

December 1941: “The Most Tremendous Undertaking”

WHEN SHE FIRST HEARD THAT PEARL HARBOR had been attacked, sixteen-year-old Elaine R. Engelson of Brooklyn was “amazed and ashamed” of her “weakness in facing a world crisis.” She wrote to the *New York Times* the next day that although she, like many others, had “felt the inevitability of war” for some time, “the thought of it actually having come upon us was sudden.” The horrifying events in Hawaii suddenly changed the rhythms of the teenager’s life. She had grown accustomed to countless airplanes flying overhead, but on December 8, the sound of an approaching plane produced a new sense of dread. Although “the world has not yet come to an end by any means,” she had the ominous feeling that “we are on the brink of a precipice overhanging a world of complete darkness.” What was at stake, she said, was something she and many Americans had not fully appreciated until then: “We are fighting to save the world from a fate worse than death.”¹

For a stunned nation, it seemed impossible that the U.S. Pacific Fleet had been caught so unaware. Over twenty-four hundred Americans had died, and the navy had lost eight battleships, four destroyers, and 350 airplanes. Along with shock and anger came another reaction, shared by millions on both coasts. People wondered if Pearl Harbor was just a prelude to something far worse. In a Gallup poll taken shortly after December 7, 60 percent responded that it was “very likely” or “fairly likely” that the West Coast would be attacked in the next few weeks.

Though Americans could not know it at the time, the leader of the first wave of planes, Mitsuo Fuchida, wanted to return to Hawaii and bomb fuel tanks and other supply stations. Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo was not persuaded, arguing that the American aircraft carriers *Lexington* and *Enterprise* still posed a threat to Japanese forces, and he refused to order a second air strike. Yet one Japanese flight deck officer succinctly expressed both the growing confidence of the Imperial forces and the fears of anxious Americans: “We’re not returning to Tokyo; now we’re going to San Francisco.”²

After being informed of the attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt summoned his cabinet to an emergency meeting at the White House, where Interior secretary Harold Ickes noted that the sullen crowds gathered near the gates “were responding to that human instinct to get near a scene of action even if they could see or hear nothing.” The president told his cabinet that it was the most serious situation the nation had faced since 1861. He also asked congressional leaders for time to address a joint session the next day. Afterward, over a late dinner with journalist Edward R. Murrow, the president vented his frustration that U.S. planes had offered such easy targets: “On the ground, by God! On the ground!”³

As Roosevelt understood, nothing since the Civil War reached the magnitude of Pearl Harbor. The United States had escaped destruction on its own shores in previous wars, but it was now vulnerable to enemy planes. Recent events had made Americans aware of the chilling possibilities: the mustard gas used by Italian bombers against Ethiopians in 1935; the fascist bombing of Guernica, Spain, in April 1937, made famous by the Picasso mural; the Luftwaffe bombings of London in 1940 and 1941. Airplanes with such destructive power were a new and terrifying technology. In the United States, Orson Welles’s radio broadcast *War of the Worlds* in 1938 had inspired panic among listeners. By the time the news of the Pearl Harbor attack reached the East Coast, Americans were besieged with a sense of dread. Paris and much of France were already occupied; England was preparing for imminent invasion; Poland, Czechoslovakia, China, and Southeast Asia had fallen; now, suddenly, America seemed vulnerable too.

As the nation struggled to understand how an American base could have been so exposed to a brazen attack, few heroes could be found. One sailor’s

courageous actions during the attack went largely unknown for months. Messman Third Class Doris “Dorie” Miller was a twenty-two-year-old African American from Waco, Texas, who found himself in the middle of the attack on the U.S.S. *West Virginia*. Because of the military’s segregation policy, Miller could perform only kitchen duties. Yet not only did he risk his life by carrying his mortally wounded captain to safety, he manned an anti-aircraft gun, despite the fact that he had never used such weaponry. Miller likely downed at least one, if not more, enemy aircraft. In May, he became the first African American to be awarded the Navy Cross. News of Miller’s heroics was widely disseminated throughout the African American community, and a song was sung in Harlem: “Dorie Miller, he’s a killer—ask the Japanese.”⁴

