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The United States and the Origins of the Second World War

On December 7, 1941, Imperial Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

The very next day President Franklin D. Roosevelt told the American people that

December 7 would forever “live in infamy.”¹ Congress quickly declared war on Japan.

Adolph Hitler then led the German people, already at war with Great Britain and the Soviet Union, into war with the United States. The vast majority of Americans, then and now, believed their unwanted war with the Axis powers was a justified and necessary response to evil acts and intentions on the part of Germany, Japan and Italy.

Nevertheless, some scholars have defended the Japanese decision for war arguing that the Land of the Rising Sun struck a blow in self-defense and in support of subjugated Asian peoples. Since just war theory allows for pre-emptive strikes in just such a situation, the question arises as to which of the belligerent powers were waging a just war?² While the answer to the question is more complex than many Americans suppose, there can be no doubt that the salient historical facts support the traditional American view that their war was a just response to Japan’s unprovoked attack and Germany’s declaration of war.

Historians, especially in recent years, have attempted to tell the story of the Pacific War with little or no reference to moral issues. But such a telling of the war is, in the words of Shakespeare, “A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”³

The fact that the US was attacked does not absolve it from the charge of waging an immoral war if the American government provoked the war. If so, the Japanese were justified in striking the blow at Pearl Harbor because the Americans had forced them into

this desperate decision. Moreover, the Germans may be also praiseworthy in coming to the aid of their Asian ally.⁴ A survey of Japanese history in the Far East, and the coming of the war in Europe are thus both in order.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan quite rationally resisted the Western imperial power's attempts at forced trade until US Commodore Matthew Perry, in command of a formidable naval squadron, entered Tokyo Bay in 1853. His steamships belched black smoke into the peaceful air, and his diplomacy "opened" the land of the Shoguns. The arrival of the Americans and Europeans initiated two decades of economic, social and political turbulence in Japan that resulted in the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Under the Emperor Meiji the Japanese decided to fight fire with fire; impressed with Western military prowess, the Land of the Rising Sun set out to become a modern industrial military power capable of defending itself from further western encroachment, and ultimately to insist on fair and equal treatment at the hands of their imperial tutors.⁵ Their success in this endeavor was astonishing. Unfortunately, the Japanese were not content to establish their proper and peaceful place amongst nations, but further desired to emulate the rapacious empires of the day as they sought to divide China amongst themselves. To that end the steel ships of the new Japanese navy attacked the wooden junks of the Empress Dowager's naval forces in 1894. The result was as predictable as it was swift. The arrogant Chinese succumbed to the militarily accomplished Japanese within months. The Nipponese victory served notice there was a new imperial power in the Far East, and the indemnity China paid to Japan, 300 million dollars, helped build the Japanese military. The victory over China also buoyed the rising nationalist and imperialist impulse amongst the people of Japan. Empire was popular.⁶ Over the next fifty years the

Japanese maintained a steady course in the Pacific: adding to the empire whenever time, chance and military prowess made success likely.

But the western powers were not inclined to give up their empires upon the asking. When the Boxer Rebellion enveloped China in 1900, they all sent troops to quell the disturbance and protect their interests. Japan too contributed to the restoration of peace and profits. The Americans now took the lead in establishing a new vision for China. Combining their sincerely held philosophies of democracy, freedom and capitalism, the US proposed that the imperial powers refrain from further carving up the vast domain of China and recognize the territorial sovereignty of the Han dynasty. Furthermore, the Americans proposed the startling notion that trade in China be free of imperial divisions: that is all nations have access to the markets of China irrespective of the existing spheres of influence. The imperial powers would have laughed at this idealism – and then ignored the upstart Americans - had it not been for the fact that Great Britain, with its powerful navy, was prepared to make good the new Yankee policy.⁷

The American “Open Door” policy was a complicated and controversial idea. Historians have argued over its intent almost since its inception, domestic politics often driving the interpretation. The recent Spanish American War had liberated Cuba from the Spaniards, but placed a cloud of American hegemony over the island. Furthermore, the Americans annexed the Spanish colony of the Philippines. Filipinos, along with many Americans, quite properly wondered at this strange interpretation of the word freedom. The political backlash against new manifestations of empire, along with a sincere friendship for the people of China, and an even greater love for profit, led to the Open Door policy. Eventually that policy took on a life of its own, a development its

formulators did not envision; indeed, they had no intention of firing a shot in the interest of the Open Door. However, as time passed the policy became a doctrine, a statement of the American vision for not only for China, but also for the world: free trade and self-determination.⁸

The Japanese were both more consistent and aggressive in the western Pacific. They coveted Korea and Manchuria and in 1904 launched a surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur. After a brief war, US President Theodore Roosevelt negotiated an end to the hostilities that garnered him the Nobel Peace Prize, the antipathy of the Japanese people, and enhanced prestige for the United States. The Japanese government blamed the less than expected results of the war on Roosevelt rather than acknowledge that the Russian bear had proven more tenacious than they had supposed. Nevertheless, Korea became part of the Japanese empire and Manchuria a focus of interest.⁹

Japan gradually expanded its commercial interests in Manchuria at the expense of the Russians and Chinese, not to mention the Manchurians, but the lackadaisical pace of progress exasperated more ardent Japanese imperialists especially junior army officers on location. These men, inspired by the writings of preeminent philosopher of empire Kitta Ikka, took matters into their own hands and initiated a war with China over Manchuria in 1931. The Japanese government was angry over the insubordination, pleased at the success of the Army's efforts, and emboldened by the resignation of the Western powers to Japanese control of Manchuria.¹⁰ The Rising Sun was well ascended.

