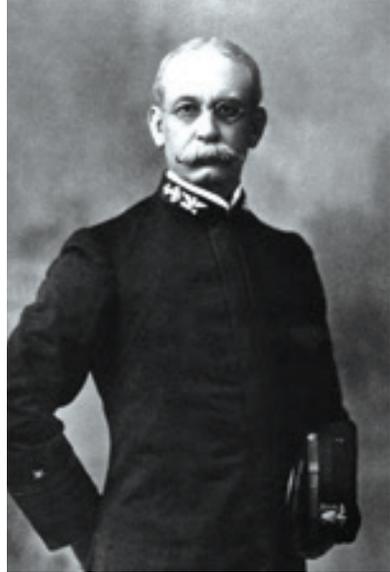


The USB *Maine* Conspiracy

Kenneth C. Wenzler

Our interpretation and understanding of the explosion of the USB *Maine* in 1898 has long centered on the cause—either by an external mine or internal spontaneous coal combustion—but not on how that determination was made at the time. A fuller review of the evidence, and across a wider range of records, compels us to take a new tack and explore the motivations and actions behind the official determination of the source of detonation. How did the investigations proceed, and were they fair and exhaustive? If not, did the key participants have ulterior motives behind their actions and decisions? This article claims that Capt. Charles D. Sigsbee, Consul General Fitzhugh Lee, President William McKinley, and the U.S. naval officer corps concluded, after hurried and flawed investigations, that an external explosion from a mine was the source of ignition, and that they colluded in a conspiracy to cover up the true cause of that sad event.



Charles D. Sigsbee was captain of the USB *Maine*.

Careful review of the primary documents supports this interpretation of the participants' unethical motivations. This research entailed using various kinds of official naval and federal correspondence, private collections, newspapers, and articles written by the major participants, among other sources of contemporary information. The key repositories for these materials are the Library of Congress and the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC.

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My interest in these questions of causation, motivations, and the official inquiries of the time developed while studying Spanish-American War primary materials

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and the events leading to the outbreak of hostilities. Re-examining the preparations of war plans by the U.S. Naval War College and the unanswered issues related to the USS *Maine's* explosion was especially revealing about the decision making at that time. Further, Adm. Hyman G. Rickover's book *How the Battleship Maine was Destroyed* (1976) made a very convincing case that an internal explosion was the cause. Talks with Dana Wegner, one of the historians who worked on the Rickover project, also compelled this inquiry.¹

A thorough re-evaluation of the source of the explosion under the auspices of Admiral Rickover and his team concluded that the explosion was, in all likelihood, caused by spontaneous combustion in a coal bunker. There have been no other scholarly works on this subject. The leading scientists of the day, most notably Capt. Philip R. Alger, agreed with this *ex post facto* determination.² Yet, Sigsbee and his fellow naval officers most assuredly lied that a mine was the source of ignition.

This article seeks to answer this discrepancy. It analyses the conduct of the naval and senatorial inquiries and the statements of the key witnesses. It asserts, for the first time, that McKinley and the Navy Department sought war with Spain before and during the investigations. Most historians would disagree with this estimation of McKinley, who has been characterized as very reluctant to go to war and seeking a peaceful settlement.³ The U.S. naval officer corps also indulged in disreputable behavior, ignoring evidence and rushing to certify preconceived judgments about the explosion. These hastily conducted proceedings and their verdicts justified the official, but secret, plans for war against Spain. The existing naval plans called for removal of Spanish presence from Cuba. For the administration and the Navy, the sinking of the *Maine* was a fortuitous event that hastened the war agenda that had already been set in motion and precipitated the needless hostilities of the Spanish-American War.

War Drums

When William McKinley took his first oath of office on March 4, 1897, he not only swore to uphold the Constitution, but to wage war on the Kingdom of Spain, since

¹ Hyman G. Rickover, et al., *How the Battleship Maine was Destroyed* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, U.S. Navy, 1976).

² *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1898.

³ See, for instance, John Dobson, *Reticent Expansionism: The Foreign Policy of William McKinley* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1988); John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain Over Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (Kent, OH: Kent State Press, 2003).

the war effort was already underway during the Grover Cleveland administration. The interests of American businessmen had been seriously jeopardized during the Cuban Revolution that broke out in 1895. Almost immediately, an ongoing humanitarian concern erupted by an indignant American populace for the suffering Cuban people. The Spanish authorities were depicted as barbarians by the yellow press. Naval and commercial circles had been desirous of a U.S.-controlled isthmian canal, so a Spanish Cuba was considered the major strategic and commercial threat. The United States, however, first developed war plans against Spain in 1888 under the direction of Lt. Cmdr. Charles H. Stockton and started to perfect them in 1896 under Lt. William W. Kimball during the Cleveland administration.⁴ Kimball envisioned an attack primarily directed at Cuba, as well the Philippines and Spain. The first page of the plan states the premise:

It is apparent that the real cause of the war will be friction between the United States and Spain upon the Cuban question, . . . Whatever may be the especial act which leads to rupture of peaceful relations, it would seem to be a foregone conclusion that the object of the war to be waged by the United States would be to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule, . . .⁵

These plans were painstakingly drawn up and characterized by refined logistics with the explicit and premeditated purpose of removing Spain from Cuba. The ultimate goal was the conquest of the island, but the urgent targets were Havana and a coaling station on the southern shoreline. The U.S Navy was to spearhead the operations and arrange for convoy deployment of Army troops if necessary.⁶

McKinley was commander in chief of the armed forces, and he most assuredly knew about the ongoing naval preparations, although there is no specific document that evinces this point. While he wanted to carry forth these war plans, when addressing the American public, his tone was quite different. He stated in his inaugural address: “We want no wars of conquest, we must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression. War should never be entered upon until every agency of peace has failed.”⁷

⁴ See: Kenneth C. Wenzler, “The First Naval War College Plan Against Spain by Lt. Cmdr. Charles H. Stockton,” *International Journal of Naval History* 13, 1 (April 2016); and Lt. William W. Kimball, “War with Spain—1896: General Consideration of the Object of the War, the Results Desired, and Consequent Kind of Operations to be Undertaken,” section 10, envelope 9, no. 255, UNOpB, Naval War College Classified Library, Record Group (RG) 8, Naval War College Archives, Newport, RI (hereinafter NHC).

⁵ Kimball, “War with Spain.”

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ William McKinley, “First Inaugural Address,” in *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States*, vol. 2 (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2009), 32. No editor is cited.

Reconnaissance of Cuba took on a greater impetus in the spring of 1897 as part of the war preparations that were nurtured and perfected in the U.S. Naval War College and by the naval officer corps. Rear Adm. Stephen B. Luce, its first president, had been advocating the seizure of Cuba as a source of natural wealth and for its crucial geographic position between the United States and Central America.⁸ After a heated dialogue between naval officers, the Ramsay Board set in motion the war plans during the waning days of Cleveland's second tenure in office.⁹ The entire fleet had been placed on alert as early as January 1897. On May 13, 1897, John D. Long, the new secretary of the navy, ordered the flagship *New York* to "be kept fully coaled and ready for any service."¹⁰ He also ordered Lt. William W. Kimball in May to ascertain the defenses of Havana and other places in Cuba.¹¹ His findings helped formulate the decisions of the Sicard Board in June for the final overall naval strategy against Spain.¹²

President McKinley was also busy. While the U.S. Navy was planning operations, Secretary of State John Sherman dispatched a note to the Spanish minister. Sherman expressed the profound dismay of the president and the American people about Governor-General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau's (known as

⁸ Kenneth J. Hagan, *American Gunboat Diplomacy and the Old Navy, 1877–1889, Contributions in Military History*, No. 4 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 148–49, 180–87.

