

What Really Happened

It is well known that Japanese carrier-based aircraft attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The reasons why this occurred should make sense to anyone who has played this game.

The inability of the French, British, and Dutch to protect their East Asian colonies did, indeed, offer an opportunity that Japan's leaders—particularly those in the Army and Navy—could not pass up. The cabinet of Yonai Mitsumasa, which had been in power since January, seemed too timid, so the Army brought it down by ordering the Army Minister to resign. Under a new, more aggressive cabinet headed by Prince Konoe Fumimaro, Japanese troops occupied northern Indochina and pressured the British into closing the Burma Road. In addition, the Japanese government demanded a new trade treaty with the Dutch East Indies, and threw its influence behind Thailand in its border conflict with Indochina, receiving from a grateful Thai government the right to construct airbases on Thai soil. To deter the United States from interfering Tokyo signed an alliance with Germany and Italy.

The United States would not be deterred. The Roosevelt administration not only persuaded the British to reopen the Burma Road after only a few months, but stepped up its aid to Jiang Jieshi and announced an embargo on sales of scrap iron and steel to Japan. Washington also encouraged the Dutch to stall on giving an answer to Japanese requests for a trade treaty.

Nor was there any immediate improvement in the situation in China. To Tokyo's surprise, the Chinese Communists launched a major offensive in late summer 1940, which coincided with a collapse of negotiations with Jiang's government. The damage was contained, and Japan decided formally to recognize Wang Jingwei's regime as the official government of China. Moreover, in an effort to undermine Chinese morale and stop the flow of aid from the Soviet Union, the Navy conducted a strategic bombing campaign against cities in western China. But while the bombing killed plenty of civilians it had no measurable effect on the war. So far Tokyo's aggressive new policy had borne little fruit.

Frustrated by the failure of the British and Dutch to cooperate in the creation of Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere," the Army and Navy began to plan for military operations against the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, Singapore, and Burma. The Foreign Minister concluded a neutrality pact with the Soviet Union, freeing up resources for the proposed "Strike South." Japanese forces occupied southern Indochina, thus giving Tokyo airbases and a major naval base (Saigon) within striking range of all of these territories. However, the Roosevelt administration retaliated this time by freezing all Japanese assets in the United States. This effectively prevented Japan from purchasing any American imports. Given that Japan relied on the United States for most of its oil, as well as other certain strategic commodities, this had serious implications for the future. At a somber Imperial Conference that fall it was estimated that by late 1942 the country would run through its stockpiles of the resources needed to continue the war in China.

The scarcity of resources strengthened the hand of those who sought greater controls over Japan's social and economic life. Propaganda efforts were heightened at all levels, and enforcement of the Peace Preservation Law of 1925 was expanded to allow for the preventive detention of those suspected of harboring subversive ideas. At Konoe's urging, the cabinet moved to create an Imperial Rule Assistance Association, and all of Japan's political parties were put under immense pressure to dissolve themselves in favor of the new organization. Furthermore, bureaucrats associated with the Cabinet Planning Board pushed for a New Economic Order, which would subject Japan's corporations to government direction and place severe limits on shareholder profits. However, rumors about alleged communist influence in the bureaucracy helped opponents to push through a far less draconian measure, the Important Industries Association Ordinance, which left the corporations with a considerable amount of autonomy—and permitted their shareholders to keep making sizeable profits.

Meanwhile the Konoe cabinet weighed its foreign policy options. Negotiations with the Americans seemed to go nowhere, and it seemed increasingly that nothing short of withdrawal from China—which the Army absolutely refused to consider—would restore normal trade relations with the United States. This meant that Tokyo had to look elsewhere to obtain the raw materials it needed. Preparations were made for a joint Army-Navy operation that would bring all of Southeast Asia under Japanese control. Moreover, convinced that the United States would not remain neutral in the event of an attack on British and Dutch colonies, the Navy made plans for a surprise carrier attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. Despairing of a diplomatic solution, Konoe resigned as Prime Minister in October, and was succeeded by the Army Minister, Tōjō Hideki. It was Tōjō, therefore, who presided over the final decision for war, made in the presence of the Emperor in late November.

