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Roots of Tragedy

J. K. Holloway

Lisle A. Rose

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Rickover also has some sharp words for the *Maine's* commander, Capt. Charles D. Sigsbee, whom Rickover calls brave but unfamiliar with his vessel. The 1911 board of inspection, which, according to Hansen and Price, correctly located the source of the explosion within the ship, comes off better than the Sampson court, but Rickover insists that the later investigation reached the wrong conclusion on the cause of the explosion for unsound, possibly political, reasons.

This book will not radically alter the historiography of the coming of the Spanish-American War. Most recent historians of the conflict have assumed that the *Maine* probably was destroyed by accident. Rickover's analysis simply furnishes expert confirmation of that assumption. How decisive the sinking of the *Maine* was in bringing on the war remains questionable. The Spanish position in Cuba would have been untenable, regardless of whether the *Maine* exploded. The American effort to find a peaceful solution to the island's troubles was a search for a middle course when neither side was interested in a middle course. The Spaniards were unable or unwilling to grant Cuban independence; the Cuban rebels would settle for nothing less and knew that public opinion in the United States supported their demand. Given this stalemate, sooner or later a mixture of democratic and humanitarian idealism, jingoistic nationalism, and strategic calculation likely would have brought about American intervention. Probably, then, the sinking of the *Maine* did little but hasten the inevitable by a few weeks or months. It is worth noting that President McKinley, in his message of 11 April 1898 asking Congress for authority for armed intervention, mentioned the *Maine* only in passing and based his request on the generally intolerable situation in Cuba.

Aside from its effect on diplomacy, the *Maine* disaster offers the historian

the chance to examine late 19th-century military and governmental institutions at work under stress. Rickover does not avail himself of this opportunity. He merely touches upon the political and bureaucratic interplay of forces in relation to the disaster, and his book thus is a scientific treatise rather than a full and complete historical study.

Rickover's narrative abounds with unanswered administrative and political questions of interest to the historian. Why, for example, did Secretary of the Navy John D. Long first allow Rear Adm. Montgomery Sicard, Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Squadron, to appoint a court of inquiry of relatively junior officers to investigate this major and politically sensitive incident? And then why did "someone in Washington" overrule Sicard and select a board of more senior officers under Sampson? The roles of President McKinley and Secretary Long are but lightly treated, and Assistant Secretary Roosevelt emerges as a man committed to a "political truth" before the investigation even started.

All these facts, and indeed many others, call for a thorough reexamination of the primary sources to reconstruct the full interplay of administrative, political, personal, and technological factors in the *Maine* incident. Admiral Rickover's useful but limited analysis deals with the disaster primarily in terms of what went wrong with the machines. Another study remains to be done on the human elements in the situation—the men and institutions responding to the crisis. The definitive account of the fate of the *Maine* remains to be written.

GRAHAM A. COSMAS
History and Museums Division
Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps

Rose, Lisle A. *Roots of Tragedy*. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1976. 249pp.

The tragedy is the failure of American policy in Asia and the roots are in

the response of the United States to Asian rebellion against imperialism from 1945 to 1953. This response is examined in the cases of Indonesia, Indochina, Korea and China in those years. The conclusion is that the response was "...to assume the exhausted and irrelevant burden of the white man's rule. ..." Tragedy makes its appearance in the book's closing lines, a quotation from an irreverent Marine Corps' ditty from the Hungnam battle:

"So put back your pack on
The next stop is Saigon."

Put starkly, this thesis has an apparent sequence and coherence. Put in Mr. Rose's almost seductive prose, it seems to have persuasion and power. Examined closely, it may be all a bit too easy.

Mr. Rose is a historian in the State Department and as such his emphasis is on the diplomatic documents, largely from the American side in keeping with his purpose of writing "...an American, not an Asian history and one sharply limited in scope and scale." Both the documentation and the narrative seem to stop at 1950, not 1953, but the author could argue that after the Chinese intervention in Korea U.S. policies toward the People's Republic and toward the Vietnamese revolution were set, not to be changed until the Nixon visit in one case and the Carter administration's tentative resumption of contact in the other.

One large question nags, as it always does in any diplomatic history of American-East Asian relations—just how much difference could the United States realistically make in the working out of the problems of nationalism and social change in these land-bound, traditional societies on which Europeans had grafted a few urban centers, some technology and a smattering of Western ideas? This question was not asked in 1945—Shanghai was just to be raised up to the level of Kansas City, as one Senator put it. From this failure of

inquiry flows Mr. Rose's lively account of our preoccupation with Europe (Acheson claimed the French "blackmailed" us into support for Indochina), with domestic politics (who lost China?) and with the myth of monolithic communism (China as a Slavic Manchukuo). Now, when we think we have liquidated our costly failures, Mr. Rose gives us a good guide to how we now see the roots. One hopes we now also see the main question.

J.K. HOLLOWAY
Naval War College

Roskill, Stephen. *Naval Policy between the Wars, Vol. 2, The Period of Reluctant Rearmament 1930-1939*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976. 525pp.

This magisterial and encyclopedic account describes in detail how British naval policy in the 1930's labored under the burdens of a climate of opinion engendered by attempts to achieve naval arms limitation and then disarmament, stringent budgets and widespread pacifism. As he did in the first volume of this authoritative series, Captain Roskill has reviewed thoroughly the extensive documentary evidence from which he quotes freely and at some length.

Whatever may have been its success at the time, the standards established by the 1922 Washington treaty limiting naval arms were soon eclipsed by differing perceptions of national needs and the criteria for establishing those needs, particularly between the Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy. If the 1927 Geneva Conference marked the nadir in relations between the United States and the United Kingdom, at least as far as naval matters go, the 1930 London Conference saw a remarkable improvement for which Captain Roskill graciously credits the tact and negotiating skill of Adm. William V. Pratt, USN. If any lesson is clear from this now largely neglected, but complex series of events it is the