⁹ After the completion of the Kimball plan in 1896, a heated debate took place in naval officer circles. The campaign against Spain with Cuba as the main target was never in doubt. It was, however, the differences in strategy that caused friction in the naval officer corps. Capt. Henry Taylor's plan of 1896 directly challenged Kimball's strategy. The plan created by the board led by Rear Adm. Francis M. Ramsay in late 1896, nonetheless, affirmed Kimball's framework. The U.S. Navy then readied itself for a potential conflict against Spain. See Rear Adm. Francis M. Ramsay, et al., to Secretary of the Navy Hilary A. Herbert, "Plans of Operations Against Spain," Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, RG 45, National Archives Building, Washington, DC (hereinafter NAB), and Capt. Henry C. Taylor, "Situation in Case of War with Spain," Dec. 1896, section 10, envelope 9, UNOpB, RG 8; NHC.

¹⁰ Asst. Secretary of the Navy William McAdoo to Senator James Smith, Jr., Jan. 18, 1897, E 124, General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80, NAB; and Secretary of the Navy John D. Long to Rear Adm. Montgomery Sicard, May 13, 1897, E 29, RG 45, NAB.

¹¹ Kimball's report of May 29 on Havana's defenses was found behind a map located in "Cartographic Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations," Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereinafter NACP). See also Long to Kimball, May 25, 1897, E 29, RG 45, NAB.

¹² After Kimball's mission, Rear Adm. Montgomery Sicard convoked the second naval board in June 1897 to finalize strategy. See Sicard, et al., to [Long], June 30, 1897, E 98, RG 38, NAB. Sicard's plan, as with the other ones, had its distinctive elements, such as whether the Navy should engage in joint action with the Army; which Cuban and Spanish ports should be bombarded; the timing of different actions; whether a fleet should be sent to the Philippines or Spain; if and how the American coast would be protected; and the establishment of a Cuban blockade. The one constant was that the focus of American naval activity would be in Cuban waters on the northern coastline with an army landing poised to strike Havana. Kimball's strategic primacy, however, remained paramount.

the “Butcher”) inhumane *reconcentrado* policies against Cuban insurgents that included detaining people in confined areas and the destruction of the agricultural economy. The president insisted “that he has a right to demand that a war conducted almost within sight of our shores . . . shall at least be conducted according to the military codes of civilization.”¹³ McKinley, however, did not demand peace or that the insurgents should stop their incendiary warfare—he and Congress never recognized the rebels as a nascent government even after the Spanish-American War. As part of the overall war agenda, he dispatched Stewart L. Woodford to Madrid as the new ambassador, but early prospects for peace seemed bleak given McKinley’s desire for the removal of Spanish authority in Cuba.

The *reconcentrado* policies, meanwhile, had been depicted in the most horrendous manner by the American yellow press, which fostered hatred for Spain’s brutality towards the Cuban populace.¹⁴ Since the populace supplied the rebels, the Spanish authorities burned villages and forced people to live in detention zones under horrifying circumstances. A minimal estimate sets the death toll at over 200,000 between 1895 and 1898. Both parties in the 55th Congress echoed the sentiments of their irate constituents, as pressure mounted on McKinley to intervene.¹⁵ McKinley had already decided to wage war, so the heightened emotions intensified his tempo.

In the meantime, the Navy Department’s war preparations quickened during the fall of 1897.¹⁶ Lt. William W. Kimball, commander of the torpedo boat flotilla, conducted reconnoitering missions in Cuban waters. Harry Drain, Consul-General Fitzhugh Lee’s chief secret agent, was clandestinely spying in Havana at least as early as October 1897. They regularly passed information to Kimball, using intermediaries to gain intelligence from the insurgents. Kimball, with his ongoing investigation of Havana Harbor during 1897, never mentioned the presence of mines. Lee would regularly send the State Department secret reports regarding the Spanish military from intelligence

¹³ Secretary of State John Sherman to Ambassador Enrique Dupuy de Lôme, June 26, 1897, in *Spanish Diplomatic Correspondence and Documents: 1896–1900. Presented to the Cortes by the Minister of State*, trans. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [hereinafter GPO], 1905), 25–26.

¹⁴ Willis F. Johnson, *The History of Cuba*, vol. 4 (New York: B.F. Buck, 1920), 88–90.

¹⁵ H. Wayne Morgan, *America’s Road to Empire: The War with Spain and Overseas Expansion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), 45–63; *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), Mar. 7, 1898.

¹⁶ Roosevelt to Sicard, Nov. 29, 1897, reel 314, Theodore Roosevelt Papers (hereinafter TRP), Library of Congress (LC); Roosevelt to Capt. Clifford H. West, Dec. 9, 1897, and Roosevelt to William A. Chandler, Dec. 23, 1897, reel 315, TRP, LC. See also Rickover, et al., *Battleship Maine*, 20, 27.

garnered by his network of informants.¹⁷ The British ambassador reported a flurry of domestic activity to London.¹⁸

President McKinley, meanwhile, announced in his State of the Union address on December 6, 1897, “If it shall hereafter appear to be a duty imposed by our obligations to ourselves, to civilization and humanity to intervene with force, it shall be without fault on our part.”¹⁹

Although thousands of Cubans were forced into concentration camps and an estimated tens of thousands of people had died from starvation, Washington was only concerned for the safety of a few hundred naturalized Americans.²⁰ The government ignored an outburst of American humanitarian concerns for the Cuban people. U.S. inaction only served to exacerbate the parlous conditions initiated by the insurgents. Popular opinion, however, blamed the Spanish, who had responded with barbarity equal to that of the revolutionaries. Lee was alarmed that rioting in Havana or elsewhere would jeopardize American lives and property. Not one American, however, was harmed up to the declaration of war in April 1898.²¹

Agitated by rumors, the latest from Consul Alexander C. Brice that another plot was brewing, though it was never substantiated, Lee informed Washington in late November that the former civil governor at Matanzas would proceed against Americans should action be taken by the United States in favor of Cuban independence.²² Without checking into the credibility of this agitation or heeding Brice’s caution, the McKinley administration became alarmed and geared up for action. McKinley ignored Cleveland’s admonition that Lee was thoroughly unreliable and too zealous.²³

¹⁷ Consul General Fitzhugh Lee to Asst. Secretary of State William R. Day, June 2 and 9, 1897, *Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Havana, Cuba, 1783–1908* (National Archives Microfilm Publication M899), reel 131, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59. See also Lee to Day, Dec. 22, 1897, box 35, William R. Day Papers (hereinafter WDP), LC, accessed in Rickover Archives (personal collection of Dana Wegner, hereinafter RA).

¹⁸ Consul Percy Sanderson to Ambassador Julian Paunceforte, Feb. 26, 1898, F.O. 5. 2361. X/J. 7672, British Public Record Office, accessed in RA.

