiny on the line."<sup>99</sup> The army made it clear in fact that all the navy had to do was to say explicitly that it was in no position to take on the United States. If it did, the army would go along with that no-war policy, and the threat of discontent from within the army would not prevent the army leadership from doing so. The army's view, as expressed by another key staff officer, Muto, was straightforward: "If the navy is loath to go to war, then I want them to say that clearly, straight from their own mouths. If they do that, we will put a stop to the pro-war arguments in the army."<sup>100</sup> Oka was told bluntly: "If the navy says 'no can do,' we will get the army under control one way or the other."<sup>101</sup> The army understood how the navy felt and was frustrated that it could not get a straight answer: "Oikawa doesn't say he isn't confident," Tojo told army chief of staff Sugiyama on October 14, "but he seems to talk that way. The matter can't be decided because he won't speak plainly. If the navy can't come out in favor of war, then we must think of a different way of proceeding based on that."<sup>102</sup> And it seems quite clear from Tsunoda's evidence that the army leadership really wanted the navy to come out and take a clear stand against war. Muto told chief cabinet secretary Tomita, a key intermediary in this affair, that he wanted the navy to say openly that the official policy had to be abandoned and war had to be avoided:

It looks like the navy really hasn't made up its mind. If the navy really doesn't want war, then the army will have to reconsider. But the navy does not outwardly oppose war and tells the army that it's up to the prime minister. I can't get things under control in the army merely by saying that it's for the prime minister to decide, but if the navy came out and told the army formally that it doesn't want war, then I can get the army under control. Can't you get the navy to come out and say this for me?<sup>103</sup>

These were hardly the words of a fire-breathing staff officer.

Muto, and General Tojo himself, were willing to take that line in part because they, like everyone else, knew how strong the United States was in terms of war-making potential.<sup>104</sup> But another part of the reason was that they were deeply loyal to the emperor, and it was evident the emperor

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 227–28.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Ike, *Japan's Decision*, pp. 187–88; Peter Wetzler, *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), p. 53; Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, p. 164.



wanted to avoid war.<sup>105</sup> After an extraordinary imperial conference at which the emperor made his feelings clear, Muto exclaimed to a member of the Military Affairs Bureau, “War is absolutely out of the question! Listen up now. His Majesty told us to reach a diplomatic settlement on this, no matter what it takes. We’ve got to go with diplomacy.”<sup>106</sup> Tojo was also prepared to follow the emperor’s lead on this issue. Colonel Ishii, a member of the army general staff, “received a communication on 16 October from the throne to the army minister saying they should drop the idea of stationing troops in China and that an imperial command (to form a cabinet) was conceivable. Ishii quickly wrote a reply justifying the necessity of stationing troops in China and gave it to Tojo for his audience with the emperor on the afternoon of 17 October. Whereupon Tojo told Ishii: ‘If the emperor said it should be so, then that’s it for me. One cannot recite arguments to the emperor. You may keep your finely-phrased memorandum.’”<sup>107</sup>

So it’s a mistake to argue that the military was intent on war regardless of consequence. The real feeling of army leaders like Tojo was that Japan found itself in a very difficult and painful situation. On the one hand, it was obvious that the United States was a much stronger country than Japan, and that in a long war Japan would simply not be able to stand up to America. On the other hand, the Americans were demanding that Japan give up its position in China and withdraw its troops from that country. After all those years of sacrifice, could Japan really just capitulate to America in that way? Tojo in particular was torn between conflicting emotions: “We have lost 200,000 souls in the China Incident, and I cannot bear to give it all up just like that. But when I think of all the lives that will be further lost if there is a war between Japan and the United States, we must even think about withdrawing troops. That will be hard to decide.”<sup>108</sup>

What is extraordinary here was that capitulation on the China issue was not out of the question, even for Tojo. If that was the view of the military leadership, what that implies is that the efforts of the political leadership to avoid war with America are not to be written off with the argument that, whatever their personal preferences, the political leaders would never be allowed by the military to make serious concessions, or even to move away from the “irrevocable” July 2 decision to expand toward the south regardless of consequence. Tsunoda, in fact, shows in some detail how after the oil embargo Prime Minister Konoye and Foreign Minister Toyoda “gutted” that decision in various ways.<sup>109</sup> You get the strong impression from the evidence he presents that they were searching desperately for a way to avoid war with the United States.

<sup>105</sup> Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, pp. 174, 176, 240–41.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>107</sup> Wetzler, *Hirohito and War*, pp. 51–52. See also Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, p. 241.

<sup>108</sup> Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, p. 217. See also p. 250.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151–52, 156, 158.

So you've done a certain amount of spadework, and you now have to deal directly with Grew's argument about Konoye's plan for a leaders' conference. When you look at the evidence bearing on this affair, it really does seem that Konoye was willing to go very far indeed. Grew, as I noted, had the distinct impression that Konoye was prepared in the final analysis to accept America's terms, no matter what they were. This, he thought, was the whole point of Konoye's proposal to meet with President Roosevelt on American territory. "Prince Konoye," he wrote in an unsent letter to the president, "was pinning all his faith on his proposed meeting with you in Alaska and he had told me with unquestionable sincerity that he was prepared at that meeting to accept the American terms whatever they might be."<sup>110</sup> Japan was even prepared to withdraw practically its entire army from China. Konoye had given him an "unqualified assurance" that "he would and could bring his country to meet *whatever requirements*" Roosevelt "might lay down at the proposed meeting with him."<sup>111</sup>

The issue is important, so you look for more evidence. One source that turns up when you search for works by people who might have had some direct knowledge of the affair is the transcript of an oral history interview with Eugene Dooman, the American chargé in Tokyo at the time.<sup>112</sup> Dooman gives basically the same account as Grew and adds some additional details. Konoye told him directly, he reports, that "as soon as I reach an agreement with the President I will report immediately to the emperor and it will be the emperor who will command the army to suspend hostilities."<sup>113</sup> That view of what Konoye intended is supported by other accounts given after the war by Admiral Toyoda, the foreign minister in 1941; by Tomita Kenji, chief cabinet secretary at the time; by an account of what Konoye told one of his intimates, Izawa Takio; and by other evidence you come across in your work.<sup>114</sup>

But what about the arguments on the other side? The leaders' meeting was never held, mainly because the U.S. State Department reacted coolly to the idea, but most scholars believe that even if the two leaders had met, things would not have worked out very differently. Herbert Feis, for example, insisted that the written documents that became available after the war did not

<sup>110</sup> Grew to Roosevelt, August 14, 1942 (unsent), p. 4, Grew Papers, Houghton Library.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. (emphasis in original).

<sup>112</sup> The search, in this case, was conducted in Eureka, the union catalogue of the Research Libraries Group, available in most American research universities. More information how this source can be used to find unpublished material is included in appendix II, p. 241 below.

<sup>113</sup> "Reminiscences of Eugene Hoffman Dooman," (1962), p. 95, oral history interview, available through interlibrary loan from the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, New York.

<sup>114</sup> Oka Yoshitake, *Konoe Fumimaro: A Political Biography* (New York: Madison Books, 1992), p. 166-67; and Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, pp. 193, 219; and Sagan, "From Deterrence to Coercion to War," p. 74, citing evidence presented in Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies*, 1:175.

support the view that “a real chance of maintaining peace in the Pacific” had been missed. Those documents, he thinks, showed what Japanese policy really was. They showed that the Japanese were simply not prepared to go far enough to satisfy the Americans, especially on the China issue. Konoye, he writes, was a “prisoner, willing or unwilling, of the terms precisely prescribed in conferences over which he presided.” He was bound by the formal policy documents that had been agreed upon, documents in which Japan’s minimum demands had been spelled out. He could not go further even if he had wanted to; the military services would see to that.<sup>115</sup>

That claim, however, has to be weighed against Grew’s response. Those documents, Grew argues, are not to be taken at face value. They have to be interpreted in the light of the fact that Konoye needed to “get the leaders of the armed forces to play along,” that there was no way that he was going to reveal to them how far he was prepared to go, and that his plan was to present them with something like a *fait accompli*.<sup>116</sup> Dooman, basing his conclusions in part on a long conversation he had in 1953 with Ushiba Tomohiko, a close personal friend of Konoye’s and his private secretary, agrees with that interpretation. “I think it is quite clear,” he said, “that what Konoye had in mind was actually a double-crossing of the army and navy.”<sup>117</sup>

How do you go about getting to the bottom of this issue? You break the question down into its component parts. First of all, there’s the issue of whether the documents show that Konoye was bound by conditions others had imposed and would therefore not have been able to go very far in his dealings with Roosevelt. What’s to be made of the Feis argument on this point? It’s really not very strong. There’s no reason to assume that a document has to be taken at face value. The existence of certain written documents does not in itself discredit Grew’s argument. Indeed, the whole premise of his argument was that Konoye intended to outmaneuver those who were opposed to what he was trying to do; with a strategy of that sort, written documents need not be taken as sacrosanct. On the issue of whether Konoye intended to go as far as he had to to avoid war, the preponderance of the evidence seems to support Grew’s argument. It is hard, for example, as Grew argued, to understand why Konoye was prepared to press so hard for a leaders’ conference unless he was prepared “to make far-reaching concessions.”<sup>118</sup> Given the obvious fact, moreover, that war with America would be an extraordinarily risky undertaking, it is not hard to believe that Konoye, who felt

<sup>115</sup> Herbert Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbor: The Coming of the War between the United States and Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 274–76. See also Barnhart, *Japan Prepares*, pp. 241–42.

