Theodore Roosevelt and the United States Battleship Maine

Kenneth C. Wenzer

The USB Maine exploded in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898.1 Interest in this ship has endured for over 100 years and has, at times, provoked controversy. Apparently, some people still believe that a mine, surreptitiously planted by Spanish authorities, Cuban rebels, or other saboteurs, caused the initial detonation.2 A literary cottage industry of publications advocating different theories have muddied the waters, most notably Remembering the Maine published in 1995 and an article by National Geographic three years later.3 Under the auspices of Adm. Hyman G. Rickover, a team of seasoned researchers in the mid-1970s proved in How the Battleship Maine

1 The Maine was an armored cruiser and a second-class battleship. A gun from the Maine (now undergoing restoration) at the Washington Navy Yard has an inscribed plaque on the turret: “6 INCH-30 CALIBER GUN FROM U.S. BATTLESHIP “MAINE” SUNK IN HAVANA HARBOR FEBRUARY 15, 1898.” Additionally, the “U.S.S.” prefix designation did not become official until 1907 by order of President Theodore Roosevelt. For a documentary history of the Spanish-American War, consult: http://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s.html.

2 Numerous articles and studies have been published about the Maine, including John E. Weems, The Fate of the Maine (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992) and Michael Blow, A Ship to Remember: The Maine and the Spanish-American War (New York: William Morrow, 1992).

3 Peggy and Harold Samuels, Remembering the Maine (Wash., DC: Smithsonian Press, 1995) and Thomas B. Allen, “Remember the Maine?” National Geographic 193, (February 1998): 92–111. The former avers that it was a secret plot that doomed the Maine, and the latter adheres to the mine theory.
was Destroyed that the culprit was the superheating of a magazine by spontaneous combustion from an adjoining coal bunker.\textsuperscript{4}

Rickover’s investigation, generally viewed as the benchmark on this topic, has sparked additional exploration and insights. In particular, a review of the information in this book raises questions about the beliefs of government officials such as Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, who, as an ardent student of naval affairs, most likely believed that it was indeed a bunker fire that caused the ignition. Yet, he vigorously advocated sabotage as an explanation for the explosion, seeing the disaster as a pretext for war with Spain.

A review of the historical record supports this view of Roosevelt’s beliefs on the Maine disaster. Many military and scientific experts were convinced that bituminous coal, the primary motive power of American ships at that time, could and often did spontaneously ignite. I have drawn on their writings and other contemporary sources found in the Library of Congress (LC), the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and newspapers, as well as secondary sources. Some of these materials have not been used before, and although the rest of them have been gleaned, with closer scrutiny they suggest a new interpretation. A reexamination of the original documents housed in NARA and the letters in the Theodore Roosevelt Papers at the LC have strongly influenced my understanding of Roosevelt’s views on the Maine’s explosion. The Washington, DC, and New York City newspapers and the Army and Navy Journal during the late 1890s, a period when much of the press was characterized as jingoistic or “yellow,” also revealed helpful rumors and classified intelligence. In that era the “goings on” were more available to the press, or in other words, officials and politicians released information to forward their own agendas. Gossip, some of it factual, was also more easily circulated in the small town that was the nation’s capital. In fact, newspaper reporters engaged in intelligence gathering for the U.S. Navy. In a cache of documents on the flagship New York, commanded by Rear Adm. William T. Sampson, for example, were reports on the defenses of Havana prepared by the New York World’s Sylvester H. Scovel.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4} Adm. Hyman G. Rickover, et al. How the Battleship Maine was Destroyed (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995). In this pioneering study, Adm. Rickover marshaled a team of scientific experts and historians that employed thorough technological and research methods to reach the conclusion that spontaneous combustion in a coal bunker was the cause of the Maine’s explosion. Dana Wegner, a co-researcher on this seminal book, has graciously given me access to the Rickover Archives, which has contributed to my conclusions about Roosevelt’s role.

\textsuperscript{5} See Entry 37, Records of Naval Operating Forces, 1849–1997, Record Group (RG) 313, National Archives Building, Washington, DC (hereinafter NAB).
This article explores for the first time Roosevelt’s views of the problem of bunker fires and the Maine. It offers additional explanations of Roosevelt’s reactions to the explosion and to official reports, his actions, and why he advocated for a war that would commit an entire nation to hostilities at any cost. This reading of the primary and secondary sources suggests that he knew intimately the dangers of storing bituminous coal in ship bunkers and the frequency of shipboard fires that coal storage caused. Roosevelt’s communications and responses show that he strongly suspected that a bunker fire was the source of the explosion but nonetheless argued forcefully for sabotage as the cause. Roosevelt sought fame—and his prime solution was to draw the sword.

