

Japan Declares War, 1941

Introduction

On December 7, 1941, two hours after the Japanese attack on American military installations at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, Japan declared war on the United States and Great Britain, marking America's entry into World War II.

The Japanese government had originally intended to deliver the declaration thirty minutes before the attack, but the Japanese embassy in Washington took too long to decode the 5,000-word document.

The declaration read, in part, that Japanese ". . . officers and men of our army and navy will concentrate their strength in engaging in battles, the members of our government will endeavor to carry out their assigned duties, our subjects throughout the empire will employ full strength to perform their respective tasks. Thus uniting one hundred million hearts and discharging the fullest strength of the nation, we expect all our subjects to strive to attain the ultimate objective of this expedition . . ." It was printed on the front page of Japanese newspapers on December 8, 1941, and again on the eighth of every month until the end of the war.

This copy of the declaration of war folds into an original blue cloth box imprinted with the document's title.

Excerpt

We, the Emperor of Japan, having acceded to the throne of the unbroken line of emperors which is for ages eternal, with the divine providence of the heavenly god, hereby proclaim unto our loyal and valourous subjects:

That we, the emperor, have now declared war upon the United States of America and Great Britain. The officers and men of our army and navy will concentrate their strength in engaging in battles, the members of our government will endeavor to carry out their assigned duties, our subjects throughout the empire will employ full strength to perform their respective tasks. Thus uniting one hundred million hearts and discharging the fullest strength of the nation, we expect all our subjects to strive to attain the ultimate objective of this expedition.

Japan Declares War, 1941

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. How did the Japanese justify the Declaration of War against the United States and Great Britain?
2. Describe the form of government that existed in Japan. How did this contribute to Japanese activities prior to December 7, 1941?
3. Why did the Japanese reprint the Declaration on the front page of their newspapers each year during the war?

Image

征戰之目的ヲ達成スルニ遺算ナカラムコトヲ期セヨ
 力衆無ハ各其本分ヲ盡シ事ヲ盡シ億兆一心ノ國家ノ總力ヲ擧ゲテ
 奮テ交戦ニ從事シ朕カ百僚有司ハ勵精ノ職ヲ奉行シ朕
 朕ニ米國及英國ニ對シテ戰ヲ宣ス朕カ陸海將兵ハ全力
 昭ニ忠誠勇武ナル汝有眾ニ示ス
 天佑ヲ保シ有萬世ノ系ノ皇座ヲ踐ル大日本帝國天皇ハ
 米國及英國ニ對スル宣戰ノ詔書

Declaration of War against the United States and Britain [in Japanese], December 8, 1941. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC01415)

Japan Declares War, 1941

Transcript

Declaration of War against the United States and Britain [in Japanese], December 8, 1941. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC01415)

We, by grace of heaven, Emperor of Japan, seated on the Throne of a line unbroken for ages eternal, enjoin upon ye, Our loyal and brave subjects:

We hereby declare war on the United States of America and the British Empire. The men and officers of Our army and navy shall do their utmost in prosecuting the war, Our public servants of various departments shall perform faithfully and diligently their appointed tasks, and all other subjects of Ours shall pursue their respective duties; the entire nation with a united will shall mobilize their total strength so that nothing will miscarry in the attainment of our war aims.

To insure the stability of East Asia and to contribute to world peace is the far-Sighted policy which was formulated by our Great illustrious Imperial Grandsire and Our Great Imperial sire succeeding Him, and which We lay constantly to heart. To cultivate friendship among nations and to enjoy prosperity in common with all nations has always been the guiding principle of Our Empire's foreign policy. It has been truly unavoidable and far from Our wishes that Our Empire has now been brought to cross swords with America and Britain. More than four years have passed since China, failing to comprehend the true intentions of Our Empire, and recklessly courting trouble, disturbed the peace of East Asia and compelled Our Empire to take up arms. Although there has been re-established the National Government of China, with which Japan has effected neighborly intercourse and cooperation, the regime which has survived at Chungking, relying upon American and British protection, still continues its fratricidal opposition. Eager for the realization of their inordinate ambition to dominate the Orient, both America and Britain, giving support to the Chungking regime, have aggravated the disturbances in East Asia. Moreover, these two Powers, inducing other countries to follow suit, increased military preparations on all sides of Our Empire to challenge us. They have obstructed by every means our peaceful commerce, and finally resorted to a direct severance of economic relations, menacing gravely the existence of Our Empire. Patiently have We waited and long have We endured, in the hope that Our Government might retrieve the situation in peace. But our adversaries, showing not the least spirit of conciliation, have unduly delayed a settlement; and in

Japan Declares War, 1941

the meantime, they have intensified the economic and political pressure to compel thereby Our Empire to submission. This trend of affairs would, if left unchecked, not only nullify Our Empire's efforts of many years for the sake of the stabilization of East Asia, but also endanger the very existence of Our nation. The situation being such as it is, Our Empire for its existence and self-defense has no other recourse but to appeal to arms and to crush every obstacle in its path.

The hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors guarding Us from above, We rely upon the loyalty and courage of Our subjects in Our confident expectation that the task bequeathed by Our forefathers will be carried forward, and that the sources of evil will be speedily eradicated and an enduring peace immutably established in East Asia, preserving thereby the glory of Our Empire.