<sup>116</sup> Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 2:1374

<sup>117</sup> Dooman oral history, pp. 120–21.

<sup>118</sup> This was Grew’s argument at the time. See *Turbulent Era*, 2:1311.

personally responsible for the desperate situation his country was now in, would want to take unprecedented and extreme action.

And then there's the question of whether Konoye could have pulled it off. Suppose he had met with Roosevelt, had made whatever concessions were needed to head off war, and then had tried to present his country with a fait accompli. Would the military authorities have allowed him to accept the American terms, no matter what they were?<sup>119</sup> Suppose the Americans had insisted on a complete withdrawal from China. Would the army have agreed to that, even if Konoye had gotten the emperor to issue the necessary orders? Konoye, it seems, thought there was a good chance he could succeed, and he was obviously in a good position to assess political realities in Japan. Other well-placed Japanese observers also thought he could have carried the country with him.<sup>120</sup> But perhaps the most important body of material bearing on the question is the evidence Tsunoda gives on the attitude of the military establishment. If you reach the conclusion that many top military and naval officers were not eager for war and in fact were looking hard for a way out, then that suggests that Konoye would not have been overthrown by the military if he had reached an agreement with Roosevelt, above all if, as seems very likely, that agreement had been endorsed by the emperor.

But if the goal in looking at the Japanese side of the story is to learn a bit more about American policy, it's not really necessary to answer such questions. The real issue is not whether the Japanese would have agreed to withdraw from China as the Americans demanded, but rather simply whether Japan could have been contained—that is, whether it could be kept from continuing its advance to the south (and kept also from attacking the USSR in the north). And the story of the leaders' conference is of interest not just because of the light it sheds on the question of whether Japan could have been made to withdraw from China, but even more because of what it tells us about whether Japan could have been contained or whether a U.S.-Japanese war was unavoidable. On that question, the implications of this story are quite clear. If key Japanese leaders were surprisingly open to the idea of accommodating the United States even on the China issue, and if even some of

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, pp. 205–06, and Butow, *Tojo*, p. 261.

<sup>120</sup> Thus, for example, former prime minister Hirota, Grew wrote Roosevelt in his unsent August 1942 letter, “who was in close touch with and carried important influence in military and political circles, said (not to me but to others) that Prince Konoye could not possibly afford to allow the proposed meeting to result in failure. Mr. Hirota added that this meant that Prince Konoye would unquestionably have to accept your terms, and that under the existing circumstances he could and would carry the entire Japanese nation, including the military, with him. No statesman in Japan was in a better position than Mr. Hirota to gauge the situation, but the same opinions were held and expressed to me by other influential Japanese at the time.” See also Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 2:1359; in that passage, Grew says that Hirota did express those views to him directly.

Japan's top military leaders did not rule out the idea of doing whatever was necessary to avoid war with America, then certainly Japan would have agreed to a much more palatable U.S. demand that it simply forgo further expansion as the price of peace.

That same question (of whether the Pacific War was avoidable) also lies at the heart of your analysis of the second key issue, the question of whether a *modus vivendi* could have been reached in the weeks before Pearl Harbor. The Konoye government fell after the collapse of the plan for a leader's conference and was replaced in October by a new government headed by General Tojo. The new foreign minister, Togo Shigemori, wanted to see if an agreement could be worked out essentially on the basis of a return to the *status quo ante*—that is, to the situation that had existed prior to the Japanese move into southern Indochina in July. Japan would withdraw its troops from that area and the flow of oil would resume.<sup>121</sup> A plan outlining an arrangement of this sort was presented to the Americans in November. At the insistence of the army high command, a provision had been included in that plan calling on the United States not to “engage in such actions as may hinder efforts toward peace by Japan and China.” The plan was not Japan's final word; Togo, with Tojo's support, was prepared to make further concessions in order “to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion.”<sup>122</sup>

People like Craigie thought that something along those lines could, and indeed should, have been worked out. Those in the west who opposed it said it would have constituted “appeasement.” The provision about China was interpreted as a demand that military assistance to that country be ended, and this neither America nor Britain could accept. For that reason, it is often argued, this proposal had no chance of leading to an agreement that would have headed off the war.

The issue is important because it reveals how far each side was willing to go to avoid war and is thus worth examining closely. And when you look at how it's dealt with in the literature, it becomes clear that the two sides were not nearly as far apart on the China issue as they were later made to seem.<sup>123</sup> The Japanese explained what they had in mind by the provision about China soon after the plan had been presented to the Americans. Togo, in a meeting with Grew, alluded to President Roosevelt's idea that the United States might serve as an “introducer” between Japan and China. After being “introduced,” the two countries would enter into an armistice and begin peace negotiations. At that point the U.S. government would suspend military aid deliveries to

<sup>121</sup> Japanese draft proposal, November 20, 1941, FRUS Japan 2:755–56.

<sup>122</sup> Tsunoda, *Final Confrontation*, pp. 261–65, 370. See also Togo Shigenori, *The Cause of Japan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 144.

<sup>123</sup> See Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, pp. 879–83, and Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, pp. 76–89.

Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>124</sup> As some scholars point out, the State Department at this time was also considering a plan of this sort.<sup>125</sup> The two sides, as Heinrichs says, had moved “within negotiating range of each other.”<sup>126</sup> But the Americans in the final analysis were not interested in working out this kind of an arrangement. Japan was clearly willing to be contained. Indeed, Japan was willing to withdraw from territory it had occupied as part of the southern advance. But with a settlement on that basis within reach, the Americans decided that it was just not good enough.

#### EXPLAINING U.S. POLICY: THE INDIRECT APPROACH

In exploring the Japanese side of the question, you are once again struck by the central problem. If Japan was not “uncontainable” or “undeterrable,” then maybe war came because the U.S. government was insisting on something more than containment. And in fact it seems quite clear that the Americans were insisting that Japan capitulate on the China issue. But why did they opt for such a policy? Until quite recently, they had been willing to live with what Japan was doing in China. They certainly did not like what the Japanese were doing there, but they were not prepared to go to war to force them out of China. But their policy had shifted dramatically, and that shift had taken place just as the situation with Germany was becoming very serious indeed.

The whole story is quite puzzling. America certainly had a real interest in East Asia. The United States, as Schroeder notes, had a major interest in putting a stop to Japan’s southern advance and in weaning Japan away from its alliance with Hitler. But both of those goals, as he argues, were attainable without war. By late 1941, he writes, the United States had reached the point “where the achievement of these two goals was within sight.” The puzzle is that at that very moment, with the United States “on the verge of a major diplomatic victory,” America “abandoned her original goals and concentrated on a third, the liberation of China”—a new goal that “rendered war inevitable.” The United States, Schroeder concludes, thus “forfeited the diplomatic victory which she had already virtually won.”<sup>127</sup> And this is in fact the nub of the problem. How is that *American* policy to be explained?

<sup>124</sup> Grew to Hull, November 24, 1941, FRUS Japan 2:763; Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, pp. 82–83.

<sup>125</sup> Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, p. 871 (for the point that the United States would suspend aid to China as soon as China and Japan entered into an armistice and began peace talks), and p. 880 (for the similarity with Japan’s own plan): “it is difficult to understand the depth of Mr. Hull’s indignation over Japanese-sponsored suggestions which in many respects resembled ideas current in the State Department itself.” See also Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, p. 81 n. 27.

<sup>126</sup> Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, pp. 208–09.

<sup>127</sup> Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, p. 203.

Schroeder's own answer was that the American government was a prisoner of its own ideology. The adoption in July of a "new offensive policy" might have led to war, he says, but that course of action was not really the product of "the reasoned decision of policy makers."<sup>128</sup> American policy, he says, was too inflexible, too moralistic. The Americans were just too unwilling to take political realities into account. Secretary of State Hull played a particularly destructive role. "His all-or-nothing attitude," Schroeder says, "constituted one of his major shortcomings as a diplomat."<sup>129</sup> And Roosevelt can be blamed for "allowing Hull and others to talk him out of impulses and ideas which, had he pursued them, might have averted the conflict." But Hull and Roosevelt were not the only ones responsible. Indeed, for Schroeder the blame has to be borne essentially by the country as a whole. "The mistake (assuming that it was a mistake)," he writes, "of a too hard and rigid policy with Japan was, as has been pointed out, a mistake shared by the whole nation, with causes that were deeply organic. Behind it was not sinister design or warlike intent, but a sincere and uncompromising adherence to moral principles and liberal doctrines."<sup>130</sup>

This is an important argument, and it echoes certain major themes in American realist thought. George Kennan, in particular, in his very influential *American Diplomacy*, argued eloquently along these lines.<sup>131</sup> American policy in the Cold War, or in Vietnam, is often interpreted in similar terms.<sup>132</sup> Perhaps you've done some work in those areas and as a result have developed a certain degree of skepticism about that kind of argument.<sup>133</sup> If so, you might be more inclined than you otherwise might be to take Schroeder's general

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 182.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 202–03.

<sup>131</sup> George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), esp. p. 73. Kennan, however, was not quite prepared to let Roosevelt off the hook in this way. For his rather negative assessment of Roosevelt's policy in late 1941, see his comment on three papers on "Allied Leadership in the Second World War," including one by Dallek on Roosevelt, in *Survey* 21 (Winter–Spring 1975): esp. pp. 29–31. For Dallek's response, see Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 531.

