

**Theodore Roosevelt as Assistant Secretary of the Navy: Preparing  
America for the World Stage**

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Theodore Roosevelt is often considered to be one of the most influential Presidents in the history of the United States. However, his political résumé begins well before his rise to the office of chief executive. Roosevelt's time in the Department of the Navy is an example of his early and rapid influence on the country. Appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy by President William McKinley on 19 April 1897, Roosevelt retired on 10 May 1898 to fight in the Spanish-American War in Cuba. During his brief time in the Naval Department, however, he played a huge part in readying the United States Navy for war. His expansionist foreign policy brought a new burst of activity into the Department, and his actions were instrumental in modernizing the U.S. Navy, planning for possible courses of action in the event of a conflict, and rallying like-minded expansionists to his cause. Thanks largely to Roosevelt's efforts, the Spanish-American War was one of the most successful military conflicts in the United States' history. The Assistant Secretary's story, however, begins much earlier.

Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. was born on 27 October 1858 in New York City to Theodore Roosevelt, Sr. and Martha Bulloch Roosevelt. His father was a partner in a large, successful importing company and descended from a long line of Dutch settlers dating back to the founding of New Amsterdam. Roosevelt's mother was of Southern stock; her family had emigrated from Scotland in the eighteenth century and owned a large plantation in Georgia. With these overseas ties, naval history was one of young Theodore's interests very early on. Two of his maternal uncles were lifetime sea captains, and one, James Bulloch, was even a famed Confederate naval officer who played a large part in acquiring ironclad ships for the rebel navy during the U.S. Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Times Books, 2002), 10; Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979), 3-22; Wayne Andrews, ed., *The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 3-12.

Being from a wealthy Northern family had its advantages. By the time he entered Harvard University as an undergraduate in 1876, Roosevelt had been to Europe and the Holy Land twice, and had seen London, Paris, Vienna, and many great Italian cities as well. He sailed up the Nile with his family, toured Jerusalem and the Pyramids at Giza, and visited many of the world's other famous places on his travels. He was also very proficient in both French and German, and had knowledge in the fields of natural history and taxidermy that was incredibly advanced for his young age.<sup>2</sup>

Roosevelt's time at Harvard provided a rather telling preview of the man he would later become. Devastated by his father's death in 1878, he strengthened his already iron will to succeed. Through an incredibly vigorous studying regimen that would have driven lesser men to madness, he did remarkably well in all subjects, even those like Latin and Greek that he despised. This academic fervor was an early sign of the indomitable persistence and concentration with which he would pursue goals later in life. Furthermore, it was at Harvard that Roosevelt began conceptualizing *The Naval War of 1812*,<sup>3</sup> a multivolume work that would become both his first published book and the first item on his résumé as a naval expert.<sup>4</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt entered into politics almost immediately after graduating from Harvard. After a brief stint at Columbia Law School, he was elected to the New York State Assembly as a member of the Republican Party. He was highly active in this position, vigorously proposing bills that fought corruption and seeming to derive genuine enjoyment from his new work. However, fate intervened. On a single, terrible day, 14 February 1884, Roosevelt lost his mother to typhoid fever and his beloved young wife, Alice, to childbirth. Overcome with grief,

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<sup>2</sup> Morris, 21-29, 35-48.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1882).

<sup>4</sup> Morris, 54-108.

Roosevelt found himself unable to concentrate on politics. He retired and moved to the North Dakota Badlands where he lived an outdoorsman's life and raised cattle. Although he had several interesting adventures out west, a horrendous winter eventually killed all of his livestock. This forced him to return to New York, at which time he built Sagamore Hill at Oyster Bay, his now-famous lifetime estate.<sup>5</sup>

Roosevelt was quick to return to politics. Appointed by President Benjamin Harrison to the United States Civil Service Commission in 1889, he used his new position to combat various forms of corruption in the nation's capital. It was also during this time that Roosevelt first became familiar with the influential work of a future acquaintance:

