No Getting to Yes:
U.S. Ambassador Joseph C. Grew and Imperial Japan, 1939-1942

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Abstract

U.S. Ambassador Joseph C. Grew faced multiple pressures that impacted his work in the years immediately preceding the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Grew labored to convince Imperial Japan that its aggressive expansionist policies in the Far East would provoke an American response. Grew also struggled with the State Department bureaucracy and European diplomats as the long-simmering Asian wars erupted in December 1941. Ultimately, Joseph Grew served in the hardest American Foreign Service post of the day, performing as admirably as one could under arduous circumstances. The confluence of untamable forces converged in just the right way to bring war to the Pacific despite Grew's best effort.

The USS *Astoria* entered Yokohama Harbor on April 13, 1939, carrying the ashes of former Japanese ambassador to the United States, Saito Hiroshi.[1] To the outward spectator, the solemn gesture and the accompanying ceremony were earnest, well-choreographed, and perhaps even portended better relations between the United States and Japan. Behind the scenes, however, the *Astoria*'s visit was fraught with diplomatic faux pas, tense miscommunication, and – rather than a sign of better times to come – was an omen of the violent future between two stubborn states whose relationship had long since deteriorated.

The weeks leading up to the port call overwhelmed the U.S. embassy in Tokyo and its leader, Ambassador Joseph C. Grew. Like the preceding seven years of his assignment in Tokyo, Ambassador Grew was caught between the steadfast, principled positions of his bosses in Washington, D.C. and the punctilious and passionate Japanese. Relying on his vast knowledge of Japanese culture and the comfort of his many carefully cultivated relationships, Grew wrangled, negotiated, and reasoned with Imperial Japan's Foreign Ministry to craft a respectable memorial ceremony, without appearing to give the public pretense that the United States endorsed Imperial Japan's policy positions across the Pacific.[2] Meanwhile, he implored the U.S. Department of State to understand Japanese culture, sensitivities, and expectations. He walked an increasingly slippery path that, as we know in hindsight, ended up sloping downward until it abruptly ended at a cliff's edge on December 7, 1941, a day of infamy, as Franklin Roosevelt decried before Congress.

Joseph Grew's diary and official correspondence describe his relief when the *Astoria* finally departed Yokohama Bay.[3] He fired off telegrams to the Department, describing his

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[1] Grew, Joseph, *Ten Years in Japan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 277-79.
[2] Grew, *Ten Years in Japan*, 276.
[3] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.

analysis of the 13-day port call and the multitude of ceremonies. He emphasized that the mission was a success and laid a "permanent" foundation for friendship between the United States and Japan. Grew also possessed an after-action report drafted by a Lieutenant Taylor, an officer from the *Astoria*, that detailed the affront experienced by Japanese representing the Foreign Ministry, Naval Department, and other prominent citizens.[4] The American embassy had acted imperiously, the offended Japanese told Taylor, handing down edicts concerning Japanese ceremonies for a Japanese dignitary on Japanese soil. The disconnect was not new, and it would persist.

The port call by the USS *Astoria* in April 1939 was the last port call by a U.S. warship in Japan until 1945. In August 1942, the Japanese sank the *Astoria* at the Battle of Savo Island in the Solomon Islands.[5] The *Astoria*'s commander in 1939, Captain Richmond K. Turner, later helmed vessels at the Battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa.[6] Ambassador Grew led the embassy in Tokyo until 1942, including eight months of internment on embassy grounds following the attack on Pearl Harbor. He toured the United States throughout 1943 on a public relations tour on behalf of the U.S. Government before serving as Undersecretary of State and Acting Secretary of State from 1944 to 1945.[7]

The immediate pre-war years offered opportunities for American diplomacy to succeed. But in this context, as in practically any context involving diplomacy, there was no defined conception of success. It was easy to cast aside diplomacy for the greater certainty of military action. Throughout the 1930s, the United States expressed its national security goals in the Far

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[4] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[5] Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, "*Astoria* II (CA-34), 1934-42," Naval History and Heritage Command, accessed 9 May 2023, https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/a/astoria-ca-34-ii.html.
[6] Naval History and Heritage Command, "US People: T: Turner, Richmond K.," accessed 9 May 2023, https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-people/t/turner-richmond-k.html.
[7] Office of the Historian, "Department History: People: Joseph Clark Grew (1880-1965)," U.S. Department of State, accessed 9 May 2023, https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/grew-joseph-clark#:~:text=Joseph%20Clark%20Grew%20(1880–1965,States%20on%20April%209%2C%201917.

East in terms of commercial access to China and the protection of U.S. citizens and property. War, the logic went, should be avoided at all costs since it was antithetical to the goal of internationally recognized commercial access to the lucrative Asian market. Was this the right framing of the question though? How could have the United States better framed the diplomatic struggle with Japan to position Ambassador Grew to achieve U.S. objectives? In reality, difficult personalities, competing interests, and chaotic cause-and-effect patterns overwhelmed the ability of embassy officers to process the tidal wave of raw data it collected. The story of Ambassador Grew and U.S. Embassy Tokyo suggests that the kabuki[8] diplomacy practiced by both sides significantly increased the likelihood of war, setting up the early battles in the Pacific that caught both sides off-guard – a situation even more shocking given the defiant muscle-flexing coming from both Tokyo and Washington, D.C. over the preceding five years.

Diplomatic success could have been defined in a number of nuanced ways that were not anchored to all-or-nothing, uncompromising principles. Though Ambassador Grew addressed a variety of issues, he did so sporadically as policy brush fires flared between the United States and Japan. The effort was not focused, persistent, or even directed by Washington, D.C.-based policymakers. As the man "on the spot," to use Grew's phrase, he was uniquely placed in Japanese policymaking circles with long exposure to the local policy landscape.[9] He offered valuable insights in the years immediately prior to war. Whether or not one believes that war in the Pacific was inevitable, Grew and his contemporaries could not see the future and did not know when – or if – war would break out between the United States and Japan. Prudence,

[8] Kabuki is a highly dramatic form of traditional Japanese theater. The actors wear ornate costumes and overperform historical and dramatic scenes.
[9] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 36.

however, should have dictated a proactive role for the embassy as the U.S. Government planned for global war.

By being both over-informed on the minutiae of local politics and under-informed on the intentions of policymakers in Washington, D.C., the embassy in Tokyo – with Ambassador Grew at its epicenter – did not play a substantial role in the formation of national security policy at one of the most significant periods in U.S. history. The reasons for these circumstances are complicated and may seem obvious in hindsight. Grew played a part in every facet of the convoluted bilateral relationship, an unsurprising observation given the role of an ambassador but nevertheless, it is worthy to point out. Ambassador Grew cultivated ties at the highest levels of Imperial Japan's government, hobnobbing with imperial courtiers, military chiefs, and current and former government dignitaries. As dean of the diplomatic corps – an honorific bestowed upon the longest serving chief of mission in the host government's capital – Grew feted and toasted his way across Tokyo, endearing himself with the Japanese like no other foreign diplomat had ever done. His aristocratic upbringing instilled in him the ease to charm, to impress, and to woo with panache as diplomacy of the day demanded.[10] Grew knew many powerful, inside people, but did he know the right people? In fact, who were the right people in 1930s Japan?

Compounding Grew's difficult task of untangling the social web of Japanese imperial power politics was the Department of State's impervious resistance to share information with Grew, to direct the embassy's efforts in light of larger U.S. policy concerns, and to view the

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[10] Hersey, John, "Joe Grew, Ambassador to Japan: America's Top Career Diplomat Knows How to Appease the Japanese or Be Stern With Them," *Life*, Volume 9, Number 3, 15 July 1940, accessed 8 May 2023, https://books.google.com/books?id=1j8EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA76&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false, 79-82.

embassy as a natural source of credible insight to Japanese policy designs. The Department was especially fixated on its longstanding defense of commercial access to foreign markets and the inviolability of international treaty arrangements. Though beyond the scope of this investigation, the personality of Secretary of State Cordell Hull likely informed the steadfast, unyielding position of the United States in its errant dealings with Japan throughout the 1930s. Of course, Japan deserved its share of the blame as well, for it repeatedly double-talked, reversed course, and generally concocted facts to support its position – all of which were known to Hull through the U.S. military's decryption of Japanese diplomatic cable traffic. Fearing the possibility of revealing those decrypts to Japan, Hull withheld information from Grew, who learned of Washington, D.C. policy positions through the British or even the Japanese in Tokyo. Grew's cultivation of arguably the wrong sources and the Department's unwillingness to proactively use the embassy produced ineffectual diplomacy that hampered the ability of the United States to prevent the war it did not want.

Historiography and Context

The story of U.S.-Japanese relations in the late 1930s and early 1940s is well documented. Some of the most graphic, dramatic events of the Twentieth Century pockmark cross-Pacific relations: the Rape of Nanking, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, MacArthur's retreat from the Philippines and the Bataan Death March, and the epic battles of the Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal. Scholars have dissected national motivations on both sides of the Pacific, turning each side's strategy inside-out to find the unifying thread of what went wrong and what could have stopped it. Barrels of ink and reams of paper tell the story of an aggressive, expansionist Japan bent on rapacious consumption of raw materials in the name of imperial glory, while an isolationist United States wrung its anxious hands trying to avoid a hot war in

Europe and a steadily simmering war in Asia. The historiography brims with analysis of the key leaders, such as Franklin Roosevelt, Yamamoto Isoroku, Cordell Hull, and Tojo Hideki, among many others.

