

EMILY S. ROSENBERG

# *A Date Which Will Live*



**PEARL HARBOR IN AMERICAN MEMORY**

*A Date Which Will Live*

AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS/GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

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*Emily S. Rosenberg*

# **A Date Which Will Live**

*Pearl Harbor in American Memory*

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## Introduction

The daughter of a navy veteran, I grew up amid some of the memory-effects of World War II. During the 1960s, as I protested the Vietnam War, my father equated military action with patriotism and contributed to the navy's lobbying organization, the Navy League. In our arguments over foreign policy, foreign foes, and military spending, we had little common ground. I now understand that World War II structured his understanding of politics and values in ways that I could hardly then appreciate.

The last decade's exploding popularity of World War II "memory products" has increased my curiosity about the various cultural meanings of that war and how memories take shape and circulate. Just as an outpouring of interest and commemoration about the Civil War came during the second generation after its end, so turn-of-the-twentieth-century America has embraced a "memory boom" related to World War II. In what forms and to what effects do the language and symbolism of World War II "live" in American culture?

This book examines the construction of Pearl Harbor as an icon in historical memory, commemoration, and spectacle. As an icon—a site suggesting a cluster of meanings—Pearl Harbor has offered "rhetorical resources" to support many different narratives, drawing a multitude of lessons.<sup>1</sup> What were the various contexts within which the powerful symbolism around Pearl Har-

bor initially developed? Why did Pearl Harbor seem to assume greater and greater visibility in American culture after its fiftieth anniversary in 1991? My goal is to explore the cultural meanings—and political contests—that have been attached to the words “Pearl Harbor.”

As this book was under way, the release of Jerry Bruckheimer’s blockbuster film, *Pearl Harbor*, on Memorial Day 2001, turned Pearl Harbor into a veritable cultural industry. Despite almost universal disdain from critics, the film popularized imagery associated with the attack. The Mall of America near Minneapolis, Minnesota, celebrated the film’s opening with a gala, complete with parade and speeches, to honor Pearl Harbor veterans. The night of the film’s opening, my own town’s television stations all led their local newscasts with interviews of Pearl Harbor veterans rather than with news of George W. Bush’s important tax-cut legislation, which had cleared Congress the same day. Bookstores stacked up dozens of new and reissued books on Pearl Harbor, and amazon.com featured a separate “Pearl Harbor store” on its website. During the spring of 2001, any documentary and feature film with a Pearl Harbor theme bedecked video store display windows, and television—especially the History Channel—offered viewers a steady stream of new and old productions. The makers of *GI Joe* tried to revive sagging sales by issuing Pearl Harbor figures; fashion designers revamped their “look” to recall that of the early 1940s. Much of this activity proved ephemeral, of course, especially as Hollywood quickly directed attention to the next, and then the next, new thing.

Fascination with Pearl Harbor during the summer of 2001, however, increased its currency as an available metaphor for discussing foreign policy. The new Republican administration’s secretary of defense pressed the case for a controversial high-tech missile defense system by alluding to the perils of a “space Pearl Harbor.” Then, on September 11, 2001, newspapers across the country ran huge headlines reading “DAY OF INFAMY” or simply “INFAMY.” Pearl Harbor became the most commonly invoked metaphor to frame the early understandings of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the most deadly strikes on American soil. With the sixtieth anniversary of the attack in

December 2001, likely the last major anniversary that many members of the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association (PHSA) would be able to attend, Pearl Harbor assumed even greater visibility as an emotion-laden icon.

This study will not provide an account of the military and diplomatic encounter that has been the subject of shelves of books about Pearl Harbor. Unlike so many other writings, it neither aims nor claims to "reveal" some new "shocking truth." Rather, this book will be attentive to the processes by which a variety of stories about the past, centered on the icon of Pearl Harbor, have taken shape in American culture. A work of cultural history, it will analyze the circulation of diverse meanings through professional and popular histories, monuments, public proclamations, the Internet, films, journalism, and other media. It understands history and other forms of public memory not as avenues to "recover" some "authentic" version of the past but as ever-changing and inevitably mediated fields of contestation over how to structure the past's representation.