[Roosevelt] spent one of the most important weekends of his life on 10 and 11 May [1890], reading from cover to cover Alfred Thayer Mahan's new book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*. Since the publication of his own *Naval War of 1812* he had considered himself an expert on this very subject, and had argued...that modernization of the fleet must keep pace with the industrialization of the economy...Now Mahan extended and clarified his vision, showing that real national security-and international greatness-could only be attained by building more and bigger ships and deploying them farther abroad.<sup>6</sup>

These ideas were of great interest to Roosevelt at the time, and were invaluable later in his life, but for the moment he was still the Civil Service Commissioner. He remained in this Washington, D.C. position until 1895, when he returned to his home state and became the New York City Police Commissioner, a post in which he tirelessly fought corruption and idleness on the police force.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 14-18.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, 434.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on Roosevelt's illustrious career in the Police Department see Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 22-26 and Morris, chapter 19, titled "The Biggest Man in New York."

During the presidential election of 1896, Roosevelt supported Republican candidate William McKinley. It proved to be one of the best decisions of his life, as McKinley, after winning office, appointed Roosevelt as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, a job that he had deeply desired for some time. It was in this role that Roosevelt truly shined, using his position to prepare the country for what he saw as an inevitable foreign conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Roosevelt's concerns about trouble abroad were not unfounded. The late nineteenth century had seen numerous tense situations that pitted foreign imperialist powers against the interests of the United States. The rise of imperialism in Europe and the modernization and increasing aggression of Japan in the Pacific meant that any of America's overseas aspirations would likely be met with foreign competition. Roosevelt and others considered Germany and Japan to be particularly dangerous. Both countries were, like the U.S., new to the business of overseas expansion and were eyeing territories whose acquisition would threaten American interests. For example, Germany expressed a desire to annex the Samoan Islands, leading to a nearly disastrous incident in 1889 that saw the deployment of German, British, and American warships. Germany also had her sights on potential colonies in Central and South America, an aspiration which Roosevelt and many others saw as a potential violation of the Monroe Doctrine. Japan also had expansionist goals that posed a threat to U.S. interests abroad. The main point of contention between the two nations was Hawaii, which had a growing Japanese immigrant population and which many Americans feared would be a dangerous addition to the rapidly expanding Japanese Empire. The island chain was desirable largely because of Pearl Harbor, an ideal shallow port for warships, located in the strategically vital mid-Pacific. Both nations contributed to the growing tension by sending warships to patrol the islands' coasts. A third

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<sup>8</sup> Morris, 576-587.

nation with which the United States had diplomatic struggles was Spain. Americans knew about the abysmal treatment of the Cubans by their Spanish masters and the native insurrection there at the end of the nineteenth century. Many in the United States looked unfavorably on Spain's actions. Some, including Roosevelt, believed that it was the duty of the United States, under the precedent of the Monroe Doctrine, to ensure the well-being of the Cuban people by expelling their Spanish oppressors, even if it meant war. Roosevelt planned to use his job in the Department of the Navy to prepare for just such a war.<sup>9</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt's appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Navy on 19 April 1897 was in his eyes the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. He saw in his new post an opportunity to enhance both the United States Navy and his own career in politics. Roosevelt's absolute elation at being given a job centered on one of his great passions is evident in the volume and content of the letters he wrote in the days immediately following his appointment. One such correspondence, to naval officer Bowman Hendry McCalla, captures his sentiments particularly well: "As you know, I have always taken a great interest in the Navy, and I sincerely hope that my connection with the service will be as beneficial to it as it will certainly be to me."<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt wasted no time in his efforts to be beneficial to the navy. Within the first two weeks of his tenure as Assistant Secretary, he was regularly writing President McKinley to make suggestions regarding naval actions in the Pacific and Mediterranean. His opinions on these matters were remarkably insightful for his relatively low level of experience, as he delved

