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“America is our sphere”:

Alfred Thayer Mahan, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Isthmian Canal

by

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It may be argued that the famous naval theoretician's views concerned first and foremost hemispheric security, the all-importance of the Monroe Doctrine as a national policy, the need for an isthmian waterway, and the related problem of Asia—of which Hawaii was a crucial element. The mid-August 1898 recommendations to Secretary of the Navy John D. Long by the Naval War Board, of which Alfred Thayer Mahan was the most influential member, during the Spanish-American War, would tend to give credence to that view for the Board was then of the opinion that the United States did not need “to acquire permanent coaling stations, except in the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean sea.” In the Pacific, Manila, Guam, and Hawaii were obvious priorities; with regard to “the circumference or entrance to the [Caribbean] sea” the Board suggested the securing of Puerto Rico with the harbor of San Juan, the Island of St. Thomas and the Bay of Samana

or, failing that, the so-called "Great Harbor" in the island of Culebra, and "[i]n the neighborhood of the Isthmian Canal" the ports of Santiago and Guantanamo.¹ Mahan's teachings since 1890 had been heeded. An Anglophile suspicious of Japan and Germany, the great navalist was perfectly aware that the Monroe Doctrine had nothing to do with international law but resulted from a strategic necessity in an age of imperialistic rivalries. His claim that the doctrine served the interests of all American states thinly veiled his conviction that U.S. security and interests were his main concerns and that Latin America in general, and the Caribbean in particular, had no voice in the matter.² His contribution to U.S. naval policy made much of the longtime canal project whose materialization he hoped would trigger an interest in a powerful navy inasmuch as it would end America's isolation and render her vulnerable to new international dangers in her natural sphere of influence, her "little corner."³ His impact on late 19th and early 20th century U.S. geopolitics, in particular his prescient emphasis on the Pacific future of the United States, was heightened by his intellectual convergence with a new generation of American policy-makers and expansionists like Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge.

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As early as 1880 the future president of the Naval War College was aware that the construction of a canal at the isthmus might bring U.S. interests and those of foreign nations "in collision." He stressed the need for a navy at least equal to that of Great Britain when and if the canal materialized, so as to be able to control it. He was of the opinion that

¹ Naval War Board to John D. Long, August 15-20, 1898, *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan*, ed. Robert Seager II and Doris D. Maguire, 3 vols. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1975), II, 582, 584, 585, 587, 588. Mahan's letters and papers, i.e. private documents, have been given precedence in the present paper over his writings inasmuch as they are felt to express his views more freely than do his public utterances or published articles and works.

² "It was a declaration of independence, not for a single nation only, but for a continent of nations [...]." Alfred T. Mahan, "The Monroe Doctrine," *National Review*, Vol. XL (February 1903), 871-889, reprinted in his *Naval Administration and Warfare, Some General Principles With Other Essays* (Boston: Little, 1908).

³ Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little), 1890, pp. 25-59, 42; Alan Westcott, ed., *Mahan on Naval Warfare: Selections from the Writings of Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan* (1941; Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), pp. 18, 25-28.

the United States should begin to build a large navy “as soon as the first spadeful of earth [was] turned at Panama.” Otherwise, if such was not the case, Washington, to put it in straightforward Mahanian language “[might] as well shut up about the Monroe Doctrine at once.”⁴ The maintenance of peace depended to a great extent on a threatening posture (“a position of menace”) on the part of the American nation. The surest deterrent was “a fleet of swift cruisers” capable of preying on an enemy’s commerce, together with adequate defense of the main ports. In the 1880s Mahan did not yet believe that the security of his country could be affected by events occurring far from its shores. “We don’t have interests out of our own borders.” he postulated at the time. Only in the 1890s would he become aware of the global framework of U.S. security. Of course, he shared the conventional naval wisdom of the day in strategic matters that war with the United States was unlikely given its geographical position. In the mid-1880s he made a first-class ironclad navy equal to that of England or France a prerequisite to any serious isthmian policy. He advocated the pursuance of a policy “not of formal alliance but of close sympathy with England” which implied “throw[ing] overboard the Irish vote”! An early proponent of Anglo-Saxon solidarity and cooperation, he was a sincere Anglophile who partook of the then nascent conviction that the “English-speaking race” was the best hope for mankind: “England is like every nation selfish but in the main honest and the best hope of the world is in the union of the branches of that race to which she and we belong.” Curiously, France in his eyes was precisely what she accused Albion of being: perfidious.⁵ He believed, however, that “Germany rather than France represent[ed] the probable element of future trouble for us.”⁶

