

Address to Congress—Franklin D. Roosevelt (December 8, 1941)

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Essay by Ryan Koonce



President Roosevelt addressing Congress

Who amongst we Americans cannot name the Day of Infamy? A spare few of us may not be able to recall the actual calendar date, but those few would likely then be able to name the Hawaiian lagoon where said infamy occurred. It is the most famous declaration of war in our history. It perfectly fits our mental image of what a war declaration should be: the national leader standing before the assembled legislature, calling forth the sword to avenge a wronged and wrathful people. It was the first—and the only—declaration of war heard by a majority of Americans. There were no national radio networks when William McKinley declared war on Spain, or Woodrow Wilson on the German Empire. But in 1941, the radio was a standard home appliance throughout the United States, and the entire nation could hear Franklin Roosevelt's call to arms.

“Day of Infamy” is, of course, a common paraphrasing. The actual words used were “a date which will live in infamy.” That date was December 7, 1941. Two waves of bomber aircraft of the Imperial Japanese Navy raided the American naval forces moored in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, headquarters of the US Pacific Fleet. The long march to Pearl Harbor began with the Japanese invasions of China in the 1930's—which led to the United States imposing economic sanctions upon Japan—which led to the militant Japanese government believing that war with the United States was inevitable—which led to the belief amongst the Japanese militarists that he who struck first and fiercest would be victorious. The attack was a brilliant tactical victory for the Japanese and a humiliating blunder of American intelligence. As Sunday turned into Monday, four American battleships lay sunk in the harbor, thirteen more ships lay crippled, 2,403 Americans were dead and 1,178 more were wounded. And that was only the beginning. Pearl Harbor was only the first strike in a coordinated invasion of the southwestern Pacific by Japanese armed forces: Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaya, and Singapore all came under witheringly effective assault by the Japanese Empire.

President Roosevelt had spent the twelve hours previous to delivering the address to Congress fully engaged with his cabinet and the military chiefs of staff in organizing the

American response to the disaster. The speech was not a meticulously crafted political address; it was quickly assembled within a few hours and with little massaging to perfection. No speechwriters assisted in its composition; Roosevelt quickly dictated it to his secretary, Grace Tully, at around 5:00 p.m. on December 7th. Just past noon on December 8th, the President entered the House of Representatives to address the combined Houses of Congress and the American people live via radio. He rose at the podium, the heavy leg braces worn over his polio-withered legs locked into position so that he could stand before the assemblage and the cameras. The speech lasted only seven minutes—within an hour the United States was officially at war with Japan.

The key force in Roosevelt's request to Congress was that it so ably encapsulated the outrage all Americans felt at being sneak attacked. "False." "Deceived." "Premeditated." "Treachery." "Unprovoked." "Dastardly." All words the President used to characterize the Japanese attack in the speech. Truthfully, Americans accorded the scope of the disaster, which was immense, of secondary importance to the means by which it was planned and executed. No declaration of war by Japan had preceded the attack. Indeed, during the period the attack fleet was at sea, Japanese diplomats were engaged in high-level talks with the United States to ease tensions in the Pacific and perhaps forge a lasting peace. The President made it clear to the nation that in order to pull off the Pearl Harbor attack, it would had to have been planned weeks in advance and for the Japanese carrier fleet to have embarked days in advance to reach Hawaii on the 7th. It was now laid bare before the world that those talks had been merely a tactic to keep the American leaders ignorant about the possibility of imminent hostilities. The President expressed his knowledge of the American character and how it would react to such duplicity: "always will our whole Nation remember the character of the onslaught against us."

The President also took the opportunity to remind and reinforce to the nation that the United States had not just entered into a regional war with Japan, but was now engaged in a world war. He took care to inform the nation that Hawaii and America were not the only recipients of Japan's reckless aggression. Hong Kong and Malaya (British) had just been attacked, as well as most of the other American protectorates in Asia (the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, Midway Island). And although Japan was united by treaty to the fascist dictatorships of Germany and Italy, by Japan being the aggressor those nations were under no obligation to enter into war with the US. It was only Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler's astoundingly stupid decision to follow his Japanese allies into declaring war on the United States that fully pulled America into the world war and united the European and Asian theaters of conflict, which, until that moment, had remained largely isolated from one another. Few Americans today realize that the country was at war only with Japan for three days—war with the entire Axis did not come until December 11th.

Prior to Pearl Harbor, eight out of ten Americans were against the United States going to war. We had isolated ourselves in form and spirit from the travails of the Old World, and were committed to remaining so. The Japanese, interpreting this passivity as impotence, had intended to knock the fight out of America, both militarily and psychologically with

the destruction of the Pacific Fleet. They failed at both. Untouched in the destruction were the Navy's aircraft carriers, now the preeminent and indispensable vessel of naval warfare. Those eight of ten mentioned above unanimously and enthusiastically switched positions. No war the United States has ever fought has garnered such resolute public support as the Second World War. American blood had been shed on American soil, and that has always been the surest means to rally the American people to the most strenuous exertions of patriotic endeavor. Instead of being cowed into swift capitulation, the American people emerged prepared—fully prepared—for total war. Pearl Harbor was a great tactical victory for the Japanese Empire, but it was also the worst strategic blunder they could have possibly made. Their ruling junta had contemptuously taken their nation to war against the greatest industrial power the world has ever known based on false assumptions of their enemy's weakness and of their own superiority. The soldiers and sailors, civilians and statesmen of Imperial Japan would come to horrible grief because of that arrogance.

The tragedy of Pearl Harbor was also a liberation for Franklin Roosevelt. For four years he had watched helplessly as the free nations of Europe and Asia collapsed under the Axis onslaughts. Isolationist American public opinion had constrained the internationalist Roosevelt and imposed a constant state of uncertainty on the American government since the invasions of China (1937) and Poland (1939). War with Germany and Japan eliminated all the anxious trepidation, all the anguished hand wringing, all the torturous uncertainty that had plagued the American president during the long shameful neutrality. You can hear the relief in the President's voice, along with the outrage, as he delivered his war address to Congress. The fog had lifted and the path forward was clear: "*No matter how long it may take us...the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.*" America was in the fight at last.

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