¹⁹ William McKinley, “Special Message” in James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789 to 1897*, vol. X (Washington, DC: GPO, 1899), 136.

²⁰ The first humanitarian aid arrived in Cuba on Feb. 9, 1898. See Percy H. Epler, *The Life of Clara Barton* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), 282–86; Sherman to de Lôme, June 26, 1897, in *Spanish Diplomatic Correspondence*, 25–26.

²¹ Lee to State Department, Apr. 15, 1898, reel 132, M899, RG 59.

²² Note, Lee to Day, Nov. 27, 1897, reel 131, M899, RG 59. It was this rumor that formed the basis of an absurd conspiratorial mine theory sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution. See Peggy and Harold Samuels, *Remembering the Maine* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

²³ Gerald G. Eggbert, “Our Man in Havana: Fitzhugh Lee,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 47 (1967): 477.

Matanzas and Santiago were desirable locations to the naval war planners: the former for landing troops for an assault against Havana (the final goal) and the latter as a coaling station and naval base to protect the proposed isthmian canal. On December 3 and 7 Long ordered the *Maine* and *Detroit* to steam to Matanzas and Havana, depending on circumstances, at the behest of Lee. On December 22, 1897, Lee then requested that any two warships at Key West should be coaled and ready for action, followed by additional vessels.²⁴

Later in December, these two ships were finally dispatched to Key West, and in January 1898 the North Atlantic Squadron, for the first time in three years, executed “winter exercises” off the Dry Tortugas.

Neither the rebels, the loyalists, nor Lee were pleased with the Spanish reform regime in Cuba, known as the Autonomist Government, formed on January 1, 1898, and led by Captain-General Ramón Blanco Erenas Riera y Polo.²⁵ No one, most notably McKinley, gave Blanco time to bring peace to the island. On January 12 riots again broke out in Havana. Some of the protesters, including loyalist officers, were irate at local newspapers that favored autonomy from Spain. Lee’s fears and hopes continued apace, so he cabled more requests for help to Washington—Secretary Long finally ordered the *Maine* to steam to Havana.

The State Department deemed that these riots could augur the fall of the Autonomist Government, so intervention might become a reality, especially with the ineffectual negotiations in Madrid. Washington informed Havana that the *Maine* was on a “mission of peace,” but Spanish officials took umbrage. McKinley, Day, and Long also thought that since the American public insisted on intervention in Cuba it would be appeased, at least for the moment.²⁶

That same month, Ambassador Enrique Dupuy de Lôme called at the Department of State. He expressed dismay that the unfriendly attitude of the United States and McKinley’s threats of intervention perpetuated Cuban hostilities. The massing of the American fleet off Florida, he stressed, would result in war. And he also

²⁴ Long to Capt. John H. Dayton, Dec. 3, 1897, and Long to Sigsbee, Dec. 7, 1897, E 29, RG 45, NAB, and Lee to Day, Dec. 22, 1897, reel 131, M899, RG 59.

²⁵ For the Autonomist Government and American doubts, see Elbert J. Benton, *International Law and Diplomacy of the Spanish-American War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1908), 66–68, 71–72.

²⁶ Journal entry, Long, Jan. 24, 1898, Papers of John Davis Long, vol. 78, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1939). For more on Long, see Kenneth C. Wenzel, “The Naval War Board of 1898,” *Canadian Military History* 25, 1 (Winter–Spring, 2016): 21–22.

remonstrated to Day about Lee's disruptive and "reprehensible" posturing and endorsement of annexation.²⁷

On January 25 the *Maine* entered Havana Harbor and tethered to buoy no. 4.

In Havana Harbor

Authorized in 1886, the *Maine* was an appropriate symbol of American naval ascendancy. With a well-trained crew of 354 officers and men, the engines could generate 17 knots. Capt. Charles D. Sigsbee boasted in a letter that the "*Maine* looks sweetly innocent in the picture—the deceptive old thing." And with a firepower of four 10-inch guns with 2 turrets *en échelon*, six 6-inch guns, 15 rapid-fire guns, and 4 torpedo tubes, "she is a powerful ship."²⁸

The *Maine* had moored off the Machina, the site of the Spanish admiral's residence. The *Army and Navy Journal* reported that

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 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.²⁹

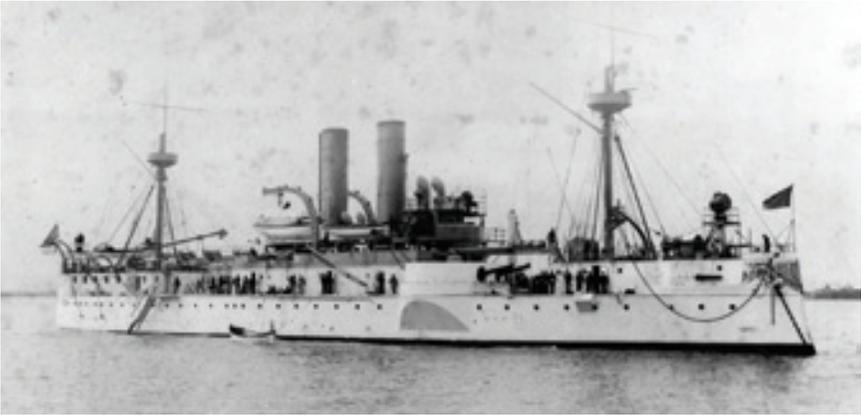
It seemed reasonable that Sigsbee, an expert in deep-sea depth sounding, one-time chief naval hydrographer, and someone who was aware of the strained relations between Madrid and Washington, would not take any chances even in a bustling commercial harbor.³⁰

²⁷ Internal document [Sigsbee], Jan. 1898, box 35, WDP, LC, accessed in RA. See also Fitzhugh Lee, *Cuba's Struggle Against Spain* in Fitzhugh Lee, et al., *Cuba's Struggle Against Spain with the Causes of American Intervention and a Full Account of the Spanish-American War, Including Final Peace Negotiations*, by Fitzhugh Lee and Joseph Wheeler, with a Story of Santiago by Theodore Roosevelt, and a Description of the Destruction of the "*Maine*" by Richard Wainwright (New York: The American Historical Press, 1899), 624.

²⁸ Sigsbee to Mrs. Smith, Feb. 9, 1898, Charles D. Sigsbee file, U.S. Navy Library, Washington, DC.

²⁹ "Loss of the *Maine*," *Army and Navy Journal*, Mar. 5, 1898, 502. Sigsbee later claimed that he did not drag the harbor in the immediate vicinity of his ship so as not to give offense to the Spanish authorities. Charles D. Sigsbee, *The "Maine": An Account of Her Destruction in Havana Harbor. The Personal Narrative of Captain Charles D. Sigsbee* (New York: The Century Co., 1899), 42.

³⁰ Charles D. Sigsbee, *Deep-Sea Sounding and Dredging: A Description and Discussion of the Methods and Appliances on Board the Coast and Geodetic Survey Steamer, "Blake"* (Washington, DC: GPO & U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, 1880).



A starboard view of the USB *Maine* photographed between 1895 and 1898.

