CHAPTER 1

The Rising Sun

Oil and Empire

Foreign oil was Imperial Japan's lifeblood and fatal undoing. Japan went to war with the United States to gain access to oil in Southeast Asia it could no longer obtain from American companies, its chief supplier of the fuel that sustained its military machine. In July 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt blocked the sale of American oil to Japan in retaliation for that country's occupation of French Indochina, which Japan planned to use as a launching point for an audacious move south into the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), one of the world's great oil-producing regions. "Riding the Equator east for three thousand miles, a distance as great as the whole span of the United States itself, the Netherlands Indies," the *New York Times* pointed up their strategic importance, "support a population of sixty million and produce commodities—oil, tin, and rubber—which the modern world cannot do without. They are an empire in themselves, and no Pacific Power can be indifferent to their future."[1]

In the summer of 1941, Japan determined to seize these resource-rich islands,

even if it meant war with the United States. It was her boldest move yet in what had been a ten-year-long campaign of conquest in Asia.

When Japan unleashed a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941, its primary strategic target was not the American fleet berthed there, but the oil fields of Sumatra and Borneo in the East Indies. Hawaii was hit to cover the flank of this great resource grab, knocking out the only naval force in the Pacific capable of stopping it.

With terrifying speed, Japan seized the territory it had long coveted in its quest for energy self-sufficiency, not just the Netherlands East Indies but also Burma, the Malay Peninsula, and the main islands in the Southwest Pacific that lay north of Australia, including the Philippines, an American protectorate. In a matter of months, it had acquired the most far-reaching oceanic empire in all of history, one blessed with every economic resource it needed to fight a major war. But the shipping lanes to these mineral-rich possessions were too far-flung to be effectively protected by the formidable, but overextended, Imperial Navy. By the late spring of 1945, a strangulating American naval blockade had cut off the Japanese home islands from the oil fields and mineral deposits of the recently conquered Asian possessions of England, France, the Netherlands, and the United States. Japan would stubbornly fight on, but the war was lost. The Pacific war was not exclusively a war over oil, but oil played a decisive role in both its origins and end.

The Road to War

In July 1941, the month that militants in Tokyo decided that war with mighty America was inevitable, Japan was fighting another country it could not hope to defeat. For nearly a decade, it had been at war with the Chinese, first in Manchuria, then in China itself. In these years, Japan—an ally of the United States in World War I and a nation that had been undergoing a robust Westernizing movement for almost a century—fell increasingly under the control of jingoistic military and political leaders. With Emperor Hirohito's compliance, they ruthlessly suppressed political opposition—often by public assassination—and began advancing a mystical doctrine of racialism, the superiority of the Yamato race and Japan's sacred mission to free Asia of white, Western imperialists. These ultranationalists were convinced that the world's major powers, all of them ruled by Caucasians, were conspiring to reduce Japan—"A Yellow Peril"—to second-rank status in the community of nations. Young

Japanese military officers, along with nationalistic poets and intellectuals, were also urging a cultural renaissance, the eradication of a soft, decadent Western materialism, with its elevation of individualism and hedonism, and a return to the "divine" land's purer warrior-state greatness. They dreamed of a new age when millions of spirit warriors abandoned the pursuit of pleasure and sacrificed their lives for the spread of *Dai Nippon Teikoku,* the "Great Empire of Japan."

Economic privation fueled anti-Western xenophobia, political despotism, and an urgent drive for autarky.[2] The Great Depression, with its contraction of international trade, had a devastating impact on Japan's fragile island economy, which was heavily dependent on foreign resources. Britain, another island economy, was also hurt badly by the economic crisis, but it had an empire to help sustain its military prowess. Japan did not. It must have one, and soon, its imperialists insisted, if it was to weather the Depression and emerge as the preponderant power in a new Asia-for-Asians.

