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U.S. Government Policy towards Japan during the

Franklin Roosevelt Administration

1933 - 1941

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Abstract

Following a decade of relative prosperity and prospects for peace exemplified by the Locarno Treaties and Kellogg – Briand Pact, the 1930's witnessed a reversal of fortunes. As a result of a global depression and subsequent conflicts such as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Spanish Civil War, tensions across the world increased. In this climate, Franklin Roosevelt became the President of the United States in 1933.

President Roosevelt was entrusted by the mostly isolationist American public with navigating the U.S. through the depression and steering clear of conflicts with other countries. However, as the decade progressed, U.S. interests in China and conflicts in Europe prompted many policymakers to advocate military confrontation with Japan. Eventually, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor provided the final spark for the U.S. declaration of war. In the preceding eight years of the Roosevelt Administration, much debate occurred over the policy that the U.S. should pursue, and whether it should be a hard-lined and interventionist or more conciliatory and isolated policy. By analyzing speeches, public announcements, agreements, diaries and communications of these policymakers in the

State Department, Executive Branch and Military, an understanding of the many facets of U.S. policy towards Japan can be understood. Secondary sources summarizing and connecting this information is also invaluable in understanding both the particular details of U.S. policy and a broader sense of U.S. sentiment and action. To broadly summarize, the U.S. moved from a primarily isolationist and soft-lined stance towards Japan (although hardliners and interventionists were still vocal) to a more aggressive and hardliner stance economically and diplomatically, especially leading up to Pearl Harbor. This paper attempts to answer, what was the United States Government's policy towards Japan before the December 7, 1941 attack, and how did it develop over the eight years of the Roosevelt Administration (1933-1941)?

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Introduction

On September 2nd, 1945, Japan surrendered to the United States of America aboard the U.S.S. Missouri, formally concluding the six year conflict of World War Two. 1365 days earlier, the Japanese had launched an attack on Pearl Harbor that provoked the U.S. to declare war on Japan on December 8, 1941. This declaration was not merely the result of the preceding mornings' events at Pearl Harbor. Rather, the U.S. and Japan had been on a war-course for a number of decades. During this time, both governments formed domestic and international policies that would help them emerge

victorious, should a war break out. In determining what this policy was, it is important to keep in mind the different characters responsible for crafting such policy. Within the broad branding of the term U.S. Government, different groups were responsible for crafting particular and sometimes contradictory aspects of the policy that dealt with Japan and the prospects of war. In particular, President Franklin Roosevelt, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, State Department Director of Far Eastern Affairs Stanley Hornbeck and U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew were among the numerous governmental personalities responsible for crafting the foreign policy of the United States in this period. The U.S. military (comprised primarily of the Army and Navy) developed plans that dealt with the possibility of war with various countries; the Army and Navy War-Planning divisions crafted plans to deal specifically with Japan among these. Not only is it crucial to understand how these figures interacted with each other, but also to recall that many of these figures held personal views that did not directly coincide with professional views, especially positions needed for garnering public support for elections. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand throughout this exploration of this subject that the key figures responsible for crafting policy were able to put forth contradictory plans in the Democracy of America. Consequently, in historian Jonathon Utley's words, "The problem, by the end of 1940, was not the absence of a foreign policy, but too many policies within one administration." The question remains, what was the United States Government Policy towards Japan by the time of Pearl Harbor, and how did it develop between 1933 and 1941?

United States Military Policy

Following World War I, the United States Military drafted plans for dealing with numerous countries. Included among these were color-coded plans that dealt with specific countries, represented by different colors. The plan for a prospective war with Japan was called War Plan Orange. This plan, developed until 1939, had three major phases. The first phase called for Japan to overrun U.S.

possessions in the Western Pacific (Spector 58). After much debate, the U.S. vaguely planned phase two to consist of retreating to a solid line of defense in the Eastern Pacific. Due to such an attack by the Japanese on the possessions and national sovereignty of the U.S., the isolationist public in the U.S. would be aroused enough to support a massive war effort. As a result of this industrialization, the U.S. would almost assuredly win a war of attrition. In the last phase, the U.S. would proceed to blockade the Japanese with Naval forces, as aerial bombardments would destroy the industrial capacity of Japan. The U.S. would use an 'island-hopping' strategy to close in around Japan.