<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (London: Temple Smith, 1983), pp. 41–42, and Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>133</sup> On the Cold War, the key body of evidence that convinced me that U.S. leaders were perfectly capable of thinking in realistic spheres of influence terms and of conducting a policy on that basis was United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference) 1945* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1960), vol. 2. On Vietnam, the two most important works showing that key U.S. leaders, and above all President Kennedy, were by no means prisoners of the U.S. Cold War ideology, are David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), and Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

interpretation of U.S. policy as a product of the American ideology with a grain of salt. But even if you were coming to the question without any general views in this area, you still might feel that you needed to come to terms with Schroeder's general argument about the basic taproot of American policy in 1941. The fundamental issue here is obviously of central importance. Was what Schroeder views as a mistaken approach to foreign policy so deeply embedded in American culture that U.S. leaders were simply incapable of thinking along different lines—incapable, that is, of thinking in realist terms?

One obvious way to explore that issue would be to see how these questions were debated, if at all, within the government. How much of a consensus was there? Did everyone take it for granted that policy had to be based on moral principle? In that context, it would make sense to look first at the advice Roosevelt was getting from his chief advisers—from Hull on the political side, and from Army Chief of Staff Marshall and Chief of Naval Operations Stark on the military side.

The case of Hull is of particular interest because the secretary of state is often portrayed as the administration's ideologue in chief. And yet Hull, you notice, when you read the relevant texts and documents with this specific issue in mind, was quite interested in reaching some kind of agreement with Japan and even thought that an acceptance of the Japanese position in Manchuria, a direct violation of American "principle," might be part of such an agreement.<sup>134</sup> In late 1941 Hull also thought it had been a mistake to reject the Konoye proposal for a leaders' conference and said he did not want to make that same kind of mistake a second time.<sup>135</sup> He was therefore quite serious about exploring the possibility of a *modus vivendi*. He in fact wanted to ignore Chinese and British objections and move ahead with the negotiations. When Roosevelt overruled him, Hull was livid. He really wanted to try to avoid war, and "taking a firm stand on principle" was not his preferred course of action.<sup>136</sup>

The advice Roosevelt was getting from America's top military officers also pointed toward a moderate policy toward Japan. The story of American

<sup>134</sup> See Halifax to Foreign Office (no. 4550), October 3, 1941, with minutes, FO 371/27910, *British Foreign Office: Japan Correspondence, 1941–1945*, series for 1941, reel 7. The point is alluded to in some historical works, but is scarcely given the kind of attention it deserves. See, for example, Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 193.

<sup>135</sup> Halifax to Foreign Office (no. 5380), November 25, 1941, para. 7, FO 371/27912, *British Foreign Office: Japan Correspondence, 1941–1945*, series for 1941, reel 8.

<sup>136</sup> Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 428–29; Blum, *Years of Urgency*, p. 387; and especially the evidence in John Costello, *Days of Infamy: MacArthur, Roosevelt, Churchill—The Shocking Truth Revealed: How Their Secret Deals and Strategic Blunders Caused Disasters at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), pp. 127–29, 388. This latter citation incidentally provides a good example of how even a not-very-scholarly book can be mined for important information on a key point.



strategic thinking in the year or so before Pearl Harbor, beginning with Admiral Stark's "Plan Dog" memorandum of November 12, 1940, and climaxing in the Joint Board's "Victory Program" of September 11, 1941, is of quite exceptional interest, and Mark Stoler gives a superb account in his book on U.S. grand strategy during the Second World War.<sup>137</sup> The information he gives is intriguing enough to make you want to look up the key documents and read them yourself. It is well known, of course, that the basic conclusion the strategists reached was that, in the event of war, the United States would be well advised to adopt a "Europe-first" strategy. But what was really important here for our present purposes is not that particular conclusion but the sort of thinking you find in those documents—the line of argument about what even prewar U.S. policy had to be.

The strategists' basic premise, and this was very much in line with Roosevelt's own thinking, was that the U.S. government could no longer afford to think in purely continental or even hemispheric terms. The United States, it was assumed, would not be secure if Britain collapsed and all of Europe fell under German control. A German superpower, the argument ran, in command of the resources of the entire continent of Europe, and no longer blocked by British naval power, would threaten the security of the Western Hemisphere. "A very strong pillar of the defense structure of the Americas," Stark wrote, "has, for many years, been the balance of power existing in Europe. The collapse of Great Britain or the destruction or surrender of the British Fleet will destroy this balance and will free European military power for possible encroachment in this hemisphere."<sup>138</sup> To be sure, a Germany triumphant in Europe might not want to go to war with America right away. After having conquered all of Europe, according to the authors of the Victory Program, Nazi Germany "might then wish to establish peace with the United States for several years, for the purpose of organizing her gains, restoring her economic situation, and increasing her military establishment." But in doing those things, the Germans would be preparing for "the eventual conquest of South America and the military defeat of the United States."<sup>139</sup> The whole analysis was framed in geopolitical terms. Indeed, this whole way of thinking was based very explicitly on a balance of power approach to the problem. A

<sup>137</sup> Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, chap. 2 and 3.

<sup>138</sup> "Plan Dog" memorandum, November 12, 1940, p. 19. This document is available online at the following URL: <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/psf/box4/folo48.html>.

<sup>139</sup> The "Victory Program" of September 11, 1941, officially entitled "Joint Board Estimate of United States Over-All Production Requirements," and signed by Army Chief of Staff George Marshall and Chief of Naval Operations Harold Stark, was published in *American War Plans, 1919–1941*, ed. Steven Ross, vol. 5 (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 160–89 for the main study, and pp. 190–201 for the appended "Estimate of Army Ground Forces." The passage quoted here is on p. 4 of the main study, p. 163 in the Garland volume. Extensive quotations from the Victory Program also appear in Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 410–18.

major U.S. objective, according to the Victory Program, was the “eventual establishment in Europe and Asia of balances of power”; and Stark wrote that “a balance of power in the Far East is to our interest as much as is a balance of power in Europe.”<sup>140</sup>

What all this implied to those military leaders was that the United States had to intervene in the war against Germany. Japan, being a lesser threat, could best be dealt with in a different way, so that American efforts could be focused on the German problem. Some officers involved in these discussions took the argument even further, and said (after Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941) that America had to intervene not just to stop Germany, but to prevent any single power from dominating Eurasia. “Germany and Russia are fighting for world domination,” one of them wrote, and “which ever wins will be a long way on the road to domination.” That in turn would pose a grave threat to America: “*if any one power dominates Asia, Europe and Africa, our country will ultimately become a second class power even if we gain South America and the whole of North America.*”<sup>141</sup> It was on the basis of this kind of thinking, which Roosevelt largely shared, that even officers of an isolationist bent (as Stoler points out) were coming to view U.S. intervention in the war against Germany as essential.<sup>142</sup>

An even more important point was that the United States would not just have to intervene massively—even if (and the logic of the argument would imply especially if) Britain were “completely defeated”<sup>143</sup>—but that America would have to intervene relatively *quickly*. The authors of the Victory Program were very worried that Germany would defeat the USSR, occupy much of that country, destroy the basis of remaining Soviet power through air attack on areas it did not occupy, and then gradually mobilize the resources of the areas under its control (in Russia and in the rest of Europe), thus building up its military power to quite extraordinary levels. But it would take a while before Germany’s conquests in the east would lead to a dramatic expansion of German military power. According to the Victory Program, it would probably take “a full year to bring order out of chaos in the conquered areas,” and Germany would not be able to profit economically even from a total defeat of Russia until mid-1943.<sup>144</sup> That meant that for the United States, a vital window of opportunity was now open. For America to wait until the Germans had their hands free in the east and had harnessed the resources of conquered Europe to their war machine would make its job much more difficult. It

<sup>140</sup> Victory Program, p. 3 (p. 162 in the Garland volume); “Plan Dog” memorandum, p. 3.

<sup>141</sup> Colonel Paul Robinett, of the army general staff, diary entry for September 12, 1941, quoted in Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, p. 50 (emphasis in original).

<sup>142</sup> See Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>143</sup> Victory Program, p. 9 (p. 168 in the Garland volume).

<sup>144</sup> Victory Program appendix, “Estimate of Army Ground Forces,” p. 4 (p. 193 in the Garland volume).

therefore made sense to opt for “a rapidly accelerated all-out effort with a view to conducting decisive, offensive operations against the enemy before he can liquidate or recoup from his struggle with Russia”; this was the only alternative to a “long drawn-out war of attrition.”<sup>145</sup> “Time is of the essence,” the authors of that key strategy document argued, and “the longer we delay effective offensive operations against the Axis, the more difficult will become the attainment of victory.” “It is mandatory,” they wrote, “that we reach an early appreciation of our stupendous task, and gain the whole-hearted support of the entire country in the production of trained men, ships, munitions, and ample reserves. Otherwise, we will be confronted in the not distant future by a Germany strongly entrenched economically, supported by newly acquired sources of vital supplies and industries, with her military forces operating on interior lines, and in a position of hegemony in Europe which will be comparatively easy to defend and maintain.”<sup>146</sup>

U.S. military leaders thus took it for granted that the specter of a German-dominated Europe was the real threat that needed to be faced. The threat posed by Japan was in their view of purely secondary importance. If Germany were defeated, Japan would not pose much of a problem; indeed, following the defeat of Germany, a triumphant America would probably be able to get Japan to come to terms rather easily. (This, incidentally, was an argument Grew and Craigie had also made to support their own relatively moderate policy recommendations.)<sup>147</sup> The implication was that the western powers would be well advised to deal much more gently with Japan than with Germany. It was this kind of thinking that lay at the heart of the basic argument of the Victory Program, a conclusion reflected in the one passage that was underlined in the original document: “*the principal strategic method employed by the United States in the immediate future should be the material support of present military operations against Germany, and their reenforcement by active participation in the war by the United States, while holding Japan in check pending future developments.*”<sup>148</sup> Admiral Stark, a year earlier, had also called for a “positive effort to avoid war with Japan.”<sup>149</sup> The basic concept of a balance of power in Asia to his mind in fact implied that Japanese power did have an important

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp. 4–5 (pp. 193–94 in the Garland volume).