Historical memory and the phenomenon of the recent memory boom have been the subjects of a rich scholarly and popular literature, and dozens of writers have discussed and theorized the relationship between history and memory. Building upon the insights of Maurice Halbwachs, the first sociologist to theorize the role of social institutions and groups in the formation and perpetuation of collective memories, much work on history/memory emphasizes its ongoing social construction, the multiplicity and mutability of memory traditions, and the roles of governments, private institutions, pressure groups, and media in perpetuating and altering narratives (often conflicting and contested ones) about the past.<sup>2</sup> This book draws throughout, with appreciation, on the diverse insights of this scholarship, which provides context for its argument at many key points.<sup>3</sup> But this analysis uses the term "memory" to evoke a special interpretive stance that should here be set forth.

In recent American culture, I would contend, historical memory (to which I will refer as "memory" or "history/memory") is inseparable from the modern media, in all their forms. Even so-called "lived memory," which revolves around individual "experi-

ence” and “testimony,” takes shape in interaction with diverse media effects and also must attract and be recorded in some kind of mediated form if it is to last and become part of known “history.” Because media provide the matrix that collects and circulates diverse memories in America, shaping them in various ways and keeping some alive while burying others, memories are enhanced (and, perhaps, even implanted) through more rapid and widespread circulation in media. Forgetting is the condition of media death (no matter how “alive” certain memories may be within individuals). In America, there is increasingly no effective memory or history outside of media, broadly defined.

Remembering and forgetting are, of course, parts of the same process. “Memory and Oblivion,” wrote the nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle, “are necessary for each other’s existence: Oblivion is the dark page, whereon Memory writes her light-beam characters, and makes them legible; were it all light, nothing could be read there, any more than if it were all darkness.”<sup>4</sup> Writer Milan Kundera claims that we can analyze what we call reality only as it appears in memory. “We know reality only in the past tense. We do not know it as it is in the present, in the moment when it’s happening, when it ‘is.’ The present moment is unlike the memory of it. Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting.”<sup>5</sup> What becomes preserved as memory of the past cannot replicate the past but can only *select* and *structure* its remains by the simultaneity of remembering and forgetting. Silences are as important as inclusions in historical production. As anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes in *Destination Culture*, “Memory is not reclaimed. It is produced.”<sup>6</sup> In America, the media matrix shapes and reshapes this social remembering and forgetting. It literally “re-members” (re-assembles) the past and provides the “texture” of memories.<sup>7</sup>

In the process of saving and discarding remnants of the past, media’s circulatory matrix blurs the distinctions between “memory” and “history” and between “popular” and “professional.” Academic historians often try to advance such distinctions. Charles Maier, expressing a view common among academics, has written that memory abets a popular and mythological nostalgia

that stands in opposition to the professional and more rational exercise of history. David Lowenthal similarly contrasts memory, which is unreliable and in the “domain of psychology,” with history, which is empirically testable and in the domain of historians.<sup>8</sup> Such separations, however, prove difficult to uphold in face of postmodern and boundary-blurring media.

I have become convinced that the distinction between “memory” and “history” is highly contingent upon time, place, and project and that for *this* project, related to American culture in the late twentieth century, it has little significance. In my writing and thinking, the two words, memory and history, seem nearly always interchangeable. Into which category, if they were to be held as distinct, would a History Channel documentary belong? Or the books and documentaries based on Tom Brokaw’s *Greatest Generation*? Or a book such as Robert Stinnett’s widely read *Day of Deceit*? Or an Internet discussion of Pearl Harbor in which academics and participants all debate a particular interpretation of events? Who can legitimately claim the cultural authority to decide which of these are “memory” and “popular” but not “history” and “professional”? Historians who work in the academy may resist and decry the collapse of distinctions between “high” and “low,” between so-called “rational” history and “nostalgic” myth, for much of their cultural capital rests on such distinctions. But this book argues that—especially in the media nation of post–World War II America—memory, history, and media all reproduce and re-present in *intertextual* relationships among diverse kinds of cultural material. It insists that memory and history are blurred forms of representation whose structure and politics need to be analyzed not as oppositional but as interactive forms.

Media often encourage multivocality in memory/history. Pearl Harbor is certainly “a date which will live,” but the particular stories that “will live” and the meanings assigned to them become highly volatile in a media-saturated culture. Pearl Harbor “lives” for most Americans in media broadly encompassing popular and professional books, films, journalism, television, memorial sites, and Internet chat rooms. It “lives” in a thousand guises and symbolizes dozens of often conflicting historical “lessons.” Sto-



ries of the past that are summoned as memory and history vie for media attention, and disagreement enhances their visibility. An earlier generation of cultural critics worried that media would homogenize culture and produce conformity in habits of thought. Media, however, often generate and then flourish on controversy and multiplicity. Sites that become monumental, iconic, or spectacularized (through media) may become *more* evocative, *more* charged with the burden of heavy meaning, *more* contested.

