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Joseph Grew and American-Japanese Diplomacy Leading to Pearl Harbor

Abstract

Joseph Clark Grew was the American ambassador to Japan in years leading to the attack on Pearl Harbor. This article attempts to uncover Grew's role as a diplomat in Japan during these turbulent years.

Keywords

Joseph Grew, American ambassador, Japan, Pearl Harbor

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Joseph Grew and American-Japanese Diplomacy Leading to Pearl Harbor
Amanda Watts

Joseph Clark Grew served as the American ambassador in Japan throughout the ten years preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor. On January 27, 1941, Grew sent a telegram to Washington warning, "There is a lot of talk around town to the effect that the Japanese, in case of a break with the United States, are planning to go all out in a surprise mass attack on Pearl Harbor."¹ Yet during the time that elapsed between Grew's warning and the actual outbreak of hostilities, Grew remained in Japan, pursuing different avenues of diplomacy to avert an "all-out, do or die attempt, actually risking national *hara-kiri*," by the Japanese engaging in a war they were doomed to lose.² Waldo Heinrichs, Grew's lone biographer, claims that because Ambassador Grew continued to view diplomacy as "personal relationships," and harbored ambitions to carve a name for himself in history, he lost "decisive influence with his government," and was therefore rendered an ineffective diplomat in Japan during the crucial months leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor.³ I will seek to weigh these claims against other scholarly sources, which portray Ambassador Grew as a perceptive diplomat who desperately sought to mend relations between the United States and Japan when faced with policy makers who "maintained a static, rigid, and unchangeable image of the situation."⁴ In this paper, I attempt to sift through a montage of primary and secondary sources supporting these divergent perspectives in an endeavor to discover the most accurate version of the truth. Ultimately, I reach the conclusion that Grew is neither a shining example of the pinnacle of diplomacy, nor a cautionary tale of an inept aristocrat. The difficulty in ascertaining the "truth" of the matter made Keith Jenkins's postmodernist approach more appealing, but I maintain that, through a close scrutiny of the available sources, it is possible to reach a more informed truth, if not absolute. Joseph Grew was simply an American diplomat who had moments of brilliance supplemented by a passion for golf and the desire for personal glorification, but reaching the truth of the matter was more trying and time-consuming than I had anticipated.

A significant portion of circumstances surrounding Grew's experience can be reasonably established as true. David Gaddis, one of America's leading diplomatic historians, confirms that Ambassador Grew was informed by Ricardo

1 Joseph Grew, *Turbulent Era: A Diplomatic Record of Forty Years: 1904-1945* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1952), 1233.

2 Waldo Heinrichs, *American Ambassador: Joseph C. Grew and the Development of the United States Diplomatic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 355.

3 *Ibid.*, 340-341.

4 Abraham Ben-Zvi, "American Preconceptions and Policies toward Japan, 1940-1941: A Case Study in Misperception," *International Studies Quarterly* 19 (June 1975): 244.

Rivera-Schreiber, the Peruvian ambassador to Japan, of an attack on the “U.S. Pacific Fleet, in the central Pacific, by using aircraft,” and subsequently informed the United States government.⁵ Heinrichs elaborates that as America increased its support for the Nationalist regime led by Chiang Kai-Shek, who resisted Japanese aggression in China, relations became further strained.⁶ These tensions were magnified by American discomfort with Japan’s continued imperialist expansion under the thin guise of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” Robert Fearey, Grew’s private secretary, writes that Grew ultimately came to place his faith in facilitating a conference between Japanese Prime Minister Konoye and President Franklin Roosevelt to “fundamentally turn U.S.-Japan relations around before it was too late.”⁷ Though the idea initially “caught the President’s imagination,” and Roosevelt considered a convenient meeting location, the notion quickly fell out of favor in Washington.⁸ Intriguingly, Paul Schroeder, an American historian and professor at the University of Illinois, believes, “The one obstacle that the Japanese were never able to overcome was the deep-seated distrust and suspicion of Secretary [of State Cordell] Hull,” who “used his considerable influence to throw cold water on the scheme.”⁹ Hull urged a pre-settlement agreement with four principles, which would “effectively torpedo the conference,” due to Konoye’s risk of assassination if the radical elements in the Japanese government caught wind of the negotiations before Konoye could secure the support of the Emperor and the Japanese public.¹⁰ Though Grew continued efforts to facilitate a leadership conference, these efforts proved to be in vain. Scholars seem to accept all these facts as accurate assessments of the situation surrounding the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Conflicting pictures of Ambassador Grew emerge when expounding upon this narrative. To a degree, Grew displayed characteristics of an aristocratic diplomat equally as concerned with leisure as with labor. Some sources seem to believe that his ineptitude may have been to blame for his inability to persuade Roosevelt to engage in face-to-face negotiations. Heinrichs deems Grew’s enthusiasm for the leaders’ meeting “an unprofessional reaction,” because “The function of diplomacy is to discover areas of agreement in confidence,” which is complicated when heads of state become involved.¹¹ Heinrichs attributes this to Grew’s concept of professionalism: “diplomacy was for him essentially a matter

