Was it wise for Adolf Hitler to declare war on the United States after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?

**Viewpoint:** Yes, Adolf Hitler’s declaration of war on the United States was the correct decision in the context of his worldview and war aims.

**Viewpoint:** No, Adolf Hitler’s decision to wage war against the United States was based on a poor assessment of American economic and military might.

Adolf Hitler’s decision to declare war on the United States four days after it was attacked at Pearl Harbor (7 December 1941) was the most puzzling of his twelve-year rule. The chain of events it set in motion made Germany’s defeat certain. Yet, what if Hitler had refrained from taking that step? It is at least questionable whether President Franklin D. Roosevelt would have immediately ventured to urge declaring war on Germany when, for the first time since September 1939, American national purpose was focused on one common goal: the annihilation of Japan. Instead, Roosevelt was more likely to bide his time and work behind the scenes to bring congressional leaders to support a war on two fronts across two oceans.

Part of that process would have involved continuing and extending support of Britain—particularly since it, by grace of Japan, would now be America’s ally in the Far East. An easy step would be to push convoy protection eastward, perhaps even to British ports, and publicize the clashes likely to result from the reactions of the Kriegsmarine (German Navy). Hitler almost certainly would have begun hostilities eventually, with or without formal declarations. Had he acted, however, on his often-expressed belief that the United States was not a dangerous foe—had he stayed his hand even for six or eight months—the U.S. buildup in Britain would have been correspondingly delayed. There would have been no Operation Torch (November–December 1942), nor occupation of French North Africa. The combined bomber offensive would have taken longer to get off the ground. The Battle of the Atlantic would have begun against an Anglo-American coalition in its preliminary stages of cooperation. The U.S.S.R., with only Britain's limited forces to create diversions in the west, would have had so little hope of a second front in any near future that Joseph Stalin might even have considered negotiation a possible option. Were these conditions for an eventual German victory? Perhaps not, but it might have been a longer, bloodier road to Berlin.
Viewpoint:
Yes, Adolf Hitler's declaration of war on the United States was the correct decision in the context of his worldview and war aims.

On 11 December 1941 Adolf Hitler declared war on the United States. In retrospect this action made little sense, for it brought the world's largest economy and military potential to bear against Germany, which was already bogged down in a vast military undertaking against the Soviet Union. How could Hitler have been so foolish? On the other hand, if he was indeed foolish, why have so many writers attributed an almost demonic genius to him? Rationality is a category of often limited efficacy for understanding human actions. One should never assume that individuals in different cultures and times share the same values and think in the same "rational" terms. Instead of damning the stupidity and infamy of Hitler's declaration of war on the United States, with the benefit of hindsight, one should examine his decision from his point of view. Hitler's declaration of war made sense, if one achieves the following feats of historical imagination: one must proceed from the assumptions of Hitler's despicable racist worldview, accept his false understanding of U.S. military potential, and recall that Germany and Japan appeared to be winning their wars prior to the battles at Stalingrad (Summer 1942–2 February 1943), Midway (3–6 June 1942), and Guadalcanal (August 1942–February 1943).

During the Weimar period (1919–1933), Hitler's foreign-policy aims differed fundamentally from those of most Germans who hated the Versailles Treaty (1919). He agreed that this treaty enslaved Germany and needed to be overcome, but he maintained that mere border corrections made little sense. As he demanded in a foreign-policy speech in 1928, as translated by Gerhard L. Weinberg in Hitler's zweites Buch: Ein Dokument aus dem Jahr 1928 (1961), "No drop of blood for goals that are not in the German people's interest. . . . Our goals are to gain liberty and land. We do not want any border corrections. 10 or 20 kilometers will not improve the future of our nation. That can never be the aim of a healthy foreign policy." German soldiers should only be sacrificed for truly worthwhile goals.

Hitler described his far-reaching foreign-policy aims in 1924 in Mein Kampf (My Struggle) and again in 1928 in his untitled "Second Book," which was not published during his lifetime. These books did not set out a fixed course for his future actions, but they did show the general direction he would take Germany, should he come to power. Hitler believed that a grand vision was prerequisite to great accomplishments. Not in his time, but in the next generation or more, Germany's racial destiny was to rule the world. His job was to set Germany well on its violent course toward this goal; his vision was nourished by a distinct view of world history, which for him consisted of a struggle among nations for survival and predominance, as well as a strong anti-Jewish component. This struggle was about trade and manufacturing on one level, but more important was each nation's ability to feed itself with its own agricultural resources. In order to achieve self-sufficiency, nations had to fight wars. Armored conflict was a fundamental reality of international relations.

