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Controlling the Big Stick: Theodore Roosevelt and the Cuban Crisis of 1906

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Theodore Roosevelt is unquestionably one of the giants of American political history. A veritable dynamo both in and out of office, Roosevelt was nothing less than a turn-of-the-century Renaissance man who combined a scholar's keen intellect with a rough-and-tumble spirit of adventure. As this Nation's twenty-sixth President, Roosevelt may be best remembered for developing his own "corollary" to James Monroe's famous doctrine of 1823 and then using American military muscle to bring its tenets to life. Not surprisingly, these exercises of Theodore Roosevelt's famous "big stick" most frequently involved the ships and men of the U.S. Navy. Indeed, Roosevelt was properly regarded as the father of the contemporary American fleet, and its officer corps undertook the role of hemispheric policeman with an eagerness matched only by its intense devotion to Roosevelt himself. In the main, this unusually close relarionship between the Chief Executive and his navy worked to the decided advantage of both. Nevertheless, there were exceptions to this rule. One of the most glaring of these anomalies concerned the U.S. intervention in Cuba in the fall of 1906. In that instance, the U.S. Navy was responsible for committing the Nation to a major military occupation of the island despite Roosevelt's strenuous efforts to prevent just such an occurrence. As such, the 1906 Cuban affair affords historians a rare glimpse of Theodore Roosevelt's navy working at cross-purposes to his own foreign policy objectives, of the Rough Rider's big stick swinging wildly out of control.

Roosevelt's intimate involvement in the day-to-day administration of his navy had become an institutional fact of life and a serious organizational problem by the year 1906. A recognized naval historian and ardent disciple of sea power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, this one-time Assistant Navy

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Secretary had carried his fascination with, and paternalistic devotion to, the service into the White House with him in 1901. Some 5 years later, there was simply no question that this was Theodore Roosevelt's navy, period. Consequently, Roosevelt effectively supplanted each of his appointed secretaries as the *de facto* head of the Navy Department. Moreover, this emasculation of the secretaryship was made all the more pronounced by Roosevelt's tendency to rotate appointees into and out of the position at an alarmingly rapid pace. While there was no doubt that the Navy itself benefited greatly from this arrangement, the situation carried with it an inherent danger: as an activist president, Roosevelt was inevitably limited in the amount of time which he could devote to the Navy. This had become apparent long before the fall of 1906. Mahan worried that "the Navy is now so big a thing as to demand the whole attention of a first class man for a full official term. No man can run it and the Presidency together."[1] Worse still, this potential leadership vacuum at the very top of the turn-of-the-century Navy's command hierarchy was exacerbated by the service's lack of a general staff (despite strenuous efforts by its officer corps to establish one), its internal fragmentation into a surprisingly contentious system of autonomous bureaus, and the poorly defined status of its highest ranking officer, Admiral of the Navy George Dewey. The net result of these organizational shortcomings was that operational initiative often fell to the Navy's commanders in the field. This was especially true in times of national crisis on distant stations. In the frequent absence of forceful direction from above, these relatively junior officers would be left to act in consonance with what they believed to be the best interests of the Navy and the Nation.

In carrying out their often ill-defined duties around the globe, the officers of the U.S. Navy would have to draw upon both their experience and their view of the 1906 world for guidance. Thus, the Fleet's leadership was likely to view most challenges through the triple lense of imperialism, national chauvinism, and social Darwinism, so in vogue at the time. Fired with the ambition to propel their nation into the ranks of the truly great powers, these officers collectively assumed an almost holy obligation to Christianize, civilize, and educate the more backward peoples of the Earth. Moreover, convinced that the world was every bit the teeming cauldron of conflict and violence pictured by Thomas Hobbes two and a half centuries earlier, the officers of the U.S. Navy had further come to the conclusion that it would truly require a (naval) Leviathan to prevent total chaos. Diplomacy might offer some utility, but only the application or threat of force could be certain to keep a necessary degree of order among the teeming masses of the globe. After all, it was Roosevelt himself who had told a Naval War College audience that "the diplomat is the servant, not the master of the soldier."[2] Understandably, the Rough Rider's fleet clearly expected to play a starring role in the exercise of his foreign policy.