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. Stark also thought the country had to move quickly, and in fact told the president right after Germany had invaded Russia that he considered “every day of delay in our getting into the war as dangerous.” Stark to Cooke, July 31, 1941, quoted in Feis, *Road to Pearl Harbor*, p. 240.

<sup>147</sup> Victory Program, p. 9 (p. 168 in the Garland volume); Craigie Report, para. 66, p. 153 in the *Confidential Print* volume cited in note. 80 above; Grew quoted in Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, p. 849. “Why on earth should we rush headlong into war?” Grew asked. “When Hitler is defeated, as he eventually will be, the Japanese problem will solve itself.”

<sup>148</sup> Victory Program, p. 10 (p. 169 in the Garland volume).

<sup>149</sup> “Plan Dog” memorandum, p. 25.

role to play in the East Asian political equation.<sup>150</sup> Again, Grew saw things much the same way. “While we would undoubtedly win in the end,” he wrote Roosevelt in September 1941, “I question whether it is in our own interest to see an impoverished Japan reduced to the position of a third-rate Power.”<sup>151</sup>

Given that whole way of thinking, it is scarcely surprising that the military authorities were opposed to the policy toward Japan the administration adopted at the end of July 1941. As Welles pointed out in August, “in the opinion of both the War and Navy Departments of the United States the chief objective in the Pacific for the time being should be the avoidance of war with Japan inasmuch as war between the United States and Japan at this time would not only tie up the major portion of if not the entire American fleet but would likewise create a very serious strain upon our military establishment and upon our productive activities at the very moment when these should be concentrated upon the Atlantic.”<sup>152</sup> The undeclared naval war with Germany began the next month, and with the embargo the United States at that time also seemed to be heading toward war with Japan. The military leadership was deeply out of sympathy with that latter policy. “With hostilities in progress and escalating in the Atlantic,” Stoler writes, “from a military perspective the president and the State Department seemed to be insanely willing to provoke a second war in the Pacific.”<sup>153</sup> In November, during the *modus vivendi* discussions, the military leaders pleaded for U.S. flexibility. One key army officer told Hull on November 21 that it was a matter of “grave importance to the success of our war effort in Europe that we reach a *modus vivendi* with Japan.”<sup>154</sup> The top commanders, Marshall and Stark, wanted to put off a war with Japan for at least a few months. As they told Roosevelt at that point, “the most essential thing now is to gain time.”<sup>155</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 3. See also Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, p. 30. The army went even further. Its complaint about the “Plan Dog” memorandum was that Stark went too far in calling for the containment of Japan. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, p. 33.

<sup>151</sup> Grew to Roosevelt, September 22, 1941, FRUS 1941, 4:469.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler*, p. 213.

<sup>153</sup> Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, p. 58. Admiral Stark’s view, however, was a bit more nuanced than this quotation might suggest. In a September 1941 memorandum—a document which Sherwood says “was highly refreshing to the President”—Stark said that in his opinion “the United States should enter the war against Germany as soon as possible, even if hostilities with Japan must be accepted.” The argument was not that the U.S. government should pursue a provocative policy vis-à-vis Japan if that was the only way of getting into the European war quickly. Stark’s point was simply that since Germany and Japan were allies, Japan might feel obliged to go to war against America if the United States declared war on Germany—but that the U.S. government should not hold back for that reason. The quotation, however, does suggest that in Stark’s view a war with Japan would not be a total disaster if it brought the United States into the war with Germany. For a long extract from the document, see Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 379–80.

<sup>154</sup> Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 213.

<sup>155</sup> Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, p. 61.

So you can see how you can assess one fundamental and very influential interpretation of American policy, the idea that policy makers were prisoners of America's liberal ideology, that they had to stand up for their moral beliefs, and that they were incapable of conducting a policy based on realist principles. It turns out that the range of choices was much wider than you had been led to believe, that key policy makers were perfectly capable of thinking in balance of power terms, and indeed that strategic realities played such a fundamental role in shaping thinking that even officers of an isolationist bent were drawn toward a strong interventionist policy.

But where does all this get us, in terms of the larger problem? The goal is to understand American policy in late 1941. If Schroeder's explanation does not really stand up, how is U.S. policy toward Japan to be interpreted? After all, there has to be *some* explanation for what the U.S. government was doing, *some* reason why the U.S. government was not willing to settle for a policy of containment. You weigh the possible explanations against each other, assessing them not just in terms of the direct evidence but also in terms of their basic plausibility. Was Roosevelt, for example, simply fed up with Japanese aggression? Was it for that reason that he opted for a hard line—that is, for a policy that led directly to war? You assess the basic plausibility of that sort of interpretation. At a time when Roosevelt was moving toward war with Germany, would he have wanted a second war with Japan—a Japan willing to accommodate to American power and forgo further expansion—simply because he was fed up with that country? Someone with real political sense would never behave in that way, and it is quite clear that Roosevelt *had* political sense. That interpretation is just not plausible. So by a process of elimination, you are pushed toward the conclusion that his policy toward Japan has to be understood in the context of his policy toward the far more important problem of the European war.

It's in that way that you go about getting a handle on the key historical problem of explaining U.S. policy in late 1941. You make your own judgment about whether the basic view laid out in documents like the Victory Program made sense. Suppose you think it did, and suppose you think it was so compelling that Roosevelt could not possibly have dismissed it out of hand. The president, after all, agreed that Germany was the main problem, and he clearly wanted to take the United States into the European war. Why then would he have wanted to fight a second war against Japan? Why didn't he limit America's East Asia policy to a simple policy of containment? The military leaders had drawn the conclusion that America should do no more than keep Japan in check. That conclusion followed logically from their basic analysis of the geopolitical problem the United States faced. That argument seems compelling, and Roosevelt shared many of the geopolitical premises on which it was based. And yet he did not draw the same conclusion as the military leaders. He did not, in the final analysis, opt for a policy of simply

containing Japan. One has to assume, especially given the cogency of the argument that the military authorities were making, that that policy decision could not have been made frivolously. Given the seriousness of these problems, Roosevelt would have had to think these matters through with great care. So *something* must have come into play that for him tipped the balance in the opposite direction, *something* that the military leaders had not taken into account when drawing their own conclusions about what America's Japan policy should be. What then could that *something* actually be?

Is it out of the question that Roosevelt not only accepted the argument of the Victory Program but took it one step further? Perhaps Roosevelt agreed that America had to be brought into the war against Germany quickly, but given public opinion at home and given Hitler's unwillingness to opt for war in response to what the U.S. Navy was doing in the Atlantic, he calculated that the only way the United States could be brought in quickly enough was by taking advantage of the situation with Japan? The very notion, of course, that Roosevelt's Japan policy was rooted in a desire to take the United States into the European war through the "back door" is generally dismissed out of hand by serious scholars, even by those historians who are quite critical of U.S. behavior in the months before Pearl Harbor.<sup>156</sup> It is tainted by its association with the absurd and baseless charge that Roosevelt had arranged things so that the American forces at Pearl Harbor would be the victims of a Japanese surprise attack—that he did so in order to bring an angry, unified, and vengeful nation into the war. But the baselessness of that particular claim does not mean that the more general argument about Roosevelt possibly using the East Asian situation as a way of bringing America into the European war is not worth taking seriously. Isn't that possibility, you might think, worth considering on its own terms?

But how do you go about figuring out what to make of the back-door argument? Your analysis so far might give you a certain basis for taking that argument seriously, but to form a more solid opinion you need to go into the question in greater depth. You are not going to find direct evidence bearing on the issue. No document will turn up showing Roosevelt saying, in effect, "I am pursuing this policy toward Japan because it is the only policy that will bring America into the war against Germany quickly enough." If any such document existed, you would certainly have heard about it already.<sup>157</sup> And if Roosevelt had *not* opted for his Japan policy for that reason, that negative

<sup>156</sup> Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, pp. 182, 202–03

<sup>157</sup> It is not inconceivable, however, that direct evidence bearing on the question will eventually become available. Certain still-classified British materials, including a copy of one of the two telegrams Churchill sent Roosevelt on November 26, 1941, might, for example, shed some light on the issue. See Warren Kimball, *Forged in War: Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Second World War* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), p. 357 n. 3. Kimball refers here to the way the withholding of that body of material has fueled speculation about Churchill's role in this affair, and he alludes

point could scarcely be proved by direct evidence. So you have no choice but to look for indirect evidence—for straws in the wind that might have some bearing on the issue. If you get enough evidence of that sort, you might be able to arrive at some kind of conclusion, and how much confidence you have in that conclusion will depend on how strong that mass of evidence is.

How then do you do that kind of work? One way is by identifying specific arguments relating to the back-door theory and then by examining those arguments in the light of the evidence most directly related to the issues at hand. It is sometimes said, for example, that Roosevelt could scarcely have opted for a back-door strategy since he had no way of knowing what Germany would do if Japan attacked the United States. That argument is based on a particular assumption about what Roosevelt knew. So to get at the issue, you'll want to see whether that assumption is well founded. You'll want to look into the question of what Roosevelt thought Germany would do if America and Japan went to war, and you'll want to look in particular at the intelligence side of the story. What assurances, if any, was Germany giving Japan, and what did U.S. intelligence know about what the Germans were saying?