The next target was China itself. Timing was the only real question. By 1937 Adolf Hitler's Nazi state alarmed Europe, the United States had deeply buried itself in

isolationist neutrality legislation, and the Great Depression weakened western interest in the Far East. In July of that year, the Japanese struck the five northern provinces of China thus beginning the Pacific War – the Asian theater of World War II. This aggressive and brutal act brought Japan into direct conflict with the American Open Door policy.

Since 1901 the Open Door had become the American vision for China. In 1922 it had received formal acknowledgement as part of the Washington Naval treaty, and it had been further ensconced in international law as part of the utopian Kellogg-Briand peace treaty of 1928. Japan had signed both documents. However, the US still had no intention of fighting for the Open Door. The whole point of the treaties was to make war less likely, not to assert the point at which the US would go to war.¹¹ Consequently, when Japan invaded China in 1937, President Roosevelt, though tempted to action, ultimately decided to send only paltry aid to China and a note of protest to Japan.¹² Shortly thereafter, the Japanese announced that the Open Door was closed.

The Japanese were well aware of pan-Asian resentment of western imperialism. Hence they rationalized their own aggressive behavior on the pretext of expelling the western powers from Asia. In order to garner both the sympathy and support of other Asian nations, they promulgated the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere while presenting themselves as liberators.¹³ In 1939 Prime Minister Prince Konoye declared Japan's purpose in China was to "save China from her traditional fate as the 'victim of the imperialistic ambitions of the occidental powers.'"¹⁴ Indeed, many Asians, though decidedly not the Chinese, greeted the Japanese in that spirit. Indigenous nationalist leaders from the Dutch East Indies hailed the Japanese as the "Light of Asia." Recently, Niall Ferguson has described the Co-Prosperity Sphere in a relatively benign manner

while emphasizing the number of Asians willing to collaborate with the Japanese. But Ferguson fails to provide a full understanding of the barbarous behavior Japan visited on its Asian brothers and sisters.¹⁵

The truth is that Japan was a brutal and callous overlord. In the late summer of 1937 the Japanese army in and around Nanking, China engaged in an orgy of rape and murder that is difficult to grasp let alone put into words. Even the deluded Japanese admit forty thousand Chinese civilians died, the more accurate number is a quarter million. Unfortunately, the events in Nanking were not unique. Koreans were sent throughout the empire to work as laborers, and thousands of Korean women were also sent abroad to satisfy the sexual appetites of Japanese soldiers. In an effort to feed their army in the Philippines, the Japanese took rice from Vietnam and starved nearly a million Vietnamese to death.¹⁶ The Co-Prosperity sphere was so blatantly mere propaganda that many who had welcomed the Japanese turned violently against them. Ba Maw of Burma grew disillusioned with what he called, “the brutality, arrogance, and racial pretensions of the Japanese militarists.”¹⁷ Eminent historian of the Second World War Gerhard Weinberg has carefully placed the Japanese conduct of their empire in its proper historical context:

In these newly conquered areas they [the Japanese] revealed with equal speed that that they had come to conquer, not liberate, the population. Not only brutality toward prisoners of war – especially Filipinos – and rounded-up Westerners, but wanton rape and slaughter of the local population showed the inhabitants that the new masters retrospectively made their former colonial overlords look like beneficence personified.¹⁸

Weinberg's observation bears scrutiny. Saburo Ienaga has written, "To call Japan's disgraceful and bloody rampage a crusade for liberation is to stand truth and history on their heads."¹⁹

The United States also possessed a formal Pacific empire in the first half of the twentieth century. The Philippines and Hawaii were the two most prominent islands taken and held against the will of the indigenous inhabitants. The Americans fought a now largely forgotten albeit bloody war against Filipino nationalists at the turn of the century to maintain their possession of the archipelago.²⁰ But the crown of empire always sat uneasily on the American brow. For the next thirty years, Americans argued and vacillated over the fate of the Philippines. Many, perhaps most, Americans were uncomfortable with the label "imperialist." Meanwhile, the United States proved a relatively benign master. Though the Americans insisted on economic advantages in the Philippines, schools and hospitals were built, malarial swamps drained, land reform initiated, and a modicum of self-government granted. Still Caucasians were wise to take precautions if they traveled in the countryside.²¹ Then in 1929 President Herbert Hoover, determined to be a "Good Neighbor," revised American foreign policy along more friendly lines. His successor was still more determined to retreat from imperialism and polish America's image to the world. Franklin Roosevelt brought the last American Marines home from the Caribbean, repudiated the Roosevelt (Theodore) Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and in 1934 signed the Tydings-McDuffie act which promised independence to the Filipinos in 1944. America was in the process of retreating from empire.²² Historian David Fromkin captures the thrust, or more properly the retreat, of American foreign policy in the late 1930s:

