

***Equal Time for Freethought* interview with George Victor, author
of *The Pearl Harbor Myth: Rethinking the Unthinkable*
interviewed by Barry F. Seidman**

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Equal Time for Freethought: Welcome, George Victor, to Equal Time for Freethought.

George Victor: Thanks, Barry. I'm glad to be here.

ETFF: Introduce us to your book. What is the core argument you're trying to make in [*The Pearl Harbor Myth*](#)?

Victor: That President Franklin Roosevelt anticipated war with Germany when he was inaugurated as president, prepared for it, and believed that it was absolutely necessary to save most of the world, that the U.S. had to get into it. He engaged in a series of diplomatic and military steps to get this country, which was very unwilling, to enter the war, to get the country into it.

ETFF: Your book makes notes of evidence recently released concerning primary sources, such as the Roosevelt administration and the military he oversaw. Because obviously, people have been talking about whether or not Roosevelt knew about the attack on Pearl Harbor before it happened, have you found that this newly uncovered information immunizes your work from those academics who freely toss around the term "revisionist history"?

Victor: That doesn't immunize us at all. I find that many people, including those who are still very devoted to the memory of Roosevelt, as well as others who grew up with the belief that the Japanese started the war with a sneak attack upon us that caught us by surprise, stick to these positions, and still call people who bring out information for another way of looking at it, they call those people "conspiracy theorists".

ETFF: In your experience, have you connected with a lot of other historians who might have challenged your opinion?

Victor: I haven't discussed it with many. I got a few historians with different viewpoints involved in reading my manuscript to criticize it and make suggestions. And that's where I encountered some of this resistance.

ETFF: What is, then, the nature of your evidence? Where does your new evidence come from? How reliable is it?

Victor: The most dramatic evidence is about 230 items of intelligence, came to Washington, saying that the Pearl Harbor attack was coming, and they varied from very specific warnings that gave the date, to very vague ones.

ETFF: Was this information that was kept top secret for a long time, or did it just recently come out?

Victor: A lot of it was in Navy department records that had been hidden away until 1979 when President Jimmy Carter ordered them released. They were nonetheless very slowly released over the years, and many of these warnings came out in the 1990s.

ETFF: Before we get into this information, into the details: another phrase, and you mentioned it just before, we hear, besides "revisionist history", from the right and from the center and certainly from the media, is "conspiracy theory". Whether we're talking about the assassination of John Kennedy or the events of September 11, 2001, many folks rush to attack what they see as radical or unpatriotic ideas, whether they are substantiated or not, as conspiracy theorizing. What's wrong with the label "conspiracy theory" regarding works such as yours?

Victor: Scholars have reported from all over the world that governments ordinarily operate by conspiracy. They keep things secret, secretly plan operations, and when exposure is threatened, they imprison and kill people to maintain secrets. And at least in the cover-up of the information we had about the Pearl Harbor attack and the planning for it, nobody was harmed except by reputation. The evidence is in the data. It's in the intelligence reports that Japan was going to attack Pearl Harbor. It's in the diplomatic steps and the military steps that Roosevelt took to provoke Japan into the attack. Because he came to believe that there was no other way to get into the war before Hitler conquered the Soviet Union and Great Britain, and then would have the resources of all of Europe to invade the Western Hemisphere whenever he chose to.

ETFF: Let's get into this evidence. Because this is the crux of your book. You report in your book that FDR, knowing in advance of the Japanese plan on attacking Pearl Harbor, what he may have done to push Japan to attack us in the first place and why he may have allowed the attack to happen fairly unimpeded. Take us to the events directly preceding August 7, 1941.

Victor: At the beginning of July, the government of Japan adopted a new policy which involved the probability of war against the United States and Great Britain. Our government immediately knew of that plan. Now that was a contingent plan by the Japanese government. That their effort would go mainly into negotiating an agreement over differences between Japan and the United States. And if the negotiations failed, they would attack us. And this was known by our government from intelligence.

ETFF: Getting into the war, the United States and Japan had been working on keeping the peace between the two countries for many years before 1941. Tell us about how the U.S. kept upping the ante, so to speak, in keeping the peace. Where the Japanese government seemed to want peace with the United States, they seemed to be afraid of

getting into a war with the United States from their intelligence telling them that they might lose such a war.

