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The Naval War Board of 1898

KENNETH C. WENZER

Abstract: The early months of 1898 witnessed the explosion of Maine and additional inducements for war. The Naval War Board, which first made its appearance in late March was summoned to arrange strategy for the impending hostilities. After some personnel shuffling it was finally composed of Montgomery Sicard, Arent S. Crowninshield, and Alfred T. Mahan.

*The Appendix to the Bureau of Navigation of 1898 insists that the Naval War Board “throughout the war acted as an advisory board” and so do all scholars of the period. David Trask, for instance, in his benchmark work *The War with Spain*, also asserts that it “served simply as an advisory body to the Secretary of the Navy. It had no executive authority, although it undertook certain administrative duties ... it did not decide the movements of any force at sea.”*

Recent scholarship refutes these views. After careful analysis of primary sources I suggest that the Naval War Board was the primary mover of the Spanish-American War. Under its aegis it amassed an amazing degree of power and for the most part directed naval, military, diplomatic, and domestic efforts. In almost constant session, both day and night, it was regularly in communication with President William McKinley.

THE BIRTH OF AMERICA as a great power took place in the Navy Library. In 1898 this repository was located in the State, Army, and Navy Building, now known as the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. Just a stone's throw away from the Executive Mansion, and housing the state and army departments, it was also the headquarters of the Department of the Navy. John D. Long was the secretary of the navy and Theodore Roosevelt his assistant. In this room, that the Naval War Board held incessant and, in many instances, grim sessions that primarily determined the successful conclusion of the

Spanish-American War. While burning the midnight oil, perhaps the inspiration from the many books offset the enervating Washington summer and allowed this *sapienza* to orchestrate a masterful symphony.

Mr. Herbert Wrigley Wilson, a British commentator at the time, remarked from a differing view, noted that its:

personnel was ... in many ways ideal, composed of practical officers, with a leaven of accomplished theorists; yet the Board's timidity and excessive caution have been the subject of unfavourable comment in Europe. [The question is] ... whether this timidity and caution were quite so great or quite so unreasonable as European critics have assumed. ... It was timidity—fear of popular indignation—which led [, for instance,] the American officers to keep three of their best ships on the northern coast.¹

Wilson was equally critical of “the Spanish management.” Here:

we find a Board of eminent Admirals guilty of apparently the opposite excess. The flag-officers who voted for the dispatch of Cervera to the West Indies, with a fleet such as his was, displayed the maddest rashness, and the result was the prompt destruction of the unhappy force. The truth is that all sense of personal responsibility is lost in a Board, and timidity almost invariably prevails. It was timidity—fear of popular indignation—which led the Spanish Admirals to send Cervera to defeat.²

Was Wilson accurate, at least about the Americans?

It is assumed, for the most part, by historians that President William McKinley, having seen the bloodshed of the Civil War

¹ Herbert W. Wilson, *The Downfall of Spain: Naval History of the Spanish-American War* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1900), 426. The opinions and conclusions expressed in this essay are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Navy or any other agency of the US Government. Much gratitude is extended to Dr. Dennis M. Conrad, Mr. Dana Wegner, Dr. Carlos R. Rivera (Lieutenant Commander, retired), Dr. Thomas R. West, and Dr. Agustín R. Rodríguez González for their indispensable commentary. Thanks also must be acknowledged to Mr. Glenn Helm and Mr. J. Allen Knechtmann of the Navy Library; Mr. Jeffrey Flannery and his staff of the Manuscript Reading Room of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC; and Mr. Mark Mollan and Ms. Susan Abbott and their colleagues of the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

² *Ibid.*

was reluctant to fight with the Spanish over the fate of Cuba. Pressures from Wall Street and politicians from both parties, we are told, favored peace so that commerce would not be disrupted and the wounds from a prolonged depression could be healed. According to a dean of American historians, Samuel Eliot Morison, the twenty-fifth president was “a kindly soul in a spineless body [and he] ... did not want war.”³ It is generally believed that after temporisation and prayer McKinley had to give way, a theme still discernible today.

The chief executive, however, after taking office on 21 March 1897, astutely nurtured preparations for a war against Spain.⁴ Bear in mind that Commodore George Dewey steamed from Hong Kong to Manila with a war plan drawn up in the early summer of 1897; it is the same plan that Roosevelt discussed with McKinley during the famous carriage ride through Rock Creek Park in late September.⁵ It was not, as some scholars assert, the Kimball Plan that was written the year before, but it assuredly laid the framework.⁶

The early months of 1898 brought the explosion of *Maine* and additional inducements for war, such as the publication of the de Lôme letter, along with mounting congressional and party pressures, public outcry, and journalistic salvos.⁷ Once hostilities were declared, we are led to believe, the Ohioan rolled up his sleeves and “day by day, and sometimes on an hour-to-hour basis, ... oversaw the war ... [He] spent the first two months raising an army, devising a strategy, and responding to the naval actions of the enemy ... William McKinley

³ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 799, 801.

