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September 11, Through the Prism of Pearl Harbor

by Emily S. Rosenberg

The images and references to Pearl Harbor seem to be all around us as the anniversary of the attack looms. They are instantly recognizable. But what do they mean?

The analogies came easily after September 11, 2001, when newspaper headlines picked up the cry of "Infamy!" and President Bush reportedly wrote in his diary that "the Pearl Harbor of the 21st century took place today." As historians who focus on popular memory have insisted, we experience the present through the lens of the past -- and we shape our understanding of the past through the lens of the present.

During the decade of the 1990s, Pearl Harbor became an increasingly visible icon of popular memory. Although the 1941 attack had long provided a familiar metaphor with various meanings, the succession of 50th anniversaries that memorialized major World War II events helped revive interest in the symbolism of Pearl Harbor. Best sellers by Tom Brokaw and Stephen E. Ambrose lauded the sacrifices of the "greatest generation" and urged Americans to honor and collect stories from aged veterans before they died.

That "memory boom" culture combined with an array of political contexts. During the economic recession of the early 1990s, a flurry of books and articles expressed often hysterical concern over U.S. weakness and the sudden economic prowess of Japan, an imbalance (in fact, short-lived) widely represented as an "economic Pearl Harbor." A movement to exonerate the military commanders at Pearl Harbor, Adm. Husband E. Kimmel and Gen. Walter C. Short, stirred controversy over who bore the blame for Pearl Harbor -- the commanders in Hawaii or Franklin Roosevelt, the Democratic president in the White House. That, in turn, became part of a larger set of partisan "history wars," fought out in both politics and the media, especially after the Republican Party gained control of Congress in 1994.

Meanwhile, a new generation of Japanese American activists broke the silence of the past and asked new questions about their community's responses to that singular event that had demarcated such a sharp divide in formulations of racial and national identities. For example, an acrimonious dispute over a new memorial to Japanese American patriotism during World War II, dedicated in Washington in 2000, made public some long-simmering tensions about whether "patriotism" to American ideals consisted of complying with, or resisting, the government's ethnicity-based policies.

At the same time, a variety of strategic analysts warned of potential "Pearl Harbors" to make their case that the United States was letting down its national-security guard in the face of electronic, biological, chemical, or more conventional attacks.

Pearl Harbor, in short, became a multivocal icon that circulated with increased intensity in diverse contexts during the 1990s and beyond.

Hollywood gave the icon its biggest boost. The film *Titanic* had shown the profit-making potential of a visually stunning spectacle of disaster, love, and survival, all set in the past. The attack at Pearl Harbor, building on the popularity of the "greatest generation" phenomenon, seemed a near-perfect vehicle for a similar blockbuster. Made with assistance from the Pentagon, *Pearl Harbor* (2001) was extravagant in every way: costs (\$135-million), spectacle (merging the actual explosion of old warships with new computer-generated graphics), and promotion. The movie premiered just before Memorial Day 2001, amid a shower of associated television specials, magazine covers, books, consumer offshoots, and journalistic promotions. As it turned out, the film flopped in the reviews and then disappointed expectations at the box office and in DVD sales.

By the summer of 2001, nevertheless, memories of Pearl Harbor -- now circulating within a generation that had no direct recollection of the attack -- had become so ubiquitous in American culture that a stranger to the planet might have imagined that the attack had just recently occurred. Less than four months after the premiere of *Pearl Harbor*, after a summer and spring of hype, those refreshed and updated memories would shape the reactions to a new, even more deadly, surprise attack.

"Infamy" framed the first representations of September 11. That word, which since 1941 had become a virtual synonym for the Pearl Harbor attack, was culturally legible to almost everyone. It invoked a familiar, even comforting, narrative: a sleeping nation, a treacherous attack, and the need to rally patriotism and "manly" virtues on behalf of retribution. Structured by the Pearl Harbor story, September 11 seemed the prelude to another struggle between good and evil; to the testing of yet another "greatest generation"; and to an inevitable, righteous victory. The Bush administration and other politicians embraced that Pearl Harbor metaphor as they prepared to strike the Taliban in Afghanistan, and journalists seemed unable to resist reacting to Al Qaeda's assaults within the rhetorical conventions of Pearl Harbor. It was a ready, and easy, metaphor. Experts who flooded the airwaves more often addressed World War II parallels than the complexities of, say, Middle Eastern politics.

The familiar melodramatic structure -- deadly threat followed by resolve and unconditional military triumph -- helped sketch a powerfully reassuring story about a world that, for Americans, was suddenly filled with mourning, national insecurity, and personal anxiety. The symbol of Pearl Harbor offered a healing balm in a time of great popular fear and keep-the-message-simple mass media.

Less than three months after the fall of the towers, the 60th-anniversary commemorations of the Pearl Harbor attack itself further solidified the identification between the two events. New Yorkers journeyed to Hawaii to embrace Pearl Harbor survivors. George H.W. Bush addressed both attacks in speeches at two museums that honored the Pacific War. His son, the president, proclaimed Dec. 7 National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, with a reminder about "the presence of evil in the world"; then he flew to Norfolk, Va., to gather with people who had witnessed the Pearl Harbor attack. From the deck of one of the first aircraft carriers to launch strikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan, he proclaimed, "We've seen their kind before. The terrorists are the heirs to fascism." Once Pearl Harbor and September 11 became rhetorically intertwined, however, the spread of disparate meanings could not be easily contained. The attack on Pearl Harbor had never represented only one story, one "lesson," or one set of rhetorical conventions. If the framework of "infamy" initially marshaled remembrance of a deadly surprise attack by "evil" racial others, the story of Pearl Harbor could easily evoke other contexts as well.

