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Edmund Morris

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## Theodore Roosevelt, Wilhelm II, and the Venezuela Crisis of 1902

*Edmund Morris*

On the evening of 2 June 1897, an extraordinary meeting of minds took place at the Naval War College, in Newport, Rhode Island. In addition to the assistant secretary of the Navy, who was the main speaker, the stage was shared by an ornithologist, a paleontologist, a zoologist, and a taxidermist. There was an expert on the naval logistics of the War of 1812. There was a Dresden-educated socialite, fluent in German, French, and English, and able to read Italian. There was a New York State assemblyman, a North Dakota rancher, an eminent historian, a biographer, a big-game hunter, a conservationist, a civil service reformer, a professional politician, and a police commissioner. All these men were called Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1897, he was still only thirty-eight years old. Soon he was to become colonel of the Rough Riders regiment in Cuba, a recognized war hero, then governor of New York, vice president, and president of the United States. In later years, Roosevelt would be a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, president of the American Historical Association, South American explorer, and the author of some forty books.

The 1897 address to the Naval War College was the first great speech of Roosevelt's career—a fanfare, a call to arms.[1] "TR," as he was already popularly known, had been assistant secretary of the Navy for less than eight weeks but was already an enthusiastic, not-too-private plotter to bring about the Spanish-American War—which he was to do almost single-handedly. That night he took as his text George Washington's precept,

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"To be prepared for war is the most effectual means to promote peace."[2] He managed to repeat the word "war" sixty-seven times before he sat down. TR was in those years a big-navy man, an unashamed imperialist, and a "Monroe Doctrinaire," obsessed with the idea of getting the Old World out of the New World. Henry James, who was exactly the reverse of these things, called him "the mere monstrous embodiment of unprecedented and unresounding noise."

In the next few years a very different Theodore Roosevelt was to emerge, a man transformed by the shock of the presidency into a commander in chief who accomplished much of his grand strategy in silence and secrecy. Notwithstanding TR's extraordinary dominance of the American political scene, by 1905—when James, reassured by his mature moderation and dignified bearing, dubbed him *Theodore Rex*—he was the most gentlemanly of American chief executives. He did not cease to be a big-navy man; he raised the U.S. Navy from fifth to third place internationally during his seven and a half years in office, and it was he who sent the Great White Fleet around the world in 1908 and 1909. He did not hesitate to deploy all the firepower in his arsenal when circumstances called for it. Nonetheless, his presidency (once he had quelled a rebellion in the Philippines, inherited from William McKinley) was peaceful. It was peaceful largely because foreign rulers were aware that Theodore Roosevelt never bluffed. The Venezuela incident of late 1902 is the locus classicus of his famously colloquial foreign policy, "Speak softly and carry a big stick."

The Venezuelan crisis of 1902 is not an unfamiliar episode in U.S. history. It has all the ingredients that attract scholars: drama, contradictions, mysteriously destroyed evidence, and the fictionalizing tendencies of human memory. Over the years TR himself offered a number of versions of the story.[3] He was noticeably circumspect about it as long as he remained in office. Only after leaving the White House did he reveal, at first in strict confidence, that in November and December of 1902 "the United States was on the verge of war with Germany." Even after the outbreak of World War I, his allusions to what he called "the Venezuela business" were cryptic. Almost a century had to pass before cohering bits of evidence suggested beyond further doubt that the basic facts of Roosevelt's account were accurate—and that he had remained silent during his presidency to spare the vanity of an emperor. The full extent of the crisis still has to be inferred from the existence of an extraordinary void, hinting at some vanished enormity, in the archives of three nations: the United States, Germany, and Britain.

Roosevelt had seen the Venezuela crisis coming for eleven months. It involved a then-familiar situation—failure by a Latin American republic to repay its foreign loans. Venezuela owed about sixty-two million bolivars to an impatient

consortium headed by Great Britain and Germany. These powers, acting in alliance, proposed to blockade Venezuela with a multinational armada until the debts were paid off. Both nations scrupulously assured the United States that they were interested in debt collection only; that they had no desire to establish footholds in the Western Hemisphere. TR sympathized with their predicament. He blamed President Cipriano Castro of Venezuela for ignoring honorable obligations. As he robustly advised a German diplomat, "If any South American country misbehaves toward any European country, let the European country spank it." However, he also made it clear that "the punishment should not take the form of acquisition of territory by any non-American power."

