

New York Times Bestselling Authors of *The Lincoln Conspiracy*

BRAD
MELTZER
AND JOSH MENSCH



THE NAZI

CONSPIRACY

The Secret Plot to Kill Roosevelt,
Stalin, and Churchill

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*The Secret Plot to Kill
Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill*

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and Josh Mensch



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For Professor Tom Collier,
my history professor at the
University of Michigan,
who encouraged me decades ago
to dive into World War II

—B.M.

In memory of my father,
Steven H. Mensch
1943–2021

—J.M.

A Note on the Text

When quoting from historical sources, we've sometimes corrected or updated the original spelling, capitalization, or punctuation to make the language clearer to modern readers. The wording itself has not changed, unless otherwise indicated in the text or endnotes.

Prologue

Tehran, Iran

November 28, 1943

The President is hiding.

The street is lined with soldiers. There are thousands of them, stretching for blocks on both sides. Most wear Soviet uniforms, some are British or American.

They brandish automatic rifles. In the hot, dry air they're using their weapons and bodies to block the noisy crowds who're trying to push through to get a look at what's happening—or rather, who's coming.

It's a broad avenue, a central thoroughfare through the bustling city of Tehran, the capital of Iran.

Here, in late November 1943, the city is in a heightened state of commotion. Starting today, it'll be the site of one of the most important events over the course of the global war currently sweeping the world. The event was previously kept secret, but has now been revealed to the public. Although Iran is not engaged in the war militarily, it is under Allied control, thus the prevalence of Soviet security forces on hand for the event.

A surge of noise rises from the crowd. Soldiers and onlookers alike turn toward the procession of cars approaching, a mix of military and civilian vehicles. At the center of the motorcade is a long, dark sedan glistening in the bright sun. This is the vehicle the soldiers have been ordered to protect.

Those who can catch a glimpse see a driver in the car's front seat. In the back is a single passenger, a tall, white-haired man in late middle age. The crowds on either side of the avenue crane their necks to get a better look. Intermittently, the passenger is visible through the car's rear windows.

The onlookers lean forward, everyone trying to see the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Or at least, that's who they *think* is inside.

As the Presidential entourage makes its way through the city, it passes crowded marketplaces and residential buildings. Some residents watch the spectacle through windows or from roofs.

The dark sedan's destination today isn't a secret: The President is traveling to the Soviet embassy, a walled and heavily guarded complex of buildings north of the city center. There, FDR will meet with two fellow world leaders who are his allies in the war: Joseph Stalin, Premier of the Soviet Union; and Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

It will be a summit of world-historical importance: the first time the "Big Three" leaders of the Allied forces in the ongoing war will come together in person. This conference took nearly a year of planning, involving immense geopolitical coordination and complicated security considerations.

Yet amid the grand spectacle, all is not as it seems. Unbeknownst to onlookers and soldiers—and even to many within the procession—the tall gray-haired man in the back seat of this sedan is not, in fact, the President of the United States. Instead, he's a member of the U.S. Secret Service, wearing a bulletproof vest and *pretending* to be the President.

The *real* President isn't even in this motorcade. At this moment, the real FDR is ducked down in the back of a very different vehicle, a small, dirty sedan racing through the backstreets of the city. While the sleek black Presidential limousine is surrounded by armed vehicles and military personnel, the nondescript car transporting the actual President is escorted only by a single fast-moving jeep as it tears through the winding streets.

Why this elaborate deception?

Late the previous night, top Soviet intelligence officials notified U.S. security of an alarming discovery: In this city under Allied control, disguised Nazi agents are on the move. Their mission, according to the Soviets, is to kill Roosevelt. And Churchill. And Stalin. It's an almost unbelievable plot, breathtaking in its audacity. Right here in Tehran, during this momentous conference, Nazi agents will attempt to assassinate the Big Three.

If successful, this plot will have consequences almost impossible to fathom.

For nearly four years now, the Second World War has enveloped the planet. Entire regions of Europe, Asia, and North Africa have been utterly devastated. The suffering and loss of life is nearly incalculable and continues daily. Mass atrocities on civilian populations are almost too numerous to count. Right now, there is no immediate end in sight.