But the U.S. embassy in Tokyo helmed by Ambassador Grew played a small, supporting role in these well-trodden explorations of the inter- and intra-war years. This paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by examining how the American embassy in Tokyo grappled with its own bureaucracy while managing complicated host government and diplomatic relationships. For the purposes of crafting a neat narrative, the historiography oversimplifies what the embassy experienced. The literature surrounding the war in the Pacific, the proximate and ultimate factors that culminated in the attack on Pearl Harbor, and how the FDR administration viewed the global battlefield is voluminous. Historians, enthusiasts, journalists, and the officials who took part in the momentous years of the 1930s and 40s have weighed in with their analysis, dissecting timelines, choices, and many – if not all – of the decision points along the way. It is likely impossible at this point to digest all the information that today's readers have available to them, a good problem in many respects but nevertheless a challenge.

In the twenty-five years following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the historiography focused on creating an easy-to-understand narrative for a wider audience. The political, economic, cultural, and historical circumstances that led to war between the United States and Japan were fantastically complex. To tell the story of such an array of decisionmakers, a slew of second- and third-tier officials, and the many versions of policy and negotiating positions they took over a multi-year period required a discerning eye for detail, nimble storytelling, and time to process the world-altering events of the Second World War. Waldo Heinrichs achieved such a story in his

1966 biography of Ambassador Grew.[11] Given the ample, in-depth public hearings concerning the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Grew's insights and the general impact of the Magic and Purple intercepts were in the public domain. As a former Foreign Service Officer, Heinrichs also had access to Grew and firsthand experience with diplomatic work, so his insights regarding the work of U.S. Embassy Tokyo are well ahead of their time. The seminal work on the causes of the Pacific War and the development of U.S. strategy in the face of aggressively expanding Japan is arguably Louis Morton's *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (1962), which painstakingly links together forty years of U.S. strategic thinking on the Pacific.[12] Likewise, in her 1962 work on the war, Roberta Wohlstetter weaved together an intricate story detailing the role of the cracked Japanese diplomatic codes and the poor communication between Washington, D.C.-based policymakers and embassy and military staff assigned to remote and difficult posts across the Far East.[13] For Wohlstetter, the United States had massive amounts of raw intelligence and a battery of subject matter experts, including Grew, but it faced such an overwhelming amount of information that it never fully digested the clues it had in its grasp. Basil Rauch, in a 1950 examination of the formation of Franklin D. Roosevelt's foreign policy, treated Grew to a supporting role in the story of U.S.-Japanese relations in the pre-war years.[14] Despite the smaller role Grew plays in this story, it still impresses for the policy insights and the peek-behind-the-curtain as policymakers – some with larger-than-life personalities – faced down crisis after crisis in the late 1930s and very early 1940s. The works in this early post-war period made strong use

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[11] Heinrichs, Waldo H. Jr., *American Ambassador: Joseph C. Grew and the Development of the United States Diplomatic Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).
[12] Morton, Louis, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Center of Military History, U.S. Army: Washington, D.C., 1962).
[13] Wohlstetter, Roberta, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).
[14] Rauch, Basil, *Roosevelt From Munich to Pearl Harbor: A Study in the Creation of a Foreign Policy* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1950).

of the information openly available to help Americans make better sense of the policy and procedural failures that led to the Pearl Harbor attack.

Over the subsequent twenty-five years, especially as the fiftieth anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack neared, historians and authors turned to the trove of intelligence and decrypted materials released in 1977 to bring greater detail to the war in the Pacific. For the story of Grew, perhaps, Gordon Prange brought together the greatest number of individual stories and decision points, highlighting the growing complexity of the Pearl Harbor narrative.[15] Grew, however, once again played a small role in the narrative Prange chose to tell. In fact, during this period, the Grew anecdote most often cited was his assertion that the Japanese would fight to the death in defiance of any logic U.S. policymakers might wish to assign to the Japanese.[16] These insights, stemming from cables Grew sent to the State Department in November 1941, made their way into multiple volumes of this era. Edwin Layton described it in detail in his 1985 memoir, though Layton's primary emphasis unsurprisingly landed on the Magic and Purple decrypts that so influenced Washington, D.C. leaders as tensions with Japan escalated.[17] In 1988, Heinrichs once again published on the pre-war years, releasing a book on his research of World War II-era foreign policy, but this latest analysis included little of Grew and his insights.[18] Heinrichs colorfully determined that "so far as diplomacy was concerned, Japanese-American relations were a wasteland in July 1941."[19] Once again the "do-or-die" assessment of Japanese intentions figured prominently when Grew was mentioned. Ultimately, the analysis of this period focused

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[15] Prange, Gordon W., *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991).
[16] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Japan 1931-1941, Volume II, ed. Joseph V. Fuller, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), Documents 379.
[17] Layton, Edwin, *"And I Was There:" Pearl Harbor and Midway – Breaking the Secrets* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985).
[18] Heinrichs, Waldo, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[19] Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, 125.

more heavily on the role of Magic on policy formation. Edward Miller's *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* does not mention Grew at all.[20] The historiography explicitly acknowledges that complicated circumstances challenged leaders on both sides of the Pacific.

Analysis deepened as the seventy-fifth anniversary approached, with authors examining the added complexity of domestic political considerations and reviewing the widening, nuanced interpretation of international political and military events. The latest works on pre-war diplomacy explore the multifaceted challenges, risks, and opportunities that both the United States and Japan sought, exploited, and missed. Eri Hotta, for example, explored the never-ending layers of subterfuge and scheming that permeated Japanese decision-making circles.[21] But those layers gain greater tone as Hotta examined broad cultural trends, persistently overheated political rhetoric, and the pitfalls of cross-cultural communication, which seem so obvious in hindsight. In Hotta's story, Grew returned to a more central role, but the value of her work lies in the deep exploration of Japanese culture and style of government rather than on the inner workings of Grew's mind or the U.S. embassy. Similarly, Richard B. Frank tackled the vast space intersecting established and rising powers that included the myriad personalities who influenced the wide range of local, colonial, tribal, and business relationships across the Far East.[22] Despite recognition that Grew "labored hard" to prevent war, the ambassador's role was almost non-existent in this sweeping work, instead focusing on the irreconcilable differences between the United States and Japan and the propensity for each side to dig in on their

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[20] Miller, Edward S., *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991).
[21] Hotta, Eri. *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).
[22] Frank, Richard B., *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937-May 1942* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2020).

negotiating positions.[23] In one of the most recent works to study Joseph Grew and his critical work in Tokyo, Steven Kemper vividly detailed the grind of diplomatic life in Imperial Japan.[24] Drawing many of the conclusions of previous writers, Kemper's work should be lauded for returning Ambassador Grew to his central place in the story of U.S.-Japanese relations as war grew increasingly more likely between the two Pacific powers. Kemper, a journalist by trade, missed the opportunity to explore not only the breadth of Grew's work but also the depth. In many respects, Kemper's work treads ground that Heinrichs traversed back in 1966, but nevertheless, it is important for Grew's story to be told engagingly. In a renewed age of great power competition, today's students, citizens, and national security officials will benefit from the experiences of those who came first.

In the context of this research project, Ambassador Grew's collection of papers at Harvard University serves as the foundation for the analysis outlined in forthcoming sections. The thesis proposes that Grew maintained a diplomatically precarious position, balancing the little information he received from his superiors with the overwhelming and often inaccurate information he learned from his hosts. Understanding how Grew himself handled this task and trying to discern his thought process as he wrestled with the flood of contradictory and misleading threads in years of conversation are monumental tasks in and of themselves. Grew wrote prolifically, so combing through his vast collection of papers requires much more study than this research project could afford.

Moreover, Grew was not alone and never operated independently of other actors. It bears pointing out that a complete understanding of what Grew faced would necessitate a full

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[23] Frank, *Tower of Skulls*, 214.
[24] Kemper, Steve, *Our Man in Tokyo: An American Ambassador and the Countdown to Pearl Harbor* (New York: Mariner Books, 2022).

examination of FDR's mindset with respect to the strategic challenge posed by Imperial Japan. It would also require in-depth research of Secretary of State Cordell Hull (1933-44) and likely even his predecessor, Henry Stimson, who served as Secretary of State from 1929 to 1933 and, more relevant to this paper, as Secretary of War from 1940 to 1945. These highest officials would certainly grace the top of any list of key decisionmakers warranting a place in Grew's story. But there are others who also played prominent roles. Edwin Layton, famous for his intelligence work in the lead-up to the Battle of Midway, served as a naval attaché at U.S. Embassy Tokyo under Ambassador Grew. His story is very much entwined with Grew's. Likewise, Stanley Hornbeck, the abrasive anti-Japanese/pro-Chinese advisor to Hull, shaped Far East policy, locked horns with Grew, and seems to have served as a gatekeeper at the highest levels of U.S. foreign policy. His story surely deserves a more prominent place if one is to fully grasp the challenges with which Ambassador Grew contended.