The precise role of the Emperor in these developments remains a subject of debate. After Japan's defeat he claimed to have always opposed war with the United States, but portrayed himself as essentially a figurehead monarch, with no real power to influence Japanese foreign or domestic policy. When asked when he did not even offer vocal resistance to war, he replied that he feared that to do so would invite violence by ultranationalists. Some historians have challenged this characterization, claiming that the war never would have occurred without at least the tacit consent of the Emperor. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that fears of ultranationalist violence silenced many potential voices for peace in 1940-41.

On one level the attacks launched in December 1941 were remarkably successful. At Pearl Harbor Japanese aircraft sank four battleships and damaged four others, while destroying nearly 200 U.S. planes. Meanwhile the offensive in Southeast Asia brought the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, Malaya, and Burma all under Japanese control by spring 1942. Singapore, which the British regarded as the "Gibraltar of the East," surrendered on February 15 in what remains the most devastating defeat in British history.

What Happened Afterward

The victories of 1941-42 could not be sustained. As great as the damage was to the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the Japanese attack did not destroy Pearl Harbor's repair facilities or oil storage tanks. Nor did it reach the fleet's three aircraft carriers, which were stationed elsewhere. When in May the Japanese Navy tried to lure the remainder of the Pacific Fleet into battle at Midway, the result was a disaster in which four of Japan's own carriers were sunk. The naval balance had shifted against Japan, and would never shift back.

Tokyo was now facing the sort of protracted war that it had never been terribly confident of winning. By early 1943 Allies had begun a slow advance against the Japanese Empire. U.S. Army forces operating from Australia headed northwest, driving the Japanese from the Solomon Islands and New Guinea and eventually reaching the Philippines, while a Navy-based force crossed the Central Pacific, isolating and destroying Japanese garrisons in the Gilbert, Mariana, and Marshall island chains. At the same time, a combined force of British, Chinese, and Americans extended steady pressure eastward from India into Burma. In each engagement Japanese forces fought bravely, even fanatically, preferring to engage in suicidal charges—or to commit *seppuku*—rather than be taken prisoner. By 1944 Japanese pilots had formed *kamikaze* units, loading their aircraft with explosives and flying them into U.S. ships. Yet the *bushido* spirit availed little against an enemy with enormous industrial capacity and a thirst for revenge. Allied casualties were dreadfully high, but Japan's were astronomical.

In July 1944 U.S. Marines captured the island of Saipan, which lay only 1,600 miles from Japan. This meant that Japanese cities were now in range of U.S. heavy bombers, and by the end of that year city after city was being devastated from the air. At the same time, U.S. submarines had imposed a virtual blockade of Japan's coastlines, preventing the resources of Southeast Asia from reaching Japanese factories. Nevertheless the Army was unwilling to contemplate surrender, and prepared for a last-ditch defense against an anticipated U.S. invasion of the home islands. Only in August 1945, after the Americans had obliterated the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs, and the Soviets had renounced their neutrality pact and invaded Manchuria, did the Cabinet agree to surrender. Even then it required the personal intervention of the Emperor to overcome the Army's opposition.

The war took an enormous toll on Japan. Over two million of its military and naval personnel were killed, along with nearly 600,000 civilians. Moreover, thanks to U.S. bombing over 40 percent of Japan's overall urban area was wiped out, including nearly two-thirds of Tokyo. The victorious Allies stripped Japan of its empire and reduced to its four home islands, plus the Ryukyus, and the country was forced to submit to occupation by U.S. troops under General Douglas MacArthur. Twenty-eight Japanese leaders were classified as "Class A" war criminals; of these seven were executed by hanging (all but one was a general, Tōjō among them) and sixteen sentenced to life imprisonment. More than 5,000 others were tried for lesser crimes. The Emperor and his family, however, were spared; indeed, the Shōwa Emperor continued to reign, although as a figurehead. MacArthur accepted the Emperor's claim that he had personally opposed war, but feared a backlash by ultranationalists if he had acted more forcefully to prevent it. MacArthur also believed that it would be easier to implement reforms in Japan if they had the backing of the Emperor.

By the time the occupation ended in 1952, Japan was in many ways transformed. The country had a new constitution, drafted by American authorities, which placed sovereignty in the hands of the democratically-elected Diet, and not the Emperor. The Army and Navy were eliminated altogether, although Japan was allowed to create a small “Self-Defense Force” in the mid-1950s. In fact, Article IX of the constitution specified that “the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.” Education was overhauled, and textbooks that fostered militaristic or authoritarian values were eliminated.