On Monday, December 8, FDR spoke before a joint session of Congress. Calling the 7th “a day that will live in infamy,” he asked for a declaration of war against Japan. Summoning the “righteous might” of an angry nation, FDR promised a military response that would bring “absolute victory.” Despite the rhetoric, many within the government and military understood the sobering reality. “This at once places at stake everything that is precious and worthwhile,” wrote Secretary of War Henry Stimson in his diary, adding that “self defense” was “the key point for the preservation of each and all of our civilized institutions.” The chances of defeat or stalemate were very real. William Batt, director of materials at the War Production Board, said it in the clearest of terms: “Not since the days of the revolution have we had much of a chance to lose a war. We have a chance to lose this one.”⁵

Within the areas of the country most worried about new assaults, a common reaction on December 8 was to look guardedly at suspected enemies. Roosevelt had signed proclamations in the hours after Pearl Harbor designating Japanese, German, and Italians whom the FBI had deemed dangerous to American security in the United States as “enemy aliens.” In Los Angeles, FBI agents and soldiers from nearby Fort MacArthur began taking “key” Japanese citizens into custody less than two hours after the attack, and some Italian Americans suffered the same fate. Filippo Molinari of San Jose, California, was arrested by the FBI on the night of the 7th, and soon found himself on a train bound for internment at Camp Missoula, Montana. When he arrived in Missoula, Molinari recalled, he was “still in his

slippers, the temperature at 17 below and no coat or heavy clothes” to keep him warm.⁶

In Hawaii, the Justice Department established an internment camp at Sand Island to keep “enemy aliens” under control. New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who had been appointed director of the Office of Civilian Defense in May 1941, directed the city’s Japanese nationals to stay confined in their homes, and known Japanese meeting places and restaurants were closed. The FBI had already compiled a “Suspect Enemy Aliens” list with help from the Census Bureau, and now used it to arrest over a thousand Japanese American leaders throughout New York. In San Francisco, Brigadier General William O. Ryan said “many planes” that were undoubtedly enemy aircraft had flown over San Francisco Bay. Western Defense Commander General John DeWitt warned that a Bay Area blackout was not sufficient and “a great many things will have to be corrected” in order to ensure the nation’s safety. Blackouts in Southern California had the unanticipated consequence of killing four people in nighttime traffic accidents when cars could not use their headlights.⁷

In Washington, D.C., the floodlights illuminating the Capitol dome were turned off, and black drapes covered the White House windows. Large sand bins were scattered throughout the Capitol building in case of an incendiary attack. Two days before Christmas, curators at the National Archives removed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, carefully placing the documents between two sheets of acid-free manila paper inside a bronze container, and then secured it all inside a lead box with heavy padlocks. Guards took the box to the train station for a trip to Louisville, Kentucky, where the shipment was received by Secret Service agents and members of the Thirteenth Armored Division, stationed at nearby Fort Knox. They took the precious documents to the recently built Bullion Depository, where they remained for the duration of the war.⁸

Adolf Hitler declared war on the United States on December 11. The week earlier, the German government called for spending the equivalent of \$150 billion over the next two years. Describing himself as “the head of the strongest Army in the world,” the German Führer called the American president “the eternal Jew,” who “aimed at world domination and dictatorship.” In response, Roosevelt sent Congress another request, asking that

the U.S. recognize a “state of war” with Germany and Italy. Congress quickly gave its unanimous support, and the nation formally entered a truly global conflict. The U.S. joined Great Britain and Russia in the Grand Alliance against Germany, Japan, and Italy (the Axis powers). “Every single man, woman, and child,” the president said in a fireside chat, “is a partner in the most tremendous undertaking of our American history.”⁹

It was a war that Roosevelt had long feared. Throughout the 1930s, he had worried about the rise of fascism but faced strong congressional opposition to enflaming potential enemies. Even after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, isolationist sentiment ran strong throughout the nation and in Congress. Many recalled the lessons of a Senate committee chaired by isolationist Gerald Nye of North Dakota, which had revealed the outlandish profits taken by munitions makers during World War I. When Hitler’s armies had marched into Paris and bombed London in 1940, there were no united calls to enter the war. Even as he campaigned for a third term in the White House in fall 1940, Roosevelt had famously promised: “I have said it before but I shall say it again and again and again. Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.” The purpose of any military buildup, he added, was to train a force “so strong that, by its very existence, it will keep the threat of war away from our shores.” Roosevelt’s reassurances that the nation could avoid war helped him defeat Wendell Willkie by a margin of 367 electoral votes.¹⁰

