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INFAMY AND THE CRACKED MIRROR OF HISTORY

Shortly after noon on December 8, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt appeared before a joint session of Congress to deliver one of history's most famous war messages. These were his opening words:

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

A date which will live in infamy—the phrase quickly became an indelible part of American history. Little known is the fact that this fine rhetoric was an editorial afterthought.

The Japanese had deliberately chosen Sunday, a quiet day, for their attack; their first wave of planes swooped in from six aircraft carriers just before eight o'clock in the morning. Three hours later, around five in the evening Washington time, the president summoned his secretary and began to dictate his message to the nation. No speechwriters were involved. The words were Roosevelt's own, and we still possess the typed text that was made from this session—heavily marked in pencil with the president's subsequent revisions. In the original version, the message began as follows: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in world history . . ."[1]

What a difference a second draft can make.

"Pearl Harbor" as Code

Immediately, "infamy" became American code for "Pearl Harbor," as well as code for Japanese treachery and deceitfulness—a stab in the back that cried out for retaliation and would never be forgotten. When the September 11 terrorist attacks occurred in New York and Washington just a few months short of six decades later, "infamy" was the first word many American commentators summoned to convey the enormity of these crimes. Pundits and politicians and appalled Americans everywhere almost reflexively evoked "Pearl Harbor." Past and present were momentarily fused, like a flashback in a film.

I was in Vermont on September 11. The next day's banner headline on one newspaper read simply "Infamy!" On the other local paper it was "Day of Infamy!" My hometown newspaper, the *Boston Globe*, headlined its September 12 issue "New day of infamy." The weekly edition of the *Washington Post*, which arrived a few days later, filled its front cover with President Roosevelt's exact quote: "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy."

President George W. Bush seized the same historical analogy when dictating to his diary on the night of September 11. "The Pearl Harbor of the 21st century," he recorded, "took place today." At the opposite end of the political spectrum, the liberal columnist Paul Krugman, reflecting on the first anniversary of 9-11, wrote, "It was natural to think of Sept. 11 as the moral equivalent of Pearl Harbor, and of the struggle that began that day as this generation's equivalent of World War II."[2]

What Krugman was evoking was the other side of infamy: the moral

1. USS Arizona *burning on Battleship Row. Japan's surprise attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor killed 2,345 military personnel and fifty-seven civilians, sank four battleships and damaged four others, and destroyed 188 aircraft while damaging another 155. The battleship* Arizona, *depicted above, sank with a loss of 1,177 sailors and became the final resting place of 1,102 of them. The memorial commemorating the attack, dedicated in 1962 and visited by over a million people annually, spans the sunken hull of the* Arizona.

2. *Flak and billowing smoke at Pearl Harbor.*

3. *A rescue boat approaches the USS* West Virginia.

4. *USS* Shaw *exploding.*

5. *A broken B-17, caught on the ground at Hickam Field.*

REMEMBERING DECEMBER 7

6–9. "Remember Pearl Harbor," the single most potent of wartime slogans, assumed new meaning in the wake of 9-11. As these posters reveal, contrary to Japanese hopes that the

outrage and thirst for revenge against a shameless foe that the crime of September 11, like that of December 7, triggered. "Remember Pearl Harbor," far and away the most popular rallying cry in America's war against Japan, ended only three years and eight months later, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (In the U.S. military, the slogan was sometimes rendered more graphically as "Remember Pearl Harbor—Keep 'em Dying.") After the destruction of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon, the ubiquitous slogan was "9-11—We Will Never Forget."[3]

The similarity of these battle cries was not mere coincidence. Like the language of "infamy," the call for everlasting remembrance of September 11 was all the more effective because most adult Americans immediately grasped—or grasped at—the resonance between the two catastrophes. As a billboard on the Kennedy Expressway in Chicago made clear, no one needed footnotes. *Never forget!* exhorted the legend in the middle, flanked right and left by two dates: *December 7, 1941*, and *September 11, 2001*.[4]

surprise attack would demoralize the Americans, the searing memory of December 7 went hand in hand with a fierce thirst for revenge.