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<sup>9</sup> David H. Burton, *Theodore Roosevelt: Confident Imperialist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 35-37; Howard C. Hill, *Roosevelt and the Caribbean* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1965), 6-7; Richard W. Turk, *The Ambiguous Relationship: Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 27-29.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Bowman Hendry McCalla, Washington, D.C., 19 April 1897, in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Etling E. Morison (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 599. *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* is an exhaustive 7-volume collection of Roosevelt's correspondences. It presents the letters in their full, original form. Morison played a strictly editorial role, inserting his own words only by dividing the letters into chronological "chapters", and providing the occasional explanatory footnote.

directly into the specifics of particular ships' mechanical problems, strategies of countering the Japanese naval presence in Hawaiian waters, and anticipatory movements and drills of warships to prepare for any possible event.<sup>11</sup>

Also notable about Roosevelt's first few weeks as Assistant Secretary is the rapidness with which he engaged top naval minds of the time, notably Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, with whom he later had a close relationship for many years. In 1890, Captain Mahan had published *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, that argued the importance of naval power to the expansionistic foreign politics of the late nineteenth century, a concept which went hand-in-hand with Roosevelt's proposed direction for the U.S. Navy. Although Roosevelt had been acquainted with Mahan since the 1880s, his new position in the Navy Department opened doors for the pair to discuss and plan future courses of action, with a very real possibility of implementing them. Such discussions began shortly after Roosevelt's appointment as Assistant Secretary, and occurred in a series of personal correspondences. These private letters, all rather candid, show that Roosevelt had incredibly far-reaching plans, even at this early stage in his career:

If I had my way we would annex those [Hawaiian] islands tomorrow. If that is impossible I would establish a protectorate over them. I believe we should build the Nicaraguan canal at once, and in the meantime that we should build a dozen new battleships, half of them on the Pacific Coast...I am fully alive to the danger from Japan, and I know that it is idle to rely on any sentimental good will towards us.<sup>12</sup>

This letter, written on 3 May 1897 (less than three weeks after Roosevelt's appointment), goes on to express Roosevelt's desire to annex the "Danish Islands" (now the U.S. Virgin Islands),

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<sup>11</sup>Theodore Roosevelt to President William McKinley, 22 and 26 April, 1897, ed. Morison, 599, 601-602.

<sup>12</sup>Theodore Roosevelt to Alfred Thayer Mahan, 3 May 1897, ed. Morison, 697.

and his apprehension towards Germany as the most dangerous of the European powers. This insightful, foretelling series of ambitions and predictions is characteristic of the correspondence Roosevelt and Mahan had in later years. The two men were very like-minded in their views on foreign policy and naval history, and their relationship would help shape the events of later American history.<sup>13</sup>

Upon entering the Department, Roosevelt found that next to nothing had been done to prepare the Navy for a possible conflict resulting from international tension. Despite his grand aspirations and extensive knowledge, Theodore Roosevelt did not wield absolute power in the Naval Department. He was only Assistant Secretary and so he had to answer to another man: John D. Long, Secretary of the United States Navy. A kindly older man who ran the Department in a rather lackadaisical manner, Secretary Long typified the attitude taken by many Americans in the late nineteenth century towards the possibility of a foreign war. Roosevelt, with his desire for a naval buildup and expansionistic foreign policy, was therefore at odds with the Department's more cautious, laid-back approach to the navy. As Roosevelt later recalled in his autobiography, "we did not at the time of which I write take our foreign duties seriously, and...we were not taken seriously in return."<sup>14</sup> Roosevelt was referring primarily to the growing tension with Spain regarding Cuba.

This do-nothing attitude towards military preparation was in sharp contrast to Roosevelt's own ideology. Nevertheless, while annoyed with his boss at times for not being an expansionist, Roosevelt did not despise him as he did many other similar men. If anything, he was grateful for Long's willingness to "watch the department function according to the principles of laissez-

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<sup>13</sup> Burton, 28-31; Morison, 607; Turk, 11, 20-37.