Efforts to reform the Japanese economy met with mixed results. The occupiers implemented land reform, breaking up large estates and distributing them to small farmers. They also guaranteed the rights of workers to organize, so that a vigorous labor movement developed. There was also talk of breaking up the *zaibatsu*, but ultimately very few firms targeted met that fate. When in 1949 the communists emerged victorious in the Chinese Civil War—sending Jiang Jieshi and his government packing for Taiwan—occupation authorities decided that a rapid economic recovery for Japan would better serve U.S. interests than a more thoroughgoing reform. As a result nearly all of the old *zaibatsu* continued to function in the postwar era (as, indeed, they still do today).

In September 1951 Japan’s Prime Minister, Yoshida Shigeru, signed the peace treaty that formally ended the war with the United States. Yoshida was a career bureaucrat who had entered the diplomatic corps in 1906, and with the exception of a few months in 1947-48 he served continuously as Prime Minister from 1946 to 1954. He presided over the rise of a new Japan, dominated not by generals and admirals, but rather by bureaucrats and business executives. Never again would the country menace its neighbors, but would instead commit itself to peaceful pursuits, particularly industrial development and trade. By the 1970s Japan was once again regarded as a world power.

What Happened to Individual Characters after 1941

After being repatriated to the United States in mid-1942, **Joseph Grew** wrote a lengthy memoir of his time in Tokyo, and it was published in 1944 with the title *Ten Years in Japan*. That same year he was named Under Secretary of State, and he served on several occasions as acting secretary of state in 1945. When Harry Truman—who became president upon Franklin Roosevelt’s death in April 1945—was considering the use of atomic weapons in the final weeks of the war, Grew joined with several other prominent officials who hoped to procure Japan’s surrender by making it clear in advance that Japan would be permitted to retain the Emperor. Truman, however, rejected this, believing that it would be a betrayal of the Allies’ stated policy of “unconditional surrender.” Grew left the State Department at the end of 1945, and died twenty years later, just shy of his 85th birthday.

The German ambassador to Tokyo, **Eugen Ott**, was deeply embarrassed by the revelation that Richard Sorge was a Soviet spy. Ott had trusted Sorge—he believed him to be an agent of the German secret service—and had given him access to top-secret embassy files. Humiliated, he resigned his position and

moved to Japanese-occupied Beijing, where he remained throughout the war. Afterward he returned to Germany, where he lived quietly until his death in 1977.

A few of those involved in the momentous decisions of 1940-41 didn't survive the war. Soon after Pearl Harbor **Tsukada Osamu** was named commander of the 11th Army in China, but was killed in an airplane accident only weeks later. **Hara Yoshimichi** died of cancer in 1944, and was posthumously awarded the title of Baron—making him the last commoner to become a member of Japan's aristocracy (which was formally abolished after the war). **Ozaki Hotsumi**, arrested in October 1941 for violations of the Peace Preservation Law, was executed in 1944. After the war he would be remembered as a martyr by the Japanese Left. The most dramatic wartime death was that of **Itō Seiichi**, who in 1944 was given command of Japan's 2nd Fleet. In April 1945 he was ordered to attack U.S. naval forces engaged in the Battle of Okinawa. Itō understood that the mission was suicidal, but dutifully led his group of warships into battle with no air cover (the Japanese Navy Air Service having by this time been effectively eliminated). The flotilla soon came under attack from hundreds of U.S. carrier-based aircraft, and Itō went down with his flagship, the super-battleship *Yamato*.

Two others committed suicide in the war's immediate aftermath. In 1944 **Sugiyama Hajime**, blamed for Japan's military defeats, was relieved of his post as Army Chief of Staff. In the final weeks of the war he was given command of the 1st Army and charged with orchestrating the defense of the home islands against a U.S. invasion. That invasion never came. Ten days after Japan's surrender, after carrying out the Allied Powers' instructions to dissolve the army, Sugiyama committed suicide by shooting himself in the heart with a revolver. **Konoe Fumimaro** urged the Emperor to open peace negotiations early in 1945, and he was invited to participate in Japan's first postwar cabinet. However, when he learned that his name was on a list of those to be accused of war crimes, he ingested a lethal dose of potassium cyanide. (Konoe's grandson, Morihiro Hosokawa, briefly served as prime minister in the early 1990s.)

