

*All war must be just the killing of strangers against whom you feel no personal animosity; strangers whom, in other circumstances, you would help if you found them in trouble, and who would help you if you needed it.*

—Mark Twain

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## A LOOK BACK AND FORWARD



### What Should We Do?

by Edward R. Murrow  
Washington, D.C. (December 8, 1941)

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PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT will call for a joint session of Congress today to discuss yesterday's bombing of Pearl Harbor and the reported loss of 2,400 Americans. I can report that our commander-in-chief is calm and will not ask for a precipitous "outright" declaration of war against the Japanese, but instead leans toward a general consensus to "hunt down

the perpetrators” of this act of “infamy.” Speaking for the Congress, Senator Arthur Vandenberg promised bipartisan support to “bring to justice” the Japanese pilots. Many believe that the “rogue” airmen may well have flown from Japanese warships. In response, Secretary of War Stimson is calling for “an international coalition to indict these cowardly purveyors of death,” and will shortly ask the Japanese imperial government to hand over the suspected airman from the *Akagi* and *Kaga*—“and any more of these cruel fanatics who took off from ships involved in this dastardly act.” Assistant Secretary Robert Patterson was said to have remarked, “Stimson is madder than hell—poor old Admiral Yamamoto has a lot of explaining to do.”

Secretary of State Cordell Hull, however, this morning cautioned the nation about such “jingoism.” He warned, “The last thing we want is another *Maine* or *Lusitania*. We wouldn’t want to start something like a Second World War and ruin the real progress in Japanese-American relations over the last few years.” Hull himself is preparing for a long tour to consult our allies in South America, Africa, and colonial France: “If we get the world on board, and make them understand that this is not merely an aggressive act upon us, much less just an American problem, such a solid front may well deter further Japanese action.”

Even as Hull prepares to depart, special envoy Harry Hopkins is calling for a general statement of concern from the League of Nations, condemning not only the most recent Japanese aggression, but also an earlier reported incident in Nanking, China. “If we can get an expression of outrage from the League, Japan may well find itself in an interesting pickle. We’re looking for some strong League action of the type that followed the banditry in Ethiopia and Finland.” Hopkins finished by emphasizing the rather limited nature of the one-day Pearl Harbor incursion, and suggesting such piecemeal attacks were themselves a direct result of past American restraint. “We did not rattle our sabers when they went into China. Had we listened to the alarmists then, we might well be seeing Japanese anger manifesting itself from the Philippines to Wake Island in the coming days.”

Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., a few hours ago reminded the nation of the current disturbing eco-

conomic news. “Four million Americans are still out of work. Americans are not out of this Depression by any means. Are we to borrow money to build planes that we don’t even know will fly?” The industrialist Henry Kaiser was no more optimistic: “There is simply no liquidity in these markets. We shouldn’t even be considering rearming. It is not as if we are going to build a ship a day. Even launching a carrier every couple of years could put us back to 1932.”

Military leaders, smarting over yesterday’s losses, were no more ready for war. Even the usually colorful Admiral Halsey sounded a note of concern to this reporter, “Look, they have all the cards, not us. The bastards over there could give us a decade of war at least. Where do I get bases for my subs and flattops? Who gives me strips for the fly-boys? This could be a new war with no rules. Believe me, brother, we ain’t going to Midway or some place like that in six months and cut down to size the whole damn imperial fleet. It’s just not going to happen.” Admiral King was nearly as blunt, “Hell’s bells, no one has ever conquered Japan since they kicked the Portuguese out. Do the American people really want to go over to that part of the world and fight those samurai madmen? The logistics are impossible. These people have been at war for years. I’ve seen these Zeros—you put a suicide basket case with a wish to die for the emperor in with a tank of gas, and you’ve got a guided rocket that will blow our ships out of the water.” Colonel James Doolittle was even more cautious than the top brass when told of calls for potential early American counterattacks. “Swell—the last thing we need is to send in some hot-dogger to drop a few bombs for the press boys that cause no real damage and get our fellas killed in the bargain.”

