

## Intelligence in Public Media

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### ***At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor***

Gordon W. Prange, with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon (Penguin Books, 2nd edition, 1991), 889 pp., maps, diagrams, appendices, selected bibliography, index

### **Reviewed by Michael J. Hughes**

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Nearly 40 years after its publication, *At Dawn We Slept* remains the single best scholarly study of the Imperial Japanese Navy's (IJN) massive air raid on US naval and military bases in Oahu on December 7, 1941. The work covers in detail the meticulous IJN planning and preparation for the "Hawaii Operation," the debate in Tokyo over the feasibility and wisdom of the proposed raid, and the IJN's execution of the assault. It also examines the deficiencies of US planning for the island's defense, the gaps in US intelligence, the US military response to the assault, and the numerous US postmortems to investigate the disaster, some of which were controversial and political divisive. Prange concludes with a judicious evaluation of just what went wrong for the United States and why.

What accounts for the enduring value of Prange's magnum opus? His exhaustive research is one factor. The author spent 37 years studying the attack, starting with what Prange called "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to gather material directly from the source." (814) In an essay included in the book that was written months before he died in May 1980, Prange described his unique access as a junior Navy officer in early postwar Japan, where he served on and eventually led the Army's G-2 Historical Section. From that position, the author was able to interview many surviving Japanese commanders, planners, and military personnel who executed the attack.<sup>a</sup> These interviews—many conducted within a few years of the attack—enabled the author "not only to spice up [his] narrative . . . and take the reader behind the scenes but also to give the story a really intimate and authentic stamp. *These interviews can never be duplicated because many of the*

*individuals, both on Japan and in the United States, have since died.*" (821) [Author's emphasis] Prange also directly interviewed many US civilian and military officials who played roles in the events before the attack.

Prange also scrutinized the nine US government inquiries into the Pearl Harbor disaster.<sup>b</sup> In doing so, he not only reviewed the official record but read the extensive transcripts from hundreds of interviews with US officials at all ranks. He interviewed many of the staff personnel on the various investigative bodies. (818) Prange mastered the proceedings and testimonies of the 1945–46 Joint Congressional Committee Investigation into Pearl Harbor and examined private papers, other unpublished sources, and a wide sampling of US national newspapers at the time.

Prange also brought the judiciousness and intellectual humility of a trained historian to the task. After his postwar naval service in Japan, Prange spent most of his career as a history professor at the University of Maryland. There he honed his craft in meticulous research, patient sifting of data, broadmindedness, and sound judgment. As his collaborators, Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon—distinguished scholars of Pearl Harbor in their own right—note in the introduction, Prange approached this controversial topic "with as nearly an open mind as any American [of that era, in particular] could bring to the subject." (ix) Prange was fascinated by the dynamic interaction at all levels—political, strategic, diplomatic, and military—between the United States and Imperial Japan as the Japanese

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a. One of Prange's interview subjects, Takeo Yoshikawa, was an intelligence officer assigned to reconnoiter the islands in the months before the attack. He published a memoir in 1963, which was recently translated into English. A review of the translation follows this one.

b. US Government investigations of the Pearl Harbor disaster include: a hasty inquiry by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox immediately after the Japanese strike, a commission led by Associate Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts from December 1941 to January 1942, the Inquiry led by USN Adm. Thomas C. Hart in February–June 1944, the Army Pearl Harbor Board from July to October 1944, the Navy Court of Inquiry from July to October 1944, an investigation led by VAdm. Kent Hewitt in May–July 1945, an investigation conducted by US Army Maj. Henry C. Clausen from November 1944 to September 1945, another probe led by US Army Col. Carter in September 1944 and resumed during July–August 1945, and the Joint Congressional Committee Investigation, from November 1945 to July 1946. (See Part III "Aftermath" and Appendix "The Pearl Harbor Investigations" in *At Dawn We Slept*, 551–738, 841–42).

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onslaught approached. Prange saw no villains or evil conspirators on either side. At the same time, he notes some personnel on both sides were brilliant while others were mediocre, some strategic and others narrowly tactical, some capable and others incompetent—“and every single one fallible, capable of mistakes of omission and commission.” (x)

The book also benefitted from Prange’s choice of collaborators. The author died in 1980 at age 70, a year before the first edition of the book was published. In accordance with Prange’s desires, two of his former students, Dr. Donald M. Goldstein and Chief Warrant Officer Katherine V. Dillon, USAF (ret.) pared Prange’s massive multivolume work of more than 3,500 pages down to a manageable one-volume book.

