

The (Non) Strategic Thinking of Japan's Decision-makers for World War II

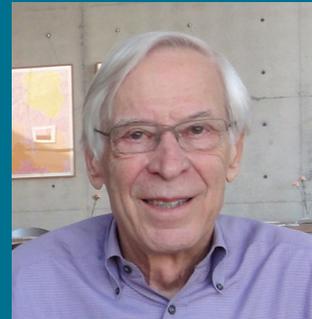
Boeing B-29 Superfortress

Abstract:

Why did Japan undertake a war from 1937 to 1945 that it had no chance of winning? Moreover, why did it undertake the war when prominent political leaders and journalists, most notably seven time finance minister Takahashi Korekiyo and economic journalist Ishibashi Tanzan, had been publicly stating for over a quarter of a century that Japan not only could not fight the Chinese, Americans, Soviets, British, Canadians, Dutch, Indians, and Australians in a war, but also that in the process of confronting those powers, Japan would make itself poorer and military weaker? China in 1937 had a population seven times Japan's, which made the military pacification of a hostile China impossible. Not only did the United States have an economy over five times and an industrial capacity nine times Japan's in 1938-1939, but also it and the British dominions were the primary sources of petroleum and other essential materials for Japan's war in China. What led the Japanese leaders to think their country was a great power—that it could rival the United States and Great Britain—when economically Japan was Italy.

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Professor Smethurst is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Pittsburgh, having retired in 2013. He is the author of three books of modern Japanese History: *A Social Basis for Prewar Japanese Militarism* (California, 1974); *Agricultural Development and Tenancy Disputes in Japan, 1870-1940* (Princeton 1986); and *From Foot Soldier to Finance Minister: Takahashi Korekiyo, Japan's Keynes* (Harvard 2008). Professor Smethurst recently signed a contract with Cambridge University Press to produce a fourth book, tentatively entitled *The Japanese Army in World War II*. He has also written many articles. For the purposes of this talk, see particularly "Japan, the United States, and the Road to World War II in the Pacific," in *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, online, September 2012.



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