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# The Round Tablette

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**Welcome to the December session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.** Tonight's speaker is Michael Wenger, co-author of *No One Avoided Danger* and *This Is No Drill*. Veterans of Pearl Harbor will join him to discuss aspects of the 7 December 1941 attack.

Japan's road to Pearl Harbor began in China. In 1931, junior officers of the Kwangtung Army staged a fake bombing of a railway in northeast China (the "Mukden Incident"), leading to Japan's occupation of Manchuria, and their establishment of the puppet regime of Manchukuo. When the League of Nations refused to countenance this aggression, Japan withdrew from the League, and found itself increasingly isolated.

Simultaneously, the economic privation brought about by the Great Depression led to a worsening of Japan's domestic situation, and an erosion of democratic norms. This was exacerbated by Japan's military, who leveraged a clause in the Meiji Constitution allowing them (in essence) to dissolve any civilian government that displeased them. At the same time, increasingly militant junior officers utilized intimidation, occasional assassination, and direct insubordination to force an increasingly xenophobic, nationalist agenda on their superiors.

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 led to full-scale war between China and Japan. Though Japan was initially successful in occupying the majority of China's important cities, they could not defeat the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-Shek, which withdrew into the vast Chinese interior. By mid-1941 Japan had conquered itself into a dead-end. The Imperial Army had 850,000 troops engaged in a seemingly intractable struggle against its huge, crippled, but unyielding foe. Imperial coffers were being drained to the tune of \$5 million a day. Having lost more than 600,000 casualties (including nearly 200,000 killed), Japan's militarists could not countenance a retreat to antebellum lines with its attendant loss of face. As a result of Japanese aggression and atrocities, U.S. public opinion had swung decidedly against Tokyo.

1941 seemed to offer new opportunities for Japan. France was defeated. Britain was belea-

guered. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, followed by calamitous Soviet defeats during the summer, seemed to foretell Russia's imminent collapse. The Kwangtung Army thus began contemplating new actions against the USSR.

The Imperial Navy disagreed. It considered that the true solution to Japan's economic woes lay not in China, but rather in Southeast Asia. Here, vast troves of oil and raw materials were now feebly guarded by a Dutch government in exile. When the Japanese forced a "defense" treaty on the Vichy French government, occupying Saigon in July, 1941 (and thereby moving Japanese bases further south towards Indonesia), the reaction from the Dutch and American governments was to freeze Japan's assets. This effectively implemented a total trade embargo.

The Japanese were stunned, having convinced themselves that the world community would not quibble with their latest move as long as it was peaceful. Now, as a result of Tokyo's disastrous miscalculations, Japan found herself trapped. She was totally reliant on foreign oil, without which her economy would grind to a halt. Admiral Nagano Osami, the Imperial Navy's Chief of Staff, crystallized the matter when he stated, "The Navy is consuming 400 tons of oil an hour. The situation is urgent. We want it decided one way or the other quickly."

The U.S. demanded that Japan relinquish its gains in *both* Indochina and China. Knowing it held the economic whip hand, Washington expected Tokyo to fold. However, the U.S. did not understand Japan's domestic politics, which were notable for a lack of both central authority and frank communication. Japan's leaders, even in the military, were far from being unified for war at the beginning of the crisis. Many had grave private misgivings regarding the advisability of attacking a foe as powerful as America. However, they were also operating in an environment where being insufficiently zealous could lead directly to an abrupt shortening of one's anticipated lifespan. Publicly, then, Japan's leaders unerringly affected a bellicose tone. Meanwhile, in private, there was a chain of lost opportunities during various Imperial Council deliberations, as one powerful person after another failed to speak openly, passed the buck, and hoped that someone else would fall on their sword to stop the

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slide towards war. Nobody did. The ultimate result was an absurd decision to try and end its unwinnable war in China by initiating an even larger conflict against the two foremost maritime powers in the world, one of which was backed by an economy more than five times larger than Japan's.