Though these officials make cameos in the following story – some more than others – the point of drawing attention to them is to acknowledge that their influence is greater than the scope of this paper. In much of the historiography, these officials, especially the president and cabinet officials, play vital roles; their decisions, after all, shaped the war that was to come. This story, however, aims to bring Joseph Grew to the fore. In the works reviewed for this research project, Grew does not always play a significant role, seeming to play a minor supporting role used to fill gaps in a narrative or to give some needed context in specific instances. This is, by no means, always or exclusively true, but it is most often the case. Of the literature that provides the backbone to this paper, there are three general categories to note: Grew's own written words recorded in his diary as events unfolded and then subsequently published in multiple books in the years following his return to the United States; those few and far between works written by

others specifically about Grew; and, finally, the many books over the decades that take a variety of angles examining everything that happened between the United States and Japan from the interwar years through the achievement of unconditional surrender in 1945.

This paper aims to add depth to the story of Grew. Waldo Heinrichs masterfully wrote of the art of diplomacy and Ambassador Grew in the mid-1960s. But modern perspectives on foreign policy, the international order, and the value of allies and partners during great power competition offer an opportunity to dust off the analytic lens to discern which lessons have been forgotten and which were never learned.

U.S. Domestic Pressures Reach Across the Pacific

Ambassador Grew knew too well that politics at home played a significant role in his work. Presidential administrations must contend with the pressures of the voting public as well as the Congress – an entity that can be fickle, potent, and meddling. Most of all, the Congress controls the purse strings, so its concerns always tacitly factor into the Executive Branch's considerations of policies, especially foreign policy, which often engender emotion, may spark controversy, and sometimes play piñata to local politics. Grew, a well-established diplomat from an old Boston family of bankers, understood this reality well; he would not be where he was had he failed to learn this lesson.

The United States of the 1930s was fiercely divided between isolationists and interventionists. America First, the Century Group, and newspapers across the United States picked sides, waged a hot public debate, and sought to sway the public and politicians one way or the other.[25] Editorials, books, and speeches pitched ideas that led to pitchforks and torches

[25] Olson, Lynne, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight over World War II, 1939-1941* (New York: Random House, 2013), 143-48, 233-34.

among a riled-up citizenry. Thousands of miles away, Grew wrote about the divided country he represented, noting that American isolationists arguing that American boys should not die "over there" had presented a weak argument for staying out of the intensifying conflict.[26] The ambassador also lamented that only pacifist/isolationist messages reached the Japanese public – a purposeful Imperial Japanese policy that primed local sentiment for hostility with the United States. He wrote on more than one occasion in his diary that Americans were a most "inflammable" people who were slow to act but once their ire was riled, they became relentless. Grew believed that if he had delivered this message often enough, then the Japanese would come to understand the weight of his warning words.

Combatting the prevalent message that Americans were "a weak, flabby, degenerate, puerile, cowardly people," Grew made sure his counterparts had the full text of FDR's fireside chats and transcripts of prominent speeches.[27] In a diary entry from 1 January 1941, Grew quoted local Japanese news radio station Chugai's report that, "In view of the opposition of war participation by [William] Castle, [Charles] Lindbergh, and others, [President Franklin] Roosevelt's broadcast can be regarded as merely a private opinion not necessarily representative of the American people."[28] Grew lamented the "unbalanced and distorted impression" that the general Japanese public had, but he expressed his ever-present optimism that his arguments "penetrated to the top [of the Japanese government] and were widely disseminated and widely discussed; when America speaks Japan listens."[29]

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[26] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 1.
[27] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 115.
[28] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22; William Castle briefly served as U.S. Ambassador to Japan in 1930. Following his assignment to Tokyo, he was Under Secretary of State (https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/castle-william-richards). In addition to his Spirit of St. Louis fame, Charles Lindbergh was also the reluctant, controversial face of America First, who maintained ties to Germany before, during, and after World War II (https://historicmissourians.shsmo.org/charles-lindbergh/).
[29] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 1.

Hollywood offers another glimpse into the public discourse in the pre-war years, especially as hostilities in Europe grew hotter and hotter. Movie moguls initially sought to avoid political statements – for no less a reason than several prominent Hollywood kings were émigré Jews from Eastern Europe, who still had deep connections to their birthplaces.[30] But they were also businessmen who understood their major overseas markets were in Europe, meaning they were loath to alienate German and Italian censors and movie-goers. Congressmen were quick to make political points on the easy target of Hollywood big wigs, who lived lavish, glamorous lives in the meager years of the Great Depression. But despite the potential for stoking popular hatred of the noveau riche, the average Joe of the 1930s went to the theater multiple times every week for entertainment and to learn about the world. As the 1930s turned to the 40s and Hitler's war machine laid waste to vast swaths of Europe, American public opinion steadily shifted in greater favor of active U.S. involvement in Europe's defense, a point to which Hollywood quickly responded but that FDR refused to believe.[31]

President Roosevelt was keenly aware that his political fate hinged on his decisions regarding the war in Europe and his response to Japanese aggression in the Pacific. In an age when public opinion polls were gathering steam as an acceptable political instrument, Roosevelt weighed every decision against its impact on the voters and how those voters would pressure the Congress.[32] FDR consistently mistrusted polls showing that Americans supported his leadership on international issues, a point that was driven home by Lend-Lease. The legislative victory that culminated in the historic Lend-Lease Act – an effort aided by the behind-the-scenes work of influential members of the Century Group, amongst others – should have propelled FDR on to

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[30] Harris, Mark, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 15-16, 37-38.
[31] Harris, *Five Came Back*, 66-68; Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 289-90.
[32] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 64.

bolder action; however, he retreated from public and allowed political momentum to dissipate. Henry Morgenthau worried that FDR was "groping" for what to do next, sensing that FDR was "waiting to be pushed into war" – that is, by the American people.[33] He was, as Lynne Olson described it, in a perpetual state of "suspended animation" throughout the pivotal year of 1941.[34]

The inertia – another Olson term – vexed the British as well. Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, for example, was practically *persona non grata* in London, becoming despised for his inability to tell the British anything substantial regarding U.S. war plans.[35] Winston Churchill, never a man to mince his words, was deeply exasperated with FDR's lack of initiative, finding it surprising and largely without explanation.[36] From the days of the Washington Naval Conference System, British officials vented their irritation with American high-handedness, propensity to talk big but walk slow, and to retreat back across the ocean whenever it suited them.[37] Grew reproduced in his diary a controversial "Jane's All the World's Aircraft" opinion piece that detailed a cynical take on the U.S. intention to fight to "the last Englishman," a quip promptly relayed by American newspapers to American readers despite its subsequent retraction by Jane's.[38] British anxiety at the lack of robust American follow-through on Lend-Lease was heightened as Germany stepped up its attacks across the English Channel and across the Northern Atlantic.

German missteps could have prompted a U.S. response, but FDR failed to move decisively, seeking to keep the United States out of the war for as long as possible, especially as

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[33] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 289-94.
[34] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 96-7.
[35] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 96-7.
[36] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 406-7.
[37] Gibbs, Norman, "The Naval Conferences of the Interwar Years: A Study in Anglo-American Relations," *Naval War College Review*, Volume 30, Number 1, Summer 1977, 55-56.
[38] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 1.

he perceived public opinion against him.[39] Even when German U-boats targeted U.S. merchant marine and naval vessels in the Atlantic outside of their usual area of operations between the British Isles and Iceland, President Roosevelt failed to respond meaningfully, adding to the pallor that had settled over him throughout 1941. Both American and British officials expected expanded U.S. naval operations following Germany's attack on the USS *Kearney* in October 1941, an attack that killed 11 U.S. sailors. Alas, the U.S. response was not forthcoming. Fearing a premature declaration of war from the United States, Hitler was furious with his admirals for the mistakes that could have drawn the United States into war before Germany had vanquished Great Britain. Despite Hitler's fears and the agitation of U.S. and British leaders, FDR stayed his hand, deciding against action before the United States was ready – and before he was sure that public opinion was on board.[40]

Despite the infuriating, inexplicable hesitation and caution, a narrative emerged that FDR was a warmonger, who had calculatingly set the stage for the United States to be drawn into world war. Wendell Willkie, FDR's opponent in the presidential elections of 1940, prominently gave credence to this idea as he fell behind FDR in the polls. Willkie, who had largely supported interventionist policies and had even agreed to withhold attacks on Lend-Lease during the campaign, accused FDR of provoking the Axis Powers while appearing to maintain the moral high ground, thus duping the American public into supporting the war.[41] Political opponents of FDR at this time and following both FDR's death and the end of the war continued to peddle this narrative despite the well-documented torpor that FDR exhibited during this period. In fact, Joseph Grew criticized his superiors in Washington, D.C. in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor

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[39] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 294-96.
[40] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 343-45; Dallek, Robert, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 291-92.
[41] Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 257, 279-81.

for their lethargy, muddled instructions, and inability to deliver clear, concise instructions. It is likely that conspiracy theorists would point to Grew's complaints as evidence that something nefarious was afoot but Grew himself would assuredly dismiss those claims as bunk.