In 1893, the piercing of an isthmian canal came again to the political and diplomatic foreground with the revolution in Hawaii and the overthrow of the Queen by the white propertied classes. Because the Sandwich Islands controlled the United States’ trade routes and naval approaches, but also because they might fall a prey to “the comparative barbarism of China,” their close supervision or annexation, Mahan publicly insisted, was desirable: “[O]ur own country, with its Pacific coast, is naturally indicated as the proper

⁴ Mahan to Samuel A. Ashe, March 12, 1880, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, I, 482.

⁵ Mahan to Ashe, March 11, 1885, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, I, 593.

⁶ Mahan to James R. Thursfield, December 1, 1897, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 529.

guardian for this most important position.”⁷ In his correspondence, too, he voiced his hemispheric concerns, notably “our own priority of interest in everything touching the Isthmus,” and his hope for increased Anglo-American friendship: “I deeply deplore any alienation between the two Anglo-Saxon states, whose interests I think largely mutual [...]” He regretted not having made his feelings clearer in his *Atlantic Monthly* article of October 1893, “The Isthmus and Sea Power,” yet noted that he had done so several times in previous articles.⁸ Three years later, his “race patriotism” would be severely tried.⁹ The canal question and the Monroe Doctrine naturally underlay the Venezuela Crisis of 1895-1896, which Mahan found somewhat distressing given his admiration and affection for Britain, on the one hand, and his commitment to the United States’ hemispheric supremacy, on the other. It was high time to “come out of an isolation, which a hundred years ago was wise and imperative, and take our share in the turmoil of the world.”¹⁰ Interestingly, he seemed to regard hemispherism as the first step toward some sort of future globalism:

The United States started with the idea of having as few external entanglements as possible. That was all right fifty or a hundred years ago, but the time has come, in my opinion, when we should and must count for something in the affairs of the world at large – and naturally, *America is our sphere*.¹¹

He found it impossible to claim that Great Britain’s interests “in the questions of this continent” could possibly be “as vital to her as ours to us.” He refused to believe war possible: “[I]f it comes and I am in it, I think I shall have to request the admiralty to hoist

⁷ Mahan to the Editor of *The New York Times*, January 30, 1893, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 92-93; Mahan, “Hawaii and our Future Sea Power,” *The Forum*, Vol. XV (March 1893), 1-11, reprinted in his *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston: Little, 1897).

⁸ Mahan to Nathan Appleton, October 29, 1893, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 171. Cf. Mahan, “The Isthmus and Sea Power,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. LXXII (October 1893), 459-472, reprinted in his *The Interest of America in Sea Power*. On September 30, Nathan Appleton had published an article in *Harper’s Weekly*, “Clayton-Bulwer Treaty and the Ship-Canal.”

⁹ Mahan to J. B. Sterling, February 13, 1896, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 445.

¹⁰ Mahan to James R. Thursfield, January 10, 1896, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 442.

¹¹ Italics mine. Mahan to Bouverie F. Clark, January 16, 1896, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 443.

some other flag than the British—for, save our own, there is none other on which I should be so reluctant to fire.”¹²

By 1898, another historical landmark, as the Anglo-American rapprochement was shaping up and the Spanish-American War looming, the by then well-established theoretician of the “large policy” was expressing concern over Berlin’s colonial goals, following the German seizure of Kiachow, China, in November 1897:

In any event he [the Kaiser] wants a navy, for Great Britain with her immense colonial occupancy, and we with our Monroe Doctrine, threaten to stand in the way of his very natural (and very proper) ambition, which I conceive to be this: that as Germans by blood are becoming too numerous for the old land to hold them, they should migrate not to foreign lands, but to regions which can be brought and kept in political conjunction with home.¹³

Mahan, however, did not believe that the Monroe Doctrine excluded the U.S. from the Philippines or China that he refused to regard as European zones of influence.¹⁴ In addition, Japan was beginning to appear to him as a most likely threat in the Pacific with regard to the Hawaiian Islands, which ought to be annexed forthwith:

That there is danger of trouble with her towards Hawaii, I think beyond doubt; if this administration is not able to put those islands under our wing, Mr. Cleveland’s name will be immortalized a century hence by one thing only, that he refused them when he could have had them.¹⁵

He tried to impress on Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt “the need of strengthening our Pacific squadron” and of building war ships “on the Pacific side” for trouble was more likely there than in the Atlantic—and he did not know “whether the battle ships we have can make the voyage,” their “coal endurance” being “small.” That

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 444.