While Japanese leaders were fruitlessly searching throughout the Fall for an exit to the trap they'd built for themselves, military planning moved into high gear. Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, C-in-C of Japan's Combined Fleet, had been mulling the possibility of an operation against Pearl Harbor for some time. Putting the U.S. Pacific Fleet out of action at the beginning of a war would allow the Japanese to conquer their objectives in Southeast Asia without having to guard against an immediate U.S. counterblow. Yamamoto had recently taken the step of unifying of Japan's fleet carriers into a combined striking force, known as *Kidō Būtai*. Now, as this formation began training hard for its mission against Pearl Harbor, it created a revolutionary proficiency possessed by no other navy—the ability to concentrate and coordinate hundreds of aircraft operating from multiple flight decks. Massed carrier airpower was now a reality. But the U.S. Navy had no inkling that Japan possessed such a weapon.

*Kidō Būtai* sortied for Pearl Harbor on 26 November. The Americans, through their reading of Japanese diplomatic codes, were coming to the realization that negotiations with Japan were increasingly futile. However, despite conspiracy theories to the contrary, Pearl Harbor's importance in Japanese planning was unknown. The Imperial Navy's operational code (JN-25) had not yet been broken sufficiently to derive usable intelligence. And while ominous signs began developing that war was imminent, the location of Japan's initial attacks was difficult to discern, partly because of a welter of conflicting information, and partly because Japan intended attacking in many directions at once. Likewise, while some American naval planners had contemplated a carrier raid against Hawaii, they conceived of it in just those terms—a small-scale attack by one or two carriers and a handful of aircraft. Instead, Yamamoto's plan not only envisioned a multi-wave assault against the naval anchorage, but coordinated attacks against every airbase on Oahu. Japanese capabilities, in other words, were completely outside the scope of American understanding. The result was total strategic, operational, and tactical surprise.

By the end of the morning of 7 December, 1941, burning American ships, blazing aircraft, and wrecked hangars lay under palls of black smoke. The Pacific Fleet's battle line was de-

molished, with five battleships sunk, and four more damaged. American airpower on Oahu had been nearly exterminated, with 350 aircraft destroyed or damaged. More than 2,400 Americans were dead. The United States was now at war.

#### FURTHER READINGS:

J. Michael Wenger, Robert J. Cressman, and John F. DiVirgilio, *This is No Drill* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).  
 Wenger, Cressman, and DiVirgilio, "*No One Avoided Danger*" (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015).  
 H.P. Willmott, *Pearl Harbor* (London: Cassell & Co., 2001).  
 Gordon Prange, *At Dawn We Slept* (New York: Penguin, 1981).  
 Walter Lord, *Day of Infamy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1957).  
 Mark Peattie, *Sunburst: The Rise of Japanese Naval Airpower, 1909-1941* (Annapolis, United States Naval Institute Press, 2002).

#### Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable - 17Dec. 2018 - *Marine Reconnaissance Units* - [mnvietnam.org](http://mnvietnam.org) - [rldietrich@mn-militarymuseum.org](mailto:rldietrich@mn-militarymuseum.org)  
 Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 18 Dec. 2018 - *Sherman's Atlanta Campaign Logistics* - [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)  
 St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 28 Jan. 2019 - *Demographics of War* - 715-386-1268 - [rossandhaines@comcast.net](mailto:rossandhaines@comcast.net)  
 Civil War Symposium - 6 Apr. 2019 - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)  
 Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>  
 Minnesota Air Guard Museum - [www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org) 612-713-2523  
**8th AF Historical Society of MN**, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130, <https://www.8thmn.org>.  
 Friends of Ft. Snelling, [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)  
 World Without Genocide, 651-695-7621, <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>  
 Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN, 320-564-6644, Air show - 20 June 2020. <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.  
 Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - 13-14 July 2019 - [www.wotn.org](http://www.wotn.org) 952-746-6100  
 Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - 30 Jan. 2019 - Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping: ... Indian Wars* - [sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com](mailto:sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com)  
 Winston Churchill Book Club: Info: [lin.hopkins@hotmail.com](mailto:lin.hopkins@hotmail.com)  
 Alliance Francaise, [www.afmsp.org](http://www.afmsp.org), 612-332-0436  
 Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - [crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com) - 651-338-2717  
 CAF - Commemorative Air Force - [www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org) 651-455-6942

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#### Round Table Schedule 2019

10 Jan.	Inside Hitler's Headquarters
14 Feb.	Economics of War
14 Mar.	Aerial Reconnaissance of the Reich
28 Mar.	WASPs
11 Apr.	General with Six Stars: J. H. C. Lee
9 May	D-Day

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