Notes and Documents

How Stimson Meant to "Maneuver" the Japanese

By Richard N. Current

In the fast-growing literature of the diplomatic background of the Pearl Harbor attack, the entry in Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson’s diary for November 25, 1941, has provided a key document and a very troublesome one. The most controversial passage concerns a noon meeting of the “War Cabinet” at the White House, at which the following, besides President Roosevelt and Secretary Stimson, were present: Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, and Chief of Naval Operations Harold R. Stark. Of this meeting Stimson wrote:

There the President, instead of bringing up the Victory Parade [which, in Stimson’s words, was “an office nickname for the General Staff strategic plan of national action in case of war in Europe”], brought up entirely the relations with the Japanese. He brought up the event that we were likely to be attacked perhaps (as soon as) next Monday, for the Japanese are notorious for making an attack without warning, and the question was how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves. It was a difficult proposition.1

Certainly it was a difficult proposition for students later to interpret. Ever since the document was made available by the congressional committee investigating the Pearl Harbor attack, in 1946, the words “how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot” have baffled both critics and defenders of the Roosevelt administration’s foreign policy.

Emphasizing Stimson’s “maneuver” expression, critics have inferred that Roosevelt and his advisers deliberately planned to pro-

1 U. S. Congress, Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack (Washington, 1946), Pt. XI, 5433. Henry L. Stimson’s definition of “Victory Parade” is given in a footnote to the diary entry as presented to the Joint Committee and published in its proceedings. The parenthetical phrase (“as soon as”) was apparently added by Stimson at the time he submitted portions of his diary to the committee.
voke the Japanese into attacking Pearl Harbor. Three of the four Republican members of the congressional investigating committee subscribed to this interpretation. One of them, Representative Frank B. Keefe, concluded, in his "Additional Views" appended to the committee's majority report, that the administration had prepared two alternative programs. First, if Japan aggressed upon Dutch or British but not American territory, the President was, according to Keefe, to ask Congress for a declaration of war. Or, second, if Japan should attack the United States directly, then no such war message would be necessary. "Mr. Stimson's diary," said Keefe, "describes the [latter] plan succinctly: 'The question was how we should maneuver them.'" Two other Republican members of the committee, Senators Owen Brewster and Homer Ferguson, were even more explicit. In their minority report they quoted the Stimson passage, reiterated the "first shot" phrase, equated "maneuvering" with "waiting for an attack," and finally averred that the President, instead of going to Congress for a war declaration, "chose the alternative of waiting for an overt act by Japan — an attack on the territory of the United States."

Several writers critical of Roosevelt's policy have elaborated on this theme. George Morgenstern, after quoting the Stimson diary, stated that the President and his advisers "reckoned with cold detachment the risk of manipulating a delegated enemy into firing the first shot, and they forced 3,000 unsuspecting men at Pearl Harbor to accept that risk." In a chapter entitled "Maneuvering the Japanese into Firing the First Shot," Charles A. Beard implied that the administration had purposely drawn Japanese fire against the United States, though he did not say so explicitly. And Charles C. Tansill, in a chapter headed "Japan Is Maneuvered into Firing the First Shot at Pearl Harbor," raised but did not specifically an-

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3 Ibid., 503-504, 530, 543, 558.
5 Charles A. Beard, President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941 (New Haven, 1948), 517, 566. Beard also noted, ibid., 518 n.: "In their Conclusions, the majority [of the Joint Committee] denied that 'the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, or the Secretary of the Navy tricked, provoked, incited, cajoled, or coerced Japan into attacking this Nation in order that a declaration of war might be more easily obtained from the Congress.' . . . They refrained from using in this sentence the word 'maneuvered.'"
answer the question: "Did he [President Roosevelt] deliberately seek the Pearl Harbor attack in order to get America into the war?" 6

Administration spokesmen have tried to explain away the diary sentence upon which the hostile writers have so largely built their case. In his testimony before the Joint Committee in 1946, General Marshall said of the White House conversation of November 25, 1941, as it was reported by Stimson:

I took a discussion of this kind — at least I take it now — was a discussion of the diplomatic procedure involved, having in mind that it was the accepted thought in all our minds at that time, that if we were forced to take offensive action, immediate offensive action, that it would be a most serious matter as to its interpretation by the American people, whether we would have a united nation, or whether we would have a divided nation in getting into a world conflict.7

Stimson himself, in a written statement submitted to the investigating committee in March, 1946, also provided an exegesis of the much-quoted entry in his diary. "One problem troubled us very much," he then explained.

