

Opinion

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What 'Pearl Harbor' teaches us

THE MOST MEMORABLE scene in the Hollywood blockbuster movie "Pearl Harbor" is of a bomb. In a sinister way this is fitting because the two historic events the film depicts — the Japanese attack on the American fleet and the Doolittle raid against Tokyo — were the opening shots of a new kind of war where bombs mattered more than people.

Director Michael Bay's rendition of the Pearl Harbor attack is a sobering reminder of the death and destruction Japan unleashed, without warning, on the men and women of the American military. In the second half of the film, the retaliatory bombing of Tokyo by Doolittle's Raiders provides a psychological boost — just as it did in 1942 — by proving that America could pay Japan back in kind.

Except that it's not that simple. For all the suffering it caused, Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor was directed at a military target. That can't be said of Doolittle's raid on Tokyo, despite Bay's best efforts to suggest otherwise.

The Doolittle raid was a turning point for the United States, but not merely as a patriotic shot-in-the-arm. It also marked a shift in American military doctrine toward the bombing of cities — and ultimately the killing of civilians — as a legitimate technique of war, which it hadn't been before. That the Doolittle attack occurred during daylight was a mistake; the plan called for a raid on Tokyo's densely populated districts at night, when discerning military targets would have been difficult.

The aim of the attack was to deliver a demoralizing blow to Japan's populace. To be sure, in World War II it was Japan's military that pioneered the slaughter of civilians. In 1937 Japanese troops bayoneted or shot between 100,000 and 300,000 Chinese during the Nanking Massacre alone. But at the same time, the United States was hatching plans to kill civilians, too — by bombing Japan.

In the 1930s, the US Army Air Corps was keen to become an independent service branch, and argued that long-range bombing could win wars. Roosevelt, fearful of miring American men in another trench war such as World War I, warmed to the idea of bombing a country from the air. No one thought much about where all this was headed, but soon Japan was the obvious target.

Months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States devised a secret plan to base 165 heavy bombers in the Philippines, with the idea that they could strike Japan.

Japanese military targets were identified, but in a new development, so were economic and civilian targets. It turned out that the Philippines were really too far from Japan; worse still, in a sad irony, these overconfident preparations cost the United States its one chance to mount a defense of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7.

A fleeting scene in the film shows an American radar operator mistaking the incoming Japanese fighters for a scheduled flight of American B-17s. The scene is factually correct, but the movie doesn't mention that those bombers were en route to the Philippines to bomb, you guessed it, Japan.

The United States went on to wage a terribly costly land-and-sea campaign against Japan in the Pacific islands, geared in part toward the holy grail of bringing American heavy bombers truly within range of Japan's heartland.

Almost three years after the Doolittle raid, the promise of Doolittle's mission was finally fulfilled. On the night of March 9, 1945, wave after wave of American B-29s bombed Tokyo with enough napalm to burn 100,000 civilians to death and a quarter of the city to the ground. Similar raids followed on 66 Japanese cities. By the time the United States hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki, each with an atomic bomb that obliterated tens of thousands of residents in one shot, nobody was counting civilian deaths anymore.

Did the Doolittle raid boost American morale? Absolutely. Did killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians in subsequent bombing raids avenge Pearl Harbor, save the lives of American soldiers, and end the war quickly? Let's hope so, because too many heroic Americans died as it is.

Either way, though, General Doolittle and his flyboys unwittingly ushered in a new era of war, and we've been playing a dangerous game of chicken with it ever since.

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