As for the Pacific front, it was largely secondary in strategic importance in comparison to Europe. Though U.S. military planners had a long history of wargaming conflict with Japan, the Pacific had always taken a backseat to Europe in the pantheon of American national security concerns.[42] It is hard to make the case that FDR sought to covertly coax Japan to attack when FDR, like many across the United States, saw Germany as the much larger existential threat, which was further amplified by the widespread belief that Japan could be defeated quickly. Of course, this belief – that one side could defeat the other quickly – was a shared misunderstanding that animated both sides. Grew understood that "it may take a very long time and we may get some serious knocks before our full power is able to register," but he was also convinced that "in the long run, Japan's defeat is absolutely certain."[43]

Grew was a prolific consumer of newspapers, books, and movies. He wrote extensive letters, conversed at length with visitors from the United States, and made speech after speech trying to explain U.S. sentiment and policy to Japan. Though he did not apologize for U.S. behavior or advocate for the appeasement of Japanese interests or emotions, he made every effort to educate his Japanese counterparts about U.S. public opinion and to dissuade them and other elites of their erroneous assumptions about the form and function of U.S. politics and

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[42] See Miller, Edward *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897*-1945, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991); and Morton, Louis, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, U.S. Army, 1962).

[43] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 23.

government.[44] But it is against this popular and political backdrop that Grew toiled in the years before the United States declared war on Japan. He was on the diplomatic frontlines, serving in the hardest Foreign Service assignment, but he was pigeonholed by a vitriolic national debate pitting interventionists against isolationists, often left in the dark by his superiors, and stymied by his double-talking host government counterparts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

State Department Obfuscates

The difficult conversations Grew held with his host government counterparts were exacerbated by apparent hostility within his own bureaucracy.[45] The State Department likely had reasonable concerns surrounding operational security of the Purple intercepts; however, the fact that Grew was forced to operate without inside knowledge significantly hampered his effectiveness. In multiple diary entries, Grew complained of the lack of communication with the Department, laying bare his criticism and clear frustration in the pages of his diary. As time passed and bilateral tensions escalated, Grew's irritation became less restrained, but it appears that he only voiced his concerns with his superiors in mid-1941.

The planning surrounding the USS *Astoria*'s delivery of Ambassador Saito's ashes again provides an example of the challenges Grew faced. In a series of cables exchanged with Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Grew expressed his concern that the Department did not appreciate the implications of the demands it was making regarding the ship's arrival, ceremonies surrounding the return of the ashes, and the interaction of the ship's crew and

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[44] This is the work of any good diplomat. Today, a diplomat must be prepared to talk about gun rights and mass shootings, excessive force and law enforcement tactics, and the long list of cultural flashpoints between the conservative and liberal camps in American politics. Both friendly and unfriendly counterparts will raise these issues, especially when U.S. diplomats engage on human rights, good governance, and democracy-strengthening topics.

[45] Fearey, Robert A., "My Year with Ambassador Joseph C. Grew, 1941-1942: A Personal Account," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* (Volume 1, Spring 1992), accessed 8 May 2023, https://www-jstor-org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/stable/23613368?sid=primo, 128.

embassy officers with Japanese government officials, dignitaries, and prominent citizens. "No problem has ever given me greater anxiety nor has any problem ever required more intensive effort," Grew wrote of his coordinating meetings with Japanese officials in the weeks before the *Astoria* visit.[46] In the same passage, Grew mentioned the exchange of cables with the Department only fleetingly, writing plainly that the cables are "best" to describe the visit.

Those cables – of the ones published in volume four of *Foreign Relations of the United States* – are tense. [47] In a cable dispatched on 25 March 1939, the Department cited a press article that appeared in the United States that described the *Astoria*'s trip to Tokyo in grand terms. The Department took issue with the characterization, laying out its unadorned terms for the *Astoria* visit and emphasizing to Grew that the ship and its crew were not on any "mission" that should be construed as political, diplomatic, or anything except the sole return of the ashes. Grew replied two days later, writing that the cited news report was an "exaggeration." He elaborated – citing the Department's cable back to it – that "no indication of the Department's views and wishes with regard to the avoidance of entertainment was given us." He added that he would have relayed his cautionary advice, but the Department had never raised its own concerns with embassy officers. Grew concluded his response by urging the Department to reply immediately with its specific wishes before he proceeded further. After it had "studied with care" Grew's point-by-point cable, the Department expressed its continued confusion with some of Grew's points but made sure to tell Grew that the Department "desires that you exercise the discretion which it implicitly and constantly accords you toward working out the arrangements in a manner harmonizing as effectively as possible the various concepts and objectives involved."

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[46] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[47] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1939, Volume IV, The Far East; The Near East and Africa, eds. Matilda F. Axton, Rogers P. Churchill, Francis C. Prescott, John G. Reid, N. O. Sappington, Louis E. Gates, Shirley L. Phillips, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955), Documents 533-38.

Four months after the *Astoria*'s visit, Grew returned to the United States on leave – his first trip home since 1936. He called on the Department in person, writing in his diary once more that the Department was not forthcoming on its views of the U.S.-Japanese bilateral relationship.[48] He lamented the "modicum" of information he was able to extract, confiding to his diary that "very seldom is one able to get a clear-cut definition of policy or any definition of policy except in broad and general terms." According to Grew, he was so often "taken little into its [the State Department's] confidence" that he could never reliably confirm or deny what U.S. policy was towards Japan.[49]

At face value, U.S. policy was not complicated, having been laid out in big announcements – the kind of announcements that get attached to a person's name and passed down in history. In this case, Grew faced two broad policy prescriptions: the Stimson Doctrine and Hull's Four Points. Building on Secretary of State John Hay's 1899 declaration of an "open door policy"[50] in China, Henry Stimson laid out his own doctrine in 1932, affirming that the United States would not tolerate Japanese aggression or expansionism in China at the cost of U.S. interests.[51] The Stimson Doctrine promulgated on the eve of Grew's assignment to Tokyo, served as the basis for U.S. policy until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. The doctrine, however, frustrated Grew and his Japanese counterparts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In meeting after meeting, Grew pressed foreign ministers and high-ranking officials for assurances that U.S. interests and claims in China, especially those pertaining to private U.S. citizens, would be respected. Time

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[48] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[49] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[50] Office of the Historian, "Milestones: 1899-1913: Secretary of State John Hay and the Open Door in China, 1899–1900," U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/hay-and-china#:~:text=Hay%20argued%20that%20establishing%20equal,the%20powers%20operating%20in%20China.
[51] Office of the Historian, "Milestones: 1921-1936: The Mukden Incident of 1931 and the Stimson Doctrine," U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/mukden-incident#:~:text=Therefore%20Secretary%20Stimson%20issued%20the,which%20the%20United%20States%20subscribed.

and again, his counterparts offered sympathy and promised support, but nothing ever came of the words uttered in those meetings. Grew lamented to his diary that "in Japan, the government proposes, and the Army disposes."[52]

By 1937, a full five years into Cordell Hull's tenure as Secretary of State, the Open Door Policy gained greater urgency. Resolving Japanese aggression in China had proven a stubborn challenge and had only worsened following the Marco Polo Bridge incident of that year. Hull, a highly principled Tennessean and a prominent lawyer and judge before his Senate and State Department days, has been described as "inflexible,"[53] which is certainly one way to describe his foreign policy. Legalistic might be another way. Hull was determined to ensure that the Japanese did not trample U.S. treaty rights in China or anywhere else. The back-and-forth between Washington, D.C. and Tokyo over these issues ultimately coalesced around Hull's Four Principles: commitment to territorial integrity of states free from coercive violence, non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, equality for states before international law, and respect for the status quo in the Pacific.[54]

After the war, Joseph Ballantine, the State Department's Japan expert in the pre-war years, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that Japan had centered its negotiating position on equally inflexible positions, "presenting demands, to be accepted or rejected" by the United States rather than "offering to negotiate a reasonable settlement by processes of agreement."[55] Whereas Robert Fearey, Grew's assistant in 1941-42, believed that a good-faith conversation could have been had between FDR and Prince Konoye, for example, Ballantine asserted that Japan's starting position

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[52] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22.
[53] Wray, Harry, and Hilary Conroy, *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 75.
[54] Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 117-18.
[55] Ballantine, Joseph W., "Mukden to Pearl Harbor," *Foreign Affairs* (Volume 27, Number 4, July 1949), accessed 8 May 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/japan/1949-07-01/mukden-pearl-harbor, 664.

was "valueless," amounting to U.S. (and British and Dutch) capitulation to Japanese demands.[56] The Japanese, according to Ballantine, sought American "noninterference with Japan's efforts to settle the China affairs, abstention from action in the Far East to threaten Japan's national defense, [and] cooperation with Japan in obtaining supplies of material."[57] Hull, it has also been suggested, was overwhelmed and not up to the task before him, missing the subtle urgency of Ambassador Nomura's messages for a Konoye-FDR meeting throughout 1941.[58]

But like diplomacy today, reality careened into the neatly manicured announcements of bosses far away, leaving Grew to figure out how to clean up the pieces and to put them back together in a way that made sense to his hosts. In 1939 when he again returned to the United States on leave, Grew came face-to-face with the "unmistakable hardening of the Administration's attitude toward Japan."[59] Grew felt that he would have to let the "American temper discreetly penetrate into Japanese consciousness," sensing that Roosevelt and others were not inclined to placate the Japanese.[60] In fact, according to Grew, Roosevelt was dismissive of the Japanese threat, especially if the United States followed through on the then-proposed oil embargo. Grew warned that the embargo would force the Japanese to invade the Dutch East Indies, a reality that would soon come to be.