Nowhere was the conviction that naval force existed as an imperialistic necessity more true than in the balmy waters of the Caribbean. There, a naval officer corps, which above all respected discipline and revered order, was disgusted by the constant pattern of political turmoil and social unrest which characterized the region. An indication of the depth of this collective disdain for the ability of America's southern neighbors to govern themselves is provided by Captain Charles Sperry's 1904 assertion that the various governments of the region were nothing more than "crews of bandits . . . not amenable to civilized opinion."[3] Still another officer spoke for virtually all of his contemporaries when he wondered "if the Latin American nations . . . ever stop to consider that the only reason they exist is because of the United States Navy."[4] This unabashedly chauvinistic attitude was both underscored and reinforced by a long history of American naval intervention in the region. Moreover, by the summer of 1906, the long-standing American commitment to maintain order in the Caribbean Basin had been given even greater urgency by the need to defend the isthmian canal then under construction, while denying other imperial powers (Germany being the most obvious and ominous threat) a foothold in the area.

Imperialism and political philosophy aside, the American naval officer corps was motivated by still another fat more parochial concern in the autumn of 1906. Since the late 19th century, an increasingly active and bitter debate over the propriety of having Marines assigned to the Navy's warships had been waged by the officers of the two services. For more than a decade, the Navy's standard-bearer in its campaign to rid the fleet of its Marine guard had been Commander William F. Fullam. A service intellectual and prolific author, Fullam never tired of championing the case against the Marines, earning him both the respect of his contemporaries and the enmity of Marine officers the world over. Fullam and company saw the Marines' presence afloat as an anachronistic insult to warship crews, while the Marines contended that they were far more effective as a ready landing force than the bluejackets could ever be. Fullam himself enjoyed the support and protection of the Navy's most senior officers and was thus able to advance his own career despite his continued presence at the eye of this bureaucratic storm. Significantly, at the time of the Cuban crisis the controversial officer was serving in command of the U.S.S. *Marietta*, a gunboat assigned the task of policing the waters of the Caribbean as part of the American West Indies Squadron. Like any number of his fellow naval officers, both in Washington and in the field, Fullam was anxious to flesh out the Navy's long-standing argument against the need for Marines with illustrative action. A sudden crisis in Cuba, therefore, might offer a perfect opportunity to demonstrate the ability of naval landing parties to project Ametican power ashore.

The immediate cause of the Cuban crisis of 1906 was the hotly contested Presidential election held on the island in December of the preceding year. Incumbent Tomás Estrada Palma won this political battle through some shady dealings, and the losing Liberal party (which had boycotted the polls) immediately called for Palma's resignation. By August the situation had degenerated to the point of armed uprising against the government. Palma, badly outgunned and rapidly losing the support of his people, soon asked for American military intervention under the auspices of the 1901 Platt amendment to the Cuban Constitution. In the meantime, the rebel forces had also embarked upon their own campaign to force American intervention, convinced that such a measure would ultimately lead to honest national elections which they would surely win. As a consequence, the rebels quickly made it a point to menace the lives and property of the sizable American community in Cuba, while the Palma government was equally calculating in its refusal to afford the Americans protection. Although much of the action taken by each side was little more than posturing intended to goad the United States into action, it was surprisingly successful. Indeed, on 8 September Roosevelt was confronted by an "absolutely confidential" telegram from the American Consul-General in Havana which announced that Palma had secretly informed him that the rebellion was out of control and that his government was "unable to protect life and property." Apparently, Palma was about to ask the Cuban Congress to request American intervention. In the interim, the wire continued, the United States should immediately dispatch two naval vessels (one to Havana and one to Cienfuegos) to keep the situation from degenerating into a bloodbath.[5] Clearly, there was no time to waste.