They [Americans] were living through exceptionally dangerous years. The United States should have been mobilizing its armed strength to defend American democracy. But instead – paradoxically – Americans sought safety in showing the world that they had disarmed and in trusting the outside world to therefore leave them alone.²³

While Americans would have preferred to remain sonorously out of the coming war, Roosevelt was well aware that the United States could not survive in a totalitarian world. Thus, world events forced FDR's hand; he gradually came to the decision to risk war with Japan rather than see the Japanese Empire control China, the rest of the Far East, and half the Pacific Ocean.

Three factors were preeminent in the President's change of mind. First was the surprising ability of Chiang Kai Shek's Chinese Nationalist forces to hold out against the Japanese Army.²⁴ Then, in 1940, FDR's limp response to Japanese aggression stiffened, much to the delight of the Chinese, as a result of the war in Europe. With Germany preeminent on the continent by June, colonial possessions of the conquered European nations lay exposed like low hanging fruit to the next opportunistic nation. Japan determined to be that power. Moreover, it seemed wise to Japanese leaders to ally themselves with the Germans hence the Tripartite Pact. It was this Japanese decision to identify with Hitler's hordes that convinced Americans Japan was the Asian Germany.²⁵ Now Roosevelt decided that China might play a key role in safeguarding American interests in the Far East. In 1938, the Open Door had appeared dislodged, discarded by the master builders of the Japanese Empire; in 1941 Franklin Roosevelt saw an

opportunity, with Chinese help, to re-hang that Door. Chiang's China was more than willing to help, or at least be helped. The Chinese saw Japan as a threat to all of the nations and peoples of the Far East, they further saw themselves as having stood alone in the maw of the advancing Japanese empire, fighting manfully for their very existence. They had stood this test for four years; the Chinese believed it was high time for the US to truly and effectively stand for the Open Door and provide help.²⁶

Thus FDR haltingly moved the American people toward confronting the Axis powers. Some historians have thus blamed Roosevelt for the war with Japan because FDR had gradually reduced trade with Japan in selected industrial and military products, and then turned off the oil spigot to the Land of the Rising Sun in the late summer of 1941. The President had been loathe to do this for fear that Japan would indeed begin a major war. Once the Japanese realized the Americans had cut off their oil imports, Japan would have to decide on war or real peace concessions. But the Japanese had created this dilemma for the American president. They had allied themselves with aggressors Germany and Italy, and they had moved their forces into southern Indo-China in July 1941 as an obvious step toward the oil of the Dutch East Indies.²⁷ Moreover, American oil was fueling the Japanese war machine that was killing Asians daily. Roosevelt thus quite correctly decided that the time had come to deny Japan oil. The US was merely responding to the aggressive moves Japan had made in the western Pacific. Moreover, just war theory does not condone a preemptive attack based on restricted trade. Finally, if the decision on the part of one nation to refuse to sell a commodity to another is a just cause for war, then any oil producing nation of the early twenty first century that refuses

to sell the US oil should not be surprised to come under American attack with full support of the scholars who have defended Japan on just such a premise.

Others seeking to place the blame for the war on the US have cited the so-called “ultimatum” the US allegedly gave Japan in its last communication before the attack on Pearl Harbor. But Secretary of State Cordell Hull gave no ultimatum in his note of November 26, 1941. Hull merely reiterated the American position regarding China, Indochina, and the Japanese empire in the Far East: there could be no resumption of trade unless Japan withdrew from China and Indochina and respected the sovereignty of other powers in the region. There was no declaration as to what the US would do if Japan refused, and there was no date by which Japan must act. The Hull note augured no aggressive action on the part of the US.²⁸ Moreover, the note Hull wrote not did not provoke Japan to attack Pearl Harbor as some suggest: the Japanese strike force, in preparation for months, left for Pearl Harbor on the same date Hull dispatched his note.