<sup>14</sup> Andrews, ed., 118.



faire.”<sup>15</sup> This meant that Roosevelt was given a great amount of freedom within the Department. He was often put in charge of decisions regarding matters like “abstruse ordinance specifications and blueprints for dry-dock construction,” as Long had little patience for such things and Roosevelt had an intimate knowledge of them, having studied naval details since boyhood. Roosevelt’s fair degree of administrative freedom within the Department greatly benefited the Navy, as he spent his first few weeks working vigorously and thus earning Long’s ever-growing approval. This, in turn, led to the Secretary’s allocation of increasing amounts of responsibility to Roosevelt. Eventually, Long felt free to take long periods of leave, often for weeks at a time. Roosevelt, was then left as Acting Secretary for significant portions of his short time with the Naval Department. It was in this position of authority that he was able to accomplish most of his far-reaching goals, ordering such actions as: the construction of new heavy battleships, the refitting of older ships with modern equipment, and the increase in the number of American dry-docks to improve the nation’s overall naval construction capability. Surprisingly, John Long did not condemn these actions, and at times even encouraged them. As Roosevelt wrote to Massachusetts Senator and lifelong friend Henry Cabot Lodge, “[Long] has wanted me to act entirely independently while he was away...and I have at times been a little nervous in the effort to steer the exact course between bothering him on the one hand, and going ahead with something too widely divergent from his views, on the other.”<sup>16</sup>

The balance Roosevelt tried to maintain between accomplishing his goals and keeping Secretary Long’s approval can be seen in his letters to his closest friends. One such letter, written to Alfred Thayer Mahan on 9 June 1897, is a rare expression of Roosevelt’s deepest and most secret feelings towards his superior:

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<sup>15</sup> Morris, 590.

<sup>16</sup>Theodore Roosevelt to Henry Cabot Lodge, 24 September 1897, ed. Lodge, 280.

In strict confidence I want to tell you that Secretary Long is only lukewarm about building up our Navy...Indeed, he is against adding to our battleships. This is, to me, a matter of the most profound concern. I feel that you ought to write him...make the plea that this is a measure of peace and not of war. I cannot but think your words would carry weight with him.<sup>17</sup>

The exasperated tone with which Roosevelt discussed Long's do-nothing views on foreign policy was something he revealed on only a private level, however, and is indicative of the deep importance he gave to his political goals. Outwardly, he remained very kind and subordinate to the Naval Secretary, writing him regularly to inform him of all that transpired in the Department. He probably did this more out of common sense than true deference, as Roosevelt benefited greatly from his superior's long periods away from Washington. Regardless of his intentions, Roosevelt's amicable relationship with the Naval Secretary paid off. Long's overall happiness with his Assistant Secretary was made known to many people who knew both men. One such person was Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who had occasional visits with Secretary Long. In a letter dated 27 September 1897, he wrote Roosevelt, "The Secretary told me that he was entirely satisfied with all you had done and praised in the highest the work and service you were doing for the Navy."<sup>18</sup> The truth of the matter was that Long's absences and trusting, easygoing demeanor gave Roosevelt an enormous amount of authority, which he likely would never have had under any other Naval Secretary. This leeway allowed him the freedom of pursuing his own expansionistic goals to a virtually unlimited extent, a freedom he used to expedite the buildup and overall improvement of the Navy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Theodore Roosevelt to Alfred Thayer Mahan, 9 June 1897, in *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters and Speeches*, ed. Louis Auchincloss (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 2004), 106.

<sup>18</sup>Henry Cabot Lodge to Theodore Roosevelt, 27 September 1897, ed. Lodge, 281.

<sup>19</sup>Andrews, ed., 118; Lodge, ed., 280; Morris, 588-602.

