"[Hotta's] account is a warning to any country that would talk itself into a foolish war." —The Seattle Times

WHEN JAPAN ATTACKED THE UNITED STATES in 1941, its leaders, in large part, understood they were entering a war they were almost certain to lose.

In an eye-opening narrative that considers Pearl Harbor from the Japanese perspective, certain to revolutionize how we think of the war in the Pacific, Eri Hotta poses essential questions overlooked for the last seventy years: Why did these men—military men, civilian politicians, diplomats, the emperor—put their country and its citizens in harm's way? Why did they make a decision that was doomed from the start?

Introducing us to the doubters, bluffers, and schemers who led their nation into this conflagration, Hotta brilliantly shows us a hidden Japan—eager to avoid war but bellicose toward the West, deluded by reckless militarism, tempted by the gambler's dream of scoring the biggest win against impossible odds and nearly escaping disaster before it finally proved inevitable.

"Hotta... brings to life the key figures of a deeply divided Japanese leadership... [and] scrupulously details [their] negotiations and squabbles... against a backdrop of dauntingly complex domestic and international maneuverings." —The New Yorker

"Hotta's groundbreaking work is both a fascinating history and a cautionary tale for those who wield power today." —The Dallas Morning News
In the early-morning hours of a frosty day, December 8, 1941, the Japanese nation woke to astonishing news. It was announced, shortly after seven, that Japan had “entered into a situation of war with the United States and Britain in the Western Pacific before dawn.” Though no specifics were given, by then the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, on Oahu, had been successfully attacked—the first wave of planes was dispatched at 1:30 a.m., Japanese time, and the surprise operation was completed by 5:30 a.m. When news of the attack arrived at 11:30 a.m., the nation was electrified. This was soon followed by Japan’s formal declaration of war on the Allies and the report of its further military successes in British Malaya and Hong Kong. (The Malayan operation actually preceded the Pacific offensive by almost two hours.) Throughout the day, the public broadcasting network, NHK, aired twelve special news reports in addition to six regularly scheduled ones for the millions of Japanese glued to their radios.

On what, because of the time difference, had been December 7 in Hawaii, the air force division of the Imperial Japanese Navy had sunk or damaged numerous ships, aircraft, and military facilities. About twenty-four hundred people were killed in the raid or died shortly afterward from their injuries. The devastating attack was carried out without a formal termination of diplomatic relations by Japan, let alone a declaration of war, a heavy, infamous legacy for the nation. But such tactical details did not interest ordinary Japanese citizens on December 8. The immediate public reaction was one of celebration.
When Japan sent planes to attack Pearl Harbor, it was mired in economic and political uncertainties. A sense of helplessness pervaded its population as the state took more and more control of public life. From the beginning of Japan's war with China in mid-1937, its people were led to believe a swift, decisive victory was imminent. Despite all the announcements of Japanese victories in China, however, the Guomindang (a.k.a. Kuomintang, frequently referred to as the Nationalist Party) leader Chiang Kai-shek was not about to give up. Similar to Napoleon's army in Russia, the Japanese forces were drawn far too deep into harsh, unfamiliar terrain to carry out an effective operation. The jingoistic tone of Japan's media coverage continued regardless, but people were privately beginning to question why the war had not ended. Though largely ignorant of the true state of Japanese diplomacy, they had been told that Nomura Kichisaburo, a navy admiral and former foreign minister, had been dispatched to Washington, D.C., in early 1941 to negotiate a peaceful solution to Japan's international isolation. But no good news was forthcoming, and its absence made people fearful. Many knew the United States was upset over recent Japanese initiatives—such as allying with Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy and occupying first northern and then southern French Indochina—and seemed intent, unless a diplomatic settlement could be reached soon, on crippling Japan with economic sanctions.

In everyday life, luxury goods had quickly disappeared, and there was a shortage of food, most noticeably the main staple, rice. As the conflict in China went on and on, those remaining in the countryside—the best men had gone to the military and war-related industries—faced increased pressure to produce more food for the troops. Starting in the summer of 1940, even the fanciest restaurants in Tokyo resorted to serving cheaper imported rice—the drier kind some scornfully called "mouse poops"—mixed with potatoes. After April 1941, in six major metropolitan cities once replete with all the conveniences of modern life, people could obtain rice only with ration coupons. By December 1941, this system applied to 99 percent of Japan. In a country where domestically grown rice occupied an exalted, almost sacred place in the national diet, this was seen as a scandalous hardship.