Unfortunately, the Japanese saw the world differently. A Japanese High Command paper formally reviewed at a 6 September 1941 Imperial conference proclaimed that the American vision was “to dominate the world,” and in so doing “prevent our empire from rising and developing in East Asia.” The paper concluded that Japan must initiate a preemptive war to “ensure its preservation,” or “lie prostrate at the feet of the United States.”²⁹ As we have seen, there was no basis for this view. Nevertheless, most Japanese leaders believed in a fiction they called the ABCD encirclement. General Hideki Tojo asserted this hypothesis in his war crimes trial.³⁰ The ABCD label stands for the American, British, Dutch and Chinese hostile surrounding of Japan. Historian Akira Irye, in explaining the origins of the Pacific War, gives much

credence to this alleged encirclement. He goes on to describe the coming of the war in morally sterilized terms. For Irye, the war was a great power conflict the Japanese were wrong to wage not because they were morally culpable, but because they could not win and were mistaken in their belief that their empire could not prosper in an American dominated Pacific world.³¹ For Irye, the ABCD encirclement gave Japanese leaders but two alternatives,

...but resistance would at least safeguard the nation's honor, whereas submission would mean nullifying the achievements of the past ten years, to go back to the 1920s which had been defined by an American-led world order. An American imposed peace, in other words was, considered less desirable and honorable than a Japanese initiated war.”³²

Though Irye seems blind to the moral questions the coming of the war raised, even he admits the Japanese were the aggressors in China and initiated the war with the US. Then too, just writing the ABCD acronym on paper implied more strength and purpose to the cooperation between those four powers than existed before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Surely it is absurd to argue that the Chinese were part of an encirclement of Japan when in 1937 Japan had invaded a China that was already wracked by a civil war between the nationalists and communists. It is still more irrational to believe the Dutch were a threat to the Japanese as Hitler's panzers had rolled over that unfortunate nation in the spring of 1940. Queen Wilhelmina proclaimed London the seat of the Dutch government in exile. Then there was Great Britain. The British were a true colonial power with substantial interests in the Far East. But they had barely survived the Battle of

Britain in the fall of 1940 and were desperate for American aid and intervention. The British were in no position to threaten the Japanese in 1941. Indeed, Dutch and British forces in the Far East were completely inadequate to the task of defending their interests from Japan. These colonies were the proverbial “low hanging fruit.”³³

Finally, we have already observed how the Americans were in retreat in the western Pacific. And the US would have liked nothing more than to bury its head in its own isolationistic beaches. The whole idea that the only course open to Japan was war or acquiescence to ABCD dominance was absurd. Indeed, Japanese aggressive moves in China in 1937 and Indo-China in 1940 and 1941 all quickly followed events which suggested to Japanese leaders they might move with impunity. In 1937 the Americans adopted a neutrality law they hoped would keep them out of any foreign war, within weeks the Japanese invaded China; in 1940 Germany defeated France, the Japanese invaded Northern Indochina; and in 1941 Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the Japanese invaded Southern Indochina. In the fall of 1941, the Japanese were hoping that a United States preoccupied with events in Europe either would not fight in the Pacific or would be unable to bring adequate forces to bear.³⁴ Clearly the Japanese did not act in self defense but rather in a concerted, aggressive and freely chosen attempt to build an empire. And there were Japanese leaders who knew the truth and advocated a peaceful course. Nomura Kichisaburo was Japanese Ambassador to the US in the months before the war began. He advocated a Japanese return to the Open Door and the pursuit of peaceful relations with the US.³⁵

Ultimately, the Japanese decided on war with the United States, not because the Americans were or had been a threat to their existence, but because the Japanese had

convinced themselves that the only honorable national course available to them was to create a completely self-sufficient empire or perish in the attempt.³⁶ The chief of the Japanese Bureau of Military Affairs declared in 1941, “Japan must be guaranteed freedom of control in the Greater Far East sphere, both in relation to its security and defense and in relation to future expansion.” Weinberg summarized the Japanese view, “If the Americans would accept all prior Japanese conquests and also help her future expansion, they might be allowed to live in peace.”³⁷

Imperialism was the guiding light of Japanese leaders for decades. The method for achieving this empire was diplomatic and military opportunism. Their aggressive moves in the five years before Pearl Harbor always followed developments in Europe or the US which suggested their potential adversaries were either pre-occupied or disinterested in the Far East. Japanese belief that the European War provided them an opportunity is what lay behind the attack on the American fleet in Hawaii, not the fear ABCD encirclement.

Unfortunately, the war the Japanese fought and the empire they administered were as brutal as their intentions were selfish. From the beginning of the war in China, Emperor Hirohito publicly espoused contempt for international law and the Chinese people. The Emperor declared that since there was no clear government in China, his military personnel were not bound by any legalities in their treatment of civilians and prisoners of war.³⁸ Japanese soldiers took full advantage of their emperor’s indulgence. Nanking experienced the most infamous but by no means singular fate. The “Rape of Nanking” went on for three months as Japanese soldiers killed and raped the Chinese people and sacked the city. Japanese general Iwane Mutsui and his staff attempted to stop

the rampage, but lower echelon officers paid no heed; they knew their emperor's heart. Mutsui and eighty members of his staff were relieved of their duties and transferred home to Tokyo.³⁹ Indeed, Hirohito's order and the behavior it suggested were an outgrowth of a Japanese military tradition that was harsh on its own members. The warrior code of Bushido required death before dishonor. Thus Japanese Field Service Regulations forbade any soldier to allow himself to be taken prisoner, even if badly wounded.⁴⁰ If a Japanese soldier were captured and managed to escape, his duty was to commit suicide, not to return to the fight. Finally, the Japanese experimented with biological weapons on captured prisoners of war and used them in China.⁴¹

