

Debating the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor

While there are many areas of debate about the origins of the Pacific War, public attention has concentrated upon one issue above all others – whether President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill had foreknowledge of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but failed to do anything to prevent the assault in order to provide an opportunity for American entry into the Second World War. The controversy about this issue began in the immediate post-war era when a number of books by critics of the late president accused him of deliberate subterfuge over Pearl Harbor. They argued that the intelligence information available to the president, which was revealed by the Congressional investigation into the Pearl Harbor attack in 1945–46, meant that he must have known a Japanese attack was imminent. These politically motivated attacks on Roosevelt were effectively parried by Roberta Wohlstetter's excellent book, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA, 1962), which demonstrated the folly of imagining that the intelligence pinpointing an air raid on Hawaii would necessarily have stood out amid the wealth of intelligence material available to Washington. Gordon Prange's monumental study, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York, 1981), took a similar view.

However, reminiscences by intelligence officers and confusion about whether the United States and Britain were able to read Japanese naval codes meant that the conspiracy theories have re-emerged with a vengeance over the past two decades, particularly in the contentious arguments used by James Rusbridger and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor: How Churchill Lured Roosevelt into War* (London, 1991) and Robert Stinnett, *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (New York, 2000). These books have, however, failed to provide conclusive evidence that any intelligence reports indicating Japan's precise intentions reached those at the highest level of government; indeed, contemporary diaries and records of meetings suggest that the attention of those in authority was focused on a possible Japanese thrust into South-East Asia rather than an attack on Hawaii. The Pearl Harbor controversy is a classic example of a historical conspiracy that can be neither proved nor disproved and as such invites endless speculation. In doing so, however, it detracts from a true understanding of the origins of the Pacific War to the detriment of real history.