⁴ See the pioneering work: Hiram G. Rickover, *How the Battleship Maine was Destroyed* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, Dept. of the Navy, 1976), 10–25 and Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), 333–370.

⁵ Letter, Theodore Roosevelt to Henry Cabot Lodge, 21 September 1897, Papers of Theodore Roosevelt, Reel 314, Library of Congress, Manuscript Reading Room, Washington, DC (hereinafter cited as DLC-MSS).

⁶ John A.S. Grenville and George B. Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy: Studies in Foreign Policy, 1873–1917* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 271–277. A future essay will address these war preparations.

⁷ The Spanish minister to the US was Enrique Dupuy de Lôme. For more, see the “Destruction of Maine” section on the Department of the Navy, Naval History and Heritage Command (Spanish-American War Documentary Project) available at: <http://www.history.navy.mil/> (hereinafter cited as: NHHC: SAW).



The Naval War Board met in the State, War, and Navy Building in Washington, DC. [National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; 16-AD-39]

expected to play the decisive part in the management of the war effort ... In doing so, he laid the foundation for the modern presidency.”⁸

With all the contemporary conveyances of communications at his fingertips, historians claim that McKinley undoubtedly masterminded the entire war. Scholars of the McKinley administration admit that for a number of salient reasons primary documents are scant and that the president was quite taciturn. Our research indicates that errors have crept into these *ex post facto* renderings of McKinley’s paramount role. McKinley, however, did set in motion the terms for the Treaty of Paris in December, but they were based on the Naval War Board’s astute prosecution of the successful naval war and its suggestions for the new acquisitions. Although military advisers were conspicuously present, most notably Secretary of the Army Russell A. Alger, Major General Nelson A. Miles, and later Brigadier General Henry C. Corbin, I contend that it was the Naval War Board, for the most part, that dictated policy for the overall strategy, major operations, and even minor logistical issues. As we shall see, there was even an outcry from the officer ranks and the public against the Board as the first and primary mover.

⁸ Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982), 59 and 67–68.

A short-lived Army-Navy Board, composed of Major Arthur L. Wagner, the head of the Military Information Division, the United State's Army's intelligence service, and Captain Albert S. Barker, Long's aide-de-camp was created in early March to generate the final war plan for the West Indies.⁹ The Spanish fleet and Havana were the prime targets. It was thought that an operation by the navy and army would quickly knock out the capital and the invading vessels and bring a speedy termination to any hostilities by the moribund Spanish Empire.

The Naval War Board, which first made its appearance that same month, was summoned to action to formulate naval strategy for the impending hostilities and use the plan of Barker and Wagner as a guide in the West Indies. After some initial personnel shuffling, that included Barker, who wanted a command, Roosevelt, first chairman, and a few more men, it was finally composed of the president Rear Admiral Montgomery Sicard, Commodore Arent. S. Crowninshield, and Captain Alfred T. Mahan. Documentary evidence from the time is fragmentary regarding exactly when these boards were established, yet the Army-Navy Board was dissolved shortly after the Naval War Board went into session.¹⁰ Letters from Roosevelt to Long indicate that in early April the Home Strategy Board (or Strategy Board), which the Naval War Board was also called, was actively making arrangements and preparations for war.¹¹ The official start of this board, however, is ambiguously dated by the Navy Department as being at the beginning of May. It was guardedly stated that it was "the outgrowth of an informal advisory board which had existed for some time."¹² The *Appendix to the Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation* of 1898 insists that the Naval War Board "throughout the war acted as an advisory board," a view seconded by scholars who have studied the conflict.¹³

⁹ See Albert S. Barker and Arthur L. Wagner to Russell A. Alger, 4 April 1898, "Pre-War Planning," NHHC: SAW.

¹⁰ Without the requisite documentation, Grenville and Young, in *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy* on page 280 claimed that the Naval War Board was established on 23 March 1898.

¹¹ See: Roosevelt to John D. Long, 11 April 1898, "Pre-War Planning," NHHC: SAW.

¹² *Annual Reports of the Navy Department for the Year 1898: Appendix to the Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1898), 33 (hereinafter cited as: *Appendix*).

¹³ *Ibid.*

David F. Trask, for instance, in his benchmark work *The War with Spain*, asserts that the War Board “served simply as an advisory body to the Secretary of the Navy. It had no executive authority, although it undertook certain administrative duties ... it did not decide the movements of any force at sea.”¹⁴

Robert Seager in his biography of Mahan comes closer to the truth when he asserts that the Naval War Board was “the body within the department ostensibly entrusted with the overall planning of naval operations” and rendered a few specific “practical decisions.”¹⁵

In *Admirals of American Empire*, Richard S. West, Jr. writes that Long relied on the advice of the Naval War Board members and that its “real power had lain in the Secretary’s very real dependence upon their advice,” yet that “of literal military responsibility it had little.”¹⁶ West relies solely on Long’s nationally published letter of 21 August that was read at its final session. “The three officers, I cannot ... forbear to express to you,” Long exclaimed to Admiral Sicard

and your associates ... the very high appreciation which the Department has of the services it has rendered since the war began. That its members have been faithful and diligent in the highest measure goes without saying, for they are animated by the high professional spirit which distinguishes the Navy and which they have themselves done much to stimulate and maintain.