Assistant Secretary Roosevelt did not hesitate to apply his goals and ideology to his new position of relative authority over the United States Navy. “Quickly, efficiently, and unobtrusively, he established himself as the Administration’s most ardent expansionist.”<sup>20</sup> Roosevelt quietly gathered together the top expansionist minds in Washington government, meeting with and writing to many Congressmen, military officers, and other influential people in his attempts to create a base of support. Publicly, he met with these gentlemen regularly at the Metropolitan Club, his favorite Washington, D.C. social location. Privately, he wrote extensively to all of them in a series of letters. This varied group of individuals included Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Judge William Howard Taft, and Captains Alfred Thayer Mahan and George Dewey, each of whom would later become a prominent figure in American politics and foreign affairs. These men were united in their expansionist (some would say imperialist) viewpoints. Topics of frequent discussion included: the annexation of Hawaii, the freeing of Cuba from tyrannical Spanish rule, the buildup of a navy to keep aggressive powers like Germany and Japan at bay, and adherence to the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that the United States must rid the Western Hemisphere of foreign intervention. Central to this expansionist foreign policy was the great importance of naval power above other military strategy. Roosevelt’s insistence on naval importance is exemplified in a letter dated 16 June 1897 to the president of the Naval War College and one of his Metropolitan Club compatriots, Captain Caspar Frederick Goodrich. His words demonstrate his often-uncanny farsightedness:

If we smash the Japanese Navy, definitely and thoroughly, then the presence of a Japanese army corps in Hawaii would merely mean the establishment of Hawaii as a half-way post for that army corps on its way to our prisons. If we didn’t get control of the seas then no troops that we would be able to land after or just before

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<sup>20</sup> Morris, 592.

the outbreak of a war could hold Hawaii against the Japanese. In other words I think our objective should be the Japanese fleet.<sup>21</sup>

This anticipatory strategic talk was typical of the sorts of discussions between Roosevelt and other members of his Metropolitan Club retinue. Many people expected aggressive action from Japan, especially regarding the Hawaiian Islands. On 16 June, the same day this letter was written, President McKinley approved a treaty annexing the Hawaiian Islands, largely due to a great deal of urging by Roosevelt and his fellow expansionists. Although the U.S.'s acquisition of the islands was a great victory for the expansionist camp, it was not their only goal.

Throughout Roosevelt's time as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, there was much pondering among Americans as to the fate of Cuba, which was then suffering greatly from Spanish colonial abuse and mismanagement. Furthermore, Spanish-U.S. relations were quickly deteriorating as the United States demanded that Spain either improve the treatment of the Cuban people or leave the island altogether. Roosevelt's opinion regarding the Cuban matter is clearly detailed in another letter, written on 19 November 1897, to naval officer and technology pioneer William Wirt Kimball:

I would regard a war with Spain from two standpoints: first, the advisability...of interfering on behalf of the Cubans, and of taking one more step toward the complete freeing of America from European dominion; second, the benefit done our people by giving them something to think of which isn't material gain, and especially the benefit done our military forces by trying both the Navy and Army in actual practice.<sup>22</sup>

He both advocated a war with Spain over Cuba, which came within the next six months, and planned how the United States military would carry it out. This sort of prediction, accompanied

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<sup>21</sup>Theodore Roosevelt to Caspar Frederick Goodrich, 16 June 1897, ed. Morison, 626.

<sup>22</sup>Theodore Roosevelt to William Wirt Kimball, 19 November 1897, ed. Morison, 717.

by executive preparatory actions within the Naval Department, was typical of Roosevelt's time as Assistant Secretary. It is important to note, however, that there had been an expansionist subculture among American politicians for over a decade. By no means did Roosevelt originate any of the expansionist sentiment shared by those who met at the Metropolitan Club; rather, he was almost solely responsible for uniting them, and was seen by many around the world as the leader of the American expansionist movement.<sup>23</sup>

Roosevelt's articulation of his plans for American expansionism was not limited to his activities within his Metropolitan Club social circle. Part of his job as Assistant Secretary required him to travel to naval institutions across the country, making inspections and suggesting courses of action. He also saw in these travels a great opportunity to project his views from a public stage. His first such opportunity came on 2 June 1897, at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. The Naval War College was where many of the top military minds were taught and went to teach. Many of the faculty members were also involved with Roosevelt's club of expansionists, and some were his frequent correspondents. Not the least among these was Captain Caspar F. Goodrich, then the president of the College, and Alfred Thayer Mahan, Roosevelt's personal friend and fellow expansionist. This constant intellectual presence at that the Naval War College made it a major center for the formation and execution of United States foreign policy. Here, Roosevelt delivered a speech that ensured the United States', and indeed the world's, understanding of his position on foreign policy and the Monroe Doctrine as it related to naval buildup.

