Back in Endicott Peabody's day, minutes of meetings, transcriptions of conversations, and other documentation were often taken in shorthand—a phonetics-based system of written strokes and squiggles that was commonly used for quick note-taking. If you can tell us what these 1920s notes, from the Rector's files, mean, please email communications@groton.org.
World War II is now known as “the Good War,” a conflict that united Americans in a righteous crusade to save humanity from tyranny and destruction. Often forgotten is that support for United States involvement was low until the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

By September of that year, the war had raged in Europe for more than two years and in China for five. In the U.S., Americans who observed the carnage overseas engaged in fierce debates about the conflicts’ causes and consequences. By December, much of America was debating the wisdom of American intervention.

Groton School played a crucial role in these debates—and not only because President Franklin Roosevelt was a graduate (1900). Many Groton alumni had outsized influence on U.S. policy, including Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1911) and U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew (1898). Their voices helped shape U.S. foreign policy at this critical moment.
Uncommon Impact

FDR was not the only graduate who made significant decisions affecting the war.

BY EDWARD C. GREEN ’63 AND HELENA MEYER-KNAPP

CONSIDER THESE intriguing questions: Was the United States impelled to go to war with Japan in 1941? Had the U.S. stayed out of World War II, would Britain have fallen to Hitler? Had Britain fallen, would the U.S. have been able to stand free and democratic against the realigned British, French, and Dutch empires dominated by Germany and Japan?

Equally intriguing: could key decisions by graduates of Groton School have prevented the war?

One alumnus in particular, the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Joseph Grew (Form of 1898), believed until the day he died that war could have been avoided without sacrificing any U.S. or Allied principles or interests, especially if one particular meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Groton 1900) and Japan’s Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoye had not been aborted.¹

In at least one other key moment, a Groton graduate determined the war/peace outcome—Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Form 1911, Assistant Secretary of State during the war

Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew 1898

¹ Robert Fearey ’37, Grew’s personal assistant, described this lost opportunity in a 1994 Quarterly article, “Might the Pacific War Have Been Avoided?”
of 1911, in FDR’s absence from Washington and without his prior consent, in 1941 put into effect a comprehensive embargo on Japan, including a ban on oil sales. It was widely believed that an embargo would make war inevitable, and it proved true.

Because of their common Groton and Harvard (and Harvard Fly Club) backgrounds, President Roosevelt is said to have trusted Ambassador Grew, two forms ahead of him at Groton, more than he trusted his own secretary of state, Cordell Hull, though Hull too was not opposed to continuing peace with Japan. Grew, with the help of his personal assistants—first Marshall Green ’35 and then Robert Fearey ’37—worked tirelessly to prevent war. The undersecretary of state and core FDR advisor Sumner Welles (Groton 1910), and more notably FDR himself, spoke publicly about how peace enabled U.S. Allies in Australia and Britain to keep essential war resources flowing. Grotonians taking the opposing position included journalist Joseph Alsop (Form of 1928), a highly visible advisor to the anti-Japan, pro-China lobby, and even more importantly, Acheson.

Hindsight examinations of World War II make it easy to ignore how deeply divided Americans were in 1941 over the U.S. joining the war, despite the idealized image of consensus about a “Good War.” Likewise in Japan, government elites were divided; it took the militarists until late 1941 to bring down Prime Minister Konoye’s government, which had been negotiating with the U.S.

As 1941 progressed, leaders in both Japan and the U.S. engaged in intense debate, and more than one strategic option for U.S.-Japan relations was actively in play. That World War II would have ended differently had the trans-Pacific war been avoided is certain: Pearl Harbor transformed the war between Japan and China, which began in 1931, and the war centered in Europe, which began in 1939, into a single, unified World War.

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turned many ordinary Americans against the country. In the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, those who wished America to confront and defeat Japan sooner rather than later sparred with those who supported a diplomatic solution.

For most of 1941, war seemed possible but not certain. At the embassy in Tokyo, Ambassador Grew had heard about a specific military threat against the U.S.: his third ranking officer, First Secretary Edward S. Crocker, a distant cousin of then new Groton Headmaster John Crocker 1918, in January 1941 passed along a tip that Japan was planning to sink the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor. In another version of events, the embassy’s third secretary, Max Bishop, reported first on the planned attack.

Crocker (or Bishop) passed this information on to Grew, who cabled Secretary of State Hull, who in turn shared it with U.S. Naval Intelligence. State and Naval intelligence concluded that “no move against Pearl Harbor appears imminent or planned for the foreseeable future,” as Gordon W. Prange wrote in *At Dawn We Slept*.