So you look for works that might throw some light on these relatively narrow questions. One source that turns up quickly is the volume Ernest May edited on strategic intelligence before the two world wars.<sup>158</sup> The title of David Kahn's article in that volume, "United States Views of Germany and Japan in 1941," suggests that that essay might give you the information you are looking for. Kahn, as you might already know if you have been working in this field for any length of time, is a leading authority on code-breaking and signals intelligence, and given his eminence you might be tempted to take his judgment as definitive. Kahn says that Hitler's decision to declare war on America "was unpremeditated and partly irrational, precipitated by the Pearl Harbor attack. There was therefore no way in which any intelligence agency could have obtained foreknowledge of it."<sup>159</sup> The first solid intelligence on Hitler's intentions, he says, came only on December 8, the day after the Pearl Harbor attack. If Kahn is right in this regard, that would pose a major problem for the back-door theory. And you are inclined to think that Kahn must know what he is talking about.

But for something this important, you wouldn't want to just leave it at that. It makes sense to cast a wider net. So you explore the literature on strategic intelligence. You identify a number of other accounts likely to have

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in particular to the account given in James Rusbridger and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor: How Churchill Lured Roosevelt into World War II* (New York: Summit Books, 1991); the passage relating to the Churchill telegram is on p. 141 in that book.

<sup>158</sup> Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 496.

relevant information. F. H. Hinsley's very detailed official study of *British Intelligence in the Second World War* seems to be of fundamental importance, so you get it and look up the section bearing on this issue. You quickly note that Hinsley's account is very different from Kahn's. "Germany's response to Pearl Harbour," Hinsley says, "came as no surprise. In August 1941 the Japanese Ambassador in Berlin had reported to Tokyo a conversation in which Hitler had assured him that 'in the event of a collision between Japan and the United States Germany would at once open hostilities with the United States'"; that decrypt, Churchill was informed, had also been sent on to Washington.<sup>160</sup> Hitler, you note from other accounts, had probably given those assurances in order to stiffen the Japanese in their dealings with America. He knew about the U.S.-Japanese talks that were going on and was worried about the prospect of a settlement between those two countries.<sup>161</sup> This point you file away in the back of your mind. It may be important later on as you try to construct the larger story of what was going on in this period.

You might be able to supplement the Hinsley evidence with other evidence you find in the literature dealing with strategic intelligence in this period. It turns out, for example, that in early November, U.S. authorities received important information from Germany's acting ambassador in Washington, Hans Thomsen, who was working as an American informant. Thomsen told the Americans that if war broke out between America and Japan, Germany would declare war on the United States.<sup>162</sup> The signals intercepts yielded additional evidence. Some scholars refer to a very specific assurance that Germany's foreign minister, Ribbentrop, gave the Japanese ambassador in Berlin in late November.<sup>163</sup> In light of that information, it is reasonable to suppose that Roosevelt calculated (at least at some point before Pearl Harbor) that if Japan attacked the United States, Hitler for his part would also, in all probability, go to war with America.

But what does all this actually prove? A critic of the back-door theory might have little trouble responding to everything that has been said so far. Yes, that critic would say, the Americans *eventually* found out about the assurances, but Roosevelt had opted for a hard line toward Japan well *before* he had any of this information about what Germany would do. And if he had no way of knowing in July 1941 what Germany would do in the event of a U.S.-Japanese war, how then can the policy he adopted at that time be understood

<sup>160</sup> F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, vol. 2 (London: HMSO, 1981), p. 75. Carl Boyd, in his book *Hitler's Japanese Confidant: General Oshima Hiroshi and MAGIC Intelligence, 1941-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), p. 31, also quotes from the decrypt, which he found in the U.S. National Archives.

<sup>161</sup> See, for example, Boyd, *Oshima*, p. 32.

<sup>162</sup> Anthony Cave Brown, *The Last Hero: Willd Bill Donovan* (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 191.

<sup>163</sup> See, for example, Boyd, *Oshima*, p. 35; Weinberg, *World at Arms*, p. 1001 n. 298; and Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, p. 441.



in terms of his supposed desire to take the United States into the European war through the back door? That point calls for a response. You think about the issue. Does this line of argument really discredit the back-door theory? Roosevelt, you agree, probably did not know when the embargo was imposed in late July what Germany would do if Japan attacked the United States, but at that point he was not irrevocably committing himself to anything. The situation, you assume, would certainly be monitored as the crisis with Japan deepened, and policy toward Japan could be relaxed if it was not producing the “right” results from the “back door” point of view—that is, if it looked like Germany was going to stay out of a U.S.-Japanese war. In other words, this counterargument would run, the initial policy choice in July was not in itself decisive. That policy could have been altered at any point. What was of fundamental importance was that the policy was maintained intact. And the fact that it was maintained intact might have had something to do with what the U.S. government was learning from the intercepts: it chose to stay the course after finding out about what the Germans had promised Japan.

So the back-door theory is able to clear a certain hurdle, but there’s a second line of argument you still have to consider. This time the issue is not whether (and when) German promises were made, but rather how seriously those promises were to be taken. Could the Americans really be certain that Hitler would not renege on his promises to Japan, no matter what commitments he had made? If there was a real chance that Hitler would not keep his word—and no one viewed him as a man of honor—wouldn’t a back-door strategy have been too risky from Roosevelt’s point of view for that reason alone? And the greater the risk that Germany would stay out of a U.S.-Japanese war, the less plausible the back-door theory would be.

You deal with that problem again by focusing on a key assumption—in this case, on the idea that a back-door strategy could work only if *Hitler* decided to intervene in a U.S.-Japanese war. But wasn’t it possible that the decision for war might be made by the *Americans*—that if Japan attacked the United States, Roosevelt might have been able to use the occasion to take America into the war against Germany, whether Hitler declared war on the United States or not? You then ask yourself whether you’ve seen any evidence bearing on this question, and perhaps you do recall certain pieces of evidence. You might remember, for example, that the U.S. government had evidently decided by early 1941 that if war broke out with Japan, the United States would (in the words of one key document) “at once engage in war with Germany and Italy.”<sup>164</sup> If that was U.S. policy, doesn’t that mean that a

<sup>164</sup> Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, pp. 225, 242. Note also the extract from a staff paper of January 1941 that served as the basis for the military talks that began that month with the British: “if forced into a war with Japan, the United States should, at the same time, enter the war in the Atlantic.” Quoted in George Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer: The Story of*

German declaration of war was perhaps not nearly as important as you had been led to believe?

But here again you have to consider a counterargument: even if Roosevelt would have liked to pursue such a policy, could he have pulled it off, given political realities in the United States at the time? Could he really have gotten the country to go to war with Germany after a Japanese attack, if Hitler at that point refused to declare war on America? That's clearly an important question, so you look for evidence that might help you answer it. It turns out there's a book called *Hitler Attacks Pearl Harbor: Why the United States Declared War on Germany*, which, as you can tell from the reviews and the discussion in H-Diplo, the email discussion network for diplomatic historians, deals with this very issue. It's not a very good book, but it does present some interesting evidence on American opinion in December 1941. Among other things, the author shows that according to a Gallup poll taken after Pearl Harbor but before the German declaration of war four days later, 90 percent of those polled favored a U.S. declaration of war on Germany.

But the views that came to the surface in the immediate post-Pearl Harbor period did not just emerge out of nowhere. The idea that the Japanese were in league with Hitler had been in place for some time. According to Paul Schroeder, the signing of the Tripartite Pact was of fundamental importance in this context. That agreement, signed by Germany, Japan, and Italy in September 1940, "caused a profound hardening of American opinion toward Japan—a once-for-all identification of the Empire with the Axis, with Hitler and the whole program of world conquest and the menace of aggression which America was sure he represented." The Axis alliance, in fact, came to be seen as much tighter than it actually was. And it was in large part for that reason that Pearl Harbor was widely blamed on the Axis as a whole. Indeed, many people throughout the country—a lot more than you might have thought—were convinced at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack that the Japanese were "Hitler's puppets."<sup>165</sup> And Roosevelt, of course, would not have been unaware of something this basic. It is safe to assume that he would have taken those popular beliefs and attitudes into account when deciding on a particular course of action. He might well have reached the conclusion that Germany would not be able to stay out of a U.S.-Japanese war, no matter

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*Admiral Richard Kelly Turner* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps, 1991), pp. 159–60. Roosevelt approved and actually even edited that document. See Simpson, *Stark*, pp. 75–76, and Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, and Their War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 50.

<sup>165</sup> Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, pp. 22–23. Richard F. Hill, *Hitler Attacks Pearl Harbor: Why the United States Declared War on Germany* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003), p. 209 n. 37 (the Gallup poll) and chap. 6 (for the evidence on the common view in December 1941 that the Japanese were "Hitler's puppets"—the phrase itself is from a December 8 *Washington Post* article cited on p. 114).

what decision Hitler made. And what this means is that a back-door strategy, if that is what it was, might well have been workable in that political context.<sup>166</sup>

So you've made certain judgments. You've considered certain arguments against the back-door theory and you've reached certain conclusions. But the core historical problem hasn't really been resolved. You certainly haven't been able to come up with anything that actually proves Roosevelt was pursuing a back-door strategy. So in a sense you're no further along than you had been when you first started to consider those anti-back-door arguments. And yet it's not as though this exercise was entirely worthless. You've obviously learned something, and what you've learned gets factored in as your general understanding of what was going on in 1941 takes shape.

