'Pearl Harbor' review: A look at FDR, Pearl Harbor and a transformed presidency

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PEARL HARBOR
Steven M. Gillon
Basic Books
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For millions of Americans, Dec. 7, 1941, is a date that lives in infamy. They remember Japan's surprise attack against the Pacific Fleet based in Hawaii as a pivotal moment that swept the United States into World War II and sealed the fate of the Axis powers.

In "Pearl Harbor: FDR Leads the Nation Into War," Steven M. Gillon, resident historian for The History Channel and history professor at the University of Oklahoma, provides a concise and informative account of Franklin Roosevelt's initial response to the crisis. Against a backdrop of "chaos and confusion," with no polls to guide him and little time for reflection, Gillon argues, the president exhibited extraordinary qualities of leadership, orchestrating a response that would reassure and inspire an anxious nation.

"Pearl Harbor" does not break new ground or depart from conventional wisdom. Along with virtually every professional historian, Gillon sees no evidence that Roosevelt knew the attack was coming and used it to push the United States into war. The president and his staff, he writes, may have "gravely misjudged Japan's intentions and capability, but they were not guilty of deliberate deception."

Gillon agrees, however, that Roosevelt did restrict the flow of information to the press. Concerned that detailed damage assessments might embolden the Japanese and demoralize Americans, he ordered that briefings come only from the White House, and did not update casualty figures. These practices, Gillon claims, perhaps naively, would not be acceptable today.

There is no doubt, however, that, for good and ill, the attack on Pearl Harbor transformed -- and enlarged -- the presidency. In one of many executive orders, Gillon reminds us, Roosevelt authorized the forced evacuation of more than 100,000 Japanese residents on the West Coast, many of them American citizens.

The White House, Gillon indicates, became less accessible to American citizens. Although the residence was not painted black to make it less visible, as security experts suggested, 10 "safe houses" were identified in the Washington, D.C., area. Despite Roosevelt's insistence that he would not enter a bomb shelter unless Secretary of
the Treasury Henry Morgenthau allowed him "to play poker with all the gold in your vaults," a facility was constructed -- and the president began to travel in an armored limousine that once belonged to Al Capone.

When Roosevelt appeared before Congress to ask for a declaration of war, he was certainly aware that the occasion was momentous. But his grave expression, according to Gillon, may have reflected his determination to get one braced foot after another down the aisle and up the ramp that led to the rostrum. Mussolini had once mocked Americans for electing a paralytic, who needed assistance "to go to the toilet or dinner." Il Duce would soon learn how wrong he was.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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