5 David Gaddis, “The Story Behind the Telegram,” *Naval History* 15 (December 2001), 33.

6 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 329.

7 Robert Fearey, “My Year with Ambassador Joseph C. Grew, 1941-1942: A Personal Account,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 1 (Spring 1992): 102.

8 *Ibid.*, 103.

9 Paul Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* (Ithaca, NY: American Historical Association and Cornell University Press, 1958), 57-58.

10 *Ibid.*, 58.

11 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 340.

of personal relationships, the intercourse of nations being governed best by the code of gentlemanly conduct. Diplomacy retained an aristocratic flavor.”¹² Grew’s attitude toward diplomacy is perhaps best understood by taking into context the circumstances in which he first became involved in ambassadorial affairs. *Time* magazine published an article detailing Grew’s rise to ambassadorial status. After graduating from Harvard, Grew planned to return to his family’s banking business, but while traveling in China, “he shot a tiger in a cave” which “enthralled” President Theodore Roosevelt.¹³ On his trip, Grew became fond of life abroad and “decided to enter the foreign service,” as a clerk at the U.S. embassy in Cairo.¹⁴ When Teddy Roosevelt heard about the “tiger-slaying exploit,” he cried, “By Jove! I’ll have to do something for that young man.”¹⁵ Within hours, Grew was appointed third secretary of the embassy in Mexico City.¹⁶

Grew appeared to take personal connections into consideration when hiring his own staff as well. Robert Fearey, in recounting his year in Japan as the ambassador’s private secretary, revealed significant aspects of Grew’s actions through seemingly menial commentary. Upon first meeting the ambassador, Fearey noted that Grew had “just received a letter,” from Fearey’s “grandfather, Bishop William Lawrence,” who had confirmed Grew at Groton.¹⁷ When Mrs. Grew entered, she lamented that, unlike his predecessor, Fearey did not play bridge.¹⁸ Fearey’s account also reveals the importance golf played in Grew’s diplomacy. Not only did golf play an integral role in the daily activities of the ambassador during the tumultuous period, but Fearey outright states, “I had known that one of my principal duties would be golf.”¹⁹ Golf evidently played a large role in Grew’s diplomacy, or lack thereof, and a large portion of Fearey’s account is dedicated to recounting golfing outings. Heinrichs concurs that, even after being presented with Japan’s notice “breaking off [diplomatic] conversations,” Grew returned to the Embassy “intending to change clothes for a game of golf, only to hear first news that Japan and his country were in armed conflict” as of earlier that morning.²⁰ Following the outbreak of hostilities, Grew and his staff, along with other Americans in Tokyo, were interned for several months until the governments arranged for the return of diplomats. This experience traumatized Grew, and in his later speeches he recounted the tales of

12 Ibid., 341.

13 “The Ambassador,” *Time* 85 (June 1965): 25.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Fearey, “My Year,” 101.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 102.

20 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 358.

torture others had told him. However upsetting this ordeal was, Grew still managed to keep a detailed account of his golfing activities. On the fourth of January, 1942, the first line in Grew's journal entry boasts, "Made my first hole in one on our Embassy golf course," and Grew proceeds to describe the course.²¹ Grew's sufferings seem to be exaggerated.