Life was becoming monochromatic—or "grave yard-ish," in the words of a contemporary observer. Fashionable men and women, who until recently dressed in colorful kimonos or the latest Western-style clothes and spent their time in cinemas and dance halls, now tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. The novelist Nagai Kafu (known as Kafu), an aging bohemian chronicler of urban life who felt as much at home in the opium dens of New York's Chinatown and the cafés of Montmartre as he did in the raffish parts of old Tokyo, deplored those changes. A tall, scrawny man, Kafu did not strike one as a fussy dresser. He actually knew and cared a lot about fashion—a remnant of his high-bourgeois upbringing—though he made sure not to look too perfect in his well-tailored European suits. But he felt the recent Japanese inattention to keeping up appearances had gone too far, even for his unorthodox taste. In the autumn of 1940, the sixty-year-old complained in his diary:

The townscape [of central Tokyo] belies its prosperity of only half a year ago. There are no activities and it is all quiet. Around 6:00 p.m., it fills with crowds of commuters just as before. But the clothes that those men and women are wearing! To say that they have become subdued is an understatement. They have become old-mannish and dowdy. Women do not seem to care what they look like anymore, not bothering to put on any makeup. The street does not get lit at night, so people hurry home. Those people who squeeze themselves into the trains, shoving one another, look like refugees.

The de glamorization of city life signified the resounding triumph of a publicity campaign to promote nationwide austerity—prompted by the prolongation of Japanese military engagement in China—that started in the summer of 1940. Fifteen hundred signs bearing slogans such as "A True Japanese Cannot Afford to Be Indulgent" and "Luxury Is the Enemy" (Zeitaku wa Tekida) were put up all over Tokyo (though the insertion of one syllable by a graffitist often turned the latter phrase into "Luxury Is Wonderful" [Zeitaku wa Su-Tekida]).

Volunteers from patriotic women's associations took to the streets, leading this campaign. These righteous women admonished those who, in their vigilant eyes, wore the kind of lavish clothes they themselves had given up, and they handed out note cards asking them to "please exercise self-restraint." Women who wore permed hairdos, rings, nail polish, lipstick, or gold-rimmed glasses were also targeted because they were seen as endorsing a "corrupt" and "individualistic" Western lifestyle. There was some angry resistance to this type of witch-hunting. One woman was spotted crying and shouting hysterically, "I can't stand this!" A young man
strutted down the street wearing makeup, daring the patriotic fashion police: "Well, aren't you going to say something?" But these were very small acts of defiance in the larger scheme of things.

Department stores, once places where dreams were sold, came under strict surveillance, too. Every store was told to enforce a one-item-per-customer policy to discourage excessive spending, which was deemed disrespectful of the general austerity efforts. In 1935, the cosmetics company Shiseido began having beautifully presented "service girls" give free makeup lessons to customers at its department store counters, increasing sales of its beauty lotion twenty-three-fold within two years. But as the China War dragged on, "wartime care packages" replaced cosmetics as top-selling products. These packages, filled with little snacks, handkerchiefs, pencils, and notepads, were sent to soldiers at the front as a show of moral support from home.

On the evening of October 31, 1940, the night before dance halls and jazz performances were to become illegal (they, too, were thought to undermine people's sense of morality and public order), every hall was packed with men and women having one last, desperate fling. They crowded the dance floors like "new potatoes being boiled up in a pot, constantly bumping into one another," as the metropolitan newspaper Asahi reported the following day. In fact, only women who were professional dancers had been allowed in dance halls since mid-1938, and their numbers had declined by half, having been pressured to join women's associations, which competed with one another for recruits and urged new members to take up more "respectable" (but much less profitable) jobs as typists and factory workers. But that evening, even after the bands had finished playing the farewell song of "Auld Lang Syne," the men and women refused to leave the dance floors, as if to defy—again, in a very small, too small, way—the coming of Japan's long journey into night.

But December 8, 1941, changed everything. The gloom of the national impasse that had arisen over the past couple of years turned almost instantly into euphoria as most Japanese cheered the successful attack.

A man who was a second grader at the time of the attack, whose father owned a radio shop in Tokyo, recalled his surprise at the sight of a long line forming in front of his father's store. People were waiting to get their radio sets repaired, in anticipation of more special government announcements. He never saw his father do so much business in one day before or after.

There was very little of the famous Japanese reserve. Strangers congratulated each other on the street. Others gathered at the public square outside the Imperial Palace in the heart of Tokyo, falling to the ground and thanking the emperor for his divine guidance of their nation. Aboard an overcrowded train that evening, the diarist Kafu detachedly observed "a fellow making speeches in shrill voice," apparently unable to contain his excitement over the day's news. This outpouring of emotion stood in stark contrast to the many contrived victory celebrations orchestrated by the government over the previous few years in an effort to rouse support for its lingering war in China.