Commenting on the abrogation of the Treaty of 1911, Grew worried in late 1939 that the oil embargo would only encourage "the disease of Japanese depredations against our rights and interests in China," so he compelled himself to perform "some sort of major operation" to halt

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[56] Fearey, "My Year with Ambassador Joseph C. Grew," 131-32; Ballantine, "Mukden to Pearl Harbor," 662-63.
[57] In addition to Ballantine's description, see also Prange's discussion of the "minimum demands" and "minimum requirements" posed by Japan to the United States: Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 205-06.
[58] Jenkins, Dale A. *Diplomats and Admirals: From Failed Negotiations and Tragic Misjudgments to Powerful Leaders and Heroic Deeds, the Untold Story of the U.S. Navy's Victories at Coral Sea and Midway* (New York: Aubrey Publishing Co., 2022), 119-20.
[59] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[60] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.

the downward spiral of bilateral relations. His major operation was the thing he knew best: a major speech once he returned to Tokyo. Working with officials across the administration, notably Stanley Hornbeck among them, Grew left Washington, D.C. with a draft speech that, on his way back to Tokyo, he "pruned ruthlessly."[61] Grew endeavored to deliver a speech that avoided the usual niceties of diplomatic speeches typical of 1930's Tokyo. Instead, he wanted to make it clear – "hammer home the [brass] tacks" – that the patience of the American people was wearing thin on Japanese aggression in China. The ruthless pruning, however, scaled back the harsher language that D.C. officials originally struck. Hull and particularly Hornbeck had set themselves up as stridently anti-Japanese.[62] As Edwin Layton described in his 1985 memoir, Hornbeck muddied the policy waters, taking positions that opposed any mollification of Japan or that would clarify what was possible for practitioners of U.S. foreign policy on the ground. Despite festering tension between the men, Grew never seems to have laid any blame at Hornbeck's feet.

Regarding the speech, Grew received the reaction he largely expected, with American newspapers delighting in the hard words but Japanese papers expressing outrage at the lack of propriety, especially for someone who had been in Japan as long as Grew had. In his diary, Grew calculated that the speech was critical and that the ensuing months would prove "monumental" in the U.S.-Japanese bilateral relationship. He hoped that his speech would cause a "gush" of fruitful conversation aimed at preventing worsening dialogue and ultimately war. He planned to tell as many Japanese as would listen that time was of the essence; the Japanese had to show

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[61] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[62] Layton, *"And I Was There,"* 154.

Americans that Japan "desired and intended" to respect American rights in China. If they would not or could not, then the only direction for the relationship was downhill.[63]

Throughout 1940, Grew struggled to ascertain U.S. policy towards Japan. The broad strokes were obvious, but as world circumstances dramatically shifted at the dawn of a new decade, he repeatedly sought clarification from the president and secretary. In December 1940, for example, Grew wrote to President Roosevelt, proposing that U.S. policy in the Far East hinged on British war prospects in Europe and how an American-Japanese war would impact both British war efforts and U.S. naval preparedness in the Pacific. "Those are questions which, with our limited information here, I am not qualified even approximately to answer."[64] In this letter, Grew expressed his ultimate support for Roosevelt's foreign policy while at the same time imploring some "cue" as to what the president fully intended, noting that it would be a "tremendous help" to understand in more detail what the desired interim would be.[65] The president's response highlighted a key conclusion that is often obscured in the art of diplomacy – when outside observers attempt to distill complicated events into graspable sound bites. Roosevelt conceded that "the problems we face are so vast and so interrelated that any attempt even to state them compels one to think in terms of five continents and seven seas." The president emphasized to the ambassador that "our problem being one of defense, we cannot lay down hard and fast plans. As each new development occurs we must, in the light of the circumstances then existing, decide when and where and how we can most effectively marshal and make use of our resources."[66]

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[63] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[64] Grew, Joseph C., *Turbulent Era: A Diplomatic Record of Forty Years, 1904-45, Vol. II* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), 1256.
[65] Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 1258.
[66] Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 1260.

Ambassador Grew continued his efforts to deliver the president's message that Japan must cease its southward advance before it came to war between the United States and Japan. The success of that message, however, was predicated upon it being delivered to the right decision-makers in Imperial Japan, a feat as hard as deciphering the details of U.S. Far Eastern policy.

Imperial Policymakers Confound

Ambassador Grew was excited as he embarked on his posting to Tokyo in 1932. It was, as he described it, the most challenging assignment in the Foreign Service. As time wore on, it was cemented as one of the most consequential for world affairs too. In simpler times, the art of diplomacy could be conducted discretely, allowing opposing sides to strategize and analyze. In Grew's era, this had certainly begun to change, as a recognizably modern period took hold. Contending with new forms of mass communication – Grew, in fact, made the very first international telephone call from Japan to the United States, calling Hawaii in 1934 – the ambassador had the unenviable task of representing U.S. interests to a government hostile to those interests at a time when Japanese public sentiment was deeply sensitive to slights.

Ambassador Grew maintained a grueling social schedule that saw him making speeches, attending milestone ceremonies in community after community, and wining and dining with the elite of Tokyo's business and government strata on a nearly nightly basis. He described at length in repeated diary entries how he would sit for hours on the floor, Japanese-style, at a host's house, regaling guests with tales of his adventures and taking in the nuances of Japanese society. His back would be broken by the end of these marathon social calls, but he said it was always worth it, for the connections he made would serve him well, as he always believed. By the end of his tour in 1941 – not counting the fraught months of internment on embassy grounds following the attack on Pearl Harbor – Grew was the ceremonial dean of the diplomatic corps, who would

often be the only non-Japanese invited to exclusive social calls with the most powerful men in Imperial Japan. These events, flowing with sake and adorned with geisha pageantry, gave Grew a glimpse behind the shoji that separated the public from the private.[67]

But was Grew talking to the right people? He certainly knew the powerful, the informed, and the influential. The dual trap, however, any time diplomats engage with host government officials resides in the incentive for those officials to say what the diplomat wants to hear and in the temptation for the diplomat to hear what he needs to. Grew, despite his decades of service, was not immune to the trap. In the instance of the dinner for the crew of the *Astoria* in April 1939, Grew recorded the message delivered by Navy Minister Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai, who would serve as prime minister for six months in 1940, to embassy officer Eugene Dooman. The message, in fluent Japanese, which Dooman spoke since childhood, conveyed the admiral's sincere belief that militant supporters of the Nazis in the Japanese government had been "suppressed."[68] The admiral reported his concern that the relationship between Japan and the United States was in peril over developments in Europe. Grew messaged Washington, D.C., saying that he regarded the conversation with Admiral Yonai as "one of the most important and significant that we have had and I regard it as marking a new trend, indeed a milestone, in Japanese-American relations."[69] This, like other conversations and Grew's assessment of them, proved overly optimistic.

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[67] Geisha are traditional women hostesses, who entertain with song, dance, and conversation. With the Allied occupation of Japan after World War II, the term "geisha" took on a negative connotation of prostitute, though this is not historically part of the role of women hostesses in Japan. As for "shoji," those are the famous paper barriers typically associated with Japanese homes and temples.

[68] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94; Asada, Sadao, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 217-18.

[69] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.

Throughout his tenure in Tokyo, Grew repeatedly felt the West-leaning moderates in Japanese government and high society were on the brink of relegating the ultra-nationalists to irrelevancy. Grew was inclined to interpret Tokyo policy in wildly swinging terms. As his biographer, Waldo Heinrichs, critically pointed out, Grew viewed Japanese politics as if it swung along the arc of a pendulum.[70] Throughout the later 1930s, Grew frequently wrote of the momentum shifts within the imperial government, describing how moderates had the upper hand while the militarists lost ground, or vice versa depending upon the day. When Grew felt the moderates were winning out, he was especially jubilant, sensing that his work and relationships were positively impacting bilateral relations. When the militarists appeared ascendant, Grew became dark and more resigned that the U.S.-Japanese relationship was beyond fixing. Although Grew distilled the complex relationship into digestible terms and manageable caricatures, he struggled to keep the right issues in focus while trying to make sense of the constant ebb and flow on both sides of the Pacific – no doubt a consequence exacerbated by the lack of clearly expressed U.S. policy.

In one confidential memorandum of conversation with Belgian Ambassador to Japan, Baron de Bassompierre, in January 1939, Grew reported that the "predominance of the moderates" in the imperial government was on the upswing.[71] This news was especially important given that de Bassompierre told Grew that it ultimately came from German Ambassador to Japan, Eugen Ott, who was apparently "willing to speak frankly about the situation." The emperor had just named Baron Hiranuma Kiichiro prime minister, succeeding Prince Konoye. With Hiranuma's appointment, diplomats suspected that Japan would lurch further to the right. This speculation was not unfounded. Hiranuma opposed Western efforts to contain Japan, sought Japan's

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[70] Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 212-13; Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 1256.
[71] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.

withdrawal from the League of Nations, and provided key support for Imperial Army actions in Manchuria throughout the 1930s. Grew found Ott's assertion that Hiranuma was a closet moderate to be "incredible" but felt that the signs pointed to growing moderation in certain quarters of the government.

