

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Remember Pearl Harbor

On November 26, 1941, Joe Davis, a former Iowa County club agent who had recently enlisted for a three-year term in the United States Army Hospital Corps, wrote a letter to his friends back home in Marengo describing military life in Schofield Barracks in the Territory of Hawaii. The government, he said, was "rapidly building a strong and impregnable defense" of the islands. Soldiers and sailors could be numbered by the thousands and unemployment had virtually disappeared as defense industries engaged in vast construction projects and manufacturing forged full speed ahead. "The army", Davis reported, "is building all kinds of armaments into these hills and mountain ranges and because of this great influx of defense workers, houses are being erected by the hundreds. Honolulu is now, perhaps, the most crowded city in the world. The population has almost doubled in the last nine months. The crowded streets are terrific. What

all this adds up to I don't know, except that if Japan makes a move these islands will play an important part."

Eleven days later, on December 7th, the citizens and soldiers of the Hawaiian Islands were subjected to one of the most dreadful ordeals that "madmen eager for blood" had ever conceived. Mrs. Elizabeth Langlie Todd, a former resident of Marquette, Iowa, who, though employed in a Honolulu music shop, was inured to the drone of bombing planes overhead, witnessed the attack. "I'm thankful", she wrote to her family and friends, "that the shell I saw drop a short block away — shearing the palm trees, breaking all the windows and clipping a good hand off a man — wasn't nearer. My first thought was — My those boys are getting careless. Then, when the black puffs came here and there, the reports blared over the radio — This is an air raid — and the real McCoy. As each report came in we all looked at each other just speechless. . . . This brutal thing whipped us awake. The dirty yellow dogs stabbed us in the back. Of course it's unbelievable how they got so close. But when an Ambassador is in Washington on peace terms — who expects such a thing? Inside of every man and woman here is shaking a fury which only yellow blood will quench. Never did I think I could get a gun

and very cold bloodedly stand and kill. Fear? . . . No, not a minute, just insane fury."

There were many Iowa boys among those who lost their lives in this treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor. Tons of shells were bursting about them before the soldiers could man their guns. Casualties were much heavier than if the army and navy had been alert. Miss Gladys Holmes, a nurse in Queen's Hospital in Honolulu, worked night and day following the raid. Many of her friends were killed during the attack. "If you people back home had seen what I saw," she wrote to her aunt in Winterset, "you would go to work with all your energy devoted to winning this war."

To some persons the attack seemed remote and unreal, "something to be read about in the papers", but as the *Independence Conservative* observed, "the tremendous blows unloosened by Japan" directly involved boys from nearly every community. For parents with sons in the service the news inaugurated a period of anxiety. Lists of local soldiers and sailors were published in most of the newspapers. Everybody will remember Pearl Harbor.

As leader and spokesman for the citizens of Iowa, Governor George A. Wilson issued a proclamation praising Iowa Congressmen and Senators for unanimously supporting President Roose-

velt's War Message and designating Sunday, December 14, 1941, as Iowa Defense Day. "We offer without reservation", Governor Wilson declared, "the vast resources of our soil and climate and the output of our industrial equipment, the genius and capacity of our men of business and the professions, the skill and tireless zeal of our manpower, the kindly sympathy and willing hands of our women, our ability to produce abundantly the food and fuel and fibre to maintain leadership in all things, and the willingness to make whatever sacrifices that may be necessary. On this occasion, as on every other of national danger, Iowa is ready." This sentiment, the Cedar Rapids *Tribune* declared, "so fully expresses the feelings of the people of this State — regardless of social position, religious faith or political creed — that it may be adopted as the unanimous declaration and pledge of all Iowans to their Government."

Although Iowa editors reacted to the attack on Pearl Harbor in many ways, all emphasized its unifying effect on the American people. "That was Hitler's great mistake", the Clinton *Herald* pointed out. "By goading Japan into Sunday's attack, he has brought a union of strength in the United States and in all democracies that will prove the undoing of the dictatorships of Germany, Italy and Japan."

Equally quick to recognize this unifying consequence was the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*. "Japan's cowardly attack upon the territory and flag of the United States will be dealt with by a strong and united nation", the editor assured his readers. The newspaper formerly edited by Verne Marshall did not mince its words. "Yesterday", declared the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, "there were interventionists and isolationists, republicans and democrats, new dealers and anti-new dealers. Today there are only Americans." Now, declared the *Muscatine Journal*, the "time for argument and for bickering is past. Unity is our national need. The signs that we will achieve it are encouraging."

The *Davenport Times*, while observing that "Nothing could have united the American people as the treachery which accompanied the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor", could not refrain from reminding everybody that the "true nature of the sinister forces which have made common cause against the democracies was brought home to the nation", which had been "lulled into a false sense of security" by the isolationists. "The peaceful aspirations of the American people were translated into ten years of effort to appease the Japanese."