If you know that your enemy is going to strike you, it is not usually wise to wait until he gets the jump on you by taking the initiative. In spite of the risk involved, however, in letting the Japanese fire the first shot, we realized that in order to have the full support of the American people it was desirable to make sure that the Japanese be the ones to do this so that there would remain no doubt in anyone's mind as to who were the aggressors. We discussed at this meeting [November 25, 1941] the basis on which this country's position could most clearly be explained to our own people and to the world, in case we had to go into the fight quickly because of some sudden move on the part of the Japanese.8

These explanations, by themselves, do not explain very much. If read superficially they even seem to confirm the hostile critics' case. Both Marshall and Stimson say that the primary aim of the administration's diplomatic strategy was to fix upon the Japanese the onus of war guilt. Such statements appear, on the surface at

6 Charles C. Tansill, Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941 (Chicago, 1952), 651. See also page 648, where Tansill quotes part of the "maneuver" sentence. Another writer found in Stimson's words a possible "clue" to the administration's "curious absence of concern for normal precautionary measures at Pearl Harbor." William H. Chamberlin, America's Second Crusade (Chicago, 1950), 167. Frederick R. Sanborn, Design for War: A Study of Secret Power Politics, 1937-1941 (New York, 1951), 473-75, deduced that the Stimson passage signified an administration decision against the conclusion of a "modus vivendi" with Japan.


8 Ibid., 5421-22.
least, to concede the charge that the administration deliberately provoked an attack on American territory.9

Writers sympathetic with Rooseveltian policy, in attempting to refute its critics, also have failed to dispose satisfactorily of the “maneuver” formula. Herbert Feis, one of the best informed authorities on Pearl Harbor diplomacy, did little more toward elucidating the passage than condense and paraphrase Stimson’s own explanation. Wrote Feis: “The Secretary’s language [in the disputed diary entry] was, I think, hurried and elliptic. The Japanese force was the attacking force. If left to choose the place and time for the first encounter, the defense might suffer.10 But if any of the defenders fired the first shot, they might be regarded as attackers. The problem of keeping the roles straight — without paying heavily for it — was far from easy.” 11

Still less satisfactory is the discussion by Basil Rauch. Though undertaking to traverse Beard (and incidentally Morgenstern) point by point, Rauch mustered only a very dubious emendation of Beard’s use of the diary passage. Rauch explained:

... the administration thought exclusively in terms of a Japanese movement southward. The question was whether the President should ask Congress for a declaration of war prior to a Japanese attack on the Philippines or Guam, in order to avoid giving Japan the advantage of a surprise attack, or wait until Japan attacked United States territory, that is, “maneuver” Japan into firing the first shot. Despite much discussion, no final decision to ask Congress for a declaration of war was made. The other course, waiting while Japan might attack the United States, was a “maneuver” only in the sense that it involved avoidance of any action that would make the United States even seem to provoke or justify an attack by Japan. Whereas Beard makes the word appear to mean that the administration took positive action to coerce the Japanese into attacking, it actually meant that the United States should do nothing that would give Japan an excuse for war.12

9 In fact, however, when Stimson here wrote of having “to go into the fight quickly,” and when George C. Marshall spoke of being forced to take “immediate offensive action,” neither was thinking of a possible “sudden move” by Japan against territory of the United States, since in case of that kind of attack there would have been no problem of explaining American counteraction to “our own people and to the world.”

10 Herbert Feis’s language was itself “hurried and elliptic,” as in the case of this dangling “if” clause. Here he appeared to say, but surely did not mean, that if the defense were left to choose the place and time, the defense might suffer!


12 Basil Rauch, Roosevelt from Munich to Pearl Harbor: A Study in the Creation of a Foreign Policy (New York, 1950), 472-73.
Here Rauch, in spite of his avowed aim to justify Roosevelt’s policy, actually granted a good deal of the critics’ argument. He admitted, in almost the language of the Pearl Harbor committee’s minority report, that the administration chose to “wait until Japan attacked United States territory,” though he mentioned only the Philippines and Guam, not Hawaii. On the point here at issue, he differed from Beard mainly in seeing the “maneuver” as a passive rather than an active stratagem.