According to Hitler, "The final outcome of the struggle for the world market will lie with force and not with the economy itself. . . . The sword must stand before the plow and an army before the economy."

Hitler described in his second book the worldwide hegemonic threat that he believed the United States posed: "The only state that will be able to defy North America in the future is the one that knows how . . . racially to enhance the value of its national qualities and governmentally to bring them into the form best suited to this purpose. . . . It is again the task of the National Socialist movement to strengthen and prepare its fatherland for this task to the utmost. These statements do not explain why Hitler declared war on the United States, but they signal his potential willingness to do so.

His writings in the 1920s were not a mere episode, but the formal expressions of a coherent worldview to which he remained true. He mentioned his worldwide ambitions in speeches to Wehrmacht (German Army) officers several times in 1939—before invading Poland (1 September 1939) but after having accomplished liberation from the armaments restrictions mandated by Versailles, the remilitarization of the Rhine, and the Anschluss (Union) of Austria and a large chunk of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Hitler did not discuss a precise plan but spoke in global terms, justifying his megalomaniacal vision with the German people's superior racial value, numerical strength, and proven ability to fight. After the campaign against Poland, he reiterated his vision in a speech in the Reich chancellery in November 1939: "A racial struggle has erupted [to decide] who should rule in Europe and therefore in the world." Germany would win, of course, because the German soldier was inherently superior to all others: "One can accomplish anything with the German soldier."
Hitler’s vision was more than mere raving. The Kriegsmarine (German Navy) had far-reaching plans for the whole Atlantic, although its ideas were never realized because its shipbuilding programs always had to make way for the growing material needs of the army. Striking the United States by air appeared to hold more promise. Jochen Thies, in Architekt der Weltherrschaft. Die “Endziele” Hitlers (1976), shows that in 1937 Willy Messerschmitt revealed to Hitler and Hermann Göring a full-sized model of a four-engine airplane of which the range would be transcontinental. In 1940 the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) placed an order for the development of six versions of the Me 264, which were supposed to be able to carry heavy loads of bombs to the eastern seaboard of the United States and do reconnaissance work as far as the west coast. In November 1940, when Hitler’s successes had seduced him into believing everything was possi-
GERMANY DECLARES WAR

On 11 December 1941 the German minister for foreign affairs, Joachim von Ribbentrop, released the following note to the American embassy.

The German Government of the United States having violated in the most flagrant manner and in ever increasing measure all rules of neutrality in favor of the adversaries of Germany and having continually been guilty of the most severe provocations toward Germany since the outbreak of the European war, provoked by the British declaration of war against Germany on September 3, 1939, has finally resorted to open military acts of aggression.

On September 11, 1941, the President of the United States publicly declared that he ordered the American Navy and Air Force to shoot to kill at any German war vessel. In his speech of October 27, 1941, he once more expressly affirmed that this order was in force. Acting under this order, vessels of the American Navy, since early September 1941, have systematically attacked German naval forces. Thus, American destroyers, as for instance the Greer, the Kearney and the Reuben James, have opened fire on German submarines according to plan.

Furthermore, the naval forces of the United States, under order of their Government and contrary to international law have treated and seized German merchant vessels on the high seas as enemy ships.

The German Government therefore establishes the following facts:
Although Germany on her own part has strictly adhered to the rules of international law in her relations with the United States during every period of the present war, the Government of the United States from initial violations of neutrality has finally proceeded to open acts of war against Germany. The Government of the United States has thereby virtually created a state of war.

The German Government, consequently, discontinues diplomatic relations with the United States of America and declares that under these circumstances brought about by President Roosevelt Germany too, from today, considers herself as being in a state of war with the United States of America.


ble, the Führer stated that, should the United States enter the war, he would send bombers against it from the Azores in order to force it to defend its own airspace instead of coming to Britain’s aid. This defensive strategy had some merit from a purely theoretical point of view; however, Germany’s economic, industrial, military, and governmental capacity was more limited than Hitler’s imagination. The Me 264 never came on line, despite repeated efforts throughout the war.

Viewed from the end of the twentieth century, these military preparations and Germany’s declaration of war against the United States appear bizarre. The U.S. superpower role, however, had not yet emerged. Germany had experienced the ability of the Americans to field, equip, and feed a substantial army in 1917-1918, but Hitler and many millions of other Germans did not acknowledge the U.S. military contribution to the Allied victory. Following the infamous stab-in-the-back legend, Hitler believed that Germany had never been defeated militarily. Rather, internal enemies had turned on the German Army and undermined its achievements, for which so much German blood had flowed.

