

Pearl Harbor History: Why Did Japan Attack?

Before The Attack

September 1940. The U.S. placed an embargo on Japan by prohibiting exports of steel, scrap iron, and aviation fuel to Japan, due to Japan's takeover of northern French Indochina.

April 1941. The Japanese signed a neutrality treaty with the Soviet Union to help prevent an attack from that direction if they were to go to war with Britain or the U.S. while taking a bigger bite out of Southeast Asia.

June 1941 through the end of July 1941. Japan occupied southern Indochina. Two days later, the U.S., Britain, and the Netherlands froze Japanese assets. This prevented Japan from buying oil, which would, in time, cripple its army and make its navy and air force completely useless.

Toward the end of 1941. With the Soviets seemingly on the verge of defeat by the Axis powers, Japan seized the opportunity to try to take the oil resources of Southeast Asia. The U.S. wanted to stop Japanese expansion but the American people were not willing to go to war to stop it. The U.S. demanded that Japan withdraw from China and Indochina, but would have settled for a token withdrawal and a promise not to take more territory.

Prior to December 1941, Japan pursued two simultaneous courses: try to get the oil embargo lifted on terms that would still let them take the territory they wanted, and ... to prepare for war.

After becoming Japan's premier in mid-October, General Tojo Hideki secretly set November 29 as the last day on which Japan would accept a settlement without war.

The Japanese military was asked to devise a war plan. They proposed to sweep into Burma, Malaya, the East Indies, and the Philippines, in addition to establishing a defensive perimeter in the central and southwest Pacific. They expected the U.S. to declare war but not to be willing to fight long or hard enough to win. Their greatest concern was that the U.S. Pacific Fleet, based in Pearl Harbor could foil their plans. As insurance, the Japanese navy undertook to cripple the Pacific Fleet by a surprise air attack.

The Warnings

The U.S. had broken the Japanese diplomatic code and knew an attack was imminent. A warning had been sent from Washington, but it arrived too late.

Early warning radar was new technology. Japanese planes were spotted by radar before the attack, but they were assumed to be a flight of American B-17s due in from the West Coast.

The Attack

On December 7th 1941, on an otherwise peaceful Sunday morning on a beautiful Hawaiian island, the first wave of Japanese airplanes left 6 aircraft carriers and struck

Pearl Harbor a few minutes before 8 AM local time.

In two waves of terror lasting two long hours, they killed or wounded over 3,500 Americans and sank or badly damaged 18 ships - including all 8 battleships of the Pacific Fleet - and over 350 destroyed or damaged aircraft. At least 1,177 lives were lost when the Battleship U.S.S. Arizona exploded and subsequently sank.