

Diagnosis and Autopsy: Britain and the Outbreak of the Pacific War

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In 1999 the publication of Robert Stinnett's *Day of Deceit: The Truth About FDR and Pearl Harbor* reinvigorated the seemingly never-ending debate about whether the Roosevelt administration was forewarned about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.¹ In the United States the information uncovered by Stinnett led to a renewed assault on the historical reputation of President Roosevelt, a man who, for reasons that the outside world finds fairly baffling, continues to excite apoplexy on the Republican right. Among intelligence historians Stinnett's book received less acclaim, for, as John Zimmerman has noted, it was flawed both in terms of its research and its historical methodology and presented a case that could only convince the converted.²

The attention given to Stinnett's book was unfortunate, for its appearance over-shadowed another new volume on the Pearl Harbor attack, Timothy Wilford's *Pearl Harbor Redefined: USN Radio Intelligence in 1941*. This is a shame, because Wilford's research in this book and in his subsequent articles is noticeably superior to Stinnett's. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that he has presented the most important challenge yet to orthodox historians who dismiss the idea that the United States and Britain had foreknowledge of what would happen on 7 December 1941.³ The key to Wilford's case is that he has uncovered some American naval records that suggest that the USN

¹ R.B. Stinnett, *Day of Deceit: The Truth About FDR and Pearl Harbor* (New York, 1999).

² J.C. Zimmerman, 'Pearl Harbor's Revisionism: Robert Stinnett's *Day of Deceit* *Intelligence and National Security*, 2002, 17/2 pp.127-46.

³ Timothy Wilford, *Pearl Harbor Redefined: USN Radio Intelligence in 1941* (Lanham, 2001), and idem, 'Watching the North Pacific: British and Commonwealth Intelligence Before Pearl Harbor' *Intelligence and National Security*, 2002, 17/4, pp.131-64.

might have been intercepting low-frequency radio transmissions emanating from *kido butai*, the Japanese carrier taskforce. In addition, he notes that a number of memoirs and affidavits, both published and in private hands, refer to the British government as having warned Washington that the Japanese might be planning an attack on Pearl Harbor. Referring to the latter point, Wilford stresses that this evidence should not be ignored because it came to be written after the events and argues that most intelligence historians have mistakenly put too great a faith in official records and have consequently ignored private papers and memoirs.⁴

Wilford therefore provides a good deal of material to digest and does so in a considered way that is absent from so much of the revisionist work on the Pearl Harbor controversy. In the light of his research, it is clearly necessary to think again about the orthodox interpretation of events and see where it might usefully be revised. This paper will focus on the British side of the picture records, both public and private, and will consider whether a renewed look at the contemporary evidence or the reassessments that took place in 1942 and 1945-47 suggest that the attack on Hawaii had been predicted.

The first requirement in any such review is to set the scene based on evidence that is in the public domain and beyond dispute. Historians who have studied the records on Britain and the origins of the Pacific War are all agreed that by November 1941 Whitehall knew that something was about to happen. The question, however, was 'what'. From early November both SIGINT and HUMINT indicated that a large build-up of Japanese forces was taking place in Indochina. At first, it was feared that this indicated that Japan was about to launch an imminent attack on Yunnan to cut the Burma Road, thus striking at China's ability to pursue the war, but by the middle of the month the concentrations of troops and aircraft suggested that Thailand was the

⁴ Wilford, 'Watching the North Pacific' p.155.

more likely target.⁵ In addition to the above, other pieces of information also indicated that Japan was likely to make a new aggressive move. For example, it was clear at this point that the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) had fully mobilised with the majority of the Combined Fleet located off Kyushu, and it was noted with interest that virtually all Japanese merchant ships had returned to Far Eastern waters.⁶

In the last days of November attention continued to focus on the impending threat to Thailand. On 26 November, a report from the American consul in Hanoi warned that a Japanese attack on the Kra Isthmus could be expected on 1 December.⁷ On 28 November a report on the present situation was released under the auspices of the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee (JIC). It observed that a Japanese strike on Thailand, possibly including a landing in the Kra Isthmus, was a strong possibility. However, it did not see this move as taking place simultaneously with an assault on Malaya, for it was held that Japan would need two to three months to prepare aerodromes in the isthmus for any invasion of the British colony.⁸ This judgement was influenced by the common perception that the isthmus was waterlogged at this time of year.

