**Pearl Harbor**

**What motivated the Japanese to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941? The answer has a lot to do with something people are still fighting over today: oil. By late summer of 1941, the United States had placed an embargo on the sale of goods, including oil, to Japan. This was a tremendous blow for many reasons, but particularly because Japan was almost completely dependent upon U.S. imports for its supply of oil. Without oil, of course, Japan would have to abandon its war against China—a humiliation that no Japanese leader would accept.**

**The result was a frenzy of diplomatic maneuvering between Japan and the United States throughout the second half of 1941. However, Japan knew that time was running out; if the United States failed to drop its trade sanctions Japan would run out of oil within months. Therefore Japan's leaders made a fateful decision-if no settlement could be reached with Washington by the end of November there would be war. Moreover, the Japanese naval command concluded that this war must begin with the most devastating attack possible against the United States—an air strike, using carrier-based planes, against the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The result, of course, would be a four-year conflict that, in the end, would prove disastrous for Japan.**

In 1941 President Roosevelt stationed fifty B17 bombers in the Philippines, standing between the Japanese and Dutch East Indian oil fields they needed so desperately to circumvent the American oil embargo. Roosevelt also ordered the U.S. Fleet to the Pacific. On December 2, 1941, Hawaii received a message from Washington that began, "This is a war warning." From deciphering the Japanese code, the U.S. knew Admiral Yamamoto was planning a Pacific attack, but not when or where. No one believed it would be Pearl Harbor.

A week later that belief would have devastating consequences. In two hours on Sunday morning, December 7, 350 Japanese aircraft sank or badly damaged 21 ships moored at Pearl Harbor, including eight battleships. (All but the *Arizona, Oklahoma*, and *Utah* were raised and repaired.) Almost 200 American planes were destroyed, and another 150 damaged. 2,400 Americans died (including 1,177 on the *Arizona* alone), and Oahu's hospitals were overrun with 1,200 more burned and maimed victims. Besides Pearl Harbor, the Philippines and other American installations were attacked the same day.

The enemy thought destroying the American fleet would lead to Japanese domination of the Pacific for two-years-enough time to build an impenetrable defensive ring using island airfields. But Japanese mistakes would contribute to their eventual defeat. The American aircraft carriers weren't damaged because they were off delivering planes to Midway and Wake Islands, presumed the more likely targets of a Japanese attack. The Japanese also failed to destroy Hawaiian shoreside facilities—including oil storage depots—that would prove vital to the American war effort.

Perhaps the biggest mistake was to attack in the first place. Yamamoto himself said it best: "I fear we will awaken a sleeping giant." On December 8, America was never more awake, and never more vengeful. Roosevelt immediately declared war on Japan (and only Japan), and then got an unexpected dividend. On December 11, Hitler blundered badly by declaring war on the United States, although his agreement with the Japanese didn't require him to do so. That made it easier for Roosevelt to keep his secret promise to Winston Churchill that when the Americans entered the war, they would defeat Germany first.

Historians will never know for sure what prior knowledge Roosevelt had of the Pearl Harbor attack. But they do know that America's emotional response was exactly what the President needed in his battle with the isolationists.

**Pearl Harbor Questions**

1. **What natural resource did the United States cut off from Japan? Why was this natural resource so important to the Japanese at this time in history?**
2. **What American naval base was selected for attack by the Japanese? Why do you think they selected this naval base?**
3. **Where there any signs or warnings that the Japanese might attack in December of 1941?**
4. **What are the statistics on Pearl Harbor? (How many ships and planes were destroyed? Lives lost?)**
5. **What mistakes were made by the Japanese at Pearly Harbor? What important things did they fail to destroy?**
6. **The U.S. immediately declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941. What action did Hitler take against the U.S. on December 11? Why did Roosevelt feel that Hitler’s action was good for the U.S.?**
7. **Why was the American emotional response to Pearl Harbor important for getting the country to go to war?**