

A year after Pearl Harbor, — America was on the attack

From the beginning, Americans have compared Sept. 11, 2001, with what President Bush, in his war message to Congress last fall, called “one Sunday in December.” He meant Dec. 7, 1941, when Japan’s surprise attack on America’s Pacific fleet killed 2,400 and plunged the United States into World War II.

The differences between those two days of airborne infamy were always obvious. But no other disaster in U.S. history so resembled what happened a year ago, at least in producing shock and outrage and a sense that life had changed.

One way of comparing the two eras is to examine the nation’s moods a year after the attacks, as reflected imperfectly by media coverage. In December 1942, how did the Pioneer Press note Pearl Harbor’s one-year anniversary?

The first difference one notices is the brutal intensity of the war America was already

against Germany. In that age of open, declared wars and formal alliances, it all made sense.

Some of the news from December 1942 sounds familiar. There was government secrecy: On Dec. 6, the Pioneer Press described what it called “the first full report of [the Navy’s] losses at Pearl Harbor.” Those losses had been much heavier than the government had previously admitted.

There also were new government agencies wielding “sweeping powers.” On Dec. 7, the agriculture secretary was given “full powers over food production, processing, distribution and rationing” throughout the nation.

Rationing was the subject of a spirited opinion page column that day, by a regular named Dr. Brady. The good doctor rejoiced that “the degeneration, softening or decadence that inevitably comes to people who acquire wealth ... is a comparatively



D.J. TICE
Editorial Writer

waging a year after Pearl Harbor —when its effort was still just beginning.

A large headline on Dec. 7, 1942, declared: “600 Allied Planes Attack Holland and France.” Combined air forces of the U.S. and Britain — allies, then as now — were bombing German positions in northern Europe. U.S. troops were also confronting Nazis in North Africa. A small item noted that Marines in recent days had killed another 400 Japanese in fighting that had persisted for

slow process.” It hadn’t yet completely ruined Americans, Dr. Brady said. He predicted that the hardships of wartime rationing would do a world of good for the nation’s “pampered parasites” and “any alleged American who grumbles.”

It is reassuring, in a way, to be reminded that there were grumblers. Reading the Pioneer Press of that long-ago anniversary week, one is struck above all by a spirit of grim resolve and total commitment that doesn’t seem quite so emphatic and uncomplicated today. One searches in vain in those 1942 papers for stories concerning how Americans felt about Pearl Harbor, how it had undermined their sense of security or changed their personal lives.

Yet how they felt — at least collectively — was clear. They felt angry and determined. A number of St. Paul stores placed ads on the 7th. Several invoked the slogan “Avenge Pearl Har-

months on Guadalcanal.

On an inside page, a short dispatch reported the number of American personnel missing in action 12 months after Pearl Harbor — 42,635.

It was a very different war, and not only in the scale of fighting. There was no doubt or ambiguity in 1942 about who America’s enemies were, or where they were. America then faced powerful nation states openly waging war. Today, it pursues a shadowy network of enemies transcending national borders and concealing their connections with foreign governments.

The result is that wartime interrelationships puzzle Americans today in a way they didn’t back then. Many ask why Bush is contemplating a strike on Iraq when America was attacked by mostly Saudi terrorists headquartered in Afghanistan.

But Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japan, and America immediately took up arms

bor,” and all expressed that martial sentiment. The paper editorialized, taunting Japan for having failed to take full military advantage of its “treacherous attack” and proclaiming an American victory “inevitable.”

There was one article dealing strictly with commemoration. At the bottom of Page 1, it announced briefly that “thousands” would gather to mark the anniversary, which had been “officially designated” as “Faith Day.” The ceremony would be a “demonstration of solemn patriotism,” renewing “faith and hope in the courage of United States forces fighting across the world.”

Faith in America’s fighting forces may be as strong today as in 1942. The nation’s overall confidence and clarity of purpose don’t seem exactly the same.

Write Tice at dtice@pioneerpress.com or at the Pioneer Press, 345 Cedar St., St. Paul, MN 55101.