¹³ Mahan to James R. Thursfield, January 25, 1898, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 536-537.

¹⁴ Mahan to John S. Barnes, July 21, 1898, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 566-567.

¹⁵ Mahan to Theodore Roosevelt, May 1, 1897, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 506. On Mahan’s influence in bringing about the annexation of Hawaii, see William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power*, 2nd ed. (1981; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), pp. 173-192.

policy in his opinion had been “rendered decisive by the Venezuela affair.” Of course, the isthmian canal was more than ever on his mind:

[T]he real significance of the Nicaragua Canal now is that it advances our Atlantic frontier by so much to the Pacific, & that in Asia, not in Europe, is now the greatest danger to our proximate interests.”¹⁶

As a matter of fact, the two men saw practically eye to eye on most issues and Roosevelt’s reply (and more generally his positions) can only have delighted Mahan. The personal correspondence of the younger navalist and expansionist early revealed a lifelong interest in geopolitics and concern for the security of the United States. Japan and Germany were the two powers that worried him most, as he would repeatedly confide to trustworthy friends and associates while assistant secretary of the Navy then vice-president. The alleged yellow peril—a lifelong obsession with him—required the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands—which he regarded as a strategic necessity—or the establishment of “a protectorate over them,” the construction of the Nicaraguan canal, and a naval increase aimed at better protecting the Pacific coast. In like manner, acquiring “the Danish Islands,” turning Spain out of the West Indies, and building up the navy should serve notice to Germany, “the power with whom I look forward to serious difficulty,” “the only power with which there is any likelihood or possibility of our clashing within the future.”¹⁷ Curiously, the Danish Virgin Islands were on the Assistant Secretary of the Navy’s mind, but not Puerto Rico; “I agree with you,” he wrote Mahan in mid-March 1898, “that we should not try to do anything much with Porto Rico at present.”¹⁸ And Roosevelt never mentioned the Philippines before September 1897: “Meanwhile, our Asiatic squadron should blockade, and if possible take, Manila.”¹⁹ As for his apparently

¹⁶ Mahan to Theodore Roosevelt, May 1, 1897, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 506.

¹⁷ Roosevelt to Mahan, May 3, 1897, *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Elting E. Morison and John M. Blum, 8 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951-1954), I, 607; to William W. Kimball, December 17, 1897, *Letters of TR*, I, 743; to George Von Lengerke Meyer, April 12, 1901, *Letters of TR*, III, 52.

¹⁸ Roosevelt to Mahan, March 14, 1898, *Letters of TR*, I, 793.

¹⁹ Roosevelt to Henry Cabot Lodge, September 21, 1897, *Letters of TR*, I, 685.

obsessive fear of Japan, it led him on several occasions to warn President McKinley that in the event of war with Spain, “we would have the Japs on our backs.”²⁰

In 1899 Mahan was U.S. delegate to the first Hague Peace Conference, which he was convinced Russia had called owing to “the shock of our late war, resulting in the rapprochement of the U.S. and Great Britain and our sudden appearance in Asia”.²¹ At some point, acting under official instructions, he expressed the American delegation’s reservations and asked for the Comité d’Examen’s permission “to abstain from voting on, or even discussing, the articles fixing the size of navies, and the expenditures for naval purposes, proposed by the representative of the Imperial Russian Navy.” There were two main reasons for that request: the modest proportion of the American naval force with regard to the population of the United States and the extent of its coastline; the post-1898 conditions were such that it was “impossible yet to foresee, with certainty, what degree of naval strength may be needed to meet them.”²² The preservation of U.S. preeminence in the Western Hemisphere was Mahan’s other major concern; he was instrumental in the drafting of a declaration qualifying Article 27 of the arbitration convention, which he regarded as an infringement upon the Monroe Doctrine.²³

The century ended with a diplomatic attempt to clear the way for the long-awaited construction of an American canal, with American money, and under American control. In Mahan’s view, as early as 1893, the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 “had become unequal in its bearing upon us,” an idea developed by James G. Blaine who pointed out that the United States’ potential strength was land and Great Britain’s actual strength maritime, but that both nations were forbidden to occupy the land by armed force, which meant “the

²⁰ Roosevelt to Lodge, September 21, 1897, *Letters of TR*, I, 685-686.

