Preface

Nomura was born to be a sailor diplomat.
—Kitazawa Naokichi, 1965

Even the most casual observer should recognize the naval officer as a close associate of the diplomat if not a diplomat himself.
—William Braisted, 1958

Perhaps invariably, the name Nomura Kichisaburō will forever remain associated with his failed ambassadorial mission that ended in the surprise—or, to use a more pejorative term, sneak—attack on Pearl Harbor. Scholars have unsurprisingly devoted considerable attention to his ambassadorship, and have found much to criticize. Western scholarship portrays Nomura as a well-intentioned but bumbling and amateurish diplomat who, in historian Robert Butow’s memorable judgment, had “no business being where he was.”¹ Japanese scholarship takes no issue with Nomura’s ineptitude, although dean of Japanese diplomatic history Hosoya Chihiro posits Nomura as an “arbitrary” or “subversive” figure who ignored “his responsibility to follow instructions from Tokyo” and who deliberately pursued a diplomatic line completely at odds with his own government’s policies.² Allowing for these differences in interpretation, the basic picture of Nomura that emerges from the existing literature is one of an amateurish diplomat with an unhealthy disregard for the limits to his ambassadorial authority. These baneful characteristics, moreover, rendered that which Nomura sincerely desired—namely, peace in the Pacific—even less likely of attainment than might otherwise have been
the case. As Hosoya would have it, Nomura’s ambassadorship was “tragic for Japanese diplomacy.”

A notable feature of the existing literature is a near universal inattentiveness to his long naval career and its significance for his ambassadorial mission. Indeed, few scholars have offered much more than the peremptory observation that Nomura’s naval profession left him utterly unprepared for the treacherous waters of diplomacy. This dismissiveness, conscious or otherwise, rather neatly reflects what historian Usui Katsumi once termed the “astonishing narrow-mindedness” with which Japan’s career diplomats greeted those “outsiders” who stepped on their bureaucratic turf. More immediately, it also serves to substantiate the portrayal of Nomura as a woolly headed ambassador whose bumbling ineffectiveness vastly outweighed his admittedly good intentions.

This study reveals that this long-standing and altogether cursory neglect of Nomura’s naval career has been to the detriment of scholarly understanding of a turbulent period in Japanese-U.S. relations. A flag-rank officer of the Japanese navy could not but involve himself deeply in policy discussions concerning the United States. Not only did the Imperial Japanese Navy from 1907 regard the United States as its primary hypothetical enemy, but Japanese navy officers were positively Clausewitzian in their refusal to draw an artificial divide between foreign and security policies. Institutionalizing this proclivity was Japan’s decision-making process, which afforded the navy—the army—the key role in foreign-policy formulation.

Japanese naval officers were virtually unanimous in the view that the United States was almost solely their service’s prerogative. Nomura was a central figure in the Japanese navy precisely because his professional assignments brought him into sustained contact with Americans and with American moral and material resources. He had been in the United States as naval attaché when it declared war on Germany in 1917 (and again as ambassador when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941). He attended both the Paris Peace Conference and the Washington Conference, and as Japan’s highest-ranking gunboat diplomat in China in the mid-1920s he assiduously sought cooperation with his American (and British) counterparts. As vice chief of the Navy General Staff in the late 1920s, he committed his service to the existing system of naval limitation and cooperation with the Anglo-American powers. He led a fleet visit to the United States in 1929 and was a key participant in the resulting show of Japanese-American friendship. He commanded the forces dispatched to quell the Shanghai Incident of 1932 and brought the inci-
dent to a conclusion in such a way as to avert the Japanese-American war scare it spawned.

Nomura's sustained contacts with Americans helped make of him a very unusual naval officer. He possessed a rare understanding of the requirements for success in modern industrial war. Where Japanese naval orthodoxy placed overwhelming emphasis on tactical and technological preparations for a single decisive battle at sea, Nomura was one of a few who saw that a successful war against the United States depended not on a single battle. In his far-sighted reckoning, victory depended instead on “the strength or weakness of the sinews of national power beyond those purely military: diplomacy, political leadership, trade, economic structure, scientific and technological competence, civilian morale, the ability to manipulate public opinion, and the rest of the elements that came to comprise total war.”

