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**Anne van Wijk. "Transatlantic Relations in the Run-up to Pearl Harbor: The Dutch East Indies at Stake." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 17 (September 2019): 370-391.**

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Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY JOHN SCHUESSLER, BUSH SCHOOL, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

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In late July 1941, the United States imposed a de facto oil embargo on Japan, making war hard to avoid. In "Transatlantic Relations in the Run-up to Pearl Harbor," Anne van Wijk examines the oil embargo from the perspective of the Dutch government, drawing on fresh evidence from the Dutch National Archives. The Dutch, as van Wijk reminds us, were at the "epicenter" of events in the Far East by virtue of their control of the Netherlands East Indies (370). Any embargo would only work with Dutch cooperation, given that the Netherlands East Indies was a crucial provider of the oil that Japan needed for its ongoing war in China.

Van Wijk's key finding is that the Americans and the Dutch had different ends in mind for the oil embargo. The Dutch supported the oil embargo as part of a larger effort to contain and deter Japan, which required cementing a united front with Great Britain and the United States (377). The United States, it seems, was less interested in deterring Japan than expelling it from China, even at the risk of war (383).

In making her case that the United States was not primarily interested in deterring Japan, van Wijk puts particular weight on two pieces of evidence. First, the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt stopped short of a public commitment to the defense of the Netherlands East Indies, even while making assurances in private (375-381, 386). Second, it locked the Dutch out of the final stages of negotiations with Japan (381-385, 386). Crucially, the Dutch were open to a deal that would have relaxed the oil embargo in exchange for a Japanese withdrawal from Indochina (383-384). The Dutch were not inclined, as the Americans were, to press for the liberation of China, which ended up being a major sticking point in the negotiations (387). The Dutch perspective, in short, lends additional support to the argument that Roosevelt's Far East policy is not best described in containment and deterrence times. It was more provocative than that (375).

As van Wijk alludes, the intent behind the oil embargo is central to a larger debate about the role that deception played in facilitating American entry into World War II (370). In the interest of full disclosure, I have staked out a position in that debate. Specifically, I have argued that World War II was hardly forced on the United States. Well before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt had come to the conclusion that the United States would have to play a more active role in defeating Nazi Germany and its allies. At the same time, he understood that domestic support for a declaration of war would not be forthcoming in the absence of a major provocation. In this light, both the 'undeclared war' in the Atlantic and the oil embargo on Japan should be understood as intended, at least partly, to manufacture an incident that could be used to justify hostilities. Although controversial, a compelling case can be made that Roosevelt maneuvered the country in the direction of war, seeking out pretexts in the Atlantic and Pacific while allowing the public to believe that the United States was being pushed into the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Theoretically, what is at issue in the "1941 debate" is how constrained democracies are

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<sup>1</sup> See John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), chap. 2 as well as John M. Schuessler, "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," *International Security* 34:4 (Spring 2010): 133-165. In developing my interpretation of the World War II case, I was heavily influenced by the work of Marc

in their ability to go to war.<sup>2</sup> Democratic institutions may act as a constraint on leaders' ability to go to war, as liberal theory would have us expect, but deception provides a way around that constraint, I argue.<sup>3</sup>

What contributions does van Wijk's article make to the 1941 debate, and the democracy and deception debate more generally? I would highlight three. First, it comes at an opportune time. Arguably, the 1941 debate had become stalemated, with each side reaching the limits of the support it could claim from the evidence that had been marshalled.<sup>4</sup> Targeted research, like that done by van Wijk in the Dutch archives, is thus indispensable for pushing the debate forward. By bringing in the Dutch perspective, van Wijk succeeds in shedding additional light on Roosevelt's intentions, albeit in an indirect way. On balance, her findings are supportive of the argument that Roosevelt aimed to provoke Japan, not deter it (375).