*The American public closely followed newspaper accounts, sublimely unaware of the alert status of the U.S. Navy, let alone the tense state of the president's nerves.*

A secret memorandum from Rear Admiral Henry Clay Taylor, chief of the Bureau of Navigation (an office then close to the center of naval policy making), warned the president that Germany's disclaimer of territorial ambitions was less trustworthy than Britain's. Taylor felt sure that if Castro resisted the blockade, the German navy would bombard Venezuela and then demand an indemnity. But President Castro had no money. Admiral Taylor laid out in logical steps what would likely follow:

> *Item*—Venezuela . . . could offer nothing but territory, or she could mortgage her revenue in such a way as to place herself in complete political dependence on Germany. The United States could not allow either of these, and yet Germany's right to indemnity would be incontestable. The only courses open to the United States [would be] payment of the indemnity taking such security as she can from Venezuela or war.[4]

Admiral Taylor's argument had a certain crude force, and the president was saddened by the prospect. "I have a hearty and genuine liking for the Germans," he said, "both individually and as a nation."[5] German blood flowed in his veins;[6] he could recite long passages of the *Niebelungenleid* by heart; Frederick the Great and Otto von Bismarck were among his heroes. He welcomed the idea of German capital investment in Latin America, on the ground that countries like Venezuela would benefit from outside development. However, Roosevelt agreed with Taylor that Germany seemed to want more than dividends in the New World. He noted an ominous sentence in Berlin's written commitment to Britain: "We would consider the temporary occupation on our part of different Venezuelan harbor places."

The adjective "temporary" reminded TR that in 1898 Kaiser Wilhelm II had "temporarily" acquired Kiaochow in China, on a lease that His Majesty had somehow lengthened to ninety-nine years. Germany's well known shortage of *lebensraum*—"living space"—had translated by 1902 into an explosive need for new horizons. Burgeoning yet constrained on both east and west, Germany had to feed a million new mouths every year, and it had to market the output of an economy doubling in size every decade. Its army was already, in 1902, the most formidable in the world, and now it was building a new navy. This combination of social, economic, and strategic aggrandizement indicated to a president well versed in German history that a new European empire was rising, just as the sun was beginning to set on German South-West Africa. What better place to establish a collection house today, a colony tomorrow, than lush, fertile Venezuela?

Baron Speck von Sternburg, a German diplomat and a longtime friend of the president's, had given TR over the years a shrewd idea of the worldview of Germany's militaristic ruling class. Expansionists like Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow regarded the Monroe Doctrine as an insult, at most a hollow threat. Naval secretary Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz made no secret of his desire to establish naval bases in Brazil, where three hundred thousand Germans lived already, and in the Caribbean. Germany, therefore, had TR's particular attention as he braced himself for foreign intervention in South America.

He could not have known that even then, strategists on the Wilhelmstrasse—which is to say, in Germany's foreign ministry—were working in the deepest secrecy on a plan for the possible invasion of the United States. This plan called for Tirpitz to dispatch his fleet to the Azores at the first signal of transatlantic hostilities. From there, the fleet would steam south, take Puerto Rico, and then launch surprise attacks along the American seaboard. German troops advancing on New York City would march within a few miles of the Roosevelt house in Oyster Bay, Long Island.

Lacking such detailed intelligence, the president had to rely on his intuition as the Venezuelan crisis developed. Fortunately, in matters concerning the Monroe Doctrine that intuition was acute indeed. He sensed the distant circling of a predator. He gave notice in his annual message to Congress that the United States was looking to its defenses. For the first time in the nation's history, TR announced, "naval maneuvers on a large scale are being held under the immediate command of the Admiral of the Navy [George Dewey]." Coincidentally or not, those maneuvers were to be conducted in the same theater as the Anglo-German blockade. On 21 November 1902, four battleships of the North Atlantic Squadron arrived off the Puerto Rican island of Culebra. The four cruisers and two gunboats of the Caribbean Squadron awaited them there. At other points in the

Western Hemisphere, more white warships put to sea, converging like slow bullets upon the target area.

Seapower, an obsession of Roosevelt's youth, had returned to haunt him as commander in chief. Since entering the White House he had been "straining every nerve to keep on with the up building of our Navy."[7] Perhaps his most important achievement in that regard had been the appointment of ardent strategic reformers as secretary of the Navy and chief of the Bureau of Navigation. William H. Moody and Admiral Taylor were working to create a larger, more war-ready fleet, and they did not lack for funds. Roosevelt's first message to Congress had generated enough money to finance the construction of two battleships and two armored cruisers, and there had been a special appropriation for the Caribbean maneuvers. The president had, at the urging of a messianic young lieutenant named William S. Sims, instigated a fleetwide program to improve gunnery. With less fanfare, he had also organized a six-month survey of the Venezuelan coastline and had transferred control of Culebra to the Navy Department, "in case of sudden war."

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In 1902, tables of naval strength worldwide ranked the United States behind Britain, France, and Russia in tonnage of ships built and building, but ahead of Germany at 507,000 to 458,000 tons. This position would soon improve, since the United States had, thanks to Theodore Roosevelt, more tonnage under construction than any other country except Britain. However, Germany had more warships *in commission*, especially in the Atlantic, at twelve battleships to eight. American ships were more heavily armed, with standard twelve-inch and thirteen-inch guns; but in November 1902 Germany enjoyed an advantage in aggregate fighting mass of about 50 percent.