When you're working out an interpretation, you have to do many exercises of this sort. There are all kinds of relatively narrow issues you need to concern yourself with. What, for example, can you find out about Roosevelt's general political style? Was he the type of person who was capable of behaving in a relatively Machiavellian way? That sort of issue has an obvious bearing on the question at hand, but can you find evidence that might shed some light on that issue? You might remember from some of the historical works you've read that Roosevelt was certainly capable at times of maneuvering for advantage. In the talks with Japan, he was willing to "baby" the Japanese, to string them along, to "play for time."<sup>167</sup> Secretary of War Stimson, in a widely quoted October 16 diary entry, referred to a meeting Roosevelt had called at the White House that day to consider the Japan problem: "and so we face the delicate question of the diplomatic fencing to be done so as to be sure that Japan was put into the wrong and made the first bad move—overt move."<sup>168</sup> In another frequently cited diary entry, Stimson quoted Roosevelt as saying on November 25 that "the question was how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves."<sup>169</sup> Such comments, of course, do not prove that Roosevelt thought that such maneuvering was needed to bring on an otherwise avoidable war with Japan.<sup>170</sup> He might have thought war was inevitable

<sup>166</sup> It should also be noted in this connection that U.S. leaders apparently took it for granted, right after the Pearl Harbor attack, that war with Germany was imminent. They were in fact relieved by this prospect and were not particularly worried about whether Hitler would actually declare war on America. See Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, p. 172.

<sup>167</sup> On the issue of "babying" the Japanese, see FRUS 1941, 4:372–74. On "playing for time," note the Hugh Dalton diary, entry for August 26, 1941, in *The Churchill War Papers*, ed. Martin Gilbert, vol. 3 (London: Heinemann, 2000), p. 1111.

<sup>168</sup> Henry Lewis Stimson Diaries [microfilm edition] (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1973), entry for October 16, 1941.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for November 25, 1941.

<sup>170</sup> See Richard N. Current, "How Stimson Meant to 'Maneuver' the Japanese," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 40, no. 1 (June 1953): 67–74. Note also Langer and Gleason, *Undeclared War*, p. 886; and Dallek, *Roosevelt*, pp. 303–04, 307.

and simply wanted to be sure that it began in what was for America the best way. But there is one key piece of evidence suggesting quite clearly that he did want to maneuver the *Germans* into war. This is the record of what Roosevelt told Churchill at the Atlantic Conference on August 19: as I noted, the president said there that “he would wage war, but not declare it, and that he would become more and more provocative. If the Germans did not like it, they could attack American forces.”<sup>171</sup> What this evidence shows is that U.S. leaders were perfectly capable of thinking in tactical terms—of maneuvering, of calculating, of pursuing their objectives in a less-than-absolutely-straightforward way.

Roosevelt’s reaction to the Pearl Harbor attack is another important indicator. The president had been worried that the Japanese would limit their attack to British and Dutch possessions and avoid contact with American forces. He knew that in such circumstances it might be hard for him to bring the American people into the war with Japan. “Hence his great relief,” as his close adviser Harry Hopkins put it a few weeks later, “at the method Japan used.”<sup>172</sup> When the news of the Pearl Harbor attack was received, the president called a meeting of his top advisers. “The conference met in not too tense an atmosphere,” Hopkins wrote, “because I think that all of us believed that in the last analysis the enemy was Hitler and that he could never be defeated without force of arms; that sooner or later we were bound to be in the war and that Japan had given us an opportunity.”<sup>173</sup> This is not quite the same as saying that Roosevelt had deliberately taken advantage of the Far Eastern situation to bring the country into the European war, but it does suggest that U.S. leaders were pleased by the way things had developed—by the situation which, as they well knew, their own policy had played a key role in producing.<sup>174</sup>

Churchill’s attitude at this point is another indicator. The British prime minister was elated by the news of the Pearl Harbor attack. “So we had won after

<sup>171</sup> Quoted in Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 214.

<sup>172</sup> Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 428–31. For additional evidence on Roosevelt’s reaction, see Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 311.

<sup>173</sup> Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, p. 431. Note that this also shows that his top advisers, well before Hitler’s declaration of war, took it for granted that America would soon be at war with Germany. That might have been a war the United States would have initiated, with Roosevelt taking advantage of popular anger about Pearl Harbor to get the Congress to declare war on Germany. But privy to the intelligence about Hitler’s intentions, the government decided to wait for a German declaration of war, which in fact came a few days later. See Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler*, p. 221.

<sup>174</sup> Stimson’s attitude on the eve of the war is also worth noting in this context. On December 2, knowing that things seemed to be coming to a head, he told Chiang Kai-shek’s representative in Washington to tell the Chinese leader “to have just a little more patience, and then I think all things will be well.” In context, what this suggests is that the coming of war (through a Japanese attack) was to be welcomed. Quoted in Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, pp. 83–84; for the original source, see the Stimson Diaries, reel 7, entry for December 2, 1941.

all!” he thought. “Hitler’s fate was sealed.” “Being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation,” he wrote, “I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful.”<sup>175</sup> The day after the Pearl Harbor attack, he “was in highest spirits at America and Japan.”<sup>176</sup> He later wrote that Craigie’s argument that war with Japan could have been avoided was entirely off-base because it was a “blessing that Japan attacked the United States and thus brought America wholeheartedly into the war.”<sup>177</sup> Again, this does not prove that Churchill had pressed for a hard-line policy toward Japan with the goal of bringing the United States into the European war, but it does point in that direction.

Churchill’s principal objective throughout 1941 had, of course, been to bring the United States into the war against Germany.<sup>178</sup> Ideally he would have loved to bring America in without America and Britain having to fight a war with Japan at the same time. As he put it at the time, that outcome would have been the “first prize.” But a war in which America and Britain fought both Japan and Germany was the “second prize,” better in his view than if both countries were to remain at peace with Japan, but with America staying out of the European war.<sup>179</sup> And on the principle that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush, Churchill was prepared to do what he could to land that second prize. At a war cabinet meeting on October 2, Churchill “questioned the statement that it was not in our interests that the United States should be involved in war in the Pacific.”<sup>180</sup> Although hesitant at times—there was always the risk that Japan might attack just the British and Dutch possessions and leave the Americans alone—his government in the final analysis therefore pressed for a relatively tough policy toward Japan and played a key role in sabotaging the plan for a *modus vivendi*.<sup>181</sup> The net effect of British policy was thus to help the British achieve their fundamental goal of bringing the United States into the war. You then wonder whether this was simply a coincidence. Given your understanding of the way governments operate, you might find it hard to believe that an element of calculation was not involved.

The point is important for our purposes because a study of *British* policy can provide a certain window into *American* thinking. If you think the two

<sup>175</sup> Quoted in Dallek, *Roosevelt*, p. 312. See also Foreign Secretary Eden’s account in *Churchill War Papers*, 3:1579.

<sup>176</sup> Oliver Harvey diary, entry for December 8, 1941, *Churchill War Papers*, 3:1586.

<sup>177</sup> Quoted in Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, p. 75.

<sup>178</sup> See Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p. 241.

<sup>179</sup> Charles Eade, notes of a luncheon with Churchill, November 19, 1941, *Churchill War Papers*, 3:1474. See also War Cabinet minutes, confidential annex, November 12, 1941, *ibid.*, p. 1445.

<sup>180</sup> Peter Lowe, *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 173

<sup>181</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 260–61. One of the key documents in this episode, Chiang Kai-shek’s letter of protest, was later said by the British ambassador to China “to have been drafted by him.” Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, p. 70n.

countries' core interests were essentially the same, and if you think that Roosevelt and Churchill, taking those common interests as their point of departure, had basically come to share the same general view about how things were to be managed, then the evidence on Churchill's thinking about a war with Japan does feed into an overall estimate of what Roosevelt was trying to do. By looking at what the British were thinking, you can perhaps get some insight into what American policy was. The impression you get from the British sources is thus one of the indicators you can take into account in deciding how to interpret what the Americans were doing.

It's in that way that you gradually form your own opinion. In the absence of strong direct evidence, you proceed as best you can. The indirect evidence is suggestive rather than compelling. You look at a particular straw in the wind, and in itself it may prove nothing. But if you gather enough evidence of this sort, you're able to assess the plausibility of a given argument. Every small brushstroke makes a difference and gradually a larger picture takes shape.

#### THE LARGER STORY

Suppose you reach the conclusion that Roosevelt used the situation with Japan as a way of bringing the United States into the European war. This conclusion is important for a all sorts of reasons. If true, it tells you something fundamental about the nature of U.S. policy—namely, that geopolitical imperatives can play a truly decisive role in shaping American behavior. It might also have certain broader implications about international politics as a whole. It might suggest that, as a general rule, war is to be understood as the outcome of a political process rather than as the product of aggression pure and simple: if, even in the case of a conflict with countries as aggressive as Germany and Japan in 1941, the decision to go to war with America is not to be viewed as a “gratuitous” act, then war in general is not to be understood as resulting from a simple decision on the part of the aggressor power to start one.

But as important as that conclusion about Roosevelt's East Asian policy is, it's just one element in a much broader interpretative structure. It's not as though you just reach that conclusion and the analysis stops. You've constructed a building block which then has to be lowered into place. The conclusion about Roosevelt has to be fit into a larger argument about what was going on in the world of the great powers not just in late 1941 but in a longer period—the period, say, from September 1939 to December 1941.