In northwestern Iowa the *Cherokee Times* ap-

plauded the "changed outlook" of the *Sibley Gazette-Tribune*. "We are as much opposed to war as ever," the Sibley editor affirmed, "but we don't propose to sit idly by and allow the little Japs to slaughter our American boys. No sir, we are now in favor of your Uncle Sam going to the limit in order to make this unruly fellow in the Orient behave himself. America first!"

No doubt about the course of American foreign policy remained in the opinion of the *Le Mars Sentinel*. "As is often the case the people who favored a middle course in our foreign relations were right. One group of extremists would have rushed us into a war for which we were unprepared and another group would have had us neglect preparations for a war that was inevitable. The country chose the sane course and our millions now stand united in defense of our country."

The inevitability of the struggle was apparent to many Iowa editors, particularly those schooled in the dangers of the "Yellow Peril". "Well, it's finally come", commented the editor of the *Osage Press* — "that war with Japan we middle-aged ones have for forty years been hearing must some day happen; and it has come with a deceitful treachery that bears out what we in boyhood used to read about the tricky Japs in the pulp-magazine thrillers."

Many editors, noting the rising swell of patriotic fervor, were inclined to draw parallels with similar episodes in United States history. "The reaction was typically American. If the reception of the devastating news in Burlington was a fair example," declared the *Hawkeye-Gazette*, the United States "is still the America of Bunker Hill, of Gettysburg, of San Juan, of Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood." Readers of the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* found a similar editorial in their newspaper. "Our people did not want this war. We had hoped against hope that it could be avoided. But we are ready for whatever may come just as we were in 1917, and as our forefathers were in 1775, 1861, and 1898." Farther up the Missouri River the *Sioux City Tribune* declared: "There is nothing for it now but to go in with all the power and vigor at our command. The war must be won! Our sovereignty has been attacked. We cannot stop now to count the cost."

Although many Iowans probably expected swift and decisive action that would strike at the vitals of the enemy, most people realized that the attack on Pearl Harbor might have forced a change in the normal strategy of our military experts. "It did weaken the air force and it did do some damage to the fleet," the *Atlantic News-Telegraph* pointed out, "but at the worst the dam-

age done will be absorbed as a good boxer absorbs a blow". Days passed with no news of our mighty fleet. No bombs fell on vulnerable Tokyo. Apparently the military leaders were using their own judgment instead of the spectacular tactics of the amateur strategists. "Remember", cautioned the Oelwein *Daily Register*, "we are supposed to be the quick victims of a Japanese blitz, German style. Every time we hold the line or strike a blow it slows down the blitz. When Japan ceases to have a succession of almost daily or hourly victories and gains, the blitz is slowing down. When a blitz assumes zephyr-like tendencies it is in its last throes."

The Dubuque *Telegraph-Herald* likewise urged its readers not to overlook the immediate advantage Japan had gained by her surprise attack. "The American people", the editor suggested, "will have to be calm and patient until our forces overcome this initial handicap." It might take longer than had been expected. "If the Philippines hold against an all-out attack by Japan, they will be doing more than many an expert has credited them with being able to do. For ten years the experts have been telling us that we will have to really fortify the Philippines, as we have fortified Hawaii, or be prepared to lose them early in a war with Japan." The Marshalltown *Times-*



*Republican* was confident that "Our troops are giving a good account of themselves whether on land, sea or air".

The press generally recognized that the war might be long and hard. "Already the war in the Pacific has taken so critical a turn as to make inescapable a long hard war, which will compel us to spend ten times the money which had it been invested in warcraft during the years when America slept would have found us dominant on the seas rather than in our present difficult position", declared the Davenport *Times*, sorry that Americans had forgotten that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Many editors in smaller communities took a similar view. "The war will not be a short one", the Winterset *News* reminded its readers. "There has been loss of life, of air power, of ships. There will be further losses but whatever comes, whatever hardships we may endure, there is one thing of which America is sure — Japan will not, cannot win the war."

Although agreeing that the "immense productive facilities" of the United States were important, the Iowa City *Press-Citizen* warned its readers not to get any "warped idea" that this was all that was necessary. "That is not the way wars are won. Wars are won by fighting. Wars are won by killing enemy soldiers and sailors."

And so, the editor concluded, "Let us not beguile ourselves with subconscious lullabies sung by contemplation of our great resources. Two million American men in the armed forces are not thus lulled. Other millions face the reality on February 16. Our task is not only to produce weapons. It is to use them. It is to seek out the enemy and destroy him. In that task many an American faces wounds and death."

