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Forgetting Pearl Harbor

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Patriotic Americans, especially those of a certain age, will never forget the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on this date 71 years ago. But the historic event is fading from a collective memory focused on a much more recent infamy. Polls show most people see the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as more historically important. In a poll taken of high school seniors back in 1991, fewer than half could accurately answer the question, "What is the significance of Dec. 7, 1941?" We hesitate to guess what the number would be today. The younger generation can afford to forget because the older one didn't. Americans responded to the Japanese attack, and to a subsequent declaration of war on us by Germany, by building and maintaining through the years the strongest military the world has ever seen.

You just cannot look up into the Tampa sky and watch a military jet from MacDill Air Force Base rumble overhead without thinking how foolish it would be for any other country to send their warships and planes against ours. Keeping our defense strong, flexible and up to date is one area of general agreement in these politically polarized times. The military budget is never big enough for some advocates. The threat of another Pearl Harbor continues to be used by the defense industry to rally support for ever higher spending. Emily S. Rosenberg, a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, has noted how "memory activists" use selected historic events to buttress their goals. Despite the memory police, Pearl Harbor will continue to fade as a guide to policy, Rosenberg predicts, just as did the national memory of the Alamo and Little Bighorn. It is increasingly hard to conceive of circumstances that would pit one major industrial power against another, the way nations fought in World War II. Now the fighting is asymmetric. We expect our opponents to be failed states or shadowy terrorist groups. The Pearl Harbor attacks do have a number of lessons every informed student and citizen should learn beyond what happened and when. Isolation is no guarantee of national security. Sometimes national leaders behave irrationally. Sometimes the only way to stop tyranny is to destroy its war machine. How strong the military needs to be in relation to the rest of the world is a relevant question this month. Unacceptably large cuts to the military budget are to take effect automatically unless Congress can agree on a reasonable spending and taxing plan. We believe those threatened cuts of \$600 billion over 10 years are too deep. They would weaken the military, including MacDill Air Force Base. But some cuts are necessary,

given the size of the budget deficit. And even with the so-called sequester cuts, military spending would remain far above pre-2001 levels. Including the costs of current foreign engagements and adjusting for inflation, the U.S. military is spending far more than at any time since World War II, and almost as much as then. Military spending has grown 48 percent in the past 10 years. The United States is spending about five times what China spends on its military and almost 10 times what Russia spends each year. Let's remember Pearl Harbor, and also remember that times and threats do change.



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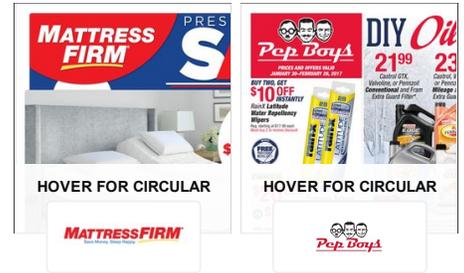
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