The Imperial Army was the leading agent in this drive for markets and resources. Profoundly influenced by Germany's defeat in World War I, its strategists concluded that Germany, with its tremendous continental army, had lost the war because of its vulnerability to the Allied naval blockade, which virtually sealed off the country from the outside world. The lesson was there. The world powers of the future would need more than strong armies and navies. They would have to become self-sufficient, capable of waging total war without reliance on food, fuel, or other war-sustaining materials from other nations. For Japan, this meant expanding industrial production at home and extending its imperial reach.[3]

Japan had already acquired Korea, Formosa (Taiwan), and a stake in Manchuria in earlier wars against China and Russia. Now it moved to enlarge and consolidate its holdings in that vital area of Asia that lay directly across the narrow Sea of Japan. In September 1931, soldiers of the rabidly nationalistic Kwantung Army, garrisoned in the semi-autonomous Chinese territory of Manchuria to protect a railroad system over which it had acquired rights, provoked a fight with the local warlord, overran the whole of Manchuria, and set up a new puppet state, Manchukuo. It would be a buffer against the Soviet Union and become "Japan's lifeline," proclaimed one Japanese leader, supplying iron and coal for the home country's new state-run military economy and "living space" for its exploding population, expanding at a rate of a million a year.[4] The United States refused to recognize Japan's new client state and the League of Nations issued a flaccid condemnation, but Japan ignored the American protest, withdrew from the League, and prepared to extend its Asian conquests.

In July 1937, when Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalists refused to give in

to additional Japanese demands for territory and influence, the Kwantung Army stormed into China itself, overran the fertile valleys of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers, and seized all the important seaports, including Shanghai, which it bombed with vehemence, killing thousands of innocent civilians. After taking the walled capital of Nanking in December 1937, Japanese soldiers—indoctrinated to look on the Chinese as a kingdom of "chinks," of roving bandits and cowlike peasants—killed over 200,000 military prisoners of war and unarmed civilians, raping, castrating, and beheading tens of thousands of them, in what has been called a Hidden Holocaust.[5] The systematic slaughter continued for three months in Nanking and surrounding villages and got so out of control that a member of the Nazi Party who was stranded in Nanking sent Adolf Hitler a telegram pleading with him to intervene to restrain the Japanese army.[6]

Japan invaded China to exploit it economically, but this backfired. The Japanese military expected a quick victory over the politically divided Chinese—one army led by the corrupt, pro-American Chiang Kai-shek, the other by the cagey Communist Mao Tse-tung. But both leaders used China's rural vastness to great advantage. Chiang's Nationalists, who did most of the fighting, suffered defeat after defeat and by 1939 both his forces and Mao's had been virtually cut off from access to the outside world. Yet they would not be conquered, and the Japanese almost exhausted themselves killing them. "China is like a gallon jug which Japan is trying to fill with a half-pint of liquid," Mao told an American officer who visited his headquarters.[7] The long war drained Japan's human and material resources, reducing alarmingly its slender supplies of oil.

Japan was a coal-driven economy. Petroleum accounted for only about 7 percent of total energy consumption. But the navy, the air force, and the merchant fleet relied on it for their existence. And that meant an embarrassingly heavy reliance on the United States, a liberal, democratic nation whose values the military held in cold contempt.

In the late 1930s, Japan imported 93 percent of its oil, 80 percent of it from the United States and another 10 percent from the Netherlands East Indies.[8] This put Japan in a precarious position, for its major supplier of oil strongly opposed the war it was now fighting. The Roosevelt administration was committed to an autonomous China and to the Open Door policy first proposed in 1899 by Secretary of State John Hay, under which all nations would have equal trading rights in China. Although few countries, including the United States, adhered to this policy, Japan's savagely prose-

cuted war in China provoked the Roosevelt administration to issue more strongly worded protests to the Japanese government. Tokyo responded stridently, denouncing the Open Door as a policy inappropriate to present and future world conditions. At this point, Japan began to look elsewhere for the oil and iron ore it needed to prevail in China and become the supreme power in Asia. In 1940, it cast a covetous eye on Indochina, Burma, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies, where these resources—along with greatly needed rubber, tungsten, and rice—were plentiful and now, suddenly, there for the picking.

Hitler's sweeping European conquests of May and June 1940, from Rotterdam to Paris, created an irresistible opportunity for Japan to snatch the Asian colonies of defeated France and the Netherlands, and of beleaguered England, which Germany was preparing to invade that summer. Three months after Hitler's legions crossed the Marne and goose-stepped through the Arc de Triomphe, Imperial Japan made a sordid agreement with the new Vichy, or collaborationist, government of France, permitting it to send troops into the northern part of French Indochina. Possession of northern Indochina would complete Japan's blockade and encirclement of China. But the Japanese government wanted more, urged on by the powerful War Minister in the new, more aggressive cabinet of Prince Fumimaro Konoe—fifty-five-year-old Hideki Tojo, a hard-line expansionist who had been chief of staff of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria. Tojo and the new extremist Foreign Minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, hoped to use Indochina as a base for an ambitious "Southern Advance" into British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.[9] That September, Matsuoka, who preached Fascism as the force of the future, was instrumental in shaping the Tripartite Pact with Hitler and Italy's Benito Mussolini, creating what became known as the Axis alliance. The three members of the totalitarian front agreed to aid one another if "attacked by a power at present not involved in the European War or in the Sino-Japanese" conflict. This was a direct warning to the United States to stay out of the war, a war that Matsuoka assured Konoe the Germans would easily win.[10]