The imperial Army's fight to the death ethos prompted responses from the enemy. American commanders sought permission from President Roosevelt to use poison gas; FDR refused. But the president's conscience could not stop some American machine gun crews from firing on Japanese sailors in life boats, or stem the habit of individual American soldiers executing prisoners.⁴²

While Japanese soldiers could be almost casually cruel, the regime itself engaged in systematic barbarity. In northern Indochina, the Japanese forced farmers to grow jute instead of rice. But the farmers had no way of importing food from southern Indochina. Two million Vietnamese starved to death.⁴³ Just War Theory cannot be made to show that Japan's Pacific war was morally justified in any way.

While it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the US into the Second World War, the conflict between the Land of the Rising Sun and China would almost certainly not have led the Japanese to war with the US were it not for the war in

Europe.⁴⁴ It is necessary, therefore, in considering who is at fault for this horrific conflict, that events in Europe be examined.

The origins of the Second World War in Europe may be found, at least in part, in the follies that attended the Treaty of Versailles which ended the First World War. In losing that conflict, Germany was punished far more harshly than the German people believed just, and far more harshly than American President Woodrow Wilson had advocated in his “fourteen points” and “peace without victory” speeches.⁴⁵ The new postwar democratic German government signed the treaty which required massive reparations payments, the admission of war guilt, and the relegation of Germany to third rate status in the family of nations. What the treaty did not do was provide for an occupation of Germany which might have made a German resurgence more difficult. Ultimately, Versailles moved many Germans to seek revenge, without making the day of retribution impossible. In the early 1930s, Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party rose to power on this emotion combined with the Great Depression’s fresh wounds. Then too, Hitler’s calling card was race. He persuaded – and it wasn’t particularly difficult – the German people that their Aryan blood made them the master race. Thus the majority of Germans believed it was particularly galling that the best of men were forced to endure a subservient existence because of the injustice of Versailles.

In 1933, Germans elected Hitler Reich’s Chancellor. He moved quickly to silence his opposition and end the unpopular German experiment in democracy. He also used massive deficit spending to put Germans back to work on government projects, many of them secret military construction in violation of the Treat of Versailles. By 1936, he was ready, or at least willing, to test the resolve of the Versailles victors in enforcing the

treaty. In that year, Germany left the League of Nations and openly violated the Treaty of Versailles when Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland – German territory largely between the Rhine River and Western Europe.⁴⁶

Most Europeans believed, and some were even sympathetic, that Hitler simply hoped to redress wrongs visited on Germany by the Versailles Treaty. But Hitler never imagined a peaceful Europe; he knew his plans for domination of central Europe and for acquisition of vast living space in Eastern Europe would engender war.⁴⁷ Indeed in November 1937 the Bavarian corporal laid out his general plan of aggression for his war minister Werner von Blomberg and the service chiefs of the army, navy and air force. He broached the subject by casually remarking that “force with its attendant risks ... [is] the basis of the following exposition [on the necessary wars of aggression].”⁴⁸

The next major move was the Anschluss, Hitler’s integration of Austria into the German Reich. Der Fuehrer used the convenient excuse that Austrians spoke German and most of them desired to be part of Germany. The language-ethnic argument worked equally well for the Sudetenland of western Czechoslovakia which was a thorn in Germany’s southeastern side. Hitler actually hoped that his demand for the Sudetenland would be rebuffed and that war would ensue.⁴⁹ But at Munich in the fall of 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French leader Edouard Daladier, the former proclaiming “peace in our time,” signed off on the deal. Hitler was disappointed. Chamberlain eventually shouldered the opprobrium of being the architect of appeasement, but he was by no means the only culprit. Historian Michael Burleigh notes, “Appeasement is indivisibly associated with Chamberlain, its most obdurate proponent, although many rats had to get off the sinking ship in order to leave the captain in such

splendid isolation.”⁵⁰In March 1939 Hitler, now too strong to be easily corralled, stormed into the rest of Czechoslovakia where few Germans lived. The whole world now beheld Hitler’s true colors: a crooked cross on a field of blood.