Men of letters were not immune to the Pearl Harbor spell. One of the most distinguished poets of twentieth-century Japan, Saito Mokichi, fifty-nine at the time, recorded in his diary: "The red blood of my old age is now bursting with life! . . . Hawaii has been attacked!" The thirty-six-year-old novelist Ito Sei wrote in his journal: "A fine deed. The Japanese tactic wonderfully resembles the one employed in the Russo-Japanese War." Indeed, that war started with Japan's surprise attack on Russian ships in Port Arthur on February 8, 1904, two days before Japan's formal declaration of war. Japan won that war.

Even those Japanese who had previously disapproved of their country's expansionism in Asia were excited by Japan's war with the West. In an instant, the official claim, gradually adopted by the Japanese government over the preceding decade, of liberating Asia from Western encroachment gained legitimacy in their eyes. Until then, the innately self-contradictory nature of fighting an anti-imperialist war for Asia against fellow Asians in China had tormented them. Takeuchi Yoshimi, a thirty-one-year-old Sinologist, now said he and his friends had been mistaken in doubting their leaders' true intentions:

Until this very moment, we feared that Japan, hiding behind the beautiful slogan of "Building East Asia," was bullying the weak. [But now we realize that] our Japan was not afraid of the powerful after all. . . . Let us together fight this difficult war.

Despite the celebratory mood that dominated the country on December 8, there were still people with cool minds and hearts who were doubtful about, if not dismayed by, Japan's new war. Private sentiments also often differed substantially from the public outbursts of joy. Many were simply tired of war and its restrictions on daily life. Others seriously worried about their loved ones having to fight.

A nine-year-old in a rice-growing village forty-five miles (seventy-two
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kilometers) northeast of Tokyo learned of the Pearl Harbor attack when he came home from school. His mother had been waiting for him outside their house. She cried and said, "We're at war." Those were no tears of joy; rather, she was anxious for the lives of her six older sons. If this war was to be anything like the China War, who knew how long it would go on, and the new war might even take her youngest away. The boy was struck by the vivid contrast between the deep sadness of families all over his village and the upbeat voice coming out of the radio.

The small number of Japanese with substantial knowledge of the West could not celebrate, either. They were too aware of Japan's limited resources and were convinced that the country would be annihilated in the end. A young man working for Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in Nagoya recalled a strange combination of exhilaration and fear upon hearing the radio announcement at work. Though he felt a certain satisfaction over the successful attack on Pearl Harbor, he was afraid of what awaited Japan in the long term. His workplace, dedicated to the manufacturing of the Zero fighter plane, would become a prime target of U.S. bombing in a few years' time. Many of his colleagues perished, and he would barely escape death himself.

But to voice such concerns in the midst of post-Pearl Harbor excitement was to risk arrest for insufficient patriotism. A great tidal wave of enthusiasm following victories in the Pacific and Southeast Asia was felt by most Japanese. They were able to forget, at least for the moment, the immensity of the task that lay ahead.

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the Pacific, Pearl Harbor had stimulated an equally pervasive and patriotic response. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress in a measured but determined voice: "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." Roosevelt's cabinet, led by Secretary of State Cordell Hull, initially urged the president to present to Congress a comprehensive history of Japan's international misconduct. Roosevelt decided instead on an accessible five-hundred-word speech so that his message would get through to as many people as possible: The Japanese attack was treacherous, and the United States had to defeat this cowardly enemy, no matter what it took.

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The presidential tactic to stir his nation's deepest emotions against Japan succeeded. The isolationist opposition with which Roosevelt had been struggling over his desire to take the United States into the European theater of war was nowhere to be seen, and his request for a declaration of war was immediately approved, with just one dissenting vote, cast by Jeannette Rankin, a pacifist Republican from Montana. From that historic moment on, Pearl Harbor was etched in the American psyche, reinforced by the powerful battle cry memorialized in the hit song "Remember Pearl Harbor." Recorded within ten days of the attack, it urged Americans: "Let's remember Pearl Harbor as we go to meet the foe. Let's remember Pearl Harbor as we did the Alamo. . . . Let's remember Pearl Harbor and go on to victory!"

Hawaii must have seemed almost like an exotic foreign country to the majority of Americans before the Japanese attack. Ironically, Japanese and Americans of Japanese ancestry accounted for nearly 40 percent of its population. Now this unique island territory in the peaceful Pacific Ocean suddenly found itself forever ensconced at the heart of the U.S. patriotic narrative.