But from my personal knowledge and observation I desire to add to this, that equally marked have been the intelligence, the wise judgment, the comprehensive forethought and the unfailing competency to every exigency and action which have distinguished their deliberation and action. May it not be said that not one error has been made. Proper control of the Department has been exercised over all movements in the field, and yet at the same time commanding officers have been duly left to exercise discretion and have never been hampered in their works. I do not know how your work as member[s] of that important Board could

¹⁴ David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 88.

¹⁵ Robert Seager, II and Doris D. Maguire, *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan: 1890–1901*, vol. 2, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 369, 371.

¹⁶ Richard S. West, Jr., *Admirals of American Empire: The Combined Story of George Dewey, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Winfield Scott Schley, and William Thomas Sampson* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1948), 221.

have been better done or where in the arena of the war you could have rendered better service or deserved more honor.¹⁷

These words are revealing, yet this historian did not engage in further investigation. Nowhere in the text or in the annotation do we see evidence that West had consulted primary documents.

John A.S. Grenville and George B. Young, in *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy* ambiguously state that the “coordination of war planning had been placed in the hands of the Office of the Naval War Board ... During the greater part of the war, [the] three officers ... advised the Secretary of the Navy on questions of strategy.”¹⁸

Standard books about the three-month war also add to the confusion. It is assumed that Secretary of the Navy Long was the head and heart of the naval operations during the war. Albert A. Nofi, in one of many attributions to Long in *The Spanish-American War: 1898*, a more than acceptable pop history, writes that

On 18 June Secretary Long instructed Admiral Sampson that, “in the event of Cadiz division passing Suez” he was to form an “Eastern Squadron,” consisting of three of his best and heaviest battleships [and other vessels] ... for a raid against the coast of Spain, in the belief that such an attack would prompt the Spanish to recall [the commander-in-chief Admiral] Camara.¹⁹

These orders, however, originated from the Naval War Board. They read, in part:

Keep the “*Iowa*,” the “*Oregon*” and the “*Brooklyn*” full of coal and ammunition, as they may be sent to coast of Spain in the event of Cadiz division passing Suez. Auxiliaries “*Harvard*,” “*Yale*,” “*Yosemite*,” “*Dixie*,” destined same service.²⁰

Even French E. Chadwick, a key player and a naval officer, in his two-volume *The Relations of the United States and Spain*, in a

¹⁷ *New York Tribune*, 24 August 1898.

¹⁸ Grenville and Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy*, 280, 291.

¹⁹ Albert A. Nofi, *The Spanish-American War: 1898* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1996), 66.

²⁰ Long to William T. Sampson, 18 June 1898, “Naval War Board,” NHHC: SAW.

vainglorious attempt at magisterial scholarship ascribes as received from the pen of Long crucial orders that were placed in force for the entire duration of the war. In another order regarding the formation of the Eastern Squadron, the rear admiral cites the secretary of the navy as the author. Long insisted that Sampson be apprised that

Though Admiral Camara has returned from the Suez Canal to Spain, the department still intends to send a re-enforcing squadron to Manila; and as Camara's force, when united with other armored ships, now presumably disposable in Spanish waters, would be, on paper, stronger than the squadron proposed to be sent to the East Indies, it has been decided to send with the latter a covering squadron strong enough to guarantee against the possible efforts of all such armored ships of the Spanish navy as may now be in condition for cruising in the straits of Gibraltar, and to hold any such force as Spain may collect, blockaded in its own ports until our squadron for the East is well on its way.²¹

Again, these orders, so meticulously transcribed by Chadwick, were initially issued by the Naval War Board.²²

Crowninshield, Mahan, and the Naval War Board were never mentioned in Chadwick's two-volume history. Sicard, however, was cited once as being present at the White House in early May to discuss campaign plans.²³

Trask, in *The War with Spain*, a serious study by a historian for whom I have the utmost respect, also assumed that orders were primarily conceived by Long. While Sampson had his doubts about deploying vessels from his fleet so that the Eastern Squadron could be formed, Trask writes that when

