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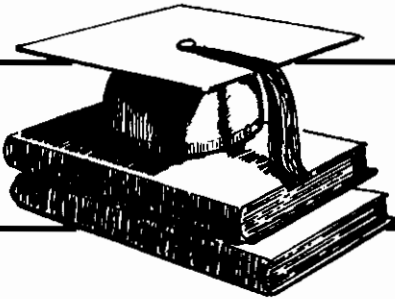
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PROFESSIONAL READING

REVIEW ARTICLE

MAHAN AND THEODORE ROOSEVELT: THE ASSESSMENT OF INFLUENCE*

by

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Assessments of American politics and international relations in the two decades around the turn of the century abound with words like confidence, rising power, and imperialism. After some of the unpleasant realities of being a world actor had been brought home to Americans by the 1960s and 1970s, many scholars, particularly revisionists who had reevaluated the cold war, turned their attention to the period in which the United States entered fully into the arena of international politics. With the new century, no longer was the country to engage in what the diplomatic historian Walter Weyl called "diplomacy de luxe" but rather the dynamism that had conquered and settled the North American continent (erroneously called the last frontier; much of South America and all of Siberia had yet to be settled) began to surge across the oceans. Spain, the last of the old world powers in the Americas, was expelled in 1898 and the United States began to acquire what some hoped and others feared was the beginning of an empire.

One of the most dramatic signals of

world stage was the cruise of the Great White Fleet from 1907 to 1909. Two names are most readily associated with that venture. They are, of course, the President, Theodore Roosevelt, and the apostle of seapower (indeed, the term is his coinage), Alfred Thayer Mahan. The rise of unabashed American imperialism has long been attributed to Theodore Roosevelt above all others in public life. The rise of 19th-century navalism, which provided the wherewithal for America's overseas activities, is properly ascribed primarily to the influence of Alfred Thayer Mahan. It seemed quite natural then, especially in view of explicit professions of the fact, to look to an influence of Mahan on Roosevelt, even as navalism influenced imperialism.

Throughout the first six decades of this century, historians have made just such an assessment of the influence of the naval thinker on the naval secretary who became a navalist president. Not only did the logic of events indicate this

*Peter Karsten, "The Nature of 'Influence': Roosevelt, Mahan and the Concept of Sea Power," *American Quarterly*, Autumn 1971.

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but Roosevelt himself, with his full praise of Mahan, also led historians and analysts to the same conclusion. A renewed look at the beginnings of American "imperialist" involvement, however, has led at least one writer to conclude, "Rather than continuing to argue that Mahan 'influenced' Roosevelt, it would be more meaningful and accurate to say that Roosevelt 'used' Mahan."¹

The question of who influenced whom when two contemporaries with essentially the same attitudes and beliefs are operating in the same general line of endeavor is usually to be decided in favor of some degree of reciprocity as in the case, say, of Haydn's and Mozart's string quartets. But in the case of Mahan and Roosevelt it can be shown, as this paper will essay, that in areas of naval and national strategy as opposed to naval operations and tactics, it was indeed Mahan who influenced Roosevelt. For many years the "standard" works on Mahan and Roosevelt have accepted the fact that Roosevelt's ideas on navies and seapower were shaped by the writings and personal influence of Mahan and have buttressed this idea with any number of quotations of Roosevelt praising the writings of Mahan. Biographies by Puleston,² Livezy,³ and O'Gara⁴ are chief sources of this idea, but more general works like the Sprouts' *The Rise of American Naval Power*,⁵ Barbara Tuchman's *The Proud Tower*,⁶ or Gabriel's *The Course of American Democratic Thought*⁷ have also drawn the inference from the sequence of Mahan's published writings and Roosevelt's public statements that the direction of influence was from Mahan to Roosevelt.

However, an article by Peter Karsten that looks specifically at the Mahan-Roosevelt relationship in terms of who influenced whom comes to a rather different conclusion.⁸ In his *The Naval Aristocracy*, Karsten views the navy of

Mahan's time as a cultural and political entity that had considerable influence on the thinking about international affairs by Americans. In his article, however, Karsten argues that the common analyses of the influence of Mahan are unsound because they do not take into account certain anomalies in the evidence. Several examples of qualified or guarded praise by Roosevelt are cited as proof. For example, Roosevelt comments that Mahan's second "Influence" book does not "contain any new ideas of first-rate importance."⁹ Karsten also points out that in his autobiography Roosevelt credits Mahan's writings with producing only "a slight change."¹⁰ In further assessment of the relationship Karsten notes the occasions when Mahan had to appeal to Roosevelt, among others, for help in getting himself out of difficulties his penchant for literary activities seems to have gotten him into. More importantly, though, it is argued that Roosevelt was already a naval historian himself and his history of the War of 1812¹¹ antedates Mahan's earliest work, *The Gulf and Inland Waters*, by a year and appeared 8 years before the book that was to make Mahan famous. Roosevelt was already a navalist when Mahan came along. To use a favorite phrase of Karsten's, "the ideas were in the air."¹²