²¹ Mahan to Samuel A. Ashe, September 23, 1899, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 658. The other members of the American delegation were Seth Low, Stanford Newel, William Crozier, and Andrew White. See Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power*, pp. 269-275.

²² Mahan to John A. Fisher, July 18, 1899, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 643. See also II, 634-652 for Mahan’s correspondence while at The Hague from late May to late July 1899.

²³ After the delegation secretary, Frederick Holls inaccurately claimed credit for the reservation in his book about the conference, Mahan devoted quite a few private letters to setting the record straight and explaining what his role had been in safeguarding the Monroe Doctrine at The Hague. Cf. Frederick W. Holls, *The Peace Conference at the Hague* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), pp. 268-271; Mahan to George F.W. Holls, Andrew D. White, Jarousse de Sillac, John D. Long, William Crozier, John Bassett Moore, March 1901-April 1902, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 704-745; III, 1-22.

game was left in [British] hands.”²⁴ Unfortunately, the first Hay-Pauncefote Treaty (February 1900), whose aim, among others, was to abrogate the 1850 agreement, contained a non-fortification clause, which, unsurprisingly, infuriated for example New York governor and vice-president-to be Theodore Roosevelt, but, interestingly, *not* Alfred Thayer Mahan who did believe the approaches of Panama to be “entirely our concern” yet was not sure the treaty conflicted with that position. Ideally, the U.S. should provide adequate fortifications and keep its navy “equal at least to that of Germany,” but he had his doubts about the actual pursuance of such a policy. He regarded, however, as “a grave political blunder in tactics” the fact that no “military or naval man” had been consulted.²⁵ The U.S. Senate refused to accept an unfortified waterway and the British rejected its amendments.

With the second Hay-Pauncefote Treaty a year and a half later (November 1901), at the dawn of the new century, Great Britain was eventually stripped of any right with respect to the future interoceanic canal. The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty was expressly abrogated and the United States obtained a free hand in all future isthmian projects. Actually, what mattered most to Mahan was the construction of the isthmian waterway, not the actual route. The unexpected and controversial reversal of the Walker Commission with its eventual preference for Panama, instead of Nicaragua, was of little significance. He had “always been a Nicaragua man, though without any personal knowledge of the merits of the case,” and he was “somewhat surprised” to find the First Isthmian Canal Commission (1899-1902), “which had been studying the matter on the spot for over two years, favor Panama”; but he was “satisfied, however, to accept either solution on competent testimony.”²⁶ He would of course welcome Theodore Roosevelt’s securing of the Panama Canal Zone in 1903 and later defend his Colombian policy.²⁷ The certainty that the U.S. would at long last embark upon the piercing of an interoceanic canal stimulated his reflection on hemispheric geostrategy but did not alter his belief that the American

²⁴ Mahan to Horace E. Scudder, July 25, 1893, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 126.

²⁵ Mahan to Seth Low, February 15, 1900, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, II, 682-684. Livezey writes that “Mahan’s reaction to the treaty cannot be positively stated.” Livezey, p. 164.

²⁶ Mahan to Bouverie F. Clark, February 8, 1902, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 9.

²⁷ Mahan, “Was Panama ‘A Chapter of National Dishonor’?”, *North American Review*, Vol. CXCVI (October 1912), 72-84, reprinted in his *Armaments and Arbitration, or the Place of Force in the International relations of States* (New York: Harper, 1912).

nation need not really fear for her security on the Atlantic side and that serious danger was more likely to come from the East where she shared “interests and aspirations” with several other powers. Hence his conviction that the battle fleet ought not to be removed from the Pacific for offensive as much as defensive purposes.²⁸

More than anything else the Monroe Doctrine became once more his main preoccupation in 1902-1903, according to an old hemispheric vision of his of which the interoceanic canal had always partaken. Planned a year before, a joint Anglo-German naval demonstration of naval force against Venezuelan dictator Cipriano Castro was being launched in December 1902 to collect overdue debts. The British on December 20 and the Germans two days later had established a blockade of Venezuelan ports. Although he felt the intervention was legitimate and did not violate Monroe’s tenet, Mahan was uncomfortable about German participation:

I am sorry Great Britain has associated herself with any other power in the Venezuela business. The action of the two powers does not contravene the Monroe Doctrine; but I fear the *joint* action will excite a popular sentiment here injurious to both. In this I care nothing about Germany; but I do care about Great Britain, both because I have a regard for you and because *our* policy requires cordial relations. It is illogical to object to two Powers doing jointly what there is no objection to either doing singly; but feeling takes little heed of logic, and I am not myself sure that the one is a less good guide than the other. However, I should not complain, for I see the facts are influencing Congress to authorize two more battle-ships.