**Prelude to War**

Before the explosion of the Maine, many people saw the dire conditions in Cuba as the major justification for U.S. intervention. Relations between the United States and the Kingdom of Spain over the plight of Cuba were strained and roiling before the explosion. The Cuban revolution erupted in 1895 with brutalities committed by both the Spanish Army and the Cuban rebels. The cruelties imposed on the Cuban people and their society evoked humanitarian concerns and a fighting spirit in the United States. Madrid’s intransigence in finding a formula to satisfy Cuban demands for independence, or political autonomy, clashed with the stern determination of the rebels. There was no end to the hostilities with the increasing atrocities.⁶ Mounting publicity and pressure from the American yellow press enraged members of Congress, and an indignant populace increasingly pressured President William McKinley to intervene.⁷

In response to events and this public outcry, the administration ordered ships to positions closer to Cuba. In December 1897, the Maine and the Detroit were dispatched to Key West, the American naval base closest to the island. Then, in the next month, the North Atlantic Squadron was ordered to conduct winter exercises off the Dry Tortugas.⁸

A riot erupted in Havana on January 12, 1898. The mob, which included loyalist officers of the Spanish army, demonstrated against some Havana newspapers

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⁸ Asst. Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt to Rear Adm. Montgomery Sicard, Jan. 3, 1898, Entry 47, RG 313, NAB.
that favored autonomy. American Consul-General Fitzhugh Lee, however, was concerned that the violence might be turned against Americans and their property. To that end, he alerted Capt. Charles D. Sigsbee of the *Maine* to prepare to steam toward Cuba at a moment’s notice. In Washington, the State Department decided that these riots portended the fall of the Spanish reform regime, known as the Autonomist Government led by Captain-General Ramón Blanco y Erenas, so they advocated intervention; at the least, that the naval squadron should ready itself for immediate action.9

As a prelude, McKinley, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, and Assistant Secretary of State William R. Day decided to send the *Maine* to Havana, ostensibly on a mission of peace. They believed that this action would satisfy those Americans calling for U.S. intervention and, since warships of other powers visited Havana regularly, would not create undue alarm.10 As seen in the early February reports from Sigsbee to Long, the captain suggested that he viewed his visit with the display of American power as a diplomatic success.11 The Spanish authorities, however, were apprehensive and resented this intrusion.

There were no problems, for the most part, though the *Maine*’s commander was careful to minimize the chances of an incident by allowing only a few select crew members to go ashore while visitors onboard were closely scrutinized. Sigsbee, an international authority in depth soundings, ordered a thorough investigation of the harbor around his ship.12

The Navy Department has evidence that the night after the arrival of the *Maine* in the harbor of Havana, Capt. Sigsbee had a careful investigation made by means of a steam launch and a drag at the end of a line to ascertain

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whether there was a mine of any kind below the ship, the investigation covering all the area in which the ship would drift in swinging at her mooring with changing tide. Nothing suspicious was found according to this statement. This certainly accords with the probabilities.\textsuperscript{13}

The crew was well-trained and was issued additional ammunition, heightened watches were established, and steam was kept up to move the gun turrets, all in the name of precaution.\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{Maine} and the rest of the North Atlantic Squadron had been on the alert for war preparations at least since early January 1897. William McAdoo, Roosevelt’s predecessor as the assistant secretary of the navy during the Cleveland administration, was apprehensive about an officer requesting a leave of absence from the \textit{Maine} “on the general ground that no one is now being allowed to go away from the ships.”\textsuperscript{15}

In April 1897 Theodore Roosevelt was appointed assistant secretary of the navy by a reluctant William McKinley, but only after incessant importunity by the Republican heavyweights. Historians agree that the young man brought his indomitable assertiveness to government service in a manner hitherto unknown.\textsuperscript{16} A newspaper boasted that the

liveliest spot in Washington at present is the Navy Department. The decks are cleared for action. Acting Secretary Roosevelt, in the absence of Gov. Long, has the whole navy bordering on a war footing. It remains only to sand down the decks and pipe to quarters for action.\textsuperscript{17}

Roosevelt later wrote that despite opposition from business and Congress, he and his colleagues made sweeping changes in the Navy Department with the utmost dispatch to ensure that the “best men were to occupy the fighting positions.”\textsuperscript{18}