There was always a messenger bearing the news that anti-war elements were gaining strength in the government. The incoherence of Japanese policy in the pre-war years would flummox any veteran diplomat; Grew was not immune to this trap either. Dealing with 11 foreign ministers from 1937 to 1941 presented an almost insurmountable challenge that forced Grew to repeat conversations and granted newly installed ministers the opportunity to claim they needed time to learn the facts. For those repeat foreign ministers, they acknowledged Grew's ongoing frustration but always needed time to get caught up on what happened while they were out of office and to assure Grew that Japan acted responsibly and in good faith.

Diplomats are stuck with the government that hosts them. They must find a way to build relationships with leaders and bureaucrats in government to make headway on the bilateral relationship. In Grew's case, the State Department tasked him with persuading the Japanese government that its military foray into China was inimical to the interests of Japan and the United States; it was in the interests of both sovereign states to maintain the status quo in the Pacific and to find peaceful solutions to any grievances, whether real or perceived. Diplomacy, after all, is the primary and official conversation between sovereign powers. Although it is true diplomats engage non-governmental entities and subnational government officials, the core work of maintaining and facilitating bilateral relations occurs at the national level. Political instability hinders this process in ways that may be hidden to those far from the turbulence. Relationships

are disrupted, negotiations and other policy discussions become disjointed, and progress on issues of mutual concern and attempts to overcome challenges are derailed.

Governments fall for any number of reasons, but the diplomatic consequence is almost always a reset of the relationships. If, for example, a prime minister overcomes a vote of no confidence, the prime minister may still shuffle ministers to strengthen their political position to prevent a future vote of no confidence. In this sense, the government survived, but the diplomat's main contact at a key ministry could be new. If the original relationships were unproductive for the diplomat, then a shuffled cabinet may improve dialogue – once the new ministerial leaders and staff are in place and up to date on bilateral issues. Of course, if the pre-shuffle relationships were constructive, then the diplomat faces the risk of working with new ministerial leadership that may oppose some or all the policies central to bilateral affairs. Political instability – especially endemic, persistent instability – obscures who is in charge and who has authority or the mandate to make decisions. Finding the right pressure points within the bureaucracy becomes increasingly more difficult, especially as host government politicians become almost exclusively focused on internal power struggles and as adversaries find opportunities to exploit the political instability and to shift narratives in their favor.

In the Japan of Grew's day, a string of assassinations, an unwritten constitution, the vagaries of imperial, divine imperatives, and the pervasive emotional drive to redress past grievances heavily influenced domestic politics, which subsequently colored foreign relations. The formal and informal structures of the imperial government allowed instability to flourish, complicating the task set before Grew.[72] Despite his several years of experience in Japan, including his engagement on several notable controversies in the years before the pivotal 1940-41 period,

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[72] Jenkins, *Diplomats and Admirals*, 121-22.

Grew contended with a policy-making process that was opaque and convoluted to both outsiders and insiders. Figuring out what was true, relevant, or strategic meant identifying the exact power centers on a given issue, determining the strength and motivation of opposing power centers, and calculating how these forces would interact.[73] This is no small feat under normal conditions, but the constant churn of Japanese officials, especially leaders, and the dogged percolation of convoluted policies prevented Grew from fully penetrating the fog of domestic politics. In other words, Grew was not at fault or deficient in his customary view of Japanese politics as a pendulum. The general chaos within the imperial government created difficult conditions and prevented fulsome interpretation.[74] Japanese politics was a moving target, which made it difficult to identify its specific objectives, decision points, and courses of action.

Grew reported to Washington, D.C. the nuances of Japanese politics, attempting to send strategic information up his chain of command. But in a notable summary of January 1941, Grew's patient understanding of Japanese policy started to fray.[75] While on the one hand he held out hope that "the moderates are steadily working to maintain that balance" – the balance between public sentiment and government policy, between moderates and hardliners – he had to acknowledge that the extremists "are firmly in the saddle." By this time, the southern advance was conspicuous, with the military overtly espousing it as official government policy.[76] Grew recognized that the push southward heralded ominous days ahead. The intensifying stranglehold

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[73] Hotta, *Japan 1941*, 137-42: Hotta described a fraught liaison conference in July 1941 immediately prior to the fall of the second Konoye government. Hotta used words like superficial, short-sighted, and wishful thinking to describe the conversation between the civilian and military factions at the conference. Matsuoka, for example, was simultaneously annoyed with Hull for a personal slight but then proceeded to call his military counterparts "wimps" and "boneheads." Although this may not be an unusual set of circumstances when talking about politics, it still demonstrates the tangled relationships and emotions Grew would have had to figure out to engage in effective diplomacy.

[74] Kagan, Robert. *The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023), 592-93.

[75] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22.

[76] Frank, *Tower of Skulls*, 230-37; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, 30-31, 232-34.

of the military over strategic locations across the Far East as "jumping-off facilities for an eventual attack on Singapore" proved that Japan did not fear war with the United States, according to Grew's summary.

Grew believed that "constructive conciliation" was the way to prevent war between the United States and Japan.[77] He vehemently opposed appeasement, which he was at pains to show he did not support, but he also thought that diplomacy could prevent a winnable but blood-soaked war.[78] He wrote the Department in a December 1939 cable "that our dignity and our power in themselves counsel moderation, forbearance and the use of every reasonable means of conciliation without the sacrifice of principle."[79] He emphasized that the preferable course of action regarding Japanese aggression in the Far East "involves no sacrifice, no compromise with principle, and no detraction from the dignity of the United States." Grew felt obligated to argue against the oil embargo because it would cause war, but on the Japanese side of the equation, the variables were still unsolved. As tension mounted in Japanese policy circles, especially throughout 1941 following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, more churn gripped government leadership. Grew saw an "absence of a unanimous or clearly dominant school of thought" with which to parlay.[80]

Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Konoye government – by all accounts then and now, to remove Matsuoka Yosuke from the cabinet[81] –

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[77] Rauch, *Roosevelt From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, 445.
[78] The July 1940 *Life Magazine* article by John Hersey has the subtitle of "America's Top Diplomat Knows How to Appease the Japanese or Be Stern With Them," which seems to grapple with the apparent contradiction of Grew's "constructive conciliation" approach to Japan.
[79] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1939, Volume III, The Far East, eds. Matilda F. Axton, Rogers P. Churchill, Francis C. Prescott, John G. Reid, N.O. Sappington, Louis E. Gates, and Shirley L. Phillips (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955), Document 572.
[80] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22.
[81] Matsuoka's erratic behavior had finally caused irritation within the cabinet and among military leaders. In defiance of the cabinet, Matsuoka unilaterally rejected an entreaty from Hull in July 1941, while he also appealed

Grew observed that it had become all but impossible to predict Japanese policy or the courses of action it intended to take.[82] Warning the Department that his observations "might not be clearly perceived" by those in Washington, D.C., Grew set out explaining that "heterogeneous and extravagant rumors [fly] about Tokyo," clouding the ability to discern how Japan would handle its rocky relationship with Germany or how it would deal with the Soviet Union. Laying out his speculative assumptions, Grew postulated that Japan would have to first relinquish its claims in China but conceded that Japan was unlikely to do that given its cultural impetus to save face; too much blood and treasure had been spilled to turn back now. Since Japanese officials ceased engagement with foreigners by this point,[83] Grew struggled with the "greater difficulty in presenting reasoned estimates and views of Japanese policy" and lamented the embassy had "few contacts with well-informed Japanese because they are threatened with severe penalties for disclosing information." Nevertheless, Grew alerted the State Department that rumors of the southward advance remained focused on French Indochina and that Japan appeared intent on following an independent foreign policy after the latest burn applied by Germany. Besides media reporting, much of what Grew sent to Washington, D.C. derived from his deep connections in the diplomatic community still in Tokyo.

Diplomats Joust

Diplomacy, at its heart, depends on relationships, conversation, and negotiation. By the time Grew reached Tokyo, he had seen this truism play out many times over from Berlin and

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directly to the emperor to invade the Soviet Union. Konoye could no longer tolerate the "willful foreign minister," to use Konoye's words. For Konoye's perspective, see: Konoe, Fumimaro, *Prince Konoe Memoir: The Secret Negotiations Between Japan and the U.S. Before Pearl Harbor* (San Francisco: Pacific Atrocities Education, 2020), 62-74. For a modern description, see: Hotta, *Japan 1941*, 136-41.

[82] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22.

[83] Hotta, *Japan 1941*, 110.

