By the end of World War I in 1918, the Japanese and Americans had contemplated each other for close to seventy years, from the time of Commodore Perry’s opening of Japan in 1853. In this time both developed strong images of the other. Though these images did not accurately or completely reflect the reality of the other, they were nonetheless powerful because they represented the building blocks of the unofficial U.S.-Japanese relationship. Although it would be inaccurate to say the United States and Japan went to war over mutually antagonistic images, perceptions of the other help us begin to piece together an explanation of tensions that made war seem inevitable by 1941.

Americans’ views of Japan were shaped mostly through the media available to the American reading public. To be certain, there were a few Americans who traveled once or twice or even frequently to Japan. An even smaller minority went to live in Japan either permanently or for long periods of time. Most prominent in this group were Christian missionaries. Those who lived in Japan and learned the Japanese language could call on more information to reach conclusions about the Japanese as a people. Only when Americans decided to stay long-term in Japan as missionaries, businessmen, or diplomats were their impressions of Japan shaped more by the Japanese flow of information and Japanese relationships. These cases were more infrequent but still influenced American perceptions of Japan.
Americans could choose from a wide variety of sources of information to find out more about Japan. Almost 80,000 newspaper articles with the word “Japan” in them were published in The New York Times alone from 1919 to 1941. In the same period, there were 2,897 magazines articles on Japanese domestic politics, society, and on U.S.-Japanese diplomacy. This number was slightly less than the number of articles published on China and slightly more than the number published on France. More articles were published on Germany and Great Britain, but the large number of articles on Japan tells us that there was a substantial amount of information available on Japan in the interwar period. One article per week for the entire interwar period could have been read. This fact runs against the traditional assumption that Americans suffered from a lack of information about Japan.¹

In addition, several dozen books were published with Japan as one part of the subject or the whole topic. Book lists with Japan as the subject were available in The Literary Digest, The New York Times Current History, The Missionary Review of the World, and The Japanese Student (a publication of Japanese YMCA students in English printed in the United States by the American YMCA). Beyond that, missionaries wrote circular letters that were sent back to home congregations in the United States. These letters had small circulation but a large impact on the people who read them. Parishioners were expected to give donations to missionaries and so paid close attention to the work they supported. Missionaries also returned home for extended periods of time to rest and recuperate, and they often went on lecture tours explaining their work in Japan. This information reached an interested listening public.

Recent Japanese history held the interest of the American public. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the Japanese campaign of modernization that followed it provided a dramatic introduction. The Japanese political leadership had guided Japan from a position of vulnerability threatened with takeover by the European powers to great power status for themselves by the end of World War I. They had achieved this great height through thorough political, economic, and military modernization. Americans were greatly impressed. However, the rapidity of Japan’s modernization left them with lingering questions about how modern the Japanese really were.

Certainly Americans interested in Japan knew of the stunning victory of the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. This victory gave the Japanese legitimacy in the eyes of the Western powers. It also marked the beginning of rivalry between the United States and Japan, a rivalry that was very much alive in 1919. After American president Theodore Roosevelt negotiated the Portsmouth Peace Treaty between the Russians and the Japanese and won a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in 1905, he reinforced the American fleet in the Philippines, saying, “Japan is an Oriental nation