In April 1946 the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) began its proceedings, indicting 28 of Japan's military and civilian leaders of "Class A" war crimes; i.e., engaging in a joint conspiracy to begin and wage war. Because the U.S. occupation authorities believed that their job would be easier if the emperor were left as a figurehead, neither Hirohito nor any of his family faced prosecution. This meant that Prince **Fushimi Hiroyasu** escaped any penalty for his role in pushing for war; however, he died in Tokyo in mid-August 1946. **Matsuoka Yōsuke**, who had been living in obscurity since 1940, was arrested soon after the end of the war, but he died in prison of a heart attack before he could face trial. A similar fate befell **Nagano Osamu**, who had been removed from his post of Navy Chief of Staff in 1944.

The IMTFE sentenced seven members of the Japanese leadership to death by hanging, among them **Tōjō Hideki**. Tōjō had become immensely powerful between 1941 and 1944; in addition to serving as Prime Minister and War Minister, he had, at one time or another, concurrently held the posts of Home Minister, Foreign Minister, Minister of Education, Minister of Commerce and Industry and Army Chief of Staff. However, by 1944 the obvious fact that Japan was losing the war led the Emperor to demand his resignation. After the war Tōjō was at the top of the list of those to be placed under arrest. He attempted suicide by shooting himself in the chest, but was taken into custody and given emergency

surgery. At his trial he was found guilty of war crimes on seven counts, and his sentence was carried out on December 23, 1946. **Mutō Akira** was hanged that same day, not for having started the war but for atrocities committed by troops under his command in the Philippines, where he served as chief of staff for Japan's 14th Area Army in 1944-45.

Sixteen others were given life sentences, although all of these were eventually paroled. One of these was **Hiranuma Kiichirō**, who had been reappointed President of the Privy Council in early 1945 as successor to Hara Yoshimichi. He was paroled in 1952, but died later that year. **Oka Takasumi**, who held on to his position as director of the Navy Ministry's Bureau of Naval Affairs until 1944, was released in 1954, and he lived until 1973. **Shimada Shigetarō**, like his ally Tōjō, had become immensely powerful during the war, concurrently holding the posts of Navy Minister and Navy Chief of Staff after February 1944. However, when Tōjō fell from power in November of that year, Shimada fell with him, and he remained essentially in retirement for the remainder of the war. He, too, was arrested soon afterward, but his "life imprisonment" lasted only until 1955. Before his death in 1976 he was the last surviving full admiral of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Kido Kōichi, **Suzuki Teiichi**, **Kaya Okinori**, and **Hoshino Naoki** were also among those sentenced to life terms, only to be released in the 1950s. In 1945 Kido had played a critical role in convincing the Emperor to accept unconditional surrender; nevertheless he pleaded guilty to all the charges he faced in an effort to protect the Emperor from any blame. In 1951 he wrote Hirohito from his cell, urging him to accept responsibility for the war and abdicate in favor of his son. Two years later Kido was released, and he settled in the town of Oiso, in Kanagawa Prefecture, where he lived quietly until his death from cirrhosis of the liver in 1977. **Suzuki had remained as President of the Planning Board until 1943, and arrested two years later. He was paroled in 1955, and lived in obscurity until his death in 1989, at the age of 100.** Kaya was also paroled in 1955, but unlike Kido and Suzuki he did not retire. He became a key figure in the Liberal Democratic Party, which has controlled Japan's government almost continuously since the party's founding. After his death in 1977 it was revealed that he had secretly been in the pay of the U.S. government, using his influence in Tokyo to press for pro-American policies. **Finally, Hoshino was convicted at Tokyo mainly for his role in the opium trade. After his release in 1958 he served as president or chairman of the board for a number of firms, including the Tokyu Corporation, until his death in 1978.**

Tōgō Shigenori was deemed a lesser offender, and given only a twenty-year sentence. Soon after Pearl Harbor Tōgō had resigned from his post as Foreign Minister to head up a new ministry charged with administering Japan's occupied territories. He gave up this position within a few months, and lived in retirement until early 1945, when he was asked to serve as Foreign Minister in the cabinet of Suzuki Kantarō. From that post he hoped that the Soviet Union would mediate an end to the war, but when the Red Army invaded Manchukuo in August 1945 Tōgō was among those calling for unconditional surrender. But like all prominent former members of Japan's cabinet, he was arrested by U.S. occupation authorities soon thereafter. Already suffering from atherosclerosis, he was struck down by an inflamed gall bladder in July 1950.