Britain therefore did not contemplate an imminent attack on its possessions, but this expected Japanese move did raise concern for since April that year it had been acknowledged that northern Malaya could only be defended if the isthmus was in British possession.⁹ This raised the question of whether it was in Britain's interest to engage in a pre-emptory seizure of the isthmus (Operation Matador), and whether, if Britain did so, this would itself precipitate war. This in turn raised

⁵ The National Archives (TNA), Kew, CAB81/105 JIC(41)439 'Japanese Intentions' JIC report 18 November 1941.

⁶ TNA ADM223/152 Weekly Intelligence Report no.85 24 October 1941, and CAB81/142 Summary of Inter-Service Intelligence report no.345 20 November 1941.

⁷ TNA FO371/27767 F12823/9/61 Meiklereid (Saigon) to Eden 26 November 1941 tel.226.

⁸ TNA CAB82/105 JIC(41)449 'Possible Japanese Action' JIC report 28 November 1941.

⁹ TNA CAB80/27 COS(41)227 'Defence of Malaya' COS report 7 April 1941.

another conundrum, namely whether the United States would necessarily come to Britain's aid if British infringement of Thai neutrality led to hostilities with Japan. On 29 November the Chiefs of Staff agreed that Matador should only be launched if Britain was sure of American support, which was a view that Churchill supported at a War Cabinet meeting three days later.¹⁰ Meanwhile, some initial precautions were taken. On 29 November the Governor in Singapore was ordered to issue the official war preparations code-word 'AWAKE', and on the next day in Whitehall the War Cabinet's Co-ordination of Departmental Action in Event of War with Japan Committee (the JWB Committee) convened for the first time.¹¹

While evidence accumulated about Japanese ambitions in South-East Asia, the official reports coming into Whitehall did not at this point provide any evidence of an impending naval threat to Pearl Harbor, or indeed to any American territory. The JIC indicated in its intelligence summary on 28 November that, as far as the Admiralty knew, some units of the Combined Fleet were still in home waters, but that a taskforce was being formed in the area around Formosa and Hainan.¹² The only telegram at this point that mentioned the whereabouts of Japan's aircraft carriers was one that emanated from the Dutch naval attaché in Washington, which stated that two such vessels might be despatched to the Mandates.¹³

In early December more information accumulated on the impending threat to Thailand. In this troubled environment, on 1

¹⁰ TNA CAB79/16 COS(41)402nd meeting 29 November 1941, and CAB65/24 WM(41) 122nd meeting 1 December 1941.

¹¹ Shenton Thomas papers, Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Mss.Ind.Ocn.S341 diary 29 November 1941, and CAB107/3 JWB(41) 1st meeting 30 November 1941.

¹² TNA CAB82/105 JIC(41)449 'Possible Japanese Action' JIC report 28 November 1941. See also TNA ADM199/1477 British Admiralty Delegation [BAD] Washington to Admiralty 26 November 1941, and Admiralty to Senior Officer Force G, 28 November 1941.

¹³ TNA ADM199/1477 British Naval Liaison Officer Batavia to C in C China 27 November 1941 and Australian War Memorial, Canberra AWM124/4/132 Casey to External Affairs 1 December 1941 tel.1065.

December the Chiefs of Staff asked the JIC to prepare a daily intelligence summary to be sent out to Brooke-Popham in Singapore.¹⁴ Unfortunately none of these summaries has ever surfaced in the public domain. The growing menace was underlined on 2 December when naval intelligence from Singapore reported the further build-up of the taskforce in the South China Sea, which was stated to include four aircraft carriers, and confirmed the presence of another two of these vessels in the Mandates.¹⁵ This accounted for six of Japan's ten aircraft carriers, the others were according, to an earlier report, still in Japanese home waters.¹⁶ Meanwhile frantic diplomacy in Washington on the subject of whether Britain could launch a pre-emptive strike into the Kra Isthmus revealed that Roosevelt was prepared to support such an act if Japan attacked Thailand.

It was only on 6 December that the chairman of the JWB Committee finally informed his peers of 'information about recent Japanese moves which suggested the imminence of an attack'.¹⁷ What had changed in the interim was that over the previous three days diplomatic intercepts had revealed that Tokyo had told its overseas missions to prepare to destroy their ciphers and cipher machines – a sure sign that war was imminent – and, moreover, informed its Tripartite Pact allies that an armed clash with Britain and the United States could occur 'sooner than expected'.¹⁸ Then, early on 6 December a Japanese convoy was spotted entering the Gulf of Thailand.

It was still, however, impossible to predict precisely how events would pan out. Would the Japanese invasion force turn north to seize Bangkok or keep moving west and strike against the Kra Isthmus? On

¹⁴ TNA CAB79/16 COS(41) 403rd meeting 1 December 1941.