In this sense, Pearl Harbor may be seen as a figurative site of contested meanings where power is exerted and challenged. Over time—now more than sixty years after Japan’s attack—disagreements over interpretations have not mellowed. As media circulation expands and accelerates and as a variety of “memory activists” press their interpretations, the diversity of (and disagreements over) meanings and narrative structures have become more, not less, pronounced.<sup>9</sup> As time passes, the cultural stakes over how to recount and valorize the various possible historical “lessons” that may be embedded in the near-sacred symbol of Pearl Harbor have intensified. Since the attack, the term “Pearl Harbor” has circulated as a sometimes contradictory representation of “infamy,” the obligations of national loyalty, the importance of military and foreign policy vigilance, the Roosevelt administration’s ineptitude or deceit, the unfair scapegoating of the military, and the need to commemorate the courage of ordinary soldiers and sailors. Stories of Pearl Harbor have been marshaled to illustrate both the necessity of military preparedness and the importance of an antimilitarist ethic; they may carry messages about Japanese character that emphasize both a negative tendency toward “treachery” and a positive commitment to honor and precise execution of duty. They have anchored disputes among Japanese Americans over how to shape remembrance of internment. This book attempts not to stabilize some truth about this iconic event but to investigate its instability and to see what can be learned from the terms of contestation.

In researching and writing this study of the meanings of Pearl Harbor, I have struggled with the question of how the past shapes the stories called “history” and, conversely, how culturally familiar stories prestructure understandings and memories of the

past. Examining the significations of Pearl Harbor in American culture suggests the usefulness of seeing a back-and-forth dynamic. The cultural and political contests reflected in the Pearl Harbor controversies preceded the attack and shaped its symbolism. Yet Pearl Harbor also focused, altered, and intensified those contests, updating contending narratives and re-presenting them to live in a new generation.

In short, this study addresses how memories of Pearl Harbor circulate in (post)modern American life. What are the cultural politics of history/memory? How do “professional” and “popular” histories (both written and visual) interact and blur with other forms of remembrance (and forgetting), such as those introduced by omnipresent cable television, film, and the Internet? *History/memory, in this investigation, is about production, contestation, and circulation in diverse print, celluloid, electronic, and commemorative media.* Memory is presented as an ever-changing process through which “realities” are remembered and forgotten, meanings are produced and contested, values are professed and debated, and political positions are expressed and challenged. Pearl Harbor “lives” less as a specific occurrence in the past than as a highly emotive and spectacularized icon in an ongoing present—always in interaction with the mediated representations that constitute memory/history.

This book is organized into two parts. The first analyzes the many meanings that became attached to Pearl Harbor in American culture during the first fifty years after the event. It sets them within four broad themes: infamy/preparedness, “backdoor” governmental deceit, commemoration, and American-Japanese relationships. The many stories of Pearl Harbor examined in this section have provided multifaceted—and highly mediated—rhetorical resources that figure in the cultural and political dynamics of postwar American history and policy.

The second part explores many of the more recent cultural contexts and contests that may have contributed to Pearl Harbor’s resurgence in American memory since the fiftieth anniversary in 1991: the broad-based memory boom in American culture; the politics of the Republican revival and the determined effort to exonerate commanders Admiral Husband Kimmel and Lieuten-

ant General Walter Short; the mobilization of military lobbying groups over issues of historical interpretation; the “*Titanic* effect” that propelled “high-concept” historical spectacles such as the film *Pearl Harbor* to the movie screen; the current stress on identity and remembrance in domestic and international politics; the post-cold war security environment; and the grasping for a historical frame through which to understand events related to September 11, 2001.

Throughout, there will be an emphasis on the interplay of three components that seem to affect remembering/forgetting and to determine visibility in mediated history/memory: (1) How does the remembering fit prior stories that already claim cultural familiarity? (2) What are the activities of various (sometimes contesting) memory activists who have a stake in maintaining or promoting particular historical formulations? (3) How are stories repeated and circulated through various print, celluloid, electronic, and commemorative media? Familiarity, promotion, and intertextual circulation will be the guiding, if not always explicit, concerns of this study.