Victor: First, about the Japanese government. They wanted peace, but that was contingent on their being allowed to keep at least some of their conquests in China. And they had conquered an enormous part of China. Probably everything else was negotiable as far as they were concerned.

ETFF: You were talking in the book about sort of like what we did with Saddam Hussein in this recent war in Iraq. We would say, "OK, we'll agree with peace under this circumstance". And then when Japan would say, "OK, we accept", then the United States would say, "Oh, we wanna add this to the ante". And then Japan would say, "OK, yes", and then the United States would come back and say, "Oh, but we wanna add this to the ante". Keep pushing them to a position where they felt that a real peace wouldn't be kept, that they were being pushed into war.

Victor: You've put it well. Until the beginning of 1941, there was no prospect of war between the two countries, and there were no negotiations. And the Japanese government initiated them by using some people who had contacts in Roosevelt's cabinet. And then a series of conversations began between our Secretary Cordell Hull and the Japanese ambassador. And they never advanced beyond talking to negotiation. In the spring, Secretary of State Hull presented four conditions that the Japanese must agree to before negotiation could start. And they said "we agree", but that didn't change. He evidently — and I don't have specific data on this — he was under instructions not to begin negotiation at any point.

ETFF: No matter what the Japanese came back with.

Victor: Yes. Over the next months, the Japanese became more specific in what they would agree to that Hull had requested, and more firm, and indicated that they would be willing to give up some of the territory that they had already conquered, and maybe even all of it, as a talking point. But we did not accept that as sufficient for starting negotiation.

ETFF: You mentioned a little earlier that we received a lot of warnings, 230 pieces of material showing warnings. Tell us about these warnings we received and how they were addressed by FDR and the military.

Victor: 188 of the warnings were in Japanese naval codes, which we had begun to break a few years earlier, and they changed the details in the code from time to time, but didn't change the basic code. So whenever they changed it, we re-broke it. But these were only partial breaks. We never fully broke it during 1941. It took until 1942. But during 1941, in the fall, the critical period, we were able to read, by various intelligence cryptographers' estimates, between 1% and 40% of the messages that we intercepted. And we intercepted thousands, of which 188 indicated a coming attack on Pearl Harbor.

ETFF: And these were specific coordinates, to let people know it was in Pearl Harbor, or in a specific part of Hawaii? Were they "guesstimates"?

Victor: A few of the warnings were very specific, so that nobody could miss them in our intelligence communities. Other warnings varied down to very vague. An estimate made by a historian at the National Security Agency of this 188 messages, is that 20 to 40 of them should have indicated to intelligence workers that the attack was coming.

ETFF: Based on Franklin Roosevelt knew and when he knew it, we're assuming he was privy to all the codes and the other warnings that were coming. Were there any warnings about a pending attack from Japan outside of the codes that they were breaking?

Victor: Yes. Besides the naval codes, we had broken the diplomatic codes. And about 25 of their diplomatic messages; we had completely broken that code.

ETFF: Would these be diplomatic messages from Japan to whom?

Victor: They were messages mainly from the Japanese consul in Hawaii to Tokyo. There were also some messages from Tokyo to representatives of Japan across the world.

ETFF: Were there any other indications, outside from breaking the codes, though? For instance, did another country, did China warn us, or did some other country near Japan knowing what they were gonna do, or thinking they knew what they were gonna do, say, "Listen, keep your eyes out for these guys?"

Victor: Yes, on all these points, you're right. The two governments whose intelligence also learned of the coming attack were Great Britain and the Soviet Union. And the government in Java. And in addition to government sources, we had our own agents who reported to Washington that the Japanese were planning to hit Pearl Harbor. And there were other people from different countries who brought information to us to the same effect.

ETFF: Based on what FDR knew and when he knew, assuming he was in the loop here, was there a way to prevent the attack or limit its severity?

Victor: Yes. The obvious way to limit the destruction of the attack would have been to put the commanders in Hawaii, Admiral Husband Kimmel and General Walter Short, on alert for an attack. This was not done.

ETFF: Well, let's play around with why it might not have been done. You mention in the book that, because of superstition and racism about Japanese people, or Asian people in general, that the Americans were not prepared for the technology and the firepower of Japan. So part of the reason you offer that some of these military leaders weren't given the right amount of information to protect themselves and protect the soldiers was because it was thought that the Japanese couldn't cause that much damage in the first place, even if they did attack.