This put Japan on a collision course with America. President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull were determined to protect the Asian interests of America's future wartime allies and, more importantly, keep Southeast Asia a leading trading partner of the United States. That meant preventing Japan from gaining overwhelming influence there. The trick was how to do this without provoking a war neither statesman wanted.

America imported more goods from the Far East than any other place on

earth. Three colonies alone—British Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, and the Philippines—accounted for approximately one fifth of all American foreign purchases.[11] The United States—an automobile society with the largest rubber goods industry in the world—bought 98 percent of its rubber and 90 percent of its tin from Southeast Asia. In all, the area provided more than half of America's needs for at least fifteen vital commodities, including chromium and manganese, metals essential in the steelmaking process.[12] By 1940, key policymakers in the State Department were prepared to defend America's freedom to trade for these resources, by war if necessary, should they come in danger of falling under the control of the Japanese. A pro-Fascist Japan in possession of South Asia could cut off trade with the United States and Britain or dictate extortionate concessions to continue it. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox put America's interest in the region in the sternest possible language in his congressional confirmation hearings of 1940: "We should not allow Japan to take the Dutch East Indies, a vital source of oil and rubber and tin. . . . We must face frankly the fact that to deny the Dutch Indies to Japan may mean war."[13]

When Japan moved into northern Indochina, Roosevelt cut off its supplies of high-quality scrap iron and aviation gas, a limited response dictated by his desire to avoid war. Roosevelt had backing for even stronger sanctions, not only from his State Department but also from an American public aroused by the suffering of the Chinese peasants they had read about in Pearl Buck's immensely popular novel, *The Good Earth,* and by news coverage of the terror bombings of Canton, Chungking, and other Chinese cities. As one protest group put it: "Japan furnishes the pilot. America furnishes the airplane, gasoline, oil, and bombs for the ravaging of undefended Chinese cities." A Gallup Poll of June 1939 found nearly three quarters of the American public in favor of a total embargo on the export of war-making materials to Japan.[14]

With war a possibility, Roosevelt had already begun to take precautionary measures. In January 1940 he had moved the base of the U.S. Pacific Fleet from San Diego to still unfinished Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. He then sent additional loans, arms, equipment, and military advisors to prop up Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist army and allowed the creation of a volunteer air force in China—the Flying Tigers—to be commanded by a retired U.S. fighter pilot, Colonel Claire Chennault. China had to be saved, not just for humanitarian reasons, but to pin down the Japanese army, stalling its relentless southward march.

Roosevelt also began beefing up American defenses in the Philippines. Orders were issued to send to the islands over 250 B-17 Flying Fortresses, America's most formidable long-range bombers. The planes, fresh from the factory, were to be put under

the overall command of General Douglas C. MacArthur, a World War I hero who had been serving as a military advisor to the Philippine government. MacArthur was recalled to active service as head of a new organization, U.S. Army Forces, Far East, made up of the Philippine army and American units in the islands.

In early 1941, the Japanese sent Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura, a sincere advocate of peace, to Washington to try to reach an agreement with the United States to reestablish trade relations and recognize Japanese interests in China and northern Indochina. The fire-eaters had not yet gained complete control of the Japanese government, and a group of navy leaders, led by Vice Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, hoped to avoid a war that would pit its forces against the combined navies of America and Britain, an unpopular position that made Yamamoto the target of right-wing assassins.[15] Roosevelt and Hull welcomed the initiative, and Hull met regularly with the congenial Nomura, often in the secretary's private home. Seeing Hitler as the major menace, Hull and Roosevelt hoped to use diplomacy to buy time for America to rearm, making itself so formidable that the Japanese would not dare attack it. As Roosevelt told his Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, an insistent advocate of tougher sanctions against Japan, "As you know, it is terribly important for the control of the Atlantic for us to help to keep peace in the Pacific. I simply have not got enough Navy to go around and—every little episode in the Pacific means fewer ships in the Atlantic."[16]