The Pearl Harbor attack also changed the fate of those already at war. Chiang Kai-shek was jubilant when he heard the news. He reportedly played "Ave Maria" on his gramophone (he was a converted Methodist) and danced. Many months of lonely fighting were finally over for Britain, too. Winston Churchill was dining with the U.S. envoy Averell Harriman and the U.S. ambassador, John Gilbert Winant, when he received a call from Roosevelt, informing him of the attack. That night, Churchill said, he "went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful." Hitler's declaration of war on the United States four days later reaffirmed Churchill's feeling of relief.

ON DECEMBER 8, 1941, cinemas and theaters in Japan were made to temporarily suspend their evening performances and broadcast a speech recorded by Prime Minister Tojo Hideki earlier that day. U.S. films—films such as Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, which the Japanese relished in easier times—were now officially banned. That night, audiences were confronted with the voice of a leader who hardly resembled Jimmy Stewart.

Tojo was a bald and bespectacled man of middle age with no remarkable features other than his mustache. His exaggerated buckteeth existed
only in Western caricatures, but he did not look like a senior statesman who had just taken his country to war against a most formidable enemy, and his voice was memorable only for its dullness. He recited the speech, "On Accepting the Great Imperial Command," with the affected diction of a second-rate stage actor.

Our elite Imperial Army and Navy are now fighting a desperate battle. Despite the empire's every possible effort to salvage it, the peace of the whole of East Asia has collapsed. In the past, the government employed every possible means to normalize U.S.-Japan diplomatic relations. But the United States would not yield an inch on its demands. Quite the opposite. The United States has strengthened its ties with Britain, the Netherlands, and China, demanding unilateral concessions from our Empire, including the complete and unconditional withdrawal of the imperial forces from China, the rejection of the [Japanese puppet] Nanjing government, and the annulment of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy. Even in the face of such demands, the Empire persistently strove for a peaceful settlement. But the United States to this day refused to reconsider its position. Should the Empire give in to all its demands, not only would Japan lose its prestige and fail to see the China Incident to its completion, but its very existence would be in peril.

Tojo, in his selective explanation of the events leading to Pearl Harbor, insisted that the war Japan had just initiated was a "defensive" war. He faithfully echoed Japan's deep-seated feelings of persecution, wounded national pride, and yearning for greater recognition, which together might be called, for the want of a better phrase, anti-Westernism. It was a sentimental speech, and it was notable for what was left unsaid.

There had been no clear-cut, overwhelming consensus among the Japanese leaders to take preemptive actions in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Many remained hopelessly uncertain and ambivalent about their decision. True, Tojo is famous for having said, "Occasionally, one must conjure up enough courage, close one's eyes, and jump off the platform of the Kiyomizu," and these words, referencing a Buddhist temple in Kyoto known for a veranda that juts out over a cliff, are often cited as a sign of his rash adventurism. But even Tojo, vilified as a military dictator who blindly pushed Japan into war, felt torn, especially in the two months preceding

the attack. Throughout the course of the government's final discussions over going to war, Tojo was acutely aware of the small possibility of Japanese victory. As a result, at the last minute, he tried to conciliate those who argued for immediate war. When he became prime minister on October 18, 1941, the first task he set himself was to attempt to resurrect diplomatic options with the United States.

Some leaders were misguided hopeful, but none were confident of Japan's eventual victory. Tojo's predecessor, Prince Konoe Fumimaro, a civilian politician, was prime minister on and off for nearly three of the four years immediately prior to Pearl Harbor. His flirtations with a totalitarian style of leadership did incalculable damage to Japan's international standing and helped to maximize the military voice in the government. But at the same time, Konoe was unmistakably against a war with the West. According to his aide and son-in-law, Hosokawa Morisada, upon hearing the news of Japan's entry into war, Konoe barely managed to say, "What on earth! I really feel a miserable defeat coming. This [favorable situation for Japan] will only last two or three months."

Unlike Prince Konoe, the novelist Ito Sei did not have access to political or strategic information. But that very absence of information led him to intuit correctly. On December 22, just two weeks after he joyfully compared Pearl Harbor to the Russo-Japanese War, he expressed his rising suspicions in his diary:

They've so far only announced that a couple of [Japanese] steamships were damaged upon landing on Malaya and the Philippines. Nothing has been damaged after that? Or is it their policy not to announce any loss on our part? If it is the latter, I would be worried.

Whatever their fears about the war's resolution, most Japanese were inclined to see it as a war of liberation not only for Japan but for the whole of Asia. This was understandable, especially for soldiers. Who would not prefer to believe that one was dying for a meaningful cause, rather than a misguided one?