One of those was the "sleeping" metaphor. American films, cartoons, comedians, and commentators during World War II commonly depicted "Uncle Sam" as having been "asleep" during the 1930s. One of the most widely read books on Pearl Harbor after the war was Gordon W. Prange's *At Dawn We Slept* (1981), and nearly every rendition of the attack since the film *Tora! Tora! Tora!* has invoked the quote, attributed to the Japanese admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, about the dangers of "awakening a sleeping giant."

During World War II, the sleeping metaphor was often directed at isolationists, specifically at Roosevelt's Republican opponents in Congress, who had resisted any substantial military buildup during the 1930s. Now it helped frame questions about America's preparedness for the attacks of September 11, but this time it had been Congress and its panels of expert witnesses who had warned publicly of future "Pearl Harbors" and urged greater alertness. Time magazine's cover of May 27, 2002, featured "WHILE AMERICA SLEPT" in big red letters. Underneath were the statements "What Bush Knew Before 9/11" and "Why So Little Was Done." This year Gerald L. Posner's detailed study of intelligence and other political failures leading up to the September 2001 attacks took the title *Why America Slept*.

Questions about blame also suggested another Pearl Harbor-era word: "Inquiry." There had been numerous wartime and postwar investigations of what went wrong at Pearl Harbor. At the time, it was Republicans who charged the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress with trying to protect themselves by scapegoating the commanders in Hawaii. Having gained control of Congress in 1994, Republicans, along with a few Democratic allies, called for new investigations into Pearl Harbor and shifted the blame for the lack of preparedness to President Franklin Roosevelt. By 2003, however, the politics of inquiry were very different.

A Republican president confronted questions about his administration's failure to anticipate a surprise attack, and a Republican Congress rallied to limit investigations. Finally forced to appoint an independent, bipartisan investigation, the Bush administration and the commission locked horns over access to documents, just as had happened during the Pearl Harbor investigations more than 50 years earlier. As Republican enthusiasm for new inquiries into Pearl Harbor faded, Democratic calls for ones related to September 11 mounted. As the Republican Bush administration built an enlarged national security state, it crafted, ironically, new governmental powers and claims of secrecy that were reminiscent of the Democratic Roosevelt's wartime administration.

Slowly but steadily, yet another Pearl Harbor analogy emerged. Just after December 7, Roosevelt's most embittered critics charged him with manipulating a "back door to war" -- provoking a Japanese attack and opening a "back door" to American involvement in the war that had already engulfed Europe. The more extreme view suggested a dark conspiracy: The Roosevelt administration knew the attack was coming, failed to send clear and urgent messages of an imminent assault to the Pacific commanders, and then covered up its misdeeds. A milder version argued simply that Roosevelt welcomed a convenient provocation to enter the war and did nothing to avoid its coming. Those back-door stories, which had circulated throughout the postwar era, gained additional visibility during the 1990s.

In an analysis of the Bush administration's policy making published in 2002, the always provocative Gore Vidal overtly invoked the title of one of the most prominent back-door works, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, edited by Harry Elmer Barnes in 1953. In his own back-door-to-empire interpretation, Vidal postulated that the Bush-Cheney oil group had plotted to beef up America's imperial presence in the Caspian and gulf oil regions and then used Al Qaeda's conveniently timed attack to justify conquest.

Michael Meacher, a former minister in Tony Blair's government, writing in *The Guardian*, pointed to the pre-9/11 imperial dreams of the Project for the New American Century, a private group that included people who subsequently became top members of the Bush defense establishment. A report by the group, Meacher wrote, had even argued that it would take some new "Pearl Harbor" to get Americans to support their globalist agenda, and he implied that some kind of attack would not have been entirely unwelcome. Back-door-to-empire interpretations, very prevalent outside of the United States, increasingly gained visibility here at home as questions began to circulate about ignored intelligence briefings, the Federal Aviation Administration's decisions on September 11, and puzzling timetables about what the president was told and when he was told it.

Politicians, in particular, often claim that the study of history teaches certain clear, and singular, "lessons." An examination of the uses of Pearl Harbor, however, suggests that history offers an arena for a diversity of narratives and for continuing debate about their possible meanings. Pearl Harbor stories have long been generating diverse debates, especially over the conduct of foreign policy, the global expansion of American power, and executive-branch responsibility. It is hardly surprising that September 11, so embedded within Pearl Harbor's metaphorical structures, has already sparked controversy over similar concerns. The politics of memory are no less complex than any other form of politics.

Pearl Harbor and September 11 thus stand as reusable and interrelated icons, shaping popular memories of past and present. Through Pearl Harbor, many of the rhetorical conventions of September 11 have been established; through September 11, the diverse understandings of Pearl Harbor have been reiterated. Through both events, longstanding debates about government's role and the direction of foreign policy can be refracted, recalled, and conducted anew.

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