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\item[15] Asst. Secretary of the Navy William McAdoo to Senator James Smith, Jr., Jan. 18, 1897, Entry 124, General Records of the Department of the Navy, 1798–1947, RG 80, NAB.
\item[17] \textit{New York Sun}, Aug. 23, 1897, Library of Congress, Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room (hereinafter LC-NRR). Secretary of the Navy John D. Long was a former governor of Massachusetts.
\end{enumerate}
Surely with such herculean efforts against entrenched interests, a rigid bureaucracy, rampant corruption, and an amazing array of problems, the new U.S. Navy would steam forth over the high seas for an undoubted future war. As an even-tempered gentleman who suffered from physical and psychological ailments that sapped his energy, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long nonetheless displayed an amalgam of resignation and duty in order to tolerate his new junior colleague.

Roosevelt had repeatedly advocated the need for war preparations, with a singular mixture of national pride, humanitarianism, distaste for conspiring and encroaching global enemies, and a belief in the Monroe Doctrine. He wrote to Lt. William W. Kimball in late 1897 that

I would regard a war with Spain from two standpoints: first, the advisability on the grounds [of] both humanity and self-interest of interfering on behalf of the Cubans, and 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. . . . It would be a great lesson, and we would profit much by it.

So, the Cuban cause was most assuredly a just cause, since it erupted opportunely at a time to give American prowess a chance to make itself known, especially when it also meant waging a battle against the nefarious conspiratorial interests (still a familiar theme) that supported Spanish atrocities. Roosevelt claimed,

I haven’t the slightest doubt that it is just as you say, namely, that the Jew money lenders in Paris, plus one or two big commercial companies in Spain are trying to keep up the war [Cuban insurrection]. I more than agree with you as to the iniquity of our country allowing these people a hold on Cuban finances, but I don’t believe that my words will be listened to. We ought to go to war with Spain unless she were to get out peaceably within the next month.

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19 For numerous examples, see Theodore Roosevelt Papers (hereinafter TRP), reels 313–315, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (hereinafter, LC-MSS).
21 Roosevelt to Lt. William W. Kimball, Nov. 19, 1897, reel 314, TRP, LC-MSS.
22 Roosevelt to Capt. French E. Chadwick, Nov. 4, 1897, reel 314, TRP, LC-MSS.
Theodore Roosevelt and the United States Battleship Maine

The New Coal-Fired Navy
The Navy had been reluctantly transforming from sail to steam since the early 1880s. Infighting between the “Old Salts” and the “Young Turks” punctuated this painful process. While coaling, the ship’s band would attempt to enliven the occasion since the enlisted men naturally found this task onerous. Slowly but surely coal conquered not only the sailors, but wind and time. Roosevelt knew that the up-and-coming steel navy faced a myriad of new issues. A long cruise by sail became unthinkable, so coal supply became the “single most important logistics requirement of a navy at the turn of the century.” To that end, the redesigning of ships became an absolute necessity, for the modern ship of war, powered by steam, permutated into a series of complex mechanical primary and auxiliary systems that pushed the limits of speed. The key to these technological marvels was coal. A ship without coal is “as helpless as a dismasted sailing-vessel in mid-ocean. With coal and without ammunition they can fight with their rams and torpedoes, or run away.”

Furthermore, new adaptations included building a domestic infrastructure, establishing coaling bases, and devising loading techniques and numerous other innovations. Since mankind had to pay homage to this new Prometheus there was a price to pay for its acquisition. The mines, for instance, witnessed scenes of horror. Émile Zola in his fictionalized Germinal captured a glimpse. A new pit pony was just lowered down the mineshaft.

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Trompette was lying on the cast-iron slab, like an immovable heap lost in the nightmare of a gloomy and endless cavern—this vast chamber echoing with noises. . . . Bataille [another pit pony] came nearer, stretching his neck to smell this friend who fell from the earth. . . . He sensed . . . in him the wholesome smell of the open air, the forgotten scent of the sun-basked grass. All of a sudden he let out a resounding whinny, coursing with a joyful song and a pitiful sob. This was his welcome, suffused with the happiness of long-forgotten things and a sadness for this prisoner who would never go back alive. . . . Although Trompette was released from his bonds he still could not move and remained on his side . . . choked by fear.26

Roosevelt, nevertheless, later affirmed the King Coal imperative in a potential war setting in his *Autobiography*. The president wrote that during the Chilean crisis in 1891 Capt. George Dewey, while off the coast of Argentina, showed sound naval judgment by ignoring regulations and bought coal, ready to steam and fight. “In a crisis, the man worth his salt is the man who meets the needs of the situation in whatever way is necessary.”27

Just before and during the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, the Bureau of Equipment’s expenses for coal topped the ledger books.28 In short: no coal—no navy. Roosevelt opened his mind to this logistical issue. His long-time advocacy of aggressive war preparations continued after he joined the Navy Department. Within a month of taking office, in a “personal and private” letter to Capt. Alfred T. Mahan about Pacific conquest, he did not forget to include a vital element.