Poor Japan: so many postwar years devoted to burying the past and proving itself a peaceful nation and devoted ally of the United States—and suddenly nineteen suicidal Islamist terrorists in hijacked airplanes had resurrected searing memories of the old and ostensibly bygone war. "Infamy" and "Remember Pearl Harbor" turned out to be but opening notes in an expansive rhetorical interplay of past and present. The attacks on Manhattan and the Pentagon also became likened to kamikaze attacks, even though these Japanese suicide tactics were not adopted until late 1944 and had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor or, indeed, with targeting civilians. The devastated World Trade Center site itself was christened "Ground Zero," a name originally associated with the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Transparently evoking the famous posed photograph of Marines raising the Stars and Stripes on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima in early 1945, a photo of firemen raising a flag amidst the smoldering ruins in Manhattan received wide circulation as a symbol of

America's heroic resolve to crush the enemy and fight through to victory. These iconic images of GIs in 1945 and New York City firemen in 2001 were frequently reproduced side by side.

The president and his speechwriters lost few opportunities to cast the new crisis in the mold of the old war. Just as Roosevelt had declared war on Japan with a memorable speech, Bush moved quickly to declare a "war on terror." Lost in the process were vast differences between 2001 and 1941. Unlike Japan and Germany, with their formidable military machines, the new antagonists were transnational, crudely armed, loosely organized, and committed to ad hoc "asymmetric" tactics of confrontation and destruction. They materialized and disappeared like phantoms. Politically, however, what mattered more than such differences was the opportunity to brand and empower President Bush, like Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman before him, as a war president.[5]

Two months after September 11, the president evoked, more obliquely, another provocative World War II allusion: Nazi genocide. Terrorists, he told the UN General Assembly on November 10, were "searching for weapons of mass destruction, the tools to turn their hatred into holocaust." Soon after, in his January 29, 2002, State of the Union address, the World War II analogy was ratcheted to another level when the president coupled Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil." This transparent allusion was to the "Axis" alliance of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and imperial Japan that had been formalized in the so-called Tripartite Pact of September 1940, culminating some five years of increasingly close relations.

The Axis alliance of World War II involved a formal military pact among three powerful nation-states hell-bent on conquest. By contrast, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea had no comparable great-power stature, no comparable formal (or informal) ties, no comparable armies and arsenals, no comparable expansionist plans. In this case, the forced analogy rested on the argument that the three nations possessed weapons programs, including missiles and existing or imminent nuclear capabilities, which could fall into the hands of Al Qaeda or other terrorists. Hand in hand with such evocations, from early on until the very end of the Bush presidency, critics of the conduct of the war on terror were routinely tarred with replicating the most craven and discredited of pre–World War II responses to the Axis threat: "appeasement."[6]

Pearl Harbor, the Axis, even the Holocaust—such plundering from the last "good war" was natural, irresistible, almost addictive, and took on a certain momentum all its own. On May 1, 2003, for example, after the war against terror had been escalated into "preemptive" war on Iraq, the president famously celebrated victory over Saddam Hussein's motley forces with a dramatic "Mission Accomplished" appearance on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*. More subtle than other official exercises in ransacking recent military history, Bush's triumphal setting reprised General Douglas MacArthur's receipt of Japan's formal surrender on the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. Even the language carried echoes. MacArthur had taken that grand moment to announce that "the Holy Mission has been completed."[7]

More overt and sustained was the use and misuse of history to frame what would supposedly follow the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his despotic Baathist regime. This campaign looked to the Axis not in war, but in defeat. Before the invasion, high officials invoked the "success story" of postwar Japan as a reassuring preview of what could be anticipated in Iraq: cordial welcome of the conquerors, followed by impressive accomplishments in reconstruction and democratization. And they continued to belabor this analogy long after the Bush-as-MacArthur moment had evaporated and the putative liberation of Iraq turned into protracted occupation of a violent, fractured land. (Occupied Germany was less useful as a positive precedent, since that defeated Axis nation had been divided into U.S., British, French, and Soviet zones of occupation and soon fell into the Cold War partition we know as East and West Germany.) On August 30, 2005, for example, Bush devoted almost an entire speech at the North Island Naval Air Station in California to this particular variant of the Japan code.

The historical touchstone for this widely publicized address was the sixtieth anniversary of "V-J Day." (Victory over Japan—"V-J"—signaled the end of World War II and actually had two anniversary dates. The Japanese emperor announced Japan's capitulation on August 14, 1945, while the formal surrender ceremony took place on the *Missouri* on September 2.) Invited audience included World War II veterans, and the president took care to mention by name Americans fighting in Iraq whose grandfathers "came together to join a mighty force that defeated the Japanese empire."