Great Britain and France, caught ill-prepared and still less willing to believe what had been obvious for some time, now arose from their stupor and guaranteed Poland’s borders against a German invasion. But Poland, unlike Czechoslovakia before Munich, was virtually indefensible thus the tragic history of the unfortunate Polish people. In March of 1939, Hitler decided that war must decide Poland’s fate. Negotiations could not be allowed to deny him a military victory and the end of Poland as an independent state. Hitler hoped and believed that Great Britain and France would do nothing to aid Poland, but was prepared to accept a war with the western powers if they proved to have more backbone than they had heretofore displayed. Indeed, he delayed the war nearly a week while he tried to detach Britain from its pledged support for Poland. When that diplomatic effort failed, the war began on Hitler’s target date: September 1, 1939. For Hitler, war with Britain and France was only a relatively minor matter of timing. The ultimate target, of course, was the Russian leviathan. But the war against Joseph Stalin’s country was to be the last step in the domination of Europe. Indeed, the Molotov – Ribbentrop agreement of late August 1939 was designed to ensure that Hitler would not have to worry about his eastern front while crushing his western foes. The pact called for the division of Poland between The Soviet Union and Germany and had the dual impact of lulling the Russians into a false sense of security while assuring Poland’s fate.⁵¹

The invasion of Poland revealed Hitler in all his infamy: liar, aggressor, and author of genocide.⁵² Great Britain and France both declared war on Hitler's reich in response to his invasion of Poland.

Obviously Germany's behavior cannot be justified by any moral standard. Indeed, the more appropriate question is to what degree Great Britain, France and even the United States bear some responsibility for allowing Adolf Hitler to launch such a devastating aggressive war. But answering that question is not the object of this survey. Adolf Hitler's Germany must bear the lion's share of the moral responsibility for the coming of WWII. A brief survey of Germany's intent in waging the war will only confirm this view.

Three days after the German invasion of Poland commenced, Hitler granted a general amnesty, much as Hirohito had done two years before, for any German military personnel convicted of crimes against Polish civilians.⁵³ In order to be sure his Polish pogrom was carried out, der Fuehrer gave responsibility for pacification behind the German lines to the Waffen-SS with instructions to "depopulate parts of Poland," and to make "Poland disappear."⁵⁴ Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda, described his intent for Poland as "annihilation," an ironically accurate description given the nature of most of his propaganda work.⁵⁵ The killings that followed surpassed scores of thousands. There was to be no puppet Polish state, the Polish population in the areas directly annexed to Germany were driven out, left to wander aimlessly in the winter weather. And those annexed areas bore no resemblance to Germany's pre-Versailles ancestral lands.⁵⁶ Hitler carefully outlined his intentions for Poland to his generals some of whom winced at the intended genocide. Hitler responded that the world had quickly

forgotten the Armenian massacre earlier in the century. On August 22, a few days before the German invasion of Poland, at a military conference at the Berghof, one of his Hitler's generals cryptically recorded the Fuehrer's thoughts, "Destruction of Poland in the foreground. The aim is elimination of living forces, not the arrival at certain line. Even if war breaks out in the west, the destruction of Poland shall be the primary objective...have no pity. Brutal attitude. Eighty million [German] people shall get what is their right [lebensraum]. Their existence has to be secured. The strongest has the right. Greatest severity."⁵⁷ Thus the Germans put into operation a clandestine program of oppression and slaughter. Polish farmers were put on a quota system for produce delivery, the elites in the arts, education, and, of course, politics were efficiently if unceremoniously shot. And the residual Polish people became slave labor for the German war machine.⁵⁸ Indeed, the need for Polish labor compromised the German endgame for much of the population. One German official lamented, "unfortunately exterminations are not going [as quickly] as we would like them too, because we have an absolute need for labor."⁵⁹ But for Poland's Jews, the rational need for workers only obviated Hitler's racial antipathy for a season. In the winter of 1941/42, the final solution commenced in earnest for the Jews of Europe.⁶⁰ Historian Niall Ferguson has aptly described the German and Japanese conduct of their war, "The brutal methods the Axis powers used to build their empires swiftly turned living space into killing space."⁶¹

The question arises, was the US aid to Britain morally just given that this aid may have triggered Hitler's declaration of war? The Fascist powers forced American President Franklin Roosevelt to face a conundrum of evil choices. As George Orwell observed in the year of FDR's decision, "the choice before human beings is not, as a rule, between

good and evil but between two evils. You can let the Nazis rule the world; that is evil; or you can overthrow them by war, which is also evil. There is no other choice before you, and whichever you choose, you will not come out with clean hands.”⁶² The American president, though no doubt understanding Orwell’s point, described the choice the American people faced as one between good and evil – and told them so in one of his fireside chats.⁶³ Given the nature of Hitler’s regime as so clearly demonstrated by his actions, Franklin Roosevelt had no moral path open to him but to lead his people to war. As Ernest Hemingway reminded Americans in 1940, English poet John Donne powerfully expressed the notion of our common humanity in the seventeenth century. It was this egalitarian ideal the fascist powers disdainfully rejected. Donne wrote:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea; Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.⁶⁴

Now, in the twentieth century, the very idea that all people shared this inherent equality was deep in the throes of its greatest crucible.