While Theodore Roosevelt was fully sensitive to the need for prompt American action in response to the troubles unfolding to the south, he was also determined to avoid military intervention at all costs. To begin with, a quick check with the Army's General Staff had led to a decidedly pessimistic report on what a pacification campaign in Cuba might look like. Mindful of the country's recent experience in occupying the island and painfully aware of the demands of a protracted guerilla war of the type still raging in the Philippines, the Army had concluded that a Cuban campaign would be a long and bloody affair requiring the employment of more troops than the Nation presently had available for duty.[6] Even more important, Roosevelt doubted the Nation's resolve to undertake the task. The American electorate had grown quite impatient and disillusioned with the guerilla war in the Philippines and an increasingly vocal anti-imperialist movement had begun to take hold in the land. These political opponents would surely seize upon an American occupation of Cuba as proof positive of the bankruptcy of the imperialist cause. The President was keenly aware of his vulnerability on this issue, writing to an acquaintance to say that "in Cuba, what I have dreaded

has come to pass." In fact, the onetime Rough Rider noted, "what I have been ardently hoping for has been, not that we should have to reduce Cuba to the position of the Philippines, but that the Philippines would make such progress that we could put them in the position of Cuba."[7] Now all of that appeared on the verge of ruin.

The emerging crisis in Cuba also threatened to reverse some spectacular foreign policy gains recently made by the Roosevelt administration. Concerned about Latin American fears regarding his own interventionist tendencies, Roosevelt had embarked that spring on a campaign intended to convince the Nation's hemispheric neighbors that the United States was not at all eager to become involved in their affairs. Secretary of State Elihu Root had been dispatched to address the Pan-American Conference held in Rio de Janeiro in July. There, the elder statesman thrilled Latin American leaders by announcing that the United States deemed "the independence and equal rights of the smallest and weakest member of the family of nations entitled to as much respect as those of the greatest empire."[8] That done, the American Secretary embarked upon an enormously successful tour of Latin American capitals. Thus could a delighted Theodore Roosevelt write his envoy on the eve of the Cuban crisis to say that Root's trip had "realized all and more than I had dared hope," and went on to express Roosevelt's feeling that the summer tour had marked "a permanent epoch in the relations of this country with the other American republics."[9] The prospect of having to land U.S. troops in the Caribbean could hardly have come at a more inopportune moment.

Though Theodore Roosevelt was intent upon avoiding military intervention in Cuba, he was nevertheless charged with protecting American lives and property in that land. Thus, while casting about for a course of action which might stave off the landing of American troops, the harried Chief Executive paused long enough to order his navy to dispatch two warships to the island "to protect American interests."[10] No more details about the Cuban situation nor guidance for the warship commanders were provided. Moreover, since the Navy Department never doubted that its officers would act in accordance with the Chief Executive's wishes, no more information was requested. After all, this action seemed like nothing so much as the windup for yet another swing of the Nation's big stick in Latin America. Consequently, the President's cryptic order received no embellishment on its way to the field. Indeed, William Fullam, on the gunboat *Marietta*, was directed to sail for Cienfuegos simply to "protect American interests," while Commander James Colwell's only instructions were to have his cruiser *Denver* "proceed to Havana without stopping at Key West."[11]

While the *Marietta* and the *Denver* were making their best speed for Cuban waters it eventually occurred to Roosevelt that he might want to make his Cuban policy clear. Thus, the President advised the State Department that "it would be out of the question for us to intervene at this time," while

spokesmen for his administration informed the press that "there would be no intervention by the United States unless the rebellion assumed the proportions of a general uprising."[12] At the Navy Department, reporters were similarly assured that the American warships were being dispatched merely to provide a safe haven for foreign nationals and would support neither side in the island's conflict.[13] None of this critical information was sent to the Navy's commanders in the field. Indeed, Colwell was later to lament that "I [did] not know the policy of my government with regard to Cuba."[14] Consequently, both he and Fullam would be forced to make key on-the-spot decisions based upon little more than their instincts, training, and experience as naval officers of the United States. The stage was set for the misadventure.

