JAPAN'S DECISION FOR WAR IN 1941

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I. Recent Trends in Japan toward Reappraising the Pacific War

The last few years have witnessed in Japan the appearance of "Revisionists" who tend to reappraise the meaning of the Pacific War and to reinterpret Japan's responsibility for Pearl Harbor. By the "Revisionists," I mean the critics and historians who in their view of the Pacific War have challenged the "Orthodox" school whose interpretations of the war are basically in line with the decisions of the Tokyo Trial or are based upon the Marxist theory of imperialism. The "Revisionists" have been characterized by their attempts to vindicate Japan's cause in World War II, and by their belief in the inevitability of an armed clash between Japan and the United States.

Hayashi Fusao, a famous writer, is one of the best known "Revisionists," having publicized his views in a book entitled Arguments for Justifying the Pacific War (Daitōa Sensō Kōtei Ron). His argument is that Japan went to war "for the defense of Asia," countering the U.S. policy of a "White Pacific." In this connection I may add that the minority dissent of Indian Judge Pal at the Tokyo Trial has also been reassessed by several Japanese scholars. I assume that this recent spurt of "Revisionism" may be explained by the revelations of recently discovered documents as well as by the new tide of nationalism.

While not accepting the interpretation of the "Orthodox" school, I would not entirely subscribe to the "Revisionist" school either. I am not inclined toward vindicating Japan's cause in the last war; rather I have a feeling of our responsibility for it. Further, I am deeply convinced that we made a grave mistake in going to war with the U.S., and I feel sorry for its having caused unprecedented sacrifice on the part of many people in many places. Nevertheless, at the same time I am of the opinion that the conclusion arrived at by the Tokyo Military Tribunal, when assessed by an objective historian twenty years after the Trial, was based on false information and on an incorrect theory.

The Tokyo Trial, adopting the general theory of conspiracy, assumed that the Japanese leaders had worked together toward expansion into Southeast Asia, carrying out an expansion program formulated in 1936 and had been well prepared for an armed clash with the U.S. in due course. This interpretation represents a most rational view of the road to Pearl Harbor. Although the theory of conspiracy is not likely to attract much support from scholars at the present time, there still seems to be a tendency on the part of Western scholars to interpret the process of Japan's decision for war rationally, perhaps projecting the Western model of the decision-making process and Western conceptions of rational behavior. For example, Prof. Louis Morton, asserts in his essay, "Japan's Decision for War", Command

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1 This paper was originally prepared to be delivered at the annual convention of the American Historical Association in New York, December 29, 1966.

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Decisions, that the decisions of the Japanese leaders were "based on the expectation that the United States would prefer to negotiate rather than fight.......

They planned to fight a war of limited objectives and having once secured these objectives to set up a defense in such depth that the United States would find a settlement favorable to Japan an attractive alternative to a long and costly war. To the Japanese leaders this seemed an entirely reasonable view." I would not deny that there was a rational calculation behind Japan's decision for war, but at the same time I would rather put more emphasis upon other aspects of the picture.

What I am most concerned with here is to make an analysis of the decision-making process in which Japan took the alternative of war with the United States, and to present a new look at this process, making use of some newly available records such as the proceedings of the Liaison Conferences, documents kept in the Office of the Navy Minister, the secret diary of the Army General Staff, and several memoirs of key personnel. On the basis of these records and of my crude model of the foreign policy decision-making process, I intend to make an analysis of this war decision case, examining first, psychological factors operative in the minds of the Japanese leaders; second, the unique position occupied by the middle echelon military officers within the structure of decision-making; and third, American policy as a force operative in Japan's external environment.

II. The Organizational Process for Foreign Policy Decision-making in Prewar Japan

In prewar Japan, the Conference in the Imperial Presence—the Imperial Conference—represented the supreme organ for making crucial decisions, such as going to war or concluding treaties of alliance. In 1941, there were four Imperial Conferences: July 2, September 6, November 5, and December 1. The first Conference took up the matter of what response Japan should make to the outbreak of the German-Soviet War. The second considered the matter of what attitude Japan should adopt in response to an economic blockade imposed by the U.S. as represented by the order freezing Japanese assets and by an oil embargo. The third Conference was summoned by the new cabinet to reaffirm the substance of the previous decisions of September 6. The fourth made a final decision for war. The Imperial Conference was composed of the Emperor, key cabinet members, the Chiefs and Vice-Chiefs of the General Staff, and the Chairman of the Privy Council. The last Conference was exceptional in having all the members of the cabinet present.