Havana, however, was the safest place on the island, as it was home to a large contingent of Spanish soldiers and sailors. Residents of pure Spanish descent resided there, and the disdain toward the Cuban insurrectionists was strong. Any meddling by a foreign power was resented by the loyalists, especially by journalistic broadsides and diplomatic pressure from the United States. It was only natural that the presence of an American warship would agitate them.

“In my opinion,” Sigsbee wrote to Long, “the arrival of the *Maine* has caused the United States to dominate the situation. It has reduced to absurdity the warnings and threats published from Spanish sources previous to the arrival of the vessel.”³¹ Sigsbee, proud of his sangfroid in the face of his misperceived adversity, relished power. He did insist on “prompt intervention, annexation, or declaration of independence” for Cuba.³²

The Spanish authorities in Havana and Madrid had no wish to antagonize the officers or crew and precipitate an untoward incident, especially with strict orders from Madrid.³³ As a safety measure, boats were not allowed to navigate at night in the harbor.³⁴ Since there were two Spanish naval and other foreign vessels present, this precaution was justified. American citizens and their property in Havana, however, were never threatened.

³¹ Sigsbee to Long, Feb. 1, 1898, *Area File of the Naval Records Collection, 1775–1910* (National Archives Microfilm Publication M625), reel 226, RG 45, accessed in RA.

³² Sigsbee to Long, Feb. 8, 1898, M899 reel 132, RG 59.

³³ Manuel Pérez (Chief of the Political Bureau, Overseas Ministry, Madrid) to Secretary of the Government General (Havana), Jan. 26, 1898, [no other information available], accessed in RA.

³⁴ *Boston Daily Globe*, Feb. 17, 1898.

Lt. Cmdr. Richard Wainwright, executive officer of the *Maine* and in charge of security, would later remember that the day prior to entering Cuban waters “preparations were made to reply in case of attack.” The crew received strict orders to man the guns at night, ammunition was placed on the decks, torpedoes readied, special sentries posted, water-tight doors closed, hogging lines lowered for collision mats, and steam kept up in two boilers to move the gun turrets. “From the commencement,” Wainwright recalled, “we were prepared for treachery.”³⁵

Cmdr. Wat T. Cluverius, Jr., recalled that “additional sentries were posted forward and aft, and, no boat, whether passing or coming alongside, escaped the challenge from our decks.”³⁶ Over a decade later Sigsbee emphasized: “[E]very precaution that could be taken against injury or treachery was taken.”³⁷

Even though there were no riots or demonstrations against the *Maine*, other than some innocuous shouting from a passing boat one night, Sigsbee constantly maintained his vigilant protocols. “The ship,” he boasted to Long, “was ready for battle in all respects excepting outside appearances.”³⁸ Visitors on the ship were closely guarded, produce from the local markets was scrupulously examined, and only officers were allowed ashore. In an interview on February 10 Sigsbee exclaimed that

I don’t want to be obliged to take any coal from Havana. It would be a risky experiment. Not that I suspect any one in authority, but there is such an irresponsible rabble here in Havana, and it would be an easy matter to get a couple of sticks of dynamite in the coal bunkers without knowing it.³⁹

Sigsbee was also specifically ordered to reconnoiter the defenses around Havana. He responded: “[W]e are doing a great amount of intelligence work here.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Richard Wainwright, “The Destruction of the ‘Maine,’” in Lee, et al. *Cuba’s Struggle Against Spain*, 623–24.

³⁶ Wat T. Cluverius, Jr., “A Midshipman of the Maine,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, 44 (Feb. 1918): 237–48, accessed in RA.

³⁷ Sigsbee, *The “Maine,”* 42. In this book, however, there seems to be a discrepancy. Although he first claimed that no picket boats were on patrol, he did order that the crew regularly carry out exercises in boats and “had gun-pointing practice with the aid of a launch steaming about the harbor . . . care was taken that our guns should never point toward the Spanish men-of-war.” *Ibid.*, 42, 55–56.

³⁸ Sigsbee to Lee, Jan. 28, 1898, RG 45, accessed in RA.

³⁹ *New York Herald*, Feb. 17, 1898. The possession of explosives was illegal in Cuba.

⁴⁰ Long to Sigsbee, Jan. [31], 1898, E 28, RG 45, NAB, and Sigsbee to Long, Feb. 1, 1898, M625, RG 45, accessed in RA.

A newspaper article in late January relayed that the *Maine*'s officers were "not alarmed" about a report that Havana Harbor contained mines because if present they would not have been charged, since most modern countries engaged in that practice, including the United States. "It is incomprehensible to them, however, that the battleship *Maine* is in any danger . . . the port is in daily use by vessels of all countries." In an interview in late January, Sigsbee concurred with his junior officers.⁴¹

Rear Adm. George W. Melville, chief of the Bureau of Steam Engineering during the Spanish-American War, wrote in 1911 that the Spaniards exhibited punctilious naval courtesy to all foreign officers and vessels. They knew that their defenses at Havana were formidable, that it was unnecessary to mine the inner harbor, and that it would have been foolish for the Spanish to jeopardize a busy commercial harbor.⁴²

Spanish sources augment Sigsbee and Melville's observations. Madrid's chargé d'affaires, in an interview on February 21, 1898, informed a *New York Times* correspondent that "no mine exists inside or outside of Havana Harbor, nor is there any submarine defenses of any kind. . . . I consider the very suggestion of such a thing as an insult to Spain."⁴³

There is also another consideration. Spanish mines at that time were notorious for their poor construction and inefficiency. Any mine placed in tropical Cuban waters would succumb to marine growth in three weeks. Cmdr. Bowman H. McCalla noted in 1899 that

those [mines] which were taken up from the channels [Guantánamo Bay] abreast of the fort on the last days of July were so foul that I do not believe they could have been exploded, unless the levers had been struck a very violent and quick blow strong enough to have broken up the barnacles and force the firing pins home.⁴⁴

The Spanish, however, did not place mines in the entrance of Havana Harbor until April 6, 1898.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *The Evening Star*, Jan. 31, 1898; Ibid.

⁴² George W. Melville, "The Destruction of the Battleship 'Maine,'" *North American Review* (June 1911): 832, 835, accessed in RA.

⁴³ *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1898, accessed in RA.

⁴⁴ Bowman H. McCalla, "Lessons of the Late War," [no other information available], No. 71, 1899, NHC.

⁴⁵ Lee to Richardson Clover (chief intelligence officer), then relayed to Capt. William T. Sampson (commander-in-chief of the North Atlantic Squadron), Apr. 6, 1898, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917, RG 94.

