



COLONEL ROOSEVELT

*Theodore Roosevelt
Goes to War,
1897-1898*

H. PAUL JEFFERS
author of Commissioner Roosevelt

Colonel Roosevelt

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Goes to War, 1897-1898**

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I had very deeply felt that it was our duty to free Cuba, and I had publicly expressed this feeling; and when a man takes such a position, he ought to be willing to make his words good by his deeds. He should pay with his body.

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Preface

From George Washington to George Bush, men who had gone to war before becoming president of the United States had done so reluctantly and with revulsion. But Theodore Roosevelt eagerly encouraged a war and happily joined the fight. "He was so overflowing with patriotism, so certain that war was at hand," observed a close friend, "that he could not restrain himself."

The war he fought is little noted, yet enormously important in the history of the United States: the Spanish-American War.

Colonel Roosevelt details the dramatic story of how and why Theodore Roosevelt almost single-handedly turned a crisis over Cuba into a war that transformed the United States into a world power. It also assured his political career. Four months after he led a charge up San Juan Hill he was elected governor of New York. In less than three years he was president.

"San Juan," he would say, "was the great day of my life."

Drawing on the diaries, letters, and memoirs of Roosevelt and those closest to him, as well as on contemporary news reports, government archives, military histories, and biographies, this book details the crisis that led to the war, reveals the personalities of those who became involved, traces the preparations for the war, and describes all aspects of the fighting. It shows that much of the responsibility for the conflict and its consequences must be attributed to the character and personal objectives of Theodore Roosevelt.

"For Roosevelt," wrote his biographer Nathan Miller, "the war had been a vindication of his physical courage and his abilities as a leader, and it thrust him into the national limelight." Another Roosevelt chronicler, Alvin F. Harlow, noted that after the war "the name of Roosevelt was on every tongue. He was very nearly the top-ranking hero of the war. His career had been helped, not hindered, by his military venture, for the people love to give military heroes high political preference."

Roosevelt's friend, novelist Owen Wister, found the war to be a whirl of history that put the United States among the great nations of the world. Because of the war—the shortest declared war in American history—the United States became a colonial power, having secured the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii. The country assumed the role of a major fighting force with a two-ocean navy, established itself as the sole arbiter of affairs in the Western Hemisphere, and planted seeds for a war with Japan some forty years later.

Roosevelt himself said, "The young giant of the West stands on a continent and clasps the crest of an ocean in either hand. Our nation, glorious in youth and strength, looks into the future with eager eyes and rejoices as a strong man to run a race."

"It has been," said the American ambassador to England, John Hay, "a splendid little war."

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Prologue

Ships, Ships, Ships

To a native Rhode Islander strolling the Newport waterfront on Wednesday morning, June 2, 1897, the short, stocky man of middle years with an impressive mustache and pince-nez glasses might have appeared to be just another wealthy vacationer up from New York. He scurried down the gangway of the Fall River steamer and bounded to the dock, much as men had been doing for decades upon arriving by way of Long Island Sound aboard the overnight boat from New York. Free to laze away their summers, these men came to enjoy the cooling breezes on the broad and shady porches and manicured lawns and croquet greens of the palatial mansions known as "cottages," which dotted the picturesque shores and yacht-crowded waters of Narragansett Bay.

Described in 1893's *Baedeker's United States* as the undisputed "Queen of American seaside resorts," Newport had long since left behind the puritanism of religious dissenters who in 1639 had fled there because Massachusetts was not religious enough for them. By the next century the settlement they created had become a lucrative base for the rum-molasses-slave trade and for colorful freebooting ocean-going privateers. Following the Civil War, its pleasant summer sea vistas had attracted intellectuals and artists down by train from Boston and the wealthy over water from New York, led by social pacesetters Mrs. John Jacob Astor and Mrs. August Belmont.

But the destination of the energetic figure who debarked on that June 2 was not one of the stately mansions along Bellevue Avenue, the membership-by-introduction-only casino where the lawn tennis championship of America was decided each September, nor one of the posh hotels or any of the town's attractive beaches. As the new assistant secretary of the navy, Theodore Roosevelt did not have opulence and leisure on his mind. He was on his way to the poorhouse.