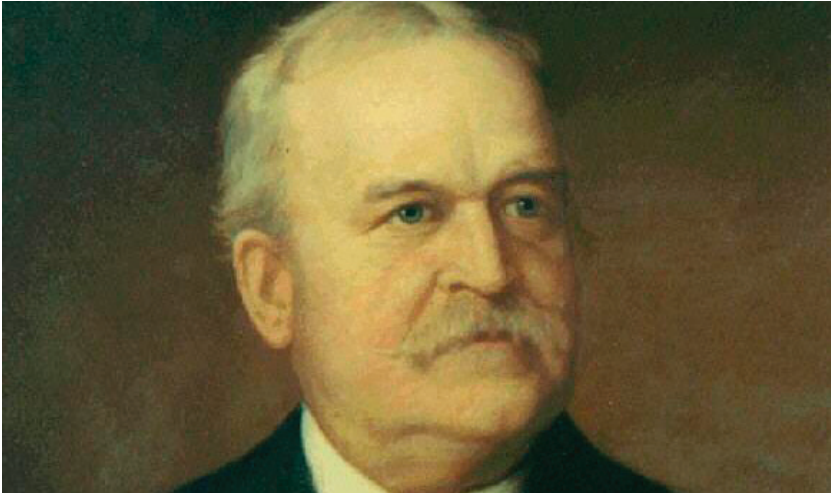
Sampson seemed to hesitate, Long cabled once more, on July 1: "The prospective advance of Camara to the east makes it much to be desired Watson's squadron should commence to move. ... The Department does not wish to weaken you, but diversion favorable for Dewey by operations positive is necessary."²⁴

²¹ French E. Chadwick, *The Relations of the United States and Spain: The Spanish-American War*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 281.

²² Long to Sampson, 15 July 1898, "Naval War Board," NHC: SAW.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Trask, *War with Spain*, 275.



Secretary of the Navy John D. Long. [Naval History and Heritage Command, Dept. of the Navy, Washington, DC; NH 54774-KN]

And yet again, these orders, transcribed by Trask, which should have had the correct wording as “positive operations,” originated not with Long, who merely acted as a conduit, but with the Naval War Board.²⁵ Officially, and for public consumption, a cursory remark in the *Appendix* pointed out that the Naval War Board “prepared for [Long’s] consideration and signature orders affecting ... [strategic] policy.”²⁶

I take issue with these interpretations or their nature of historical inquiry. I suggest that the Naval War Board was the primary (but not the entire) decision-making body for the overall strategic plans of the Spanish-American War and most assuredly for all naval plans and orders. I contend that they emanated from Sicard, Crowninshield, and Mahan—assuredly not from Long.

I also believe that it amassed great power and, in fact, initiated and contributed the most input for naval and military operations, diplomatic efforts, and even coastal defense. In almost constant session, both day and night, these three men took the role occupied by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in today’s military—and more. Sicard, Crowninshield, and Mahan, after all, regularly had the tuned ear of McKinley and the near-deaf ear of Long, and spoke with all the

²⁵ Montgomery Sicard to Long and Long to Sampson, 1 July 1898, “Naval War Board,” NHHC: SAW,

²⁶ *Appendix*, 33.

authority and pomp of Sousa's band. Once a campaign plan decision had to be made, such as with Dewey's commanding control of Manila Bay or the presence of Cervera's squadron in Santiago de Cuba Harbor, the army had to follow in its wake, only taking control of its forces when a landing had been effected, or as my colleague Dr. Dennis Conrad has correctly asserted, altered some operations *sub rosa*.²⁷ Both Generals Miles, who did contribute to strategic operations, nonetheless, raged at the White House and made himself *persona non grata*, and General Shafter in the field, who could be characterised as the second Cunctator, resented the army playing second fiddle. The army, furthermore did not muster a similar board, nor did it have a general staff. These gentlemen, however, were singularly unaware that their instrument was ineffective for want of strings—and they sorely lacked pluck.²⁸

The most striking proof that we have of the Board's paramount influence is a recent discovery. I have determined that what have been called memoranda, and there were myriads of them, were drawn up by the Naval War Board on its official stationery for Secretary Long. They were issued without alteration as orders under the latter's name. These memoranda would cover a wide spectrum—from minutiae, such as sending a collier to re-coal a ship, to a major operational plan.

The usual format would politely begin with the words that: "The Board recommends that the following telegram be sent to Admiral Dewey" or "Admiral Sampson," and so forth. It was signed by Admiral Sicard, the president of the Naval Board, and followed by the "request" and Long's signature.

Here follows one example of a Naval War Board memorandum of 23 June to Long that relates to logistics in the Pacific:

The *Monadnock* which sailed from San Francisco the 25th inst.,

²⁷ Dennis M. Conrad, "Joint Operations in Cuba and Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War." An unpublished speech given on 17 September 2015 at the McMullen Symposium, US Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD.

²⁸ In a letter to his father Major General Henry C. Corbin, Rutherford describes this field commander: "Poor old Shafter; Everyone is roasting him because he spent his time lying on his back in the rear, having his head rubbed, which isn't my idea of what a commander should do. He is not the man for the job and the entire army will be relieved when his successor comes," 7 July 1898, DLC-MSS, Papers of Henry C. Corbin, Box 1.

accompanied by the Collier *Nero*, was ordered to make all the sea speed safely possible, and stops as short as possible, and to make the best of her way to a point six hundred nautical miles east true from Cape Engano, and thence to run west true until up with the Cape. If she has then received from you no message of the contrary, she is to run for Manila. This arrangement enables you to meet the *Monadnock* or to send a message to her within 600 miles of Cape Engano, should you so desire. Furthermore, Gen. Merritt's third division of transports, which probably sails from San Francisco with about 4000 troops this afternoon is not convoyed, but has been advised to make and run the 600 miles east and west line, as described for the *Monadnock*.²⁹