Sure enough, the so-called Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere began with great fanfare as the Western colonial possessions fell one by one to Japanese military advances from late 1941 to early 1942. Almost all the nations in the sphere—including Burma (now Myanmar), British Malaya (Malaysia and Singapore), the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia),
French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), and the Philippines—had been part of Western colonial empires (though the last was no longer a colony at the time of Japanese invasion). So the Japanese occupiers could conveniently claim that they were finally freeing their oppressed Asian brothers and sisters in order to help them reorganize their societies into a viable cultural, economic, and political bloc under Japan’s leadership. Though cloaked by a veneer of a civilizing mission, however, the sphere was first and foremost about Japanese economic imperialism, meant to strengthen its hold over much of Southeast and East Asian resources needed for Japan to continue fighting. That need would grow all the more pressing with time.

The Imperial Navy would lose its winning momentum soon, owing to a major defeat at Midway in June 1942. The tactical planning for that battle had been carried out by the same team that devised the Pearl Harbor attack. This time, Japan lost more than three thousand lives, 289 aircraft, and four aircraft carriers. Midway also revealed that the Japanese had left many jobs unfinished at Pearl Harbor.

On December 7, 1941, the pilots under the command of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo did accomplish their most immediate goal of hitting all eight U.S. battleships, sinking four and damaging four others. But Nagumo’s team missed other vital targets that proved to be of more critical importance. Oil tanks and ammunition sites were spared from Japanese strikes. Repair facilities were not struck, either, and this allowed for the majority of the damaged battleships to be quickly repaired or even improved. Of the eight battleships hit by the Japanese, only the Arizona and Oklahoma could not be salvaged. Most important, no American aircraft carriers were present during the attack, which allowed the United States to win at Midway.

From then on, almost everything went badly for Japan. As a result of the strict censorship that Ito had already suspected in his diary in December 1941, the Japanese long remained officially ignorant about their country’s losses. But as the months and years passed, they came to sense Japan’s slipping control over the war situation, and their acute hunger was proof. The rationing system wasn’t working because there was too little to be distributed to begin with. Longer and longer lines formed, and fresh products such as vegetables and seafood became impossible to find. One doctor’s wife in her forties, who had lived in the United States for many years before the war, noted in her diary: “Rationed goods don’t actually mean

that you don’t pay for them. You pay for every bit, but you still get treated like beggars. It’s so infuriating!”

The caloric consequences were undeniable by the second and third year of the war. The rationed diet alone provided only about fourteen hundred calories a day. (A 140-pound adult male requires twenty-four hundred calories daily.) The government told individuals to be “inventive” in the way they procured food. This meant, for instance, buying on the black market, growing their own vegetables, and using straw, sawdust, or rice husks as fillers when baking “bread.”

By late 1944, life on the home front had become even more desperate, with Japan’s major cities, including Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe, Sendai, Nagoya, and Yokohama, burned to ashes by U.S. carpet bombing. In the wee hours of March 10, 1945, much of old Tokyo was engulfed in fire in one of the most devastating air raids carried out by B-29 bombers. Kafu, awakened by the neighbors’ shouting, hastily gathered his diary and manuscripts and fled with his briefcase. He made a dash through billowing smoke, helping others on the way. But when he finally reached a vacant plot on a hill, an irresistible urge to witness the fate of his home of twenty-six years made him turn around. His house had been miraculously spared from the devastating fire that followed the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and so perhaps he hoped for another miracle. He hid himself behind trees and telegraph poles in order to escape the eyes of a policeman who was directing people from harm’s way. Kafu managed to get back to his neighborhood, where he was halted by black smoke. He looked to the sky as flames suddenly blazed up, a result, he was convinced, of his upstairs library catching fire. Kafu, who claimed to have no profound attachments to people, “regretted deeply having to part with those books.”

Kafu and his diary survived. Many did not. More than a hundred thousand people are thought to have died in just one night, though the exact figure remains unknown. By then, unless one was seriously deluded, it was clear that Pearl Harbor and the invigorating sense of liberation it brought had merely been the start of a catastrophic war.

SUPERFICIAL OBSERVERS ARE QUICK to label as an apologist anyone who tries to explain the unsavory past of his or her country to the outside world. It should be clear in the following pages that justifying Japan’s behavior is the least of my aims in recounting the eight months leading up to the
decision to attack Pearl Harbor. To the contrary, Japan's leaders must be charged with the ultimate responsibility of initiating a war that was preventable and unwinnable. War should have been resisted with much greater vigor and much more patience.

To be sure, it is all too easy to adopt an air of moral superiority when indicting those who lived many years ago. Still, that should not stand in the way of a critical evaluation of how and why such an irresponsible war was started. If anything, it is a great historical puzzle begging to be solved. And with the emotional distance that only time can accord, one should be able to look back on this highly emotive period of history with a clearer vision.