Such personalized touches were characteristic of Bush's public presentations in general, but the V-J Day address was an especially blatant—and, by this date, desperate—attempt to emphasize the intimate, generational "sacred bond" among "patriots past and present who have worn the nation's uniform." At the same time, painstaking care was taken to place Bush himself in the hallowed light of Franklin Roosevelt. Although Roosevelt and his liberal New Deal policies were reviled by the administration where domestic policy was concerned, the speech amounted to a paean to the wisdom, vision, and resolution of Roosevelt ("and later President Truman") as a leader in war.

One can almost picture White House speechwriters working from a crib on World War II highlighted with a magic marker. Pearl Harbor and the "dark days" that followed received the usual emphasis. More insistently, however, the V-J Day speech lingered on the hard struggles and decisive moments of victory that followed, including the Battle of Midway in mid-1942 and "the flag-raising of Iwo Jima" over two years later. (Iwo Jima, where U.S. forces began to take heavier losses as they drew closer to victory, was mentioned many times.) The ferocious Japanese enemy was exhumed—"kamikaze pilots on suicidal missions, soldiers who fought to the last man, commanders animated by a fanatical belief that their nation was ordained to rule the Asian continent." So too were the ghosts of Jimmy Doolittle (who led "the daring first attack on Japanese soil") and General MacArthur (who "sixty years ago this Friday . . . accepted the Japanese surrender aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay").

There was a double lesson in all this. First, history had come full cycle:

> As we mark this anniversary, we are again a nation at war. Once again, war came to our shores with a surprise attack that killed thousands in cold blood. Once again, we face determined enemies who follow a ruthless ideology that despises everything America stands for. Once again, America and our allies are waging a global campaign with forces deployed on virtually every continent. And once again, we will not rest until victory is America's and our freedom is secure.

FLAG-RAISING HEROES, 1945/2001

10–11. For Americans, combat in the Pacific and rescue operations at the World Trade Center each produced a single photograph that surpassed all others in conveying heroism and patriotism. After 9-11, Thomas Franklin's color photograph of three firemen raising the Stars and Stripes in the ruins of the World Trade Center was often set alongside the most famous counterpart image of World War II: Joe Rosenthal's black-and-white photograph of five marines raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima on February 23, 1945 (described in one commentary as "the most reproduced photograph in the history of photography"). A post–9-11 website captured the prevailing sentiment with this legend running across the paired images: "Different times, different enemy, same flag, same feeling . . ."

Both iconic images were cropped and reproduced as postage stamps. The Iwo Jima stamp appeared in July 1945 in response to public demand and congressional pressure, overturning a long-standing Post Office policy that living persons could not be depicted on postage. For many years, this was the best-selling stamp in U.S. postal history, with well over one hundred million sold. The firemen image, bearing the words "Heroes USA 2001," was issued in March 2002.

And second, looking to the future, one could find hope and inspiration in Japan in defeat. "American and Japanese experts claimed that the Japanese weren't ready for democracy," the president declared. (This was, indeed, largely true in conservative American and Japanese circles at war's end in 1945.) But they were wrong, he emphasized, and this would prove to be the case in Iraq as well—so long as Americans did not lose heart and abandon the good fight.[8]

The Boomerang of "Pearl Harbor"

Words matter. History matters. Freedom and democracy matter. But the V-J Day speech, coming as it did more than two years after the "Mission Accomplished" celebration, rang hollow. Osama bin Laden was still at large. The trumpeted rationale for invading Iraq—its supposed weapons of mass destruction and putative support of Al Qaeda—had long been discredited. Occupied Iraq was almost into a free fall of murderous chaos. Although White House ghostwriters were obsessively and perhaps sincerely drawn to making comparisons to World War II, most of the analogies they belabored were misleading. History misused is a cracked mirror, and tragedy can ensue from failing to recognize this. In this case, it did.

Even a cracked mirror throws back recognizable reflections, however, and the rough correspondence between September 11 and December 7 that most American adults instinctively perceived was provocative. As touchstone or code, "Pearl Harbor" signifies many things—negative and positive, infamous and catalyzing, ultimately deeply disturbing. On September 11, for example, it captured not merely moral outrage and a furious desire for swift and thoroughgoing retaliation, but also deep shock at the nation's unpreparedness. All the "while we slept" imagery that followed the surprise assault on Pearl Harbor—all the horrified realization that Fortress America was actually vulnerable to attack by determined enemies—suddenly returned.