Topped with a graceful cupola, the federal-style red brick building on Coaster's Island had been a place of last resort for the down-and-out until it was taken over by the navy in October 1884 to accommodate the Naval War College. The grand ambition of Admiral Stephen B. Luce, the college had as its purpose advanced training and instruction for commissioned naval officers in science and the history of marine warfare. Between 1886 and 1889 and again from 1892 to 1893 its president had been a brilliant but quirky naval strategist who, despite a forty-year career, thoroughly disliked naval service and could not board even the largest ship in the fleet without suffering severely from seasickness. Yet Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan was the foremost propagandist for an American navy that he thought should be second to none in the world. Led by the most formidable assemblage of battleships that money could buy, the United States Navy of Mahan's dream would not only defend and secure America's coasts but project American interests, prestige, and power to the four corners of the world. On these vital issues, in Roosevelt's opinion, "there was no one else in his class, or anywhere near it."

Although Mahan had retired from active duty and been succeeded as commanding officer of the Naval War College, his idea of a first-class American fleet plying all the world's oceans and seas had been given wide circulation by scores of his articles, letters to newspaper editors, and books, the most important of which, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, had been published in 1890. Among its many readers, none had been so admiring, nor had agreed so wholeheartedly, as Theodore Roosevelt.

October 1890's issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* had afforded Roosevelt an opportunity to review the book. The critic noted that the author clearly proved the "tremendous effect which seapower has had upon the development of certain of the great nations of the world, especially at momentous crises in their history." He declared that "one or two of the points which Captain Mahan brings out have a very important bearing on our present condition." These were the need for a secure base of operations for action against an enemy's commerce and some kind of line of battle to fall back on.

It was not enough for the United States to rely on coastal fortifications for defense. Roosevelt wrote, "Forts alone could not prevent the occupation of any town or territory outside the range of their guns, or the general wasting of the seaboard, while a squadron of heavy battleships, able to sail out and attack the enemy's vessels as

they approached, and possessing the great advantage of being near their own base of supplies, would effectively guard a thousand miles of coast."

The meaning was clear. "We need a large navy, composed not merely of cruisers, but containing also a full proportion of powerful battleships, able to meet those of any nation."

Between the lines one could read Roosevelt's proposition that the closer this powerful fleet was stationed in the way of any potential routes of attack on the United States, the better; ideal sites would be islands such as Puerto Rico and Cuba in the Atlantic and the Hawaiian Islands in the Pacific.

Another Roosevelt review of a Mahan book—this one on the life of Britain's naval hero Admiral Horatio Nelson—was scheduled for publication in *The Bookman* during the very month that Roosevelt traveled to Newport to address the Naval War College. In this essay he would assert, "No triumph of peace can equal the armed triumph over malice domestic or foreign levy. No qualities called out by a purely peaceful life can stand on a level with those stern and virile virtues which move the men of stout heart and strong hand who uphold the honor of their flag in battle. It is better for a nation to produce one [General Ulysses S.] Grant or one [Admiral David] Farragut than a thousand shrewd manufacturers or successful speculators."

While Roosevelt certainly placed Captain Mahan in such a category, Mahan was not at the war college to greet his admirer. He had been succeeded by Captain Casper B. Goodrich, who, shortly before Roosevelt's arrival, had received an order from the assistant secretary to engage the college's staff and student officers in deliberating a "Special Confidential Problem." It centered on two of the most debated policy issues facing the administration of President William McKinley. The first involved the Hawaiian Islands.

Since American residents there had overthrown the regime of Queen Liliuokalani, they had been agitating for formal union with the United States, and in 1893 they had included in Hawaii's constitution an authorization for a treaty of annexation. Roosevelt's problem posited a pair of breathtaking assumptions: (1) Japan makes demands upon the Hawaiian Islands; (2) the United States intervenes militarily. Because as assistant secretary of the navy he was directly in charge of fleet operations, Roosevelt wanted to know what force would be necessary to uphold the intervention and how it should be

employed. He added that the problem should be considered while "keeping in mind possible complications with another Power on the Atlantic Coast," referring to Spain and its colonies, Puerto Rico and Cuba.

