

Dec. 7, 1941: A Day That Will Live in Immunity

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

What would have happened if Richard Nixon had been President of the United States on Dec. 7, 1941?

Instead of the news of Pearl Harbor being radioed immediately to the rest of the country, the Pentagon would have imposed a complete news blackout on what had transpired in Hawaii. Only rumors would have reached stateside and then not before Dec. 15. Press inquiries at the White House would have been met by Ziegler saying, "We're not about to comment on source stories."

Three days later a New York Times correspondent who had commandeered a rubber life raft in Honolulu would have paddled into San Francisco Bay with a somewhat garbled but essentially accurate account of the destruction of the American Pacific fleet.

A few days later Ziegler reappears in the dolorous precincts of the White House press room to read a statement: "The rumors of some kind of attack by units of the Japanese Imperial Fleet on our naval base at Pearl Harbor have been grossly exaggerated. There was a small incident at Pearl. Some Japanese marines, there as part of a goodwill visit by the Japanese fleet, got into a fight when they claimed a madame in a brothel overcharged them. They were arrested by their own navy's shore patrol and returned to their ship. That's all there was to it, and may I say these stories that have been appearing in the papers—none of them attributed to any official in this administration—are just another example of outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting."

That quiets things until a Swedish freighter picks up an American sailor from the battleship Arizona babbling an incredible tale about Japanese bombers sinking his ship. In due time, the sailor is returned to a continental American port where he tells such a frightening narrative of destruction that the press goes after Ziegler again.

"The situation is exactly as it was. No change. We are receiving our normal quota of Sonys and Toyotas, but I am now in a position to give you some added details about the scuffle with marines in the brothel. The dinghy returning the rowdy marines to their ship did, accidentally, ram the battleship Arizona and sink it.

"The helmsman of the dinghy has been punished and the President has sent a stern note to Emperor Hirohito suggesting that on future goodwill trips the Japanese fleet bring its own geishas and not rely on our talent unless they're prepared to pay an American minimum wage. The incident is now closed. I think we've stretched a point with you guys by even commenting on this trivial pierside brawl."

Even as he is speaking, however, the captain of a tuna boat out of San Diego is radioing that he is netting large pieces of debris from the battleship California. The Pentagon denies the existence of any such battleship, but now a Senate committee announces its intention of looking into the whole thing by issuing subpoenas requiring the Pacific fleet to present itself at the mouth of the Potomac and be inventoried. The President responds that such information is covered by executive privilege.

Red Hots like Sen. Abourezk of South Dakota make speeches saying, "We're going to have to go to war against somebody, either Tokyo or the White House, or maybe both." The liberal wishy-washies like Percy of Illinois and Cranston of California caution about pre-judging the President. "We still may have a fleet out there somewhere." Sen. Goldwater says, "I support the

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President, and if somebody can find it, I'll support the fleet too."

Under growing pressure, Nixon proposes a compromise, which he says will allay the misguided hysteria caused by inaccurate press reports and still preserve the confidentiality of his constitutional commander-in-chiefdom. Sen. Stennis will be allowed to count our ships and report to Judge Sirica's grand jury which will, according to our tradition of fair play and due process, say nothing about it. Unfortunately an antiadministration fink in the Justice Department leaks the contents of the Stennis report.

Upon the truth seeping out, Ziegler looks piteously at the press and asks, "How can you guys say I lied to you? I never told you the seven other battleships hadn't been sunk. What? Yes, yes, it's true we've been at war for a month now, but I want to read you a statement from the President which will renew the American people's confidence in him. He says he can take anything any American can dish out. He also says the accusation that he tried to cover up Pearl Harbor and not go to war with Japan because of Rebozo's Tokyo real-estate holdings is false and that he is now at Key Biscayne, reflecting on the fact he comes from tough Midwestern farm stock. He says he's never been cooler and his mind has never been sharper."