Thus Karsten's conclusion, "Roosevelt 'used' Mahan."¹³ Karsten concedes that Mahan may have played "a part in the development of some of Roosevelt's ideas; it was *not* the lead part"¹⁴ (original emphasis).

I have summarized the burden of Karsten's article because it presents the case in chief for those who favor the idea that in matters of naval affairs and strategy or, for that matter, in international political outlook, Roosevelt was his own man and specifically not a disciple of Mahan. The most recent biographies of the two show the influence, in one case

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explicitly, of what can be characterized as the revisionist school of writing about these apostles of American imperialism. Edmund Morris' *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*¹⁵ accepts Karsten's viewpoint that the relationship between the two men is at least complex and Morris notes that "facts recently uncovered" (he means Karsten's article) suggest it was Roosevelt who influenced Mahan's thinking. Robert Seager's biography of Mahan¹⁶ does not treat the subject of Mahan's influence on Roosevelt explicitly, but it is clear that Seager regards Mahan as something of an oddity and makes only brief reference to Mahan's influence on worldwide naval thinking. The biography is, as Seager admits, based largely on the available letters of Mahan and aspires to be a "psychological" portrait. More of Seager's prejudice than Mahan's seem to be revealed.

The influence of Alfred T. Mahan's writings on most of the world's major industrial countries and their leaders seems undeniable. Even Karsten somewhat implicitly concedes this. Barbara Tuchman notes in *The Proud Tower* that even though Mahan was not physically present at the Second Hague Conference, his spirit was still one of the most powerful influences.¹⁷ How is it then that Mahan can be argued not to have been the significant influence on such a navalist president as Theodore Roosevelt? In fact, I would argue, Mahan did influence Roosevelt's thought on naval matters just as most writers on the two men have held. The evidence is strong that Mahan did so and Karsten's reinterpretation of available evidence—Morris' statement notwithstanding, there were no "recently discovered facts" in Karsten's article—more asserts than demonstrates the independence or precedence of Roosevelt's thought.

Essentially Karsten makes two points about the Roosevelt-Mahan relation-

ship in support of his thesis. One is that Roosevelt did, from time to time, show annoyance with Mahan or that he persistently "intermingled with each of the panegyric reviews of Mahan's works...seriously qualifying phrases."¹⁸ The second point is that Roosevelt had been, in his own right, a student of naval theory and global power politics long before Mahan began his writing career. Each man did in fact write a naval history of the War of 1812. Karsten feels this is an important point in evaluating the two men. One may agree and still come to a rather different conclusion about what the comparison shows.

Theodore Roosevelt had a lively, active mind that went well with his being a man of action. But for his constant championing and carrying out of the life of strenuous exertion, he might well have been an intellectual. He had a lifelong interest in things naval (two of his uncles had been Confederate naval officers) and it is not surprising that he should produce, as his first effort in adult life after college, a book on the naval war of 1812. Nor is it surprising that he should come to read others' books on naval subjects with an informed and critical mind. Thus qualifying phrases do appear "persistently" (if not frequently) in his reviews of Mahan's works. But they must be balanced against the overwhelming preponderance of laudatory remarks and whether or not they are "seriously qualifying" is a matter of judgment. Some examples may illustrate.¹⁹ On Mahan's first "Influence" work Roosevelt did offer the comment that Mahan "shows conclusively what many historians have felt." Mahan's historical writing was based entirely on secondary sources, on what historians had written, and presumably their feelings as well as their explicit words were what Mahan used to construct his thesis. To borrow what has been said of Darwin, Mahan saw what everyone had seen and

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thought what no one had thought. It is precisely the genius of Mahan's thought that he used available data, partially realized inferences, and avenues not previously fully explored to make his argument. Roosevelt did not and could not argue that Mahan's explicit theses were common currency.