While Imperial Conferences gave sanction to crucial decisions, no serious discussions were carried on at these sessions. The Emperor would very seldom express his views, and most of the talks centered around the questions raised by the Chairman of the Privy Council on behalf of the Emperor and the answers previously prepared by the Chiefs of the General Staff, the Foreign Minister, and others. Rather, it was at the meetings of the Liaison Conference where the most crucial talks were carried on at the highest level of decision-making. These conferences were held some 32 times during the period from August 1 to the end of

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November 1941, that is, almost twice a week. The Liaison Conference was organized in November 1940, being composed of key cabinet members and the Chiefs of the General Staff.

While the cabinet was a legally established organ in which important decisions for national policy should have been made, it was usually excluded from a substantial part of the talks about crucial decisions relating to foreign policy. Often cabinet members gave their formal sanction to a document of national policy which was somewhat differently drafted from the one which had already been adopted at the Liaison Conference.

III. Alternatives

1. The first stage

Since the imposition of an oil embargo by the U.S. government at the end of July 1941 had struck a mortal blow at the vital points of the Japanese economic structure, Japanese leaders felt forced to make their stand toward America more definite. Under the circumstances, there seemed to be three alternatives for them to consider. 1) To meet the U.S. demands in principle to get rid of the economic pressure (Choice 1). 2) To make further diplomatic efforts to find a compromise favorable to Japan (Choice 2). 3) To decide immediately for going to war with America (Choice 3). The second choice could be subdivided into three alternative courses, supposing the negotiations could not produce good results within a certain period: a) negotiation—surrender (Choice 2A); b) negotiation—further negotiation (Choice 2B); c) negotiation—opening hostilities (Choice 2C). In the same way Choice 2B could be subdivided into 2BA, 2BB and 2BC.

When they received the information about the oil embargo, the middle echelon military officers were inclined toward taking Choice 3, namely, determination to wage war, and they had taken the initiative in drawing up the "Essentials for Executing the National Purpose of the Empire." On the other hand, both the civilian leaders and senior officers of the Navy preferred to opt for the second alternative (Choice 2), placing their hopes in a new diplomatic effort such as a conference of the heads of the two governments, besides the use of ordinary diplomatic channels. Premier Konoye, among others, was most anxious to have a talk with President Roosevelt.

At the Imperial Conference of September 6, the decision-makers took the alternative 2C, in other words, they decided to "endeavor by every possible diplomatic means" to secure acceptance of the Japanese demands and "if there is no hope in the diplomatic negotiations by the early part of October, we will immediately make up our minds to get ready for war." And at the same time they decided on proceeding with war preparations.3 Following this

3 The essence of the "Essentials for Executing the National Purpose of the Empire" which was sanctioned at the Imperial Conference on September 6, reads as follows:

a) Determined not to be deterred by the possibility of being involved in a war with America (and England and Holland) in order to secure our national existence, we will proceed with war preparations so that they be completed approximately toward the end of October.

b) At the same time, we will endeavor by every possible diplomatic means to have our demands agreed to by America (and England), together with the Empire's maximum concessions which are embodied in the attached document.

c) If by the early part of October there is no reasonable hope of having our demands agreed to in the diplomatic negotiations mentioned above, we will immediately make up our minds to get ready for war against America (and England and Holland).
decision, the Army and Navy accelerated war preparations on the one hand, and Konoye and the Foreign Minister, on the other hand, made renewed efforts to reach an agreement by means of diplomatic negotiations. A new formula for reaching an agreement was adopted at the Liaison Conference on September 20 and sent to the U.S. on September 25.

2. The second stage

In his note of October 9, Secretary of State Cordell Hull turned down the proposal for holding a summit conference. It was extremely discouraging to Konoye and other leaders who had pinned their hopes of avoiding war on this conference. Dr. Feis remarks that this note, “rather than the one of November 26 on which controversy has centered, ended the era of talk.” Since it became apparent for the Japanese leaders that “by the early part of October there is no reasonable hope for having our demands agreed to in the diplomatic negotiations,” it appeared that the time was approaching for “immediately making up our minds to get ready for war against America.”