The Aftershock of the Explosion

No boats in the harbor were challenged on February 15, 1898, the night the *Maine* burst into history.⁴⁶ After the explosion, Sigsbee reached the deck and ordered his men to repel an attack.⁴⁷ When he was able to compose himself, he realized that the Spanish naval vessels and the fortresses were silent. Soon afterwards, Sigsbee told reporters that “it was impossible that the magazines could explode.”⁴⁸

Rescue boats from the Spanish man-of-war *Alfonso XII*, the first to reach the fiery hulk, were quickly followed by local services. Spanish sailors exposed themselves to danger to save as many lives as possible while ammunition was exploding. A fireman, while rescuing a drowning man, was badly burned. Some of the survivors were taken to *Alfonso*’s dispensary and others to hospitals on shore. The care given to the wounded and dying men was exemplary.⁴⁹

Sigsbee and a few officers and sailors rowed to the *City of Washington* to recuperate. Spanish authorities sped immediately to the captain to offer whatever assistance he desired. Havana then displayed the most glowing tribute to the dead sailors through official mourning and a magnificent funeral procession two days later.⁵⁰

The night of the catastrophe Sigsbee cabled the Navy Department. “Public opinion,” he emphasized, “should be suspended until further report” regarding the cause of the explosion.⁵¹ He was lauded for being cool-headed and circumspect by McKinley, Long, and the press. Sigsbee later claimed that he couched the telegram in such language because “I feared the result of the first impressions of the great disaster on our people, for I found it necessary to repress my own suspicions. . . . Naval officers, no less than other citizens, have sober judgment of the people of the United States.”⁵² His counsel, however, was ignored. The nation, drunk with frenzy, rose up in a general uproar crying for revenge against the Spaniards.

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of the Naval Court of Inquiry upon the Destruction of the United States Battle Ship Maine in Havana Harbor, February 15, 1898, Together with the Testimony Taken Before the Court*, 55th Congress, 2nd session, 1898, Document 207 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898), 132, 160.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁸ *The World*, Mar. 22, 1898; *Naval Court of Inquiry*, 16.

⁴⁹ *Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 1898. Sigsbee did not visit his wounded and dying sailors until five days after the explosion. *The World*, Feb. 21, 1898.

⁵⁰ Lee, *Cuba’s Struggle Against Spain*, 134–38, 628; John E. Weems, *The Fate of the Maine* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1992), 71–90; Michael Blow, *A Ship to Remember: The Maine and the Spanish-American War* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 95–105.

⁵¹ Sigsbee to Lee, Feb. 15, 1898, reel 226, M625, RG 45, accessed in RA.

⁵² Sigsbee, *The “Maine,”* 76.



The last known picture of the *Maine's* crew.

It was possible that Sigsbee needed time to collect his thoughts in order to exonerate himself and his crew from the stigma of an accidental cause of the explosion, be it technologically generated or by human error. His naval self-esteem could have been piqued and he would have been censured by his fellow officers if found at fault. Naval appropriations could have also been jeopardized.⁵³ Most importantly, the war plans already set in motion would have been thwarted. Before he or anyone else had investigated the sunken ship, Sigsbee quickly cabled to Long:

Maine probably destroyed by a mine. It may have been done by accident. I surmise that her berth was planted previous to her arrival; perhaps long ago.⁵⁴

In the meantime, official activity in Washington, Madrid, and Havana quickened. Newspaper headlines around the United States trumpeted that the Spanish destroyed the *Maine*. Articles indulged in all kinds of imaginary treachery.

Lee established his own examining board to collect hearsay about the numerous alleged plots.⁵⁵ Sigsbee also worked closely with Sylvester Scovel and Harry Drain during these crucial days, while the Navy Department started to organize an official

⁵³ *New York Times*, Feb. 17 and 20, 1898.

⁵⁴ Charles D. Sigsbee, "My Story of the 'Maine,'" *Cosmopolitan Magazine* LIII, 2 (July 1912): 152.

⁵⁵ *San Francisco Call*, Mar. 6, 1898.

court of inquiry.⁵⁶ Scovel, *The World's* syndicated reporter and a close associate of Sigsbee and Lee, was a leading proponent of the underwater mine theory. Articles penned by him claimed that only Spanish officials were capable of such a deed.⁵⁷ Sigsbee never publicly denied this reportage.

Lee at first reported to Washington that the captain was not prepared to give a reason for the explosion.⁵⁸ Lee would undoubtedly have heeded the captain's expert opinion, and he became privy to the conspiracy rumors garnered by Drain and Scovel. Sigsbee claimed that he and Lee "were always in harmony."⁵⁹ The first documentation that indicated Lee determined that a mine was the culprit was when he informed his superiors on February 22.⁶⁰ Immediately after the incident, Spanish authorities denied Sigsbee's request to use hired civilian divers, but he then gained permission to use official U.S. Navy divers. In a jurisdictional fight, the Spanish did not allow the Americans to examine the ship from the outside, and the Americans refused to allow the Spanish to go inside. The harbor water, however, was so murky from the churned-up muddy bottom and centuries of garbage that visibility was extremely limited—it was impossible for anyone to make an accurate assessment. The murkiness was worse inside the wreck as the divers had to blindly grope around.⁶¹

The Spanish authorities had requested a joint investigation, but the Navy Department, with Theodore Roosevelt in the vanguard, refused.⁶² Both sides convoked their own inquiries, but the Americans ignored the Spanish call for them to testify.⁶³ When the U.S. Navy finally began its Court of Inquiry no Spaniard but one was called to testify. Tempers flared and relations deteriorated between the Spanish and Americans, which in turn fomented more resentment in the United States and Spain. Even more rumors about the cause of the explosion ran amuck and emboldened martial spirits in the press and populace in both countries.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ *The World*, Feb. 19, 1898.

⁵⁷ *The World*, Apr. 10, 1898.

⁵⁸ Lee to Day, Feb. 16, 1898, UD 417, vol. 19, Records of U.S. Embassies, Legations, Consulates, and Missions, RG 84, NACP.

⁵⁹ Sigsbee, *The "Maine,"* 106.

⁶⁰ Lee to Day, Feb. 16, 1898, reel 128, M899, RG 59, and Lee to Day, Feb. 22, 1898, box 6, WDP, LC.

⁶¹ *Naval Court of Inquiry*, 48, 61, 64, 73, 76; Sigsbee, *The "Maine,"* 149.

⁶² Roosevelt to Capt. William S. Cowles, Feb. 23, 1898, reel 315, TRP, LC. For the entire Spanish proceedings, see U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Relative to Affairs in Cuba*, 55th Congress, 2nd session, Apr. 13, 1898 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898), 565–636. The humanitarian efforts of the Spanish on the night of the explosion are depicted in detail.

⁶³ *Washington Post*, Feb. 17 and 18, 1898.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Feb. 18, 1898; *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1898.

While confusion reigned in Havana, McKinley and Long publicly expressed their opinions that the *Maine* succumbed to an accidental explosion and counseled that calm should prevail until the findings of the inquiry would be made known.⁶⁵ In reality, as documentation shows, these two men concluded early on, based on Sigsbee and Lee's communiqués, that it was a mine that destroyed the battleship. The *Maine*'s explosion occurred at a propitious time and ignited McKinley's war timetable.

The *Maine*'s officers and most scientific experts inside and outside the Navy, most notably Capt. Philip R. Alger, believed that the explosion originated from spontaneous combustion in a coal bunker.⁶⁶ Alger determined that a smoldering coal fire overheated the bulkhead and set off the tightly packed ammunition in an adjoining magazine.⁶⁷ Lt. Frank F. Fletcher, assistant chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, wrote two days after the explosion:

The disaster to the *Maine* is the one topic here now. Everybody is gradually settling down to the belief that the disaster was due to the position of the magazine next to the coal bunker in which there must have been spontaneous combustion. . . .⁶⁸

There were, of course, dissenting views. Many commentators advanced theories regarding how the mines were planted and fired, but none of them could be proven.⁶⁹ Roosevelt, seeing a grand opportunity, was outwardly convinced that a mine indeed destroyed the *Maine*.⁷⁰ The Navy Department, nevertheless, witnessed infighting between the advocates of internal and external causes over their worst naval ship disaster to date.