For two years, tacticians at the Naval War College had been trying to combat this advantage in war games played on oceans of floor-sized charts. They sat cross-legged on "islands" and perched on "mainland" stools, throwing dice to send their celluloid ships (blue for the United States, black for Germany) creeping across the gridlines, trailing dotted wakes and firing off tiny broadsides of pencil lead. The results were not encouraging. In almost every engagement BLACK prevailed, the sheer range and accuracy of its fire combining to scatter BLUE all over the gaming floor. In Germany, meanwhile, tacticians concluded that *their* navy could seize key harbors in any Caribbean confrontation.

Roosevelt himself was convinced that the forthcoming maneuvers would show better than any calculation by college or committee how much seapower the United States actually had. Real ships and real guns were being committed to

this game; if Germany and Britain wanted to splash in the same water, they would have to play by American rules, or the game would become deadly.

He was able to send a subtle but unmistakable signal to this effect in the executive dining room of the White House on 24 November. Baron von Sternburg was the guest of honor. "Specky," as he was popularly known, had been a young diplomat in the German embassy in Washington in the late 1880s, when Roosevelt had been head of the U.S. Civil Service Commission. At the same table sat the Englishman John St. Loe Strachey, editor of the *Spectator* and another member of Roosevelt's broad circle of foreign friends. Von Sternburg was well connected on the Wilhelmstrasse, and Strachey, through his magazine, was one of the most powerful opinion shapers in Britain. Both men could be counted on to return home with the kind of intelligence that, in von Sternburg's phrase, was "better talked over than written."

Between them that night Roosevelt placed someone who could not fail to impress them, Admiral of the Navy George Dewey, who was about to assume command of the Caribbean exercises. Dewey (whose rank had been specially created by Congress in 1899) was America's greatest military hero. He had destroyed the entire Spanish fleet at Manila on 1 May 1898—and, given a chance, would have destroyed the German fleet there too. Blessed by Farragut and anointed by McKinley, he had an almost holy aura. Genteel ladies wore little cameos of him in their bosoms; some Filipinos reportedly believed that he communicated directly with God. The admiral was now almost sixty-five. His immaculate mustache was graying, his well pressed uniform no longer hung as straight as it once had, and his mahogany tan had been pinkened by too many good luncheons at the Metropolitan Club. He tended to nod off at odd moments. Awake, however, Dewey still had formidable authority, accentuated by the glitter of four gold stars. TR had selected him for the forthcoming maneuvers, his last command, to ensure world attention. Moreover, Dewey was the most notorious Germanophobe in the United States—as Baron von Sternburg well knew.

Next day, 25 November, Britain and Germany officially informed the State Department that they intended to proceed against Venezuela. Secretary of State John Hay replied that the United States greatly deplored any European intervention in the affairs of the South American republic, while conceding that the action in this case was justifiable. The U.S. armada at Culebra was swelled by a flotilla of support vessels, including colliers and torpedo boats. Farther south, two battleships and four cruisers of the European and South Atlantic Squadrons rendezvoused north of Trinidad at a point only 125 miles from the Venezuelan coastline. On the first day of December, Admiral Dewey departed the Washington Navy Yard in the presidential yacht *Mayflower*.


There was nothing TR could do while Dewey sailed south except monitor how the Anglo-German blockade proceeded against Venezuela and wait for an opportunity to invoke the Monroe Doctrine once and for all. He believed that "only power, and the willingness and readiness to use it," would make Germany understand the doctrine fully.[8] The next week he remained in the White House. The American public closely followed newspaper accounts of the blockade, while remaining sublimely unaware of the alert status of the U.S. Navy, let alone the tense state of the president's nerves.

By 4 December, Secretary of the Navy Moody had authorized a concentration of fifty-three warships, the largest deployment the Navy had yet seen, compared with twenty-nine Anglo-German vessels. The imbalance of fifty-three to twenty-nine signified little, of course, since neither armada was intending battle, but Roosevelt had instant strength available if he needed it. He knew the historical propensity of blockaders to become invaders.

On 7 December, Germany and Britain informed President Castro that they were closing their consulates in Caracas and initiating "specific measures" to satisfy their claims against Venezuela. Admiral Dewey simultaneously took command of the fleet off Culebra and issued orders to be ready to move at an hour's notice. He began an immediate program of practice landings along stretches of Puerto Rican shoreline that resembled the coast of Venezuela.

