

"A date which will live in infamy"

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT

Speech by President Franklin D. Roosevelt before a joint session of Congress,
December 8, 1941.

As you read...

The day after the Japanese navy bombed Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress for a declaration of war against Japan. He made this speech before a joint session of Congress — that is, both the House of Representatives and the Senate sitting together — and the speech was broadcast nationwide on the radio. In it, Roosevelt coined the phrase that is now so closely associated with the attack on Pearl Harbor — “a date which will live in infamy.”

Congress immediately passed a declaration of war. The Senate passed the bill unanimously, and only one Representative, pacifist Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin, voted against it. Germany and Italy, Japan’s allies, declared war on the United States a day later.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How did Roosevelt describe the attack on Pearl Harbor? What words did he use? Why do you think he chose those words?
2. Although Roosevelt was speaking to Congress, he knew that his speech would be heard and read by many other people. What other audiences were there for his speech? How did he speak to each of those audiences?
3. Roosevelt’s primary purpose was to ask Congress to declare war on Japan. What other reasons did he have for making this speech?
4. Why did he repeat so many times that the attack was “planned” and “premeditated” (thought out in advance)?
5. If you had been a member of Congress in December 1941, would you have voted for war? Why or why not?

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Figure 1. President Franklin Roosevelt.

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives:

Yesterday, December 7th, 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 the American island of Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. And while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of 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. I regret to tell you that 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.

And this morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today 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. But always will our whole nation 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 that 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 it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.

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 unbounding 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 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

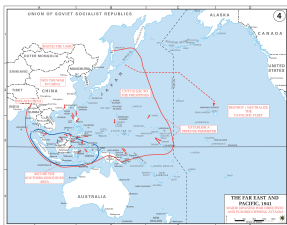


Figure 2. This map shows Japan's planned opening attacks and strategy in December 1941.

On the web

World War II: Pearl Harbor, Japanese internment camps, and the atomic bomb

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/WWIIPearlHarbortoAtomicBomb8.pdf>

In this lesson from the Civic Education Consortium, students will explore major events occurring at the end of World War II, including the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the forced relocation of Japanese Americans into internment camps, and America's use of atomic weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Students will explore primary sources, read poetry and a narrative, and discuss the US government's choices in depth while examining the affect on America, Japan, and the world community at large.

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About the author

DAVID WALBERT

David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

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Figure 2 (page 2)

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