As events turned out, McKinley and his chosen circle closely guarded their secret war plans that had been activated in 1896 so that preparations against Spain could be ramped up. Two days after the explosion, Roosevelt started to dispatch intelligence regarding the defenses of Cuba and Spain, as well as Spanish war vessel plans and other

⁶⁵ *Washington Post*, Feb. 19, 1898.

⁶⁶ *New York Herald*, Feb. 18, 1898; Kenneth C. Wenzer, "Theodore Roosevelt and the United States Battleship *Maine*," *Federal History* 9 (Apr. 2017): 124–28.

⁶⁷ *Naval Court of Inquiry*, 143–46.

⁶⁸ Frank F. Fletcher to Gleaves, Feb. 17, 1898, box 8, Albert Gleaves Papers, LC. See also *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 18, 1898.

⁶⁹ Eugene Zalinski to Charles O'Neil, Feb. 18, 1898, box 8, Charles O'Neil Papers (hereinafter COP), LC. Newspapers, of course, explored all kinds of possibilities, such as electrically charged mines set off from a control panel on shore. See also *New York Journal and Advertiser*, Feb. 17, 1898.

⁷⁰ Wenzer, "Battleship *Maine*," 111–30.

data.⁷¹ Long's office became swamped with "defense contractors" who were begging to sell their wares, while the Washington Navy Yard revved up gun production. Capt. Charles O'Neil, chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, met with Long and McKinley on February 27 and 28. He dutifully carried out the new orders for ammunition and other war preparations.⁷² Congress, meanwhile, readily assented to McKinley's requests and appropriated \$50 million on March 9, mostly slated for the Navy.

Shipyards now bustled with activity, and the Navy placed orders overseas for additional vessels, some to block Spanish purchases. The Navy and Army set in motion feverish preparations. All this work continued at an ever-increasing pace up to the outbreak of hostilities in late April. The Spanish were naturally alarmed. A small squadron under the command of Adm. Pascual Cervera y Topete massed at Cape Verde Islands, but Washington viewed this mobilization as a national threat. Panic seized the East Coast since people thought that the Spanish Navy would bomb their cities.

McKinley increasingly tightened the diplomatic thumbscrews on Madrid until the United States declared war on April 21, even though Madrid granted many reforms for Cuba and accepted a cease-fire. The Spanish government also acquiesced to McKinley's additional demands, including virtual autonomy for Cuba.⁷³ The president, however, was not to be satisfied. The concessions did, after all, conflict with his war policy.

The Naval Court of Inquiry Proceedings

The Naval Court of Inquiry convened primarily in Havana Harbor on the lighthouse tender *Mangrove* for almost a month, from February 21 to March 15, and afterwards a Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing transpired, both during a time of raging war fever. The latter held session from March 30 to April 12. The court and Senate committee hearings proved to be disgraceful exercises in mendacity, with Sigsbee as the center of attention and Lee as a sideshow in the former, but with equal billing in the latter. These two proceedings contributed, nonetheless, to the popular hysteria and federal intransigence.

Long ordered the court to convene. Capt. William T. Sampson, who presided, probably suffered from a prolonged bout of multiple infarct dementia during

⁷¹ Roosevelt to Sicard, Feb. 16 and 18, 1898, Records of Naval Operating Forces, E 37, RG 313, NAB.

⁷² Diary entries, O'Neil, Feb. 26, 27, 28, 1898, and Mar., 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 1898, box 2, COP, LC.

⁷³ Benton, *International Law*, 65–127.

most of its proceedings.⁷⁴ It was a foregone conclusion before the Court of Inquiry met (solely composed of naval officers) that a mine would be deemed the culprit and Sigsbee exonerated from any impropriety. Sigsbee was the prime witness. He was also present for the entire proceedings and served as an adviser, no doubt present when his crew members testified. Newspaper reporters, such as Scovel quite accurately depicted the court's prejudgment that a mine blew up the *Maine*.⁷⁵



Fitzhugh Lee was the consul general in Havana.

The first 110 pages of the published proceedings painstakingly attempted to prove that it was impossible for any accident, either by the slightest negligence, by any technical fault, or spontaneous coal combustion to have destroyed the ship. Sigsbee and his crew were deemed blameless. They did, after all, carry out their duties in a punctilious manner.

Technology at the time, however, was less refined than now, and a thermostat, for instance, associated with any given coal bunker was on par with the sophistication of a doorbell. The *Maine*'s bunker thermostats, however, malfunctioned before the explosion. A smoldering fire could go undetected for days. The singled-out wing bunker A-16 with a deep bottom pocket, and given its ancillary position, was rarely emptied—perfect conditions for spontaneous combustion. It was hand-felt for heat like the other bunkers (and not often, given its difficult access); an archaic test method even for the time. The New River coal taken on at Hampton Roads in November 1897 was subject to self-ignition, especially in a tropical climate, as were other bituminous coals. This tragedy occurred in the wake of a series of coal-bunker fires that had plagued the U.S. Navy.⁷⁶

A major focus was on the number of explosions. Sigsbee, for instance, insisted there was one, while other men spoke of two blasts. So an ambiguity, whether a first explosion came from a mine and then a magazine, was never reconciled. The strakes at the impact area were bent inward. Since their rivets popped, this suggests that it

⁷⁴ Martin R. Netsky and Edward L. Beach, "The Trouble with Admiral Sampson," *Naval History* (November–December 1995): 8–16.

⁷⁵ *The World*, Feb. 25, 1898.

⁷⁶ *Naval Court of Inquiry*, 32, 37, 152–53, 154, and Wenzel, "Battleship *Maine*," 119–22.

was pressure from the ship first hitting the harbor bottom with a great water surge inwards. That meant that the cause was internal because of the overall downward and then upward movement with the ship bending inwards before it settled to the bottom again.

The navy divers and the officers, however, who served as examiners at the site, nevertheless considered the cause external. A blown-out area on the hull was never found, and neither did any witness report that a funnel of water shot up into the air, a sure sign of a genuine mine explosion. The water was so turbid that any given diver had to put his face to the plates in order to ascertain if they were bending in any given direction—a rather crude way of determining an explosive impact.⁷⁷

Another concern was the position of the *Maine* the night of the tragedy. Sigsbee, for instance, insisted that his ship swung into a specific direction only that evening. This fact, he intimated, was an undoubted reason that the mine was surreptitiously planted in anticipation. Other crewmen, such as Lt. George Blow, however, reported that the *Maine* had done so on other occasions.⁷⁸

Since internal factors were ruled out and the crew exonerated, it was obvious that the source of the explosion was external, so it was undoubtedly a mine that was the source of ignition. Cmdr. George Converse, who had formerly commanded the torpedo station in Rhode Island, was called to the stand. Apparently Converse's testimony, claiming that a mine destroyed the *Maine*, was a prearranged affair.⁷⁹

Other officers and crewmen were asked their opinions on whether the *Maine* was exploded by a mine, and responded with assurance without any evidence. Sigsbee's response, however, was cryptic, but suggestive: "I knew immediately that the *Maine* had been blown up."⁸⁰ Years later he would boast: "I surmised from at first that the explosion initiated from outside the vessel."⁸¹ Until his death in 1923 he insisted that a mine destroyed his ship, but he did so without remotely approaching any degree of certitude.