Neither Stimson himself nor any of the writers on the subject has explained the “maneuver” expression adequately or related it properly to the policies actually being considered by the President and his advisers in the fall of 1941.\(^7\) To see what the Secretary of War really meant, it is helpful to look first into the assumptions on which he based his thinking at that time. For one thing, he believed that the United States, for its own best interests, should become a full belligerent in the war against the Axis, the only questions being when and how.\(^8\) He also took it for granted that a Japanese movement assaulting or even menacing British or Dutch possessions in the southwestern Pacific would be tantamount to aggression upon American interests and would require war by the United States against Japan.\(^9\) He was confident, however, that the Japanese would not dare to launch a direct attack upon American territory; he proceeded on “the assumption that the Japanese, however wicked their intentions, would have the good sense not to get involved in war with the United States.”\(^10\) Above everything else, he was preoccupied by the idea of using the Philippines as a base for American air power which, he thought, would serve to deter or to

\(^7\) Walter Millis, *This is Pearl! The United States and Japan—1941* (New York, 1947), quoted the Stimson report of the discussion on November 25 among Roosevelt and his advisers, then observed (p. 236) that “what they thought was the danger” was “that Japan would make a decisive move into the Kra Isthmus but without striking at American territory.” Further (p. 237): “the evidence of Mr. Stimson’s diary suggests that what worried them chiefly was how to explain matters to the country in case they should have to go to war suddenly to counter a Japanese move not ostensibly directed against the United States.” This view, which Millis did not elaborate, accords with the conclusions of the present paper.


\(^9\) See, for example, his diary entry of November 28, 1941, in *Hearings . . . Pearl Harbor Attack*, Pt. XI, 5436.

defeat any Japanese sea expedition to the south.\textsuperscript{17} And, finally, he assumed that the President possessed constitutional authority to implement a policy (or strategy) of "defense" as he saw fit, without consulting Congress except as such consultation might be expedient.\textsuperscript{18}

Stimson was ready to act on these assumptions when the War Cabinet met on November 25. For several weeks he and his colleagues had been expecting, from day to day, a Japanese advance to the southward threatening or attacking British or Dutch territory. At a regular Cabinet meeting earlier in the month the President had raised the question "whether the people would back us up in case we struck at Japan down there and what the tactics should be."\textsuperscript{19} Now, on November 25, the War Cabinet took up the "maneuver" problem, as reported by Stimson.

What sort of "maneuver" he had in mind becomes reasonably clear when the word is placed back in the context of his diary. The entry for November 25 continues:

It was a difficult proposition. Hull laid out his general broad propositions on which the thing should be rested — the freedom of the seas and the fact that Japan was in alliance with Hitler and was carrying out his policy of world aggression. The others brought out the fact that any such expedition to the South as the Japanese were likely to take would be an encirclement of our interests in the Philippines and cutting into our vital supplies of rubber from Malaysia. I pointed out to the President that he had already taken the first steps towards an ultimatum in notifying Japan way back last summer that if she crossed the border into Thailand she was violating our safety and that therefore we had only to point out (to Japan) that to follow any such expedition was a violation of a warning we had already given.

Immediately after this White House conference Stimson learned

\textsuperscript{17} He had been much impressed by the "success of the American Flying Fortresses in operations from the British Isles." \textit{Ibid.}, 388. He also believed, "The effectiveness of the airplane against a navy in narrow seas had been recently demonstrated in the Mediterranean by the German air attacks on British naval forces, as well as by the success of the British attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto." Statement to the Joint Committee, March, 1946, in \textit{Hearings . . . Pearl Harbor Attack}, Pt. XI, 5419. He elaborated his views on the potentialities of Philippine-based aircraft in a letter to the President, October 21, 1941, \textit{ibid.}, Pt. XX, 4442-44. What Stimson failed to see was that the Japanese also might have taken a lesson from Taranto — a lesson to be applied at Pearl Harbor.

\textsuperscript{18} Stimson stated his theory of presidential powers in foreign affairs in his answer to a series of supplemental questions proposed by Senator Ferguson. \textit{Hearings . . . Pearl Harbor Attack}, Pt. XI, 5456-57.