Although it is far from appreciated, Nomura's naval career forged in him an eminently accurate understanding of the underlying reality of Japanese-U.S. relations. Japan could not hope to defeat the United States in war; enforcing American surrender was patently out of the question; there was similarly no prospect of concluding war by prescribing peace terms to the United States. This being the case, there was no reason to expect the United States in peacetime to acquiesce in Japanese policies that adversely affected vital American interests. Nomura recognized that his service's foremost task in the realm of foreign policy was to ensure against the definition of goals and objectives that overtly provoked the United States. His prognoses as a flag-rank officer, and later as foreign minister, were notable insofar as they frontally challenged the reckless abandon with which his contemporaries treated the necessarily interrelated questions of foreign and security policies vis-à-vis the United States.

This study also seeks to rectify the existing literature's failure to examine adequately the circumstances surrounding Nomura's ambassadorial appointment. Even Sudō Shinji’s otherwise valuable Nichi-Bei Kai-sen Gaikō no Kenkyū portrays the appointment as a drama centering on the differing personalities and intentions of Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke and Nomura. This study rejects the widely held and virtually unquestioned assumption that Matsuoka persuaded Nomura to come out of retirement and serve as ambassador. The Japanese navy’s hitherto virtually unnoticed role receives long overdue attention here. So, too, do the pressures that the navy brought to bear on a reluctant Nomura, as well as the demands Nomura made of the naval leadership. Quite clearly, the existing literature has largely ignored the fact that Nomura regarded
himself as a naval emissary, beholden in no way to his nominal superior in Matsuoka.

Upon locating Nomura in Washington, this study takes direct issue with existing portrayals of his ambassadorship. It makes apparent what until recently remained unknown to scholars: a crucial channel of communication connecting Nomura to the naval authorities in Tokyo. And it highlights what historians have for the most part overlooked: the extent to which Nomura continually—and ultimately futilely—warned Japanese policymakers against their complacent and ill-founded assumptions concerning the issue of war and peace with the United States. Finally, it seeks to understand why Nomura on 7 December failed to deliver the last note, as instructed, at 1:00 PM and thereby ensured that the Pearl Harbor attack came without warning.

This study is not informed by any ill-conceived objective of lionizing Ambassador Nomura. He made his share of errors as ambassador, and those errors did serve to complicate diplomacy. Nonetheless, this study posits that the ensuing war was not attributable to Nomura’s shortcomings as ambassador. The Japanese-American war represented less a failure of diplomacy than it did a continuation of diplomacy by other means. In developing this thesis—a thesis that owes an obvious debt to Clausewitz and a thesis with which few Japanese naval officers would have taken exception—this study examines why the Japanese navy abandoned and betrayed Nomura. In other words, it seeks to reconstruct as fully as possible the context in which Nomura acted and, in so doing, reveals Nomura as a hard-nosed realist straitjacketed by the harsh and conflicting circumstances of his diplomatic position.

The Japanese-American war confirmed Nomura’s prescient forecasts of Japan’s aggressive course. At the same time, the Japanese-American war did nothing to alter his bedrock convictions: Japan remained a maritime nation whose future was inseparable from that of the United States. Throughout Japan’s postwar occupation and for the remainder of his long life, Nomura devoted his considerable energies and efforts to ensuring the compatibility of Japanese and American interests. A reconstituted Japanese naval force, in his reckoning, was a necessary component of this overarching need. In examining Nomura’s postwar reemergence, this study offers a more complete portrayal of his reasons for advocating Japanese rearmament than otherwise exists. It also stands as a corrective to some wild existing interpretations. To offer one example, historian Howard Schonberger holds that Nomura was driven not only by “right-wing nationalist” leanings but also by his leeriness
toward those “initial post-surrender [U.S.] plans” for occupied Japan that “threatened” his hitherto exalted “position” in Japanese society. Such implausible guesses, based less on a careful approach to the past than on preconceived notions of what might have driven an advocate of postwar Japanese rearmament, serve to illustrate the underlying rationale for this study: despite Nomura’s importance to the mid-twentieth-century Japanese-U.S. relationship, he remains—at best—an imperfectly understood figure. This critical examination of his life and times seeks to rectify that situation.

A Note on Japanese Names and Usage

Japanese names are presented in Japanese order, that is, surname first and given name second. The only exceptions to this are for those Japanese who have published in English and adopted the Western fashion. Japanese words are italicized on their first, but not subsequent, usage (except for words generally familiar to the English-language audience, which are not italicized at all). Macrons are used to denote long vowels, except in the case of well-known place names.