Paris during and after World War I to Ankara during the heady days of Kemal Ataturk's reign.[84] At different times, any of these components of effective diplomacy may play a larger role than the others, but each is always in play. Without the right relationships, then conversation cannot be had; without conversation, negotiation does not take place; negotiations absent mutually respectful relationships bear little fruit.[85] Grew understood his craft, telling an audience at a farewell dinner for Ambassador Horinouchi in 1938, as Horinouchi prepared to take up his post in Washington, D.C., that an ambassador is an "interpreter" above all else.[86] The ambassador, according to Grew, is "an agent of mutual adjustment" who translates the circumstances, desires, and goals of two sovereign governments that do not speak the same language. Grew told the audience that "an ambassador's potentialities for creating harm and danger through misinterpretation are tremendous; his opportunities for constructive good are absolutely incalculable." This peek into Grew's perspective on his role helps explain his approach to Imperial Japan and how he handled his diplomatic responsibilities.

Grew, as the dean of the diplomatic corps, held sway among fellow diplomats in Tokyo. During his speech at the Horinouchi dinner, Grew explained the importance of diplomatic tradition. He was intent to show that diplomats were not mere "messenger boys" relaying routine information between governments but served a critical role to allay "international friction" that was most often the result of "nebulous misunderstanding and doubt."[87] In his anecdote, Grew remarked that seniority in the diplomatic community of a host government – in this case, the community hosted by Tokyo – established protocol, rankings, and procedure, so that

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[84] Waldo Heinrichs traced Grew's career in *American Ambassador*, highlighting formative experiences in Grew's early Foreign Service years. Likewise, Grew wrote about his experiences in Europe before, during, and after World War I in *Turbulent Years*.

[85] For a richer discussion of these concepts and related ideas, see Fisher, Roger, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

[86] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 1.

[87] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 1.

ambassadors and their staffs could set expectations and manage friction related to etiquette while placing emphasis on the conduct of diplomacy. By the end of his tenure in Tokyo, Grew enjoyed the benefits of being diplomatic dean, which was especially important in status-obsessed Japan.

In addition to interpreting between one's own government and the host government, the diplomat must also cultivate relationships and carry on conversation within the diplomatic community. A diplomat who is well connected among their colleagues from other countries gains a force multiplier on difficult issues, may be alerted before controversy or conflict erupt, and plugs into a dense but often unseen network of information that may prove useful at some opportune time. Grew was well connected, staying in close communication with the British, Dutch, and other European diplomats and keeping a close eye on the comings and goings of the Germans. Grew fancied himself a bit of an intelligence officer – which was fair since the State Department performed an early version of that function in the years before the establishment of modern-day intelligence agencies – but, as Waldo Heinrichs noted, Grew only seemingly executed the function half-heartedly when a given issue raised alarm bells in Tokyo or Washington, D.C.[88] Grew, however, embraced his role as diplomatic dean and always had time for his fellow diplomats.

Although Grew was convinced that bilateral diplomacy, rather than multilateral, was the most effective way to pressure Tokyo,[89] he collaborated closely with the British in particular and with the broader diplomatic community in general. After several years in country, he had learned that the Japanese were "sentimental and emotional;" therefore, they bristled at the appearance of other states ganging up to force issues.[90] Coming out of the Washington and London Naval

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[88] Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 196-97.
[89] Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 223, 249-51.
[90] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.

Conferences, this was, in fact, the view that certain elements within the Japanese military had fixated upon.[91] The idea that the United States and the United Kingdom set tonnage limitations at the conferences in specific ratios to limit Japan's ability to defend its home waters while allowing the U.S.-UK tandem the ability to project into the Far East penetrated deep into the militarist mindset. Though Grew maintained professional relationships with a wide range of diplomats and always maintained diplomatic propriety even with those diplomats from hostile countries, including Nazi Germany, the U.S. ambassador was always close to his British counterparts – a relationship that was also sometimes strained.

For the most part, Grew was on the same page with the British, especially Sir Robert Craigie, who was posted to Tokyo from 1937 to 1941. When they worked together, they brought concerted pressure on Japan but in a manner that attempted to obscure their close partnership. In December 1938 and January 1939, Grew and Craigie coordinated demarches to the Foreign Ministry that levied complaints against Japanese attacks on American and British citizens in China. Grew wrote in his diary that the U.S. note had been delivered on December 30. Craigie said that the British note had been delivered on January 14. According to Craigie, London had not seen the American note, but Grew noticed that the contents of the British note were "molded very much along the same lines" as the American note.[92] Grew recounted that he inquired with the Department concerning the British draft demarche. The Department confirmed it had not shown the draft to the British embassy in Washington, D.C. The coordination of demarches is typical, especially for close partners working on common challenges, but Grew's suspicion of

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[91] Asada, Sadao, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, 190-91; In a memo delivered to Grew on 8 December 1941, Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori cited the combined "interference" of the United States and the United Kingdom against "Japan's constructive endeavors toward the stabilization of East Asia" and their "collusion" to maintain the "status quo…of imperialistic exploitation." The letter is reproduced in: Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 23.

[92] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.

Craigie's well-informed document was based on being blindsided repeatedly by Craigie on the intricacies of U.S. policy.

In one recap of a meeting between Grew and Craigie, Grew recounted Craigie's detailed description of a meeting between Ambassador Horinouchi and Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles in Washington, D.C. in 1939.[93] Craigie relayed the contents of the meeting, which he received from the British ambassador to the United States, that described Japan's dismay over deteriorating relations with the United States. Welles allegedly replied that the "downward grade" would only get worse as Japan flirted with Germany and Italy. Upon Craigie asking about the exchange, Grew had to concede that the State Department had not informed him of it. "Sir Robert seems to be so much better informed than am I with regard to intelligence concerning my own Government."

But Grew was also skeptical of British diplomacy in Japan. Recalling an exchange with Baron Harada, Grew criticized the heavy-handed approach he saw Craigie and other British diplomats take.[94] Calling the British approach "inept," Grew believed that the British failed to understand Japanese psychology and sentimentalism, which hampered their ability to make progress on any substantive issue. For his part, Craigie lamented the "uncoordinated but parallel" paths that the UK and the United States had taken in the pre-war years.[95] In his estimation, U.S. domestic policy, particularly the pervasive popularity of isolationism, prevented President Roosevelt from taking a more aggressive posture in the Pacific in direct coordination with the UK. By early 1940, however, Craigie saw "the writing on the wall," as the United States allowed the commercial treaty with Japan to lapse. For Craigie, Matsuoka's master-stroke effort to bring

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[93] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[94] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Volume 94.
[95] Craigie, Robert, *Behind the Japanese Mask* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1945), 200.

Japan into the Tripartite Pact was the death knell for U.S.-Japanese relations, an ironic outcome given that Matsuoka saw the pact as a way to persuade the United States the time was now to negotiate.

As previously described, the United States appeared little interested in negotiating with Japan, especially when Japanese officials made few, if any, meaningful gestures suggesting they were serious about the conversation – a point that both Grew and Craigie recognized in their writings.[96] Grew, however, did negotiate between the British and the French in Tokyo.[97] According to Grew in his diary, the British had entreated the French to rein in attacks by local fighters in Thailand. The British were desperate to remove any security pretense that Japan could exploit to send its soldiers further into Southeast Asia. Feeling the pressure over the Burma Road, the British sought French concessions to local freedom fighters in order to maintain order in the face of the Japanese advance southward. Grew contended with two problems: first, the British and French ambassadors in Tokyo were not on speaking terms; and second, Grew felt that asking the French to cede territory undermined the U.S. position that the territorial integrity of polities could not be compromised through force, a position that was also enshrined in Hull's Four Points. Grew agreed to engage French ambassador Arsene-Henry generally on the situation in Indochina but sought the State Department's advice on how to proceed more specifically. In the meantime, from a later entry in Grew's diary, Japan ended up "mediating" the Thai dispute, extracting port rights in Camranh Bay. "Thus does the southward advance proceed," Grew wrote, adding that "it may be a process of nibbling, but the process is going forward with ever-increasing rapidity and thoroughness."[98]

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[96] Craigie, *Behind the Japanese Mask*, 202-03.
[97] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22.
[98] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22.

Despite the differences of opinion over policy and Grew's frustration at Craigie knowing more than him about U.S. policy – likely more a function of Washington, D.C. not informing Grew of the latest policy developments than of Craigie using underhanded tactics – Grew and Craigie had a close working relationship. They shared information routinely and coordinated their efforts whenever possible. Grew received an "agreeable message" from UK Foreign Minister Sir Anthony Eden in June 1941, thanking Grew for sharing "confidential information."[99] Grew wrote that the information he passed to Craigie was for the eyes of Churchill, Eden, and the War Cabinet only, and that he kept it primarily to issues concerning Japan, not of the United States. In fact, Grew suspected that Craigie's communications with London were compromised, a suspicion that Baron Harada confirmed for Grew. The amateur intelligence officer was nonplussed by this possibility, joking that Craigie reported to London that "my American friends tells me…" Grew was confident that their "pipelines" were protected since he "seldom if ever" named a source to Craigie and rarely gave exact details when communicating with Washington, D.C. "Protecting the confidential thoughts of our own government (of which I learn very little) are the primary considerations in this interesting game."

Grew reported on all manner of conversations with prominent diplomats in Tokyo, but his relationship with Craigie is, perhaps, the most consequential. With the UK taking the brunt of vitriol lobbed by the Japanese in the years immediately leading up to the war in the Pacific, it was incumbent on the two partners to set aside old animosities and to find common cause. As with any relationship – and this one had not yet blossomed into the special relationship christened by Churchill – interests and courses of action do not always align. For the United States and the UK, this was certainly the case from 1939 to 1941. On two critical points, the

[99] Joseph Clark Grew Papers (MS Am 1687-1687.9), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Box 22.