Roosevelt, Karsten continues, comments that Mahan's second "Influence" book (*The Influence of Seapower on the French Revolution and Empire*, published in 1892) did not contain "any new idea of first-rate importance." This comment, too, can hardly be taken as a "serious qualification" when it is considered that this second work is really a continuation of the first. It did and was meant to provide further illustration of the ideas presented in the earlier work, as the author's preface notes. A more telling case against Mahan's influence can be made by turning to Roosevelt's autobiography, published in 1913. Here, to be sure, only one passing mention is made of Mahan but then the autobiography is the story of the actions, not ideas, of a man of action. In any event, when Karsten notes that Roosevelt credited Mahan's writings with producing only a "slight" change he does not tell us that Roosevelt is talking about Mahan's immediate influence on American public opinion and not at all on Roosevelt himself. It is clear from the bulk of Roosevelt's writings on the subject that he was both convinced of the rightness of Mahan's views and dismayed at the relative slowness of the American public to adopt them. A possible explanation for Roosevelt's impression is given below. If there is a case to be made against Mahan having influenced Roosevelt, the latter's "serious qualifications," as Karsten styles them, of praise for Mahan's works do not provide anything like convincing evidence.

Now to a fact that Karsten makes a great deal of, viz. that both Roosevelt

and Mahan wrote a history of naval actions in the War of 1812, and Roosevelt's had appeared 18 years earlier: Roosevelt's account is stirring and intensely patriotic (if somewhat embarrassingly racist and jingoist by today's standards). His purposes were, he says, to provide an important account of the actions and to draw lessons from the past as a guide to present naval policy.²⁰ As a historian Roosevelt bettered Mahan in one respect, for he did make greater use of primary source material, but he was also rather opinionated. For example, Thomas Jefferson was "perhaps the most incapable executive that ever filled the executive chair."²¹ Elsewhere he notes that the war's outcome was a humiliating defeat—for Britain.²² He credits privateers with being "of incalculable benefit to the United States" and causing "enormous damage to the foe."²³ Roosevelt drew, for him, the obvious conclusion that a larger navy would have accomplished a great deal more, but just what he does not say. It should not be inferred, however, that the main part of Roosevelt's book is analysis. The vast preponderance of text is given over to descriptions, in loving detail, of the practices and customs of seamanship and ship fights. Battles are recounted in volley-by-volley detail. It is quite technical and difficult for all but the most ardent lay enthusiast to follow. In short, Roosevelt's study had just that sort of technological orientation that Mahan strove so earnestly to overcome among his students at the Naval War College.²⁴

Mahan's work on the War of 1812 is primarily one of analysis and argumentation. Indeed, one might wish for a bit of Roosevelt's color and verve. The first 60 or so pages are a discussion and explication of British naval policy in the period covered by all three "influence" works (1660-1813). This is the most fully worked out exposition in Mahan's oeuvre of what is obviously for him

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almost an ideal of naval policy. Mahan's discussion then turns to the war itself and, in particular, he treats the material and moral results of the battles, much more so than did Roosevelt.

Mahan, of course, shared Roosevelt's conviction that a larger navy would have been of more use to the United States but, using essentially the same evidence, comes to quite different conclusions on several of the effects of the naval part of the war. First, Mahan disagrees with Roosevelt that the ship-to-ship duels on the high seas were decisive. Rather, he argues, these victories were delusory for they indicated a naval strength that did not exist at all.²⁵ Mahan argued that the privateers were not effective as an adjunct to American naval power.²⁶ They only served to draw strength away from the American Navy in competing for skilled seamen.²⁷ He specifically disputes the contention, held by Roosevelt among others, that privateering inflicted any substantial harm on British commerce. In the matter of warfare on the lakes Mahan differs with Roosevelt on the propriety of American strategy, the aim of British strategy, and so on. Mahan concludes that privateering, *guerre de course* in general, is usually an ineffective use of the resources available to build naval power. Finally, he raises a point not addressed at all by Roosevelt, i.e., the deterrent effect that even a small but respectable navy would have had when Britain was embroiled in continental wars (cf. Hamilton's *Federalist*, Number 11).

Though the two men use many of the same sources in their retelling of the war, the books have significant differences. Roosevelt's is mostly concerned with individual episodes, with setting the record straight on what he considers the anti-American bias of some British writers, and with demonstrating the idea that a larger navy would have been able "materially [to] affect the result of the war"

the War of 1812 must be seen in the context of his writings as one of a series demonstrating his philosophy of seapower and its relation to national greatness. Mahan is concerned with larger themes and works on a broader canvas than Roosevelt. Mahan's conclusion about the need for a stronger navy goes beyond Roosevelt's to assert that such a navy, as few as 20 ships of the line, would have deterred the war altogether.²⁹