By 1939, the military had drafted new plans, replacing the Color-coded Plans, to deal with the outbreak of war in Europe in September (Spector 59). This is how the five 'Rainbow Plans' were drafted, which assumed different levels of support from other countries such as France and Britain. In 1940, Chief of Naval Operations Harold Stark drafted the 'Plan Dog Memo', which stated that Rainbow 5 would be the official U.S. strategy (Utley 113). Rainbow-5 and this memo presumed French and British support, and planned for an offensive war in Europe while taking a defensive stance in the Pacific. Although in sharp contrast to the previous importance given to Japan, the Pacific campaign would be defensive in nature while Europe, Africa and the Middle East would be dealt with first (Spector 66). This was the strategy that the U.S. entered World War II with on December 8, 1941.

United States President Franklin Roosevelt

As President of the United States of America beginning in 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was instrumental in shaping U.S. policy towards Japan. During Roosevelt's first term in office, Japan had already broken the Kellogg-Briand pact and invaded Manchuria in the first act of naked aggression since the pact's signing. Roosevelt chose to respond with a stern protest against the Japanese action. In public, this was all Roosevelt dared attempt. The mostly isolationist public of the United States (Morrison 66) would almost certainly not have tolerated the military involvement of the U.S. in China.

However, Roosevelt was privately determined to see China survive against the Japanese. Emotionally, he felt a deep connection to the China trade as he had a relative, Warren Delano II, who had been involved in such trade (Ward 352). Beyond Roosevelt's personal feelings, the U.S. was poised to favor supporting China as well. Economically, Japan and China had both been huge trading partners in the East. However, with Japan's attack on Manchuria, the U.S. had reason to worry about its 'Open-Door Policy' in China of over thirty years. Moreover, many military strategists predicted an impending war with Japan. For this reason, the U.S. would benefit from a Japanese quagmire where they would get bogged down and possibly have to retreat from China. Even if the army did not retreat, the drain on Japan's limited resources would only weaken the Japanese position, and by extension, reinforce the American position. Because of this, the Government tried to secretly support the Chinese, though they never gave them enough support to outright defeat the Japanese (Utley 146).

Publicly, Roosevelt and the U.S. were in a paradox of sorts regarding China. The preceding Secretary of State, Henry Stimson and Under Secretary of State William Castle, both under President Hoover, had issued strongly worded protests against Japan. However, the U.S. had also issued statements that it would use neither economic nor military force in upholding the Nine-Power Treaty and Kellogg-Briand Pact (Pelz 68). Thus, when Roosevelt assumed power in 1933, he was unable to levy pressure economically or militarily on Japan, but if he refused to exert any pressure the U.S. would appear to be backing down from Stimson's promises, and thus give the Japanese some tacit approval of its aggression.

This restraint was further illustrated by the American government following the Japanese apology for the sinking of the USS *Panay* in 1937, and is broadly indicative of Roosevelt's first two terms (Morrison 72). Rather than go to war or demand concessions, the U.S. was content to receive indemnity from Japan. Even before he was elected, Roosevelt had developed a fine sense as a

politician for following the sentiments of his constituents." (Pelz 68) This was developed particularly as Governor of New York. As President, Roosevelt sought to maintain this relative restraint with his "personal control over foreign policy" (Pelz 68). The U.S.S. Panay incident was one of numerous examples of these American actions that attempted to remain as peaceful and not belligerent as possible. The *zeitgeist* in most of the country was one of isolationism and introspection in order to overcome the global depression. This introspection led to reductions in domestic military spending, and attempts by the U.S. to thus find peaceful, and cheaper, alternatives to confronting the Japanese over China trade issues, rather than outright military action.

Overall, Roosevelt maintained a policy that balanced the continued 'Open Door' in China with not allowing for Japanese aggression. As of 1935, his aim was to secure a reduction in naval armaments (Pelz 94). By doing this, Roosevelt felt able to curb Japanese aggression, though if Japan broke the treaty agreements, the U.S. would have a clear cause for a large scale growth of the U.S. Navy. However, if the Japanese agreed to the limitations that Britain and America sought, then Roosevelt would win a political victory at home by containing the amount of money spent on the military budget at the height of the depression as well as curbing the military threat posed by Japan. Although Roosevelt was not interested in being "soft" on the Japanese issue, he was staunchly opposed to Hornbeck's suggestion that the U.S. immediately engage in a Naval Race and violate treaties with Japan just because she had already broken the Nine-Power Treaty (Pelz 85).