Even at this stage, Konoye and other civilian leaders, as well as the senior officers of the Navy, were still hesitant about deciding to go to war. Almost every day serious discussions went on among the leaders and the middle echelon military officers as well, as to the Japanese response to the Hull note of October 9. The meeting of Five Ministers on October 12 touched off a heated controversy among them as to the choice of the alternatives and witnessed a sharp division of views. Konoye, supported by the Foreign Minister, strongly argued for keeping alive negotiations with the U.S., and he even exhibited his willingness, though only implicitly, to yield to the U.S. demands in the event of a failure in persuading the Americans to agree to the Japanese demands. In other words, Konoye was prepared to take alternative 2BA. Kido, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal—chief adviser for the Emperor—and other civilian leaders appeared to take a similar view and to follow Konoye’s lead.

On the other hand, War Minister Tojo was vigorously opposed to Konoye’s position and was most unyielding in regard to the problem of withdrawing Japanese troops from China. As a result of the split, the Konoye cabinet fell. Tojo took over the premiership.

After reviewing the decision of September 6, according to the imperial order for “wiping the slate clean,” Tojo held the most crucial meeting of the Liaison Conference on November 1. At this conference, the three alternatives to be taken into account were clearly defined and presented to the decision-makers. The first alternative was a policy of enduring great hardships—the “gashin-shōtan” policy. This policy was interpreted in two different ways by the leading decision-makers. a) One was to reach an agreement even at the cost of grave concessions on the part of the Japanese. b) The other was to watch the world situation even at the cost of great hardships at home, neither resorting to arms nor conducting further diplomatic negotiations. The second alternative was to continue further diplomatic efforts and, at the same time, rapidly to complete operational preparations, with the determination to go to war whenever that should prove necessary. And the third was an immediate determination to open hostilities with the U.S.

The alternative chosen at the Conference was the second one. According to my scheme of the decisional-tree, it can be said that they took alternative 2BC. This decision was sanctioned at the Imperial Conference on November 5 and put into effect immediately. For about

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three weeks after the conference, the Japanese government made its last diplomatic efforts in Washington, first presenting Proposal A and then Proposal B.

3. The third stage

The Hull note of November 26 put an end to the last hopes of Japan’s decision-makers to reach an agreement with the U.S. The deadline for diplomatic negotiations was passed at the end of November. Before making a final decision for war, Tōjō summoned a meeting of a group of ex-premiers to seek their views. However, their view, which was rather against war, did not have an effect on the decision-making process. The Imperial Conference on December 1 did not see any other alternatives but to go to war with the U.S. The Rubicon was crossed.

IV. Psychological Factors Operative in Japan’s Decision-making Process

The above description of Japan’s decision for war clearly indicates that the Japanese decision-makers had not firmly decided about the course of action to be followed and many of them had been hesitant about going to war with America until the last moment. This attitude was related to the outlook of the leaders regarding the development of the war.

Did they have a good prospect for victory? The answer is no. Even the military leaders who were better prepared for war with America than the civilian leaders did not hold an optimistic view about the war, especially if it was to be a long one. For example, Shigeru Fukutome, chief of the Operations Division within the Navy General Staff confessed his lack of confidence in the southward operation at the meeting of the Navy on October 6, and Shigetarō Shimada, the Navy Minister, revealed at the Liaison Conference on November 1 that he did not see a bright prospect either. As to the proceedings of the above conference, Osamu Tsukada, Vice Chief of the Army General Staff, made these remarks: “Because of the fact that if we go to war the prospects are not bright, and that people wonder if there is not some way to proceed peacefully, there is no one who will say ‘Don’t worry, I will take the responsibility even if the war becomes prolonged.’” We know that the only thing the chiefs of staff of both branches, in spite of their strong stand, assured to the conferees was that Japan could keep on fighting favorably for two years, but that the outlook after that was bleak.

Then the question might be raised why they took the alternative of going to war with America, given their lack of confidence in victory? Here we have to look at several psychological factors operative in the process of Japan’s decision for war, in addition to rational calculations that were made.

a) Image of the U.S.