The difference in purpose and level of sophistication in these two works is not surprising when one considers that Roosevelt began his work as an undergraduate at Harvard in 1880 (and finished it on his honeymoon) whereas Mahan's work appeared 15 years following publication of the book that had brought him world fame and after he had spent years in lecturing at the War College in Newport and in correspondence with the eminent historians and navalists of his day. What is surprising is that Karsten should wonder why Roosevelt then asked Mahan's permission to refer to the latter's study of the War of 1812 in the 1906 Presidential message to Congress.³⁰ In that message, Roosevelt told the Congress that for an illustration of what could happen to an America with insufficient naval power "nothing could be more instructive than a rational study of the War of 1812, as is told, for instance, by Captain Mahan."³¹ Curiously enough, Karsten overlooks what seems to be a rather solid support of his general thesis. In a letter to James Roche, Roosevelt notes that "I was as disappointed as you with Mahan's *War of 1812*. He is a curious fellow, for he cannot write in effective shape of the navy or of the fighting of his own country."³² This appears, at first glance, to be more than a serious qualification, but I find that Roosevelt's evaluation is in consonance with my own. What is objected to is not the quality or lightness of Mahan's work, but its

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appeal. The point of view is also consistent with Roosevelt's remark, given above, in his autobiography to the effect that Mahan's writings had made only a "slight change" in the public mind. With himself and other members of the government, it was a different story.

Karsten answers his own question on this account in terms of the two men agreeing to play roles, i.e., Roosevelt "the man of action" and Mahan "the man of thought." Moreover, Karsten notes, Mahan's reputation as an accomplished and recognized historian quite naturally elicited an attention that Roosevelt wished to make use of. While that idea may be true, it does not in any way account for the fact that Mahan's work is by far the superior analysis and, for that matter, a superior advocacy of a strong navy, especially for an informed audience. Roosevelt's motive need not be ascribed to any calculating and instrumental use of Mahan's reputation as a naval historian; his motive for using Mahan's work may be more readily attributed to the fact that Roosevelt, the sometime historian and part-time navalist, knew a more rigorous work when he saw it.

If there is a case to be made for Roosevelt being very much his own man in deciding about naval matters, it is in the area of technology and its application to the Navy. Mahan became involved in a dispute with then Lt. Cdr. W.S. Sims in 1905 about the types and calibers of guns to be included in the new American battleships being built just after the turn of the century. Mahan was less well grounded in technical matters than the scope of his writings would suggest. Unfortunately for him, he based the most important of his conclusions, viz., guns of several calibers were the optimum design, on some misinformed journalism coming out of the Russo-Japanese War.³³ Proponents of the all-big-gun battleship, led by Sims and backed by Roosevelt, won out.

Mahan's books, after his *War of 1812* were basically reeditings of earlier articles and lectures he had produced. This is the clearest case of Roosevelt's not being under the afflatus of Mahan and yet Karsten devotes only one paragraph to the matter, and that something of an afterthought.

If Mahan's lack of influence on Roosevelt on naval matters is to be shown, the proper method would be to make a parallel study of Mahan's writings and then Roosevelt's statements and writings, particularly after the latter began holding office as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. If, in view of their personal conversations and correspondence, most of which is rather well documented, it can be shown that Roosevelt's views tended to reflect those articulated and espoused by Mahan no more so than before, it would certainly be a reasonable inference that, by and large, Mahan had not influenced Roosevelt. This would be more persuasive evidence than the sort of statements Karsten and others make about Roosevelt's infrequently modified praise for Mahan. In fact the results of such a study are to be found in David H. Burton's *Theodore Roosevelt: Confident Imperialist*.³⁴ Burton emphasizes the point that "As interested as Roosevelt was in the lessons that naval history offered, he was more eager that these lessons be made intelligible to his fellow Americans."³⁵ While one need not go so far as Burton in saying that "Roosevelt came markedly under the spell cast by Captain Mahan,"³⁶ it is worth noting Burton's point that when Roosevelt, as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, wished to convince his superiors or friendly Congressmen of some matter or another of naval gospel, it was inevitably to Mahan that he turned for that rationale.