On the afternoon of 12 September the cruiser *Denver*, white hull gleaming and guns blazing in salute, made its grand arrival at the port of Havana. Once ashore, Commander Colwell was dismayed to discover that the American legation also had received no instructions with regard to the employment of his ship. Thus, eager to be of assistance but unsure of how to accomplish the task, Colwell launched into a series of meetings with local businessmen and reporters in an effort to understand the local situation. Additionally, the naval officer met twice with the Cuban President and received considerable advice from the several American diplomats present. The product of this diligent research was the determination by Colwell (a firm supporter of Fullam's campaign to use sailors for expeditions ashore) that his command should take an active role in the drama unfolding before him. Hence, before sunset on 13 September, the *Denver* landed 124 armed sailors and 3 field pieces. After marching through the troubled city, this contingent set up camp next to the Presidential palace while the *Denver* herself moved to the head of the street to cover the men with her guns. Few present in the city, watching the Stars and Stripes fluttering above the troops on Palma's front lawn, had any doubt as to which side the Americans were taking in the crisis. Within hours the rebels had approached the naval force to seek a truce and Colwell quickly found himself the key actor in midnight peace negotiations between the insurgents and an understandably intransigent Tomás Estrada Palma. In the meantime, American reporters on the island noted that, whatever the outcome of the ongoiug parley in the capital, the *Denver*'s sudden landing was "accepted . . . as evidence of [American] intervention" by Cubans and foreigners alike.[15]

Roosevelt was furious. After making sure the press understood that the White House had not ordered the Havana landing, the President blasted his Acting Secretary of State with a wire bluntly stating that he "had no business to direct the landing of those troops" and ordered them back to their ship at once.[16] From that point on, Roosevelt himself would decide when and how American fighting men would be employed on the island. That done, the

Chief Executive launched into a special meeting at his home in Oyster Bay with key Cabinet members in an effort to minimize the damage done.

In Havana, things were hardly looking up. When the Acting American Minister rushed to inform Colwell of the monstrous mistake they had made, the anxious diplomat was rebuffed by the naval officer. Indeed, even when the envoy showed Colwell the text of a belated Navy Department message directing the cruiser captain to "take no part in troubles at Cuba," Colwell dismissed the direction as being outdated and in ignorance of the situation. As for the landing itself, the naval officer was positive that "the results justified it."[17] Later, a reporter confirmed that the American Government was indeed eager to have Colwell's men return to their ship. Upon hearing this the ship's captain "expressed great astonishment and said he had received no such orders, adding that he believed the Navy Department had not deciphered his code message explaining the situation."[18] In short, Colwell was so convinced of the propriety of his action that he simply could not conceive of it meeting with anything other than the enthusiastic approval of his President. Only when still another unambiguous order to remove his men from the city was received did the American officer reluctantly direct his men to break camp and repair to the anchored *Denver*. There a disappointed and confused James Colwell told reporters that his men "will remain right here handy in case the need arises of landing a second time."[19]

Back at Oyster Bay, Roosevelt was finding it increasingly difficult to manage this sudden Cuban crisis. On the one hand, he remained steadfast in his determination to avoid American intervention. However, now that American sailors had spent some 24 hours encamped on Cuban soil, that goal would be even more difficult to attain. Indeed, both sides in the conflict had seen the landing as proof positive that the Americans were willing to intervene in the island's troubles, while the sudden withdrawal of forces was similarly viewed as evidence that Palma's government was not going to be supported in its moment of need. From that point on, neither side was interested in compromise. The welcome prospect of American intervention simply loomed too large to make such an endeavor seem worthwhile. At the same time, Roosevelt had received yet another secret note from Cuba which claimed that only the immediate dispatch of several thousand American troops could prevent "a massacre of citizens in Havana."[20] Thus the onetime Rough Rider was placed in the unenviable position of having to take steps to launch a massive intervention should one prove necessary, while coincidentally sending a clear signal that the American Government earnestly hoped to avoid meddling in the crisis at all. To accomplish this delicate chore, Roosevelt chose a combined approach which saw the dispatch of a peace commission (composed of his Secretary of War and the Acting Secretary of State) while he mustered as many American warships and Marines in Cuban waters as was possible. The President even made a personal appeal to Palma to

see the crisis through without resorting to American intervention. Such a tack just might have succeeded, provided that American resolve to avoid intervention was communicated forcefully and unambiguously to the Cuban people.

