

# T.R. AS ASSISTANT SECNAV

**BEFORE HE BECAME PRESIDENT, BEFORE SAN JUAN HILL, THEODORE ROOSEVELT SOUGHT TO TRANSFORM THE NAVY**

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At first glance, it appears ironic that the man who was the moving force behind the founding of the Navy League of the United States was a former Army officer who, even after serving as President of the United States, preferred to be addressed as "Colonel". However, Theodore Roosevelt had a life-long interest in naval matters. Indeed, his mother used to "talk to me as a little shaver about ships, ships, ships, and fighting of ships, till they sank into the depths of my soul." A man of strong opinions, he was first able to put his ideas about the Navy into practice in the civilian post of Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the McKinley Administration.

In order to put Roosevelt's service as Assistant Secretary of the Navy into perspective it is first necessary to look briefly at his career up to that point. Born in 1858 into a prosperous upper-class New York family, Roosevelt was sickly and asthmatic as a young boy. His father, "who I have always been able to regard as the ideal man," challenged the boy to attempt to overcome his physical shortcomings. The young Roosevelt accepted saying "I will make my body" and undertook a rigorous exercise program that did indeed transform his body. Moreover, the

experience molded Roosevelt's character as he came to relish taking on challenges, approaching problems with an almost single-minded determination. For example, when he achieved only mediocre grades during his first year at Harvard College, he set up a rigorous study program that brought him to the top of his class.

After graduation Roosevelt threw himself into writing a history of the Navy in the War of 1812. Except for trips taken as a passenger on transatlantic crossings, Roosevelt had no sea experience. But, as with every project that interested him, he researched the topic thoroughly and produced a classic that became required reading amongst naval officers. Indeed, it has been credited with influencing Alfred Thayer Mahan's thinking on sea power.

At the age of twenty-three, Roosevelt was elected as a Republican to the New York State Assembly. Politics was considered beneath a gentleman of his social class but Roosevelt saw it as a means for social change. "I very strongly feel that if there is going to be any solution of the big social problems of the day, it will come, not through a vague sentimental philanthropy and still less through a sentimental parlour socialism, but through actually taking hold of what

is to be done and working, right in the mire." His persistent calls for reform brought him public attention and within a few years he was made Minority Leader despite having offended the party bosses.

Then tragedy struck. While attending a legislative session in Albany, Roosevelt received word that his wife had had a baby. When he returned home to Manhattan, he found his wife dying from Bright's disease, a kidney ailment. In addition, his mother was dying of typhoid on the next floor. The two deaths rocked Roosevelt. He disengaged from politics and set out for the Badlands of South Dakota.

This was 1884. Only eight years before Lt. Colonel George Custer and 270 men of the 7th U.S. Cavalry had been massacred at the nearby Little Big Horn River. The conditions were primitive and the bespectacled Manhattanite found himself roughing it with cowboys and fighting outlaws. "I heartily enjoy this life, with its perfect freedom . . ." Indeed, he fit in so well that he was made sheriff.

After two years, his emotional wounds had healed sufficiently for him to return to New York. Roosevelt did not immediately resume his political career. Instead, he married his childhood sweetheart and settled down to writing histories. However, when Benjamin Harrison was elected President, Roosevelt's friends persuaded Harrison to appoint him one of three United States Civil Service commissioners. Once again, his fervor for reform flamed and Roosevelt received national attention for his attempts to eliminate corruption in the federal civil service. Similarly, when he

returned to New York, Roosevelt achieved notoriety for vigorously fighting crime and corruption as a New York City police commissioner. The press delighted in reporting Roosevelt's nightly patrols of the City's streets.

By 1896, Roosevelt was becoming frustrated with being a police commissioner, feeling "I have done nearly all I can do with the police under the present law." Since it was a presidential election year, he hoped that if the Republican candidate won, there might be a place for him in Washington. Realizing that he did not yet have the stature to seek a cabinet post, Roosevelt set his sights on becoming Assistant Secretary of the Navy.

Although he had not supported William McKinley for the nomination, once McKinley became the candidate, Roosevelt met with McKinley's political adviser Mark Hanna and offered his services to the campaign. The tough self-made millionaire was wary of this blue-blood reformer but accepted nonetheless. Accordingly, with characteristic enthusiasm, Roosevelt made numerous passionate speeches for McKinley in New York and in the West, coming to feel that the election of Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan would divide the nation along class lines. "It was the greatest crisis in our national fate, save only the civil war; and I am more than glad I was able to do my part in the contest."

When McKinley was elected Roosevelt's friends and allies petitioned the president-elect to appoint Roosevelt to his desired post. But, McKinley was wary that the fiery Roosevelt would be disruptive in his administration and likely to cause a war. In addition, New

York Republican boss George C. Platt was reportedly interested in running for the Senate in an election to be held in January and McKinley did not want to offend Platt by appointing one of his political enemies to office.