¹⁵ See TNA CAB81/142 Summary of Inter-Service Intelligence report no.356 1 December 1941, and Naval History Section, Canberra, B6227 Combined Operations Centre DS/156 4 December 1941.

¹⁶ TNA ADM199/1477 BAD Washington to DNI 26 November 1941 tel.2225/26R.

¹⁷ TNA CAB107/3 JWB(41) 3 December 1941.

¹⁸ See Antony Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor: Avoiding War in East Asia, 1936-41* (London, 1995) p.188.

both 6 and 7 December the Chiefs of Staff and the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Alexander Cadogan, spent hours ruminating over the possible scenarios. One thought was uppermost in their minds, in the words of General Sir Alan Brooke, how to ensure that 'in every case the USA would not be left out'.¹⁹ Such was their concern that late in the afternoon of 7 December they prepared a new memorandum for Churchill, asking if US support was assured in the case of Britain attacking the Japanese convoy at sea.²⁰ This memorandum was never shown to the Prime Minister, because by the time it was printed it had been superseded by events, for news came in of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the landing at Kota Bharu.

The picture that emerges from the papers in the public domain is therefore one in which Britain's concentration was squarely focused on South-East Asia. Little thought was given to the United States, except to the extent that Britain was nervous that any precipitous action might mean that it would have to face Japan alone. At no point was it assumed that Japan would do Britain the huge favour of attacking the United States. The British response to the attack on Pearl Harbor was thus generally one of surprise, as can be seen from the diaries of Major-General Sir John Kennedy, the Director of Planning at the War Office, and Malcolm Kennedy, a Japanese-language cryptographer.²¹ Brooke went even further, for his reaction was one of irritation at the time that had been needlessly wasted in trying to map out every possible scenario in the last days of peace; he noted on 8 December 'All of our work of the last 48 hours wasted! The Japs themselves have now ensured that the USA are in the war.'²² The only figure to contradict this trend was Leo Amery, the Secretary of State for India, who observed

¹⁹ Brooke diary entry for 7 December 1941, in Alex Danchev (ed), *Field Marshal Alanbrooke: War Diaries, 1939-1945* (London 2001) p.208.

²⁰ TNA CAB79/16 COS(41) 411th meeting 7 December 1941, annex II COS to Churchill 7 December 1941.

²¹ John Kennedy papers, LHCMA, 4/2/3, diary entry 13 December 1941, and Malcolm Kennedy papers, Sheffield University Library, 5/37, diary entry 7 December 1941.

²² Brooke diary entry for 7 December 1941, in Danchev (ed), *op.cit.*, p.209.

in his diary that he had always suspected that the Japanese would strike against the United States first, though he provided the caveat that he had expected the attack to come at Manila rather than Hawaii.²³

It is curious then, as Wilford has noted, that the recently released memoirs of the former Conservative MP, Sir Julian Ridsdale, then a junior intelligence officer at the War Office, tell a different story. Ridsdale states in his memoirs that around 27 November he was asked to deputize for his immediate superior at a meeting of the JIC. This gathering, he says, included a troubled discussion about the fact that no precise information existed on the whereabouts of the carriers. Accordingly it was decided that a warning telegram should be sent to Washington, bringing to its attention that these vessels posed a potential threat to the American fleet. The uncertainty, he records, was based on the fact that the carriers had suddenly started to observe radio silence.²⁴ Ridsdale then recounts that in 1987 he discussed this episode with Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, the chairman of the JIC in 1941, who confirmed his recollection.

The problem with Ridsdale's contention is that it is not easy to corroborate. The first and most obvious difficulty is that there is no record of any such meeting or discussion in the JIC files. This, however, is not surprising for the JIC itself did not discuss day-to-day intelligence but rather dealt with administrative matters. It is probably the case that, if Ridsdale is correct, he is referring instead to a meeting of the Junior JIC, which usually met twice weekly to discuss operational intelligence. This is also likely because Ridsdale, being only an army captain, was not senior enough to deputize for the War Office at a full JIC meeting.²⁵ Unfortunately, there is no certain way of knowing if this discussion took place, for, according to the Cabinet Office, the Junior

²³ Avon papers, Birmingham University Library, AP20/1/12 Diary 1941, and Amery diary entry 7 December 1941 in J. Barnes & D. Nicholson (eds), *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries, 1929-1945* (London, 1988) pp.752-3.

²⁴ Ridsdale memoirs, Churchill College Archives (CCA) Cambridge, RIDS 1 p.42.

