

PRIMARY SOURCE ACTIVITY

REQUEST FOR A DECLARATION OF WAR

Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1941

During the first years of World War II, the United States remained neutral. U.S. citizens did not want to get involved in the conflict overseas. During this same time, Japan joined forces with the Axis powers of Germany and Italy. While negotiations for peace between Japan and the United States were taking place, Japan launched a surprise attack on the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii. Following the attack the United States felt it could no longer remain neutral and joined the Allied forces in World War II.

Reading Focus

What events led to the United States' declaration of war on Japan?

MESSAGE TO CONGRESS

Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific. Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in Oahu, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to the secretary of state a formal reply to a recent American message. While this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. Very many American lives have been lost. In addition American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

This morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

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Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As commander in chief of the Army and Navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.

Always will we remember the character of the onslaught against us. No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people, in their righteous might, will win through to absolute victory. I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces—with the unbounded determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December seventh, a state of war has, existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

From *Congressional Record*, 77 Cong., 1 sess., 1941, pp. 9519–9520. *Congressional Record*, App., 77 Cong., 1 sess., 1941, pp. 9519–9520 and reprinted in *The Annals of America: Volume 16, 1940–1949*. Copyright© 1976 by Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

Analysis Questions

- 1 How did the government know that Japan's attack had been planned for some time?
- 2 Why did the attack on Pearl Harbor come as such a surprise?



ANSWER KEY

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Analysis Questions

- 1 How did the government know that Japan's attack had been planned for some time?

It would have taken days or even weeks for Japan to move into position to attack.

- 2 Why did the attack on Pearl Harbor come as such a surprise?

Japan had been communicating its hope for peace in the Pacific right up until the attack.