One reason for Roosevelt’s reluctance to commit troops to Europe or the Pacific was the state of America’s armed forces. The military resources the commander in chief had at his disposal at the beginning of World War II were not what Americans today are accustomed to. In 1939, the U.S. Army was ranked nineteenth in the world in size, with 187,886 troops in 8 divisions, smaller than the armies of Switzerland or Portugal. The German Wehrmacht, in comparison, consisted of 3.7 million troops in 103 divisions, the Italian Army had over 90 divisions, and the Imperial Japanese Army had 1.7 million members. In 1940, the German Luftwaffe had 25,000 planes compared to just 2,665 aircraft in the Army Air Corps. American infantry trained with wooden rifles and used trucks to simulate tank warfare, and horses pulled battlefield cannon. The standard rifle was the 1903 bolt-action Springfield that had been used in World War I.¹¹

The Army Air Force had but 18,000 airmen and 1,300 officers when war broke out in Europe. General Henry “Hap” Arnold understood that the U.S. followed “antiquated air doctrines” reminiscent of World War I, with “heroic pilots in dogfights.” Now that planes “had broken down all boundaries of time and distance,” Arnold believed Americans recognized that “even our own inland cities were within bombing range of the enemy.” Arnold knew the task ahead was daunting: “Germany required ten years to create her Luftwaffe,” while the U.S. had to “build our air force in one, and fight with it in four corners of the world at the same time.”¹²

As the war raged in 1940, President Roosevelt and Congress began rebuilding the army and navy. One step was the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which required all American men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five to register for the draft. In October 1940, the nation held its first peacetime draft lottery, and by the time of Pearl Harbor, over 17 million Americans were registered and 921,000 men had been drafted. Over 12 million men received deferments, including 10 million who were listed as having “persons dependent upon them for support.” Another 1,178,000 were “physically, mentally, or morally unfit,” while just 5,710 registered as conscientious objectors. A decade of economic deprivation had its consequences: half of the first recruits for the U.S. Army were found to be unfit for service due to malnutrition and poor health care.¹³

In May 1940, to prepare the nation for the worst, FDR had set an outlandish production goal of fifty thousand planes. The Lend-Lease Act, passed by Congress in March 1941, called for an additional \$7 billion worth of planes, ships, and other goods that would serve as a lifeline to Great Britain. In case of American entry into the war, the military worked secretly on a variety of overall strategies. In September 1941, the administration settled on a “Victory Program” calling for a 10-million-man army that would not be fully ready to confront Hitler’s forces until mid-1943. Word of the secret plan was leaked to the isolationist *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Times-Herald* the first week of December 1941. In its issue of Saturday, December 6, the *Tribune* warned readers of the Roosevelt administration’s secret “blueprint for total war.”¹⁴

The fear of more attacks led one of the world’s leading private insurers, Lloyd’s of London, to cancel all policies protecting American property from

enemy destruction. Many U.S. insurance companies followed suit. The Insurance Executives Association, a lobbying group, suggested that another entity should assume the loss in case of war. Two New York insurance executives, Clement L. Despard and Isaac Witkin, sent a plan to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation outlining how the federal government should underwrite losses in the case of “invasion, revolution, insurrection, rebellion, civil war, bombardment,” and damage caused “by the operation of martial law, military or usurped power in connection with foregoing perils.”¹⁵

The government did not take long to respond. On December 13, 1941, President Roosevelt chartered the War Insurance Corporation, capitalized with \$100 million, to provide protection against losses resulting from enemy attacks. Three months later, the agency was renamed the War Damage Corporation (WDC) and authorized to underwrite policies worth up to \$1 billion. In the event of enemy attack, all claims had to be approved by the secretary of commerce and the president. More than five hundred private companies served as the WDC’s agents, and within a year nearly 4 million policies had been issued, insuring a total of \$94 billion. The federal government in 1942 collected premiums totaling over \$218 million. The policies covered buildings and structures as well as crops and orchards, but excluded losses due to “blackout, sabotage, capture, seizure, pillage, looting, use and occupancy,” as well as lost “rent, rental value or other indirect loss.” Jewelry, furs, paintings, antiques, and stamp or coin collections could be insured for up to \$10,000, and museums and art dealers could insure their collections for up to \$100,000. Policies would not be extended to anyone “who, in the opinion of the President, [is] unfriendly to the U.S.” The tangible fear of inland attacks was revealed by companies such as the Matlaw Corporation of Hammond, Indiana, which bought a policy for \$104, insuring a commercial building located twenty-three miles south of Chicago.¹⁶