The breaking point came on July 2, 1941, when the Japanese government and the military ended their internal bickering and came together behind a plan to occupy all of Indochina "in order to consolidate the base of our national existence and self-defense."[17] American cryptologists had recently broken the Japanese diplomatic code (through an operation known as MAGIC, the equivalent to Britain's code-breaking system, ULTRA) and Roosevelt knew, therefore, that this latest move was but the first step toward the invasion of British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies—and that the Japanese had decided to take that step even if it meant war with Great Britain and the United States. An intercepted Japanese dispatch could not have been clearer about this: "After the occupation of French Indochina, next on our schedule is the sending of an ultimatum to the Netherlands Indies. . . . In the seizing of Singapore the navy will play the principal part . . . [W]e will once and for all crush Anglo-American military power and their ability to assist in any schemes against us."[18]

A shaken Roosevelt ordered a freeze on Japanese assets in the United States. The President had not intended to cut off oil entirely, seeing this as excessively provoca-

tive, but the freeze became a de facto embargo when State Department officials, led by the young Dean Acheson, persuaded the Treasury Department to refuse to release any of the frozen funds to Japan to purchase oil.[19] This was done while the President was away from the capital at a secret meeting with British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill. By the time Roosevelt got word of what had been done it was too late to reverse the policy. Two Japanese oil tankers that had been waiting to be filled in San Pedro Harbor, near Los Angeles, were forced to return home with their tanks empty. In the meantime, the State Department persuaded Britain and Dutch authorities in the East Indies to impose their own embargoes. Both were eager to comply; the occupation of Indochina put Japanese bombers within range of Singapore, and gave Japan two excellent harbors, Camranh Bay and Saigon, from which to strike south toward Borneo, a crown jewel of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group, one of the most powerful fuel consortiums in the world.

This virtual severing of trade with the empire damaged Japanese-American relations irrevocably, for Japan saw it as a threat to its very survival. The embargo strengthened the hand of the military leaders in the Japanese cabinet, and they, along with their civilian allies, were set on a war that even the vacillating Emperor was now willing to risk. Without American supplies, and with the nation's yearly oil production able to supply its ships for only one month, the Japanese navy's reserve of oil would last only two years unless fuel could be found elsewhere.[20] That gave war an insane logic of its own. To continue to make war against indomitable China, Japan would have to go to war against an even tougher opponent. This was kamikaze politics—state policy fueled by a desperate ideology of resource scarcity. Koichi Kido, an intimate of the Emperor and an advocate of moderation, later told the Japanese Premier in confidence, "The whole problem facing Japan had been reduced to a very simple factor, and that was oil."[21]

If Japan's reserves "[are] dribbled away," said a Japanese naval official in charge of resources mobilization, "Japan . . . [will] grow weaker and weaker like a TB patient gasping along till he drop[s] dead on the road. A grim and humiliating end. However, if we could strike boldly and get the oil in the south . . ."[22]

Roosevelt's fresh resolve removed all ambiguity from Japanese-American negotiations. Japan now faced a stark choice: continue on its present course or capitulate in response to American pressure. War was not inevitable—Konoe began backpedaling, proposing a secret summit meeting with Roosevelt (which Hull did not think appropriate, given Konoe's unmovable positions on China and the "Southern Advance"),

and the Emperor wanted to give the talks in Washington more time. But after Japanese troops marched into southern Indochina on July 28 only a miracle would have prevented war. "There is no choice left but to fight and break the iron chains strangling Japan," Admiral Osami Nagano, chief of the Naval Staff, told colleagues.[23]

Hull and Roosevelt also realized that they had crossed a divide. As Hull told Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles five days later, "Nothing will stop them except force."[24]

On September 6, the Japanese made a fateful decision. At a cabinet meeting in the presence of Emperor Hirohito, Tokyo's leaders agreed to continue the talks in Washington, sending over Saburo Kurusu as a special envoy to help Nomura restore harmony to Japanese-American relations. But Japan's demands remained extreme. It refused to give up its new economic colony or disengage from China. If no agreement satisfactory to the Imperial interests was reached by the beginning of October, Japan was to prepare to go to war with the United States, the cabinet solemnly agreed.[25] When the Emperor formally ratified the decision to go to war should diplomacy fail—"the most important decision of his entire life," according to his biographer, Herbert P. Bix—the movement toward war—now tied to a rigid timetable—would continue to accelerate and all subsequent diplomatic discussion between Japan and the United States would become mere shadow boxing.[26] That the talks continued is an indication that both sides needed time to build up for the showdown, and that some leaders, including Hull and Nomura, hoped that the war they saw on the horizon could somehow be postponed.

