

Why Did Japan Attack Pearl Harbor?

It is possible to argue that the most memorable day in United States history was Sunday, December 7, 1941, the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Within hours America was deeply embroiled in World War II, both in the Pacific against Japan, and in Europe against Japan's ally, Nazi Germany. The world would never be the same.

To begin to understand why Japan attacked Pearl Harbor one must step back at least a few years to the end of an earlier war. In 1919 many of the major world powers met in Versailles, France, to sort out the wreckage of World War I. Among those present were Japan and the United States. One of Japan's interests was to hold on to some islands in the Pacific it had picked up from Germany. President Woodrow Wilson led the American delegation. Wilson's special interest was the creation of a **League of Nations**, an organization to solve future world problems.

In fact, a League of Nations was established. Many nations joined, including Japan. Surprisingly, the United States did not join. Some American leaders simply did not want to get tangled up in the world's problems. The failure of the United States Senate to vote for the League got a mixed reaction in Japan. Some Japanese leaders were quite shocked and disappointed. Others, however, were not surprised. They were suspicious of the United States. And besides some Japanese leaders had been resentful of the Versailles Treaty. They had always seen it as a way for the Europeans and the Americans to maintain the **status quo** – to keep the world divided between the haves and the have-nots. And in the 1920s, Japan was still one of the have-nots.

In the early 1930s things changed. The military gained increasing power in Japan. In 1932 the Japanese established a **puppet state** in **Manchuria**. When the League of Nations objected, Japan itself left the League. In 1937 Japan invaded China.

The United States and President Franklin Roosevelt were upset and worried about Japan's advances in China, but there was an even bigger concern in Europe. That concern was Adolf



Hitler and Nazi Germany. In 1939, Germany attacked Poland. In the next two years German tanks and planes threatened to conquer most of the European continent. France fell. England held on by a thread. In September 1940, Japan signed a three-way pact with Germany and Italy. This was very upsetting to the United States. Roosevelt realized war with Germany was just a matter of time. He had hoped to avoid a war with Japan. He did not want to fight on **two fronts**.

Roosevelt did not get his wish. On December 7, 1941, 361 planes launched from six Japanese aircraft carriers and delivered a surprise attack on the American naval base and airfields at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

But why? At the time Japan had half the population of the United States. In area, it was smaller than Sweden. Japanese leaders knew they were taking a big risk. With all this, *why did Japan attack Pearl Harbor?*

3. What is an “embargo”?
4. Why would the actions in August of 1941 be a concern to Japan?
5. Judging from the this timeline, why do you think Japan attacked Pearl Harbor?

Document D:

1. What is an import?
2. In the late 1930s, about what percent of Japan’s oil came from the United States?

10%	20%	50%	80%
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3. True / False -- Japan had few oil reserves and produced very little of its own oil.

4. The United States stopped all trade of oil, steel, and scrap iron with Japan on August 1, 1941. There is evidence that President Franklin Roosevelt was concerned about cutting off all oil to Japan. What might have been his concern.

Document E:

1. The speaker of this document is _____. His role was _____ and _____ in Japan.
2. Tojo says that it would be hard for Japan to pull their troops out of China because _____ soldiers are either dead or wounded, Japanese _____ have suffered from grief, and the country has spent several _____ of _____.
3. The United States (does / does not) want Japan to pull their troops out of China.
4. According to Tojo, Japanese supply of oil will only last for _____ years.
5. According to Tojo, what will happen to the US navy over the next few years? Provide a quote to support your answer.
6. Based on this document, what are 2 reasons why Japan would attack Pearl Harbor?

Name: _____

Pearl Harbor DBQ's

Essential Question: *Why did Japan attack Pearl Harbor?*

Background Essay:

Pearl Harbor was attacked by Japan on Sunday, _____, _____. Within hours of this, America was in WWII in the _____ against Japan and Nazi Germany in _____. The roots of this go back to the year _____ when many world powers met in _____, France, to help sort out the end of WWI. Japan had an interest in holding on to some of the islands in the _____ that it picked up from Germany. US President Woodrow Wilson wanted to create the League of _____ to help solve future world problems.

Japan ended up joining this, but the _____ chose not to because some leaders didn't want to get tangled up in the world's problems. This caused the _____ leaders to have shocked and _____ response. Japanese leaders had been _____ of the Versailles Treaty because they saw it as a way for Europe and America to divide the world between the haves and have-nots. In the 1920s, Japan was still one of the _____.