Even more dubious testimony was admitted into the court's hearings. These accounts, supplied by the triumvirate of Lee, Drain, and Scovel, took on ominous dimensions. Lee continued conducting his own court of inquiry. No doubt his

⁷⁷ *Naval Court of Inquiry*, 92.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷⁹ Rickover, et al., *Battleship Maine*, 67–68, and *Naval Court of Inquiry*, 257–60.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ Sigsbee, "My Story of the 'Maine,'" 150.

“irregulars” scurried after any gossip flying around Havana in the wake of the tragedy. Drain and Scovel rounded people up and brought them to Lee’s star-chamber or straight to the Naval Court.⁸² “Thousands of startling rumors,” Scovel wrote for public consumption, “are current in Cuba. Those who are willing to swear to them I have sent to the Court of Inquiry.”⁸³ Scovel uncovered an unidentified man whom the court graciously accepted anonymously lest he would be assassinated. This person claimed that he overheard unidentified Spanish officers state that they had made clandestine arrangements to blow up the *Maine*.⁸⁴ Drain also interpreted for the court a letter signed by “An Admirer.” The writer claimed that three divers sank the *Maine*, including their *chef*, Pepé Taco. Drain then corrected his reading and reported that it was not destroyed by Taco, now conveniently deceased, but another intrigant, Pepé Barquin.

Lee also appeared in the proceedings. The court members, however, only asked him perfunctory questions relating to the *Maine*’s arrival and his diplomatic arrangements and correspondence with the State Department and Spanish officials.⁸⁵

The court’s final verdict placed the blame on a mine without mentioning any additional conclusions. Was it the Spanish government, disenchanting soldiers, insurgents, or just some malicious men who did it? Nor did the court explain how it was planted. Was it dropped off a boat, tethered to the buoy, or set off by electrical wires or by contact? And was the mine planted before the *Maine* arrived or afterwards? This decision was made without the advice of the leading experts of the time, including experienced scientific minds. The court’s pronouncement, as it turned out, was just as explosive as the superheated magazine in the *Maine*.

Given the ambiguous ruling, it was assumed that a large mine was needed and that only the Spanish government could have had such a weapon. It was readily apparent to the court that discontented Spanish officers, who were in the vanguard of the conspiratorial plots, were undoubtedly the perpetrators. Historical documents, most conspicuously from the pens of Sigsbee and Lee, convey these opinions.

McKinley, as mentioned above, was notified before the court met that a mine was the cause; nonetheless the court officially informed him of that conclusion

⁸² Scovel was aware that Drain had supplied the Navy with secret intelligence. See *The World*, Mar. 4, 1898.

⁸³ *The World*, Feb. 28, 1898.

⁸⁴ *Naval Court of Inquiry*, 93–95.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 246–47. On at least one occasion Lee had invited the court members to dinner. See *The World*, Feb. 23, 1898.

on March 25—over a month later.⁸⁶ The U.S. Navy, meanwhile, was placed on a heightened war footing without financial limitations 19 days earlier.⁸⁷

While the Court of Inquiry met, Senator Redfield Proctor visited Cuba and reported to the Senate the deprivations of the Cuban people in a most emotional manner.⁸⁸ His speech added to the growing frenzy of Congress and the American populace, while McKinley was ramping up his preparations for hostilities. The Navy Department was also busy placing orders for ships, transporting ammunition, and arming civilian vessels. Capt. Charles O’Neil, chief of the Ordnance Bureau, wrote that the “hurried order for ammunition for Key West, like that shipment of guns to New York, both of which are embarrassing, emanated from the Office of the Assistant Secretary [Roosevelt].”⁸⁹

The Senate Hearings

The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations convened in late March. Despite the sage presence of Henry Cabot Lodge and his peers, it was, like the Court of Inquiry, a spurious affair.

Witnesses of various sorts were called to testify, but they admitted that their primary source of information was the press and that they did not look at, or only perfunctorily skimmed, the Court of Inquiry’s proceedings. Capt. Albert S. Barker, for one, stated that he did “not carefully” read newspaper articles. In his opinion, the Spanish officials were the culprits. “Havana Harbor has been mined,” he averred, “but I have nothing to base it upon.”⁹⁰

Honoré François Lainé, who had lived in Cuba, also responded to senatorial questioning. He was in a Cuban prison for 13 months, having been accused as an insurgent leader. He was incarcerated again for claiming that the *Maine* was blown up by a mine.⁹¹ Lainé possessed a handwritten copy of an alleged letter by “Butcher” Weyler. Apparently the former governor general made unspecified provisions for Havana Harbor so it could be “well prepared” for an American attack. Lainé, however, forgot to bring the copy to the proceedings, but it then miraculously appeared with an English translation just in the nick of time for the senators.⁹²

⁸⁶ For a succinct overview of the court’s failings, with additional information debunking the mine theory, see I.S. Hansen and Dana M. Wegner, “Centenary of the Destruction of USS *Maine*,” *Naval Engineers Journal* 110, 2 (March 1998): 93–103.

⁸⁷ Diary entry, O’Neil, Mar. 6, 1898, box 2, COP, LC.

⁸⁸ *Senate Report*, 471, 477, 492, 493–94, 495–98.

⁸⁹ O’Neil to Cmdr. William Swift, Mar. 6, 1898, box 13, COP, LC.

⁹⁰ *Senate Report*, 471, 477, 492, 493–94, 495–98.

⁹¹ *The World*, Mar. 7, 1898, and *Senate Report*, 513.

⁹² *Senate Report*, 508–12, 513.

Sigsbee testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on March 31. He did not know whether the mine was electrically fired from the shore or not, or whether the mine was planted before or after the *Maine's* arrival. If the latter case, in his opinion a makeshift mine could have been dropped from a lighter and also set off from an unspecified location. When asked whether it was a Spanish official, Sigsbee responded: "I have a certain reason for believing this, which perhaps it would be injudicious to disclose."⁹³ The *New Yorker* also suspected a Spanish captain who did not exude the customary naval courtesy and shunned him. Sigsbee was convinced that treachery lurked everywhere and claimed that the authorities provided no protection while his ship was in port.

Sigsbee, moreover, reported that the handfelt coal-bunker tests were conducted three days before the explosion. "There was no rigid time to examine," since "one time was as good as another." Nor did he study or was familiar with the nature of spontaneous coal-bunker combustion. And finally, Senator Joseph B. Foraker asked the captain: "You have no doubt your ship was destroyed by an explosion from the outside?" And the response was: "I have none whatsoever—none from the first minute."⁹⁴

Lee appeared on April 12, 1898. He presented as evidence the same letter from Weyler as did Lainé. "I am satisfied," Lee claimed without any investigation that "it is a genuine copy." Then Lee claimed without any factual basis who blew up the ship:

I have always had an idea about the *Maine* that, of course, it was not blown up by any private individual or by any private citizen, but it was blown up by some of the officers who had charge of the mines and electrical wires and torpedoes in the arsenal there who thoroughly understood their business, for it was done remarkably well.⁹⁵

Just like Sigsbee, he did not know whether the mine was planted before or after the ship's arrival, or by whom. He assumed that it had to be a mine because he had chatted with American naval officers at the site of the wreck "and people I happened to meet and talk to about it."⁹⁶ Lee only "glanced" at the final proceedings of the Court of Inquiry.