Why did Hitler choose 11 December 1941 to declare war on the United States? Weinberg’s explanation is the most convincing one. Proceeding from Hitler’s worldview, his overestimation of Germany, and underestimation of the United States, and also taking into account German armaments policy, Weinberg places Hitler’s decision into the global context in which the German chancellor thought. Hitler wanted to avoid war with the United States in 1939 and 1940, so he kept his navy on a tight enough leash to ensure that its actions against shipping in the Atlantic would not give the United States cause to enter the war. Germany would first defeat the Soviet Union; then it would build a blue-water navy big enough to take on the United States. But the war against the Soviet Union could not be ended in 1941; Britain was still in the conflict, and the United States was supplying both these countries. One way to deal with Britain, Hitler thought, would be to encourage Japan to move south against vulnerable British possessions. Such a move would also keep the United States occupied in the Pacific. Japan wanted to take advantage of British weakness but needed German support against the United States, which Hitler gladly promised since he thought the United States could do little more than continue to send goods to Britain and the Soviet Union. Germany could make up for its insufficient naval power with the Japanese navy. Japan never revealed its precise plans to Germany, but Hitler welcomed its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor (7 December 1941). He immediately ordered his navy to sink all ships it encountered from the United States or from countries who declared their solidarity with it. Hitler took a few more days to officially declare war because he was on the Eastern Front. He had to return to Berlin, and the Reichstag (German parliament) and public opinion had to be prepared.
Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Hitler’s declaration of war, as Weinberg points out, was that it received near unanimous support among Germany’s military and political leadership, which had not been the case with his other military undertakings. This support did not mean that Germany’s entire leadership shared Hitler’s worldwide ambitions, but it did believe that Hitler’s declaration of war on the United States was the correct, indeed the “rational,” thing to do at the time. This decision was not initiated on an insane or suicidal whim. It was clearly thought out. That the premises upon which it was based were false did not make it any less “wise” in the eyes of Hitler and the rest of Germany’s military and political leadership.

—MARK R. STONEMAN, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Viewpoint:
No, Adolf Hitler’s decision to wage war against the United States was based on a poor assessment of American economic and military might.

Hindsight makes the question of Adolf Hitler’s declaration of war against the United States seem absurd. Conventional wisdom asserts that Germany’s war was definitively lost when the Führer deliberately engaged the United States in a coalition already holding the Third Reich in a stalemate. What were the possible advantages, from both a tactical and strategic standpoint, as well as the immediate and long-term goals of such a move? Can Hitler even be considered a “rational actor,” or as Sebastian Haffner suggests, was this a conscious first step toward Göterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods)?

From Hitler’s perspective, in December 1941 the war was going reasonably well. General Erwin Rommel was poised just west of Tobruk, reorganizing for his drive to the Suez. The Battle of Britain (July–September 1940) had switched from the air to an underwater war of attrition, whose ratio seemed in Germany’s favor. France was out of the war except for an unimportant army-in-exile consisting mainly of quibbling factions. Scandinavia was either safely occupied, neutral, or allied in fighting against the Russians. The Balkans presented problems only for Italy’s Benito Mussolini. Only in Russia did shadows accompany light, and even there prospects seemed anything but desperate.

The drive into Russia in June 1944 had initially produced tremendous gains of territory and enemy armies destroyed. October, however, brought the rasputitsa (season of impassable roads). Autumn rains turned eastern Russia into a tank-swallowing quagmire. November snows and subzero weather froze the mud, but slowed the struggling Wehrmacht (German Army) to a ragged halt just short of the gates of Moscow. Marshal Georgy K. Zhukov began his counteroffensive on 5 December, two days before the Day of Infamy on the other side of the world. Conditions on the battlefront were so confused that the German General Staff was unsure of the extent and depth of the Russian attack. For the moment optimism prevailed—always the best attitude to hold when presenting Hitler with any news.

The Japanese strike at Pearl Harbor caught Hitler completely off guard, as it did everyone else. He quickly looked to see what political and military advantage he could make from it. The United States had been waging a de facto war against Germany for at least two years, providing both war matériel and supplies to keep Britain alive during the Blitz. With the Lend-Lease arrangement Britain added fifty destroyers to her fleet, to be returned later with no deductible for torpedo damage. For the last six months the U.S. Navy had been providing escort service for all convoys as far as Greenland, losing two destroyers in the process. In addition the United States was sharing its intelligence data with Britain—no small matter to a Kriegsmarine (German Navy) ignorant of British successes in breaking its codes.