He began the speech by invoking one of America's most legendary military figures: "A century has passed since Washington wrote, 'To be prepared for war is the most effectual means

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<sup>23</sup> Burton, 34-35; Morison, 626, 717; Morris, 591-593.

to promote peace.”<sup>24</sup> Having hooked his audience by appealing to their reverence for such an iconic American as George Washington, Roosevelt then tied the first president’s famous words into his own expansionistic goals, reiterating the need for war in order to secure peace:

We but keep to the traditions of Washington, to the traditions of all the great Americans who struggled for the real greatness of America, when we strive to build up those fighting qualities for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, no refinement, no culture, no wealth, no material prosperity, can atone.<sup>25</sup>

Roosevelt then made mention of the contemporary foreign affairs that were central to his and other expansionists’ goals. Making a thinly veiled reference to the injustices in Cuba, he continued, “Better a thousand times err on the side of over-readiness to fight, than to err on the side of tame submission to injury, or cold-blooded indifference to the misery of the oppressed.”<sup>26</sup>

Inevitably, given his position and his life history, Roosevelt connected a nation’s ability to live up to the ideals in his speech with its naval prowess. He tapped into his extensive historical knowledge to cite example after example of what had happened in the past to nations who failed in adequately preparing themselves for war, even going so far as to scold Thomas Jefferson for not avoiding the War of 1812 by building a more powerful U.S. Navy. Roosevelt went on to warn the members of the Naval War College that if the United States continued its current lackadaisical attitude towards its navy, it would be woefully unprepared for a conflict with any of the great powers. He thus began using his speech as a way to urge Congress to build more state-of-the-art battleships. Overall, Assistant Secretary Roosevelt’s Naval War College speech served both to broadcast his expansionist ideas to the national and global communities,

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<sup>24</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Naval War College Address, 2 June 1897,” *Almanac of Theodore Roosevelt*.

<sup>25</sup> Roosevelt, “Naval War College Address, 2 June 1897.”

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

and to lobby Congress to heed his warnings regarding the expansion of the navy. For these reasons, it is generally considered to have been the first great speech of his political career.<sup>27</sup>

The response to Roosevelt's speech gave him the publicity he had intended. Newspapers all across the country commended him for his rousing oratory. The *Sun*, out of New York, showered Roosevelt with particular praise, lauding the speech with such adjectives as "manly, patriotic, intelligent, and convincing."<sup>28</sup> Roosevelt used his newfound publicity to push for expansionism even more. The speech had been a masterstroke; it focused on Hawaii and Cuba, which were the most important foreign policy issues of the day. The Naval War College address had brought Roosevelt's persuasive opinion on these issues to the forefront of national attention and, more importantly, had denounced his pacifist opponents in Washington. Roosevelt did not stop there, however. For days after giving the speech, he wrote to the editors of the many newspapers that had covered it. One letter, written to fellow expansionist and editor of the *Sun* Charles Anderson Dana, captures Roosevelt's feelings perfectly in the aftermath of his newly earned publicity:

I very much appreciate your editorial on my speech; but upon my word I sometimes grow to fear that the *Sun* and a few Senators are the only representatives of true American sentiment, in naval and foreign affairs which we have in the Northeast. I feel that all true Americans should be grateful for the stand you take in these matters.<sup>29</sup>

The letter, written on 7 June 1897, only five days after the Naval War College speech, demonstrates both a show of Roosevelt's gratitude for the *Sun*'s positive coverage of his address, as well as a clever display of friendliness that ensured Dana's continued support of Roosevelt as he faced his opponents in the administration regarding the possibility of a foreign war. Several

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<sup>27</sup> Chessman, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Power*, 66; Morris, 593-596; Roosevelt, "Naval War College Address, 2 June, 1897."