Like December 7, the shock of September 11 prompted fevered analysis of the failure of U.S. intelligence. And, as it turned out, such analysis—particularly in the official form of joint congressional committee hearings in 2002 and the widely praised 2004 report of the 9-11 Commission—generally came up with diagnoses of "system failure" and recommenda-

tions for organizational reform comparable to the official response to the Pearl Harbor debacle over a half century earlier. Bureaucracies change but do not change, and much the same can be said of committees appointed to investigate them. Both are predictable, and the former can be counted on to undercut or circumvent whatever of substance the latter may recommend.

The same also can be said of human psychology, error, and folly. For "Pearl Harbor" turns out to be code for other things as well—myths of American innocence, victimization, and "exceptionalism," for example, as well as failures of both imagination and common sense. Prejudice and preconceptions skew assessment of the intentions and capabilities of potential enemies more than is usually acknowledged by those who focus on structural failure—especially where differences of race, culture, and religion are involved. By the same measure, such biases impede comprehension of the grievances that enable antagonists to mobilize support.

Failure of imagination goes far to explain why officials in Washington and commanders in Hawaii were unprepared for the surprise attack in December 1941, despite the fact that Japan's leaders were clearly poised for war. The imaginative failure is even more flagrant in the case of September 11. The first terror attack on the World Trade Center occurred eight years before 9-11. Osama bin Laden and other Islamist militants had issued a fatwa, or religious injunction, declaring holy war against "the Judeo-Christian alliance" and calling on Muslims in every country "to kill the American[s] and their allies—civilian and military" more than three and a half years before the attacks in 2001. This was the very opposite of a secret agenda, but analysts outside the inner sanctum of Washington policy planning struggled in vain to elevate terrorist threats to the homeland on the agenda of national security priorities before it was too late.[9]

A major study chaired by two former senators, released in January 2001 under the title *New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century*, for example, predicted that "states, terrorists, and other disaffected groups will acquire weapons of mass destruction and mass disruption, and some will use them. Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers." Later bipartisan investigations disclosed that between the time of that January report and September 10, counterterrorism specialists in the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Council made

urgent presentations on the threat ("the system was blinking red"); the president himself received over forty top-secret President's Daily Briefs with entries related to bin Laden; a dozen or so concrete leads to the 9-11 plot were not vigorously pursued; and there had been at least a dozen warnings about the possibility of using planes as weapons. Signals and warnings pointing to an impending attack on U.S. soil were far more numerous than in the case of Pearl Harbor, although they were not absent in the latter case.[10]

No one at top levels of the Bush administration, however, had the imagination to take these warnings seriously. The president's handlers prevented one of the coordinators of the *New World Coming* study from even meeting with the president, for example, and a canceled policy address on "the threats and problems of today and the day after, not the world of yesterday" scheduled for the evening of September 11 by national security adviser Condoleezza Rice did not mention bin Laden, Al Qaeda, or Islamist extremists. The primary focus was on promoting missile defense, and terrorism was mentioned in passing only in the context of rogue states. In strategic-planning circles, a considerable portion of pre–9-11 energy was devoted to identifying China as the great pending threat to American hegemony. In domestic policy projections, terrorism was not even included among the "top-ten" priorities established for the Justice Department by Attorney General John Ashcroft. "9-11" surpassed the Pearl Harbor debacle in exposing negligence and inability to think outside the box at the highest levels.[11]

Pearl Harbor analogies did not end with 9-11, moreover. On the contrary, they became greater and more provocative thereafter, as both the locus of "infamy" and failure of intelligence and imagination became compounded by the war of choice against Iraq. March 19, 2003—the date the U.S. military initiated "Operation Iraqi Freedom," its code name for the invasion of Iraq—joined December 7 and September 11 as the decisive marker of an unprovoked act of aggression. The octogenarian scholar of U.S. history Arthur Schlesinger Jr. introduced this jarring perception in an anguished response to the invasion. "The president has adopted a policy of 'anticipatory self-defense' that is alarmingly similar to the policy that imperial Japan employed at Pearl Harbor on a date which, as an earlier American president said it would, lives in infamy," Schlesinger wrote.

