THE ILLUSION OF MAGIC
Intelligence and the Attack on Pearl Harbor

In 1941, the US possessed one of the best intelligence systems in the world, but still suffered one of the worst "surprise" attacks in history. The contradiction between intelligence capability and strategic failure raises questions about how intelligence is used, rather than simply its existence. Historians have long debated whether the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor was the result of intelligence failure or a broader issue of how exactly that intelligence was utilized. Prior to World War II (WWII), the US had developed a complex system of communications intelligence (COMINT) that was capable of intercepting and decrypting foreign diplomatic messages.[1] Via this system the US obtained access to a large amount of Japanese diplomatic communications, which provided significant insight into the country, especially relative to their relation with the US. This collection of the Japanese encryption system PURPLE's intelligence was known as MAGIC.[2] Despite this advantage, Pearl Harbor still struck the US as a devastating surprise. Prior to Pearl Harbor, American codebreakers successfully decrypted Japanese communications, but were forced to restrain their usage to protect the secrecy of MAGIC: their trump card. The strategic silence, although ultimately advantageous, allowed for preventable losses and exposed the moral and ethical costs of intelligence as a weapon. In short, the US had highly advanced COMINT systems that provided direct access and insight into Japanese diplomatic thinking, PURPLE, resulting in MAGIC and allowing information to go beyond pure speculation. MAGIC represented and demonstrated the effectiveness and strategic importance of COMINT as a tool for modern warfare. The distribution of MAGIC intelligence was highly restricted in order to preserve its secrecy, limited to high-ranking officials who each knew only a part of the whole. Moving down the ranks, this

[1] David Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last: American Diplomatic Codebreaking in the Early Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 5 (2007): 867, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24916103.

[2] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 866.

meant that codebreakers or even military commanders knew nothing or an inconsequential amount of intelligence. This limitation reflects the strategic decision to prioritize long-term intelligence advantages through secrecy over immediate effective use. The combination of restricted intelligence, analytical obstacles, and strategic assumptions contributed to the ultimate failure that was Pearl Harbor.

During WWII to prevent enemy forces from intercepting plans, nations would use cryptography to create codes that only they knew how to decrypt. Simultaneously, opposing powers would utilize cryptanalysis in an attempt to break those codes and gain powerful information that could potentially be the winning factor. From the early 40s to the late 80s of the twentieth century, United States Cryptanalysis took place in Arlington Hall, Virginia. American codebreakers commonly worked with the British, a trend that followed during the war. Even before the start of WWII, the US successfully decrypted diplomatic communications from dozens of countries. Many historians see COMINT as the most powerful form of secret intelligence and consider it to be superior to human intelligence and open sources. This is due to its ability to allow for direct access to government decision making structures and its view as the most credible because it is the target's own words. This explains why MAGIC was seen with so much value.[3] William D. Leahy was a lifelong naval officer who at one point reached one of the highest positions in the navy, Chief of Naval Operations. In 1940 he assured Congress and the public that the US Navy was prepared for war. Leahy's seniority, position, and credibility gave his testimony strength. This, paired with the later shock of attack, suggests that even top officials were operating on incomplete or incorrect information.[4] On November 26, 1941 US Secretary of

[3] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 867.

[4] "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of William D. Leahy before the Pearl Harbor Committee on His Lunch with with President Roosevelt and Admiral James Richardson Excerpt," 1945, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=17232&itemid=WE52&primarySourceId=14851.

State Cordell Hull presented Japan with the "Hull Note," a ten-point proposal that demanded absolute Japanese withdrawal from China. Japan declared these negotiations as impossible to accept since they would be giving up a significant amount of land and resources. For Japan, this marked the start of the end for its diplomatic relationship with the United States. For the United States however, Japan's response message, known as the Fourteen-Part Message, was not delivered until after Pearl Harbor due to Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura and diplomat Saburo Kurusu delayed in translating and typing the long message. This shows Japan's transition from diplomacy to war almost two weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor while the US remained oblivious to the situation. This also shows that Japan's attack was in fact not spontaneous but carefully planned, framing a clear causation timeline.[5] Accurate intelligence, or intelligence whatsoever, was not needed for an effective defense. Pearl Harbor's defense systems could function successfully without warnings and therefore failure at Pearl Harbor can not be solely attributed to intelligence failures. Responsibility spreads from solely intelligence to other factors such as command decisions.[6] Intelligence, while extremely powerful, posed significant structural problems, especially in information dissemination. On one hand, limiting access to information reduced its usefulness but broad sharing of that knowledge could potentially expose the US's possession of decrypted messages. In other words, sharing intelligence creates a complex relationship between the costs carried by action and inaction respectively.