If Mahan was not *always* persuasive with Roosevelt in naval matters, particularly those in the area of technology, Mahan was a powerful

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influence on Roosevelt's thinking on the size and purposes of navies. Moreover, Mahan's writings went far beyond abstract considerations of naval and sea power and into the policies needed to sustain such power and, concomitantly, the policies that such power could sustain. In what was for the United States the relatively new area of overseas policymaking, one of the strong influences on the development of Roosevelt's thought was none other than the same Captain Mahan. Again, in this matter, as in the matter of navies generally, Roosevelt had strong tendencies formed in his earlier years. But again, his ideas and later his policies showed the effect of his having read the works of John Hay, W.W. Rockhill, Brooks Adams, and Alfred T. Mahan. At one point he wrote to Mahan, "I take your views [of Hawaiian acquisition] absolutely, as indeed I do on foreign policy generally."³⁷ Professor Burton traces this development of Roosevelt's thought on foreign affairs, particularly Far Eastern matters, to a number of sources but certainly one of these was Mahan's book *The Problem of Asia*.³⁸ In this work Mahan argues for the exclusion of Russian (one almost says Soviet) influence by some sort of an Anglo-American-Japanese alliance. This in fact is the policy that Roosevelt, not having elsewhere advocated it, sets out to construct on his accession to office. Howard K. Beale notes that "The concepts on which Roosevelt based his plans for action in the Far East are strangely like what Adams and Mahan wrote."³⁹ Mahan's writings on geopolitics did not confine themselves to the Far East. He was one of the first to recognize the value of an Isthmian canal to U.S. naval interests⁴⁰ and from this viewpoint there grew his recognition that Germany was in a position to prove a threat to American interests in the Caribbean. Beale notes that Roosevelt's awareness of Germany's being a natural economic rival, at least,

of the United States was helped by Mahan's writings on international trade and markets.⁴¹ Certainly the Germans saw this influence for Kaiser Wilhelm II styled Mahan, in 1898, as "our greatest and most dangerous foe."⁴² Several years later, in 1905, Roosevelt could write that Germany "respects the United States only insofar as it believes our navy is efficient."⁴³ This idea of the deterrent value of a navy is one of the arguments advanced in Mahan's *War of 1812* that had not been emphasized in the earlier works. If in March of 1906 Roosevelt felt this work was ineffective for the inspiration of the American people, he certainly made use of ideas when he went to Congress in December.

Theodore Roosevelt was a man of many parts but virtually all of his biographies describe him as a man of action. There were, of course, the early scholarly efforts and all his life he wrote reviews and articles for publication, but his primary activity was politics. He had a well-informed sense of the destiny and importance of the United States and clearly envisioned a permanent larger role for the country in world affairs long before he sent the Great White Fleet on its cruise in February 1907. Even earlier than his idea of a world role for the United States came his fascination for ships, navies, and the aura of the strenuous life of manliness and daring with which he is so identified.

One may contrast Roosevelt's change from budding scholar to public figure with that of Alfred Thayer Mahan—naval officer and Civil War veteran turned historian and geopolitical thinker. The two men were obviously in harmony on almost all areas of thought concerning the importance of a powerful navy to the United States and the importance of a powerful United States in world affairs. By far the greater study and more comprehensive working out of a theory or even a philosophy of naval power and national greatness was that of Mahan. When two men of

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7. R.H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ronald Press, 1956).
 8. Karsten.
 9. As cited in *ibid.*, p. 594.
 10. Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), p. 207.
 11. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812....* (New York: Putnam, 1883).
 12. Karsten, p. 600.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 598.
 15. Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, Geohegan and McCann, 1979), p. 574.
 16. Robert Seager II, *Alfred Thayer Mahan The Man and His Letters* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977).
 17. Tuchman, p. 331.
 18. Karsten, p. 593.
 19. Mahan's three "influence" books form a trilogy of exposition of his ideas on seapower and national greatness. Each covers a specific period but the overarching themes become progressively more sophisticated in their working out. The three works are: *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890); *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1892); *Sea Power in its Relation to the War of 1812* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905).
 20. Roosevelt, *The War of 1812*, p. xxviii.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 388.
 24. Seager, p. 160.
 25. Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relation to the War of 1812*, v. I, p. 296.
 26. *Ibid.*, v. II, p. 126.
 27. *Ibid.*, v. I, p. 398.
 28. Roosevelt, *The War of 1812*, p. 411.
 29. Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relation to the War of 1812*, v. I, pp. 74, 107.
 30. Karsten, p. 593 ff.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), v. 5, p. 173.
 33. Seager, pp. 525-526 ff.
 34. David H. Burton, *Theodore Roosevelt: Confident Imperialist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968).
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
 38. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Problem of Asia* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901).
 39. Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), p. 259.
 40. Holger Herwig, *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889-1941* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 27, 157.
 41. Beale, p. 177.
 42. Herwig, p. 69; Tuchman, p. 252.
 43. As cited in Beale, p. 256.
 44. Henry Cabot Lodge, ed., *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, 1884-1918* (New York: Scribners, 1925), pp. 174, 351, 472 ff.
 45. Morison, v. VIII, p. 861.
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