It can be observed that many of the Japanese decision-makers held the view that Japan was destined to go to war with America sooner or later as a consequence of the basic

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7 Ibid., p. 378.
incompatibility of its policy in Asia with that of the U.S. In any case, unless Japan yielded completely, they assessed, the U.S. would surely take the military offensive against Japan, whenever it became ready to do so. The idea that an armed clash between the two countries was inevitable seemed to operate, more or less, in their determination for war.

b) Concern over missing a chance

As often cited, there is a saying of Clausewitz: "A small state which is involved in a contest with a very superior Power, and foresees that each year its position will become worse should make use of the time when the situation is farthest from the worst if it considers war to be inevitable. The small state in this position is advised to attack." The Japanese military leaders, particularly those of the General Staff, who envisioned the inevitability of an armed clash between Japan and the United States, were worrying about losing time for carrying on war with America under favorable conditions. They were aware of the fact that time was on the American side, since the U.S. would build up its armed forces, the weather would become less favorable for operations, and Japan's oil supply would lessen. Hence, it was repeatedly argued by them that now was the opportune time for war.

In this connection, we may recall that the military leaders used the same argument in 1903, to convince the civilian leaders of the necessity of going to war with Russia. Namely, they argued that the balance of power had been changing unfavorably for Japan and now was the time for war.

c) "Death rather than surrender"

The value structure of the military leaders is also in part accountable for their decision. The military people had been thoroughly imbued with such values as moving forward with bravery and according high regard for honor, besides many others, in the course of their training and education. The most abhorrent thing for them was to retreat or given in. They were supposed to choose death rather than surrender or suffer humiliation of any sort.

Thus, when they were confronted with the three alternatives, as mentioned before, to be taken in response to the oil embargo, they immediately ruled out the first choice, that is, substantial concessions on the part of Japan. When the choice was narrowed down to submission or war, the latter appeared as the only alternative in their view, no matter how much risk was involved or regardless of the odds. In their view, Japan had no alternative but to go to war while it still had the power to do so. It might lose, but defeat was better than humiliation and submission. It is well known that War Minister Tōjō told Premier Konoye that "sometimes a man has to jump, with his eyes closed, from the veranda of Kiyomizu Temple."

d) Memory of past wars

The memory of wars Japan had experienced, above all, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, seemed to have an effect on the attitude of the military leaders toward the coming war. In their minds, the memory was still vivid that Japan, much weaker in national strength than Imperial Russia, had taken the great risk of going to war and had won the gamble. For example, references to the Russo-Japanese War were made by both Premier Tōjō and Foreign Minister Tōgō at the Liaison Conference on November 1. Tōjō said that when Japan reached the final stage of deciding on war, Emperor Meiji asked Prince Itō for his forecast. Itō expressed his view that there was a prospect that Japan could maintain a defense line along the Yalu River for one year. Moreover, he told of his resolve to go to the battlefield as a soldier if the war was to proceed unfavorably for Japan. Tōjō found a lesson in
this story, saying “You have to plunge into war if there is some chance, however slight, of winning victory.” Tōgō followed this, saying “I was told that before Japan’s decision for war with Russia, General Kodama, then Vice Chief of the Army Staff, expressed his view of the prospect for victory as ‘fifty-fifty’ and Admiral Yamamoto, the Navy Minister, opined ‘very difficult’.”

The Russo-Japanese War certainly did provide an example of a stunning victory won by a country which did not have a favorable prospect for war at the outset. The memory of this successful experience was a factor in the leader’s decision to take another great risk.

e) Hope for success of the Germans in Europe or reliance on unexpected occurrences like “Kamikaze”

The Japanese military leaders pinned their hopes on the success of the Germans in Europe. Whereas Foreign Minister Tōgō expressed his doubt on November 1 about the success of the German invasion of the British Isles, Chief of Navy Staff Nagano stated at the meeting of the Army Generals and Navy Admirals on November 4 that the Germans might be successful in invading Britain and consequently the U.S. might be put into an extremely difficult position.9

There was, moreover, the myth of the Kamikaze—namely, that God would help the Japanese in their most critical situation—hovering in the minds of the Japanese. When Tōjō said that one might find it necessary to jump, with his eyes closed, from the veranda of Kiyomizu Temple, I suspect he might have been anticipating another Kamikaze.