While the West Coast braced for more Japanese air raids, the East Coast readied for attacks from the German Navy. Shortly after Hitler declared war on the U.S., German admiral Karl Dönitz’s U-boats began attacking ships in the Atlantic Ocean as far west as the U.S. coastline. Long before American ground troops could be deployed in Europe or the Pacific, the war would be fought in the waters of the Atlantic, and for the time being the Germans held a clear advantage. Given their control of the ocean, it seemed

likely that their planes would soon bomb eastern cities or unleash chemical warfare.¹⁷

Air raids became a part of everyday life in many American cities. The Office of Civilian Defense (OCD) hastily issued some "rules." First, "remain calm and do not be frightened. Much more damage can be caused by panic than by falling building materials or even the bombs themselves." In addition to avoiding subways and telephones, citizens were advised that "if bombs should fall, lie down, whether at home or outside, and keep as far as possible from windows." Parents were told that if an air raid occurred while their children were at school, "see to your own safety, stay home, do not try to reach the school. You could accomplish no good. You could do a great deal of harm by such action." The OCD acknowledged that "this is hard advice," but "it is for your best interest and for the welfare of your children." New York City teenagers met at the Triangle Ballroom to volunteer for service in a citywide air-raid drill, performing such tasks as acting as couriers to deliver food and clothing and rendering first aid. One scoutmaster who attended the meeting warned, "If any of you are here seeking telephone numbers or dates, go right home and remain there. This is not a social affair, but the grim business of war." When she was told to prepare for an air-raid drill at her elementary school in New York City, one young girl was not quite sure what to do. She likely knew little about the details of what had happened nearly five thousand miles away in Hawaii, but after seeing how the adults in her life were responding, she sensed that something awful had occurred. She asked her teacher, "Is this when I cry?"¹⁸

Some within the Roosevelt administration proposed having the War Department take over "Home Defense" in order to adequately prepare for enemy attacks. Secretary of War Stimson rejected the idea. "We have burdens enough," he said. He hoped to keep his department focused on fighting the war abroad and to avoid the public outcry that could occur if the U.S. mainland suffered an attack. Yet he admitted that an attack "in the immediate future" on American soil was "likely."¹⁹

If fear of conventional bombings provoked anxiety throughout much of the country, so did the fear of chemical warfare, something that anyone knowledgeable of World War I knew well. Some U.S. military officials thought that massed squadrons of planes dropping mustard gas, chlorine, or lewisite

could cause “a complete revision of how we wage war.” Despite international agreements, no nation had abandoned the production of chemical weapons, and the United States maintained a massive supply. Although gas was rarely used in combat in World War II, U.S. Navy researchers conducted experiments on sixty thousand U.S. sailors, in part to see if the effects of mustard gas differed according to one’s race.²⁰

One place that did not panic after Pearl Harbor was Wall Street. After the Dow Jones Industrial Average closed at 115.9 on Friday, December 5, the first day of trading after the attack saw only a slight decline, to 112.52. There was no rush by investors to convert their equities to gold or cash. Rather than worry about stock prices, Wall Street was more focused on its physical structure. The insurance bonds that covered its trading rooms contained a war risk exclusion, and firms began negotiating for a new indemnity bond that would also cover enemy bombing. One financial firm trained its workers to pile trays of paper securities into a vault, and those on the trading floor were advised to keep their papers in fireproof steel boxes.²¹

The reaction of pundits and political observers to any national tragedy usually includes a call to end partisan bickering. Throughout the nation that December, opinion makers counseled that politics should take a back seat to a united effort against the common enemy. Basil Brewer, publisher of the *New Bedford (Mass.) Standard-Times*, published an editorial that read: “ABANDON POLITICS in preparedness program FROM THE PRESIDENT DOWN,” followed by “Stop beating the OLD CLASS HATRED TOM TOMS. The welfare of ALL is threatened.” In addition to an end to red tape and giving “dollar a year men” authority, Brewer called for building factories and airports underground. He implored the nation to “SACRIFICE THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE, BUT AS MUCH AS NECESSARY.”²²

President Roosevelt welcomed calls to end partisan sniping and began considering the full extent of his powers in total war. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln had suspended the writ of habeas corpus and assumed extraordinary executive power. In 1918, Woodrow Wilson had signed the Sedition Act, which outlawed “disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language” about the government, flag, or armed forces of the United States. No president exercised similar power until 1933, when Roosevelt, declaring that the American people wanted “vigorous action” to combat the Depression, asked