Another question brought to light by Fearey's account is the notion of a report Grew compiled, yet has never been published. Fearey recalls that during the internment in Japan, Grew worked on a report to Hull and Roosevelt presenting his views on "Washington's mishandling of the pre-Pearl Harbor negotiations."²² Fearey summarizes the main points of Grew's report, but the accuracy of his rendition is highly questionable. Fearey states, "Although it is 50 years since I studied and made suggestions on Grew's internment report, and I kept no notes, I believe the above is an accurate rendition of what I read."²³ This ignorant statement severely undermines the credibility of Fearey's entire account, and suggests that Fearey's memories should probably be taken as mere reminiscences, and nothing more. Fearey remarks that the report "would seem to add to the strength of Grew's case that the Konoye-Roosevelt meeting should have been held," and appears puzzled by its mysterious disappearance.²⁴ Upon his return to the United States, Grew delivered many speeches with fervent patriotic rhetoric appealing to American passions. Personally, I think Grew may have buried the report in order to promote unity in a time of crisis. Still, this mention of an unpublished, unknown report compiled while being held in Japan during World War II raises many questions about what else Grew may have concealed from the public.

Additionally, Grew seems to have been influenced by the prospect of securing his legacy. Evident in his speeches and published documents are conspicuous attempts to paint himself as champion of peaceful relations, a negotiator between unyielding interests. Heinrichs claims that Grew could hardly resist the opportunity to attend a "successful summit conference averting war," which would be "the crowning moment of a mission, a career, the perfect last chapter."²⁵ These excerpts, taken in conjunction, evidence a leisurely lifestyle of a pompous aristocrat more concerned with improving his putting than international relations.

This evidence seems to contradict the notion that Joseph Grew was truly a talented ambassador dedicated to the avoidance of war between Japan and the

21 Joseph Grew, *Ten Years in Japan: A Contemporary Record Drawn from the Diaries and Private and Official Papers of Joseph C. Grew, United States Ambassador to Japan, 1932-1942*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 510.

22 Fearey, "My Year," 117.

23 *Ibid.*, 120.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 341.

United States. Yet many sources reached precisely that conclusion. *Time* magazine maintains that, “above all else, Grew was a precise and accurate diplomatic reporter.”²⁶ On what authority this assertion is founded remains unclear, but other sources seem to sympathize with Grew as well. Roberta Wohlstetter, a prestigious American military intelligence historian, commends Grew for “Extremely competent on-the-spot economic and political analysis,” calling Grew a “most sensitive and accurate observer.”²⁷ Additionally, Abraham Ben-Zvi, who wrote his doctoral dissertation, “American Preconceptions and Policies toward Japan,” for the University of Chicago, places the blame on policy makers such as Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Cordell Hull, who were “doctrinaire, dogmatic, and rigid in their convictions. . . unwilling to consider any view which was different from their own – even when the ‘different views’ were expressed with vigor and vehemence by an experienced diplomat like the American ambassador to Tokyo, Joseph C. Grew.”²⁸ Ben-Zvi categorizes the former men as “globalist-realists” who “perceived American national interests in the Far East as but one element within a wider context,” and therefore focused on American opposition as “essential to the preservation of the European and Pacific balance of power.”²⁹ Ben-Zvi contrasts this group with the “nationalist-pragmatists,” which include Grew and Roosevelt as men who focused on the “maintenance and protection of American interests,” and were well aware of the tremendous burden of a “two-ocean war.”³⁰ Ben-Zvi points to these differing priorities as the prime source of dissonance between the policy makers.

Perhaps, then, Heinrichs is correct, and Grew’s shortcomings as an ambassador can be more accurately perceived as the result of his lack of influence within his own government. Yet if he was ideologically aligned with Roosevelt, Grew should have had more success in facilitating a leaders’ meeting. The deficiency of Ambassador Grew’s power within the American government is plainly evident in his self-compiled diplomatic record, *Turbulent Era*. Throughout the book, Grew’s frustration becomes increasingly apparent as his advice continued to fall on deaf ears. He titled one section, “Recommendation for Speech by President Unheeded,” and describes how he attempted to convince Roosevelt to prepare a speech outlining benefits to the Japanese if they were to settle with the United States.³¹ Grew chronicles another failure under the subtitle, “Another Recommendation Unheeded,” referring to his suggestion to warn the

26 “The Ambassador,” *Time* 85: 25.

27 Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 383.

28 Ben-Zvi, “American Preconceptions,” 245.

29 *Ibid.*, 231.

30 *Ibid.*, 235-236.

31 Joseph Grew, *Turbulent Era: A Diplomatic Record of Forty Years: 1904-1945*, (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1952), 1342.