The ascendancy of Hideki Tojo ended all hope for a compromise. In late October, with the Emperor's support, he replaced Konoe as Prime Minister. Two weeks later, on November 5, at an Imperial Conference before the Emperor, Tojo outlined the majority opinion of the cabinet he now firmly controlled. Admitting to "some uneasiness about a protracted war" with prodigiously powerful America, he went on to emphasize that, with oil reserves what they were, "I fear that we would become a third-class nation after two or three years if we just sat tight."[27] Even if the Americans softened their position in the current negotiations, Japan would be forever dependent for war-making resources on the whims of Washington bureaucrats and politicians.[28]

At this point, the government sanctioned a bold war plan put forward by Admiral Yamamoto. He proposed a secret, preemptive strike—one of staggering suddenness—on the U.S. fleet at its anchorage in Pearl Harbor. This, combined with a simultaneous attack on the Philippines, would eliminate the American threat on the

northern and eastern flanks of Japan's "Southern Advance." Perhaps there was even hope for victory in this. "The coming war will be protracted and dirty," Yamamoto had told Konoe in an earlier conversation. But after Pearl Harbor he would try to bring on an early and decisive naval engagement, involving the entire fleet. If he prevailed and the Americans came to the peace table, a long and brutal war of attrition might be avoided.[29] In any event, such a strategy was, Yamamoto thought, Japan's only hope for success in a war he loyally supported, but believed his country should have avoided.

Yamamoto's respect for America's enormous material might have convinced him that a more conventional strategy would fail. The Admiral knew the enemy well. He had attended Harvard in the 1920s and traveled extensively in America before being appointed Japan's naval attaché in Washington. And though he had a low opinion of the U.S. Navy, considering it a country club for golfers and bridge players, he had the highest respect for the purposeful determination of the American people. They were not the weak-willed sybarites portrayed by Tokyo hard-liners, he reminded his naval colleagues.

What gave Yamamoto hope for his plan was that Japan had carrier planes and aviators beyond compare, along with specially designed torpedoes to sink ships in the shallow—forty-foot-deep—waters of Pearl Harbor. It was a dangerous gamble. He would be risking Japan's entire front-line carrier strength on a single, unproven operation. But against such an enemy, risks had to be taken.[30]

On November 26, while Yamamoto was making final preparations for his Hawaiian offensive, Cordell Hull handed Ambassador Nomura and special envoy Saburo Kurusu a ten-point document calling for their country to withdraw its military forces from both Indochina and China as a precondition for the resumption of trade with the United States. Interestingly, the draft document did not mention Manchuria and was headed "strictly confidential, tentative and without commitment," leaving things open, in other words, to future discussion, including, perhaps, the timetable for troop withdrawals. Nor did the document have a deadline for acceptance or rejection.[31] As Hull said later, he was not asking the Japanese to surrender their right to be a major power in Asia.[32] But Tojo chose to interpret it as a humiliating ultimatum, tantamount to a declaration of war. And he got his government to agree, thereby throwing the blame for the war on the intransigent Americans, and absolving Japan of moral responsibility for what it was about to do.[33] Japan chose war, the Imperial Conference declared, because it would not bow to American demands that "ignored our national sacrifices during more than four years of the China incident."[34]

To those who doubted that Japan could prevail against the American colossus, Tojo replied that "a reasonable prospect of victory is enough. Even if there is apprehension that we may be defeated, the nation should trust the military and move ahead."[35]

On November 27, the Pearl Harbor strike force sailed from its secret anchorages in the southern Kurile Islands. It left with the Emperor's blessing; and he himself worked closely on the war rescript, which stated, "Our empire has been brought to cross swords with America and Britain" in a war that he, the Emperor, said he had resisted but now considered "unavoidable."[36] And so His Royal Majesty sent his country into a war that would come close to destroying it, claiming, incredibly, that it was peace he really wanted.

Unaware of the location of the Japanese navy, but expecting an attack somewhere, most likely in Southeast Asia, Washington sent out a war warning to all American commanders in the Pacific. One of them was Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, commander of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.