And here follows the secretary of the navy's message to Dewey:

The *Monadnock* sailed June 25 from San Francisco, accompanied by collier *Nero*. Was ordered to proceed at utmost speed safely possible, and stops as short as possible, and to make best of way to a point 600 nautical miles east true from Cape Engano, and thence to run to the west true until up with to Cape Engano. If then she has not received from you a message to the contrary, she will proceed at once to Manila. This enables you to meet the *Monadnock* or to send a message to her within 600 miles of Cape Engano, if you desire to do so. Furthermore, Gen. Merritt's third division of transports will leave about June 27 from San Francisco with about 4,000 men and not convoyed, but he has been advised to make and to sail the 600 knots east and west line as described for the *Monadnock*.³⁰

Given Long's scholarly background, he may or may not have edited this missive himself.

For a major strategic decision a memorandum dated 25 May, slated for Commodore Winfield S. Schley, should be of interest:

All Department's information indicates Spanish Division is still in Santiago. The Department looks to you to ascertain the fact, and that the enemy, if therein, do not get out without a decisive action. Cubans familiar with Santiago say there are landing places five or six miles west

²⁹ Sicard to Long, 27 June 1898, National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter cited as DNA), RG 45, Entry 372.

³⁰ *Appendix*, 108.

of the harbor mouth, and that there insurgents will probably be found, and no Spaniards. From the height about the town all vessels lying in the bay can be seen. As soon you ascertain, inform the Department whether the enemy is there or not. Could not vessels coal to leeward of Cape Cruz[?]³¹

And here is the direct order signed by Long and sent to *Harvard* on the same day to be relayed to Schley:

Proceed at once and inform Schley, and also the senior officers present off Santiago, as follows: All Department's information indicates Spanish division is still at Santiago. The Department looks to you to ascertain facts, and that the enemy, if therein, does not leave without a decisive action. Cubans familiar with Santiago say that there are landing places 5 or 6 nautical miles west from the mouth of the harbor, and that there insurgents probably will be found, and not the Spanish. From the surrounding heights [you] can see every vessel in port. As soon as ascertained, notify the Department whether enemy is there. Could not squadron and also the *Harvard* coal from Merrimac leeward of Cape Cruz, Gonaives Channel or Mole, Haiti? The Department will send coal immediately to Mole. Report without delay situation at Santiago de Cuba.³²

These are almost identical in content with the final embellished orders, and so are numerous others.³³

The National Archives and Records Administration also contain a number of seemingly untapped documents. Separate memoranda were not used, but Board notes were affixed with a pin to Long's orders, be they of a minor logistical character or a major operational plan. One note, dated 3 August, politely makes a suggestion for the Eastern and Converging Squadrons that they should steam to Spanish waters. It starts in a similar manner as the other documents:

The Board recommends that the appended letter be sent to Admiral Sampson. Very respectfully, M. Sicard. Rear Adml. Pres. of the board.

³¹ Sicard to Long, 25 May 1898, DNA, RG 45, Entry 372.

³² *Appendix*, 395.

³³ For more examples, see: Sicard to Long, 17 June 1898; Sicard to Long, 18 June 1898; and Sicard to Long, 1 July 1898, "Naval War Board," NHHC: SAW.

It states that:

Though a speed of ten knots per hour was used in estimating the amount of coal that would be required for the service contemplated, the Department does not enjoin upon either squadron that particular rate, but expects that such speed will be usually made as seem proper for the service in view, having due regard to economy of coal, wear and tear on machinery, boilers, et cetera.³⁴

The order was indeed sent to Sampson with Long's signature on the same date. It details a projected logistical problem that could have been addressed at the command level rather than at the apex of the Navy Department.

Another pinned note dated one day later begins in the usual respectful manner:

The Board recommends that the appended letter be sent to Commo. John A. Howell. Very respectfully, M. Sicard. Rear Adml. Pres. of the board.

Again, the order was indeed sent to Sampson with Long's signature on the same date, but its contents are significant. It reads in part:

When Acting Rear Admiral Sampson sails with the fleet that is to cross the Atlantic, you will receive an order constituting you Commander-in-Chief of the North Atlantic Squadron, during his absence. This places under your general supervision and direction all operations in Cuba, including the blockade of both the north and south coasts, and also the operations in Porto Rico; with authority, of course, to commit such special portions thereof as you may think best to the immediate control of other officers under your command, and in view of this probable temporary change of Commander-in-Chief, the following observations are made.³⁵

Additional "observations" by Long in this directive, that of course originated from the Naval War Board, look as if they are tantamount to orders. They include the scope of the northern and southern blockades, the disposition of colliers, a closer focus on Havana, maintenance of a blockade of Puerto Rico, the use of light draft

³⁴ Sicard to Long and Long to Sampson, 3 August 1898, DNA, RG 45, Entry 464.