Roosevelt’s formulation of a “corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine would perfectly match his own view of the latter’s geopolitical status in the early 20th century:

I am myself increasingly impressed with the idea that the Monroe Doctrine, in its inception and in present scope exclusive, is arriving at a stage where without changing in essential *internal* character, it is becoming a shaped and chiselled piece, fitted for a place in the general scheme of world wide relations; and that this particular place, for which the years have fashioned it, is becoming increasingly apparent.”²⁹

²⁸ Mahan to Henry C. Taylor [then Chief of the Bureau of Navigation], December 7, 1903, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 80.

²⁹ Mahan to Leopold J. Maxse, February 7, 1903, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 58-59.

The proclamation and application of the Corollary explicitly turned the Caribbean into the United States' "Mediterranean":

Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power."³⁰

In point of fact, in his annual message of December 1904 President Roosevelt enunciated not a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine but a wholly new diplomatic principle: the United States was to act as policeman of the Western Hemisphere; it was to put to use the right of interference it continued to deny the European powers.³¹ Of course, U.S. interventionism had been at work in Latin America long before the 1904 pronouncement that was to legitimize it. But the great North American republic for the first time, as the first Roosevelt was well aware, like Mahan, was then strong enough to monopolize interference in the New World; not only did it evince industrial and agricultural might but it had acceded to world power status in 1898 at the close of a splendidly profitable little war. This new condition called for a new diplomacy, especially in that part of the globe where the United States was predestined by geography to play a leading role—a tireless Mahanian argument. After all, Monroe's "doctrine" had a weakness: nowhere was U.S. preeminence clearly stated. A "corollary" was therefore needed to remedy that unfortunate omission and give the hitherto defensive dictum a markedly aggressive coloration. Nevertheless, Mahan thought "the effect of the Monroe Doctrine as making for universal peace."³² The catalyst for that drastic mutation, as we know, was no other than the isthmian canal. Ulysses S. Grant's dream of an American waterway exclusively financed and controlled by

³⁰ One finds here the "big stick" in a nutshell... Theodore Roosevelt, *Presidential Addresses and State Papers*, Homeward Bound Edition, 8 vols. (New York: The Review of Reviews Co., 1910), III, 176-177.

³¹ Cf. Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 9th ed. (1940; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice, 1974), p. 505: "In brief, the Monroe Doctrine, which was originally designed to prevent intervention by the European powers, would be used to justify intervention by the United States."

³² Mahan to Leopold J. Maxse, February 7, 1903, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 60.

the United States had by 1904 become a reality thanks to the controversial acquisition of the Canal Zone, for the 26th president had “taken” Panama the year before by passive interference. It was out of the question to tolerate more European interventions in the Caribbean³³; the protection of the approaches of the future canal, the defense, in other words, of the Panamanian lifeline, demanded that the latter be turned into an American lake, and ultimately America’s backyard.³⁴

From then on, Mahan who had ceased to be a theorist really became a publicist, and notably a propagandist of the Monroe Doctrine, “that national idol,” “our most cherished international dogma,” which had gradually won acceptance among the powers of Europe, and which it was out of the question to arbitrate—a position he had defended at The Hague in 1899.³⁵ He came to justify it not only in terms of security and strategy and by reference to the national interest, but in terms of power politics, or *Realpolitik*:

Plausible reasons for wrong action have always been forthcoming when policy required. In fact, I have never been quite clear that governments are not bound to forward national interests even when doubtful of legality. Take our Monroe Doctrine. It is policy pure and simply. No one can say it is a *right*, legal or natural that we exclude European acquirement—if we can—in these continents; but it is greatly to our advantage, because it averts occasions for clashing interests.

³³ Dexter Perkins, *A History of the Monroe Doctrine*, new rev. ed. (1941; Boston: Little, 1963), pp. 168-170, notes the annoyance those frequent resorts to coercion caused in the State Department during the last quarter of the 19th century.