²⁵ For details on the work of the Junior JIC see TNA CAB21/3622 Edwards (JIC Sec) to Mackesy 8 February 1941.

JIC records do not exist.²⁶ The situation is made even more frustrating by the fact that none of the members of the JIC left diaries or letters papers in the public domain that cover these crucial days. Thus not even private papers can be used to judge the accuracy of Ridsdale's recollection. However, it has to be said that some evidence from the official record suggests that Ridsdale recollection cannot be correct. In early December a comment by the Naval Intelligence Division (NID) on American intelligence, stated that the whereabouts of the carriers was known, but did nothing to contradict Honolulu's assertion that they were in the mandates, the South China Sea and home waters, and did not refer to Pearl Harbor at all.²⁷ This hardly tallies with Ridsdale's version of events.

Still, the basis of Wilford's argument is that Ridsdale's contention cannot be dismissed simply because it cannot be confirmed by the extant official record. Moreover, he notes in support of his argument that in the 1970s Cavendish-Bentinck provided a similar version of events in 1941 to the writer Constantine Fitzgibbon.²⁸ However, it must be noted here that memoirs are problematical sources. Ridsdale's memoirs were written over forty years after the events described above and some of his descriptions of events suggest that his memory was not perfect. In one passage describing the events of October 1941 he ascribes the decision to send HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* to Singapore as arising from a warning from 'C', the head of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) that a Japanese advance south was imminent.²⁹ There is nothing in the official record that would support this contention, and, indeed, much that contradicts it, for the arguments used at the Cabinet Defence Committee meetings in mid-October which decided to send these vessels to the East were largely political rather

²⁶ Cabinet Office to author 11 July and 17 September 1997.

²⁷ TNA ADM199/1477 NID comment 4 December 1941 on BAD Washington to DNI 26 November 1941 tel.2225/26R.

²⁸ Wilford, *Pearl Harbor Redefined* p.98.

²⁹ Ridsdale memoirs, CCA, RIDS 1 p.40.

than strategic. As far as we can tell these ships were sent to overawe the Japanese, whose intentions were still unknown, and to impress Britain's allies, and not because of any signs of immediate attack.³⁰ If Ridsdale produced an over-dramatized version of this episode, is it not possible that his memory exaggerated the significance of the later JIC discussion? Here in a nutshell is the whole problem of memoirs as reliable historical evidence.

Another problem with Ridsdale's account is his contention that it was Japanese radio silence that led the JIC to conclude that 'the Japanese Fleet was now in a position to be considered a major threat to the American Fleet in Pearl Harbor'.³¹ This is quite a leap in logic and, indeed, contradicts Wilford's own hypothesis that Britain and the United States were able to intercept low-frequency radio messages emanating from *kido butai*. It may be, of course, that Ridsdale, as an army officer, was not fully informed about what was going on and that, in fact, the Admiralty did have reliable sources of information about Japanese naval movements. But if this were so, what sources would the Admiralty have been able to use?

The major area of speculation in recent years has centred on the British and American ability to read JN-25, the IJN's main operational cipher, which in the following year contributed so much to the Allied victory at Midway. It is known that in 1941 both the British naval cryptographical unit at Singapore and its American equivalent at Cavite in the Philippines were working hard to break this cipher, but there is a dispute about whether by the autumn it was capable of generating operational intelligence.³² Recent archival releases in

³⁰ Christopher M. Bell, 'The "Singapore Strategy" and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z', *English Historical Review*, CXIV (2001) 608-34, and Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor* pp.174-6. For a different interpretation, see Ian Cowman, *Dominion or Decline: Anglo-American Naval relations in the Pacific, 1937-1941* (Oxford, 1996).

³¹ Ridsdale memoirs, CCA, RIDS 1 p.40.

³² See Stephen Budiansky, 'Too Late for Pearl Harbor', *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, (1999) pp.47-51 and Stinnett, *op.cit.*, pp.72-3.

Britain suggest that considerable advances had been made in regard to researching the cipher, but that exploitation for operational purposes was still problematical.