Roosevelt's political sense prevented him from attempting any large scale internationalist or interventionist moves. When he had sought international engagement, Roosevelt received a storm of criticism for attempting to bring progress to the stalled Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1933 (Pelz 72). Roosevelt's greatest contributions to the U.S. policy towards Japan were his restraint and cautious pressure towards Japan along with his execution of policy proposed by his advisors. Though not

known as a cautious man, and known to be more impulsive, his decisions were relatively cautious. Roosevelt's other contributions to the foreign policy of the US lay in his appointments of Secretary of State Cordell Hull and U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph C. Grew, both in 1933. Alongside these key advisors though, were many others in the government who were not necessarily in accord with Roosevelt's policy. One of these men was the State Department Director of Far Eastern Affairs, Stanley Hornbeck.

Stanley Hornbeck of the State Department

As Utley concisely states, Hornbeck was a "defender of China and an implacable enemy of Japan" (Utley 8). That is to say, Hornbeck sought a hardliner or more hostile approach towards Japan. Hornbeck played a role in securing the U.S. embargoes of scrap Iron, oil and other valuable materials to finally put pressure on Japan in 1940 and 1941 (Barnhart). However, without a policymaking role in the State Department, Hornbeck could only advise such policymakers. Although Secretary of State Hull was too restrained and cautious to consider the use of sanctions, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles was willing to listen to Hornbeck's arguments.

Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles

Welles shared Hornbeck's belief that the only way to curb Japanese aggression was by cutting off the source of the supplies they were using to wage war in China (Utley 47). Despite his initial reservations about economic sanctions in 1938 (Utley 97), Welles proposed sanctions of oil in 1940 (Feis 90), 1941 (Feis 227), and also advocated freezing Japanese funds in 1941 as well (Feis 247). Even though Welles advocated these policies, he was only able to put them into effect when his superior, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, temporarily relinquished his powers to Welles for trips or

vacations. On November 25, 1938, Hull left to attend a South American conference in Lima, Peru (Utley 46). After talking with Morgenthau, Welles was convinced that Japan needed to be pressured more. To achieve this, Welles was ready to increase aid to China, embargo Japan, freeze Japanese assets and harass Japan in other ways to weaken her position (Utley 47). Welles sought President Roosevelt's approval of this mapped out policy, but Welles fail to foresee the opposition of Ambassador Grew's protests and other State Department qualms, which prevented the issue of sanctions from being discussed with the President. Instead, only the issue of the loan to China was allowed to be discussed (Utley 47). Welles and Morgenthau's main victory of these years was tallied when Franklin Roosevelt did agree to the loan, even though Hull put up staunch resistance upon his return home. Overall, Welles policy can be seen as more hardliner than Hull's, yet less so than Hornbeck's.

U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew

Unlike the hardliner views of Hornbeck or the cautious, not provocative stand of Secretary of State Hull, Ambassador Grew favored a conciliatory approach towards Japan (Butow 197). Grew warned that Hornbeck's approach dangerously underestimated the ferocity and might of the Japanese War machine, and also the relative weakness of the United States at the time (Millis 20). However, Grew was also firmly against appeasing the Japanese as Neville Chamberlain had infamously done to Hitler. Butow's summation of Grew's plan for the U.S. is succinct,

"The Ambassador wanted to build a permanent structure of peace in the Pacific on a secure foundation, and yet he felt there could be no compromise with the fundamental principles on which American policy was based. The methods of building that structure, however, should be flexible. If 'constructive conciliation' failed, the United States could always fall back upon 'progressive economic sanctions'" (272).

In 1939, following a return to the United States, Ambassador Grew noted with alarm the course towards a confrontation with Japan that America seemed to be unwittingly proceeding down. For the next two years, Grew tirelessly sought a peaceful solution with Japan against the planning of mounting

numbers, both inexperienced and well-versed in Asian affairs, of hardliners. In particular, one incident in which Grew was responsible for crafting his own American policy, without initial knowledge of his superiors, was in November of 1939 when he sought a relaxation of tensions between the U.S. and Japan (Utley 69). Grew's plan was to convince the Japanese to make a serious concession [opening the Yangzi River], and then the U.S. government would respond with a concession of its own. This cycle would continue until the tensions of war had all but disappeared. However, Grew's plan relied on two key foundations. First, the moderates in Japan were the only politicians who would agree to such concessions. If these politicians did not appear to help Japanese integrity, and particularly if the U.S. did not agree to any concessions when the Japanese did, they could expect to lose all political power at best and to be assassinated at worst. Secondly, the American politicians had to believe in the Japanese intentions as well. Unfortunately, none in Congress or the State Department were eager to believe the Japanese after years of dereliction of American interests. For that reason, Secretary of State Hull ultimately rejected what Joseph Grew called a crucial "juncture... [in] Japanese-American relations" (Utley 71).

