

A City in Waiting
San José, California Reacts to the Bombing of Pearl Harbor

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Introduction

This paper was written for a historical writing course at Santa Clara University during the winter of 2001-2002. I have always been fascinated with the Second World War, and was advised by my professor, Gerald McKevitt, S.J., to write on a local topic so that he could be of the most assistance. With the attacks of September 11, 2001 still fresh in my mind and the emotional effects still lingering, I wondered what sort of shock the Americans of 1941 must have gone through. Shortly after the 2001 assaults on the United States people began to compare the two sudden attacks, and there were many debates on whether or not the two were indeed comparable. Though sixty years apart from one another, these two significant events in American History brought with them remarkably similar psychological responses in the American people. The purpose of this paper is to examine the reactions of the small city of San Jose, California to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in light of the modern-day American's newly gained perspective.

On September 11, 2001 the United States was attacked from the sky, seemingly without warning or provocation. The nation was caught totally unaware, confronted by an enemy that very few Americans viewed as a threat. It did not take long for people to draw comparisons between the recent destruction at the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the bombing of the United States' Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Historian A.G. Block described the events as "two ferocious assaults against America committed with such treachery as to make the date a synonym for outrage."¹ The two largest surprise attacks ever carried out on American soil both brought the people of the United States to the shocking realization that they were neither invincible nor immune to global violence on their own soil.

Fearful of a follow up to the damage that had already been done, the American public was in both instances put on alert to watch for suspicious activities. Americans in both 2001 and 1941 were asked to be vigilant and help protect their country. Without specific instructions as to what or who was considered suspicious, they directed their attention towards people who looked similar to the perpetrators. The effects of such actions were shameful. Racial profiling and discrimination were used by the populace of the United States to harass and detain people deemed potential conspirators, whether they were U.S. citizens or not.

Following such vicious assaults on their homeland, the American people felt surges of anger, grief, paranoia, and anxiety. Falling into somewhat of a panic, they wondered when the mayhem would spread and whether the enemy had the resources or desire to hit their hometown. For the citizens of San José, California in December of

¹ A.G. Block, "Pearl Harbor and the Birth of Modern California" California Journal 32, no. 11 (2001), 8.

1941, these feelings were very intense indeed. Brian Chen writes: “Stunned by the Japanese surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, West Coast residents worried that a follow-up strike might hit America’s Pacific shore.”² The small city of 68,457 inhabitants thought that they might be the next target.³ There was little doubt that a Japanese attack on the Bay Area would be a damaging blow to the United States’ war economy. They believed that San José’s defense industries and its proximity to the Bay made it a prime target for Japanese harassment or invasion. The people of San José knew that Japan had already carried out a very successful operation far from their home islands. What they did not know was that the possibility of a Japanese assault was extremely slim and that the Japanese Empire lacked the resources to successfully bring the War to the West Coast of the United States. Nonetheless, beginning on December 8, 1941, San José, California reacted to its fears and perceived vulnerability by mobilizing into a city of organized defense. It was soon bustling with activity aimed at maintaining order in a wartime setting and protecting against saboteurs and Japanese attack.

As news of the incidents of Sunday December 7 reached the mainland, the first reaction was disbelief. The second was fear. Many people of San José drove over to the coast to wait in silence for the Japanese Navy to appear on the horizon. Others scanned the skies for Japanese aircraft. Still others waited and prayed for some word from loved ones who were in Hawaii and might have been harmed by the attack. News of the San José State football team was especially valuable because they had been in Honolulu at the time of the assault on Pearl Harbor. The San José Mercury Herald soon reported that

² Brian B Chen, Artillery at the Golden Gate: The Harbor Defenses of San Francisco in World War II (Missoula, Montana: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company Inc. 1994), 1.

³ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940-Population (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 611.

they were all unharmed in the attack.⁴ The extreme emotion of the time touched every resident of the small city of San José.

San Joséans' unease was furthered as false reports came in of enemy activity along the West Coast. The San José Mercury Herald reported that enemy planes had been spotted both north and south of San Francisco, with several groups flying near San José. The newspaper announced: "The grim fact that San José's own backyard is a battlefield was brought home last night."⁵ The report was all the more frightening because it was reinforced by the comments of Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, commander of the Fourth Army and the Western Defense Command. "I don't think there's any doubt that they came from a carrier' he said...'They could have been on reconnaissance duty: they could have gathered information for later use.'" ⁶ Lieutenant General DeWitt did not refute the story, and his explanation that the Japanese were merely on a scouting mission was hardly reassuring to a San José public who now believed that the enemy was gathering information for an attack. False headlines of "Enemy Warplanes Over L.A."⁷ and stories of "Mystery Fires" hitting Santa Cruz only strengthened the belief that the Japanese were coming.

