



Pearl Harbor: From Infamy to Greatness by Craig Nelson.

New York: Scribner, 2016. Pp. x, 532. ISBN 978-1-4516-6049-4.

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In a book published to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, prolific historian Craig Nelson¹ addresses four points of inquiry. First, the political instability of prewar Japan that led to the attack on Pearl Harbor and a disastrous conflict with the United States. Second, the many opposition voices that predicted the attack yet went unheeded. Third, the role of key figures like Rear Adm. Husband Kimmel and Lt. Gen. Walter Short, commanding US forces in Hawaii, and Japanese Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura. Fourth, the legacy of Pearl Harbor and its lasting effects on the United States and the postwar global order. Though written for a general readership, it will appeal to and instruct interested military historians and other specialists as well.

A central thesis of the book is that the Pearl Harbor attack was a direct result of prewar Japan's political instability. In that chaotic environment, the country was increasingly dominated by a fascist military regime unable to provide stable or coherent governance. In the absence of any rational, long-term decision-making, the regime opted for immediate and impulsive military actions. Nelson argues that the continually shifting political landscape in Japan made it hard for the United States to prevent war and to know how best to defend against one, should it break out.

Nelson highlights the many individuals in the American military, intelligence, and diplomatic communities who predicted the attack on Pearl Harbor. He believes they were disregarded for several reasons: simple complacency, an innate faith in American military superiority, inter-service rivalries, and the lack of a centralized agency to sort and interpret multiple intelligence streams. As a result, though the United States was expecting war with Japan in December 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt and leading military and political figures believed Japan lacked both the means and the will to strike specifically Pearl Harbor, the supposed impregnable Gibraltar of the Pacific; instead, they expected the Philippines, Malaya, or the Dutch East Indies to be Japan's target of first choice.

The author argues that three major actors in the Pearl Harbor attack—Kimmel, Short, and Nomura—were victims of forces beyond their control. He indicts Kimmel and Short, who were widely blamed for the disaster, for failing to maintain an adequate level of readiness in Hawaii, but stresses that they had received ambiguous warnings from Washington and were not provided with vital intelligence information that might have alerted them to the imminent threat to the Pacific Fleet. He writes that Nomura, often portrayed as a dishonest broker or a hapless martinet of the militarists, attempted to negotiate a last-minute diplomatic solution in good faith, but was even more out of the loop with his superiors than Kimmel and Short. He was thus as surprised by the strike on Pearl Harbor as the US military. Nelson exonerates him of being duplicitous or a gullible pawn of the pro-war factions in Japan, judging him “as honorable, and as unlucky” (63) as Kimmel and Short.

1. His wide-ranging previous books include *The First Heroes: The Extraordinary Story of the Doolittle Raid—America's First World War II Victory* (NY: Viking, 2002)—the definitive account, *Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon* (NY: Viking, 2009), and *The Age of Radiance: The Epic Rise and Dramatic Fall of the Atomic Era* (NY: Scribner, 2014).

Nelson persuasively contends that the effect of Pearl Harbor “was so profound that it could easily be said that the America we live in was born, not on July 4, 1776, but on December 7, 1941” (430). That is, Pearl Harbor ended American isolationism and positioned the United States for global military, political, and economic hegemony. It also made subsequent American leaders determined to prevent any future global cataclysm like the Second World War.

Military historians will appreciate Nelson’s nuanced analysis of prewar political and military machinations in Japan but will find that he offers little new information in the course of his vivid and detailed account of Pearl Harbor. Nonspecialists may find the first-person accounts of Japanese airmen, American servicemen, and Hawaiian civilians of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds at times unsparingly gruesome:

Sterling Cale oversaw six men boarding the charnel house that had once been the USS *Arizona*, to collect the dead. In hip waders and elbow-length black leather gloves, the workers came across a giant mass of bodies so charred that individual human beings could not be distinguished. Cale’s strongest memory was of the piles of ashes by the antiaircraft guns, which floated in the winds, eddying around his legs, and drifting onto his boots. These, he realized, were once men. He bagged up all he could—the heads, the torsos, and even that dust—for a week, pausing every so often to vomit. (332)

The author’s broad survey of the subsequent course of the Pacific War, with stress on the Doolittle raid and the American victory at Midway in June 1942, is geared primarily to lay readers.²

Nelson is at his best writing about Pearl Harbor and at his weakest recounting military actions elsewhere in the Pacific War. For example, he states that French Indochina, British Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies were all overrun by the Japanese in September 1940. But only portions of French Indochina were occupied at that time, the invasion of Malaya began on 8 December 1941 to coincide with Pearl Harbor, and the Dutch East Indies were not fully occupied till March 1942.

There are additional errors regarding weaponry. Nelson correctly credits the Japanese navy for its technological edge over the US Navy in the development of torpedoes, but describes them as “two-foot-long” (57) devices—a figure that refers to their *diameter*, not length. He also singles out the Americans’ standard-issue M1903 Springfield rifle as particularly deficient. But that weapon was comparable to the bolt-action rifles of contemporary Japanese, British, Russian, and German armies and, in any case, the semiautomatic M1 Garand had begun to enter US Army service before Pearl Harbor. He describes barrage balloons as “blimps hanging from metal cables to interfere with low-flying pilots” (171); in fact, the cables *hung from* the blimps, not the other way around.

Both historians and general readers will find *Pearl Harbor: From Infamy to Greatness* to be an engaging, well-written, and intelligent, if not especially original account of events before, during, and after the attack on Pearl Harbor, an account much enriched by moving eyewitness testimony.

2. Here, as elsewhere in *Pearl Harbor*, there is considerable overlap with *The First Heroes* (note 1 above); some paragraphs in the two books are virtually identical.