Japanese “*in advance* that certain economic sanctions will be imposed if [bases in Indochina] are taken.”³² Again indicating his sensitivity to future accounts of the events, Grew notes that “History will wish to know,” why his recommendation was not carried out.³³

Grew’s lack of persuasion may be connected to what some scholars deem to be unwarranted optimism. Heinrichs notes that “Grew tended to a more hopeful view of things than circumstances warranted,” and his attitude seemed “more imaginative, positive, and resilient than that of his government.”³⁴ Schroeder points out that in late November, Hull presented an “uncompromising” proposal which convinced the Japanese “beyond all doubt that settlement was impossible.”³⁵ Yet, Heinrichs notes, in a “burst of sheer wishful thinking,” Grew threw his support behind it.³⁶ Grew’s desperation to seize any agreement worked to discredit everything he endorsed. Schroeder notes, “Grew was undoubtedly over-optimistic,” concurring with Heinrichs’s view.³⁷ Gordon Prange, an expert on Pearl Harbor and Chief Historian for General Douglas MacArthur after World War II, believes Grew “overestimated his expertise about the Japanese scene,” and “could visualize only beneficial results” from the meeting because he was such a romantic aristocrat.³⁸

The ultimate failure for the leaders’ conference to materialize was a colossal disappointment for Grew. Though some sources attribute Grew’s lack of influence in the American government to his excessive optimism, there is also evidence that indicates the Japanese were hoping to reconcile with the U.S., which may refute the conception of Grew as an incompetent ambassador. The Foreign Minister told Grew that “the personnel of the Prime Minister’s suite, including full admirals and generals, have been confidentially appointed and the ship to carry the party has been put into momentary readiness to sail,” once the United States confirmed the conference.³⁹ The Japanese had not only prepared to depart for the conference; Konoye had also indicated that he “wholeheartedly” agreed with Hull’s four principles for “rehabilitation of relations.”⁴⁰ Hull had required the Japanese agree to four principles before meeting: “respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, equality

32 Ibid., 1347.

33 Ibid., 1343.

34 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 351, 354.

35 Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, 205.

36 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 357.

37 Schroeder, *Axis Alliance*, 205.

38 Gordon Prange, *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 170-171.

39 Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 1308.

40 Ibid., 1330.

of commercial opportunity, and peaceful procedures.”⁴¹ In fact, Konoye secretly “invited Grew to dine to convey his personal assurances” that he accepted Hull’s preconditions and that he would be able to carry out an agreement reached at the meeting.⁴² Konoye’s willingness to make any preliminary agreements at all is indicative of his eagerness to negotiate, because he was risking assassination if the radical elements in Japan heard of the talks.

Grew’s attempts to salvage the relations between Japan and the United States leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor attest to his value as an effective ambassador. However, these efforts must be examined, bearing in mind Grew’s biases and desires. Constantly reminding the reader that “the verdict must be left to history,” Grew demonstrated his hypersensitivity to how events would be retroactively judged.⁴³ Ultimately, I have reached the conclusion that despite his flaws, Ambassador Grew did genuinely strive to revive relations between the United States and Japan. His unwarranted optimism undermined his influence in his home government, and he was often distracted by golf, but his attempt to initiate a meeting between Roosevelt and Konoye had real potential. Scholars cannot reach a consensus on Grew’s overall effectiveness, and this is mainly attributable to the obscurity of the truth. The truth, in this instance, was masked both unintentionally and purposefully. Although the research proved to be much more extensive than I expected, I retain my original view on historical truth. If I had more time, I would be able to ascertain much more of the truth; unfortunately, I had far more sources than I had time. I would have liked to explore in much more detail what happened to the report Grew supposedly compiled while in internment, as well as the events of December seventh in Japan. Intriguingly, Grew requested an audience with the emperor after receiving a telegram from Roosevelt, but all he received was a notice breaking off diplomatic relations while the strike on Pearl Harbor was in motion.⁴⁴

Ultimately, I believe Joseph Grew was a diplomat who desperately wanted to reconcile the governments of Japan and the United States for political as well as personal reasons. He retained an archaic attitude toward the nature of diplomacy, and enjoyed the luxuries associated with that mentality. Grew’s ludicrous optimism eroded the foundation of his influence with the American government, which ultimately compromised his diplomacy. Grew certainly was no martyr, but he was no imbecile either. A good portion of the blame may lie within the American government and beyond Grew’s reach. Scholars may debate

41 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 344.

42 Ibid., 346.

43 Grew, *Turbulent Era*, 1372.

44 Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 358.

for centuries Grew's effectiveness as a diplomat, but it seems unlikely they will ever reach a unanimous verdict. This is cause for Keith Jenkins to gloat. However, with more dedicated researchers like Heinrichs, a better understanding of the past will continue to evolve.