Lee then indicated that there was another secret telegram regarding the explosion that he read at the inquiry. The former consul general, however, did not want to divulge it for fear that his informant would be killed. It did not appear in the published proceedings at Lee's request. Yet a third secret document was presented at

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 481–85.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 489, 492.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 536, 547.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 537, 539–40.

the testimony regarding an order for electric cables by the Spanish authorities. Again, Lee relied upon his “irregulars” for this information. He never did find out if they were shipped from Madrid, nor could he remember whether Vice Adm. Vincente de Manterola y Taxonera (commander of Spanish naval forces in Cuba) sent a telegram before or after the *Maine* arrived. According to extant documentation, however, Lee was intimately familiar with Havana Harbor and dutifully reported to the State Department the comings and goings of ships and other activity with regular punctiliousness.⁹⁷

In the Senate committee’s final report, published without consultation with leading scientific experts, the members undoubtedly thought that the evidence presented proved compellingly that a mine caused the *Maine*’s explosion. As with the Court of Inquiry, they did not know when it was planted, by whom, or how it was done. Some of these gentlemen also remarked that the Spanish have always been noted for their “duplicity, perfidy, and cruelty,” so that

the destruction of the *Maine* was compassed either by the official act of the Spanish authorities . . . or was made possible by a negligence on their part so willing and gross as to be equivalent in culpability to positive criminal action.⁹⁸

Just before these proceedings began on March 28, McKinley sent a special message to Congress regarding the *Maine*. He repeated the findings of the Court of Inquiry. And while the senatorial interrogation was taking place, the president requested a declaration of war on April 11. He adumbrated a number of reasons, but stated in an ambiguous manner:

The naval court of inquiry. . . was unanimous in its conclusion that the destruction of the *Maine* was caused by an exterior explosion—that of a submarine mine. It did not assume to place the responsibility. That remains to be fixed.

In any event, the destruction of the *Maine*, by whatever exterior cause, is a patent and impressive proof of a state of things in Cuba that is intolerable [T]he Spanish Government cannot assure safety and security of the American Navy in the harbor on a mission of peace, and rightfully there.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 536, 537–38. Lee also stated that he never got in contact with the insurgents, but in reality he did so through his network of scouts. See Lee to Day, June 9, 1897, reel 130, M899, RG 59.

⁹⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report: Affairs in Cuba*, 55th Congress, 2nd session, Report No. 885 (Views of Minority), Calendar No. 78, Apr. 13, 1898 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898), vii.

⁹⁹ William McKinley in Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 148.

Although the flow of humanitarian aid had ceased, the president recommended for his public that it should be continued.¹⁰⁰

McKinley then refused to reply to the Spanish request for an impartial international investigation of the *Maine* on the grounds of prolonging the agonizing situation.¹⁰¹ On April 13, the House, in what was described as “a scene of wild disorder,” recognized the independence of Cuba, but the Senate pared down its suggestions so that the insurgents would not be acknowledged as the nucleus of a new government. The war declaration was then approved by Congress on April 25, retroactively in effect for four days—a tribute to bipartisan solidarity.

Afterthoughts

Although the deaths of over 200,000 Cubans were condemned in the newspapers, churches, and in Congress, the McKinley administration had only requested \$50,000 in aid for a few naturalized American citizens residing in Cuba up to late 1897.¹⁰² U.S. consuls protested over the State Department’s refusal to heed their pleas for more assistance. Consul Walter B. Barker resigned over this gross negligence after having exhausted his personal resources to feed the destitute.¹⁰³ Despite years of pleading over the parlous and inhumane conditions in Cuba, McKinley did not send out an appeal to the American public until late December 1897. Aid did not arrive in Cuba until six days before the *Maine* exploded. Assistance was not forthcoming from the federal government or Congress, but from private efforts. Clara Barton and her associate John K. Elwell, under the auspices of the Central Cuban Relief Committee of the American National Red Cross, worked tirelessly to organize the transportation and distribution of food and other necessities to starving people. Lee, who clamored for intervention for humanitarian reasons, neglected his responsibilities in helping with the organization and distribution of foods and supplies that he promised the Red Cross.¹⁰⁴ His dereliction of duty suggests that his primary concern was for conquest and postwar land speculation schemes rather than to address privations.¹⁰⁵

With the sinking of the *Maine*, revenge resounded throughout the U.S. Navy and beyond. The sailors who went to war were imbued with a consuming desire to destroy the Spanish. Smokestacks were painted and shells were etched with

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 148–49.

¹⁰² *Senate Report*, 542–44.

¹⁰³ *The World*, Mar. 7, 1898.

¹⁰⁴ John K. Elwell to Stephen Barton, Feb. 23, 1898, box 98, Clara Barton Papers, LC.

¹⁰⁵ Lee to Daniel S. Lamont, July 10, 1897, Nov. 29, 1898, and Dec. 3, 1898, box 82, Daniel Lamont Papers, LC. Lamont was secretary of war from 1893 to 1897. See also Eggbert, “Our Man in Havana,” 463–85.

“Remember the Maine!” The American populace became increasingly vociferous, both houses of Congress screamed for revenge, and diplomatic activity became more intransigent while war preparations escalated. Ungovernable mass emotions nurtured by power, falsehood, and ambition overtook reason and compassion. McKinley, who was amenable to everyone and depicted as the reluctant president, quietly counted on the storm to reach hurricane status thanks to the disgraceful machinations of Sigsbee, Lee, and other officers of the U.S. Navy.

The key participants in the aftermath of the explosion effectively steered the final conclusion to that of a mine explosion set off by the Spanish. The duplicity of Sigsbee and Lee, central witnesses, the poor standards of proof at the hearings, and the complicity of the U.S. naval officer corps and the federal administration all aligned with the public’s call for revenge to hasten the ongoing plans for war with Spain. These inquiries were conducted with exceptionally poor legal and evidentiary standards in order to promote a predetermined conclusion and rationale for armed force. It would have been unthinkable that the conduct and management of a U.S. naval captain and his crew or a poorly designed ship could have been the real cause of the explosion. Sigsbee could not possibly be blamed, and the honor of the Navy had to be maintained unblemished.

In reality, Cuba was an island rich in natural resources that had already been tapped, backed by large investments of U.S. interests. More importantly, a Spanish-controlled Cuba was deemed a threat for a proposed American-controlled isthmian canal that would enhance commercial and military interests. In the wider view, the explosion of the *Maine* and the subsequent duplicity of the key participants in the inquiries were part of the developing U.S. plan for a more active role in the hemisphere, one more attuned to the assertions of the Monroe Doctrine. Those developments that placed the blame on Spain proved to be a pivotal turn that enabled the eviction of Spain from the region and the rise of the United States as a major power in a new international order.

Picture credits: Charles D. Sigsbee, Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 95096); USB *Maine*, Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 60255-A); *Maine’s Crew*, *New York Daily Tribune*; Fitzhugh Lee, Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 48273)

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