

The Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001: Another Pearl Harbor?

Many people immediately described the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon as a “new Pearl Harbor.” This is understandable on an emotional level, as both were surprise attacks. However, important differences exist.

First, Pearl Harbor was a strategic surprise. U.S. policy makers expected a move by Japan but not against the United States. The Soviet Union was seen as a possible target, but the greatest expectation and fear was a Japanese attack on European colonies in Southeast Asia that by-passed U.S. possessions, thus allowing Japan to continue to expand its empire without bringing the United States into the war.

The terrorist attacks were more of a tactical surprise. The enmity of Osama bin Laden and his willingness to attack U.S. targets had been amply demonstrated in earlier attacks on the East African embassies and on the USS *Cole*. Throughout the summer of 2001, U.S. intelligence officials had warned of the likelihood of another bin Laden attack. What was not known—or guessed—were the target and the means of attack.

Second, Japan and the Axis powers had the capability to defeat and destroy U.S. power and the U.S. way of life. The terrorists do not pose a threat on the same level.