American codebreaking expanded significantly following their entry into WWII. On a global scale, tens of thousands were involved in the clash of cryptography and cryptanalysis. The U.S. had extremely advanced surveillance reach which eliminates any argument that intelligence

[5] "Decrypted Japanese Messages."

[6] Matthew Cadbury, "Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, Psychology and Command Failure," Journal of Intelligence and Terrorism Studies, n.d., 5, https://doi.org/10.22261/23S441.

failure was due to weakness or underdevelopment while simultaneously defending the idea that intelligence was strategically kept secret, not by accident. This helps contextualize MAGIC as part of a broader intelligence system.[7] While American codebreaking operations were technically successful, intel analysis lacked leadership structure. Important intercepts were read separately from each other to prevent any single person from having an understanding over the entire situation. While this did prevent major information leaks, the practice also left information unorganized and never compared and contrasted, preventing an actual understanding of the intercepts.[8] For this reason, codebreakers really only cared–and really only could care about–decrypting, not analyzing. The lack of clear responsibility for interpreting decrypted messages posed significant problems, and this issue persisted during the war. This provides a potential explanation of why decrypted warnings did not always translate into action before Pearl Harbor. Silence was not only intentional secrecy, but also bureaucratic limitation. This supports the argument in which preventable losses stem from structure rather than ignorance.[9] Decrypted messages were not synthesized with any other intelligence sources, policymakers would have to interpret barely, or in some cases completely, edited decrypts, there was no centralized warning analysis, and the institutional secrecy in place discouraged any forms of collaboration or interpretation. The culmination of all of these flaws, intentional or indirect, point to possible explanations of how intelligence can exist without producing any action whatsoever. This supports structural critique rather than blaming specific individuals as the possession of intelligence does not always lead to responsibility being fulfilled.[10] While US codebreaking showed that the war was imminent and Pearl Harbor commanders were warned prior to the

[7] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 865-866.
[8] Robert F. Piacine, Pearl Harbor : Failure of Intelligence? (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2016), 32-33.
[9] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 880.
[10] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 880.

attack, the overwhelming decryption success created an overload of signals. This created translation bottlenecks which slowed down the sharing of intelligence, making it extremely difficult to utilize. Although in a simple aspect more information means more useful knowledge, intelligence abundance greatly reduces its overall effectiveness which helps explain the idea of a partial warning without fully being prepared.[11] Most explanations of Pearl Harbor treat intelligence failure as a problem of missing key signals in a noisy environment while in reality failure is instead attributed to a lack of specific, tactical warnings. Decision makers' unwillingness or inability to respond was just as–or arguably more–important as the information itself. This reframes Pearl Harbor from ignorance to institutional judgement with failure placed in the structure and receiving of intelligence, not its existence. This places responsibility on leadership receptivity, rather than analyst competence.[12] Although the US could read Japanese diplomatic messages, they could not read Japanese military and naval messages. The main naval code used by Japan (JN25b) was mostly unreadable to the US which explains why a majority of Japan's attack plans were missing in US intelligence. Due to restrictions placed on US inability to decode JN25b and similar naval codes, codebreaking mainly gave political insight to the US but only a meager amount of military. This explains why Pearl Harbor was not predicted. Failure was not because of a careless oversight, the US simply did not have the ability, technicality, or staff to decipher Japanese military and naval messages.[13] For this reason, in addition to others, the US based its predictions of Japan on their past actions. When Japanese carriers went silent in late November, the US assumed the carriers would stay near Japan, as they had in the past. US intelligence believed this was a repeating pattern which caused them to greatly misread Japan's

[11] Cadbury, “Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, Psychology and Command Failure, ” 2.
[12] Dahl, Intelligence and Surprise Attack, 29-30.
[13] David Kahn, "The Intelligence Failure of Pearl Harbor," Foreign Affairs 70, no. 5 (1991): 144, https://doi.org/10.2307/20045008.