The path to this decision had been long and uncertain. The American people had grown disillusioned with their crusade to make the world safe for democracy shortly after the Great War’s end in 1918. Ironically, writers like Hemingway had played no small part in that development. In 1922 the Americans had scuttled a good deal of their navy in the Washington Naval Treaty, in 1928 they signed the sophomoric Kellogg-Briand Treaty which sought to ban war by stuffing the muzzles of tanks and artillery with pen and

paper, and in the mid 1930s Congress passed neutrality legislation that was specifically designed to keep the United States out of the last war and, hopefully, its successor.⁶⁵ But the President interpreted the neutrality laws, whenever he could, to the advantage of America's friends. In general, the neutrality laws made it difficult to sell arms to belligerents and required purchasers to pay cash and then carry the purchased items in their own ships. These laws, though befuddling, bent and even broken, were a thorn in FDR's side until the eve of Pearl Harbor.⁶⁶

After the fall of France in June 1940, Great Britain faced the Nazi hordes virtually alone. That fall British pilots turned back the German attempt to gain control of the skies over their island home. But the war bankrupted Britain. Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote a letter in December to President Roosevelt in which he explained in detail that his vaults were empty. He wrote,

I do not believe that the Government and people of the United States would find it in accordance with the principles which guide them to confine the help they have so generously promised to such munitions of war and commodities as could be immediately paid for.⁶⁷

Churchill's message found the President relaxing on board the *Tuscaloosa* in the Caribbean. He contemplated his response for some time then told Harry Hopkins, his chief aide, of his plan to lend or lease aid to Great Britain – no payment required. In explaining the program to the American people and their representatives he used a homely metaphor. He described a neighbor's house burning, the neighbor desperate for help. Would you not lend him a garden hose the president asked?⁶⁸ Of course, most Americans answered. The bill passed in March 1941. Upon hearing the news, Churchill,

typically florid, told the House of Commons that Lend Lease was “the most unsordid act in the history of any nation.”⁶⁹ It was not. The Americans required British concessions on trade and naval bases, and of course the defeat of Hitler was as much in American interest as Britain’s; though it is true that most Americans did not grasp this reality. It is also true that Lend Lease marked a momentous move on the global chessboard. For FDR’s brainchild was a decidedly un-neutral act and meant the risk of war.⁷⁰

As Churchill contemplated his epistle to Roosevelt in November 1940, news from the north Atlantic was as dark and troubling as a winter tempest. German U-boats, now running like wolves in packs, sank over 350,000 tons of British merchant shipping in October, far surpassing their earlier efforts.⁷¹ For Churchill, American aid in the battle against the u-boats was essential. And that naval aid was as logical as the American opponents of Lend –Lease claimed it was in their arguments against the program. What sense did it make to send England supplies if that aid rested harmlessly at the bottom of the Atlantic? In the winter of 1940/41, the U-boat wolves seemed sated, but the respite was short-lived; from March to June 1941 the British lost more than a million tons of shipping. In April, FDR moved another chess piece – or more properly pieces, he approved the transfer of an aircraft carrier, three battleships, and over twenty smaller warships from Pearl Harbor to the Atlantic. The reinforced American navy assumed defense of Iceland and began escorting the merchant ships of all nations.⁷² The German naval commander Erich Raeder implored Hitler to declare war on the United States. After all, the Americans had certainly provided provocation. Hitler demurred; he had his hands full with the invasion of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, both sides now risked war in the Atlantic. Roosevelt himself admitted as much in a Fireside Chat on September 11, 1941.

Describing the U-boat menace in the Atlantic he told the American people, “But when you see a rattlesnake poised to strike you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him.”⁷³ But the snake moved quickly. In October, German U-boats torpedoed the American destroyer Kearney, and three days later sank the USS Reuben James; 115 American sailors died. Now Roosevelt demurred. Though Hitler and Roosevelt refused to acknowledge it, their navies were at war in the Atlantic.⁷⁴

So the United States followed a course of action in 1940 and 1941 which provided more than enough cause for Germany to justly declare war in December 1941, unless Germany’s own immoral acts in Europe justified American behavior. This, of course, is precisely what happened.

Both Germany and Japan were aggressive nations that, left unopposed by the US, would have divided the world between them. That world would have been bereft of freedom, democracy, and elemental human decency.

¹Franklin D. Roosevelt, War Message to Congress, December 8, 1941, Congressional Record, 77th Congress, 1st session, p. 9519.

²Charles Guthrie and Michael Quinlan, *Just War: The Just War Tradition: Ethics in Modern Warfare* (New York: Walker and Company, 2007), 19.

³William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5.

⁴Guthrie and Quinlan assert aiding an ally in a just cause is itself engaging in a just war. Guthrie and Quinlan, *Just War*, 17.

⁵Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 62, 73, 115, 122.

⁶Gordon, *Japan*, 118.

⁷Robert D. Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19-23. Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: The Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 52-55.

⁸Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 335, 549. Morison, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 264.