One final example of how Grew still favored a more conciliatory approach towards Japan in the months leading up to Pearl Harbor in 1941 were his efforts to persuade the Japanese and American Governments to hold a Pacific conference between Roosevelt and Prime Minister Konoye (Butow 273). Even before the 1941 began, Ambassador Grew had realized that a conflict would ultimately be unavoidable (Millis 10). Thus, Grew's plans for stalling that conflict and for ensuring a stronger U.S. position in that conflict constituted a dangerous cocktail for Grew to balance. Grew's opposition to sanctions, already discussed, were slightly lessened as December 7, 1941 loomed closer and as Grew himself stated that "further conciliatory measures would appear futile and unwise" (Millis 20). Thus the ambassador stated, albeit vaguely, that the time had come for more 'firmness' (Ibid.). This firmness

came from the State Department in the form of a September, 1941 embargo on iron and steel scrap exports to Japan. This embargo, coupled with various other embargoes on Japan was a key part of the further shift in U.S. policy that marked the approach to Pearl Harbor, as the U.S. became even firmer towards Japan.

Secretary of State Cordell Hull

With Grew's call for more firmness towards Japan in 1941, the last real obstacle for implementation of increasingly hardliner policies was the continued presence of Secretary of State Cordell Hull. As Secretary of State under President Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull had enormous influence over the foreign policy decisions of the United States, beneath only President Franklin Roosevelt and perhaps the United States Senate. Hull's policy was essentially a restraint against the activist, interventionist and pro-China sympathies of characters in the Roosevelt Administration, including the President himself, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, Henry Morgenthau and Stanley Hornbeck. However, it is important to note that Hull never felt as conciliatorily towards Japan as Ambassador Grew did. Hull, a self purported realist, strongly desired to curb Japan's ambitions in the Far East. However, Hull also recognized that the U.S. was not in a sufficiently strong military position to confront Japan directly either. Lastly, Hull was not quite comfortable with an alliance with Britain in confronting Japan, as he did not wish to have any "entanglements" that could draw the U.S. unwillingly into war.

Broadly, Hull promulgated a position that supported China in order to leech away Japanese forces, but did not openly support China. Essentially, Hull sought to continue the policy of non recognition of Japanese occupied Manchuria, while pushing for Japan to evacuate from China in a humiliating fashion (Utley 146). Hull's plan in this entire scheme was to weaken the Japanese Army, whether through forcing it to retreat humiliated or by giving China just enough support to wear down

the Japanese, while never giving enough to allow China to outright beat the Japanese (Utley 146). This policy served not only to weaken the Japanese, but also to hide U.S. support that others such as Morgenthau and Welles clamored to increase in blatant view of the rest of the world. Moreover, Hull, unlike many in the State Department and Oval Office, did not consider himself a great friend of China (Utley 146). Rather, he only sought to support China in order to weaken Japan.

Hull's policy can be summarized as one of caution and restraint, but striving to never acquiesce to Japanese pressure. Hull strongly opposed embargoing Japan (Feis 41). However, at the same time, he vigorously opposed the Japanese takeover of Shanghai and the closing of the Burma Road as violations of the American Open Door policy (Feis 71). Thus, Hull's primary aims in his policy were to allow the United States to wait for the Japanese extremists and the military to either wear themselves out in a quagmire in China, or to have the Japanese simply retreat humiliated from China on their own accord. Essentially, Hull proposed and executed a policy of restraint. Hull was firmly against President Roosevelt and Hornbeck's thoughts of sending the U.S. fleet to Singapore as a show of force, but at the same time, was also opposed to Grew's calls for a conference between Roosevelt and Prime Minister Konoye of Japan (Feis 254). Hull's enormous influence on the U.S. policy and his policy of restraint were evident throughout his tenure. His restraint during the USS Panay crisis is most evident of how he sought apologies and peace rather than revenge and war with Japan. At the same time though, Hull did agree to talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Nomura. However, these talks achieved nothing (Spector 68). This was primarily because Hull offered nothing new in his negotiations, and he solely reiterated the U.S. demands to the respect of all American commercial interests and the removal of Japanese soldiers from Chinese soil. In conclusion, Hull can be described as a cautious, realistic man with planning that drew on long foresight. He planned to allow Japan to

defeat itself politically and militarily over a long period, rather than risk a large engagement between the enormous Japanese and American Militaries in the short term.