The first version of the Japanese general naval cipher was introduced in 1939 and was referred to by the British as JN-25A. Initially work on breaking the cipher was carried out in Britain by the GCCS, but in the autumn of that year once its general organization was understood, the task of deciphering was delegated to the cryptographic unit attached to the Far East Combined Bureau (FECB) at Singapore. This unit, which was led by Commander Shaw, was able to make some progress and in December 1939 reported that it had 'a few current messages stripped and translated'. A problem, however, arose in December 1940 when the IJN introduced a new cipher book (JN-25B). This was a considerable setback, but the IJN decision not to change the reciphering tables and indicator system meant that Shaw was optimistic that the new book would slowly give up its secrets.³³ By May 1941, with co-operation with Cavite now up and running, he informed London that half of the 1,000 indicators and 9,000 out of 50,000 subtractors had been solved and that the new book was 20% readable. He concluded that 'operational intelligence ... is therefore expected shortly'.³⁴

GCCS continued to nag Shaw about his unit's progress and in September, following a change to the reciphering system at the start of August, it asked when operational intelligence could be expected. Shaw's answer on 5 September was that 'It is hoped to start reading General Cypher in about a month.'³⁵ By the beginning of November there was still no breakthrough, and the head of the GCCS, Alistair Denniston, lamented to 'C' that 'the failure to produce any Japanese naval or military special intelligence' was due to the 'policy of

³³ TNA HW8/102 Shaw to GCCS 20 December 1940 tel.50.

³⁴ TNA HW8/102 Shaw to GCCS 6 May 1941 tel.92.

³⁵ TNA HW8/129 COIS to DNI 5 September 1941 tel.153.

decentralising the main cryptographic effort'.³⁶ This he contrasted to the success against the German Enigma cipher system, where all the work had taken place within the GCCS. However, within a month the situation was more promising. In frustratingly vague language Denniston observed on 2 December that 'it appears that progress is being made on this cypher as we have seen evidence of naval intelligence in reports from Singapore'. He then went on to note that, however, that 'results are scanty' due to the lack of clerical staff.³⁷ Here then is evidence that perhaps a smattering of JN-25B messages may have been broken prior to the change of the reciphering tables on 4 December. Whether such results would have provided any meaningful operational intelligence is though a moot point, for it appears that the FECB was ill equipped in terms of personnel to exploit this source.

It is therefore doubtful whether JN-25B could have provided the British with current intelligence on the movements or intentions of the Japanese carrier fleet. Wilford is willing to accept this; he bases his case instead on radio direction-finding (RDF) and traffic analysis. Certainly there is some evidence that the expansion of the British Empire's RDF network in 1940-41, with the opening of new stations in Australia, Canada and the South Pacific, increased Britain's capabilities in this area. In March 1941, for example, the FECB noted that over the last few months traffic analysis had allowed it to follow a reorganization of the Japanese fleet.³⁸ This intelligence was not, however, entirely reliable, for in its next periodical report the FECB admitted that it was unsure of the precise whereabouts of elements of the Second Fleet, but in October it did reveal that the IJN carriers had been organized as a separate command.³⁹ What was revealed in late November and early

³⁶ TNA HW67/2 Denniston to 'C' 1 November 1941.

³⁷ TNA HW67/2 Denniston to DSD-9 2 December 1941.

³⁸ TNA HW4/26 'Far East D/F Organization: Periodical Analysis' FECB report 26 March 1941.

³⁹ TNA HW4/26 'Far East D/F Organization: Periodical Analysis' FECB report 25 July 1941, and 'Far East D/F Organization: Periodical Analysis' FECB report 16 October 1941.

December 1941 is not entirely clear, but it seems probable that it was DF and traffic analysis that led the NID to state that it knew the location of the Japanese carriers, even if that report said nothing about Pearl Harbor.

There is little then in the extant contemporary material, either governmental or private, that would suggest British foreknowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack. The only evidence that appears to support that contention is anecdotal and post-facto. Grey areas do, however, exist. It is clear from a document in the Australian archives that in November 1941 Britain received information from an American source about Japanese 'activities' in Hawaii, but what the expression 'activities' meant in concrete terms is unclear. We also have in Australia the single most elliptical diary entry pertaining to Pearl Harbor. On 8 December the Australian minister in Washington, Richard Casey, after dining with the American Under-Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, made a tantilizingly remark in his journal, observing, 'He is humiliated and furious about Hawaii; although he clearly doesn't know half of it.'⁴⁰

What happens, however, if the net is cast wider to include the various post-mortems on the strategic failures of December 1941? Is it possible that these might cast more light on the darkness that surrounds the American humiliation at Pearl Harbor? Naturally the British investigations focused primarily on events in Southeast Asia rather than Hawaii, but the way in which they were handled provides an interesting commentary on the way in which intelligence is handled retrospectively and includes some material that reflects on the Pearl Harbor attack. The process began as early as January 1942 when the Director of Military Intelligence, Major-General Francis Davidson, called for an analysis of the JIC reports in 1941. The subsequent investigation led the section of his organization that dealt with East Asia, MI2, of which Ridsdale was a member, to the general conclusion