Unfortunately, clarity does not come easily; so many complexities and paradoxes surrounded the fateful Japanese decision. There is no question that most Japanese leaders, out of either institutional or individual preferences, avoided open conflict among themselves. Their circuitous speech makes the interpretation of records particularly difficult. For most military leaders, any hint of weakness was to be avoided, so speaking decisively and publicly against war was unthinkable, even if they had serious doubts. That is why the same people, depending on the time, place, and occasion, can be seen arguing both for and against the war option. Some supported war at a liaison conference of top government and military leaders, for example, while making their desire to avoid it known to others in private. Many hoped somebody else would express their opinions for them.

The scarcity of conference records also presents a major difficulty. The Sugiyama Memo, an official name given to a collection of notes kept by Army Chief of Staff Sugiyama Hajime, provides a rare glimpse into what was discussed in top-level conferences. The papers survived by chance, thanks to the sheer ingenuity of a junior officer who, near the end of the war, defied the order to destroy them and instead kept them in a steel oil drum in the basement of his home, convinced of their historical value.

And yet these "memos" are far from sufficient. For a start, the manner in which they were kept was inconsistent. After each conference, Sugiyama gathered his senior staff officers to report what was discussed, relying primarily on his notes and memory; one of the officers would then jot down what Sugiyama said. Clearly, not every word was recorded, and the memos lack descriptions that could help us imagine the general atmosphere and mood inside the conference room, adding to the eerie sense that Japan's most critical decisions were made in some symbolic void. The language often switches between stilted and flowing, with varying degrees of formality, making it even more difficult to determine the true tone, let alone the nuances, of the recorded words. Even a precise, immaculate translation would not fully convey what was at stake in those conferences.

However, these surviving records do provide a sufficient testament that the leaders, after numerous official conferences, made a conscious and collaborative decision to go to war with the West. Having talked themselves into believing that they were victims of circumstances rather than aggressors, they discarded less heroic but more rational options and hesitantly yet defiantly propelled the country on a war course. Manifest in Tojo's December 8 speech was the self-pitying perception that Japan was somehow pushed and bullied into war by unrelenting external forces—be they U.S. economic sanctions, the willful U.S. misreading of Japan's peaceful intentions, or, more broadly, Western arrogance and prejudice.

One should not, of course, underestimate the enormous pressure these leaders faced on the eve of Pearl Harbor. They felt they had to choose between waging a reckless war and giving up all of Japan's imperialistic conquests of many years in order to stave off war. They tended to ignore that such extreme choices grew directly out of their own recent decisions and actions. As they made more diplomatic missteps and committed themselves to an impracticable war, claiming all the while to be more prepared than they ever were, their range of policy options both at home and with the outside world narrowed considerably. It was as if Tokyo had gotten stuck in the thin end of a funnel. The war option, it must have seemed to those leaders, provided the quickest and surest way of breaking free of that constricting situation. That they didn't think about what would happen afterward was a tragic act of negligence.

Why didn't they? Mainly for reasons having to do with Japan itself, as this book will show. Still, Japan and its immediate surroundings in 1941 were undeniably a product of the tumultuous experiences of the 1920s and 1930s, when the world at large underwent a significant transformation. In the aftermath of World War I, which many saw as a clash of imperialist ambitions, various attempts were made to create a new kind of international order to prevent the outbreak of another devastating war. The League of Nations, the Washington Conference (1921–22) on disarmament, and the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) outlawing wars were all manifestations of such efforts to regulate and facilitate international affairs so that all nations, great and small, could work together toward the goal of bringing about a
more peaceful world. But many nations felt cheated by this newly emerging, highly idealistic, and more democratic order.

Germany, the vanquished power, was the primary example. Its desire to fulfill an imperialist dream—of achieving greater territorial expansion, glory, military buildup, and self-sufficiency through conquest—had led it to start World War I, lose it, and be disarmed. Perceiving postwar settlements and their offshoot internationalist movements as a conspiracy of the victors to emasculate Germany, it was even more anxious to resurrect those ambitions, eventually enabling the rise of National Socialism. From 1933 to 1938, in a cleverly incremental fashion, Hitler's Germany left the League of Nations, rearmed the country, reoccupied the Rhineland, and moved into Austria. Liberal Western powers, preferring to keep peace at any cost, sacrificed Czechoslovakia—Central Europe's only viable democracy. When they realized that Hitler would never be satisfied and would always up his demands, it was too late, and the greater part of Western Europe had succumbed to Nazi invasion by the middle of 1940. This disheartening experience would have repercussions on how the West perceived Japan, a Nazi ally, in 1941.