# I



## **Signifying Pearl Harbor**

### *The First Fifty Years*

As dawn broke over Honolulu on December 7 (December 8 Japanese time), Lieutenant Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, the lead pilot in a fleet of Japanese aircraft, looked into the distance as the U.S. Pacific Fleet came into view. Seeing planes neatly grouped on the runway and naval vessels tranquilly lined up along “Battleship Row,” he radioed the code word signifying that a complete surprise had been achieved: “Tora, Tora, Tora.” At 7:55 A.M. the first Japanese raid swooped down, interrupting the USS *Nevada*’s brass band playing “The Star-Spangled Banner” for flag raising. “Air raid, Pearl Harbor. This is no drill,” blared a radio message three minutes later. After an hour, a second Japanese raid circled in. Within less than two hours, 18 U.S. battleships, cruisers, and destroyers lay in ruins; 188 planes were hit; and some 2,400 Americans died. U.S. aircraft carriers, luckily, were out of port. In Washington, Secre-

tary of State Cordell Hull, who had been negotiating with Japanese diplomats, grimly heard the news. When Japanese envoys arrived to present Japan's final terms in the ongoing negotiation, an hour after the attack had started, Hull ordered them out of his office. Throughout the government, anger flared at Japan's "treachery"—apparently covering a carefully planned "sneak attack" with the appearance of continued negotiation. At that moment, few Americans knew much about Hawaii, America's distant island possession. Fewer yet had ever heard of Pearl Harbor.

The words "Pearl Harbor" quickly became one of the most emotive icons in American culture, and the dramatic story of the attack has subsequently been told and retold in thousands of print and visual representations. It should be emphasized that formulations in memory and history are seldom clear-cut. Neither people nor societies remember or recount things in only one way but can sometimes hold in their memories many meanings at once and invoke them in variable, even inconsistent, contexts. During the first fifty years, Pearl Harbor narratives came to offer rhetorical resources related to national security preparedness, to assignment of blame to the Roosevelt administration in Washington or to the commanders at Pearl Harbor, to characterization of Japan and its relations with the United States, and to commemoration of war dead.



## 1 Infamy

### *Reinvigorating American Unity and Power*

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a master of persuasion, seized the opportunity of the surprise Japanese attack to appeal to Americans to join together in a war against the empire of Japan. In penning his six-and-one-half-minute speech to Congress asking for a state of war against Japan, he chose his words carefully. The address opened: “Yesterday, Dec. 7, 1941—a date which will live in world history—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” FDR crossed out “world history” and substituted “infamy.”<sup>1</sup>

*“A date which will live in infamy”*

Infamy became the theme of the address. FDR did not ask Americans to go to war to protect the national interest, to stop Japan’s imperial ambitions, to protect vital resources, to avenge Japan’s atrocities in China, or to stand firm against aggression from a Tripartite alliance of dictators. He did not ask Americans to save democracy or civilization. Although any of these themes might have been invoked to rally Americans around familiar foreign

policy traditions and to provide a persuasive framework, he did not choose them. Perhaps Roosevelt feared recalling President Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric during World War I. Wilson's war message of April 1917 had detailed the strategic threat posed by the enemy, agonized over the violence of war, and advanced idealistic and lofty goals to justify participation. During the 1930s, however, the country's strong antiwar, isolationist, and anti-Wilsonian sentiment had made such themes a political liability. In this initial speech to Congress, Roosevelt avoided echoes of Wilson's war message and, instead, adopted the sole framework of "infamy"—a rhetorical tradition closely related to America's frontier-fighting heritage.

In a very short appeal that contained no details about America's security interests or the lives and equipment lost, the president called on Americans to avenge "infamy," "treachery," and "an unprovoked and dastardly attack." Roosevelt summoned the nation to fight not just an enemy nation, but a treacherous people who would deceitfully negotiate for peace while preparing a surprise war. "Always will we remember the *character* of the onslaught against us" (*italics mine*). In emphasizing the "character" of the attack by Japan and promising that such "infamy" needed to be followed through to "inevitable triumph," Roosevelt structured his narrative to recall America's most celebrated frontier legends: Custer's Last Stand and the Alamo. These, too, were terrible defeats that provided rallying cries for overwhelming military counterforce leading to total victory. Memory research confirms that people remember events in ways that fit already familiar patterns and narrative structures. The infamy framework for Pearl Harbor was perhaps so powerful because it already circulated widely in frontier lore.