³⁴ See, for example, Roosevelt’s annual message of December 5, 1905: “That our rights and interests are deeply concerned in the maintenance of the Doctrine is so clear as hardly to need argument. This is especially true in view of the construction of the Panama Canal. As a mere matter of self-defence we must exercise a close watch over the approaches to this canal; and this means that we must be thoroughly alive to our interests in the Caribbean Sea.” Theodore Roosevelt, *Presidential Addresses, op. cit.*, IV, 603.

³⁵ Mahan to Charles W. Stewart, March 19, 1909, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 291-292. On the exclusion of the Monroe Doctrine (and Asiatic immigration) as a “justiciable” question from treaties of arbitration in 1911-1912, see Mahan to the Editor of *The New York Times*, June 2, 1911, to Theodore Roosevelt, June 19, August 11, and December 2, 1911, to Henry Cabot Lodge, January 6 and 8, 1912, to John Bassett Moore, February 26, 1912, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 408-409, 411-412, 420-421, 435-436, 441-445; see also Mahan, “Why Not Disarm?”, *ibid.*, pp. 685-687.

Realism here goes along with an unusual tinge of cynicism. “The mere expediency,” he mused, “may constitute a moral right for the Government of a nation, as a trustee, to follow a course of action which another Govt. [sic] equally as a trustee must oppose.”³⁶ By the end of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency, he was convinced that Great Britain, “already overloaded with colonial possessions” and deterred by the preservation of Canada’s interests, would not seek additional American territory but that Germany was a more likely threat for the colonies she had recently acquired were “far from the first order of commercial value,” and since “all other land throughout the world [was] now preempted,” she could not but desire acquisition by war.³⁷ Mahan worried about the strength of the German navy, “second only to that of Great Britain,” and predicted that in the future the Reich could do as it pleased about the Monroe Doctrine for the U.S. had over it “no military check such as the interests of Canada impose[d] upon Great Britain.”³⁸ As he wrote Josephus Daniels at the outbreak of the Great War, why would not Germany seize Martinique if she downed France?³⁹

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The concern for national security did not really develop in the United States until the end of the 19th century. Hemispheric inviolability was geographic evidence, so much so that until Mahan’s authorial fame a coastal defense was regarded as sufficient protection. The army and the militia would do the rest! The navalist lobby of the 1890s, the oft-called “Mahan-Lodge-Roosevelt group” and their supporters, were the first to conceive of American safety within a global framework, the first to posit that the U.S. would no longer be invulnerable in the age of big navies and that its security could be imperiled by conflicts occurring far from its shores in remote parts of the world—an imperialist world in which power was measured in terms of overseas possessions and

³⁶ Mahan to William H. Henderson, May 17, 1910, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 342-343.

³⁷ Mahan to Stewart, March 19, 1909, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 291-292.

³⁸ Mahan to the Editor of *The Daily Mail*, c. June 1910, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 345.

³⁹ Mahan to Josephus Daniels, August 15, 1914, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 542.

military might. Mahan was “the high priest of American navalists”⁴⁰; some of his theorizing on sea power would eventually be implemented by his young fellow navalist, Theodore Roosevelt, from 1901 to 1909. “Mahan’s philosophy of sea power [had] entered the White House,” as Harold and Margaret Sprout put it, despite the fact the 26th president had evolved his own thinking independently.⁴¹ The naval buildup of the German Reich and the rise to power of the Japanese Empire became new parameters for war planners. Both countries were felt to be likely to come on a collision course with the U.S. at some point on account of their imperial designs in the Caribbean and the Far East, respectively. Yet both sought American friendship and neither was in a position to inflict any serious harm on American soil. After the Spanish-American War the Second Reich would remain the only power with imperial ambitions in the Western Hemisphere, hence its grudging acceptance of the Monroe Doctrine when Britain and France acknowledged United States preeminence there.

Although the *concept* of a national security did not come into its own until after World War One, in other words after Mahan’s death, it should be noted that the General Board of the Navy in the previous two decades was legitimately concerned with foreign threats. With the Anglo-American rapprochement of the turn of the 19th century Great Britain ceased to be considered even as a *possible* enemy, and that view was paralleled by a similar perception of the United States in London. The fact that following the German defeat of 1918 Wilson’s naval advisory group pointed to England as America’s future rival is of little significance.⁴² After 1900 Anglo-Saxon solidarity and cooperation was the new catchword; British and American interests in the Western Hemisphere, notably, were felt to be identical. Yet, the General Board’s impression was anything but sentimental for concretely Canada was “a hostage to British good behavior,” a realistic assessment that

⁴⁰ Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1814* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 13.