This brings us to one of the less laudatory instances in Roosevelt's career. Upon learning of McKinley's concern, Roosevelt visited Platt to ingratiate himself. The boss was polite but non-committal, looking to see if Roosevelt would support him in his Senate bid. Accordingly, when Joseph H. Choate, Roosevelt's longtime friend and mentor, approached Roosevelt for support in seeking the nomination for senator, Roosevelt turned him down. Platt received the nomination and was duly elected. While Choate had no realistic hope of obtaining the nomination, the incident is an anomaly in a life where personal loyalty was prized.

Still, because of his intense dislike for Roosevelt, Platt did not tell McKinley immediately that it would be acceptable to have Roosevelt as Assistant Secretary. Instead, it was not until April that Platt acquiesced after having been persuaded that it would be less troublesome to have Roosevelt in Washington than in New York. As a result, Roosevelt was nominated for the post on 6 April 1897.

Roosevelt was to serve under John D. Long who was more interested in tending his garden in Massachusetts and writing books of poetry than in the Navy. He was suspicious of Roosevelt, believing that he would try and dominate the department. But, when Roosevelt promised to stay in Washington through the hot weather and whenever else Long

wanted, Long decided that the young man might be useful after all.

"There is a great deal of work to be done here, and though my position is of course an entirely subordinate one, still I can accomplish something." Accordingly, Roosevelt eagerly plunged into his new work, taking on tasks that Long did not want to perform, reviewing war plans that had been rejected by the previous isolationist administration, inspecting ships and facilities, and writing detailed memoranda to McKinley concerning ship deployment and overall strategy.

Roosevelt drew around him a close circle of like-minded men. They believed that the interests of the nation were no longer confined to the continental United States. The group included Roosevelt's long time friend Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and historian Brooks Adams, future Secretary of State John Hay, and appellate judge William Howard Taft. It would subsequently expand to include then-Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan and Commodore George Dewey. In addition, the charismatic New Yorker attracted many of the younger officers in the Navy Department. "[I]t is a relief to be dealing with men who are simple and straightforward, and want to do well, and strive more or less successfully to live up to an honorable ideal."

Two months after taking office, Roosevelt rocked the boat with a speech at the Naval War College. The Navy had been allowed to deteriorate after the Civil War. This trend had halted during the Chester A. Arthur administration but the Navy still lagged behind the European powers. Many Americans thought rebuilding it would be

provocative and embroil the United States in conflicts with those powers. "Preparation for war is the surest guaranty for peace. Arbitration is an excellent thing, but ultimately those who wish to see this country at peace with foreign nations will be wise if they place reliance upon a first-class fleet of first-class battleships rather than on any arbitration treaty which the wit of man can devise. Nelson said that the British fleet was the best negotiator in Europe, and there was much truth in the saying. Moreover, while we are sincere and earnest in our advocacy of peace, we must not forget that an ignoble peace is worse than any war." Consequently, Roosevelt concluded, the nation must rapidly increase the size of the fleet.

The speech has been called the first great speech of Roosevelt's career and it caused a nationwide sensation, achieving much praise in the press. It was not so well-received within the Administration, however. McKinley, whose focus was on domestic issues, lamented "I suspect that Roosevelt is right and the only difference between him and me is that mine is the greater responsibility." Secretary Long, who was "only lukewarm about building up our Navy", chided Roosevelt for overstepping his authority.

But, Roosevelt had shown himself to be too useful to cast aside. Indeed, when the warm weather came to Washington, Long went on vacation and Roosevelt found himself Acting Secretary. "I am having immense fun running the Navy. I am absorbed in my work. It is delightful to be dealing with matters of real moment and of great interest, and at the same time with men who are not unadulterated scoundrels."

In addition to his campaign to increase the size of the Navy, two foreign policy questions were much on Roosevelt's mind. The first of these concerned the future of the Hawaiian Islands. Hawaii had been recognized as an independent nation in 1848 but had substantial economic ties to the United States and many Americans had moved to the islands. In 1852, the government of King Kamehameha III had sought a treaty of annexation but negotiations broke down when the king died. A revolt in which U.S. Marines participated toppled the monarchy in 1893 but President Grover Cleveland denounced the move, leaving the islands under a "republic" headed by American businessman Stanford Dole.