<sup>28</sup> Morris, 596.

<sup>29</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Charles Anderson Dana, 7 June 1897, ed. Morison, 621.

more letters like this one were sent out, many on the same day, to other newspaper editors. If he were going to convince the more stubborn pacifists in Washington that naval buildup was essential to the United States' well-being, Roosevelt realized that he would need all the support that he could get.<sup>30</sup>

Despite all of Roosevelt's warmongering and plans for expanding the navy, it was not certain that Spain and the U.S. would go to war in the closing years of the nineteenth century. President McKinley was hesitant to entertain the possibility of bloodshed, opponents of the war still had a strong presence in Congress, and there had been no single event that had pushed the legislature to issue a Declaration of War. However, a chance soon arose for the Assistant Naval Secretary's ideas to be put to the test.

The moment Theodore Roosevelt and his expansionist comrades had been waiting for occurred on the evening of 15 February 1898. The USS *Maine*, an American battleship, was anchored in the harbor of Havana, Cuba. At exactly 9:40 p.m., she exploded without warning, instantly killing 252 men and wounding many others. Pandemonium ensued in Washington the next morning. Some in the administration believed that the *Maine* was destroyed by a freak accident. Others, perhaps the most vocal of whom was Roosevelt, held that her destruction was caused by a Spanish underwater mine. The former group did not want to commit to a war with Spain, while the latter group saw it as the only logical course of action.

During this chaotic time in which the nation debated over a course of action regarding Spain, Assistant Secretary Roosevelt made his opinion known to anyone who would listen. An example of this is recalled by Charles G. Dawes, a close associate of President McKinley. While

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<sup>30</sup> Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 27; Morison, 621; Morris, 596-597.



visiting the War Department on 19 March 1898, Dawes noted that “Theodore Roosevelt came in [to the room], urging war and emphasizing the dangers of delay.”<sup>31</sup> The division in government between those for war and those against it was mirrored within the Naval Department as well. Long, on the one hand, did not want to be hasty in judging the Spanish guilty of the tragedy, while Roosevelt, on the other, felt that the ship’s fate was “an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards.”<sup>32</sup> Even as the United States’ government assembled an official Court of Inquiry to determine the cause of the *Maine*’s explosion, the Assistant Secretary tried desperately to convince his superior of the need to prepare for war. Carefully restraining his personal opinions, Roosevelt wrote Secretary Long a very persuasive letter on 16 February, just one day after the *Maine*’s explosion:

The coincidence of [the *Maine*’s] destruction with her being anchored off Havana by an accident such as has never before happened, is unpleasant enough to seriously increase the many existing difficulties between ourselves and Spain. It is of course not my province to in any way touch on the foreign policy of this country; but the Navy Department represents the arm of the government which will have to carry out any policy upon which the administration may finally determine.<sup>33</sup>

As the Court of Inquiry debated, Roosevelt did all he could to prepare the Navy in the event of war. One key preparation was made during one of Long’s absences in which Roosevelt was Acting Secretary. Using his temporary power, on 25 February 1898, Roosevelt sent the following cablegram order to Commodore George Dewey, commander of the U.S. Navy’s Asiatic squadron:

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<sup>31</sup> Dawes, 146-147.

<sup>32</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Benjamin Harrison Diblee, 16 February 1898, ed. Morison, 775.

<sup>33</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to John D. Long, 16 February 1898, ed. Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters and Speeches*, 136.

