

Last Secrets of the Outbreak of War between Japan and the United States: Developing Roosevelt's Final Telegram to the Emperor of Japan

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[Summary]

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Detailed footnotes which appear in the English translation were omitted from the Japanese version.

The personal telegram from President Roosevelt to Emperor Hirohito, dated December 6, 1941, one day before the attack at Pearl Harbor, has been seen as Roosevelt's final attempt to avoid war between Japan and the United States, and that Roosevelt to the very end aimed for peace. However, Sugihara argues that it was not the simple message it appeared to be. The first half of the article examines in detail how individuals both within the Roosevelt Administration on the one hand, and the Japanese embassy in Washington on the other, worked towards developing the final telegram to the Emperor.

Langdon Warner and Kan'ichi Asakawa were the first to seriously embrace the notion of having the president send a personal message to the Emperor. They devised an early draft of the telegram, and used their influence to persuade those around Roosevelt of the importance of sending such a message to the Emperor. In a sense, Asakawa's draft was the starting point for the final version.

On November 29, 1941, the State Department devised a draft of the message to the Emperor which Roosevelt had directed Hull, Stimson and Knox to produce the day before, clearly drawing upon the Asakawa draft in its conception. Secretary of State Hull observed, though, that this perfunctory draft was little more than something which would "leave a record."

Meanwhile, Ambassador Saburo Kurusu led separate efforts within the Japanese embassy in Washington to persuade the President to send a message to the Emperor. He instructed First Secretary Hidenari Terasaki, and the Reverend Stanley Jones, to brief the President on the delicate psychological mood in Japan, and then to ask him to send a peaceful overture to the Japanese emperor. But because the Japanese embassy had failed to get permission from its government, these efforts had to remain off the record.

The second half of the article turns towards analyzing the message actually sent to the Emperor, why Roosevelt wanted this particular version sent, and possible alternative policy options.

Roosevelt had a habit of sending a personal telegram to the leader of a hostile nation when war seemingly could not be avoided. Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, but just before this, Roosevelt sent a personal telegram to Hitler urging him to abort his military attack. Mussolini entered the war on Germany's side in June 1940, and Roosevelt then too sent a number of telegrams to persuade him to reconsider.

Like his messages to Hitler and Mussolini, the December 6, 1941 message to the Emperor was also ostensibly meant to bring about peace. However, Roosevelt included no

concrete proposals for alleviating the current crisis. The message instead focused attention on the activities of the Japanese military in French Indochina, which appeared in neither the Asakawa draft nor the November 29 draft. Thirty minutes after dispatching his message to the Emperor, he read through decrypted intercepts of the first 13 of 14 parts for the “final memorandum” from Japan to the American government, and surmised that war was imminent.

An alternative draft of the message to the Emperor, also devised by the State Department at around the same time, did indeed directly address the main points of contention. It proposed a workable ninety-day cease-fire, a possible *modus vivendi* in connection with the American oil embargo, and included the idea of mediation towards a peaceful settlement with China. This pragmatic draft was discarded, though because, Sugihara argues, it did not suit the President’s overall global strategy.

Roosevelt bided his time, and waited until the very last moment before the outbreak of war to send his message to the Emperor, when he was confident that war was inevitable, and that the message he finally did send would be ineffectual. He successfully deceived people all over the world, that he had “struggled” until the last moment for peace, and left a “good record” for his own role in the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States.