In their May 1941 meeting off the coast of Newfoundland, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt made a pact that when the United States entered the war, and both knew it was only a matter of time, the conflict in Europe would take precedence over any war in the Pacific. At that time, however, American sentiment was wholly against getting involved in the European war. The “America First” movement, vigorously led by national heroes such as Charles Lindbergh and national hatermengers such as Father Charles Coughlin, made it political suicide for Roosevelt to do more. For the next step to war he needed a spectacular cause célèbre. Japan gave it to him—but Hitler helped.

The United States and its new allies declared war against Japan on 8 December 1941. The following Friday, 11 December, Germany and the United States declared war on each other. Hitler believed it was a safe decision. He had nothing immediate to fear militarily from the United States. This decision was made at the height of the U-boat rampage in the North Atlantic, with the sinking of 350,000–750,000 tons a month. This number...
leaped in the next three months to 1.7 million tons after they were freed to roam the central and south Atlantic. The German Admiralty had been lobbying for this freedom of movement for some time, promising to close the Atlantic to Allied shipping. Now the time seemed right. With Germany’s war going well on all fronts and the Americans preoccupied in the Pacific, Hitler and the Kriegsmarine felt they could put a lock on the Atlantic and strangle Britain, leaving the Reich free to concentrate on Russia. He never dreamed America could be any near-term threat to invade Europe or fight a two-front war.

Hitler had been wooing the Japanese for years to join him in the fight against Russia. Japan had its own agenda to the south. Besides, after the clash with the Russians at the Battle of Khalkin Gol in 1938, the Japanese army’s High Command wanted nothing more to do with the mechanized and steel-tipped weapons of the Soviets. Nevertheless, in Hitler’s reasoning, he had much to gain and nothing to lose diplomatically by aligning himself with Japan. It was always possible Japan would oblige him by at least making a feint toward Russia, which would oblige Joseph Stalin to keep a sizable army in the East. In fact, Russia and Japan had signed a non-aggression pact in 1938, which both sides adhered to until August 1945. Stalin knew Japan was primarily interested in South Asia, so he had already transferred a sizable portion of his eastern army, unbeknownst to Hitler, to the Moscow theater.

In short, Hitler believed that he had nothing to fear from declaring war on an ill-prepared and geographically distant United States. His navy would now control the whole of the Atlantic, as they then controlled the North Atlantic, keeping any potential American force from reaching Europe. At the most a few expeditionary divisions might supplement the British army, which he considered a spent force anyway. At best, by presenting a solid front with the Japanese, the Allies might hesitate in any counterattack, giving him time to finish Russia and consolidate the Reich.

Of course he overlooked a few things. The United States as yet had a numerically insignificant standing army, but they had an almost unlimited manpower pool, and, more important, the existing army was solidly professional, especially in its officer corps. Continuing budget cuts throughout the 1920s and 1930s had whittled out all but the most dedicated. Those left, men such as George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Omar N. Bradley, George S. Patton, and Douglas MacArthur, were, by good chance, uniquely talented to wage a modern war. On a lower level the noncoms were equally proficient in making civilians into soldiers. Hitler equally misjudged the ability of American industry to stop turning out Fords on Monday and start rolling off tanks on Tuesday. During the course of the war America produced 86,000 tanks, 297,000 aircraft, 8,800 naval vessels, 193,000 pieces of artillery and 2.5 million trucks, not to mention munitions of all types.

The attack on Pearl Harbor caused the immediate collapse of the “America First” Campaign and discredited its leaders, many of whom long bore the label of traitor. By declaring war in support of Japan, Hitler shared equally in the firestorm of public hatred, scorching away all arguments for not getting involved in European affairs. Thus Roosevelt had full political license to fulfill his commitment to Churchill that the European conflict take precedence. Declaring war on the United States also appealed to Hitler’s vanity and his warped vision of a world in flame. Yet, he traded short-term military and diplomatic advantages, which were largely illusionary, to poke a stick at an already aroused tiger.

—JOHN WHEATLEY, BROOKLYN CENTER, MINNESOTA

References

Adolf Hitler, *Hitlers zweites Buch: Ein Dokument aus dem Jahr 1928*, edited by Gerhard L. Weinberg (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1961);

Jochen Thies, *Architekt der Weltherrschaft. Die “Endsicht” Hitlers* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1976);