actions. Therefore intelligence also failed because it relied on patterns and weak assumptions.[14] Washington and Hawaii knew some kind of Japanese attack was possible, especially because multiple intelligence reports showed Japan preparing for war. However, only an extremely small portion pointed towards Pearl Harbor. Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and Lieutenant General Walter C. Short, the primary military leaders at Pearl Harbor, had enough information to see the impending attack coming, but failed. The problem was not the lack of information but of interpretation. US focus on general dangers rather than specifics left Pearl Harbor as an unlikely candidate and therefore ignored.[15] Additionally, information was not fully shared with Hawaiian command with Washington officials in possession of more knowledge regarding Japanese intentions and the likelihood of potential hostility than Kimmel and Short. In addition to this, the Army and Navy in Hawaii failed to share between each other, ultimately weakening overall US readiness. The attack on Pearl Harbor therefore was, in part, caused by organizational breakdowns as even the most powerful intelligence is useless if never shared and utilized.[16] This can be tied directly to the outcomes of Pearl Harbor.[17] Around this time, the United States Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall, had obtained decrypted Japanese messages, such as the Fourteen-Part Message. Various other important intercepts also went through Marshall. In other words, he was at the center of intelligence. Therefore it can be concluded that for Marshall himself, the attack on Pearl Harbor was no surprise. Knowledge without corresponding action raised accountability issues. In other words, intelligence failure was procedural, not informational.[18] In a trial following the events that took place at Pearl Harbor, Marshall declared

[14] Kahn, "The Intelligence Failure of Pearl Harbor," 145.

[15] Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence at Pearl Harbor (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1997), 5-6, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000188601.pdf.

[16] Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence at Pearl Harbor, 1.

[17] "Conclusions of Army Pearl Harbor Board Report."

[18] George Marshall, C., "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of George C. Marshall before the Pearl Harbor Committee on His Knowledge of a Possible Attack Excerpt," 1945, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=17232&itemid=WE52&primarySourceId=14647.

that he believed Hawaii's defenses were adequate in both air and ground to fend off potential enemy attacks. Marshall had assumed that defenses were properly organized and alerted at Pearl Harbor, but in reality, they were not. This frames failure as readiness rather than capability. Receiving the warning earlier would likely have significantly reduced casualties.[19] Marshall had only received the full Fourteen-Part Message on the morning of the attack. Since the message was very long and in many segments, Marshall did not give his final instruction until 1:00 p.m.. In this case, intelligence arrived far too late to function as any means of proper warning, showcasing the importance of information control and timing just as much as access.[20] The Fourteen-Part Message was not broad, Japan placed strict deadlines implying urgency and escalation of the situation.[21] Deadlines are a clear warning sign of impending conflict. Failure to respond forcefully becomes harder to justify with this knowledge. Intelligence signals pointed toward action, not continuation of diplomacy. Additionally, radar and fighter defenses existed at Pearl Harbor but were not operational.[22] In other words there was a second layer of warning that failed. Comparatively however, structural failure is placed above intelligence as it is expected to be a warning whereas information is potential. This highlights the difference between having intelligence and acting on it. Once Marshall decided to send a warning, the message was sent slowly via teletype. This, coupled with poor weather conditions, worsened the speed of information transmission, only getting the warning to Hawaii hours after the attack already happened.[23] Faster communication systems did exist, so it can not be an argument that the US was forced to use teletype. Timing failures rendered intelligence useless and responsibility can be traced past local command. In the trial and testimony of Husband E. Kimmel, he initially

[19] Marshall, "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of George C. Marshall."
[20] Marshall, "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of George C. Marshall."
[21] Marshall, "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of George C. Marshall."
[22] Cadbury, “Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, Psychology and Command Failure, ” 8.
[23] DiPaolo, "Pearl Harbor Attack."

stated that he believed Hawaii was unlikely to be targeted but after the attack admitted that the danger was in reality very high. In this way Kimmel placed blame on himself for an incorrect original assessment, while in a similar case of trial and testimony, Harold R. Stark pushed blame elsewhere.[24] The culmination of these trials and testimonies highlight a theme of hindsight awareness but a lack of foresight. There is no doubt that both Kimmel and Short possessed intelligence that indicated that war was imminent, Pearl Harbor base was well equipped to defend an attack, and various warnings of danger existed prior to the attacks.[25] Therefore, intelligence failure can not be an answer for the deaths at Pearl Harbor. In other words, intelligence-centric blame decreases and subsequently is placed on the defense capabilities and their utilization of Pearl Harbor. This was unusual however as Kimmel and Short were not known to be incompetent, placing psychological denial as a possible explanation. Many American leaders, similar to Kimmel and Short, thought that the war would only happen via their choice.[26] In other words, denial extended beyond the two of them and were not the only ones responsible. This frames Pearl Harbor as systemic failure of perception and mindset, providing a strong explanation of why warnings were dismissed. Intelligence existed, but psychology determines action, pushing structural failure explanations over individual blame.