Victor: That was thought by some of our leaders in Washington, including Roosevelt; General Marshall, the head of the Army; and Secretary Knox of the Navy. Even a surprise attack could be fought off with minimal loss. But that's not the reason they didn't want the

commanders in Hawaii. Washington had also received information that Japan would attack only if our armed forces in Hawaii appeared to be unprepared. And they had spies and informants in Hawaii who repeatedly sent messages that our forces were unprepared. And General Sherman Miles of Army intelligence testified before the congressional committee investigating the Pearl Harbor attack to this effect: that we knew that they would attack only if the forces appeared unprepared. And that, I infer, is the main reason that they were not alerted before the attack.

ETFF: But wouldn't they have been able to appear unprepared while being prepared? Just in case the military force of Japan was more than expected?

Victor: This is a matter of speculation. And it seems to me that to have them prepared, while giving the appearance of being unprepared, would have involved many thousands of Navy and Army troops. So that possibly a reason for not doing that was to prevent a leak beforehand that would discourage Japan from attacking. And afterward, to protect the government from knowledge of this plan.

ETFF: So what you're arguing, then, is that the very top, from President Roosevelt on down, knew that the Japanese were planning on attacking, got enough intelligence information from breaking codes and from other countries letting them know that Japan was gonna attack, probably had an idea when they might attack, and what the forces in Pearl Harbor must look like in order for them to attack, and made it such. So clearly, when you opened up our conversation, when you said the overall view of your book is that Franklin Roosevelt wanted to declare war on Germany because of the clear danger that Hitler presented and was presenting by taking over country after country in Europe, but they couldn't do that because people were resistant to going into another European war. So Pearl Harbor seems to have been just a pawn in this chess game to get us into the war. How much do you think the American people knew at the time about what was going on in Europe? What Hitler was all about.

Victor: The American public was reasonably informed about Hitler's military conquests and his statements that he meant to rule the world, or for Germany to rule the world. They were informed, but in a state of denial, as if the ocean would keep us safe. Knowing that the Japanese were well informed about what we were doing and planning as we were about what they were planning. During the fall of 1941, secretary of state Cordell Hull gave some particularly insulting and lengthy scoldings to the Japanese ambassador. And this needs to be viewed in the context, the reputation that the Japanese had, that if threatened they would fight no matter what the odds were against them. This was believed by many Japanese specialists to be characteristic of the Japanese. Others thought they would back down. But certainly both viewpoints were well represented in the administration and brought to the president's attention.

ETFF: Can you briefly describe for us how the official story of the surprise attack was sold, as well as sustained, to the American people?

Victor: In his address to Congress, which was his first public response to the attack, President Roosevelt characterized it somewhat as a sneak attack. He did not use that word. He used it later. And like some of our government leaders, the American public also had grossly underestimated the Japanese military power, and didn't believe that Japan could inflict all these defeats, in Hawaii and in our other islands in the Pacific, just by military power. They sought an explanation that would enable them to continue to believe that we were still the greatest power on Earth. And this explanation of the sneak attack, catching us by surprise, helped with that. Immediately, there was a lot of criticism, both in Congress and scattered around the nation, of "How did it happen, that our ships were caught in Pearl Harbor like sitting ducks?" And Roosevelt immediately began a couple of operations to deal with those questions. And there was a threat of a Congressional investigation, already been made by the head of the House committee. And he sent Secretary of the Navy Knox to Pearl Harbor to get information about what happened there. Secretary Knox reported back to him that our forces were caught by surprise, but contrary to rumors that they were drunk and lax and so forth. They had performed their duties very well once the attack began. Roosevelt did not let him make that report public, but had him say that there were indications of failure to carry out their duties by people in Hawaii. And he was ordering an investigation, a full and formal investigation, and he appointed an investigating committee with members of high prestige, headed by a Supreme Court Justice. And that commission, which was given very selective access to what was available in government records, brought in a finding that the commanders at Pearl Harbor had failed to carry out their duties. And the Roberts Commission report, named for Justice Roberts, was the first major public statement that had impact, and it shaped the succeeding history of the Pearl Harbor attack.