Others who held prominent positions in prewar Japan were not subject to criminal prosecution, but rather “purged”—that is, they were prohibited from holding public office, or even leadership posts in large businesses. **Tanabe Harumichi** was one of these, although by the end of the war he was already in poor health, and died in 1950. Another was **Ogata Taketora**, who in 1944 gave up his editorial responsibilities at the *Asahi Shimbun* and entered politics. He served as the Minister of State of the Koiso Cabinet, President of the Intelligence Bureau, and Vice President of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, until resigning in 1945. After the purge was lifted in 1952 he was elected to Japan’s House of Representatives, and eventually became leader of the Liberal Party. Ogata was anticipating running for prime minister when he died suddenly in 1956. Also purged was **Kobayashi Ichizō**, but he eventually returned to the business world, resuming the presidency of the Tōhō Motion Picture Company. In the 1950s Tōhō would become wildly successful, producing international box office hits such as *Seven Samurai* and *Godzilla*. Kobayashi died in 1957, at the age of 84. Finally, **Ogura Masatsune** was purged for his presidency of the Wartime Finance Bank and the East Asia Economic Council, as well as his membership on the National Economic Committee of Wang Jingwei’s Nanking National Government. However, he decided to remain in retirement after the lifting of the purge, and he died in 1961.

Finally, there were a whole category of leaders who emerged from the war with no stain on their records. **Oikawa Koshirō** briefly served as Navy Chief of Staff in late 1944, but resigned in early 1945 when the cabinet refused to consider peace proposals. He testified at the Tokyo War Crimes trials, but otherwise lived in obscurity until his death in 1958. Likewise, **Sakonji Seizō** joined the cabinet of Suzuki Kantarō early in 1945, and was a fervent advocate of surrender. After the war he was able to return to private pursuits, and in 1951 was even invited to serve on a committee charged with establishing Japan’s Maritime Defense Force. **Kondō Nobutake** commanded Japan’s naval forces during the Guadalcanal campaign of 1942-43, and in December 1943 he was named commander of the China Area Fleet, a position which he held until May 1945. He, too, was ignored by the occupying authorities, and died in 1953. Unlike Oikawa and Kondō, **Toyoda Teijirō** gave up active duty in the Navy; after leaving the cabinet he took a position directing the state-owned Japan Iron and Steel Works. In that capacity he addressed chronic labor shortages by offering generous benefits to employees, including child care, thus maintaining production at reasonably high levels—that is, until U.S. bombers began targeting the steel works. He returned to politics under the Suzuki cabinet, taking the posts of Minister for Transportation and Communications and Minister of Munitions. Toyoda’s efforts toward peace in 1940-41 were remembered by the U.S. occupation authorities, who refused to prosecute him. He remained involved with steel production in the postwar period, until his death from kidney cancer in 1961.

But the greatest success story of postwar Japan is no doubt that of **Kishi Nobusuke**. Kishi continued to serve on the cabinet until 1944, when he played a critical role in bringing down his old ally Tōjō in November of that year. He publicly broke with the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, forming his own political party made up largely of bureaucrats and businessmen who had benefited from his activities in Manchukuo. Like most former cabinet members, Kishi was arrested after the war, but a group of influential Americans, calling themselves the American Council on Japan, decided that the former cabinet minister was the perfect man to lead the country in the postwar era. As a result he never went to trial, but was released in 1948. For the next four years he was banned from holding public office, but

he spent that time planning his political comeback. In 1953 he was elected to the Diet as a member of the Liberal Party, but immediately clashed with the party leadership. He was expelled in 1954, but by this time had built a political coalition of his own made up of some 200 fellow legislators. Later that same year he brought his faction into the rival Democratic Party, effectively taking it over, and in 1955 he engineered a merger of the Liberals and Democrats, forming the Liberal Democratic Party. As head of the LDP Kishi became prime minister in 1957, and served in that position for the next three years. The party he founded remains the dominant force in Japanese politics to this day, and Kishi remained heavily involved in party affairs until his death in 1987, at the age of 90.

How was it that within ten years of the end of World War II, so many of those complicit in the decision to commit Japan to that war had found their way back into positions of responsibility? The answer lies largely in the context of the Cold War. U.S. authorities had begun the occupation intending a thoroughgoing overhaul of Japanese institutions. However, by the end of the decade the Soviet Union was a hostile power, and China was under Communist control, making Japan the most important U.S. ally in the region. The country's stability and prosperity were now valued over the cause of reform.