Prange and his posthumous collaborators included photographs and maps, including one that plots the course of the IJN carrier task force to and from Pearl Harbor. (418) The book also includes an extensive set of appendices that

- review the source material,
- identify the major personnel involved in the Pearl Harbor attack and defense,
- list the Pearl Harbor investigations,
- provide a bibliography, and
- explain and rebut the various camps of Pearl Harbor revisionism.

So is this work still advisable reading for intelligence officers or military personnel in 2020? (Copies seem easily obtainable and it is available in a Kindle edition.) Is it worth the investment of time to read a book of 889 pages prepared more than 40 years ago about a surprise attack that occurred nearly 79 years ago? A skeptic would note that vastly different strategic conditions, economic realities, military technologies, and intelligence capabilities reduce studies of Pearl Harbor to almost purely historical interest. New cyber weapons, the existence of invulnerable nuclear deterrent forces, system “learning,” and modern means of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance suggest the odds of a modern-day Pearl Harbor-type surprise are very low. Pearl Harbor as a modern-day case study is therefore deceiving, according to this skeptical view.

But the skeptic’s view overlooks the enduring lessons of the Pearl Harbor disaster for modern-day intelligence officers and military personnel. Those lessons include:

•*The desperation of proud national leaders who resent US “arrogance” and feel trapped in a strategic quandary that will only worsen with time, unless bold measure are taken.* Imperial Japan during 1940–41 was mired in a protracted counterinsurgency campaign against China as US economic sanctions were starting to hit on the home front and US naval rearmament was kicking into high gear.

•*The allure of surprise as a feasible option for weaker powers mired in an enduring strategic rivalry with stronger adversaries.* Admiral Yamamoto and the Japanese Army and Navy staff knew Imperial Japan could not win a grinding war of attrition with the United States and Great Britain. But this knowledge, rather than fostering caution, instead made the prospect of a sudden demoralizing knock-out blow against Pearl Harbor all the more attractive as the opening coup in Japan’s quest to overrun, occupy, and exploit Western colonial possessions in Southeast Asia.

•*The skill, nerve, and grit of the adversary’s operational planners, commanders, and military personnel.* At *At Dawn We Slept* goes into meticulous detail about how Japanese military planners identified, grappled with, and overcame a daunting series of challenges before December 7th: ensuring secrecy, gathering accurate intelligence, adapting existing weapons, forging a massive carrier strike force, training aircrews, refueling at sea, transiting safely to and from the strike area, and ensuring military confidence and morale.

•*The passivity, inertia, compartmentation, and red tape that impede the victim state’s vigilance and preparedness for sudden hostile action.* In passages whose collective effect is akin to that of a Greek tragedy, Prange details the failures of the US War and Navy Departments to rise to the occasion and bolster the alert posture of US military forces on Pearl Harbor. Time and again, warnings dispatched to Pearl Harbor were ambivalent, vague, misunderstood, or late. Commanders in Pearl Harbor failed to institute a rapid alert system so that even *initial reports of enemy action*<sup>a</sup> would be communicated rapidly to combatant forces on Oahu.

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a. Neither the notification from the US Navy destroyer Ward that it had fired on and sank an IJN midget submarine trying to enter Pearl

•*Failures of imagination and status quo bias that prevent the target-actor from taking prudent counter-measures.* Time and again, US military personnel told US investigators (and in many cases, Prange himself) that they simply did not expect the Japanese to initiate war with the United States with a massive attack on a supposedly impregnable US island fortress so far from Japan. The author demonstrates that the Japanese were counting, in part, on the very audacity of their bold plan to keep the United States asleep.

•*The hard tradeoffs and competing crises facing US political leaders and senior military commanders.* Contrary to decades of revisionist assertions, Prange convincingly demonstrates that the Roosevelt administration did not goad the Japanese into attacking Pearl

Harbor or turn a blind eye to incontrovertible evidence of an impending attack. Instead, US leaders sought to avert war with Japan, confront the menace of Hitler's Germany, support US allies worldwide, and accelerate US defense rearmament and mobilization. In Hawaii Admiral Husband Kimmel was focused on training the Pacific Fleet for *offensive* operations, while Army General Walter Short was obsessed with the threats of sabotage and an outright invasion.

From nearly eight decades out these realities should still resonate with US intelligence officers and military personnel. If they do, then Prange's epic work remains a useful starting point for thinking in concrete terms about how disaster could strike and how to avert it.



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Harbor at approximately 5 AM Hawaii time nor the 0700 message from Army radar station operators on northern Oahu that a large mass of planes was approaching the island resulted in a heightened alert for military forces in Hawaii.