Eventually, Hull was unable to continue his policy of cautious restraint as public opinion, the President's opinion and the number of State department officials all shifted against Hull, Grew and Hamilton's preaching of caution and towards the views of Morgenthau and Hornbeck. Throughout 1940 and 1941, there were a number of State Department officials that began to realize how important Japan's role was, now that authoritarian states occupied all of Europe except for neutral states and Great Britain. As Japan and the U.S. behavior towards her grew more important to the U.S. role in the world, many more engaged in the debate of what U.S. policy should be. In brief, almost all of these officials, having studied Germany so carefully, felt that appeasing or negotiating with an authoritarian state would be futile. In response, many of these latecomers to the debate felt either that war would come with Japan sooner or later, so sooner was better (Utley 88), or that the only way to stop Japan's expansion was to stop supplying it with oil, metal and other vital war supplies and to make it realize it had "more to lose than gain by aggression" (Utley 92). The most notable of these latecomers according to page 94 of Utley included State Department officials from Europe such as Ambassador to France and later Germany William Bullit, Ambassador to Germany Hugh Wilson, Ambassador to Italy William Phillip, and millionaire Businessman Will Clayton (Utley 85). All of these men, having no prior engagement with policy towards Japan, advocated action against her.

Others in the Ensemble, including Hamilton and Morgenthau.

There were vastly many other characters active in shaping U.S. policy. However, even pre-eminent scholars are sometimes only able to trace aspects of policy back to "Someone in the State Department" or "Someone in the Naval War College". Concisely, some of the most influential of these others were either hardliners or soft-liners. Among these, Maxwell Hamilton and Secretary of the

Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. were two more characters who were influential in clear instances in forming U.S. policy in some manner.

Maxwell Hamilton was the State Department Chief of the Far Eastern Division, and can be characterized as in the same vein as Grew and Hull. Hamilton was very cautious, and among those who favored negotiating with Japan in order to avoid a war. Uncommon about Hamilton was his sympathy for the Japanese position, meaning he sought settlements and agreements between the U.S. and Japan, rather than simply having the U.S. protect its own interests (Feis 173). Hamilton was instrumental in influencing Hull to not give further aid to China in 1938 as Hamilton saw such action as a possible spark for war with Japan (Utley 46). Hamilton's basic plan for policy was very similar to Hull's. He believed both that Japan was bogged down in war in China, and that U.S. principles such as the Open Door policy and non recognition of occupied Manchuria were able to be asserted and protected without an armed conflict.

Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau Jr., was vehemently anti-Japanese in his outlook, and sided with Stanley Hornbeck in calling for a hardliner approach regarding Japan. In brief, Morgenthau pushed for President Roosevelt to increase aid to China (Utley 45), while also attempting to secure embargoes against Japan (Utley 97) and to indiscriminately freeze all Japanese funds in order to halt the purchase of war materials in the U.S. (Feis 143).

Conclusion

The US policy began as more cautious but shifted over the years to become more "hardlined" towards Japan, especially as more policymakers jumped into the debate. Also, as the U.S. was increasingly isolated, she became more determined to preserve the liberal commercial order *ante bellum*, even if that meant war. Shared by all policymakers of these years were reverence for

American systems, beliefs in cherished American traditions such as the Open Door, liberal commercial order, and freedom from persecution and a rejection of proposed Japanese policies such as 'spheres of influence' in particular regions. A dash of racism and disdain for the Japanese was present in some policymakers as well. Lastly, almost all in the government felt that Japan should acquiesce to U.S. demands, while believing at the same time that the U.S. should not concede to any Japanese desires. As the Government was increasingly preoccupied with Japan throughout the thirties, the U.S. Navy's desire of offensive action against Japan developed intently. However, this was abruptly overturned in 1940 by Harold Stark and the 'Plan Dog Memo' which decreed the official 'Europe-first' strategy. In brief, a cautious and isolationist, but still aware U.S. policy shifted over the latter half of the 1930's to become more interventionist and hard-lined, especially through an increase in economic and diplomatic hostilities towards Japan.

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