Order the squadron...to Hong Kong. Keep full of coal. In the event of declaration of war with Spain, your duty will be to see that the Spanish squadron does not leave the Asiatic coast, and then offensive operations in Philippine Islands.<sup>34</sup>

Secretary Long, when informed of this cablegram, was irritated that Roosevelt had been so assuming. The Assistant Secretary was justified, however, as a month later, on 28 March 1898, the Court of Inquiry found that the *USS Maine* had been blown up “by an external device.”<sup>35</sup> After another month of debate and worsening relations between the two countries, Spain declared war on 25 April 1898. Mr. Roosevelt finally had his war.<sup>36</sup>

Not long after war broke out with Spain, Theodore Roosevelt resigned as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He left his Washington office to fulfill a commitment to service that he had made months before while lobbying and preparing for the conflict. Receiving a reserve commission as a Lieutenant Colonel, Roosevelt joined the 1<sup>st</sup> United States Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, nicknamed “The Rough Riders,” and shipped out with the U.S. Army to Cuba. Here, he eventually led the famous charge up Kettle Hill at the battle of San Juan Heights and earned himself national recognition.

Meanwhile, even though Roosevelt was no longer in the Naval Department, the legacy he had left over the past thirteen months greatly benefited the United States. Throughout the war, thanks to modern technology and improved strategic maneuvers instituted by Roosevelt, the U.S. Navy outclassed the Spanish in virtually every encounter. The most famous example of the U.S. Navy’s superiority was the decisive battle at Manila Bay in the Philippines, where Commodore

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<sup>34</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to George Dewey, 25 February 1898, ed. Morison, 784.

<sup>35</sup> Note that the Court of Inquiry did not specify that Spain was the owner of the “external device.” Nevertheless, the Court’s findings were enough to incriminate the Spanish in the minds of most Americans.

<sup>36</sup> Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 27; Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters and Speeches*, 136; Morison, ed., 784; Morris, 625-642.

George Dewey, in an advantageous position thanks to Assistant Secretary Roosevelt's controversial yet insightful telegram of 25 February, handed a disastrous loss to the Spanish Navy.

After the war, Roosevelt returned home as the most famous man in America. He entered as the Republican Party's candidate for Governor of the State of New York, and won the 1898 election by about 20,000 votes, a significant margin. The governorship, in turn, provided Roosevelt with invaluable executive experience, as well as the opportunity to gain even more national publicity. This publicity proved to help not only Roosevelt personally, but also the Republican Party in general. In the presidential election of 1900, Theodore Roosevelt was nominated as William McKinley's running mate, and his popularity and appeal to independents played a significant part in the incumbent President's re-election. While many thought Roosevelt would be "shelved," and his career stalemated by the office of Vice President, President William McKinley was assassinated on 14 September 1901, making Theodore Roosevelt the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.<sup>37</sup>

During his tenure as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt played an invaluable role in preparing the United States Navy for the Spanish-American War. In Roosevelt's own words, "I had preached, with all the fervor and zeal I possessed, our duty to intervene in Cuba, and to take this opportunity of driving the Spaniard from the Western World."<sup>38</sup> In the months before the USS *Maine* incident, and during the period of uncertainty afterwards, he was a constant (and very loud) advocate of modernizing naval technology, implementing fleet maneuvers that anticipated foreign conflicts, and taking an assertive stance

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<sup>37</sup> Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 35-38; Chessman, *Governor Theodore Roosevelt*, 39-49, 305-306; Morris, 646-780.

<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 1.

towards foreign powers over territory abroad. Roosevelt accomplished all of this to varying degrees largely because of his bold, aggressive attitude towards fulfilling goals, the unusual amount of administrative freedom he was given within the Naval Department, and his persuasive advertisement of his expansionistic ideology. Each of these factors ultimately helped to prepare the United States Navy for the eventual war with Spain. America's overwhelming success in this conflict and resultant emergence as a world power are due in large part to Theodore Roosevelt, who would go on to become one of the most famous and influential figures in modern history.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Andrews, ed., 117-121; Auchincloss, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 26-28; Morris, 588-644; Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 1.

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