That the author of the provocative request had followed up by actually coming to Newport served to underscore that the problem meant more to Roosevelt than an interesting exercise in naval strategy. Neither was it lost to the college faculty and student officers that the speech would be Roosevelt's first public pronouncement since becoming assistant secretary on April 19. Nor could they have been unaware of the dramatic emergence on the national political stage of a man who was one of the country's most fascinating and controversial public figures.

In June 1897, Theodore Roosevelt was four months shy of his thirty-ninth birthday and seventeen years out of college, yet he already had been a leader of the New York state legislature, a candidate for mayor of New York City (defeated in 1886), a member of the United States Civil Service Commission, and president of the New York City Board of Police Commissioners (1895-97). When the potentates of the Republican Party pondered the future and combed party rolls for prospective candidates for president of the United States, they placed his name high on their list.

Upon Roosevelt's appointment as assistant secretary of the navy by McKinley, the *Chicago Times-Herald's* Washington correspondent had noted, "He is by long odds one of the most interesting of the younger men seen here in recent years."

A prolific writer, Roosevelt had established himself as an essayist and author of books, including *The Winning of the West*, published in four volumes between 1889 and 1896, and *The Naval War of 1812*, published in 1882. The latter had been started in the form of his senior thesis while he was at Harvard University.

"When the professor thought I ought to be on mathematics and the languages," Roosevelt recalled, "my mind was running to ships that were fighting each other."

This fascination with warring ships had surfaced long before Roosevelt went to Cambridge. Born in New York City on October 27, 1858, and nicknamed Teedie, he had been a sickly child about whom his doctors had expressed grave doubts that he could survive to adulthood. Because he was often confined to bed, he read voraciously and listened eagerly to his mother's stories about the Civil War exploits of an uncle, James Bulloch, who had built the Confederate warship

Alabama. When not telling him about Uncle James, he recalled, his mother would “talk to me as a little shaver about ships, ships, ships, and fighting ships, till they sank into the depths of my soul.”

Begun in 1880 when Roosevelt was twenty years of age, *The Naval War of 1812* was completed and published two years after his graduation from Harvard. According to his friend and classmate Owen Wister, Roosevelt’s postcollege writing had been pursued in Roosevelt’s New York City house. In *Roosevelt, the Story of a Friendship, 1880–1919*, Wister described Roosevelt’s new wife, Alice, looking in at her husband’s “oblivious back” and exclaiming in a plaintive drawl: “We’re dining out in twenty minutes, and Teedie’s drawing little ships.”

In a room crammed with ships’ log books, navigational charts, and stacks of other source material, Wister watched Roosevelt doing his work “mostly standing on one leg at the bookcases . . . the other leg crossed behind, toe touching the floor, heedless of dinner engagements and the flight of time. A slide drew out from the bookcase. On this he had open the leading authorities on navigation, of which he knew nothing. He knew that when a ship’s course was one way, with the wind another, the ship had to sail at right angles, and this was called tacking or beating. By exhaustive study and drawing of models, he pertinaciously got it all right, whatever of it came into the naval engagements he was writing about.”

Book critics agreed. A reviewer for the *New York Times* hailed the work as an excellent one in every respect, showing “in so young an author the best promises for a good historian—fearlessness of statement, caution, endeavor to be impartial, and a brisk and interesting way of telling events.” *Harper’s* extolled the book “as the most accurate, as it is certainly the most cool and impartial, and in some respects the most intrepid, account that has yet appeared of the naval actions of the War of 1812.”

These judgments have withstood the test of time. In *Theodore Roosevelt, A Life*, Nathan Miller wrote, “A century after its appearance, [Roosevelt’s book] is still a standard work on the subject.” In *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, Edmund Morris noted that it remained the definitive work in its field, “an extraordinary achievement,” its merits “as simple as those of any serious piece of academic writing: clarity, accuracy and completeness, backed by massive documentation.” But it is also an exciting adventure story brimming with vivid accounts of ships at war on the high seas.