³⁵ Sicard to Long and Long to John A. Howell, 4 August 1898, DNA, RG 45, Entry 464.



Rear Admiral Montgomery Sicard. [Naval History and Heritage Command, Dept. of the Navy, Washington, DC; NH 45388]

vessels, and orders for Schley.³⁶ In the concluding paragraph, Long, in an apologetic mood writes, especially in reference to the latter, that this “arrangement is not intended to restrict your command of the station.” There are also additional lengthy and detailed operational plans in this cache of documents.

The Naval War Board also kept personnel busy in the State Department, American ambassadors, general consuls, and consuls around the world before and during the hostilities. It would issue numerous and varied suggestions pertaining to logistics, spying activity, prisoner exchange, and others. Long in turn would write a request to the secretary of state, for the most part William R. Day, who would then issue these orders to the targeted localities or to all represented points. A pre-typed blank letter for Long to sign followed a recommendation from the Board to send it to Secretary of State Day:

I have the honor to request that your department will impress upon its offices the prime duty and necessity of collecting and forwarding to your department promptly, all reliable information they are able to collect regarding the movements and plans of the Spanish ships and troops in their neighborhood, and that such information, as soon as received, shall be furnished to this department.

³⁶ Ibid.

It is thought to be very essential to the service that these officers should be active and vigorous in collecting and transmitting immediately information as above suggested.

It is also suggested, that if it meets your views, a fund might be placed at their disposal to aid them in obtaining information.³⁷

Record Group 59 at the National Archives and Records Administration contains a copy of this letter with Longs' signature, a State Department stamp dated 7 May and a notation that it was acknowledged five days later.³⁸ Numerous letters of thanks from Long for helpful information, reconnaissance, assistance in purchasing vessels overseas, and reports from consuls also grace this document collection. Some of Longs' letters unashamedly begin with the words: "the Naval War Board recommends."

The Board was mustered into the service of the Navy Department and the country by the preparations for and the exigencies of the Spanish-American War. From its inception Secretary of the Navy Long veiled its existence with an aura of secrecy. His letters indicate that it was unofficial in nature, and after all, Congress never legally recognised its existence. A newspaper article reports that

When Secretary Long left the Department this afternoon, after an exceptionally busy day ... [he] paid a handsome tribute to the War Board and said that there was no purpose whatever of changing the present system, where by this Board co-operates with him in giving every possible assistance and advice, mainly in the way of information to the admirals in command. The office of the War Board, the Secretary said, was not to fight battles; that was exclusively the province of the squadron commanders. The Board acted in merely in an advisory way, and at no time had assumed executive functions.³⁹

Numerous other articles of this nature appeared in the American press throughout the duration of the war, also mentioning the many conferences of the Board at the White House, the midnight sessions, and short biographies of the members.

³⁷ Sicard to Long and Long to William R. Day, 5 May 1898, DNA, RG 45, Entry 372.

³⁸ Long to Day, 6 May 1898, DNA, RG 59, M179.

³⁹ *New York Tribune*, 24 May 1898.

A 1903 *Scribner's* article by Mahan entitled "The United States Navy Department" was subsequently incorporated five years later in the book *Naval Administration and Warfare*. Mahan seconds Long's insistence on the nature of the Board, and stresses that:

During the Spanish war an *ex tempore* board was constituted to give purely military advice upon the strategic movements of the fleet. It had no powers and, therefore, no responsibility for expert advice given; all orders were the Secretary's own.⁴⁰

Another book by Mahan, the *Lessons of the War with Spain*, was first published in 1899. It contains a series of *McClure's Magazine* articles that first appeared, for the most part, that same year. Nowhere is the Naval War Board mentioned, only that the navy department issued orders and received information.⁴¹

In 1906 Admiral George Dewey officially requested that Mahan write a report about the Board. In this rather lengthy endeavour the retired captain wrote that:

Captain Crowninshield being Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, points also to the conclusion that, as originally constituted, the Board was simply a meeting of the officers whose other particular duties indicated them to be the proper persons for fruitful consultation, and for coordination of the many and speedy steps which had to be taken, outside and above Bureau action, in the pressing preparation for war. As such steps would need the Secretary's sanction, in whatever way given, the Board fell naturally into the position of an advisory body; to which function, as far as my observation went, it was limited throughout its existence.

This function of advice constituted the relation of the Board to the administration of the Navy Department throughout my acquaintance with it; and from my communications with President Roosevelt, ex-Secretary Long, and Rear Admirals Barker and Crowninshield, I gather

⁴⁰ Alfred T. Mahan, "The United States Navy Department," *Naval Administration and Warfare: Some General Principles with Other Essays* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1908), 64-65.

⁴¹ Alfred T. Mahan, *Lessons of the War with Spain and other Articles* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1900).