United States and the UK did seem to consistently agree: Japan threatened their interests in the Pacific, and the Pacific was secondary to the European theater.

Conclusion

Ambassador Grew was a highly respected, well-placed chief of mission in a strategically important country at a critical time. He had seen, learned, and experienced a lot throughout a turbulent decade in Tokyo. The United States benefitted from having his experience and knowledge – a conclusion supported by the fact President Hoover initially appointed him and President Roosevelt subsequently renewed his appointment three times. The United States did not use Grew and his staff effectively. Additionally, Grew failed to find the right pressure points in the Japanese government. Finally, Grew and his diplomatic allies never truly envisioned coordinated, combined, or otherwise concerted efforts to persuade Japan to abandon its expansionist policies in Asia. It is difficult to assign blame to a specific actor or to distill the myriad decisions and fluid circumstances down to digestible terms for easy analysis. That is the point of this exploration of the people and conditions that Grew faced. Though he could have been better informed, developed the exactly correct relationships, and worked seamlessly with allies and partners, it was still quite likely that he or any other diplomat would have been overcome by events.

Diplomacy is a key component of national power. Unlike the other components of power (informational, military, and economic), diplomacy is an art undefined by hard science, unencumbered by natural laws, and unaccountable to objective analysis. War may also exhibit some of these characteristics, but militaries, nevertheless, deploy warfighters who can be counted, who can expend a certain number of rounds of ammunition, and who can inflict measurable damage. Diplomacy enjoys no such quality though some try to extrapolate

diplomatic power based on the number of linkages a country has established with foreign states.[100] Grew lived in a nascent information age when computers, international communications, and data collection and dissemination were only just becoming useful on a global scale. Look no further than his unreliable, irregular contact with his own leadership. On an individual level, Grew amassed a personal collection of papers that number in the thousands of pages – that he typed on a typewriter, filed in a cabinet, and shipped home to the United States in crates on a boat. Those pages contained the fruits of the relationships he developed and the knowledge he cultivated. It is subjective, and in the pre-digital age, it is very likely that any insights were only truly known to him.

On a bigger level, the State Department contended with a flood of information from across the globe, facing unprecedented threats on a scale that was then unimaginable. Like Grew, it had to manage this information manually, which interrupted the decision loop. The United States had had global aspirations for at least a half century prior to the outbreak of World War II in Europe, but it had not developed the infrastructure or procedures to deal with global responsibilities. In many respects, it enjoyed the benefits all states of the world enjoyed, which were those public goods underwritten by the British Empire. As some scholars have detailed in multiple works,[101] the passing of the mantle of global leadership across the Atlantic from the United Kingdom to the United States was well under way by the late 1930s. War in Europe progressed that transition, but war in the Pacific guaranteed it. For Grew, however, this was not yet a reality. The traditional, colonial power in Asia was still the United Kingdom. Grew, as an aristocratic Bostonian who went to Groton and Harvard, was an Anglophile but he was also the

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[100] For example, see the Lowy Institute's Global Diplomacy Index, which can be accessed at https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/.

[101] Among others, see Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House UK, 2017) and also *Victory at Sea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

chief representative of the United States in Tokyo. Any patriotic diplomat with an attuned sense for subliminal messaging will bristle at the suggestion that they carry the water for a fellow diplomat from another country – that is, doing the bidding of a foreign power as if a lackey. This tension appears to subsist just below the surface of the Grew-Craigie relationship.

At the heart of the present argument lie the many relationships that defined Grew's work in Imperial Japan. Grew likely knew the "right" people in Japan, but due to the idiosyncrasies of the Japanese way of government, Grew had to keep track of a constantly rotating menu of leaders. Under the most benign set of circumstances, this poses a challenge for any diplomat. Conversations reset; progress halts; political potholes form where once a smooth path had been. Grew constantly had to restart his conversations with his host government counterparts. Those counterparts were also keenly aware that their interactions with the U.S. Government's chief representative could be fraught with peril among their compatriots, especially if they intimated some sensitive piece of information or contradicted some unofficial firebrand policy. This confounding set of circumstances proscribed meaningful dialogue. Each side accused the other of acting in bad faith – if the accusations were not open, then they at least took place privately. Grew always contended that he could break through by sticking to the cold, hard facts, overcoming Japanese intransigence with reason. This seems foolhardy since Grew also acknowledged that the Japanese were irretrievably sentimental, prone to outrage over the slightest of slights. The quality of Grew's various relationships is hard to assess, whereas it is easy to count the number of those relationships as they multiplied, leading to convoluted conclusions and conjecture with respect to the bilateral relationship.

Ambassador Joseph Grew and U.S. Embassy Tokyo played a bad hand as well as they could have. Their superiors in Washington, D.C. focused primarily on the great game in Europe

but kept enough attention on Asia that Grew had little room to maneuver. Their antagonists in Tokyo played by different rules and maybe even in an entirely different game. Meanwhile, their allies and partners had different interests and objectives in playing the game in the first place. Joseph Grew faced many challenges, but none of them were insurmountable – if only policymakers had the mindset to articulate achievable goals, identify critical requirements, and empower the personnel on the ground to carry out their intent.

What It Means Today

The experience of U.S. Embassy Tokyo in the years immediately leading up to the war in the Pacific holds special significance for today's policymakers, diplomats, and military leaders. There are important parallels between Grew's age and today's age, but there are also salient points of departure that U.S. leaders should bear in mind. The similarities start with the rise of a dominant Asian power propagating a narrative that cuts against Western interests. The PRC today, like Imperial Japan before it, has championed an "Asia for Asians"[102] – in Japanese terms – and "a shared future for all mankind" – in PRC terms. Each Asian power presented an alternative future for the Pacific region, promoting prosperity free of U.S. interference. To meet this objective, the PRC has built a world-class military capable of challenging U.S. supremacy. In some key capabilities, the PRC enjoys a substantial power advantage over the United States in the Western Pacific. Whereas Imperial Japan had a superior carrier fleet with advanced fighter aircraft that supported an expanded empire, the PRC has deployed a preeminent missile and rocket force capable of projecting power far from its shores. The parallels, however, are not confined to the Asian powers but extend to the United States.

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[102] Prange, Gordon, *At Dawn We Slept*, 5.

Broadly speaking, the United States today faces many of the challenges it faced in the 1930s. Domestically, the United States contends with a sharply divided civil society. Just as isolationists and interventionists battled for the soul of the United States in the 1930s, today civil discourse over the war in Ukraine, for example, breaks down along hyper-partisan lines, with some factions openly supporting Russian state interests in sharp contrast with recent historical norms. Furthermore, U.S. economic emphasis is primarily confined to consumer goods, services associated with the gig economy, and information technology dominated by social media and entertainment companies. In other words, like the economy of the pre-war years, the U.S. economy today is not focused on wartime industries, critical defense manufacturing, or rebuilding essential native skillsets for modern great power warfare. The United States has shown economic resilience throughout its history, overcoming significant deficiencies in times of great national emergency. To successfully meet those previous challenges – such as the existential threats during the Civil War and World War II – the United States needed time to generate economic momentum by gearing up its wartime industrial capacity before it could overwhelm its foes militarily. The luxurious geographic position of the United States granted it the time it needed. It is unclear whether geography today will be the asset it has been in the past.

This raises a point of difference with past experience. Because the United States has been the world's leading superpower since the end of World War II, it has accrued greater and greater responsibilities. The number of diplomatic posts has dramatically increased – as much a result of the end of colonialism as the expansion of U.S. hegemony – just as the number of military deployments, U.S. companies, and U.S. citizens overseas has dramatically increased, reaching every corner of the globe. This diffusion of U.S. hard and soft power also results from the long peace the world has enjoyed since the end of World War II. Though conflict persists, there has

been no major power war and the rate of violence has dramatically decreased globally. In many respects, this positive development stems from the overwhelming military superiority the United States has maintained in the post-war period. But that edge, as already noted, is much diminished – if not completely erased – in the Asia-Pacific region.

This paper has argued that the United States did not fully utilize the diplomatic power it had built up in Japan before World War II. Diplomacy appeared to be a largely laissez faire undertaking when it was not being micro-managed. The full blame, however, does not lie solely with either Ambassador Grew or with the Department of State. Grew contended with difficult circumstances on the ground, locking horns with his hosts and playing politics with his allies. Better communication and coordination with the Department, however, would certainly have tilted circumstances more in favor of Grew than those conditions he endured. The State Department under Cordell Hull took an unrelenting principled stand. This is admirable and understandable. Even Grew agreed that principle could not be sacrificed in the face of aggression. The lesson might be that niche programs, parochial projects, and the various sacred cows of U.S. foreign policy may need to be shelved temporarily while national security is refocused on great power competition. The long, lavish period of U.S. global dominance may be coming up on a dangerous, unrestrained period that will require concentration, concerted effort, and the wisdom to prioritize national strategic objectives without sacrificing the essence of the United States. In short, the time has come for the United States to actively defend the principles it has extravagantly espoused for the last 78 years

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