⁴⁰ Richard Casey papers, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Melbourne, M1153/20, diary entry 8 December 1941.

that the JIC had been ‘remarkably accurate’ in its assessment of Japanese strategy towards Malaya and the scale of attack. This, however, involved a rather desperate attempt to pretend that the failure to predict simultaneous attacks on the Kra Isthmus and Kota Bharu was a minor shortcoming.⁴¹ Regarding other operations, MI2 noted that the attack on the Philippines had not been foreseen, and more generally observed that:

Where they [JIC] went badly wrong was failure to realise that Japan could and would attack America and Britain simultaneously. There was always the background that Japan hoped to get at Britain without rousing America.⁴²

Davidson agreed with this assessment and noted that it had appeared at the time that the Hull-Nomura talks were a ruse to ‘keep the USA in play and out of the war, while the next stage (Thailand) was carried out, if possible without war’. This was an interesting appraisal of British thinking in the autumn of 1941, which, in retrospect helps to illuminate British fears at the time. However, another writer noted anonymously of the MI2 conclusion that it was ‘Wrongly put and most unfair’.⁴³

The other early questioning of the pre-war intelligence forecasts came from an aggrieved Churchill, who on 19 January 1942 demanded to know who had been responsible for the ‘opinion, so violently falsified by events’ that the Kra Isthmus would be waterlogged in December.⁴⁴ The response from an anonymous intelligence official opined disingenuously that this judgement had not been reflected in any of the advice the JIC had given, although it did note that elsewhere ‘the sub-committee were certainly a long way out in many of their

⁴¹ TNA WO208/871 ‘DMI’s paper dated 3rd January’ MI2 note undated [January 1942] and ‘Comment on DMI’s minute’ unattributed and undated [January 1942].

⁴² TNA WO208/871 ‘DMI’s paper dated 3rd January’ MI2 note undated [January 1942].

⁴³ TNA WO208/871 ‘Conclusions’ Davidson note undated [January 1942].

⁴⁴ TNA CAB121/761 Churchill to Ismay 19 January 1942.

prognostications'.⁴⁵ The immediate post-facto assessments thus pointed to some intelligence errors on Britain's behalf, but shed no light on Pearl Harbor.

During and immediately after the war further departmental assessments of intelligence were produced as part of the war history series, these being designed as exercises in lesson learning. Within the Admiralty these reports touched on more than merely the events in Southeast Asia and a number of tantalising comments emerged. For example, one assessment of British and America radio intelligence observed that 'Y' staff had given 'ample warning that Japan was going to war in December 1941', while another observed that penetration of the Japanese naval cipher had provided 'intelligence covering a wide field in November 1941 and from March 1942 until its supersession in June 1942'.⁴⁶ However, while these sentences might hint at foreknowledge, the report specifically on the Pearl Harbor attack was categorical that Britain had no such information and that the only carriers that were known to be operating east of Japan were those in the Mandates.⁴⁷ In addition, some of the histories included material that was deeply critical of British failings. In particular, one report cast doubt on the FECB's capacity for DF work. It noted that an officer who had gone out to Singapore in August 1941 had later opined that the DF operators had been of poor quality with the result that the daily plotting of Japanese movements shown to the Commander-in-Chief China Station was 'only misleading'.⁴⁸

Internal histories were also produced within GCCS. One chapter

⁴⁵ TNA CAB121/748 DiD to Hollis (COS Secretariat) 19 January 1942.

⁴⁶ TNA ADM223/297 'NID War History Vol.42 Far East and Pacific III, Special: Collaboration of British and US Radio Intelligence' unattributed and undated, and NID War History Vol.42 Far East and Pacific III, Special: Japanese Cyphers – Notes' Barham (NID) 18 July 1942.

⁴⁷ TNA ADM223/494 'NID War History Vol.40 Far East and Pacific I, History: Pearl Harbour and the Loss of the Prince of Wales & Repulse' unattributed and undated [1945?].