"Franklin D. Roosevelt was right, but today it is we Americans who live in infamy."[12]

This was a decidedly minority opinion among Americans at a moment when patriotic passion ran high, the high-tech extravaganza of the opening "shock and awe" assault dominated the media, and the fatal myopia of relying on sheer military might to combat terrorism had not yet been exposed by Iraq's subsequent descent into chaos. Outside the United States, Schlesinger's critique of the so-called Bush Doctrine would have been unexceptional. Within the nation, it was heresy—albeit less so as time passed, the rationales for invasion were discredited, and the promised liberation turned into bloody and seemingly interminable occupation of a broken land.

As it became clear that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a tactical success and strategic disaster, "Pearl Harbor" took on symbolic meaning at yet another level, unimagined even by those who shared Schlesinger's concern that the United States was violating the very principles it professed to uphold. The code here was psychological and practical rather than moral or legalistic—a matter of strategic folly or, put differently, of irrationality, wishful thinking, and groupthink at the highest levels.

Collective irrationality is the diagnosis most commentators have offered to explain imperial Japan's disastrous decision to take on the United States and Allied powers. Pearl Harbor was but one of scores of Japanese attacks launched throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific in December 1941. In the long run it was an ephemeral "mission accomplished," a Pyrrhic victory indeed. The most acid (and probably most quoted) judgment on Japan's decision for war was delivered by the American naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison in his semiofficial history of the war at sea. In his view, the Pearl Harbor attack,

> far from being a "strategic necessity," as the Japanese claimed even after the war, was a strategic imbecility. One can search military history in vain for an operation more fatal to the aggressor. . . . On the strategic level, it was idiotic. On the high political level it was disastrous.[13]

After the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, those who search military history for a strategic imbecility comparable to December 7, 1941,

will no longer come up dry. But what are we to make of this? Hitherto, the accepted explanation for imperial Japan's disastrous policy making, particularly by Americans and Europeans, was simple: for reasons of history, culture, and perhaps even ethnicity, the Japanese simply did not think rationally as Westerners did.

Here, too, we have some almost canonized observations—often by Joseph Grew, who served as U.S. ambassador to Tokyo from 1931 through Pearl Harbor (and was one of the authorities Morison quoted in advancing his thesis of Japan's "imbecile" behavior). As one of the State Department's highest officials after his repatriation from Japan in 1942, Grew spoke frequently and published prolifically about the thought and behavior of the enemy. His often lengthy dispatches to Washington before the outbreak of the war filled many pages in a massive 1943 State Department publication that reproduced many originally secret diplomatic papers from the decade leading up to Pearl Harbor. In 1944, these in-the-belly-of-the-beast views reached an even broader general public when Grew published a widely reviewed trade book based on his official communiqués and the detailed diary/journal he had maintained during his eventful years in Tokyo.

Grew's caricatures were all of a piece. A lengthy dispatch recycled in the wartime publications, for example, read as follows in the original cable sent September 29, 1941:

> The Ambassador stresses the importance of understanding Japanese psychology, fundamentally unlike that of any Western nation. Japanese reactions to any particular set of circumstances cannot be measured, nor can Japanese actions be predicted by any Western measuring rod. This fact is hardly surprising in the case of a country so recently feudalistic.

Another Grew character sketch (picked up in the postwar congressional Pearl Harbor hearings as well as by later commentators) held that "Japanese sanity cannot be measured by our own standards of logic."[14]

This is the formulaic language of "civilizational" differences and Western superiority. The irrational, nonwhite foreigner was a stock figure in the rhetoric of European and American imperialist and colonial expansion, and the Asia-Pacific War triggered countless English-language vari-

ations on Grew's perception of the Japanese as a race and people alien to any Western measuring rod. Brigadier General Bonner Fellers, MacArthur's chief of intelligence and a putative expert on Japanese psychology, for example, was especially proud of a pre–Pearl Harbor report in which he concluded that "in methods of thought, the Japanese and the Americans are today as different as if each had always lived on different worlds, separated by hundreds of *light years*."[15]