The driving force of the war is a terrifying and appalling ideology that has taken root in several nations, but has reached its most extreme and powerful form in Germany under the Nazi Party.

Built on a twisted form of extreme patriotism, it's fueled by racial hatred, mass propaganda, conspiracy theories, the demonizing of minority groups, and the cult of personality around a narcissistic leader. Under the influence of this ideology—plus the ruthless political party that promotes it—a country that formerly embraced democratic values has turned toward authoritarianism, hatred, and violence. It is Germany and its principal allies, Italy and Japan, who have unleashed this calamitous war.

The clash of world military powers, as vast as it is, is not all that's at stake. As the Nazi regime expands, it's committing mass atrocities that go far beyond the scope of ordinary warfare, targeting peoples it considers "undesirables": the Roma, the mentally ill, Poles, and other Slavic people. Civilian populations, including women and children, are routinely imprisoned, tortured, worked to death, or simply massacred.

Above all, the regime has directed its brutality toward one group that, from the very beginning, it has vilified and blamed: the Jewish people. To solve what they call "the Jewish problem" in Europe, Nazi leaders have, in

the course of the war, created an apparatus of mass slaughter so horrific it will take years for the world to fully comprehend.

To fight back, the Allies have planned this long-anticipated meeting of the Big Three—the leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union—knowing that this meeting in Tehran represents the best and perhaps only chance for Allied powers to implement a military strategy to finally cripple Nazi Germany and put an end to the war that has caused such suffering around the world. Planning and executing this strategy will be a mammoth undertaking that will require global military coordination at an unprecedented scale.

Millions of lives depend on the success of this conference. Probably tens of millions.

If the Nazis have their way, these three world leaders won't leave the city alive—and the Allied hopes for victory will die with them.

It's not an exaggeration: The survival of nations is at stake.

And right now, FDR is ducked down, hiding in the back of a speeding car.

PART I

Commander in Chief

1

TWO YEARS EARLIER ...

The Pacific Ocean

December 7, 1941

The ships have been traveling—secretly—for ten days.

Now, on this quiet Sunday morning, as the first light of dawn winks from the Pacific Ocean, the fleet prepares to change course.

There's no land in sight. Measured against the vast scale of the Pacific, this collection of warships is a tiny blip. But on a human scale, the fleet is enormous: six massive aircraft carriers, two battleships, nine destroyers, three cruisers, eight fuel tankers, and several small support ships. Below the waves are twenty-three accompanying submarines. On each carrier, the flight decks are lined with dozens of planes. In total, tens of thousands of crewmembers are aboard and mobilized.

For most of their ten-day journey, these ships have traveled eastward. Astonishingly, their movement across more than 3,500 miles of water—from a secluded bay on East Asian shores to here in the Central Pacific—has remained undetected by radar systems throughout the ocean. Every aspect of the fleet's journey has been planned and conducted at the highest levels of secrecy.

Now, several hundred miles south of the Aleutian Islands, the fleet commander issues a series of orders to chart a southern course. As the ships begin to move in the new direction, the slower-moving tankers break off

from the fleet. The rest accelerate, going from twenty knots to twenty-four knots, a speed that provides momentum suitable for aircraft to launch from carrier decks.

At 6:05 a.m., a green light is waved on the deck of the flagship carrier. It's a signal to launch. One by one, engines roar and warplanes speed across the runway, rising into the dark morning air above the ocean waters. The other carriers simultaneously launch planes of their own.

The aircraft circle above the fleet and begin to maneuver. A total of 183 planes are soon flying south in battle formation, leaving the ships behind.

A reconnaissance plane shoots ahead of the others, disappearing in the clouds. The pilot's job is to scout the sea and air ahead, tuning into nearby radio frequencies to see if there's any indication that either the planes or carriers have been detected.

Ninety minutes later, at roughly 7:40 a.m., the lead pilots can see a sliver of land in the distance. They send a signal to the others: The air fleet remains undetected. Visibility is strong. The coast is clear. Time to attack.

The target? A small island of less than six hundred square miles. It's a place they're not at war with—yet the Japanese air fleet commanders are about to unleash the full destructive power of their fighter planes, bombers, torpedo planes, and dive-bombers.