⁴⁸ TNA ADM223/495 'The Loss of Singapore and its Lessons for NID' Barrett (NID) report undated [1947?].

in a history entitled 'Allied Sigint – Policy and Organisation' included important material on the FECB's progress with JN-25B. Echoing Denniston's observations in the autumn of 1941, it underlined that the FECB's ability to attack the cipher had been compromised by its lack of resources. Indeed, it went as far as to note that, 'There was not a single Service cipher which was being currently read. Even the JN/25 in the FECB was producing no current intelligence – to the natural disgust of the local naval authorities.'⁴⁹ As noted above, this might be a slight exaggeration of the situation, as there is some evidence that the FECB was able to provide albeit scanty intelligence from the latter cipher, but in regard to the general lack of knowledge it is apt. Another account touched on the American attack on Japanese naval ciphers. This report observed that the Americans had had problems in developing 'the art of book-building' and that this had led to 'confusion as to whether prior to the outbreak of war the main Japanese Fleet had assembled at Truk, or at a port in Kyuushuu (sic)'.⁵⁰ This is an interesting observation for, while it suggests that the USN had made some progress in breaking open JN-25B, it also underlines that they, like the British, were not in a position to exploit it effectively. More might be said about this topic, but unfortunately some of the potentially interesting files in the GCCS history, namely those on JN-25 and traffic analysis of Japanese signals, remain closed to researchers even though their file numbers are now included in the National Archive lists.⁵¹

Another notable area of post-war activity that throws some light on the events of 1941 is the government reaction to pressure for public inquiries. The most famous post-mortem was the Congressional hearing of 1945-46 into the Pearl Harbor attack. Britain was marginally involved in these proceedings, for occasionally the State Department asked for permission to forward documents of British origin to the

⁴⁹ TNA HW43/76 'Allied Sigint – Policy and Organisation chapter IV, part 2 The Japanese War' de Grey (GCCS) undated.

⁵⁰ TNA HW4/25 'History of HMS Anderson' Shaw report undated.

⁵¹ See the files TNA HW43/33, 34 and 63.

inquiry. These requests covered various Foreign Office telegrams, military conference reports and items from the Churchill-Roosevelt correspondence. Most of these were and are uncontroversial, but it is worth noting that some Foreign Office files from 1946, which appear to deal among other things with Churchill's 'thin diet' telegram to Roosevelt of 26 November, have again been retained.⁵²

Some light is shed on at least one aspect of controversy by documents from Australia. In April 1946 a problem arose in April 1946 when the inquiry asked for information about the draft warning drawn up on 7 December 1941 that Roosevelt contemplated presenting to the Japanese emperor. This led to Australia pondering whether it should release a telegram on this matter that Richard Casey had sent from Washington to Canberra on 6 December 1941. In this communication Casey had summarized a conversation with the British ambassador, Lord Halifax, who had just returned from an interview with Roosevelt. Much of the telegram focused without controversy on the message of warning to the Japanese emperor, but it ended with the line, 'British Ambassador tells me that the President does not believe that the Japanese will make an aggressive move as soon as the Secretary of State does.'⁵³ Neither Australia nor Britain wished the last sentence to become public, for it might embarrass the late president in the sense not of his having foreknowledge of Pearl Harbor but rather making him appear naive and unprepared. Needless to say a more anodyne way of communicating the relevant information about Roosevelt's message to the Emperor was found.⁵⁴

What though of Britain's own military disaster in Southeast Asia in 1941-42? Why did that not lead to a public inquiry? This is an interesting question for such an investigation might have also shed

⁵² See the files TNA FO371/51650 and FO371/51652.

⁵³ NAA, Canberra, A3317/373/46 Casey (Washington) to External Affairs 6 December 1941 tel.1096.

⁵⁴ NAA, Canberra A3317/373/46 Hood (London) to Evatt 23 April 1946 tel.A13, and Washington to Hood 10 May 1946, and TNA FO371/51650 AN1579/19/45 Wilson (American dept) minute 28 May 1946.

little on events at Pearl Harbor. The issue of whether such an enquiry should take place was first raised in January 1946 following the release of the text of Churchill's speech on the Malayan fiasco to a secret House of Commons session on 23 April 1942. Responding to Australian pressure for an inquiry, the Chiefs of Staff asked the Joint Planning Staff (JPS) to look into the practicality and ramifications of such a study.⁵⁵ The JPS took just over a month to produce its report. Its conclusions were that in the interest of Commonwealth cohesion, inter-departmental cooperation in Whitehall, and the reputation of a man whose career had already been blighted by the Gallipoli inquiry in the First World War – namely Churchill – it was best to let sleeping dogs lie. Moreover the report observed that an inquiry was unacceptable because it would also necessitate some discussion of intelligence methods, which 'are and should remain secret'.⁵⁶ Clearly intelligence could not be kept out of any inquiry for, as the annexe to the report observed, it had played an unfortunate role in Britain's defeat in that 'our intelligence appreciations of the timing, strength and quality of the Japanese attack were gravely at fault'.⁵⁷ The JPS elaborated on the intelligence mistakes that had been made, noting that Japanese capabilities, particularly in the air, had been grossly underestimated. Moreover among its comments it too singled out the final JIC report of 28 November 1941, in which it had been asserted that a Japanese attack on Malaya could only follow two to three months after the seizure of the Kra Isthmus. There was, however, no reference in the report to Pearl Harbor.