Arent S. Crowninshield, Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. [Naval History and Heritage Command, Dept. of the Navy, Washington, DC; NH 51738]

that, although perhaps never formally stated in orders, such was its office from the beginning. It possessed neither original nor executive powers.⁴²

Later on Mahan did give an interesting clue that supports my contention. In frustration, because he wanted a single commander, he stated that

It is obvious, and notorious, that such a body as the War Board, irresponsible, because without authority, yet possibly influential, behind the Secretary, occupies a somewhat invidious position; and that its relations to Commanders-in-Chief, though indirect, are real and extremely delicate.⁴³

Yet scholars have only one official and public reference to the Naval War Board apart from that cursory mention in the *Appendix* on page 33. Apparently, the Board asserted some control over protection of the Atlantic and Gulf shorelines through the Coastal Signal Service. In the House of Representatives Document No. 500 regarding an attempt to prohibit publication of US coastal plans, a letter from Secretary of War Russell A. Alger expressed his concern and cited a 3 March note from Long that it should be referred “to the

⁴² Alfred T. Mahan, “The Work of the Naval War Board of 1898: A Report to the General Board of the Navy,” 29 October 1906, Papers of Alfred T. Mahan, DLC-MSS. For an annotated version, see: “Naval War Board,” NHHHC: SAW.

⁴³ Ibid.

Naval War Board for consideration.” Then follows an endorsement dated 9 March from Sicard, the president of the Naval War Board that is referred back to Alger through Long:

Respectfully returned to the Secretary of the Navy.

It would seem that the publication and exposing for sale of views of the navy-yards, fortifications, new ships, and other Government structures for military or naval use should be forbidden by law during the war.⁴⁴

Yet although the Board existed in an almost *ex facto* fashion, but assuredly not in a *de jure* manner, it was there, but not there, nevertheless, it still dominated the Spanish-American War to a great extent.

This phantom body apparently irked the public and the press from coast to coast. An article of 25 May in the *Washington Post* article, “Functions of War Board: Secretary Long Says Its Main Business Is to Furnish Information,” declares that

There appears to be a great misconception on the part of the public and the newspapers as to the nature of this naval board, its composition, functions and manner of work. According to the popular mind this board sits in the Navy Department and with autocratic orders directs the movements of fleets and the execution of plans of campaigns down to the very smallest details. This conception has led to a good deal of comment, some humorous and some serious, at the expense of the board, and the idea had even spread to Europe.⁴⁵

It seems that many naval officers, such as Rear Admiral George E. Belknap, were somewhat disenchanted with the Board, and although he knew that it was inharmonious to criticise the navy, especially during hostilities, he claimed that the members had no fighting experience, and that

⁴⁴ *Publication of Plans of United States Coast Defenses*, “Letter from Secretary of War, Transmitting a Letter from Commander C.H. Rockwell for Consideration in Connection with House Bill 9553, an Act to Prohibit the Publication of Plans of Coast Defenses of the United States,” 55th Congress, 2d session, HR Document No. 500, Library of Congress, Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room.

⁴⁵ *Washington Post*, 25 May 1898.

Fancy Dewey, brave, able and a splendid seaman and brilliant commander, who, if the reports of this forenoon are true, has won one of the most unique, complete and signal naval battles of the century, taking advice on professional lines from a mere writer of books like Mahan! It is utterly absurd. Mahan is an accomplished and forceful writer, but there is no Farragut or Dewey sea genius in his makeup.⁴⁶

One newspaper even claimed that: “naval officers are of the opinion that Admiral Dewey cut the cable to prevent the board from harassing him with petty and detailed orders.”⁴⁷

A further glimpse can be found in the *Army and Navy Journal*:

The present emergency seems to have brought into existence a new branch of the government of the Navy, which is called the “Strategy Board.” Just what its functions are, or under what law or regulation it exists, is not clear, but its activity is certainly great. Experience is certainly not in favor of the efficiency of such an organization in emergencies when everything depends on prompt decision and vigorous action.

If the commanders of the fleets on the spot are not competent to direct their own campaigns, it is proper to supersede them; if they are, the less officious meddling with them done by the “Strategy” or any other Board or Boards in Washington, the more likely they will be to achieve success. We had some disastrous experience with the old Navy Board of sixty years ago, or so, and thankfully got rid of it.⁴⁸

A revealing poem a few pages later chants:

Tell me not in mournful numbers
That our Navy cannot fight;
We have whipped two loads of lumber,
And we did it in one night.
This ‘ere row is run on genius,
Brains we counts on, not on swords;
So we grabbed that lumber, sonny,

⁴⁶ *New York Tribune*, 9 May 1898.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, 5 May 1898.

⁴⁸ *Army and Navy Journal*, 30 April 1898.