Roosevelt was concerned that Japan would act to fill the power vacuum left by President Cleveland's refusal to annex the islands. Not only would such annexation by Japan jeopardize American business interests in the islands but it would deny America a coaling station needed to fuel the fleet and it would expand Japan's sphere of influence thousands of miles to the east. Moreover, time was short as Japan had ordered two new battleships from English shipyards and once they were delivered, the United States would not be in a position to contest a Japanese takeover. "If we don't take Hawaii it will pass into the hands of some strong nation, and the chance of our taking it will be gone forever." Accordingly, Roosevelt and his circle successfully lobbied McKinley to approve a treaty of annexation. Having received McKinley's assent, Lodge secured ratification in the Senate. When Japan protested, Roosevelt told an audience of

naval militia: "The United States is not in a position which requires her to ask Japan, or any other foreign power, what territory it shall or shall not acquire." Long again reprimanded Roosevelt for overstepping his authority but McKinley told Roosevelt privately that he was pleased with the speech.

The other issue that concerned Roosevelt was control of the Caribbean. "[T]here are big problems in the West Indies. . . . Until we turn Spain out of those islands (and if I had my way it would be done tomorrow), we will always be menaced by trouble there." Roosevelt saw that a stronger European power might wrest the colonies from Spain. With the recently unified Germany looking for colonies around the world, Roosevelt was especially concerned that the Kaiser, in particular, might be tempted to "gain a foothold in the new world" by supplanting Spain in the Caribbean.

Tensions in the Caribbean centered upon the revolution in Cuba, which had been a Spanish colony since the time of Columbus. This revolution, begun in 1895, was the latest in a series of revolts dating back to 1832 but unlike earlier revolutions this one had the sympathy of a large part of the American public. In part, American sympathy for the rebels was the result of sensationalist "yellow" journalists. However, Spain's heavy-handed attempts to suppress the guerrillas caused much suffering. Peasants had been forced into concentration camps in order to deny the rebels aid and comfort but lack of food, bad water, and poor sanitation had resulted in cholera and starvation. Meanwhile, the two sides laid waste to the countryside and Cuba's economy.

Still, McKinley, like Cleveland before him, resisted the calls for American intervention.

Roosevelt firmly believed that the United States should intervene in Cuba. "Our own direct interests were great, because of the Cuban tobacco and sugar, and especially because of Cuba's relation to the projected Isthmian canal. But even greater were our interests from the standpoint of humanity. Cuba was at our very doors. It was a dreadful thing for us to sit supinely and watch her death agony. It was our duty, even more from the standpoint of National honor than from the standpoint of National interest, to stop the devastation and destruction."

While Long was on vacation, McKinley invited Roosevelt to several private meetings. "I gave him a paper showing exactly where all our ships are, and I also sketched in outline what I thought ought to be done if things looked menacing about Spain, urging the necessity of taking immediate and prompt initiative if we wished to avoid the chance of some serious trouble." Roosevelt's plan called for the main fleet to sortie from Key West, Florida within 48 hours of a declaration of war to blockade Cuba and to cover a subsequent landing by the Army. A squadron of auxiliary cruisers would menace shipping off the Spanish coast. At the same time, the American Asiatic Squadron was to blockade and take Manila in the Philippines. While there is no record of McKinley's reaction, it bears substantial resemblance to the strategy America followed in the war.

Key to Roosevelt's thinking was that the Asiatic Squadron be commanded by a man of action and he had in mind his friend Commodore Dewey. "Success

in war depends very largely upon choosing a man fit to exercise such powers, and then giving him the powers." However, on the day before Long was to return from vacation, Roosevelt intercepted a letter from a powerful senator urging Long to appoint Commodore John A. Howell to the post. Howell was just the type of cautious officer that Roosevelt did not want. Accordingly, he contacted Dewey and suggested that Dewey enlist any friends that he had in the Senate to persuade McKinley that Dewey was the man for the job. Dewey did so, his friend in the Senate visited the White House, and McKinley wrote a letter to Long suggesting that Dewey be appointed. When Long returned, he was annoyed at the political intrigue that sought to prevent him from naming Howell, the senior officer and Long's personal choice. However, Long was not about to ignore McKinley's suggestion.

In January 1898, a riot in Havana led to Spanish troops closing newspapers that were critical of their occupation of the island. The U.S. Consul-General sent dispatches to the State Department expressing fear that American lives were in danger. USS MAINE (BB 00), then in Key West, was put on alert. In Washington, the crisis caused Roosevelt to write a lengthy memorandum concerning redeployment of the fleet and the necessary preparations that should be made for war. "In short, when war comes it should come finally on our initiative, and after we have had had time to prepare. If we drift into it, if we do not prepare in advance, and suddenly have to go into hostilities without taking the necessary steps beforehand, we may encounter one or two bitter humiliations,

and we shall certainly be forced to spend the first three or four most important weeks not in striking, but in making those preparations to strike which we should have made long before." Long was amused by Roosevelt's overreaction but nonetheless implemented many of his suggestions. In fact, he went beyond Roosevelt's memo and suggested to McKinley that the President ask the Spanish ambassador whether Spain would welcome a good-will visit by MAINE to Havana.