With this attitude the *Waverly Independent* concurred. "Before we are finished," the editor declared, "we shall see our fill of blood, and tears, and sweat. We have only now barely begun our task of becoming the arsenal of democracy, and to this will be added the problem of tremendously expanding the armed forces of the nation. It will not be easy, but to it we today bring a high resolve. We have set our hands to the task, and we will not turn back."

Most editors recognized that the United States had everything at stake in this gigantic conflict. It was not merely the loss of prestige or the possible reduction of this country to a second-class power that threatened. Indeed, the whole realm of liberty and the democratic way of life hung in the balance. According to the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*: "All that America holds dear is at stake, our heritage of freedom, our glorification of

man over state, our religion centering about the golden rule."

After reviewing the history of Japanese-United States relations, the Humboldt *Republican* scorched Nipponese officials for "utter irresponsibility, the flagrant disregard of truth and honor, and the violation of international law." Frankly, the editor declared, "I am not sorry the die has been cast and that Japan cast it. If ever a nation needed a licking Japan is that nation. She has been bullying, bluffing and assuming the ways of the white man long enough. She has been pouncing on helpless victims long enough. She has been sitting tight on her smug little island while her soldiers and other forces have been raping, pillaging and sacrificing those she pounced on in other lands. The people of Japan have known no suffering beyond that necessary for the full production of materials and men to keep the army, and other forces going." But the wind is changing. "Japan is going to reap the whirlwind" and presently her people "will realize something of the suffering of the Chinese that Japan has been trying to crush."

Since the "ultimate goal" of the United States is to crush Japan, the Ames *Tribune* urged that "America must strike hard and fast." Twenty-four hours after the treacherous attack on Pearl

Harbor the *Washington Evening Journal* observed that the "one wish in America today is, 'Let's get the job done. The sooner the better.'" But the *Estherville News* felt that the American people were still "quite bewildered" by the "breath-taking" events which began with the "underhanded" attacks on United States naval bases. Most writers, the *News* believed, had scarcely had time to evaluate the dispatches but the editor felt certain "it will take time" to "end the Japanese menace." "All of us," the *Spencer Reporter* declared, "will be in the fight before it is over, for that is the result of modern all-out warfare. Whether or not we actually carry guns, pilot warplanes or man naval units, final victory cannot come without the fullest sort of cooperation by the entire population of America. And final victory must come or there will be no America."

The people of Iowa quickly manifested their whole-hearted support of the war effort. Recruiting stations were jammed, the navy, the air corps, and the marines being particularly popular. On Monday following the attack on Pearl Harbor more than one hundred applicants for enlistment in the United States Navy kept the Davenport office open until three o'clock in the morning. News of such action must have lent encourage-

ment to the 111 Scott County men serving in the army and navy, in the "extreme danger areas" according to a "hurried survey" made by the Davenport *Times*. "Thousands of young brave men are flocking to Uncle Sam's colors to help when it really becomes necessary", the Gladbrook *Tama Northern* asserted. "They will strike with vengeance that will never give back. And in the meantime we at home will keep 'em flying."

Agriculture and industry, labor and capital, subscribed to this all-out spirit. On Monday the students, faculty, and alumni of Luther College telegraphed a message to President Roosevelt expressing their "wholehearted loyalty" to the government in this "hour of crisis" and pledging their support to "whatever measures you deem it necessary to take in protecting our nation, its rights, and liberties." Similar action indorsing the declaration of war was taken at other educational institutions.

Meanwhile, many persons were looking forward to the day of peace. Charles E. Snyder, pastor of the Unitarian Church at Davenport, told the Contemporary Club his views of the new world order. "The best we can hope for as a result of World War II", the Decorah *Public Opinion* declared, "is the setting up of an international governing body with jurisdiction over

and with proportionate representation from all the peoples of the world."

If Iowa was the center of isolationist policy, as eastern commentators assumed, the conversion was sudden and complete after the Pearl Harbor incident. "Some day peace is going to come again", wrote W. Earl Hall in the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*. "Uncle Sam is going to occupy the head chair at the table where plans will be drawn for creating a world society in which civilized people may be secure against the pagan ideologies of future Hitlers. When that time comes, we shall discover whether it is possible for a nation to learn from bitter experience.

"Here's one who has had his fill of isolationism and self-sufficiency for America", Hall concluded. "From this point on all his doubts are going to be resolved in favor of those who work with reason and sanity toward the creation of a better world."

For this "rational interpretation of the fundamental lesson of the whole experience of this nation and the world since Armistice Day of 1918" the *Des Moines Register* expressed "unstinted admiration." Pearl Harbor apparently rocked the very foundations of isolationism in the Hawkeye State.

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