⁹Gordon, *Modern Japan*, 121.

¹⁰Robert J.C. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 34-40.

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- ¹¹Paul Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 6.
- ¹²David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 406.
- ¹³Gordon, *Modern Japan*, 210.
- ¹⁴John Costello, *The Pacific War, 1941-1945* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1981), 61.
- ¹⁵Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 499-501.
- ¹⁶Gordon, *History of Japan*, 206, 211. Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 480.
- ¹⁷Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 501.
- ¹⁸Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 322.
- ¹⁹Saburo Ienaga, *Japan's Last War: World War II and the Japanese, 1931-1945* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), 153-156.
- ²⁰Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900*, 22, 23.
- ²¹Morison, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 318.
- ²²Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 391, 392. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 497, 498. Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 487.
- ²³David Fromkin, *In the Time of the Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 339.
- ²⁴Youli Sun, *China and the Origins of the Pacific War, 1931-1941* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), 133, 134, 136, 157.
- ²⁵Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese American Relations*, 20-23.
- ²⁶Sun, *China and the Origins of the Pacific War*, 136, 153, 158, 159.
- ²⁷Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 510, 511.
- ²⁸Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, vo. II (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1948), 1083, 1084. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 339. Iriye, *The Origins of World War II in Asia and the Pacific*, 181. In his memoirs Hull asserts that it was Japanese propaganda in the later stages of the war that began calling his November 26 note an ultimatum (page 1084).
- ²⁹Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 490.
- ³⁰Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 154, 224.
- ³¹Ikira Irye, *The Origins of WWII in Asia and the Pacific* (New York: Longman, 1987), 176, 177, 178.
- ³²Irye, *Origins of WWII in Asia and the Pacific*, 177, 178.
- ³³Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 485.
- ³⁴Ford, *The Pacific War* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 37, 47.
- ³⁵Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 490.
- ³⁶Iriye, *Origins of WWII in Asia and the Pacific*, 175-178. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 334-344.
- ³⁷Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, 247-254
- ³⁸Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 18.
- ³⁹Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 20.
- ⁴⁰Beevor, *The Second World War*, 561. Van Waterford, *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1994), 38.
- ⁴¹Beevor, *The Second World War*, 771, 772.
- ⁴²Beevor, *The Second World War*, 618, 460. Ienaga, *Japan's Last War*, 184.
- ⁴³Beevor, *The Second World War*, 619.
- ⁴⁴Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, 6.
- ⁴⁵Woodrow Wilson to Congress, 8 January 1918, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vo. 45 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 534-539. Woodrow Wilson to the Senate, 22 January 1917, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vo. 40 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 536.
- ⁴⁶Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, 23.
- ⁴⁷Weinberg, *A World At Arms*, 20, 21. Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 24.
- ⁴⁸Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 32.
- ⁴⁹John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Viking, 1989), 38, 39.
- ⁵⁰Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 38.
- ⁵¹Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, 32, 33, 42, 43. Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 115, 116.

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- ⁵²Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 115.
- ⁵³Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 133.
- ⁵⁴Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 123. The Waffen-SS was a military force that Hitler kept separate from the regular army. It was especially devoted to Nazi ideology. The Nuremberg tribunal condemned it as a criminal organization.
- ⁵⁵Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 397.
- ⁵⁶Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, 57, 58.
- ⁵⁷Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth Century Combat and the Decline of the West* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 396, 397.
- ⁵⁸Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, 59.
- ⁵⁹Burleigh, *Moral Combat*, 138.
- ⁶⁰Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 567, 598.
- ⁶¹Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 475.
- ⁶²The quote is from George Orwell's book review, entitled *No, Not One*, of Alex Comfort's novel *No Such Liberty*, as published in *Adelphi* in October 1941. The title of the review is an allusion to the Biblical passage in Romans 3:12 in which Paul quotes Psalm 14:3 "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." One may be surprised that Orwell's view of the war does not contradict just war theory; indeed Guthrie and Quinlan make clear that a just war must always be the lesser of two evils. Guthrie and Quinlan, *Just War*, 11.
- ⁶³From *Colony to Superpower*, 524.
- ⁶⁴John Donne, "Meditation XVII" as found in *The Poems and Prose of John Donne* (Norwalk, Conn.: The Easton Press, 1995), 227.
- ⁶⁵Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 505-506.
- ⁶⁶Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 290-292.
- ⁶⁷Winston Churchill to Franklin Roosevelt, 8 December 1941, in Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. II, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949), 558-567.
- ⁶⁸Franklin Roosevelt's Press Conference of December 17, 1940, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1940 Volume (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), 607.
- ⁶⁹Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 36, 37. Churchill's quote in Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 569.
- ⁷⁰Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 525. FDR's Press Conference of December 17, 1940, 604-615.
- ⁷¹Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000), 238.
- ⁷²Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1963), 35, 36. Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt & American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40.
- ⁷³Franklin Roosevelt, Fireside Chat of September 11, 1941.
- ⁷⁴Murray and Millett, *A War to be Won*, 249.