Grew was not sanguine. A month earlier he had written to his school friend Roosevelt (as documented in Grew’s published diary, *Ten Years in Japan*): “It seems to me to be increasingly clear that we are bound to have a showdown someday, and the principal question at issue is whether it is to our advantage to have that showdown sooner or to have it later.”

Early in the fall of 1941, Grew actively worked in support of Japanese Prime Minister Konoye’s proposal for a top-level meeting with FDR in Honolulu. FDR, initially favorable to the idea, cited problems about distance, proposing Juneau, Alaska, instead. Konoye was agreeable. Then FDR insisted on having representatives from U.S. allies Britain, Holland, and China at the meeting. The Japanese were concerned that leaks could make the prime minister and Japan look weak and ultimately lead to the collapse of the Konoye government. Ambassador Grew urged Secretary Hull to accept the meeting without some of the preconditions, promising that the Emperor as well as top Japanese civilian and military leaders would be willing to reverse Japan’s expansionist trends and that it would not look like an act of appeasement on either side. The U.S. then demanded, as a precondition to the meeting, that Japan withdraw completely from China and Indochina—renounce the Axis pact it had recently joined—and adopt friendly trade pacts. Grew and Fearey feared these terms were far too exacting, but in November 1941 Japan was still seriously considering withdrawing from China and Indochina if its access to oil were restored and war with the U.S. avoided, according to Japanese special envoy Saburo Kurusu’s account in *The Desperate Diplomat*.

In the U.S., Japanese special envoy Kurusu and Ambassador Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura were likewise trying to avoid the outbreak of war. Both the ambassador and the special envoy were actively negotiating terms for the Konoye meeting, namely the
withdrawal of Japanese forces from Southeast Asia and China in return for a steady supply for Japan of oil and other raw materials. Both men claimed throughout their lives that they had no warning whatsoever that the militarists in Tokyo had prevailed in December—that war had indeed begun.

Prior to Pearl Harbor, pressures urging the U.S. to join the wider war came from Americans colloquially known as the China Lobby. One prominent voice was Henry Luce, born of a missionary family in China and founder of *Time* magazine. Another was Pearl Buck, also born in China of missionary parents. Her novel *The Good Earth*, along with its 1937 movie version, left Americans with visions of noble Chinese peasants struggling against poverty and the rising Communist threat, just waiting to be converted to Christianity and Americanized. Joined by Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek’s family, the China Lobby pressured Washington politicians and crisscrossed America with speeches about the brave nationalist army holding back Japanese attacks. These partisans urged the U.S. to impose sanctions and embargoes on American oil and steel to force the Japanese war machine to grind to a halt. Journalist and Grotonian Joseph Alsop was an important mouthpiece for the China Lobby.

There was no Japanese equivalent of the China Lobby spreading propaganda in the U.S., although sample pamphlets arguing Japan’s position, published in English, French, and Spanish, are available in the E.S. Crocker archive at the Library of Congress. They reveal Japan’s argument as simply: Why were only Caucasians to have empires in Asia? Why not the Japanese? Wouldn’t other Asian countries benefit under the rapidly modernizing and industrializing Japanese?

According to Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking* and James Bradley’s *The Imperial Cruise*, Japan had developed a mighty military over the previous half-century and believed its master-race ideology, equivalent to Nazi Aryan race beliefs, would allow it to lead all of Asia into a modern future.

FDR had been emotionally steeped in Chinese lore. His mother’s father, Warren Delano, made fortunes in the China trade, which in his particular case meant the opium trade. Young Franklin heard tales of mysterious old China and later formed a warm friendship with a Chinese fellow student at Harvard, disposing him to like Chinese people in general. In a historical parallel, Theodore Roosevelt developed a close friendship with a Japanese fellow student at Harvard at a time when there was considerable racism against Asians in the U.S., leading to Teddy’s lauding the Japanese as the “honorary Aryans of Asia” and supporting (if not always publicly or with Congressional approval) Japan’s expansionism by conquest in Asia and its war with Russia.

The Oil Embargo and Pearl Harbor

In the months and weeks before December 7, 1941, nothing was certain: both in Washington and Tokyo, officials were repeatedly negotiating, planning, and reexamining options for U.S.-Japan relations. This was no inexorable march toward war—until Acheson implemented the fateful oil embargo, despite extensive rhetoric against it by Marshall Green ’35, FDR, and others.

As early as 1939, Green, later an ambassador himself, expressed concern that “the very effectiveness of arms and oil embargoes will inevitably plunge us all into war,” as he recounted in his book, *Pacific Encounters*. As Grew’s diary puts it, “My recommendations have consistently been of the ‘red light’ variety (as in ‘Stop! Let’s not go down this road’), advocating not ‘appeasement’ but constructive statesmanship through conciliatory methods and the avoidance of coercive measures.” Still, in the fall of 1940, the U.S. imposed an embargo on the importation of scrap metal, which Japan needed for its machinery and weaponry. Japan had been importing about 90 percent of these materials from the U.S.