I would send the OREGON, and, if necessary the MONTEREY (either with a deck load of coal or accompanied by a coaling ship) to Hawaii, and would hoist our flag over the island, leaving all details after action.29

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29 Roosevelt to Capt. Alfred T. Mahan, May 3, 1897, reel 313, TRP, LC-MSS.
Global naval experts knew that anthracite coal burned cleaner, longer, without smoke, and was not prone to spontaneous combustion. The Royal Navy used Welsh anthracite, what it termed Admiralty Coal. Reports from seasoned American naval officers concurred. Cmdr. Bowman H. McCalla quoted a British report about German maneuvers that bituminous coal would betray a fleet’s position and render guns almost useless because of the ceaseless smoke and cinders in the crew’s eyes during action. And then he stated that “with Anthracite there is immunity from spontaneous combustion, always distracting and perhaps demoralizing.”

Commo. Winfield S. Schley, who commanded the Flying Squadron during the Spanish-American War, reaffirmed McCalla’s finding. “Smoking coal . . . discloses the positions of belligerent squadrons at least thirty to forty miles away. . . . When this disadvantage is added to the great menace to a ship’s safety, we run two risks.”

In spite of the known advantages of anthracite coal, a majority of American ship commanders, given more to impatience, favored the soft bituminous coal, especially the Pocohantas variety from the Appalachian Mountains. Since it had quick-firing qualities and burned hotter, it could produce faster speeds. Officers were seemingly unconcerned by the belching smokestacks. The thick smoke and cinders most assuredly contributed to poor marksmanship reported by McCalla. Whether coal soot was a factor in the parlous waste of ammunition at the Battles of Manila Bay and Santiago in 1898 would be interesting to ascertain.

All agreed, nonetheless, that spontaneous combustion in bituminous coal caused fires, especially in enclosed areas. As an ardent navalist Roosevelt was undoubtedly concerned about this issue. At sea or in harbor, an alarming number of incidents involving self-ignition in stored coal were documented in naval files—so fires posed a grave danger to the sailors and the ships. Roosevelt most assuredly did not need another headache while fighting Congress for appropriations, wrangling

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30 Cmdr. Bowman H. McCalla to Sicard, Feb. 16, 1898, Entry 41, RG 313, NAB.
31 Ibid.
32 Commo. Winfield S. Schley to Long, May 12, 1898, Entry 464, HF (Fires, Explosions, Etc.), RG 45, NAB.
34 Capt. William S. Sims’s reference to the latter battle would be a good starting point for a historical inquiry. Roosevelt would recall that he “wrote letter after letter pointing out how frightfully backward we were in marksmanship.” See his Autobiography, 217.
35 The Navy Department was located in the building now known as the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.
with bureau chiefs, addressing navy yard issues, stamping out corruption, and streamlining operations—to list just a few of his numerous daily issues.

In 1894 the crew of the USS *Petrel* had to contend with a fire. In 1895 the newly launched *Olympia* had to flood fires three times, as did the *Cincinnati*. In the following year, coal fires flared up in the *Lancaster*, the *Indiana*, and the *Wabash*. The *San Francisco* and the *New York* experienced one each, and the *Wilmington* tops the list with four in 1897.  

Reports reveal the dangers. Capt. Mortimer L. Johnson of the *Cincinnati* related that his crew discovered burning wood in three forward magazines, so they flooded the culprit, bunker B-8. A report from Capt. Robley D. Evans of the *Indiana* stated that fires broke out simultaneously in two different bunkers; both bunkers laden with coal taken on board at Newport News, Virginia. Luckily, flooding them mitigated serious damage. Capt. Albert Kauntz of the *Wabash* reported that after the detection of smoke that “It was decided that fire must have come from the coal bunker. . . . After removing about forty tons of coal, it was discovered that at about three feet from the bottom of the bunker the coal was incandescent.” The bunker was then flooded. A joint letter written by three officers to the commander of the *New York* averred, “The fire, in the opinion of the Board was caused by spontaneous combustion of New River coal stowed in this bunker on February 23, 1897.” To recur to Schley, he reported to Secretary Long a calamitous situation in his squadron:

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56 From a typed list of ship fires compiled by Dana M. Wegner and Francis Duncan (the two historians on the Rickover team), Office of the Curator of Models, Naval Surface Warfare Center, West Bethesda, MD, Rickover Archives (hereinafter RA). Fireproofing and temperature-lowering features, for instance, were installed in the *Olympia* after service in Asian waters. See Benjamin F. Cooling, *USS Olympia: Herald of Empire* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 129–30.