The book had also impressed the Navy Department. It ordered a copy placed aboard every ship in the fleet and designated it a textbook at the Naval War College.

Fifteen years later, here was the book's author taking to a podium at the college, when he could have had his choice of speaking venues in Washington and New York. Surely, anyone might rightly reason, he had not traveled all the way up to Rhode Island from the capital simply to deliver a pep talk to the Naval War College, class of '97. He was, after all, the man who would, said the *Washington Post* at the time of his appointment to the Navy Department, bring to Washington "all that machinery of disturbance and upheaval which is as much a part of his *entourage* as the air he breathes. He is a fighter, a man of indomitable pluck and energy, a potent and forceful factor in any equation into which he may be introduced. A field of immeasurable usefulness awaits him—will he find it?"

Typically, the robust Roosevelt had answered the query with dramatic action. Early in May he seized the occasion of a mishap involving a navy torpedo boat to conduct a personal inspection and write a report for the secretary of the navy, John D. Long. This on-the-scene investigation by an assistant secretary of the navy was a first in naval history, as was the report. In assuring Long that no serious damage had been caused in the incident, Roosevelt took advantage of the event to expound on his views regarding the qualities and dispositions of the men chosen to command U.S. Navy ships.

In his report Roosevelt wrote, "Boats so delicate, which, to be handled effectively must be handled with great daring, necessarily run great risks, and their commanders must, of course, realize that a prerequisite to successfully handling them is the willingness to run such risks." He concluded, "The business of a naval officer is one which, above all others, needs daring and decision and if he must err on either side the nation can best afford to have him err on the side of too much daring rather than too much caution."

Hailed by the press as an expression of a new spirit in the Navy Department, the report was welcomed by one newspaper for its "snap and vigor," while another editor invited Roosevelt to provide a series of such papers setting out his views on what needed to be done to revitalize a navy that had been "running along in a groove for altogether too many years."

The editor need not have worried. The new assistant secretary had been busily engaged in writing almost from his first day in office.

Although the report on the status of torpedo boats had been made public, the press was not privy to other communications from Roosevelt to both McKinley and Secretary Long, each of them filled with much "snap and vigor" on the subject of Theodore Roosevelt's positions on the challenges to, and the proper use of, naval resources.

Upon the Atlantic the issues were as old as the nation and took the form of imperialist designs on the Western Hemisphere by the major European powers of Britain, France, Germany, and Spain, each with a great fleet. Of gravest concern in the Pacific was the future of the Hawaiian Islands and a growing interest in their outright annexation. This movement was viewed with alarm by the government of Japan, concerned for the fate of twenty-five thousand Japanese residents on the islands.

Noting that the Japanese had sent their cruiser *Naniwa* to Hawaii, Roosevelt, in his capacity as operational head of the navy, had advised McKinley on April 22 that in view of this event, "I would like to inform you as to the [American] vessels at Hawaii and those which could be sent there." He went on to name and discuss in detail the attributes and advantages, as well as the inadequacies, of several warships, including the cruiser *Philadelphia*, "an old boat"; the *Marion*; the *Bennington*, en route from San Francisco; the *Baltimore* and the *Charleston*, under repair at Mare Island, along with the gunboat *Concord*; and the battleship *Oregon*, which could be in Hawaii in two weeks. "She would be an overmatch for half the Japanese Navy," he boasted while warning, "although they (the Japanese) have two battleships of the same class now on the point of completion."

The Japanese navy, he ventured darkly, was an efficient fighting navy and, therefore, might pose a serious hindrance to any American attempt to annex Hawaii.

Although President Grover Cleveland's administration had exhibited no eagerness for taking over Hawaii, the idea had found not only favor but enthusiasm in leading personalities of the Republican Party and the McKinley administration, and none more so than Theodore Roosevelt. Among his friends who looked benignly on American expansionism in the Pacific and hegemony over the Western Hemisphere were Senators Henry Cabot Lodge, William E. Chandler, and Albert Beveridge; Judge William Howard Taft; Charles A. Dana, editor of the *New York Sun*; John Hay, the American ambassador to England; and Brooks Adams, the brilliant but eccentric philosopher and younger brother of writer Henry Adams.