In constructing that broader interpretation, one question leads to another. If you think that Roosevelt in 1941 wanted to bring the United States into the war against Germany (and put America on a collision course with Japan as a means of doing so), you then have to think about why he opted for that policy. What did it have to do with his understanding of German policy?

What was his view of Hitler's long-term goals, and how exactly did that view take shape? These questions lead to yet further questions about Hitler, about what *his* goals were, and about what his plans were for achieving them. Did he think that if he won in Europe, a struggle with America for world domination would be inevitable? If he did sometimes talk in that vein, are such remarks to be dismissed as idle speculation, or was he seriously contemplating war with the United States in the not-too-distant future?

Such issues are studiable in the usual way. You look to see what historians say, and you try to assess those arguments in terms both of their internal logic and of the adequacy of the evidence supporting them. Some scholars argue that Hitler did not intend in his lifetime to enter into such a struggle with America, and that in his view the war between the United States and Germany for world domination would take place only in the "dim, indefinite" future.<sup>182</sup> Others take a different view, and once again you wonder who is right. You make an assessment based on the preponderance of the evidence cited, and it turns out that some of the most crucial evidence has to do with Hitler's armaments policy. Even before the war broke out in Europe, Hitler, it seems, had decided to prepare for a major conflict with the United States. A great oceangoing navy and a powerful long-range air force were to be built. "The naval programme," Richard Overy notes, "and the strategic bomber plans, including the 'Amerikabomber' which Messerschmidt began work on in 1939, and the range of advanced technological projects on which German research was working, all indicate clearly the drift of Hitler's strategy"; the "major programmes" were to be "completed by 1943–5."<sup>183</sup> The plans had to be put aside when, contrary to Hitler's wishes, war broke out prematurely in September 1939. But whenever it looked like the war in Europe would soon be over—after the defeat of France in June 1940 and then again in July 1941 when it looked like Russia would soon collapse—Hitler revived preparations for a final confrontation with America.<sup>184</sup> This suggests that Hitler did think that matters would come to a head with America not in the distant future but

<sup>182</sup> Meir Michaelis, "World Power Status or World Dominion? A Survey of the Literature on Hitler's 'Plan of World Dominion' (1937–1970)," *Historical Journal* 15, no. 2 (June 1972): 352; see also pp. 353, 359.

<sup>183</sup> Richard Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. 194–95. It is important to note in this context that the United States had also begun to develop an inter-continental bomber (what would eventually become the B-36) before it went to war with Germany. On the origins of the B-36 program, see Robert Lovett's testimony in 81st Cong., 1st sess., House Armed Services Committee hearings, *Investigation of the B-36 Bomber Program* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1949), pp. 24–26.

<sup>184</sup> Overy, *War and Economy*, pp. 194–95; Richard Overy (with Andrew Wheatcroft), *The Road to War* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 282; Andreas Hillgruber, "Der Faktor Amerika in Hitlers Strategie 1938–1941," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (supplement to *Das Parlament*), May 11, 1966, p. 507; and Weinberg, *World at Arms*, pp. 86, 238–39, 250.

in the course of the next few years—preferably not right away, but after his European enemies had been crushed and he had built up his own military strength to a level that would enable him to take on the world's greatest industrial power, say by 1943–45.

Learning about Hitler's goals then helps bring the questions about America into focus. How did Roosevelt view the problem? What did the president know about Hitler's intentions and in particular about German armaments policy? There are many indications that the president was worried about the threat Germany would pose if it conquered all of Europe and was able to mobilize the vast resources of that continent—indeed, that he was worried about how the United States would fare if war with a triumphant Germany broke out at some future point.<sup>185</sup>

Clearly, the sense that their core interests were imperiled pushed the Americans toward intervention. But wouldn't the growing specter of American involvement inevitably affect *Hitler's* calculations? With that question in mind, you look at the literature on Hitler's policy during the war and, in particular, at the literature on his decision to attack the USSR. That question helps you draw out one key point buried in that literature: you note that his decision in 1940 to attack the Soviet Union the following spring was evidently rooted at least in part in his sense that America was growing stronger and more determined to enter the war and that time was working against him. His own "window of opportunity," that is, was closing rapidly; all continental European problems had to be solved in 1941, he said, "because beginning in 1942, the USA will be in a position to intervene."<sup>186</sup> But if Russia was conquered, Germany, with no power in the east to worry about and with the vast resources of virtually the entire continent of Europe under its control, would be in a position to deal with the United States.<sup>187</sup> Window logic, it seems, was thus a major factor in shaping *both sides'* policies. The prospect of an enormous growth of German power in the near future, as

<sup>185</sup> Note in this connection Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 125–26. See also Joseph C. Harsh, "The 'Unbelievable' Nazi Blueprint," *New York Times Magazine*, May 25, 1941, with key passages marked up by hand, almost certainly by President Roosevelt himself (<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/psf/box31/a296L01.html>). In assessing the impact on Roosevelt of the Harsh article, one notes that the president picked up on one of Harsh's arguments—the point that *Japan* would be threatened by a German triumph in Eurasia, and thus had a certain geopolitical interest in joining with America to resist Germany—and used it in a meeting with the Japanese ambassador on July 24, 1941 (FRUS Japan 2:530). This is a typical "straw in the wind" that you use to reach at least tentative conclusions on such issues.

<sup>186</sup> Quoted in Hillgruber, "Faktor Amerika," p. 515, and in R.A.C. Parker, *Struggle for Survival: The History of the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 63. Hitler had also argued along these lines on November 4, 1940. Barry Leach, *German Strategy against Russia, 1939–1941* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), p. 77n.

<sup>187</sup> Antony Read and David Fisher, *The Deadly Embrace: Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi-Soviet Pact, 1939–1941* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 549. See also Weinberg, *World at Arms*, pp. 204–05.



the Germans mobilized the resources first of central and western Europe and then even of the Russian heartland, spurred on the Americans, and the prospect of American intervention played a key role in pushing Germany forward.

“Window logic”? Where did *that* come from? The term refers to the sorts of pressures that result from the opening and closing of “windows of vulnerability” and “windows of opportunity”—from the calculations generated by the sense that the strategic balance is moving in one way or another, from the sense, for example, that it might be a question of “now or never” and that it might be important to act before it is too late. You can see this kind of logic at work when you study in the pre–Pearl Harbor period, but the term itself comes from international relations theory. The concept plays a key role in the writings of contemporary international relations theorists like Stephen Van Evera and Dale Copeland.<sup>188</sup> And you can see from this one case why it pays for the historian to develop a certain familiarity with that body of thought. If you’ve been exposed to these sorts of arguments and then come across a document like the Victory Program, it’s as though a bell is rung. The key historical points are more likely to register in your mind. You’re more likely to say, “this is important, this really matters.” You’re much better able to understand the larger significance of the sort of thinking laid out in such documents than if you had come to the issue cold, without any exposure to this literature at all.

With a prepared mind, you’re thus much better able to see the sort of logic that was at play. But you can’t just stop at that point. You’re aware of the relative thinness of the evidence on which this sort of interpretation is based, and you want, if you can, to build on a much more solid foundation. So you need to flesh out that basic interpretation and develop it in much greater depth. You need to look at the specific areas in which that sort of logic might have come into play—for example, German armaments (and especially air and naval) policy, or German policy toward northwest Africa and the islands in the eastern and mid-Atlantic (Madeira, the Azores, and the Canary and Cape Verde islands). In each case, you would like to see what the Germans were doing in those areas and the extent to which their efforts were directed against the United States. In particular, you would like to know the degree to which they were preparing for what they saw, and indeed could rationally see, as a growing American threat to their position in Europe. So you look at the literature, for example, on German policy toward northwest Africa and the Atlantic islands—especially Norman Goda’s *Tomorrow the World*—and you are struck by the fact that German policy in this area was shaped by a mix of

<sup>188</sup> See Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. chap. 4, and Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

offensive and defensive considerations vis-à-vis America.<sup>189</sup> And again if you've been exposed to international relations theory—in this case, to a well-known line of argument developed by Robert Jervis—you're in a better position to deal with some of these issues: you understand something about what happens in a situation in which offensive and defensive strategies cannot be distinguished from each other.<sup>190</sup>

Of course, you can't just limit yourself to an examination of the German side of the story. The key issue that lies at the heart of this kind of interpretation is the degree to which the two sides influenced each other. So you have to ask the same kinds of questions about American policy as you ask about German policy. To what extent was Roosevelt, in moving ahead with an active policy in these areas, essentially trying to beat the Germans to the punch?<sup>191</sup> This is the sort of issue you can try to get at by studying American sources. What did Roosevelt know about what the Germans were doing with regard to northwest Africa and the Atlantic islands? What did he think their intentions in this area were? How did he interpret whatever evidence he had? Did he fit it into some sort of larger interpretative framework? Did he, for example, link Germany's interest in that area (and especially in Dakar) to German designs on Latin America (given how close Brazil was to the west African bulge)? To what extent was he thinking of the need to preempt a possible German move into northwest Africa and the islands? To what extent, that is, did he think it was important to move before it was too late? All these questions are open to study, and in fact those questions frame the research effort. And because they are the product of this sort of thought process, the way they are answered will give you insight into some really fundamental historical and indeed theoretical issues.