57 Capt. Mortimer L. Johnson to Secretary of the Navy Hilary A. Herbert, Dec. 11, 1895, Entry 464, HF, RG 45, NAB.

58 Capt. Robley D. Evans to Rear Adm. Francis M. Bunce, May 19, 1896, HF, RG 45, NAB. This document also indicates that another fire broke out in the *Indiana* in 1907.


60 Passed Asst. Engineer Franklin J. Schell, Naval Cadet Carlton F. Snow, and Lt. Charles Laird to Capt. Silas Casey, Mar. 11, 1897, typed notes, RA. Reports of bunker fires continued to fill the files of the Bureau of Equipment after the Spanish-American War.
There has been considerable difficulty experienced in the past week with spontaneous combustion in the coal bunkers of this vessel, notwithstanding that the greatest possible precautions are taken. . . . During my command of these new vessels, I have experienced at least a dozen instances of spontaneous origination with this bituminous coal taken on at several points along our coast.⁴¹

Schley was thankful that these fires were not near any magazines, otherwise he would have had to take drastic steps. He also remarked that the coal was the New River variety taken on board at Newport News, but nonetheless, all bituminous coal was subject to spontaneous ignitions and therefore a “constant menace.”⁴² This Schley document is revealing, for it sums up a widespread fear in the Navy, undoubtedly shared by Roosevelt.

In November 1897 the U.S. Navy consisted of 6 battleships, 2 armored cruisers, 15 gunboats, 6 monitors, and 9 additional vessels.⁴³ Given the size of this rather small, but growing fleet, solely dependent on coal for motive power, the constant threat of spontaneous fires evoked apprehension. A basic ship design allowed ordnance and powder magazines to be close to mid-ship but next to the outer bunkers. The logic at the time was that if a shell or torpedo were to hit the hull, the coal would absorb the impact and protect the ammunition. Standard procedure for naval architects allowed for one-quarter inch of steel to separate the outer-wing coal bunker from a magazine with installation of a single noncirculating vent pipe, such as on the Maine.

So Roosevelt recommended that month, and Long agreed, that a board consisting of “coal operators, agents of steamship lines, consulting engineers, chemists, engineers of gas works, and other works handling large quantities of coal” should convene to investigate the spontaneous combustion issues, since it is “confined to bituminous or ‘soft’ coal, inasmuch as we have not learned of a case of fire due to . . . anthracite coal on shipboard.”⁴⁴

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⁴¹ Schley to Long, May 12, 1898, Entry 464, HF, RG 45, NAB. According to Dana Wegner, he and Francis Duncan “found evidence that the alarms were unreliable. Some failed to detect heat when present, while some alarms went off when there was no heat. Also, we were convinced that low-grade spontaneous combustion probably could occur deep enough in the bunker that the mass of coal above the ‘fire’ could absorb all of the emitted heat before it reached the top of the bunker.” [e-mail exchange with Dana Wegner, Mar. 9, 2016.]

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1897, 3.

⁴⁴ “Report of Board on Investigation of the Spontaneous Combustion of Coal” in Reports of the Efficiency of Various Coals, 81.
Roosevelt also ordered naval attachés in Europe to ascertain what protocols and technology foreign navies used to prevent self-ignition. Many transmitted notes inundated Washington. The Italian Navy used gas expellers, refrigerating machines, and various noncombustible wall linings. The Imperial German Navy initiated a system of ventilating conduits and cooling machines to forestall combustion. The French Navy installed refrigerating machines, double floors, and asbestos lining. And the Royal Navy used asbestos and other linings, air spaces between walls, and ventilating fans. The results were eye opening for the Americans.45

The Explosion on the Maine

One of the newest American battleships, the Maine was authorized in 1886 and commissioned in 1895. This vessel, the pride of the U.S. Navy and the symbol of its resurgence, was 310 feet long, at maximum 57 feet wide, displaced 6,682 tons, and could steam at a respectable 17 knots. Four 10-inch guns with two turrets en échelon and six 6-inch guns composed the main battery, seven 6-pounders formed the secondary battery, and four torpedo tubes, two on each side, added firepower—formidable armament for the time. The seasoned crew numbered 354 officers and men.46 The Maine was the first armored battleship built from an American design, almost entirely of domestically produced materials, and in an American shipyard at Brooklyn, New York.