Actions were taken by the cities of the West Coast to disrupt the efforts of incoming enemy aircraft. The first of the measures was the installation of air raid sirens and loud speakers to notify the public of an incoming attack and allow them to prepare for it. The second technique used by Bay Area cities was the blackout. Army planners did not want to give incoming aircraft any beacons to hone in on, so in times of possible

⁴ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 8 Dec. 1941.

⁵ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 9 Dec. 1941.

⁶ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 9 Dec. 1941.

⁷ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 11 Dec. 1941.

assault the urban populations were ordered to turn off all of their lights and cover all windows with blackout screens. Hardware stores advertised in Bay Area newspapers, selling black paint and window covers, and offering advice on installation. In cases of blackouts, all illuminations were turned off-- including billboards, shops, streetlamps, and even the headlights on cars. The police enforced the order and made sure that as little of the city as possible could be seen from the sky at night. The people of the Bay Area wanted to make it as hard as possible for enemy aircraft to see targets over their cities.

The first blackout for San Francisco came during the night of December 8 with the report of enemy aircraft approaching. San José did not experience its first blackout until 2:21 a.m. on December 10. The San José Mercury Herald whose “crews prepared their copy by candle-light,” announced that the city’s first blackout was “almost totally effective.”⁸ Aside from some inconveniences to newspaper staffs, these blackouts had other negative effects. Two people were killed and eleven people were wounded in car accidents in the Bay Area from the total darkness caused by the blackouts.⁹

Law enforcement officers worked hard to keep the local population from becoming hysterical, but tensions were high, and people were terrified. An article in the San José Mercury Herald three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor illustrated the kind of paranoia that Bay Area residents experienced. “State employed painters on the San Francisco-Oakland bay bridge want it known that they are not saboteurs and will the span’s guards please stop shooting at them?”¹⁰ Although no worker was hurt, the incident showed the extent of uncertainty and alarm that infected the people of the Bay Area and the mistakes that the city of San José hoped to avoid in setting up its defense.

⁸ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 10 Dec. 1941.

⁹ San Francisco Examiner (San Francisco) 12 Dec. 1941.

¹⁰ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 10 Dec. 1941.

Less than five hours after Japan declared War on the United States, San José's Civil Defense Council went into action. Although the Council itself had been organized less than a week before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, it responded immediately to the task at hand. "Guarding bridges, railroad yards, and key industrial plants got underway by early evening," a local historian records. "By midnight, a telephone switchboard had been installed to establish communication between the city and the Army command."¹¹ The San José Civilian Defense Council wasted no time in getting their city ready for possible assaults.

In the event of a local war crisis the Civilian Defense Council would have command of all of the city's municipal departments. The San José Mercury Herald published forms asking for volunteers to sign up for "duties in connection with the vital defense of the community."¹² Volunteers immediately flooded the Council. More than five hundred San José residents responded to the call and joined in the defense of their city. The civilians manned air raid posts, twenty-four hours a day, and patrolled precious water supplies and vulnerable areas. On December 11, the Council assigned some two hundred men to be trained by the Police and Fire departments as well as medical services to be auxiliary members for use in a crisis.

The Council took the defense of the city one step further on December 12 with the creation of 109 precincts within the city. Each precinct was assigned a captain who was responsible for his assigned area in case of emergency. Historian Clyde Arbuckle recorded the further division of the city: "And the precincts, in turn, were divided into blocks, each with a block warden whose photo was published in the papers so residents of

¹¹ Clyde Arbuckle, History of San José, (San José, California: Smith & McKay Printing Co. 1985), 360.

¹² San José Mercury Herald, (San José) 9 Dec. 1941.

his block could know him.”¹³ San José’s Civilian Defense Council formed an almost military-like chain of command that would ensure that the city would not fall into anarchy should San José come under attack.

In addition to being a model for wartime organization, the city of San José hosted an F.B.I. War Course to instruct law enforcement officers how to prepare for the War. Over five hundred officers from five counties attended the course. The topics covered included sabotage, “Un-American activities,” blackouts, air raid warnings, and other wartime measures.¹⁴ The F.B.I. trained local law enforcement to protect the West Coast from any form of Japanese attack.

The F.B.I. was not the only federal agency to enter the San José area. The United States Army made its presence known, reminding citizens that they were living in a nation at war. On December 12, the San José Mercury Herald announced “Several large detachments of soldiers moved into San José under the cover of darkness last night and took up stations in various sections of the city. Movement of troops and number involved were clothed in the strictest secrecy.”¹⁵ The mystery of the arrival of the troops alarmed some residents who wondered why so many soldiers were in their town. It turned out Major General Robert C. Richardson’s Seventh Army had established headquarters in San José. The Army was so large that it took over the entire ten-story Commercial Building at 28 North First Street.¹⁶ The presence of such a large group of soldiers changed the social scene for the city of San José. Locals held dances and parties for the

¹³ Clyde Arbuckle, History of San José, 362.

¹⁴ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 12 Dec. 1941.