Congress for “broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.” Eight years later, the nation confronted those foes.²³

On December 16, 1941, after two hours of debate and a voice vote, Congress passed the War Powers Act, giving the president authority to redistribute and establish executive agencies, impose government censorship, and award war contracts without competitive bidding. It also authorized the president to order surveillance “when deemed necessary to the public safety.” Having declared war, Congress entrusted the conduct of the war abroad and at home to the chief executive. The *New York Times* felt the legislation gave FDR “almost unlimited powers to regulate the nation’s emergency war effort at home,” and the *Wall Street Journal* lamented that FDR “now holds greater powers over life and property than any President before him.” One Democratic congressman from Virginia, John W. Flannagan Jr., argued that in some way the nation “needed a Pearl Harbor—a Golgotha—to arouse us from our self-sufficient complacency.” Flannagan felt that Pearl Harbor produced a “righteous wrath” so powerful “that our differences and divisions and hates melted into a unity never before witnessed in this country.”²⁴ Time would soon test Flannagan’s observations.

With massive war spending imminent, congressional leaders began considering how to combat the inflation that they believed was certain to follow. During the Civil War, prices had risen 120 percent, and during and immediately after World War I they had risen more than 170 percent. Considering what the nation now confronted, similar inflationary levels could prove disastrous to the war effort and wreck the nation’s economy as well. The budgetary challenges also gave the president’s opponents an opportunity to drastically cut domestic spending. Over the preceding decade, conservatives in both parties worried that the administration’s response to the Depression, a vast system of government work programs and regulatory agencies termed “the New Deal,” was misguided. While his most vocal opponents considered it a socialistic experiment that prolonged the economic downturn and generated government waste, others worried it had created a vast bureaucracy that produced dependence on government. After Pearl Harbor, New Deal programs that conservatives had long hated were among the first to be targeted. Led by budget hawk Virginia senator Harry Byrd, a

joint committee named Reduction of Non-Essential Federal Expenditures suggested cutting over \$1.7 billion, mostly in programs ranging from the Civilian Conservation Corps to the Farm Security Administration. A minority report, led by Wisconsin senator Robert LaFollette, rejected the committee's proposals, saying that the cuts would fall "on the very lowest income groups among our population" and would cripple national morale.²⁵

By the last week of 1941, more bad news came from the Philippines with the bombing of Manila, followed by additional Japanese attacks on Guam, Wake Island, Thailand, and Hong Kong. Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana was clear about how he felt toward the Japanese: "One can come to only one conclusion from the action of the Japanese," he said, "and that is that they are an inhuman and half-civilized race." Wheeler, an isolationist who had made the famous declaration that the passage of Lend-Lease would "plow under every fourth American boy," added that "the tragedy is that we have given away so much of our material that we cannot retaliate and bomb Tokyo, Kobe, Yokohama, and Nagasaki." Senate majority leader Alben W. Barkley of Kentucky struck a less racist but more vengeful tone, noting that as "Manila is suffering, with its 600,000 helpless inhabitants huddled under the rain of Japanese missiles," Japanese leaders should "think of Tokyo, with ten times as many inhabitants, when the inevitable day of destruction comes, as our bombers swoop down upon the city."²⁶

On New Year's Eve, FDR predicted that in the coming year, half of the national income would be expended on the war. While he would not specify exactly how much spending he would ask Congress to approve until a subsequent address in early January, estimates among Washington insiders reached as high as \$50 billion, more than the nation's GDP in 1939. To place that sum in context, in 1939, when Roosevelt asked for a \$309 million increase in military spending over the previous year's appropriation of \$1 billion, the request had prompted some isolationists in Congress to object to the "enormous outlay."²⁷

As the new year approached, Columbia University historian Allan Nevins admonished Americans that the coming year was "destined to be one of the most critical—perhaps the most critical—in the history of the United States." He called for a "heroic mood" that could be achieved only if "the whole people be enlisted on as nearly an equal basis as possible" to stave off

the “grumbling, rumor-mongering and passive resistance that will become the vocation of large groups.” Nevins also hoped that the war could produce “a new and sounder world organization, which can make fresh advances toward the preservation of peace, the equalization of economic opportunity, and the promotion of liberty.” Another scholar, W. E. B. Du Bois, writing just days after Pearl Harbor, was less hopeful: “War, like every other human ailment, tends to leave the body politic folded along ancient creases and festering in old sores.”²⁸