In November 1897 the USB Maine was loaded up with New River bituminous coal at Newport News before proceeding, under secret orders, to points south.47 Lt. Cmdr. Richard Wainwright, in transition as head of the Office of Naval Intelligence to the executive officer of the Maine, worked directly under Roosevelt’s authority. He had an amicable relationship with Roosevelt. Wainwright made the final preparations for the blue-ribbon report on coal slated for the assistant secretary’s desk.48 A newspaper article stated that he compiled a list of previous incidents of onboard fires. On the Cincinnati, although no outward signs were noticeable, the

45 Washington Post, Feb. 18, 1898, LC-NRR, and Rickover, et al. Battleship Maine, 20–21. This pioneering study conclusively argues that the Maine exploded as a result of spontaneous combustion in bunker A-16. For examples of naval attaché reports, see Entry 301, RG 45, NAB, and Baltimore Sun, Feb. 21, 1898, LC-NRR.
46 Rickover, Battleship Maine, 1.
47 Ibid., 23. Anthracite coal was also loaded at Key West in December 1897.
48 Roosevelt to Wainwright, Nov. 8, 1897, Naval Historical Center, Operational Archives, Naval History and Heritage Command, Wash., DC, and Baltimore Sun, Feb. 21, 1898, LC-NRR.
“fires in the bunkers from spontaneous combustion were so fierce that the steel bulkheads that separated them from the ammunition magazines were red hot and the wooden cases in which the ammunition was stored were actually in flames when the danger was discovered.”

The anchoring of the Maine in Havana Harbor on January 25, 1898, preceded by two days the final Roosevelt report with 11 recommendations. The first collective suggestion stipulated that “no magazine should be separated from a coal bunker by a single bulkhead only, but in all cases there should be a double bulkhead with efficient air circulation, artificial if necessary.”

“It thus appears,” moreover, “that anthracite is, on the whole, distinctly inferior to bituminous for naval use except in the freedom from spontaneous ignition.”

So anthracite coal was rejected as an alternative because of slower firing and rate of combustion, greater cost, and falsely claimed scarcity. But the report stated most revealingly that “the comparative rarity of this phenomenon [of spontaneous combustion] on our ships shows that we could not for a moment allow this advantage to outweigh the numerous and important disadvantages.”

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49 Washington Post, Feb. 18, 1898, LC-NRR.
51 Ibid., 84.
52 Ibid. At that time anthracite coal could have been easily conveyed to any port facility on the East and Gulf Coasts.
The battleship *Maine* exploded about three weeks later on February 15, 1898. The extent of the damage revealed the most catastrophic example to date of a ship explosion from a bunker fire. The magazine located next to bunker A-16 was loaded to over-capacity. A report published in 1923, however, revealed some alarming figures about contemporary shipboard fires. On British vessels, from 1890 to 1901, for instance, 204 of 648 onboard fires were due to spontaneous combustion. During that period fires in coal bunkers “increased strikingly” from 9 to 53 per annum. The overall number of incendiary incidents had grown over the years even with the replacement of wooden ships by steel ships. Apparently bunker fires had contributed to the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 because the outer hull plates were weakened by supercharged heat so the ship sank far quicker than had been anticipated when navigating into an iceberg. The construction of the *Maine* did not augur well for a long life. The hull was composed of hand-riveted plates known as strakes. In addition, the ship was bow heavy, so 48 tons of concrete were added to the stern; yet while under steam the front decks were still swamped by water.

**Confusion Reigns**

Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, although he was genuinely upset, maintained a balanced approach to the calamity. In a journal entry, he wrote

> There is an intense difference of opinion as to the cause of the blowing up of the *Maine*. In this, as in everything else, the opinion of the individual is determined by his original bias. If he is a conservative, he is sure that it was an accident; if he is a jingo, he is equally sure that it was by design. The former is sure that no design could have been carried out without discovery; the latter is equally sure that no accident could have happened in view of the precautions which were taken. My own judgment is, so far as

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53. Report of the Naval Court of Inquiry, 143–44.