By referring to an "infamy framework," I am not suggesting that Japan's attack was in any way unreal or that "infamy" was not an appropriate descriptor. Rather, I use the term "infamy framework" as a shorthand for the various rhetorical and narrative components that came to structure the most influential remembering of the attack. Later chapters will examine other frameworks, some more and some less compatible with this one.

Historian Richard Slotkin (among others) has shown how the

defeat of General George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry regiment by a large force of Indians led by Sitting Bull at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 had become the iconic object called "Custer's Last Stand." Shaped by mass-marketed and highly partisan newspapers during the late nineteenth century, the last-stand legend buttressed a familiar frontier perspective on late nineteenth-century debates over Indian policy: progress in America could be achieved not through accommodation and philanthropy toward so-called "noble savages." Instead, it could come only through regenerative, violent warfare against these barbaric racial others. In the traditional version of that legend, writes Slotkin, the battle occurs "in the margins of civilization, which poses the most extreme test of the culture's value and its power to shape history." This frontier challenge summoned men to marshal their assertively masculine traits and to reject soft, feminized values and policies. The Custer created in the legend, with his blond hair and youthful vigor, gallantly sacrificed his men in a defeat that would subsequently be gloriously avenged by vigorous military counterforce. The last-stand legend taught that strong, frontier-hardened men needed to secure civilization against barbarous attacks and to oppose the compromises proposed by (feminized) weaklings in the East.<sup>2</sup>

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this last-stand legend became widely memorialized in journalism, histories, textbooks, Wild West shows, and visual images of all kinds.<sup>3</sup> Slotkin shows how it became an available metaphor not only to support the federal government's determined warfare to end Indian resistance, but also to justify the use of force against whomever—labor militants, for example—seemed to threaten the established order.<sup>4</sup>

The metaphor provided by the last-stand legend also contributed to reshaping the historical memory of an earlier event—the siege at the Alamo. In March 1836, during the struggle over the independence of Texas, Mexico's general Antonio López de Santa Anna had led an attack on some two hundred Texans at an old mission in San Antonio called the Alamo. All of the Alamo's defenders, including the legendary frontier figures James Bowie and Davy Crockett, were killed. The Alamo became a rallying cry



for a counterattack by Sam Houston's army, which defeated Santa Anna and secured the independence of Texas later that spring. An event of mostly regional significance for most of the rest of the nineteenth century, the battle of the Alamo was shaped by a concerted effort of Texan elites during the 1890s into a legend of national visibility and significance. Like the Last Stand, the Alamo became a metaphor for a massacre by racialized primitives that rallied righteous revenge by men of heroic, masculine qualities.<sup>5</sup> "Remember the Alamo!" became a slogan known to most Americans, and on the eve of the War of 1898 a similarly structured call to action, "Remember the *Maine*!" whipped up nationalistic anger against a (mis)alleged Spanish "attack" on a U.S. ship in Cuba.

Nearly half a century later, the Pearl Harbor narrative became a refreshed version of these familiar cautionary tales. Physical defeat justified righteous revenge, even expressed as divine retribution. It became a marker of the nation's moral superiority and its unjust victimization. In the late 1930s the Fiesta San Jacinto pilgrimage to the Alamo had become a popular annual event celebrated each April 22. Hollywood's rendition of Custer's Last Stand, *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), starring Errol Flynn, played to packed theaters just before the Pearl Harbor attack.<sup>6</sup> Understood through the prism of the Last Stand and the Alamo, the Pearl Harbor attack gained emotive power as an icon. It, too, promised fierce revenge against another humiliating defeat visited upon Americans. In the final revision of his speech, Roosevelt handwrote: "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." The Custer/Alamo/Pearl Harbor narrative was simple and nationalistic: Don't mess with Americans or they will rightly rise up to destroy you.

Roosevelt's speech also emphasized that the attack hit U.S. territory itself. Roosevelt's fear that the damage might not be perceived as hitting close enough to home to crush isolationist sentiment guided his revisions. Three times in his first draft, Roosevelt wrote that attacks came against Hawaii and the Philippines. On revision, the Philippines (a U.S. colony but not a terri-