¹⁵ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 12 Dec. 1941.

¹⁶ Clyde Arbuckle, History of San José, 360.

men, many of whom were far from home. Eventually San José formed a United Service Organization in order to entertain their guests.

While some San Joséans partied with their new friends, local Japanese and Japanese-Americans were suffering. As soon as news reached the mainland of the attack on Pearl Harbor, countless Californians became suspicious of anyone of Japanese ancestry. Although the Japanese were the largest non-white ethnic group in San José they made up just 0.62% of the population.¹⁷ These four hundred twenty three individuals were watched with suspicious eyes by their white neighbors. Historian Lou Cannon observed, “Many suspected that an attack [on the West Coast] would be abetted by Japanese and Japanese-Americans.”¹⁸ The Japanese community denounced the assault and pledged its loyalty and support to the United States of America. But many people of San José let their prejudices against Japanese guide their opinions on the issue of Japanese loyalty. The Japanese community tried in vain to convince their neighbors of their loyalty and that they were not working with the Japanese government.

The first action of suspicious Bay Area residents was to restrict the travel of their Japanese neighbors. It didn’t take long for this to happen and all Japanese crossing Bay bridges were required to halt and have their cars searched for explosives. On December 8, all Japanese traveling were stopped and asked to show their credentials and explain the reason for their trip. By December 11, a ban was placed on all persons of Japanese heritage forbidding them to travel on bus or train.¹⁹ It didn’t matter whether they were

¹⁷ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940-Population (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 611.

¹⁸ Lou Cannon, “After Pearl Harbor: The Politics of Patriotism” California Journal 32, no. 11 (2001),

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¹⁹ San José Mercury Herald (San José) 8 Dec. 1941-- 11 Dec. 1941.

born in the United States or not, all people of Japanese heritage were limited in their travels.

The prejudices and suspicions of the Bay Area continued as people began to accuse various Japanese and Japanese-Americans of conspiracy. Arbuckle noted “Nervous citizens [of San José] swamped authorities with reports of ‘strange airplanes’ and ‘suspicious’ persons.”²⁰ The F.B.I. compiled a list of suspect persons and not surprisingly most of them were Japanese. These people were arrested and detained to prevent them from aiding an assault on the West Coast. It was this sort of public opinion that was based both on the original assault and prior prejudices that eventually got the Japanese relocated to American Concentration Camps. Despite the fact that Governor Olson believed that most Japanese living in California were loyal, they were viewed as enemies.²¹

The bombs and torpedoes that the Japanese dropped on Pearl Harbor sent ripples across the Pacific that reached the California coast. These ripples manifested themselves in the hearts of the people of the Bay Area and caused an initial panic that gripped the residents of San José. The residents responded by developing the means by which they could bear an assault from the Japanese Empire.

The reaction of the city of San José proved wholly unnecessary. It is now evident that the Japanese could not successfully launch an offensive against the mainland United States. Aside from the shelling of an oil field just north of Santa Barbara in 1942, Japan never did mount an attack on California.²² They did not even make a large effort to

²⁰ Clyde Arbuckle, History of San José, 360.

²¹ Lou Cannon, “After Pearl Harbor: The Politics of Patriotism”, 18.

²² Clark G Reynolds, “Submarine Attacks on the Pacific Coast, 1942”. Pacific Historical Review 33, no. 2 (1964): 183-193

sabotage the West Coast's industry. In the final days of 1941, San Joséans were erroneous to conclude that they were the next targets of the Japanese. But it is important to look at the way in which San José reacted to its perceived threat because in looking at the events of the past, scholars can find remarkable similarities and insights into present situations and future events.

A few short weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, it became clear that the enemy did not have the means to significantly strike again on United States soil. Thus, fear gradually subsided, and the public returned to as normal a life as was possible for citizens of a nation at war. Again, this result was similar to the reaction of the residents of San José following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In both cases, residents were urged to fly American flags and the nation temporarily put aside their political differences for the sake of showing the enemy that the United States was united.²³ All that remained a few weeks after both incidents were inconveniences reminding the American public that it was indeed at war. The San Joséans of 2001 went from anxiety of another catastrophic attack to concerns over longer lines at airports. In 1941, San Joséans went from fright of Japanese invasion to food, gas, and other war material rationing. Although both assaults took place hundreds of miles from the city of San José, California, both put dread into the the city's residents.

Whoever experienced one, or both, of these incidents in the history of the United States forever remembers where they were when they heard the news of the dastardly deeds. As A.G. Block writes, "Two fateful days smashed into the calendar of American history."²⁴ September 11, 2001 and December 7, 1941, two dates in American history

²³ San José Mercury Herald Dec. 8, 1941

²⁴ A.G. Block, "Pearl Harbor and the Birth of Modern California", p. 8

where the nation was tested, and in the weeks that followed, the American people proved themselves equal to the challenge.

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