55. In a number of conversations with Mr. William Garzke in 2016 he told me that the quality of the rivets used in the *Titanic* was substandard. See also William Garzke, et al. “*Titanic*, The Anatomy of a Disaster—A Report from the Marine Forensic Panel (SD-7),” *The Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers*, Annual Meeting Technical Sessions (1997): 1–4. Vicki Bassett, in a University of Wisconsin article titled “Causes and Effects of the Rapid Sinking of the *Titanic*,” *Undergraduate Engineering Review*, suggests that brittle fracture of the rivets and hull steel and flaws in the watertight compartments were also factors. See [http://writing.engr.psu.edu/uer/bassett.html](http://writing.engr.psu.edu/uer/bassett.html) (accessed Dec. 11, 2016).

any information has been received, that it was the result of an accident, such as every ship of war, with the tremendously high and powerful explosives which we now have on board, is liable to encounter. The best way, however, seems to suspend judgment until more information shall be had.  

The future Rough Rider, however, had difficulty remaining outwardly unperturbed, and in a letter to former Assistant Secretary of the Navy William McAdoo, Roosevelt vented his frustrations about this incident. “I have been holding my judgment in suspense,” he wrote, “but I confess privately to you that it is exceedingly difficult for me to believe that there was an accident at all.” A private missive sent down the hall to Long urged temporization to get his desired results for war preparations for a telling blow against Spain.

I would not intrude on you with any suggestion or advice did I not feel, sir, the greatest regard and respect for you personally, no less than a desire to safeguard the honor of the Navy. It may be impossible to ever settle definitely whether or not the MAINE was destroyed through some treachery upon the part of the Spaniards. The coincidence of her destruction with her being anchored off Havana by an accident such as

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57 Long, Feb. 17, 1898, journal entry, Vol. 78, PJDL-MHS. After the Maine Board of Inquiry finished its proceedings, Long accepted its findings that a mine caused the explosion.

58 Roosevelt to McAdoo, Feb. 23, 1898, reel 315, TRP, LC-MSS.
has never before happened, is unpleasant enough to seriously increase the many existing difficulties between ourselves and Spain. . . . It would be well to take all possible precautions.\footnote{Roosevelt to Long, Feb. 16, 1898, reel 315, TRP, LC-MSS.}

At that time, before the Sampson Board of Inquiry released its findings, since Long believed that an internal explosion was the explanation for the tragedy, so perhaps for a moment Roosevelt evinced concern for his health. Roosevelt, nonetheless, was not happy that his boss was not a champion of sabotage. Some of the naval officer corps, nevertheless, agreed with Long while others insisted that the explosion was caused by a torpedo mine, so divisiveness reigned.

While the confusion raged in and outside the Navy Department, the leading scientists of the day in ballistics, mines, ship design, and other fields added to the stressful situation. They too disagreed whether the \textit{Maine} exploded from an internal or external source.\footnote{See, for example, box 8, Charles O’Neil Papers, LC-MSS; Rickover, \textit{Battleship Maine; New York Herald}, Feb. 18 and 19, 1898, LC-NRR.} Capt. Philip R. Alger, \textit{primus inter pares} among his contemporaries, was deemed as the Navy’s leading expert in ordnance and the chemistry of explosives. Although he was soon to publish classic textbooks on ballistics, gunnery, and hydromechanics, he had the temerity to assert that it was impossible for a torpedo mine to cause an explosion of such magnitude or to set off ammunition, and that the source of ignition was in the coal bunker.

When it comes to seeking the cause of the explosion of the \textit{Maine}’s magazine, we should naturally look not for the improbable or unusual causes, but those against which we have had to guard in the past. The most common of these is through fires in the bunkers. Many of our ships have been in danger various times from this cause and not long ago a fire in the \textit{Cincinnati}’s bunkers actually set fire to fittings, wooden boxes, etc., within the magazine and had it not been discovered at the time . . . it would doubtless have resulted in a catastrophe on board that ship similar to the one on the \textit{Maine}.\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, Feb. 18, 1898, LC-NRR.}

For years Roosevelt had been at full steam for war, but when he responded to Alger’s conclusion, he evoked a naval self-esteem with a slight muting of his battle
horn. Roosevelt claimed that Alger was totally ignorant regarding the explosion, presented convoluted thinking, was flagrantly pro-Spanish, and inappropriately put blame on the U.S. Navy.

All the best men in the Department agree that, whether probable or not, it certainly is possible that the ship was blown up by a mine which might, or might not, have been towed under her; and when we have a court sitting to find out these facts it seems to me to the last point inadvisable for any person connected with the Navy Department to express his opinion publicly in the matter.  