\textsuperscript{19} Stimson Diary, entry for November 7, 1941, \textit{ibid.}, 5432.
from army intelligence reports that the long-expected Japanese movement finally had begun.\textsuperscript{20}  

In this crisis, what should the United States do? Stimson recorded, in his diary entry for November 28, the discussion of the question among the President and his advisers. Stimson’s own preference, as he told Roosevelt in the morning, was to use Philippine-based B-17 bombers to strike, without a war declaration, at the Japanese expedition proceeding southward. Later that same day the other members of the War Cabinet agreed that “if the Japanese got into the Isthmus of Kra, the British would fight,” and that “if the British fought, we would have to fight.” But the consensus was that, “rather than strike at the Force as it went by without any warning,” the United States should first warn Japan that if the expedition “reached a certain place, or a certain line, or a certain point, we should have to fight.” The White House conferees then turned to a discussion of a warning to Japan and a message to Congress “reporting the danger, reporting what we would have to do if the danger happened.”\textsuperscript{21} Meanwhile, Stimson was trying, without success, to commit the President to the agreement earlier reached by Anglo-Dutch-American staff conferences at Singapore that “joint military counteraction against Japan should be undertaken only in case Japan attacks or directly threatens the territory or mandated territory of the United States, the British Commonwealth, or the Netherlands East Indies, or should the Japanese move forces into Thailand west of 100 degrees East or south of 10 degrees North, Portuguese Timor, New Caledonia, or the Loyalty Islands.”\textsuperscript{22}  

From the record of these discussions it is fairly plain that Stimson and his colleagues were not anticipating an early Japanese blow against the Philippines or Guam, to say nothing of Hawaii. What they did expect and await was a movement against some such place as Thailand or, possibly, Singapore. When, therefore, Roosevelt “brought up,” in Stimson’s words, “the event that we were likely to be attacked,” he could have meant “we” only in the sense of what he and Stimson assumed to be our side, including the British

\textsuperscript{20} I\textit{bid.}, 5433.  
\textsuperscript{21} I\textit{bid.}, 5435-36.  
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Report . . . Pearl Harbor Attack}, 174-75; Feis, \textit{Road to Pearl Harbor}, 324. As Feis says, “Whether or not the American forces would have gone into action right away if American territories had not been attacked remains a matter of conjecture.”
and the Dutch. The words of the diary as well as the later explanations of Stimson, Marshall, and Feis are ambiguous because the authors neglected to make an explicit distinction between our being attacked in a strict, literal sense and our being "attacked" in the broader and more inclusive sense in which they were using the expression.

The fact that the President and his advisers on November 25 did not expect the Japanese soon to strike at American territory was precisely the reason why the question "how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot" was such a "difficult proposition." Since the Japanese were not thought likely to initiate hostilities against the United States itself, the problem was how to put them into a position of seeming to fire the "first shot" at this country. The policy makers, on November 25 and 28, considered two ways of doing this. One was a diplomatic "maneuver," a warning to Japan; and the other a political "maneuver," a message to Congress and the people. Both the dispatch to Japan and the address to Congress were to be phrased in such a way that, if the Japanese proceeded with their southward movement, even though they did not touch any American territory, they would nevertheless appear to be deliberately assailing our vital interests and, in that sense, attacking us.

Despite Rauch's view, American policy makers apparently had no intention of waiting for an attack on Guam or the Philippines, and, despite the suggestions of Beard and others, no intention of compelling an attack on Pearl Harbor. True enough, the Japanese attack, when and as it actually came, did give the administration a way out of its foreign policy dilemma, and Stimson for one confessed that on December 7, 1941, his "first feeling was of relief that the indecision was over." But the available portions of Stimson's diary, including the "maneuver" passage, do not document the thesis that the President or the Secretary of War planned it that way.24

23 Hearings . . . Pearl Harbor Attack, Pt. XI, 5438.
24 Possibly the typescript of Stimson's diary, which is not yet accessible as a whole, may clarify further the meaning of the "maneuver" passage. From an examination of the microfilm of the diary to 1933, in the Yale University Library, it can be said that Stimson in earlier entries, as in the entry for November 25, 1941, rather frequently expressed himself in hurried, elliptic, and inexact language.