Unfortunately for Roosevelt and his administration's Cuban crisis strategy, still another American naval officer was about to make his debut on the foreign policy stage. Even as the President and his aides were wrapping up their critical policy meeting in Oyster Bay, the U.S.S. *Marietta* was dropping anchor in Cuba's southern port of Cienfuegos. There, Commander William Fullam was at once confronted by disturbing news delivered to him by the local American consul and several distraught American businessmen. According to the warship's visitors, the rebels threatened several American plantations and stores in the area, and the Cuban Government's forces were powerless to protect them. If only Fullam would agree to sending a landing force ashore, they begged, disaster could be averted. Yet Fullam was in receipt of the same order which had been shown Colwell in Havana just a day before, the one which forbade him from taking a part in the Cuban "troubles." There was a codicil, however, which would permit action "in case of necessity or in accordance with the wishes of the American Minister."[21] Fullam, the lifelong advocate of using American sailors instead of marines for landing parties ashore, could hardly resist such a temptation, especially when it came in the form of a request from the one American diplomat in town. Best of all, the *Marietta*'s radio operator had informed his captain that he had intercepted messages referring to the landing of a force from the *Denver* in Havana.[22] Fullam was no fool. If an officer more than 50 numbers senior to him on the Navy list could get away with landing troops under the eye of the Acting Minister, then there could hardly be any objection to him doing the same in Cienfuegos. Thus Commander Fullam, the man who had written the Navy's *Landing Party Manual* just a year before (1905), ordered a party of 32 sailors and a rapid-fire gun ashore to protect the American-owned Soledad plantation just outside of town.

As word spread of Fullam's initial landing, more requests for the protection of American properties began to flood the gunboat. Within a day's time another 37 men with their own Colt guns had been placed ashore to confront the local rebel forces. As in Havana before, the American officers quickly found themselves involved in negotiations with the insurgents. The insurgents, in turn, rapidly found themselves to be the Americans' apparent opponents. For the second time in as many days, the U.S. Navy had become a force to be reckoned with in Cuban politics. Fullam made it clear that menacing his somewhat partisan force would be regarded as a hostile act against the American flag and one euphoric plantation manager even went so far as to inform a rebel leader that the *Marietta* sailors guarding his property were there "in obedience to orders received from the President of the United States."[23]

Not surprisingly, when word of the widening American presence on the southern coast reached Havana, the American legation promptly sent word that Fullam should not have landed his men. As incredulous as Colwell had been before him, Fullam (who was actively taking steps to ensure that the American people understood that bluejackets—and not marines—were doing the dirty work ashore in Cuba) wrote his executive officer to say that he was "glad that we did not wait, because I feel that we *did wright* (sic). We were sent here to protect American interests."[24] In fact, when a contingent of marines arrived on the old transport *Dixie* several days later, Fullam at once directed more than 200 of them to take up positions ashore. (In a fascinating show of his determination to prevent the Marine Corps from gaining the upper hand in the drama unfolding around him, Fullam stipulated that the Marine officers placed in charge of each of the detachments should be junior to the *Marietta*'s officers serving ashore.)[25] At the same time, Fullam made certain to petition influential local businessmen to have them write the State Department in praise of the naval officers' actions. This calculated step bought the *Marietta*'s skipper the reluctant approval of Roosevelt's already distracted administration and, unlike Colwell, Fullam ultimately was permitted to keep his armed conringent ashore.

On 19 September, Roosevelt's special peace commission arrived in the Cuban capital and immediately set to work attempting to resolve the crisis. Under the best of circumstances, this task would have been difficult. The American Navy, however, doomed the effort from the outset. Indeed, while Secretaries Taft and Bacon were trying to impress upon the Cuban people the reluctance with which the United States would intervene militarily, Commander Fullam was busy expanding his role in the south to include guarding British property and placing American guards on the trains of the Cuban Central Railroad. In Havana, a growing American fleet was making overt preparations for intervention (arrangements were being made to obtain railway transportation for a large landing force, supplies and ammunition were being stockpiled ashore, and a party of naval officers was busy scouting defensive positions in the city and surrounding countryside). Eventually, some 6 battleships, 7 cruisers, a gunboat, 2 auxiliaries, and more than 8,000 marines and sailors were poised for intervention in Cuban waters. Moreover, like the men of the *Marietta* and *Denver* earlier, this force plainly believed that military intervention in the Cuban crisis was both inevitable and proper, a sentiment which quickly found its way ashore. Small wonder, then, that the American commission was having trouble convincing Palma and his opponents to reach a compromise solution. Even so, the American emissaries managed to slog through more than a week of fruitless negotiations before the situation deteriorated completely.