⁴¹ Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918*, Introd. Kenneth J. Hagan and Charles Conrad Campbell (1939; rpt. of 1966 Edition; Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1990, p. 288; Richard W. Turk, *The Ambiguous Relationship: Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1987).

⁴² Challener, pp. 11, 17, 26.

strikingly echoed, word for word, Theodore Roosevelt's early opinion on the future of Anglo-American relations and paralleled Mahan's own view as late as 1910.⁴³

Germany's case was an entirely different matter. U.S. naval officers were always wary of Berlin's intentions in the Caribbean. Latin American instability, they believed, afforded an ideal pretext for frequent European interventions. Admiral George Dewey apparently never recovered from the Diederichs incident after his memorable victory at Manila Bay; as president of the General board he would persistently focus on the German danger. In the fall of 1902, shortly before the Anglo-German blockade of Venezuela, the Navy Department created a permanent Caribbean squadron with a policeman's mission. In the summer of 1903, when the crisis was over, the Joint Board was created with a view to bringing about some cooperation between admirals and generals. In 1904 the Navy devised the "Haiti-Santo Domingo plan" with the supposition that the Reich would be the enemy. The same year the Army and Navy began their first formal efforts to draft joint war plans. In 1906 the General Board voiced the gravest suspicions about Berlin's ambitions. The risk of German aggression in the Caribbean was deemed real enough to justify such scenarios as the "Black Plan" of 1914. Of course, especially after 1898, there was an awareness of the logistical difficulties that any outside enemy would have to surmount in order to attack the United States, especially if lacking a Caribbean foothold. Naval planners did not really anticipate direct action by Germany, though a limited attack on portions of the East Coast was not ruled out, at least until 1913. Nevertheless, war as a "possibility" was never totally discarded. In addition, the construction of the Isthmian Canal and its protection before and after its completion in 1914 made the Caribbean zone vital for American interests. After 1898 the interoceanic waterway became a high priority for the Navy, who for years had presented it as a crucial naval need; officers would come to regard the defense of the Panamanian lifeline as a fixed national policy, like the Monroe Doctrine or the Open Door.⁴⁴ When addressed a question in 1910 by the General Board concerning Naval Yards and Stations, Mahan held that the nation then had "two principal and permanent external policies: the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door." It followed that the Isthmus of Panama was central in the first instance while the second policy

⁴³ Cf. Roosevelt to Mahan, May 3, 1897, *Letters of TR*, I, 607. See also notes 37 and 38 above.

⁴⁴ Challener, pp. 22, 28-29, 32, 34-35, 43, 47-48.

required positions “as far advanced in the Pacific Ocean” as permitted by the current U.S. possessions; he believed that “the choice and maintenance of naval stations should be determined by strategic considerations, rather than by such as are industrial or economical.”⁴⁵

It took some time to identify a “natural” enemy in the Far East. Until the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan was regarded as a friendly power rather than an enemy. It was thought that Great Britain, the United States, and Japan might naturally line up against likely troublemakers in the concert of Powers, Russia and Germany, and possibly France. After Portsmouth the change in U.S. attitudes was swift: the Island Empire became Washington’s only potential enemy in Asia. The defense of the Philippines was then the uppermost preoccupation. Acting on President Theodore Roosevelt’s instructions, the General Board in 1906 began to work on the “Orange Plan,” which was completed in 1911. It would stand as *the* war plan for conflict with Japan until the late 1930s. The enemy was to be left master of the Pacific for two months, the time necessary to assemble the full power of the entire American fleet in Hawaii. The fleet would then sail across the Pacific and strike Japan with a view to destroying its naval strength—and, if still possible, rescuing the besieged Army garrison in the Philippines... The security of the archipelago was of course the United States’ weakest point in any confrontation with Japan; its obvious vulnerability as “our Achilles’ heel” came to be recognized as early as 1907 by both the Navy and the President.⁴⁶ Mahan’s leitmotiv recommendation, however, was that the fleet should not be divided under any circumstances. Any breach—his greatest fear—of this crucial tactical principle of naval concentration would seriously imperil the security of the nation. He allowed himself to suggest to outgoing president Theodore Roosevelt that he warn William H. Taft of the risks incurred with such a division—naturally demanded by the “people of the Pacific slope.” Roosevelt’s advice to his successor upon leaving the White House is evidence that he cared for, and shared, Mahan’s opinion. The best illustration of the dire results of a divided, as opposed to a concentrated, battle fleet was afforded by the naval disasters suffered by the Russians in the recent Russo-Japanese

⁴⁵ Mahan to Philip Andrews, September 24, 1910, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 353.