Japan fought on the winning side in World War I, and the League of Nations duly rewarded it with territorial and mandate rights. For a while, many Japanese subscribed to the principle of liberal internationalism with gusto, though some remained dissatisfied. The dissenters believed that the so-called status quo, or “have,” powers, especially Britain and the United States, were bent on keeping Japan from achieving true greatness because they were either selfish or racist. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, when Japan faced severe social problems stemming from a deepening economic depression, such a claim gained currency.

Of course, similar socioeconomic problems were confronted worldwide, and people sought remedies in diverse ideologies, ranging from the extreme right to the extreme left, which divided the world as well as nations (as was the case in Spain and France). In the 1930s, a considerable number of Japanese fell to the easy temptation of blaming their social ills on foreign powers while attaching excessive, metaphysical significance to Japan's nationalism, noting it up to the level of ultranationalism. The veneration of the emperor, who was regarded as a living god and the benevolent patriarch of Japan’s family-state, played a central role in this intensification of Japanese nationalism. Many Japanese claimed that an incomplete nation could be completed by imperialist expansion abroad and militarization at home. And not unlike in Nazi Germany, the fulfillment of old imperialist goals—some no longer viable—became an integral part of the ultranationalist agenda.

Young officers in the lower to middle echelons of the armed forces were especially susceptible to this brand of aggressive nationalism because it gave them a key role. They loudly accused the “have” powers of creating after the Great Depression bloc economies, which put high tariffs on imported Japanese goods, and declared it a Western conspiracy. The ultranationalists also saw the rise of Bolshevism in the Soviet Union, modern Chinese nationalism, and U.S. economic and military assertiveness in Japan’s backyard as threatening the country’s regional dominance. They had specific domestic enemies as well. Westernized conglomerate capitalists and their client party politicians, sympathetic to democratic liberalism, were blamed for pretty much everything and became targets of ultranationalist violence, including assassinations. Though those ultranationalist terrorists never succeeded in taking over Japan, they did succeed in creating a fearful atmosphere that would partly compromise the outspokenness of Japanese leaders in 1941.

**MANY OF THE REAL** or imagined constraints that Japan's leaders faced in 1941 had historical roots going back to Japan's opening of its doors to the wider, often hostile world in the second half of the nineteenth century. The end of Japan’s self-imposed isolation, the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, and the subsequent founding of a modern Japanese state coincided with a large-scale realignment in the power configuration of the world itself. The predatory nature of Western colonialism, as well as the collapse of the old Chinese, Spanish, and Ottoman empires, impressed on Japan that power was the very basic requirement for survival. It was also the age of uncritical belief in linear progress, New Imperialism, Social Darwinism, and white supremacy, all of which in turn confirmed the racist view of the world. Like a model student, Japan went about becoming a proper power, feeding, educating, and industrializing its society to catch up with the West, though the Japanese could not, of course, change the color of their skin.

It is important to note that throughout its fledgling years, modern Japan understood extremely well that becoming a great power was not simply about becoming industrialized and militarized. It was also about
playing by the rules and gaining international respectability—hence the need to secure favorable world opinion. After the victory over Qing China in 1895, Japan’s emperor cautioned his subjects against becoming “arrogant by being puffed up with triumph and despising others rashly, which would result in losing the respect of foreign Powers. . . . We are particularly against insulting others, and falling into idle pride through elation over victories, and thus losing the confidence of friendly States.” By the 1930s, however, such modesty and humility had been willfully forgotten by most Japanese. Its success as a modern nation-state, coupled with historical resentment over having been treated unfairly by the West, fueled the irrational conviction that Japan somehow pull through times of internal and international crises with sheer force of determination (and good luck, which it had usually had). Such conviction would eventually push Japan to conquer Manchuria, to expand its sphere of influence farther in North China, to escalate its conflict with China, and to seek resources in Southeast Asia, so that it could continue fighting the China War to a favorable conclusion while breaking free of economic dependence on the outside world, taking the first of the series of wrong steps toward the war in the Pacific. Colonial Asia’s overall weakness caused by Hitler’s war in Europe would make it doubly tempting for Japan to be daring.

Japan’s self-righteous calls for expansion on the eve of the Pacific War prevented an accurate assessment of its more recent policy mistakes and a reassessment of its aggregative imperialism carried out over the previous decades in China, Korea, and Taiwan. Still, its belief that it was a nation destined for greatness, despite all the disadvantages of not having enough natural resources of its own, died hard. Self-confidence bordering on hubris became very much a part of the mind-set of Japan’s policymakers as they contemplated the nation’s options in 1941.