US codebreaking was treated as their most secretive success. While the Army and Navy limited dissemination of decrypted intelligence (MAGIC), other intelligence agencies were denied access to this information.[27] The protection of the source was prioritized over broader operational use, displaying strategic restraint in using MAGIC and the ethical issues of preserving intelligence at the cost of human lives. MAGIC intelligence was compiled into a

[24] "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of Husband E. Kimmel."
[25] Cadbury, “Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, Psychology and Command Failure, ” 8.
[26] Cadbury, “Pearl Harbor: Intelligence, Psychology and Command Failure, ” 8.
[27] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 881.

Daily Diplomatic Summary with very little circulation, exclusive to only top civilian and military leaders only.[28] This meant that any lower-level commanders and analysts were excluded, highlighting a possible reason why warnings did not reach commanders at Pearl Harbor. The restraint of sharing intelligence was not a technical issue but a policy choice with secrecy magnifying consequences when decisions failed. While useful Japanese messages were decoded, they stayed in Washington, leaving local commanders in Hawaii with absolutely no warning.[29]Although benefits were present, the practice of centralized intelligence increased disconnection of leadership as commanders were operating without full understanding and awareness.

On another front, US leaders were under the belief that Japan was weaker than it actually was. They assumed Japan would avoid direct war as they were "unable" to defeat the US. This shaped how the US judged threats and this overconfidence made leaders greatly underestimate Japan. While US officials expected the war to happen very soon, military planners expected Japan to act rationally and attack resource-rich territories in the Southwest Pacific and in Southeast Asia such as the Dutch East Indies, Malaysia, and the Philippines.[30] In other words, Hawaii was not seen as a primary target due to a significant strategic misjudgement of Japanese plans. Washington underestimated Japan's reach and willingness to attack the US directly and Pearl Harbor was most likely not a secret plot, but more a result of flawed assumptions.[31] With the lack of intelligence utilization, assumption took its place in predictions. In fact, strategic intelligence was sometimes ignored when it contradicted expectations, explaining why warnings did not always cause action and highlighting the psychological and doctrinal barriers to

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[28] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 867.
[29] DiPaolo, "Pearl Harbor Attack."
[30] Vidyalankar, "Pearl Harbor," 849; "Conclusions of Army Pearl Harbor Board Report."
[31] Robert H. Ferrell, "Pearl Harbor and the Revisionists," *The Historian* 17, no. 2 (1955): 226, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24442314.

response.[32] There were no clear signals that Pearl Harbor would be attacked as no deciphered messages mentioned Pearl Harbor. Moreover, no intercepted code even pointed towards Hawaii in general. Since intelligence suggested potential attacks elsewhere and analysts had no specific warning to detect, failure was due to missing information, not analysis of it. This supports the idea Pearl Harbor was not predictable.[33] Japan also used deception in order to make the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. When Japan made its radio signals look normal, US analysts expected Japan's aircraft carriers to stay near home waters as they had in the past. Fake radio traffic aligned with this belief showing how Japan not only hid its actions, but shaped what the US saw. This explains another factor of why warnings did not cause significant concern.[34] This deception was very sophisticated as Japanese radio operators stayed behind and sent fake messages, using the same style and call signs as real carriers.[35] In this way Japan was able to move and prepare its attack force without being detected framing Pearl Harbor as both a military and intelligence failure.[36] In addition to this, Japan's military told diplomats to keep talking to the US such as discussing negotiations. In reality however, these "negotiations" were never going to happen but were designed to be a distraction to hide attack plans. In other words, Japan used its diplomacy intentionally as a tool for deception.[37] This attack was further planned as Japan gathered extensive, precise data on Pearl Harbor. Coming into the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan was aware that the base was divided into four separate surveillance zones and of the different ship positions and types. This highlights the depth of Japanese planning and removes any argument centered around surprise narratives.[38] This planning was also not occasional surveillance as

[32] Dahl, Intelligence and Surprise Attack, 66.
[33] Kahn, "The Intelligence Failure of Pearl Harbor," 147-148.
[34] Robert J. Hanyok, ""Catching the Fox Unaware"," Naval War College Review 61, no. 4 (2008): 103, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26396966.
[35] Hanyok, ""Catching the Fox Unaware"," 110-111.
[36] Hanyok, ""Catching the Fox Unaware"," 99.
[37] Ikuhiko, "Going to War," 232.
[38] "Decrypted Japanese Messages."