Once sensitized to the importance of window logic, moreover, you naturally pay particular attention when you see historians arguing along those

<sup>189</sup> Norman Goda, *Tomorrow the World: Hitler, Northwest Africa, and the Path toward America* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 67, 69, 177, 195–96. How, incidentally, can you identify a work of this sort? Just use your library's search engine, and search for titles including the words "Hitler" (or "Nazi" or even "Germany") and "Africa." Note also that once you have identified this single work, you can then do more extensive study by looking up various works cited in Goda's superb bibliography.

<sup>190</sup> See especially Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): esp. pp. 199–206. The indistinguishability problem was particularly acute in the area of air strategy, since defense against air attack could be achieved most effectively by the "destruction of enemy aviation at its bases," as a March 1939 U.S. Army Air Corps memorandum put it. The effect was that each side in a conflict would be led to reach for aircraft of greater and greater range, meaning that it would be increasingly difficult to infer strategic intent from the type or location of the force each side deployed. For the March 1939 memorandum and for a discussion of the increasing range of planned U.S. bombers before the war, see Craven and Cate, *Army Air Forces*, 1:119–20.

<sup>191</sup> Note his formal justification of the need to occupy French North Africa, cited in Goda, *Tomorrow the World*, pp. xiii–xiv.

lines. In Overy's view, for example, window logic probably played a major role even in 1939. The British and French governments, he argues, felt at that point that their current "high levels of arms spending could be sustained for only a short time." That fact, he says, "pushed both western governments towards the conclusion that it would be better to take decisive action, even war, sooner rather than later," and that in turn was a key factor leading to war in 1939, a war which Hitler would have preferred to put off for a few years.<sup>192</sup> If Hitler had had his way, and if Germany had "enjoyed a further four or five years of peace," history, in Overy's view, might have taken a totally different course. Germany, he says, would have developed into "one of the military superpowers of the 1940s."<sup>193</sup>

The basic point suggested by this and other accounts is that the coming of war in 1939 had set off a dynamic which Hitler was unable to control and which eventually overwhelmed him. The idea here, as Andreas Hillgruber argues, is that by December 1941 the Nazi leader had essentially resigned himself to the fact that the United States was going to go to war against him and, in declaring war on America, was simply trying to make the best of a bad business.<sup>194</sup> If war with America was inevitable in any event, he might as well take advantage of the opportunity he now had, after Pearl Harbor, to firm up his alliance with Japan. To wait for Roosevelt to move first, moreover, would be taken as a sign of weakness. A declaration of war might therefore be his best option. But the conclusion to be drawn from these accounts is that for him war with America at that point was not a happy solution.

So you come to see how one thing leads to another. War breaks out in 1939 as the western powers see their window of opportunity closing; Germany's early victories lead to a deepening U.S. involvement; and Hitler's fear of an eventual U.S. intervention is a major factor pushing him forward. His moves, in turn, generate more pressure on America to enter the war, and U.S. policy toward Japan has to be understood in that context. The conflict with Japan comes to a head with the attack on Pearl Harbor, and within days the United States and Germany are officially at war. There is a logic tying all these things together, a logic in which power considerations play a key role, and to understand the story—to make these events intelligible, in Hanson's sense—is to work out what that logic is.

So gradually, as you put these things together, a certain sense for the larger story, or at least for one major strand in that larger story, takes shape in your

<sup>192</sup> Overy, *Origins of the Second World War*, pp. 62, 69–73, and Richard Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War in 1939," *Past and Present*, no. 116 (August 1987): 167–68, reprinted in Overy, *War and Economy*, pp. 231–32.

<sup>193</sup> Overy, *War and Economy*, p. 195.

<sup>194</sup> Hillgruber, "Faktor Amerika," pp. 522–23. See also Gerhard Weinberg, "Germany's Declaration of War on the United States: A New Look," in his *World in the Balance: Behind the Scenes of World War II* (Hanover, N. H.: University Press of New England, 1981).

mind. That sense may be very rough and imperfect, but you know how you can deepen your understanding of what was going on. You know that the particular elements of the story can be studied more closely. In this case, all the things I just talked about can be fleshed out by looking at the specific claims on which basic arguments rest, and those specific claims can then be studied by looking at the empirical evidence, especially the evidence cited in the works in which those claims are made.

How far do you take this process? The answer depends on what your goals are. But even if you want to go into these questions in considerable depth, it still makes sense to try to work out early on, in a relatively rough way, what the basic structure of the historical problem is. What you are able to come up with might be little more than a sketch. But as you proceed with your work, it's vitally important that you have *something* to go on, some sense, however rudimentary, for what the overall story was. Little of that interpretation may remain intact by the time you are done, but it is the process that is important. As you do this sort of work, you come to understand at a much deeper level how things fit together. You get a better sense for the texture of the historical process you are studying—a better feel for what was actually shaping the course of events.

And note the role that a certain familiarity with international relations theory plays in this process. I've touched on this issue a number of times before. My basic point in those passages is that by grappling with the fundamental conceptual issues—and in particular by coming to terms with the arguments developed in the theoretical literature—the historian is able to appreciate the importance of various elements of the story that might otherwise go unnoticed. A few paragraphs back I gave the example of “window logic.” But the general point is so important for our present purposes that I'd like to give a couple of other examples here.

One of the most basic ideas in contemporary American international relations theory has to do with what is called the “security dilemma”—that is, with the idea that states might be led to adopt aggressive policies for purely defensive purposes. Their aim might be simply to provide for their own security, but they might, as Robert Jervis puts it, be “trapped by the logic of the situation.” And that problem, the argument runs, is particularly serious in situations where the offense is believed to have the upper hand, where a premium is placed on offensive as opposed to defensive military operations.<sup>195</sup>

So suppose you're familiar with that body of thought when you study American policy in 1941. You note that President Roosevelt and other top

<sup>195</sup> See Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” esp. pp. 186–99, and Van Evera, *Causes of War*. For a recent survey of this body of work, see James D. Morrow, “International Conflict: Assessing the Democratic Peace and Offense-Defense Theory,” in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner (New York: Norton, 2002).

officials defined defense in very expansive terms. They thought it would be foolish for the Americans to sit on their hands until their homeland was attacked. They assumed by 1941 that it was important to move against Germany before it was too late. They took it for granted that Germany was so great a threat that “any action” that the United States took against that country was “necessarily one of self defense and could never be considered as aggression.”<sup>196</sup> You note that that general view was linked to their understanding of the basic nature of modern warfare—that, for Roosevelt especially, U.S. policy had to be rooted in an understanding of the “lightning speed of modern warfare.”<sup>197</sup> And you’re struck by the fact that they felt the nation was threatened by Germany’s offensive military capabilities and that it therefore had to develop offensive forces of its own.<sup>198</sup> You’re struck in particular by what you see going on in the very important area of air warfare—by the fact that each side understood that the best way to defend against air attack was to destroy the enemy air force on the ground, that each side was therefore under pressure to develop aircraft “whose range outdistanced the striking ability of potential enemies,” and that each side was therefore led to build bombers of greater and greater range and thus to adopt a more threatening offense-oriented posture. Indeed, you’re struck by the fact that both Germany and America had begun to develop intercontinental bombers even before they went to war with each other. And you note that Roosevelt’s understanding of the importance of these developments helps explain why his policy took the shape it did.<sup>199</sup>

If you’re familiar with the theoretical arguments, you take special notice when you see these things—when you see people saying in effect that their country needs to act aggressively for defensive purposes, and when you see how that attitude is linked to their understanding of modern warfare. You take special notice because you sense that what you see is not just an isolated historical artifact, a way of framing the issue specific to this particular case. You sense that something more general is at work—that the sort of dynamic the theorists have discussed at a more abstract level is at work in this particular

<sup>196</sup> Turner in meeting with Japanese ambassador Nomura, July 20, 1941, reported in Turner to Stark, July 21, 1941, FRUS Japan 2:519, quoted and discussed in Deborah Miner, “United States Policy toward Japan 1941: The Assumption That Southeast Asia Was Vital to the British War Effort” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1976), pp. 243–44. (emphasis added).

<sup>197</sup> Radio address announcing the proclamation of an Unlimited National Emergency, May 27, 1941, Roosevelt, *Public Papers*, 10:188–89.

<sup>198</sup> Craven and Cate, *Army Air Forces*, 1:117–18; Roosevelt, *Public Papers*, 9:198, and the other documents in this collection cited in note 13 above.

<sup>199</sup> In addition to the sources cited in notes 183 and 190 above, see Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907–1960* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Ala.: Air University Press, 1989), 1: 109–11; and Thomas Greer, *The Development of Air Doctrine in the Army Air Arm, 1917–1941* (Washington D. C.: Office of Air Force History, 1985), pp. 93 (for the quotation), 94, 100–101, 118–19.

case. To understand means to see the general in the specific, and that's what the theory has helped you do.

But here I'm looking at the issue from the historian's point of view. For the political scientists, the connection is the same, but it works the other way. When you see what was going on in 1941—when you see the sort of thinking that lay at the heart of American policy—key theoretical points come to life. They take on a certain reality quality. You come to see that in doing theoretical work you're not just playing a sort of intellectual game. You're not just dealing with abstract intellectual constructs. You're dealing with ideas that help you understand how international politics actually works.

So history is important for the theorist, and theory is important for the historian. To sort out a particular problem, the historian has to do a lot of thinking, and the theoretical literature can provide a certain degree of support. And it's little short of amazing how much the theorist can learn by studying the historical issues the way they need to be studied—by going into them in some depth and by analyzing historical claims in terms both of their internal logic and of the adequacy of the evidence that supports them.