V. Role Played by the Middle Echelon Officers

The question concerning Japan’s decision to go to war with America can be more illuminated when we take a closer look at the role played by the group of middle echelon military officers in the decision-making process. It can be observed that there were two ways for them to project their views on the process. 1) By means of drafting documents on national policy. All of those documents which formed the basis of national policy and around which serious talks proceeded among the decision-makers at the Liaison Conference were originally drawn up by middle-echelon officers, and the substance of those documents had been agreed to through talks among them at meetings within each service and at joint staff meetings. For example, the “Essentials for Executing the National Purpose of the Empire” had been formulated by this process. Once a plan for national policy had been formulated through talks at the level of both the middle echelon officers and the senior staffs of the Army and Navy, it was extremely difficult for the military decision-makers to oppose it. We know that in many cases of the Liaison Conference the military people, particularly the Chiefs of the General Staff, almost echoed the views of their subordinates and did their utmost to persuade other conferees to accept their plans. It might be said that although the Liaison Conference was supposed to be the most important organ for decision-making, the substantial part of the deliberations in the process was carried out at lower levels.

2) When the military leaders were examining a given plan and the alternative courses

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9 Sugiyama Memo, p. 396.
of action available, they were under pressure exerted by the middle echelon officers. The middle echelon officers had tried directly to influence their superiors individually or collectively to have their views accepted. If the senior officers did not carefully consider the strong views of their subordinates or leaned toward a flexible attitude, they were likely to be branded as “weaklings” or “degenerates.” I would not say that “the ranking members of the military services were robots of their subordinates,” as Dr. Butow puts it, but it is true that there was much influence by the subordinates upon the seniors.

The middle echelon officers had been more prepared than their superiors for going to war with America and more unyielding in regard to making concessions. They had had more courage to jump, with their eyes closed, from the veranda of Kiyomizu Temple, and they were more concerned with the branch to which they had belonged. It might be said that the determination for going to war with America was first crystalized among them within the Japanese decisional organization. For example, the First Committee which was set up in November 1940 within the Navy, with the middle echelon officers occupying key positions, had worked on war planning and reached an agreement as early as May 1941 on the policy of marching southward with the determination of going to war with America. Furthermore, they agreed to endeavor to maneuver their superiors and the Army into moving toward the determination for war. When the American government took the step of imposing an oil embargo, the middle echelon officers of the Army and Navy responded to it most vigorously, arguing for war.

It might be observed in every country that the middle echelon military officers or government officials tend to display a similar attitude and behavior—that is, taking a firm stand, lack of feeling of responsibility, more concern about their own branch than the broad considerations of national goals and so on. What I would like to emphasize is that in prewar Japan there existed a decision-making system in which the middle echelon military officers or government officials could easily press their views on their superiors and often make their opinions dominant in the process. I have also defined the organizational characteristics in the decision-making process of prewar Japan as a decentralized pattern. When looking at the decision-making process of Japan leading to the Russo-Japanese War, the decentralized pattern is discernible too. The middle echelon military officers and officials of the Foreign Office, who had organized a group called “Kogetsukai,” determined to go to war with Russia as early as May 1903 and had exerted their pressure in this direction upon the decision-makers. Under their influence, the Chief of the Army General Staff had become more ready for war than other leaders, and he gave his advice to the Emperor to take a chance before the situation would become much more unfavorable to Japan.

VI. Miscalculations in American Policy toward Japan

The last point I would like to make is that the U.S. made miscalculations in regard to

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10 Robert J.C. Butow, Tojo and the Coming of the War, 1961, p. 308.
11 Sugiyama Memo, pp. 64-90.
12 Chihiro Hosoya, A Case Study of the Japanese Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process: Japan's Response to the German-Soviet War, 1941 (The University Seminar on Modern East Asia, Columbia University, May 1963), mimeograph.
the effect its firm policy would have on the decision-making process in Japan. As a result, American policy accelerated Japan's movement toward war rather than retarding it. Conscious of the effect economic pressure would have on Japan, the U.S. leaders had been considering an application of economic pressure to constrain the actions of the Japanese government, especially in the face of the expansion of Japanese military activities in China after July 1937 and the resulting increase in the infringement of U.S. treaty rights by the Japanese. As the first step in this direction the U.S. government announced its intention to abrogate the 1911 Japanese-American Treaty of Commerce and Navigation on July 26, 1939 and, as a result of its effectuation on January 26, 1940, the legal obstacles standing in the way of applying effective economic sanctions were removed. On July 26, 1940, the U.S. issued an order expanding the export license system to include aviation motor fuel and lubricants, and No. 1 heavy melting iron and steel scrap. From then on the American government proceeded to augment economic sanctions.