Not surprisingly the official despatches by the British commanders in Malaya which were made available to the public in the late 1940s did not refer to Pearl Harbor, for that was not within their brief. Nor do the official histories or the correspondence in the Cabinet Office generated by their compilation contain any reference to this particular

⁵⁵ CAB121/765 COS(46) 17th meeting 31 January 1946.

⁵⁶ CAB119/208 JP(46)29 Final 'Malayan Campaign – Public Inquiry' JPS report 5 March 1946.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

aspect of the Japanese offensive. One attempt to write the history of the period did, however, lead to an interesting episode. As has recently been related by David Reynolds, in the autumn of 1949 Winston Churchill began to write the section of his Second World War memoirs that dealt with the outbreak of the conflict with Japan. In order to clarify his recollection of events, he asked 'C' for information on the intelligence that had been passed to Downing Street in the last days of peace. Consequently, 'C' requested that the GCCS consult its files.⁵⁸ A report was quickly compiled. Its conclusion observed that:

It is suggested that Mr Churchill was or should have been very fully informed about Japan though the evidence was cumulative rather than sensational until the beginning of December. After the 1st it was obviously only a question of a few days one way or another ... He was therefore at no great disadvantage as compared to the President.⁵⁹

The report did, however, note that that the United States had not forwarded copies of Japan's 'deadline' messages to Washington on 6/7 December to London, but 'C' informed Churchill that he was convinced that this was an oversight rather than an attempt to keep the British in the dark. Reynolds notes that this episode casts doubts on the idea that Churchill deliberately withheld information from Roosevelt about a possible attack on Pearl Harbor, for it portrays him as having the same or less information to hand than the president.⁶⁰ However, the GCCS report cannot be taken as a wholly satisfactory document, for it deals exclusively with the information derived from the diplomatic intercepts and does not mention naval intelligence at all. The chance to produce a definitive document was thus allowed to pass.

⁵⁸ David Reynolds, *In command of history: Churchill fighting and writing the Second World War* (London, 2004) pp.262-3.

⁵⁹ TNA HW50/52 de Grey (GCCS) note 9 December 1949.

⁶⁰ Reynolds, *In command of history* p.263.

We are then left in the dilemma of not knowing concretely one way or another whether Britain had any kind of forewarning of the Pearl Harbor attack. Some memoir evidence suggests that Whitehall did, but both the official records and private papers lack any contemporary corroboration of these allegations and indeed include telegrams, reports, diary entries and letters that veer in the other direction. In addition, the internal histories produced both by NID and the GCCS do not substantiate the allegation. Wilford argues quite sensibly in his defence that the so-called 'traditionalist' historians must nevertheless address the memoir evidence directly as such a wealth of this material exists. How is it to be explained away? The case of Ridsdale perhaps provides an answer, for if one checks some of his comments against the contemporary records they seem inflated. That is not to say that they are outright lies but they do contain misconceptions. Is it therefore the case that speculation has been twisted by memory or by a heightened sense of drama into bald fact? At the same time one can turn this argument on its head, for surely the revisionists have to explain why the anecdotal memoir evidence is often not supported by the contemporary sources. Ridsdale says that the JIC did not know the whereabouts of the Japanese carriers, but this is contradicted by an extant NID comment on American intelligence. Who then are we to believe? Can it really be argued that the Admiralty sent out deliberately false intelligence reports on the eve of war?

The contemporary evidence available to us therefore continues to lean towards the idea that Britain did not have foreknowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack. Perhaps the best compromise that we can come to is to say that in late November and early December 1941 the British had some apprehension about the scale of a Japanese attack and may have communicated this concern to the United States. However, there is nothing on the British side that indicates that it was involved in a conspiracy, either by itself or in league with Washington to allow Pearl Harbor to be sacrificed. Indeed, the behaviour of the Chiefs of Staff right up until 7 December suggests that Britain was not thinking about a Japanese attack on American soil. Rather the scenario it envisaged was

an incremental move into Thailand that would compromise the security of Malaya. This, however, cannot be the final word of this contentious topic for there is more information out there. As noted above, quite a number of official files are still closed to researchers, and until they are released the speculation will continue.

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