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J. Garry Clifford and Masako R. Okura. *The Desperate Diplomat: Saburo Kurusu's Memoir of the Weeks before Pearl Harbor*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8262-2037-0 (hardcover, \$35.00).

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Review by **Justus D. Doenecke**, New College of Florida, Emeritus

The reputation of Saburō Kurusu has not been good. As special envoy of the Japanese government in the final three months before the Pearl Harbor attack, Kurusu met with American leaders in a last-ditch effort to prevent Japan and the United States from engaging in a bloody conflict. In a famous encounter that took place at 2:20 P.M. on the afternoon of December 7, the Japanese diplomat—along with Ambassador Kichisaburō Nomura—met with Cordell Hull, who had already been informed of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Secretary of State, his hand shaking, accused them of “fabrication and falsehood.”¹ In his memoirs, Hull accused Kurusu of seeking “to lull us with talk until the moment Japan got ready to strike.”²

Hull was not alone. Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles found the “oily” diplomat acting as the “goat tethered as bait for the tiger.” On Pearl Harbor day, Eleanor Roosevelt complained about that “nasty little Jap sitting there talking to my husband while Japanese planes were attacking Honolulu and Manila.” (9) Though no specialist has accepted this indictment, Kurusu’s popular image has been one of duplicity.

Thanks to the efforts of the late J. Garry Clifford and Masako R. Okura, a far more sympathetic—and accurate—picture of Kurusu has emerged. The two scholars have supervised the publication of an English translation of Kurusu’s memoir, published in Japanese in 1952 and deposited in the National Diet Library in 2007. The diplomat had died in 1954, before he could publish the English version. Okura, a political scientist conducting research in Tokyo in 2001, came upon the manuscript by accident and immediately recognized its importance. Okura and Clifford, her mentor at the University of Connecticut, have produced a beautifully edited document, whose introduction and elaborate endnotes reveal a superb knowledge of Japanese decision-making and the most recent scholarly literature. Manuscript sources include the papers of Kurusu, President

¹ J. Garry Clifford and Masako R. Okura, eds., *The Desperate Diplomat: Saburo Kurusu's Memoir of the Weeks Before Pearl Harbor* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2016), 122.

² *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, II (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 1063.

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Franklin Roosevelt, British Ambassador Halifax, Herbert Hoover, financier Bernard Baruch, diplomat Sumner Welles, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, and the U.S. State Department. This reviewer finds one slight error: “pace” should be “peace.” (12)

Kurusu had long been a major diplomatic figure, having served in posts as varied as Hankou, Honolulu, New York, Santiago, Rome, Athens, Lima, Hamburg, and Brussels. He was Ambassador to Germany when, in September 1940, Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka negotiated the Tripartite Pact. In his unpublished memoir Kurusu claimed he unsuccessfully sought to resign in protest of the accord.

Early in November 1941, Foreign Minister Shigenori Tōgō, realizing that relations with the U.S. were at a dangerous impasse, sent Kurusu to Washington as special envoy. Ambassador Kichisaburō Nomura, a former admiral, was well liked by the Roosevelt administration. However, Nomura, whose command of English was poor, found himself out of his depth. Hence, that summer he asked his foreign office for Kurusu’s aid. Before he left Tokyo, Kurusu met with Hideki Tōjō, who held the offices of Prime Minister and War Minister and was a full general. Tōjō stressed the necessity of concluding negotiations by the end of the month, although he did not reveal that war preparations were to be completed by early December. (Two days later, Japanese leaders fixed the date of December 7 for an attack on Pearl Harbor). Tōjō saw the negotiations having only thirty percent chance of success, but promised that despite powerful internal opposition he would keep any agreement.

Most of the memoir covers Kurusu’s negotiations with the Americans. During his first meeting with Roosevelt and Hull on November 17, the President suggested direct negotiations between Japan and China. There was, however, no follow through. Within a week, American decoders mistranslated significant Tokyo instructions to Kurusu. The U.S. thought that Japan would be obligated to act ‘automatically’ if Germany invoked the Tripartite Pact of September 1940. In reality the foreign office told Kurusu Japan would act ‘independently.’ When Nomura and Kurusu sought to assure Hull that their nation was under no obligation to assist Germany, the Secretary believed that the diplomats were deliberately lying.

The varied propositions of the American and Japanese representatives (Proposals A and B, Hull’s ten points of November 26) resemble a form of diplomatic ping pong. Because of deadlock over such matters as continued American support for China, the U.S. suggested a three-month *modus vivendi*: Japan would withdraw 50,000 troops from southern Indochina in return for which the United States would resume moderate sales of oil. Once China objected, Hull decided to “kick the whole thing over” (14). Hull’s ten points were the ultimate ‘nonstarter,’ as they included withdrawal of all Japanese forces from China and Indochina and support only for Chiang Kai-shek’s (Jiang Jieshi’s) government. War appeared inevitable.

By and large historians have overlooked the fact, so clearly brought out in the Kurusu memoir, that even after November 26 the Japanese diplomats actively continued their peace efforts. Due to the efforts of Herbert Hoover, Kurusu met with international lawyer Raoul Desvernine, an attorney on trade matters for Japan’s embassy. Desvernine in turn put him in touch with financier Bernard Baruch, who convinced Roosevelt to reconsider the *modus vivendi*. Meanwhile, the Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones suggested that Roosevelt communicate with Emperor Hirohito directly and immediately. By the evening of December 6, however, when the president cabled the emperor, it was too late.

In their perceptive introduction to the memoir, Clifford and Okura indicate that the Pacific War might have been avoided. They write, “Without rekindling conspiracy theories about who fired the first shot in 1941, we

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are nonetheless struck by the pervasive atmosphere of fatalism and diplomatic passivity in the final days prior to war” (12). American fatigue played an obvious role. Hull, who suffered from tuberculosis, had put in sixteen-hour days. The Japanese envoys noted that Roosevelt, too, appeared “very tired” (22). The President had undergone blood transfusions that spring and summer and may well have been suffering aftereffects in late fall. The two historians speculate that had Roosevelt contacted Hirohito shortly after Hull’s ten-point note, the diplomatic process might have been continued. Conscious that the U.S. was committed to a ‘Europe first’ strategy, American military officials were pressing Roosevelt and Hull for more time, so as to deliver B-17 bombers to the Pacific.

Thanks to the labors of Clifford and Okura, it will be difficult to look again at the last three weeks of peace in quite the same way.

Justus Doenecke is emeritus professor of history at New College of Florida with a Ph.D. from Princeton (1966). He has written twelve books, including *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), and in 2015 came out with the 4th edition, with John E. Wilz, of *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015). He is writing a sequel to *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America’s Entry into World War I* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011). The volume will cover the politics and diplomacy of U.S. as a full-scale belligerent, the period from April 6, 1917- November 11, 1918.

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