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REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR

As we "Remember Pearl Harbor" on its fortieth anniversary, it must seem incredible to the current generation that the Japanese rulers, no matter how warlike, could ever have thought they could have defeated the great United States. Cross the Pacific with battleships and small propeller planes and tackle America with its vast resources?

But they did. They thought the United States wasn't ready for battle and didn't have the will to fight. "Enjoy your dream of peace just one more day. ... Hawaii, you will be caught like a rat in a trap," said Admiral I. Yamamoto's chief of staff, on the day before Pearl Harbor.

America was caught completely by surprise. We weren't ready for war, but we did have the will and the resources to get ready. As Yamamoto said ruefully, the Pearl Harbor attack awakened "the sleeping giant."

It took years of investigation, but now we know that America's leaders weren't surprised at all; they had plenty of warnings. Americans had broken the Japanese codes and had built marvelous machines, invented by Navy Captain Laurance Safford, which deciphered Japanese messages faster than the Japanese could decode their own messages.

Our military intelligence about the enemy was probably more accurate, up-to-the-minute, and complete than at any time in our country's history. Captain Safford testified that, on November 19, 1941, the Navy decoded a Japanese message to their embassies saying that a weather broadcast in the clear -- "East wind rain" -- would mean "War with the United States, war with Britain, peace with Russia."

On the morning of December 4, Tokyo broadcast the "East wind rain" message. A copy was sent to the White House at noon the same day. Our machines also decoded the Japanese messages which ordered their agents at Hawaii to give daily reports on the location of U.S. ships based at Pearl Harbor -- information obviously designed for the purpose of telling the Japanese attack force where to drop their bombs and torpedoes.

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At the Congressional hearings on Pearl Harbor, Lieutenant L. R. Schulz testified that, on the evening of December 6, 1941, he personally handed President Franklin Roosevelt a 13-part decoded Japanese message which conclusively proved that an attack was imminent. After reading the 13 parts, Roosevelt looked up and said to Schultz, "This means war."

But Roosevelt did not tell this to our commanders in Hawaii or anywhere else; he kept that vital information to himself. Pearl Harbor Commanders Admiral H.E. Kimmel and General W.C. Short were unjustly blamed for our worst military disaster.

Fortunately, the weapons of war in 1941 were slow enough that we had time to rearm. It took us four years and the lives of nearly 300,000 Americans to prove that the Japanese were wrong in believing they could defeat us.

America went to work and built a mighty war machine which defeated two powerful aggressors on two fronts and successfully defended ourselves and all our allies. That unparalleled military superiority lasted from the end of World War II in 1945 until the SALT I Agreements of 1972 under which our leaders agreed that the Soviet Union would have more offensive weapons than we have and that we would not build defensive weapons to protect our people from a missile attack.

Although we stopped building the kind of weapons that could reach the Soviet Union, they kept building the kinds of weapons that can reach us. On Nov. 7, 1981, the Kremlin leaders stood on a balcony and watched their weapons rolling through Red Square to celebrate the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. "No nation will ever overtake the Soviet Union in military might," boasted Defense Minister Dmitri F. Ustinov.

The problem with thinking the unthinkable about a Pearl Harbor-type attack in the 1980s is that there will be no time to get ready after a surprise attack. The only weapons that count are the ones in place when the first shot is fired.

That's why Winston Churchill's eloquent warning to the United States should be studied by all those trying to sabotage President Reagan's military budget: "Sometimes in the past we have committed the folly of throwing away our arms. Under the mercy of Providence, and at great cost and sacrifice, we have been able to recreate them when the need arose. But if we abandon our nuclear deterrent, there will be no second chance. To abandon it now would be to abandon it forever."

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