This began to change in the _____ when the Japanese military gained more power. In _____, they developed a **puppet state** in _____, and then they the invaded _____ in 1937. This worried the US and President _____, but the country of _____ was an even bigger concern because of Adolf Hitler's actions. Germany caused _____ to fall, and _____ was barely hanging on. In 1940, Japan signed a pact with _____ and _____. Roosevelt realized that war with Germany was about to happen, but he wanted to avoid war with _____. Roosevelt did not get his wish.

On _____, 1941, _____ planes delivered a surprise attack on the American _____ base and airfields at Pearl Harbor, _____. Japan had _____ the population of America and is smaller in area than _____. Japan was taking a big _____. Why did they _____ Pearl Harbor?

Document A:

1. What is a subject
2. What is meant by the "old order"?

Document B:

2. Japan was expanding their empire. What islands might they invade to seize more oil fields?
2. If the Europeans were busy fighting a war with Hitler, what nation could be expected to block Japan? Explain.

Document C:

1. How many years was it between Japan's attack on China and Pearl Harbor?
2. What actions did the US do in 1939 and 1940 to show that they did not like the "new order" (an Asia controlled by Japan)?

Document A

Source: Excerpts from *The Way of the Subjects*, published by Japan's Ministry of Education in 1941.

Note: *The Way of the Subjects* was required reading in most Japanese high schools and colleges.

- An old order ... (European and American) ... is now crumbling.
- The ideals of Japan ... are represented by the principle that the benevolent rule of the Emperor may be extended so as to embrace the whole world.
- Japan is the fountain source of the Yamato race. Manchukuo (Manchuria) is its reservoir and East Asia (including China) is its paddy field.
- The way of the subject is to be loyal to the Emperor in disregard of self, thereby supporting the Imperial Throne coexistence with the Heaven and the Earth.

CV

Note: The Yamato race refers to a pure, unmixed Japanese people.

Document B

Source: Map created from various sources.



CV

Document C

Source: Timeline adapted from *Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War* by Akira Iriye, 1999.

1932		Japan completes occupation of Manchuria.
1937		Japan attacks China.
1938		Japan declares its policy to establish a “new order in East Asia.”
1939		US begins an embargo* of aircraft and aircraft parts against Japan.
1940	May	President Roosevelt moves US Pacific fleet from California to Pearl Harbor.
	July	US Congress passes Naval Expansion Act. Promises to triple fleet size by 1944.
1941	July	The United States freezes all Japanese assets and bank accounts.
	Aug.	The United States imposes an embargo on oil shipments to Japan.
	Dec.	Japan attacks Pearl Harbor.

*Embargo = stopping trade

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Document D

Source: Chart adapted from "U.S. Economic Sanctions Against Japan and Its Aid to China during the Sino-Japanese War" by Suzuki Akira, *Asia Kenyu*, April 1986.

Japanese Imports 1937 – 1941						
Petroleum (Oil) in units of 10,000 tons						
Steel and scrap iron in units of 1,000 tons						
	<u>Petroleum</u>		<u>Steel</u>		<u>Scrap Iron</u>	
	<u>Total</u>	<u>US</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>US</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>US</u>
1937	482	380	995	409	242	178
1938	392	316	857	310	136	101
1939	343	291	706	32	256	218
1940	436	291	690	...	139	112
1941	141	88	646	6	20	11

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Note: Japan had few oil reserves and produced very little of its own oil.

Document E

Source: Remarks made by Hideki Tojo at the Imperial Conference of November 5, 1941, where it was determined that Japan should go to war.

Note: Tojo was both Prime Minister and War Minister of Japan. These comments were made in a closed meeting of Japan's top government and military leaders in the presence of the Emperor.

The United States has not conceded a single point; it simply makes strong demands on Japan.

... What they insist upon is Japan's acceptance of the principle of the withdrawal of troops [from China].... As I understand it, withdrawal of our troops is retreat. We sent a large force of one million men to China, and it has cost us well over 100,000 dead and wounded, the grief of their bereaved families, hardship for four years, and a national expenditure of several billions of yen. We must by all means get satisfactory results from this.... We can expect an expansion of our country only by stationing troops. This the United States does not welcome.

...[H]ow can we let the United States do as she pleases, even though there is some uneasiness? Two years from now we will have no petroleum for military use. Ships will stop moving. When I think about the strengthening of American defenses in the Southwest Pacific, the expansion of the American fleet, ... I see no end to difficulties.... I fear that we would become a third-class nation after two or three years if we just sat tight.

CV