This is a surprise attack, a preemptive strike intended to inflict maximum shock and devastation.

Within the next two hours, the world will change.

2

FOUR HOURS EARLIER

Washington, D.C.

It's 8:45 a.m. and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt is still in bed. He wears a sleeping robe and has a tray of food in front of him. This is no leisurely breakfast, however. He's surrounded by paperwork, and a busy telephone sits nearby.

He often starts the day this way, conducting the nation's affairs while under the covers. It's not so easy for the President to move from room to room—since being stricken with polio two decades ago, he's almost entirely without the use of his legs—and he's found that breakfasting and working in bed is often the most efficient way to begin the day.

The President was up late the night before. Well after midnight, he was still on a series of emergency phone calls with members of his national security staff.

Earlier that evening, U.S. Naval Intelligence services intercepted and translated a top secret memo from the Imperial government of Japan in Tokyo to the Japanese ambassadors stationed in Washington, D.C. The memo was in the form of a fourteen-point bulletin, with instructions to the ambassadors to deliver its message to the Americans according to a prepared timeline.

The Navy's intercept contained thirteen of the fourteen written points; the final section supposedly still to come. In methodical fashion, the

bulletin outlined the Japanese response to the latest round of American diplomacy, rejecting what it perceives to be the United States' unreasonable demands to stop Japan's expansion into China and various territories in the South Pacific region. In addition, it views the United States' continued sanctions and oil embargo against it as intolerable.

To put it bluntly, ongoing negotiations between the United States and Japan have apparently collapsed.

This deterioration is the last thing the President wants. FDR's primary focus, and the focus of U.S. foreign policy in general, has been on providing aid and supplies to the United Kingdom for its war against Nazi Germany.

Now, with his legs still under the covers, Roosevelt is rereading the thirteen-point bulletin and trying to understand its implications. At roughly 9:30 a.m., a messenger from the Navy Department rushes into the room. He has the fourteenth section, which the Navy just received, decrypted, and translated.

This final paragraph officially states what the previous sections already implied. Japan will declare that since "efforts towards the establishment of peace" have failed, "it is impossible to reach an agreement with further negotiations."

Minutes later, the President receives yet another decrypt, a separate message sent in parallel. This message instructs the Japanese ambassadors to deliver the preceding bulletin to American officials at precisely 1 p.m., with no indication of why this time of day is so important. Even more ominously, the message instructs the ambassadors to destroy all confidential documents within the Japanese embassy and, apparently, to terminate their offices.

This is not good news. Time to get out of bed.

Once up, the President coordinates group phone calls and meetings with key leaders of his foreign policy and national security staff. By midmorning, they've analyzed the documents.

They agree that Japan is probably about to take military action against U.S.-friendly interests in Southeast Asia. Perhaps they'll attack British-controlled Singapore, or Guam, or try to seize the coveted oil fields of the

Dutch East Indies. They may even attack the Philippines, an American protectorate.

If so, what should the United States do? Would these actions demand military response?

As his advisors debate options, Roosevelt decides that on this day, the typical Sunday skeleton staff at the White House won't be sufficient. He needs his top people. Soon, the White House operator is making phone calls all around the greater Washington, D.C., area, trying to locate personnel who are out shopping, in church, or with their families.

Among those who receive a call is Grace Tully, Roosevelt's personal secretary, who's relaxing at her apartment in Washington, D.C. "The President wants you right away," the White House operator tells her. "There's a car on the way to pick you up." Tully dresses quickly, "like a fireman" as she later recalls, and runs outside to meet the car.

The growing staff at the White House is tense. A military action somewhere in the South Pacific may be pending. The President's wife, the exceedingly busy Eleanor Roosevelt, had organized a large White House luncheon for supporters that day.

"I was disappointed but not surprised when Franklin sent word a short time before lunch that he did not see how he could possibly join us," she later recalled. As is sometimes the case, she'll play the role of President for the visitors because her husband cannot attend.

Instead, for lunch, the President and his longtime advisor Harry Hopkins huddle with sandwiches over a desk in Roosevelt's White House study. They're strategizing what comes next.

Then, at 1:47 p.m., the President's late lunch with Hopkins is interrupted by a call from Frank Knox, the Secretary of the Navy.