After World War II, irrationality was passed on like a candle flame to burn one nonwhite adversary after another—the Chinese, Koreans, peoples of Southeast Asia, and Muslims and Arabs. Speaking about the Chinese in 1955, for example, President Dwight Eisenhower channeled Joseph Grew in observing that "we are always wrong when we believe that Orientals think logically as we do."[16] L. Paul Bremer III, the U.S. viceroy in occupied Iraq in 2003 and 2004, commented similarly about one of the most admired of local leaders, the Ayatollah Sistani (who demanded that popular elections be held before the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority pushed through a new constitution and other drastic reforms). "Unfortunately developments in Iraq were not always logical," Bremer wrote in the memoir of his year in Iraq. "Certainly Ayatollah Sistani operated on a different rational plane than we Westerners."[17]

Turned about, this stereotype of the irrational Oriental reflects an abiding assumption that the Enlightenment ideals of reason, order, and civilized behavior do indeed guide modern Western thought and behavior. Sometimes they do. Just as often they do not, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the modern history of war and peace. Even if we were to set moral issues aside, technological and technocratic sophistication all too often go hand in hand with wishful thinking, delusion, and herd behavior at top levels. This was true of Japan's military planners in 1941—and true in many comparable ways of the U.S. planners and war enthusiasts who promoted the invasion of Iraq over six decades later. Rereading the detailed minutes of the top-secret Japanese policy-making sessions that culminated in Pearl Harbor is sobering. The Japanese deliberations are procedurally more formal than what we know of decision making in the Bush Oval Office. They involve articulate civilian and military officials engaged in ostensibly rational discussion. And, in the upshot—as in official Washington in the wake of 9-11—neither wisdom nor common sense prevail.

Consider the similar rationales and rhetoric of Japan's war of choice in 1941 and America's in 2003. Both rest on a combination of deep anxiety about national security and a professed goal of bringing about "liberation" overseas as prelude to establishing a lasting peace. Control of strategic resources abroad enters the picture in each case. Preoccupation with planning the initial attack overwhelms all other considerations in both Tokyo and Washington. Pushed aside is any truly serious evaluation of the nature, resources, and likely psychological response of the enemy. To question the justness of a preemptive or preventive war is taboo, and all criticism of the war plans on practical grounds is condemned as defeatism and close to treason. Ultimately, both wars of choice released forces of destruction beyond control and caused unspeakable suffering.

In a now-classic analysis of the Pearl Harbor debacle published in 1962, the social scientist Roberta Wohlstetter expressed wonder at "the paradox of pessimistic realism of phrase coupled with loose optimism in practice" where the U.S. response to imperial Japan's looming threat was concerned.[18] This observation turns out to work well as a generality. It can be applied to the imbecility of Japan's leaders opting to take on the Allied powers without engaging in serious long-range planning. It fits well the casualness of the Roosevelt administration in anticipating Japanese aggression while failing to give serious scrutiny to the actual mindset of Japan's leaders and capabilities of its armed forces. And it captures the paradox of the Bush administration's rush to war with Iraq—apocalyptic forebodings about the target nation's arsenals and inclinations, and the menace of terror worldwide, coupled with a nonchalance regarding post-invasion contingency planning that bordered on the criminally negligent. Had the Oval Office planners been Japanese, a legion of white pundits would have materialized to explain that they simply did not think logically, as Westerners do.

Perhaps the greatest boomerang effect that arose out of the pervasive Pearl Harbor and World War II analogy was the fatal assumption that terrorism, like the old Axis enemies, could be defeated by brute force. Almost everyone at top levels in Washington bought into this, no one more so than the president. For years after embracing the role of "war president" and invading Iraq, Bush ignored the roots of anti-Americanism and insurgency and kept asking his commanders for body counts of killed enemy.

An attack by a small nonstate organization was equated with an assault by a formidable nation-state. What should have been recognized as a fundamentally criminal challenge, calling for a broad range of multilateral responses, was addressed as a threat to be met, first and foremost, with conventional military force. More than undiscerning and counterproductive, this response was a disaster.[19]

Obviously, the differences between World War II and the "war on terror" are compelling. At the same time, it is well to keep in mind that code words—and the use and misuse of history more generally—can be political and ideological triggers. Thus, among power brokers, "Pearl Harbor" is also code for useful catastrophes. A full year before September 11, conservatives committed to radical revision of U.S. foreign and military policies who later became influential in shaping the Bush administration's foreign policy were already ruminating on "some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor" that might facilitate military expansion and a more aggressive policy in the Middle East, particularly against Iraq. They did not wish this horror upon the nation, but it served their strategic purposes well.

Prophecies may be self-fulfilling, as we constantly learn and forget, and catastrophes godsends for the agile and cynical.[20]