On the home front, prominent voices in the arts expressed far stronger reservations about possible American “revenge”. Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago explained to me that the Pearl Harbor incident cannot be separated from its larger cultural context. “We must guard against this absurd and ongoing moral absolutism on the part of the United States in seeing complex cultural differences in black and white terms of the Occident and the Orient. We have no monopoly on morality or justice.” His colleague, Mortimer J. Adler, elaborated: “Far too often we look at the world through Western lenses. But in Japanese

eyes, this rather desperate attack is seen as a “slap”, a lashing out of sorts to get the attention of the United States, really more of a desperate cry of the heart than anything else.” Adler went on, “Japan has had a tradition of isolation from and distrust of Western civilization—rightly so in some respects, given everything from past European missionaries to racism, economic exploitation, and colonialism. If we inflame passions, they may well simply divorce themselves from the world community—or worse, set off a conflagration of pan-Asian hatred toward Occidentals that could last for generations. It seems to me Pearl Harbor is rather more of a case of Admiral Perry’s chickens at long last coming home to roost.”

Contacted at home, the noted naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison was pessimistic about the strategy involved in any U.S. response: “Good God, do they want us to fight the entire world—Germany, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and now Japan? We lose 2,400 sailors—less than an annual poliomyelitis outbreak—and then we start a World War II? I find these calls for mindless retaliation not only naïve, but disturbing as well in their failure to take account of America’s strategic impotence. That’s a part of the world we know very little about.”


Prominent American clergymen blasted the very idea of armed retaliation, calling instead for interfaith services and greater tolerance of Japanese religious beliefs. Cardinal Cushing warned against castigating the entire Japanese people for the actions of a few fanatics, adding that “Bushido, is, in fact, merely a variant of Shintoism, itself an age-old and misunderstood faith that is as humane as anything in Christian teaching.” Cushing added, “There is nothing in Bushido, much less Shintoism that is inherently bellicose or at all anti-Western. These few extremists are hardly representative of either public or religious opinion in Japan.” Cushing concluded, “The Emperor himself is a pacifist, a Zen scholar in fact deeply devoted to entomology, with no interest at all in bloodshed. And so the better question might be posed: ‘Why does so much of Asia hate us?’ ”

Celebrated director John Ford reflected Hollywood’s unease with the early rumors of war. “Hell, we are artists, not mouthpieces. What are we to do—join the Navy to make movies on government spec? Had we had more Japa-

nese films available to the American people in the first place, we wouldn't have had this misunderstanding." A few Hollywood stars who were willing to speak on the record agreed. Jimmy Stewart called for a world conference of concerned actors and screenwriters. "There have been some great Japanese movies. We need to reach out to our brother actors over there. The last thing we need is a bunch of us would-be pilots storming over to Burbank to enlist." Clark Gable was adamant in his belief in keeping America from doing something "stupid," as he put it. "If you haven't heard lately: We're actors, artists really, not war-mongers. I'm sure that our Japanese counterparts feel the same way. We need to put away the B-17s and get the cameras rolling on both sides."

Celebrated veterans were especially angered about knee-jerk American anger. Alvin C. York, Medal of Honor winner and hero of the Great War, was reported as "madder than hell" at the "war scare." "We shouldn't fight in some jungle island just because the Japanese hate old man Rockefeller as much as we do."

In an in-depth newsmaker interview, 81-year-old General John J. Pershing told Henry Luce of *Time* magazine, "I've made war before—long and hard. I've seen it. These sunshine sluggers talk a great game, but wait until our dead pile up. No, it is time to collect our thoughts and think like adults for a change. Lashing back is just what these extremists want us to do. If a war breaks out, then their mission is accomplished. I'd hate to see us playing into the hands of a few militarists who want to topple the moderates and the emperor. This ocean war with carriers is an entirely new challenge, nothing like we have ever seen before. Why get our boys killed only to make a few samurai martyrs?"

And so it is with confidence today that this reporter assures the American people and the world that sobriety, maturity, and prudence—not bombs—are the watchwords on the home front. Remember—our enemies can only win if they make us answer their violence with more needless violence. 

*Edward R. Murrow (1908-1965) is regarded as broadcasting's most illustrious journalist. He is credited with*

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and sincere, and with establishing standards to which  
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is published weekly for its members by the

**CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS**

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer Adler & Max Weismann

E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)

Homepage: [TheGreatIdeas.org](http://TheGreatIdeas.org)

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