

A Briton spelled out the war with Japan

by Carol White

Visions of Infamy, The Untold Story of How Journalist Hector C. Bywater Devised the Plans that Led to Pearl Harbor

by William H. Honan

St. Martin's Press, New York, 1991

346 pages, hardbound, \$22.95

The subject matter of this book is inherently gripping. Author Honan contends that the war plan followed by the Japanese, beginning with the Dec. 7, 1941 surprise attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, was in fact scripted by a British naval correspondent and sometime intelligence agent, Hector C. Bywater.

Sixteen years before the Japanese attack in 1941, Bywater wrote a book, *The Great Pacific War*, which not only outlined the naval strategy and tactics to be subsequently followed by the Japanese, but also scripted the island-hopping countermoves which, in fact, led to a final U.S. victory in the war of the Pacific. Strange to say, until Honan's book, Bywater's astounding role as, literally, the author of the Pacific aspect of the Second World War, has been virtually eclipsed. Written in 1925, *The Great Pacific War* (which has just been re-issued by St. Martin's Press), describes a future war between Japan and the United States.

Unfortunately, despite the dramatic thesis of the book, it managed to be exceedingly dull reading—at least for someone like myself who is by no means a naval buff. Notwithstanding that, it sheds light on one aspect of the many interlocking causes which impelled the Japanese to initiate a war which they could not win—or, more precisely, how they came to shift from a defensive to an aggressive naval strategy. William Honan's thesis is an interesting sidelight on the war, but it does not deal with such key political issues as Franklin Roosevelt's deliberate courting of just such an attack as Pearl Harbor, in order to bring the United States into the war, despite a sizable anti-war lobby at home.

Honan expresses his thesis in his concluding epilogue: "But who would have imagined that the Japanese and American war plans had been spelled out in such detail in a book published in the West 16 years before Pearl Harbor? Even when this truth is grasped in all its complexity, and Yamamoto's actions, together with the American counteroffen-

sive, are seen as driven by a subtle mix of influence and innovation, it seems bizarre. . . .

"Finally, now that the story is out, one hopes it will, in at least a small way, help to lay to rest the old canard about the Pearl Harbor attack as a characteristic expression of the 'treacherous and deceitful' Japanese. When one considers that that historic event—possibly the greatest event of the 20th century—was conceived by an Englishman and encouraged in its conception by an American publisher who took pains to conceal his involvement, it appears it was, in reality, as English as plum pudding and as American as apple pie."

One revealing bit of background information collected by Honan, was that Bywater was not the first to pose the inevitability of an armed conflict between Japan and the United States. As early as 1913, Franklin D. Roosevelt—then Assistant Secretary of the Navy—had been a jingoist advocate of an armed conflict with Japan. In the spring of that year Roosevelt tried to convince the Japanese that the U.S. was about to launch an unprovoked attack upon them, as a way of encouraging the Japanese to a surprise attack on U.S. naval forces.

The occasion was the passage of a law stigmatizing Japanese immigrants by the California legislature. A sharply worded protest by the Tokyo government against the racist legislation was viewed by the Roosevelt crowd in the Department of the Navy as presumptuous. They put out a false story of the regrouping of U.S. naval forces in the Pacific in order to enrage the Japanese and stampede them into a first strike. President Wilson learned of this conspiracy and rebuked Roosevelt and his co-conspirators.

Did the British plan Pearl Harbor?

Bywater's scenario for a Japanese surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet included the capture of the Philippines and Guam. Most interesting is the fact, which Honan reports, that Japanese Admiral Yamamoto adopted Bywater's strategy, even though he himself did not advocate going to war, when he believed war to be inevitable. The backdrop to the accession to power by a militarist faction in Japan, was, of course, the determination by the British and Americans to prevent the Japanese from being an Asian power, and the Anglo-Americans' deliberate control of vital resources upon which the Japan depended.

Despite a series of provocations, such as the U.S. annexation of Hawaii, and British and American efforts to limit the growth of Japan's merchant marine as well as its Navy, the Japanese strategy—until they shifted to Bywater's plan—was for a defensive, rather than an aggressive, war. Such an aggressive strategy, however, would have threatened the British control of the Dutch East Indies, without any assurance that the United States could have been brought into the war on behalf of British interests.

It would seem that barely had the First World War ended, when the British were planning the next.