On 28 September, Roosevelt's fragile bubble finally burst. Dejected and convinced that he had been betrayed by his powerful American ally, Tomás

Estrada Palma turned the contents of the Cuban national treasury over to the American peace commissioners and, at midnight, resigned his post. With Palma went the entire Cuban Government, leaving the threat of general anarchy heavy in the air. Taft, acting in obedience to worst-case instructions provided by Roosevelt, proclaimed himself provisional governor of the island and quietly landed the huge Marine force which had been waiting offshore. The landings were unopposed. In time, a 6,000-man American Army for Cuban Pacification would relieve the leathernecks in Cuba and occupy the island for more than 2 years.

For Theodore Roosevelt, his nightmare had become reality. Despite his most strenuous efforts to forestall such an action, the United States was embarked on a massive military intervention in Latin America. Once again the Cuban nation had been reduced to virtually colonial status. Fortunately, the undertaking proved to be bloodless, there was little political backlash, and by January of 1909 the Americans would turn over the reins of government to a peacefully elected Cuban President. Yet the fact remains that Roosevelt had not wanted to intervene in the first place. Instead, the American President had been forced into a Cuban occupation by a devoted Navy furiously working at cross-purposes with his administration's best diplomatic efforts.

Clearly, it was Roosevelt who bore the lion's share of the blame for this curious turn of events. By effectively acting as his own Navy Secretary, Roosevelt had robbed the service of a strong, attentive leader at the moment one was needed most. Instead, beset by the myriad duties of his office and further harried by the demands of the Cuban crisis itself, Roosevelt was only able to give the service enough direction to set it into motion. Unfortunately, by the time the Chief Executive realized that that motion was carrying the organization down the wrong path, the damage was done. Left to their own devices, the officers of the American Navy acted in perfect consonance with their professional upbringing, fully convinced that they were doing their president's bidding. Senior officers and department officials were loath to place themselves between the Chief Executive and the men in the field, and the latter were absolutely sure that they understood the tacit meaning of their dispatch to the island. One need only think of both James Colwell and William Fullam discounting urgent orders to withdraw their respective landing parties to sense the degree to which they believed in the propriety of their actions. After all, the Navy had performed this type of service countless times before. This time, however, the organization's benefactor and guide had chosen a different course for them to follow. Confused, the American Navy had paused momentarily, then lurched headlong in the direction with which it was most familiar, swiftly propelled by its own institutional inertia. From that point forward, the Nation's Navy was no longer serving the foreign policy needs of the United States of America. Intervention in Cuba was assured. Theodore Roosevelt's big stick had swung out of his control.

Notes

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13. "U.S. War Ship is Ordered to Cuba," *Washington Post*, 12 September 1906, p. 1.
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16. Morison, p. 409.
17. George Converse to *Denver/Marietta/Dixie*, 12 September, 1906, *Cipher Messages Sent*, pp. 484-486 and Colwell, p. 8.
18. "Colwell Gets Orders," *New York Times*, 14 September 1906, p. 1.
19. "Commander Colwell Statement," *Washington Evening Star*, 14 September 1906, p. 2.
20. U.S. Department of State, p. 476.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Fullam to Bureau of Navigation, 14 September 1906, Fullam Papers.
23. Hughes notice to rebels in the vicinity of Soledad Sugar Estate, 15 September 1906, Fullam Papers.
24. Fullam to Lieutenant Klemann, 16 September 1906, Fullam Papers.
25. Fullam to Holmes (U.S.S. *Dixie*), 18 September 1906, Fullam Papers.