Japan’s official line that the war with the West was forced upon it reflected a state of mind based on a long historical memory. In part, it explains why the suicidal war could readily be sold to the public, which embraced it in December 1941. But in the end, pent-up negative feelings alone do not explain why Japan launched a war despite the real and pervasive reservations of its leaders.

One of postwar Japan’s leading political scientists, Maruyama Masao, reflected on this very issue in 1949:

Trembling at the possibility of failure, [the leaders] still thrust their way forward with their hands over their eyes. If we ask, “Did they want war?” the answer is yes; and if we ask, “Did they want to avoid war?” the answer is still yes. Though wanting war, they tried to avoid it, though wanting to avoid it, they deliberately chose the path that led to it.

It is especially difficult to assess blame when individual responsibilities were vague and diluted, as they were in this case. Unlike its fascist partners, Japan was never a dictatorship, even though its parliamentary politics had formally ceased to exist in the fall of 1940. Its decision-making process was drawn out and often baffling. It involved a complicated structure and a political culture that straddled different institutions, including the military, government ministries, and the Imperial Palace.

Most of all, it did not help that the government was formally divided. Under the constitution, the military was allowed to “advise” the emperor independently of the civilian government, a prerogative commonly referred to as “the independence of the supreme command.” This meant that Japan could have two governments with completely contradictory foreign policies. And to complicate matters further, there were deep political and ideological divisions within those two “governments.” The army and the navy were constantly at odds, and each service itself was divided in its political sympathies, worldviews, cliques, and strategic preferences and had different primary enemies. In light of such disagreements, it is surprising that the Japanese leaders were able to agree to embark on a war that no one really knew how to win.

Japanese culture, with its intrinsic preference for consensus and harmony—even if of a most superficial kind—could not have helped to encourage honest discussion about the country’s future at various crucial junctures over the course of 1941. The Japanese language itself, brilliant in negotiating intricate social relations, preserving nuances, and saving face, is not known for its strength in clarifying thoughts or fostering open debate. Nonetheless, though these structural, cultural, social, and even linguistic considerations might help to explain what happened, they are no excuse for the calamitous political misjudgments.

Japan’s fateful decision to go to war can best be understood as a huge national gamble. Social factors made the gamble harder for the leaders to resist, but their final decision to take the plunge was a conscious one. Believing that Europeans fighting Hitler had left their colonial possessions relatively unguarded, some bellicose strategists in the military planning bodies effectively pushed their aggressive proposals forward, convincing their superiors that the more time they took, the fewer resources they
would have left to fight with and the more time the United States would gain to prepare for what was in their minds an "inevitable" clash—a geo-political necessity to determine the leader of the Asia-Pacific region. If it had to happen anyway, why not dictate the timing? Objectively speaking, it was a reckless strategy of enabling a war by acquiring new territories to feed and fund that war, tersely expressed in the ancient Roman saying Bellum se ipsum aet (The war feeds itself). To be sure, many of Japan's leaders did not see a Pacific clash as a historical certainty. Not everyone gave up completely on a diplomatic settlement with the United States until fairly late. But nobody was ready to assume responsibility for Japan's "missing the bus," in a popular expression of the time, to gain a strategic advantage.

The law of risk taking commands that the slimmer the chance, the sweeter the victory. Encouraged by the memory of Japan's modern wars, both of which were successful (the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05), the leaders felt there was always a chance this reckless war could turn out well, too, though they didn't dwell on how that might be accomplished. Their state of mind might have been one of desperation, but it was also one quickened—bizarrely—by a gambler's high. Especially when they concentrated only on the short-term prospects, that high grew even headier. No matter what the leaders' psychological state, however, the war was completely reckless. An unlikely Japanese victory was predicated entirely on external conditions (aside from Japanese willpower, that is) that were beyond Japan's control, such as the wishful scenarios of the United States quickly suing for peace or of Nazi Germany conquering Europe. Just as the Japanese leaders claimed that they were pushed into war, they seemed to think that they would somehow be pushed into peace. Japan on the eve of Pearl Harbor could be described as being led by men like Hermann, Pushkin's impoverished antihero in "The Queen of Spades," who quietly prepares himself for a maximum win in a game of cards and loses his mind.

The great irony in Japan's decision to go to war is that its leaders could not have even conceived of taking such a grand gamble had it not been for Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, who was fundamentally against war. As a coolheaded political analyst, Yamamoto warned the naval general staff in Tokyo in late September 1941 that "a war with so little chance of success should not be fought." But at the same time, as an operational planner, Yamamoto, Japan's most informed commander and its biggest gambler,