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Second, for those of us focused on Roosevelt's lack of candor with the American public, the article is a needed reminder that U.S. allies like the Dutch were no less in the dark. At the time the oil embargo was imposed, the Dutch Ambassador to London "wrote about the 'vagueness' of U.S. policy toward Japan, saying that 'some days it seems it wants to separate Japan from the Axis through a conciliatory posture, while other days through intimidation with the possibility to convert to the Allied powers, other times like they want to lure Japan into committing acts of war, by which the United States, without starting a shooting war itself, could move Congress into issuing a declaration of war.'" The Ambassador concluded that "it would be very useful for us to know which of these concepts they are working at the moment" (376).<sup>5</sup> As van Wijk summarizes the matter, "The recurring theme that can be identified in the diplomatic exchanges is the Dutch concern over the *intent* of the United States in the Far East" (385).

Indeed, it is not hard to understand the growing unease that the Dutch felt after joining in the imposition of the oil embargo: If the Americans wanted to contain and deter Japan, as the Dutch did, why would not they issue a public guarantee that they would come to the aid of the Dutch in the event of Japanese aggression? Why did they freeze the Dutch out of negotiations with the Japanese until there was little left to negotiate? The Dutch had put the Netherlands East Indies on the line by joining in the oil embargo. Their wager was that only a united front with Great Britain and the United States would suffice to deter Japan from further aggression. It is little wonder that frustration mounted as it became apparent that the United States was less committed to containing Japan than rolling it back.

Finally, and relatedly, van Wijk's article forces us to ask: How could the oil embargo be open to such divergent interpretations, then and now? The Dutch understood the risks they were incurring when they joined the oil embargo but felt there was no alternative if the goal was to contain and deter Japan. Roosevelt, in turn, saw the oil embargo as a way to

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Trachtenberg. See Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chap. 4.

<sup>2</sup> "1941 debate" comes from Christopher Darnton, "Archives and Inference: Documentary Evidence in Case Study Research and the Debate over U.S. Entry into World War II," *International Security* 42:3 (Winter 2017/18), 86. The staunchest critic of the "deception" position that Trachtenberg and I advance is Dan Reiter. He argues, broadly, that Roosevelt wanted to contain the Axis short of war if possible, which was what public opinion at the time would tolerate. Roosevelt, in other words, was constrained by democratic institutions to act cautiously, exactly as liberal theory would predict. See Dan Reiter, "Democracy, Deception, and Entry into War," *Security Studies* 21:4 (2012), 594-623 as well as the exchange in H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable 5-4, "Democracy, Deception, and Entry into War," 17 May 2013; <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-5-4.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Darnton, "Archives and Inference," 97-101.

<sup>5</sup> Along similar lines, in early August 1941 the Dutch Ambassador to Washington complained about the lack of transparency in U.S. decision-making: "Issues are discussed between various sections of government for a relatively long time, but when decisions are made they are made suddenly with the foreknowledge of only a few insiders and these decisions are immediately executed" (386).

bring matters to a head with Japan, so that the United States could have a back door into the European war. That, at least, is the crux of the “deception” argument that van Wijk finds indirect support for in her article.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the debate continues to this day on whether the oil embargo was intended to deter or provoke is an important reminder of how difficult it is to distinguish ‘defensive’ from ‘offensive’ behavior in international politics.<sup>7</sup> Reaching confident conclusions about whether a great power had aggressive or peaceful intentions may simply be a bridge too far, even in a well-studied case like U.S. entry into World War II.<sup>8</sup>

**John Schuessler** is Associate Professor in the Department of International Affairs and Co-Director of the Albritton Center for Grand Strategy at the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University. He is the author of *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 2015). He is currently writing on the United States as an ambivalent offshore balancer. Schuessler received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago.

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<sup>6</sup> For the deception argument, again see Trachtenberg, *Craft of History*, chap. 4 and Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*, chap. 2, esp. 46-56.

<sup>7</sup> Offense-defense theory continues to grapple with this problem. See the collection of articles in Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Offense, Defense, and War* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> For a pessimistic view on great powers’ ability to assess each other’s intentions, see Sebastian Rosato, “The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers,” *International Security* 39:3 (Winter 2014/15): 48-88.