Alger had posted his report on a bulletin board in the Navy Department, but it was torn off at the behest of the assistant secretary of the navy. Roosevelt’s knowledge of bunker fires would have also exacerbated the contentious factions as he was a war hawk and wanted to crush the supporters of an internal explosion. It is likely that having read extensively on the history and nature of spontaneous coal ignition Roosevelt did agree with Alger and Long.

Apparently he suppressed his insight while Wainwright oversaw the investigation of the wreckage. Wainwright, who saved the ship’s mascot Tom the cat, reported his findings to the Court of Inquiry and signed them off six days after the hearings ended on March 15. Meanwhile, Spanish authorities in Cuba, fearful that the court might decide that the Maine had been destroyed by sabotage, conducted an investigation of their own. The findings of the Navy’s court—which concluded that sabotage indeed was the cause of the destruction, although no one was specifically blamed—and of the Spanish investigation—which concluded that

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63 New York Times, Feb. 23, 1912, LC-NRR.


65 Report of the Naval Court of Inquiry. Tom and Sigsbee’s dog Peggy survived and became national heroes; however, two cats died.
the **Maine** was blown up from within—were at odds.\(^66\) A Senate investigation held in April reaffirmed the Sampson verdict.\(^67\) Once the Navy’s Court of Inquiry adjudged that sabotage caused the destruction of the battleship, the demand for action, both public and private, became overwhelming, and mobilization for war geared up.\(^68\) Thus began the least-celebrated milestone in U.S. history—the Spanish-American War.

**Conclusion**

Roosevelt, after many years of beating war drums, realized his dream, and as recounted in many writings, was catapulted to fame. The United States became a global power seemingly overnight. There was, however, a price to pay, and that was the needless suffering of people and animals. A Spanish captain later wrote that

> The blockade as practiced in Cuba [by the U.S. Navy] caused a thousand more victims and more horrors than bursting shells, the burning of cities, the massacre of battles, and all the cruelties of weapons. The blockade . . . annihilates human beings without distinction—or rather, with one distinction, for it strikes particularly the feeble, the children, the women, and the sick. . . .

> In the Spanish-American war the whole enormity . . . become [sic] apparent in the frightful mortality. After two months . . . there could be seen in the cities and in the country thousands of human beings looking like ghosts . . . dying of hunger in the public roads.\(^69\)

The officers and men of the U.S. Navy were subjects of King Coal, but it was a dispiteous reign that exacted total subservience. The modernizing navy was

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\(^68\) Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982), 34–51.

entirely dependent on the dangerous reality of an imperfect technology. Coal-fired ships contained bunkers that could ignite spontaneously, so they were, potentially, floating infernos. Theodore Roosevelt knew of this danger, but viewed such sacrifice as insignificant for his war plans in a world guided by global imperialism and Social Darwinism. Although scientific experts were well aware of the potential problems, at Roosevelt’s insistence the Navy readied itself for action.

The *Maine*’s explosion was a boon to the advocates of war during a time of heightened tensions and public indignation with Spain. Roosevelt knew, in all likelihood, that combustible bituminous coal was the enemy. Yet, as documentary evidence shows, he used this incident as a rallying cry against Madrid and publicly suppressed his belief that the explosion of the *Maine* had an internal cause. In his influential position with many national and international ties, he nonetheless flagrantly campaigned against anyone who asserted what he likely knew was the truth. While in the Navy Department, he sedulously worked to thwart a joint investigation with Spanish authorities. The findings of the Sampson Court of Inquiry and the Senate Report agreed with his stance that a mine undoubtedly destroyed the *Maine*. The Furies were let loose so that Roosevelt and his berth mates could suppress opposition against the verdict of sabotage. He wrote,

> If we will not fight for the blowing up of the MAINE (and personally I believe we should have fought long ago because of the atrocities in Cuba) we are no longer fit to hold up our heads among the nations of the earth.

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70 A forthcoming article will amplify my theme of a “silent conspiracy” and discuss the roles of Capt. Charles D. Sigsbee, Consul-General Fitzhugh Lee, the Maine Board of Inquiry, the Senate hearings, the Spanish investigation, and other influential events and people after the *Maine*’s explosion.

71 Roosevelt to Capt. William S. Cowles, Feb. 23, 1898, TRP, reel 315, LC-MSS.

72 Roosevelt to William Tudor, Apr. 5, 1898, reel 315, TRP, LC-MSS.
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