⁴⁶ Challener, pp. 29-31; Roosevelt to William Howard Taft, August 21, 1907, *Letters of TR*, V, 761-762.

War.⁴⁷ Mahan was submitted the Naval War College's Strategic plan of 1911 concerning a "Hypothetical Naval War in the Pacific between Japan (Orange) and the United States (Blue)." His numerous comments testify to his remarkable mastery of naval warfare and strategy as well as his vast knowledge of military history. One important piece of advice on this occasion was that the fleet "should be moved to the Pacific ("not later than eighteen months before the Canal is completed," he even specified), and there remain until the opening of the Canal; that the Pacific ports be duly fortified, and Hawaii secured."⁴⁸

The combined fears of Germany in the Atlantic and of Japan in the Pacific naturally influenced naval policy.⁴⁹ It was believed that in accordance with Mahan's teachings the fleet ought to be kept undivided in the Atlantic, at least as long as the two-ocean standard of 48 battleships was not reached. Was not the British fleet concentrated in home waters for the same national security reasons? The interest in overseas bases quickly waned as other concepts emerged, like the "advance base" idea or the resort to fleet colliers for refueling at sea. The 1907-1909 world cruise, which was planned in response to the Japanese-American tension that resulted from the California school crisis, proved an invaluable experience for the Navy: among other things, it demonstrated the fleet's ability to reach Far Eastern waters without refueling. Given Japan's need to recover from the strain of her war with Russia, Roosevelt, most realistically, did not believe in the

⁴⁷ Mahan to Roosevelt, March 2, 1909, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 290; Roosevelt to William Howard Taft, March 3, 1909, *Letters of TR*, VI, 1543. See also Mahan to [Senator] George C. Perkins, January 11, 1911, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 371-372; Mahan, "Some Reflections upon the Far-Eastern War" (renamed "Retrospect upon the War between Russia and Japan," *National Review*, Vol. XLVII (May 1906), 383-405, reprinted in his *Naval Administration and Warfare*, pp. 167-173; Westcott, ed., *Mahan on Naval Warfare*, pp. 269-275.

⁴⁸ Mahan to Raymond P. Rodgers, February 22, 1911, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 380-388. See also his suggestions regarding coaling and strategy while waiting for the canal to be completed in Mahan to George von L. Meyer, April 21, 1911, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 399-404.

⁴⁹ Mahan's correspondence for 1912, for instance, perfectly reflects that dual concern inasmuch as it contains several letters devoted to the Japanese and German dangers, the Monroe Doctrine, the possible seizure of Martinique by Germany, and the Democrats' unfortunate unwillingness to continue with naval increase. Mahan to William H. Henderson, March 28, 1912, to the Editor of *The New York Times*, April 2, May 22, and August 20, 1912, to Horatio G. Dohrman, June 6, 1912, *Letters and Papers of ATM*, III, 451-454, 457-459, 463-464, 473-476.

possibility of an aggressive move on Tokyo's part but he did not disregard the prevailing rumors of war, or the frenzy about the possible sabotaging of U.S. ships during the cruise, and he used them to his political advantage by ordering the Great White Fleet on its famous voyage despite the many objections raised in political and naval circles. The Far Eastern strategy of the United States underwent drastic revision. In the aftermath of the crisis also came the difficult decision to make Pearl Harbor, instead of Subig Bay in the Philippines, the main Pacific base.⁵⁰ All of these changing policies reflected the major influence – posthumous at some point – of Alfred Thayer Mahan.

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⁵⁰ Challener, pp. 33-35, 39-40, 43; James R. Reckner, *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988); Robert W. Love, Jr., "TR's Big Stick: Roosevelt and the Navy, 1901-1909," *Theodore Roosevelt: Many-Sided American*, Prepared under the auspices of Hofstra University, ed. Nathalie Naylor, Douglas Brinkley, and John A. Gable (Interlaken, N. Y.: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1992), pp. 317-328; James R. Reckner, "'I Had Great Confidence in the Fleet': Theodore Roosevelt and the Great White Fleet," *Roosevelt: Many-Sided American*, pp. 383-390.