Knox clears his throat as the President gets on the line. Knox's voice is shaking as he says that the Pentagon "picked up a radio from Honolulu from our Commander-in-Chief of our forces there advising ... that an air raid attack was on and that it was 'no drill.'" It appears, Knox continues after a pause, "like the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor."

Pearl Harbor? In Hawaii? That can't be right.

The U.S. naval base on the Hawaiian island of Oahu was thought to be impervious to attack. It's also, based on its location, far from any Japanese interests. So why would Japan possibly attack Hawaii?

Lunch partner Hopkins, one of Roosevelt's most trusted foreign policy advisors, doesn't believe it. "I expressed the belief that there must be some mistake," he records in a memo that day. "Surely Japan would not attack in Honolulu."

But the President has a terrible feeling. He needs to find out what happened.

By this point, Grace Tully is at her desk, frantically managing the Presidential phone lines. Shortly after Knox's call, the White House operator informs her that Admiral Harold Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations, is on the line for the President.

"I could hear the shocked unbelief in Admiral Stark's voice as he talked to me," Tully later recalled. She puts him on with the President, and Stark confirms the incomprehensible news: Japan has attacked Pearl Harbor. The base was entirely unprepared, and the results are catastrophic.

One thing is becoming clear. This will be the worst day of Roosevelt's presidency.

During his time in office, FDR had earned a reputation for unflappability. So while his staff begins to react with "near hysteria" to the news from Hawaii, he remains in control. The President retains "greater outward calm than anybody else," as Tully put it, but "with each new message he shook his head grimly and tightened the expression of his mouth."

Indeed, the terrible news keeps coming. The U.S. naval base was caught totally unaware. Battle stations were mostly unmanned, with ammunition locked in storage rooms and vaults. The ships in the harbor were sitting ducks.

The first wave of Japanese planes set their targets on "battleship row," where the hulking centerpieces of the U.S. Pacific Fleet were docked side by side. The attacking aircraft struck the USS *Oklahoma* first, with strafing guns and a pair of carefully aimed torpedoes. Massive explosions rocked the harbor as the fuel tanks ignited, and the huge vessel soon tilted toward

port as water flooded through the damaged hull. Minutes later, the battleship began sinking to the bottom of the harbor, pulling more than four hundred sailors and crew to their deaths.

Within an hour, the entire base was an inferno. Two battleships sank completely, and several other battleships, destroyers, and cruisers were obliterated. The harbor was full of flames and wreckage. A group of Japanese planes also peeled off from the water to strike nearby airfields; the surprise attack decimated what was nearly the Navy's entire fleet of planes on the base.

According to early reports, by the time the attacks ended, well over two thousand American servicemembers or staff were dead. Another thousand were seriously wounded. The average age of sailors on the base was nineteen years old.

Aside from the horrors of the attack itself, the global consequences for what just occurred are momentous. At this moment, Japan is allied with Germany and Italy, nations that are fighting the British in a war that has swept Europe.

Japan's surprise attack on the United States has just altered the global balance of power, but it's difficult to grasp the ramifications.

The West Wing remains in a state of shock and panic. As word spreads through the afternoon, reporters pick up the story and soon the press corps surrounds the White House.

Amid the chaos, at 5 p.m., after a full day of nonstop frantic meetings and phone calls, President Roosevelt slips away to his small personal study adjoining the Oval Office. He's accompanied only by Grace Tully.

Tomorrow he will address both houses of Congress, and now, sitting in this study, he needs to figure out what to say.

For the past few hours, the State Department has been working frantically, preparing a speech for the President's review. It now sits in front of him—fifteen pages long, containing a lengthy history of diplomatic relations with Japan, and a detailed assessment of various military responses to the surprise attack.

Roosevelt tosses the papers aside. He may be addressing Congress, but his real audience is the American people. Rather than deliver a foreign

policy lecture, he needs to speak for a nation that he knows was just shocked to the core. His speech should be short, simple, and strong. Every word counts.

With Tully seated nearby at a typewriter, Roosevelt leans back, puffs on a cigarette, and begins to dictate his message.

Tomorrow, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Commander in Chief, will address the nation.