Diplomatic courtesy required Spain to acquiesce to McKinley's suggestion. However, when MAINE reached Havana on 25 January, she received a polite but cold reception. Tensions mounted when William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal published a letter written by a Spanish minister insulting McKinley and showing that Spain was not negotiating in good faith with the U.S. regarding an autonomous government for Cuba. Then, on 15 February, MAINE blew-up, killing 252 American sailors.

While the press clamored for war, McKinley, who had served as an officer in the Civil War, lamented "I have been through one war. I have seen the dead piled up, and I do not want to see another." Accordingly, he urged the public to remain calm until a court of inquiry determined the cause of the explosion.

"The MAINE was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards I believe," Roosevelt wrote privately. However, in deference to Long's view that the explosion was accidental, Roosevelt referred to it as an accident in Department memos.

On 25 February, as the nation waited for the results of the court of inquiry, Long decided to take the afternoon off and left Roosevelt as Acting Secretary. As soon as Long was out the door, Roosevelt sprung into action. He cabled Dewey to prepare for war and instructed him that in the event of war his first duty was to keep the Spanish Asiatic Squadron from leaving the Asiatic coast and then to commence offensive operations in the Philippines. He sent similar messages to squadron commanders around the world instructing them to purchase coal and supplies and where to rendezvous in the event of hostilities. He ordered reserves of ammunition, requisitioned guns, reassigned officers, and sent a message to Congress calling for more men. In short, he put the Navy on a wartime footing. "I felt it was vital to send Dewey (as well as each of our other commanders who were not in home waters) instructions that would enable him to be in readiness for immediate action."

The next morning, Long was appalled to find what Roosevelt had done. However, he did not countermand any of Roosevelt's orders. Perhaps he sensed that Roosevelt understood the situation better than he did.

It was not until 19 April that Congress voted for intervention in Cuba. In the interim, the court of inquiry had found that MAINE had been destroyed by a mine. McKinley looking for any solution other than war had suggested that the United States buy Cuba from Spain, or that Spain pay a huge indemnity for the loss of the MAINE. He had attempted to negotiate with Spain but the Spanish government only

stalled. Public opinion and the Congress were turning against him. "McKinley has no more backbone than a chocolate éclair," scorned Roosevelt. "The blood of the Cubans, the blood of women and children who have perished by the hundred thousand in hideous misery, lies at our door; the blood of the men of the MAINE calls not for indemnity but for the full measure of atonement which can only come from driving the Spaniard from the New World."

When war came, the Navy was in good shape. The orders Roosevelt had given in February resulted in the Navy being strategically positioned and well-supplied. Indeed, the orders given to Dewey made possible the victory at Manila Bay, the central sea battle of the war. In addition, the Navy benefited from having had a year of this dynamo's attention. Although smaller than the Spanish Navy, it was better trained, better supplied, more efficient, and had better morale largely due to Roosevelt's planning and campaigning on its behalf. In the future, the service would benefit from his advocacy of new technologies including torpedo boats, submarines, and airplanes. His personnel recommendations would bring about less friction between line and staff officers.

Before war was declared, Roosevelt had told the President that if hostilities commenced he would resign his post at the Navy Department in favor of active service. McKinley had acquiesced at the time probably putting it down to another manifestation of Roosevelt's boyish enthusiasm. Now that war had come, McKinley, Long and Roosevelt's friends tried to dissuade him from such a course, arguing that Roosevelt could do more good in

Washington and that at 39 he was too old and not in shape for the rigors of combat in a disease-ridden tropical island. Roosevelt conceded these points but remained adamant. Biographers have speculated that he felt the need to test his mettle in the ultimate physical challenge, that he felt he had to make-up for his father's decision not to serve in the Civil War, or that he was still under the influence of the romantic stories of warriors that he had read as a boy. However, what the man actually said was more straightforward. "It does not seem to me that it would be honorable for a man who has consistently advocated a warlike policy not to be willing himself to bear the brunt of carrying out that policy."

Still, one problem remained. Since Roosevelt had no substantial military experience, there was no ready market for his services among the established formations. However, to expand the size of the Army quickly, Congress had authorized the creation of volunteer regiments from the West to be made up of cowboys, hunters, Indians, and other frontiersmen. Roosevelt's time in the West qualified him for these units and he persuaded the Secretary of War to give him a commission as a lieutenant colonel in the First Volunteer Cavalry, which the press would dub "The Rough Riders". Accordingly, Roosevelt left the Navy Department on a road that would take him to a jungle where he would earn the Medal of Honor (awarded after his death), the governorship of New York, and eventually to the White House where he once again worked to implement his belief in a strong Navy.