For to make Strategic Boards.⁴⁹

And to complicate matters, the three gentlemen who composed this august collegial body were not always on friendly terms. It took a majority of two to send the memoranda and orders to Secretary Long. One document that was signed by Sicard also had a concurrence by Crowninshield—not Mahan.⁵⁰ Although the Board members were at times contentious, especially Mahan, who was depicted by Long as having gone on rampages even in the White House, it proved to be effective, and as cogently pointed out by Dr. González with the help of poor Spanish decision making.⁵¹

Captain Mahan harbored an incessant distaste for the Naval War Board, and made his intentions known, despite his constant presence. He rigidly adhered to what he considered to be objective historical principles and claimed to approach any issue from a dispassionate stance. “Resting,” in his words, “as my opinion does, upon a wide study of military history, it is not liable to change, and at present it has the advantage of absolute impersonality.”⁵² He insisted as soon as he joined the Naval War Board that it should be abolished in favor of one commanding officer with a group of advisors. He wrote to Long that

The change suggested is from a Council of War, which the Board virtually is, with corporate responsibility and without individual responsibility, to the single, individual responsibility, which alone achieves results in war.⁵³

In an exchange of letters with his mentor Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce in August 1898, Mahan was even more rancorously emphatic about the Naval War Board, especially Sicard.

Sicard is a clear headed man for Bureau work, but very second or third rate for what we had to do—in my judgment; and the Secretary knows

⁴⁹ Ibid. The first stanza was quoted from the *New York Evening Telegram* and the second stanza was written by “P.B.” (presumably someone on the staff of the *Army and Navy Journal*).

⁵⁰ See: Sicard to Long, 18 July 1898, “Naval War Board,” NHHHC: SAW.

⁵¹ As quoted in Lawrence S. Mayo, *America of Yesterday as Reflected in the Diary of John D. Long* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1923), 194. The date of Long’s Journal Entry is 19 May 1898.

⁵² See: Mahan to Long, 10 May 1898, “Naval War Board,” NHHHC: SAW.

⁵³ Ibid.



The Naval War Board. [Robert Seager, II and Doris D. Maguire, eds., *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan*, Vol. 2 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1975)]

this, for I told him 20 several times ... As far as a Board is concerned, I don't believe in it at all; and less than ever since I served on [it] ... If I believed it would do good, I would feel bound to write; but I have written [and] talked and stormed for three months before the Board, the Secy, [and] the President, and I feel now very much like the teacher who after laborious explanations, receiv[es] from one of his boys one of those answers we see in the funny columns of a newspaper.⁵⁴

But the unfortunate fact that we have to grapple with is that the secretary of the navy was unsuited for command decision, nor even for the workings of his bureaucracy. In one of his journal entries he admits that he was not the best man for the job, so it would be propitious to leave the bureaus, yards, and ships in more capable hands.⁵⁵ He apparently suffered from a psychological affliction and quite frequently recused himself from work. The *Maine* disaster exacerbated his mental problems and increased his absences from the Navy Department, and he seemed more comfortable tending to minor office details. In his journal of 21 January, he wrote that "My sleep [is] utterly broken down and [I have] much nervous trouble."⁵⁶ He served,

⁵⁴ See: Mahan to Stephen B. Luce, 31 August 1898, "Naval War Board," NHHC: SAW.

⁵⁵ Mayo, *America of Yesterday*, 157. The date of Long's Journal Entry is 2 Feb. 1898.

⁵⁶ As quoted in Grenville and Long, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy*, 279.

in other words, as little more than a rubber stamp for the Board's decision-making before and during the Spanish-American War.

George B. Cortelyou, one of McKinley's secretaries, described his demeanor in the White House in mid-May of 1898:

Secretary Long moves along quietly. He is not so sure-footed as his friends would have us believe; he hesitates, questions too much, seems hampered by too great conservatism and oftentimes seems to be in the position of the surgeon who fails of the end desired in an operation through lack of "nerve" and decision at the critical moment.⁵⁷

Yet the Naval War Board, in spite of the vacuum created by Long and the endemic venom directed at it, did singularly contribute to the successful prosecution of a major war and also oversaw the creation of a geopolitical framework. A document written by Mahan in mid-August just after the peace protocol, called for the acquisition of eight coaling stations and naval bases for the new global American naval and commercial presence for the twentieth century. Its gist was succinctly stated:

It is obvious, however, that the United States does require coaling stations outside its own territory, from which coal can be freely and certainly obtained during war. Such stations therefore should now be obtained, and under such conditions, either of use or cession, as shall enable us to assure their safety and free use in time of war.⁵⁸

The report wisely refrained from suggesting any appreciable territorial aggrandisement, an object lesson learned from the mistakes of the European powers, and to avoid international friction.

My research indicates that the Naval War Board was the prototype for major administrative changes in the navy, and sparked innovations in the army as well.⁵⁹ American foreign policy for decades was also not untouched by its influence. This enigmatic group of men, nonetheless, is virtually unknown today, was probably the most important military moment in American history between the Civil War and World War

⁵⁷ Journal, 15 May 1898, Papers of George B. Cortelyou, Box 52, DLC-MSS.

⁵⁸ See: Sicard to Long, 13 August 1898, "Naval War Board," NHH: SAW.

⁵⁹ Grenville and Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy*, 297–336 and Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy: 1898–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 6–7.

I. Like Ludwig van Beethoven in classical music, it summed up the past, and foreshadowed the future for many years to come.



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