On July 24, 1941, two days before imposing a freeze on Japanese and Chinese assets in the U.S., President Roosevelt made a public speech arguing that
Whatever the reason, Acheson, a 1911 alumnus, made a profound change in U.S. policy and Roosevelt, a 1900 alumnus, chose not to reverse it.

A Pearl Harbor Surprise?

On December 7 at 2:00 p.m., Japanese special envoy Kurusu and Ambassador (and ex-Foreign Minister) Admiral Nomura had requested a meeting with Hull at the State Department. They didn’t know at the time that he had just seen a bulletin saying Pearl Harbor had been attacked that morning at 7:35 a.m. Hawaiian time. Hull was said to have cursed out the Japanese diplomats, who had been unaware of the attack. Like Grew, they had been trying to negotiate a way to avoid war. Nomura would later comment wistfully: “Working for peace is not as simple as starting a war.” Grew referred to Kurusu as a fellow peace-seeker who “tried to reverse the engine, and tried hard and courageously.”

After the American Embassy staff learned about Japan’s attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, Grew asked his first secretary, Crocker, to receive the official declaration of war from Japan. Crocker’s unpublished diary quotes the euphemistic diplomatic language of the declaration:

December 8, 1941

Excellency:

I have the honor to inform your Excellency that there has arisen a state of war between your Excellency’s country and Japan beginning today. I avail myself of this opportunity to renew to your Excellency the assurances of my highest consideration.

—Shigenori Togo
Minister for Foreign Affairs
To his Excellency Joseph Clark Grew,
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary

There followed eight more orders from the Japanese government, including those forbidding U.S. Embassy activity, phone calls, cables, and communication with the outside world. All shortwave radios were confiscated. The outer gate to the embassy was locked. Throughout that day, files were burned, just as would later happen in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979.

This was the beginning of a six-month internment of Grew and the pared-down embassy staff, mostly in the embassy compound, where people shared space and food as best they could. There was little or no planning for this on the Japanese side. Crocker’s diary describes how the staff ran out of food and snacks, then had to implore the Foreign Ministry to let a Japanese employee of the embassy fetch carry-out food for the group. Grew’s diary comments on the good luck (or planning?) that a substantial consignment of canned goods from America had recently arrived.

As the internment wore on, Grew and his staff kept their morale high, amusing themselves with bridge and other games. They even built a crude golf course on the embassy grounds, which they dubbed the Greater Black Sulphur Co-Prospertiy Golf Course, mocking the “co-prosperity” euphemism used by Japan to explain its expansion into Asia and alluding to the town in West...
Virginia where the Japanese delegation was interned. White Sulphur Springs (at the same hotel where Hull was recuperating in July 1941 while Acheson cut off Japan’s oil and financial assets).

Grew explained declining an offer to play golf on a public course: “Were I to accept an invitation to play golf, publicity would be given to it as an indication of how well the Americans are being treated ... Yet our treatment has been very far from considerate and at the beginning it was contrary to all concepts of international usage. We were treated not only as prisoners but as criminal prisoners; throughout our internment, we have been subjected to repeated indignities and humiliations by the police.”

Ambassador Grew finally returned to Washington in the summer of 1942. Invited to speak by CBS that August, he said of his Japanese friends: “They are not the people who brought on this war. As patriots they will fight for their Emperor and country, to the last ditch if necessary, but they did not want this war and it was not they who began it.”

The Groton Connection

Why is this story so full of Groton boys (and Edward S. Crocker from rival St. Mark’s), especially considering the small size of the school? Acheson and Alsop may have been on the more hawkish side, with Grew, Welles, and FDR himself on the more cautious side, but all played key roles.

In the first half of the twentieth century, indeed until the Vietnam era, careers in public service, including the Foreign Service, were as commonplace as careers in finance or the law for the graduates of America’s elite prep schools. Salaries at the Foreign Service were not adequate to cover the costs for officers hosting the dinners and cocktail parties where much informal diplomacy took place, but Groton boys were assumed to have the family resources to function as needed and expected. As a result, Foreign Service officers were drawn disproportionately from men from privileged backgrounds, WASPs, the Protestant Establishment.

When Ambassador Marshall Green was promoted to Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific affairs in 1969, about 25 percent of his immediate predecessors, including Averill Harriman 1909 and William Bundy 1935, came from the very same Groton network. Harvard connections aside, the three requirements for joining the old Foreign Service were half-seriously said to be. “Yale, pale, and male.” A Groton education didn’t hurt either.

2 Father of co-author Edward Green ’63