ETFF: I was born in the Sixties, so a lot of this stuff is really history for me. I know you're a little older, you might have lived through some of this and have first hand experience. I'm listening to what you're saying about Knox and about what Roosevelt would allow to be told and to come out in the open and what wouldn't. And it just keeps sounding like what we're hearing about 9/11. It surely sounds like this is the kind of thing that governments have done over and over again.

Victor: I would say all over the world. It took a couple of years for pressure to build for an independent investigation. And it is documented fully that Army and Navy officers had testified in 1943 and 1944, and in the Congressional investigation in 1945 to 1946, were ordered to lie if necessary. To hide our advanced knowledge of the coming attack at Pearl Harbor.

ETFF: Well clearly, you are not necessarily unhappy with FDR, and see him as one of the more progressive presidents of the 20th century, as far as the presidents go. Your book was not a partisan attack, necessarily, on FDR, his policies, or more broadly, the Democratic party at the time. And yet you've made clear that because of the successes of Nazi Germany, FDR must indeed even be praised for helping stop Hitler. So what should Americans take from *The Pearl Harbor Myth*? What do you see as the significance of knowing the truth about what happened in 1941?

Victor: From my position, the better informed the public is, the better a nation is. But that is not the common view. Most Americans agree with their governments that secrecy is an important part of world affairs and even domestic conduct of government operations. I think

the lesson there is going to take decades, if not centuries, to be appreciated. And maybe we're heading toward a time way down the road when a government can be based on trust, as distinguished from manipulation, across the world.

ETFF: Do you think that had we been able to accept the truth, "we" as in the American people in general? It wasn't like everybody just heard yesterday that it was possible that our government knew in advance about the Japanese attack. So do you think that, had we been able to accept the truth about Pearl Harbor, or that we can now, that the American people would not have been so duped by President Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin lies; or George Bush Sr.'s arguments for why we had to go into Kuwait to fight Saddam Hussein; and of course the many, many lies of George W. concerning Iraq in 2003? It seemed that just a little critical thinking, a little bit of understanding that the United States government is like any other government across the world, and it's going to do things to manipulate what it finds and what it thinks is in the best interest of its people or of itself. And it would just seem common sense that if people would accept that, and understand that regardless of what they felt about Roosevelt, that would have built a kind of resistance?

Victor: I don't see any sign of that happening yet, even though people in this country and probably in most of the world consider politicians to be crooked and untrustworthy, they still need to trust and believe that their own leaders are telling them the truth, and will continue to do so for the indefinite future.

ETFF: Why do you think that is?

Victor: Well, let me mention first that the first serious historical study about Roosevelt's role in leading the nation into war was written by Charles Beard, who was widely considered the leading historian at the time. He wrote this in 1948. And he called Roosevelt a traitor for doing what he showed Roosevelt had done. I believe that despite our skepticism of what politicians say, most of the nation would have felt betrayed, as Beard felt. We need to trust our parents, other people in authority, teachers, scholars, scientists, and certainly rulers. We feel dependent on them. We feel helpless without their good offices, and this may be a reason why we extend to them more trust than we know they are entitled to.

ETFF: Well, that does seem to be the opposite of what we preach democracy is. Democracy is the people making decisions, and being able to be well informed so that they can make these decisions and not necessarily rely on authority. But therein lies the situation of the state.

Victor: I want to add something. A few times, you referred to what Roosevelt knew of the intelligence of the coming attack. We don't have data on what he knew specifically. We do know that every day, intelligence officers of the Army and Navy came to him with intelligence that had arrived since the day before. And we know that that included warnings of the coming attack. But we're not in a position to say what Roosevelt knew at one point or another point. That cannot be documented day by day.

ETFF: What's next for George Victor? I hear you're writing another book.

Victor: The subject is the role of Christian fundamentalism in genocide.

ETFF: I just saw a series of movies about the connection between the Christian church and the Nazi party.

Victor: Yes, the Holocaust is one big chunk, along with events leading to it. And I also take up genocide in Yugoslavia and in New England, when the Puritan settlers came to New England.

ETFF: Well, Christian fundamentalism has been addressed on Equal Time for Freethought many times in the past. It's something that's very alive right now, and operates fairly successfully in the Republican party right now. When the book is finished, give me a call.

Victor: Thank you very much.

ETFF: Thank you, George Victor, for joining us on Equal Time for Freethought today.

Victor: My pleasure.