Japanese officials wanted daily reports on US naval activity at Pearl Harbor. Specifics that Japan was mainly interested in included observation balloons, tracking whether American warships and carriers were in port, and whether ships had anti-mine nets.[39] Focus on balloons and anti-mine nets especially highlights attention to US defensive measures which corroborates the argument that Japan treated Pearl Harbor as a potential target many days before the attack on December 7. Japan realized that Hawaii forces lacked sufficient long-range bombers and its limited reconnaissance capacity. In other words, US chances of detecting enemy carriers are therefore very unlikely and shortages of weaponry made intelligence even more important. With Japan understanding Hawaii would be forced to place more dependency on alerts and that defensive planning relied on planning than pure numbers and force, their reason for information deception becomes clear.[40] In fear of sabotage, Short had grouped aircraft tightly together which prevented quick takeoff. Japanese attackers were aware of this in advance and exploited this setup. Since defenses prioritized wrong threats, the fear of sabotage outweighed invasion preparedness, causing tactical choices to directly increase casualties.[41] Kimmel also believed that the shallow harbor would protect battleships from torpedoes and similar weapons, expecting any possible damage to be very little. This belief shaped defensive assumptions and precautions which ultimately backfired on the US and increased losses. In this case, overconfidence reduced urgency.[42] Additionally, Kimmel and Short did not use continuous radar and reconnaissance flights were not regularly done. Defensive detection systems were underutilized as various technologies and preventive measures were available but not used. Therefore, the attack was not completely unforeseeable on the local level and the neglecting of basic defenses increased

[39] United States Department of Defense, “Magic” Background of Pearl Harbor, A-151.
[40] Marshall, "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of George C. Marshall."
[41] DiPaolo, "Pearl Harbor Attack."
[42] "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of Husband E. Kimmel."

vulnerability.[43] Stark also confirmed that the orders required reconnaissance and agreed that the failure to scout violated instructions. Therefore responsibility lay with commanders of Hawaii as defensive procedures were not followed. With or without warnings, there was a significant preparedness failure.[44] In addition to this, various senior officials underestimated the capabilities of Japan and Pearl Harbor was assumed as geographically safe. This meant it was not just local military leaders such as Kimmel and Short, but misjudgement was on a national level that shaped overall readiness at Pearl Harbor. US underestimation contributed to failure due to the inability to respond effectively. This failure was not exclusive to Hawaii as the US saw similar trends elsewhere. For example, even after the news of Pearl Harbor reached the Philippines, General Douglas MacArthur failed to fully protect American air power.[45] This suggests broader organizational and strategic failures.

Revisionist historians argue that US President Franklin D. Roosevelt deliberately left Pearl Harbor vulnerable in order to force an attack to bring the US into WWII. In other words that attack was not a surprise at all, but a strategic political move to justify US entry into war. This frames Pearl Harbor as an act of manipulation of justification rather than failure or error.[46] This idea was known as the "back door to war" thesis. The problem with this was that no solid documentary proof on Roosevelt existed and the argument relied mostly on suspicion and interpretation than on objective proof.[47] Additionally this theory can be nullified as even a failed attack would have sufficed in entering the US into the war, meaning purposely allowing absolute disaster was not necessary.[48] Due to the events and failures of the Pearl Harbor Attack,

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[43] DiPaolo, "Pearl Harbor Attack."
[44] "Trial Transcript of the Testimony of Harold R. Stark."
[45] DiPaolo, "Pearl Harbor Attack."
[46] Ferrell, "Pearl Harbor and the Revisionists," 215.
[47] Ferrell, "Pearl Harbor and the Revisionists," 224.
[48] Martin V. Melosi, "The Triumph of Revisionism: The Pearl Harbor Controversy, 1941-1982," *The Public Historian* 5, no. 2 (1983): 88-89, https://doi.org/10.2307/3377253.

Intelligence coverage became global. US surveillance applied to enemies, potential enemies, and even to allies. The overall mission of COMINT transformed to aim to create a comprehensive picture of global activity. COMINT and similar intelligence raises notable ethical concerns, especially in the surveillance of allies. This shows an increase of intelligence power but lack of concern for accountability.[49] This global intelligence coverage persisted after the war ended and by 1946, the US was reading diplomatic codes of over forty-five governments. Secrecy was institutionalized, not situational. This continued surveillance after the war furthered ethical concerns. Ultimately, due to the events that took place at Pearl Harbor, MAGIC helped normalize permanent intelligence surveillance for the US.[50]

[49] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 868.
[50] Alvarez, "Trying to Make the MAGIC Last," 869.

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