Nathan Miller described these men as well-educated and cultivated patricians living by an aristocratic code that assumed the superiority of white American men; they sought relief from the boredom of an increasingly mechanized commercialism by finding romance in the sound of far-off bugles. Referred to as "the expansionist lobby," they were also categorized by a word—*jingo*—that had been popularized in the English vocabulary in 1878 by a London music hall ditty composed by G. W. Hunt. Written during the Crimean War in reference to the opposing British and Russian designs on the Turkish port of Constantinople, the song contained this bit of bravado:

We don't want to fight yet by Jingo!
 if we do
 We've got the ships, we've got the men,
 and got the money too.

Originally a euphemism for "Jesus" or "God," *jingo* had by 1897 in America come to mean a bellicose patriot or warmonger. Theodore Roosevelt had accepted the label *jingo* unabashedly and with no apologies.

Such an attitude was nothing new to Roosevelt. In 1886 when newspapers were filled with predictions of war with Mexico, he had offered to organize a cavalry battalion from the harum-scarum cowboys of his ranch in the Dakota territory. That July 4 he told an audience in the West that he hoped to see a day "when not a foot of American soil will be held by any European power."

In 1894 he had been among the first to call for Hawaiian annexation and endorsed the building of an ocean-linking canal through Nicaragua, whether the Nicaraguans agreed or not. Speaking to the National Republican Club on May 28, 1895, he had called for a navy "that will sustain the honor of the American flag [and see] the Monroe Doctrine upheld in its entirety."

Writing on the subject of the Monroe Doctrine in *The Bachelor of Arts* in March 1896, he declared, "The United States ought not to permit any great military powers, which have no foothold on this continent, to establish such a foothold; nor should they permit any aggrandizement of those who already have possessions on the continent. Every true patriot, every man of statesmanlike habit, should look forward to the day when not a single European power will hold a foot of American soil."

When Great Britain sought to settle a boundary dispute with Venezuela without considering the interests of the United States, he all but welcomed a war. "American cities may be bombarded," he said, but "we will settle the Venezuelan question in Canada. Canada will surely be conquered, and once wrested from England it would never be restored."

During a brief crisis involving the treatment of U.S. sailors by Chile, he had been teased by his wife and friends about his dream of valiantly leading a cavalry charge. They had called him "Theodore the Chilean Volunteer."

At the height of the Venezuelan crisis, he wrote to Henry Cabot Lodge on December 27, 1895, "This country needs a war." But he added, forlornly and angrily, that the "bankers, brokers and anglomaniacs generally" appeared to favor "peace at any price." In expanding on these feelings of animus toward individuals who put profit and personal interest ahead of patriotism, Roosevelt later wrote in his autobiography, "These men were not weak men, but they permitted themselves to grow shortsighted and selfish; and while many of them down at the bottom possessed the fundamental virtues, including the fighting virtues, others were purely of the glorified huckster or glorified pawnbroker type—which when developed to the exclusion of everything else makes about as poor a national type as the world has seen. This unadulterated huckster or pawnbroker type is rarely keenly sympathetic in matters of social and industrial justice, and is usually physically timid and likes to cover an unworthy fear of the most just war under high-sounding names."

Hand in hand with these men, he went on, was "the large mollycoddle vote—the people who are soft physically and morally, or who have a twist in them which makes them acidly cantankerous and unpleasant as long as they can be so with safety to their bodies."

He believed all these elements taken together formed a body of public opinion so important during the decades since the Civil War as to put a stop to any serious effort to keep the nation in a condition of military preparedness. A victim of that shortsighted view, he believed in June 1897, had been the U. S. Navy. Consequently, the theme he had chosen for his speech to the Naval War College graduating class was inspired by America's first president.

"To be prepared for war," George Washington had advised, "is the most effectual means to promote peace."