The basic assumption underlying the argument, within the U.S. government, of the hard line faction, who had argued for imposing strong economic sanctions toward Japan, was that in dealing with the Japanese a conciliatory attitude was to be avoided and power was the only thing that made any impression. If America showed an unbending resolution, Japan would without fail tamely submit. A representative of this faction, Stanley Hornbeck in the Division of Far Eastern Affairs, State Department, had repeatedly argued for showing an unbending resolution through strong economic sanctions and had assessed their deterring effect on Japan's expansion.14 Another exponent of a firm policy toward Japan, Henry Stimson, Secretary of War, stated at a cabinet meeting on October 4, 1940, that “in 1919 President Wilson got his dander up and put on an embargo on all cotton going to Japan and a boycott on her silk, with the result that she crawled down within two months and brought all of her troops out from Siberia like whipped puppies.”15

Now, by means of economic sanctions were they successful in producing the expected effect on the reaction of the Japanese? Let us look at Japan’s response to the U.S. order for the economic restrictions on July 26, 1940. They did not have a restraining effect on Japan’s march southward; rather they prompted the middle echelon military officers to take immediate action in North Indochina. And at this time the Navy General Staff estimated that if the Japanese military advanced into the whole of French Indochina, the American government would probably impose an embargo on all petroleum and scrap iron. Thus, the middle echelon officers reinforced their own conviction that in case of an “American imposition of a complete embargo” the use of military force toward the south would become inevitable.16

Economic pressure, rather than restraining Japan and forcing a retreat in its movement for a southern advance, had in fact produced an “acceleration of the southern policy” and even stiffened the Japanese government’s decision to go to war with America. What were the factors that caused these miscalculations? One of these factors was, I assume, an inadequate understanding on the part of the U.S. government leaders of the important role

15 Stimson Diary (The Yale University Library), entry for October 4, 1940.
played by the middle echelon military officers in the course of Japanese foreign policy decision-making in the prewar period. It must be emphasized that the middle echelon military officers were more adventurous, contemptuous of compromise, and more exclusively military-minded in their way of thinking and mode of action than their superiors.

Ambassador Joseph Grew, representative of the soft line faction, had often warned the decision-makers in his country not to miscalculate Japan's response to U.S. strong measures, stressing the importance of the "psychological factors" in predicting Japanese actions. For example, as early as December 1, 1939, he wrote in a report that "Japan is a nation of hard warriors, still inculcated with the samurai do-or-die spirit which has by tradition and inheritance become ingrained in the race" and advised his government about this time to accept a modus vivendi in order to "bring in its train further Japanese steps towards ameliorating the position of our interests in China."17

Grew had believed in the efficacy of a gradual reduction in tensions, and he had repeatedly recommended that his government take steps toward relaxing economic pressure on Japan or follow a path of "constructive conciliation." Even after an oil embargo was imposed upon Japan, he was advising the State Department to relax the economic and military measures which were exerting inexorable pressure on Japan, step by step, as Japan, step by step, altered its course. In his view, the U.S. government was missing a real chance to lead Japan back to peaceful ways.18

However, it is hard to tell whether, if the U.S. government had taken conciliatory steps to generate a de-escalating effect, the Japanese government would have altered its course to avoid war. But at the same time, it is true that the American strong policy had made Japan's decision-makers vulnerable to pressure for war exerted from the middle echelon military officers.

Further, I have often asked myself what would have happened if, as a result of U.S. conciliatory steps, the Japanese decision-makers had not decided to go to war during the course of 1941. I am certain that those decision-makers would have found themselves in an extremely difficult position to decide to open hostilities with America after the spring of 1942 because of the "gradual exhaustion" of war materials, especially oil and because of a changing situation in Europe. In this respect, I would not agree that the Pacific War was the inevitable product of history.