Book Reviews


If Japan’s prewar peerage system had survived into the postwar era, the author of this book would surely rank among the nobility. By birth he was the great-grandson of Inukai Tsuyoshi, Japan’s twenty-ninth prime minister, who was assassinated by right-wing militants in 1932. His maternal grandfather, Yoshizawa Kenkichi, served as foreign minister, became a member of the House of Peers, and ended his diplomatic career as ambassador to the Republic of China on Taiwan. His father, Iguchi Sadao, served as counselor of the Japanese embassy in Washington in December 1941 and returned after the war as ambassador to the United States and Canada. Clearly destined to become a member of Japan’s diplomatic elite, Iguchi Takeo by his own merits – ambassador to three countries, law school professor, and scholar – might well have earned a peerage on his own. But thanks to the war that began with the Pearl Harbor attack, that was not to be.

The author’s lineage explains the structure, substance, and principal purpose of this book. He begins with an autobiographical account of the transition from peace to war, a traumatic change that took him from the privileged life of an eleven-year-old diplomat’s son in Washington through the constraints of internment and on to an adventurous two months’ journey back to Japan. He had felt the rise in tensions between America and Japan when Jewish girls, who had fled with their parents from Nazi Germany, taunted him because his country was “beating up” China. His ordered world of school and play collapsed on 7 December 1941 into six months’ confinement in luxury resort hotels. Iguchi responded to his loss of freedom by imbibing intense nationalism from the junior diplomats and naval attaches who tutored him. He even bullied the half-Caucasian daughter of another diplomat.

His long voyage from New York to Yokohama aboard the first vessels exchanging Japanese and American diplomats was a delightful adventure that, ironically, helped prepare him for the rigors of life in wartime Japan. It was broken by trips to the zoo in Africa and a long sojourn in Singapore, where grandfather Yoshizawa was Japan’s senior diplomat for all of occupied Southeast Asia. There Iguchi stayed in the palace of the Sultan of Johore and visited the sites of Japan’s swift and successful attacks against the British, breathing in the intense national pride that suffused his country during the first year of the war. That attitude served him well later, when, back in Tokyo, he entered the prestigious and then highly nationalistic Ichikō, the school for future members of Japan’s elite.

In the second and third sections of his book, Iguchi attempts to “demystify” the causes of the Pacific War and the reasons for the breakdown of prewar negotiations. He rejects interpretations that he considers wrong and offers some of his own. In his view, a Japanese-American war was not inevitable. No fundamental ideological differences separated the two
nations, and their disagreements over China were not beyond the possibility of at least temporary resolution. The two sides did not misperceive one another's intentions. The reason President Franklin D. Roosevelt imposed economic sanctions and his Secretary of State Cordell Hull rejected compromise over China was not because they wanted or needed a “backdoor to war.” But they did respond to pressures from China and Britain not to strike a bargain with Japan. The Japanese were not forced into a “rational choice” for war by what their putative enemies did. Rather, they blundered into it through inept diplomacy made worse by discordant military, naval, and civilian strategies for protecting their empire’s security.

The book’s fourth and most important section attempts to explain what happened during the last days and hours of peace and to expose postwar falsehoods about those events. The fault was not from lax or incompetent Japanese diplomatic staff in Washington. In fact, Tokyo kept its senior negotiators, Admiral Nomura Kichisaburō and Kurusu Saburō, unaware of the timetable for war that had been agreed upon. They and their subordinates were not responsible for the fifteen hour gap between receipt of the first thirteen segments and the arrival of the final and fourteenth segment of the message terminating negotiations. That delay meant that Japanese attacks at Pearl Harbor and in Southeast Asia would be underway before the Washington diplomats could deliver the full message to the Americans. Responsibility lay with military and naval officers in Tokyo. Major Sejima Ryūzō of the Operations and War Plans Section of the Army General Staff and his counterpart in its Communications Section altered priorities for transmission of the message so as not to tip off the Americans to what was about to occur. They even held back delivery of President Roosevelt's last-minute appeal to the emperor for peace.

Second, and even worse in Iguchi’s view, Japanese diplomats after the war hid the truth about what had happened in the days leading up to it. In an unsuccessful attempt to shield Foreign Minister Tōgō Shigenori from prosecution and conviction as a war criminal, they publicized accounts that blamed embassy personnel in Washington for mishandling Japan’s final message. But in fact, it was the non-resistance of diplomats in Tokyo to military and naval pressures which resulted in belated delivery of the message and allowed the Americans to claim that Japan had launched a “sneak attack” on Pearl Harbor. Iguchi’s prolonged, careful research revealed that these officials removed key documents, including his father’s detailed account of the final negotiations and events in Washington, from Foreign Ministry archives. Thus prewar civil-military collusion and a postwar cover-up in Tokyo rather than diplomatic incompetence in Washington explain the common understanding of what did, and did not, occur during the final moments of peace.

Although he added background to it, Iguchi’s book is not meant for readers unfamiliar with the literature on prewar Japanese–American diplomacy and the Pearl Harbor attack. He thought it would be useful to non-Japanese readers for two reasons. First, it untangles the particulars of what Japanese in Tokyo and Washington did on the eve of war on the basis of archival sources rather than the inaccurate or self-serving accounts Japanese officials gave to war crimes trial investigators or published as memoirs. Second, the book reviews recent Japanese-language literature on its subject in ways meant to open non-Japanese eyes to arguments, some useful, some fanciful, about what happened in 1941.

I also found the book useful, however, for a reason that Iguchi may not have intended. It stands as a reminder of how troublesome a presence the Pacific War remains for postwar Japanese—and Americans. The war is the greatest disaster in their shared past—a calamity