There was a veil over my mind about the Japanese War. All the proportions were hidden in mist.¹

Although Churchill described the Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, on 7 December 1941, as the ‘felon blow’ which led to the Japanese gaining ‘mastery of the Pacific’, America was now officially in the war.² The wartime Anglo-American alliance, which Churchill had nurtured for so long, was, at last, formally declared and acknowledged the world over. The road to Pearl Harbor, which stretched back beyond the kurai tanima or ‘dark valley’ to the aftermath of the First World War, had been a long one.³ The momentum which the Japanese gathered as they launched themselves from the Marco Polo Bridge towards Hawaii had been underestimated by almost everyone in the higher echelons of British and American government – not just by Churchill, who acknowledged in his memoir that he could ‘not pretend to have measured accurately the martial might of Japan’.⁴ Like successive British governments since the termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1923, Churchill’s wartime national government had no realistic British policy in place for dealing with a rival imperial power in the Far East.⁵ In the simplest of terms, the policy was for America to attend to Japan. But how could Churchill, especially when he was at the helm, narrate this weakness in British strategy and British imperial power in his memoir without it reflecting poorly on himself or Britain?

Beginning with Churchill’s depiction of the way in which the Anglo-Japanese alliance came to an end, his portrayal of the Washington Conference of 1921, the ramifications of the Great Depression of 1929, and the Manchurian crisis of 1931, this chapter will illustrate how Churchill differentiated between the long-term and the short-term
reasons for the war with Japan, and how he placed the onus for the outbreak of the Pacific war on American economic and diplomatic failings during the inter-war years. The short-term causes of the outbreak of war in the Pacific in December 1941 were narrated by Churchill as emanating from the diplomatic failure of the American–Japanese negotiations of 1941 and the American-initiated economic sanctions of the same year. The brevity with which Churchill outlined the long- and short-term reasons for the outbreak of war from the British perspective will also be examined.

Churchill’s first volume of memoirs, *The Gathering Storm*, was primarily devoted to promoting his thesis that there had never been a war more preventable than the Second World War. The first volume had originally been intended to deal with the inter-war years, the outbreak of war in Europe, Churchill’s return to the Admiralty, and his first seven months as wartime Prime Minister: three books spanning the period 1919 to the end of 1940. After consulting his syndicate, Churchill amalgamated the originally planned three books into two, and this meant that he ‘further condensed his already brief account of the 1920s’. Adhering to a sharply reduced word limit enabled Churchill to gloss over his own less-reputable past as well as ignore how, for example, he had once written that Japan was like ancient Rome, in that ‘she is trained for war’ and had an ‘aptitude and zest that bode ill for those who rate her too lightly’. Churchill may have found it hard to publicly reconcile his awareness of the threat Japan posed to the British Empire in 1936, with his lack of regard for Japan in 1941 – and as he was presenting himself to the post-war world as central to the world political stage, to have revealed his previous confusion may have worked against him.

Churchill was not just setting the scene for his theory that the Second World War had been an unnecessary war; arguably, he was also emphasising how his own political life had followed similar fortunes to that of Britain and her Empire – it was a tale of defeat into victory. Churchill’s defeat was his time in the ‘political wilderness’, whereas his victory was leading Britain, eventually aided by her Allies, to the defeat of the Axis powers. Of his time in the wilderness, Churchill wrote that it had enabled him to be free from ‘ordinary Party antagonisms’ and that this freedom allowed him, along with only a few cohorts, to become preoccupied with the alarming rate at which Germany was rearming. By emphasising how the dangers of German rearmament became his raison d’être, Churchill cultivated the image that his voice had been the loudest (of only a handful) to warn of the impending danger of Nazi Germany. But what of Japan? Why did Churchill make no reference to