The following morning, the German ambassador to the United States, Theodor von Holleben, visited the White House with a party of his compatriots. The appointment was ceremonial; however, it gave TR a chance to talk to the ambassador privately without attracting the attention of reporters. The reason for his circumspection was that he knew that, through von Holleben, he was dealing with the most dangerous man in the world—Wilhelm II.

The emperor of Germany loomed clear in his imagination. Although the two men had not yet met, Roosevelt had a shrewd idea of how dangerous Wilhelm could be. Roosevelt the Germanist admired the kaiser's finer Teutonic qualities, as indeed he did those of Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke. He was also aware of some beguiling similarities between Wilhelm and himself. Only three months separated their dates of birth, Roosevelt being the senior. Physically they were alike in their burly, grinning vitality, their hunting prowess, and their conquest of juvenile disabilities—in TR's case, chronic asthma, in the kaiser's, a withered

left arm. They had the same quick nerves, charm, explosive speech, the same tendency to moralize. They were both catholic in intellect and encyclopedic in memory. They shared a passion for things military, identifying particularly with seapower.

However, as TR once pointed out, the superficial similarities between men (and between nations) only accentuate their serious differences. In contrast to his own steely sense of direction, he saw a waywardness in Wilhelm. The kaiser was vain, coarse, romantic, and often foolish, xenophobic in general and anti-Semitic in particular, given to hoarse shouts of *"ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Gott!"* His bouts of rage were so violent as to make onlookers physically sick. What may have especially worried Theodore Roosevelt was Wilhelm's inclination toward fantasy: "He writes to me pretending that he is a descendent of Frederick the Great. I know better and feel inclined to tell him so."[9] The kaiser even liked to dress up as Frederick. TR understood that in negotiating with Wilhelm he must at all times remember the importance of show—or, in diplomatic parlance, "face." It would be foolhardy to humiliate a person like that in the Caribbean. Tho retreat if retreat were made to look glamorous.

Having taken Ambassador von Holleben aside, TR spoke with extreme emphasis: "I told him to tell the Kaiser that I put Dewey in charge of our fleet to maneuver in West Indian waters, that the world at large would know this merely as a maneuver, and we should strive in every way to appear simply as cooperating with the Germans, but that I regretted to say . . . that I should be obliged to interfere, by force if necessary, if Germany took any action that looked like the acquisition of territory in Venezuela or elsewhere in the Caribbean."

The tactfulness of this warning was lost on von Holleben, who doggedly repeated Germany's official position. The kaiser, he said, had no intention of taking permanent possession of Venezuelan territory. TR replied, with a touch of sarcasm, that he was sure Wilhelm felt the same about Kiaochow and its ninety-nine-year lease. Again von Holleben failed to react. The president politely informed him that he would wait ten days for a total disclaimer from Berlin. If none was forthcoming, Admiral Dewey would be ordered south "to observe matters along Venezuela."

"You gave that Dutchman something to think about," said TR's secretary, William Loeb, as the ambassador escorted his party out. But Loeb wondered if von Holleben had the courage to transmit an ultimatum. "I do not think, Mr. President, that he will give the Kaiser a correct picture of your attitude."

The blockade turned violent the next morning, 9 December. Four Venezuelan gunboats were seized by the allies, and three of them were destroyed by Germany. President Castro, in a panic, proposed that all claims against his country be arbitrated, and he asked the United States to intercede for him to that end. John Hay

relayed this proposal to London and Berlin, while Roosevelt considered the implications of his secret ultimatum to the kaiser. The sinking of the gunboats struck him as "an act of brutality and useless revenge." If Wilhelm II was this willing to lay violent hands on Venezuelan shipping, what price Venezuelan real estate?

More than ever the president suspected that Germany wanted to establish a strongly fortified place near the future isthmian canal. This triggered his strategic alarm bells, especially those related to naval deployment. Neither the Pacific nor the Far Eastern Squadron, more than eight thousand miles away, was needed for Caribbean duty; even so, Roosevelt remembered that during the Spanish-American War it had taken the battleship *Oregon* sixty-four days to rush from San Francisco to Florida via Cape Horn. There shimmered in his mind an image of a waterway with locks across Panama, between the wings of his divided fleet. Roosevelt was pledged to violence now, with only nine days remaining of his ultimatum. In Berlin, Speck von Sternburg warned Vice Chancellor von Bülow and state secretary Oswald von Richthofen against "basking in [any] illusions" about Theodore Roosevelt's statements regarding the Monroe Doctrine. Von Sternburg—expressive, self-effacing, but cunning—had his own interests in mind. He knew that TR was not happy with Ambassador von Holleben and would prefer more congenial company in Washington. "I feel absolutely confident," he secretly wrote the president, "that a radical change must take place [in our embassy]. Of course, I did not say a word in regard to myself as a candidate."[10] (Roosevelt did not mind members of his secret diplomatic fraternity advancing themselves, since by so doing they usually advanced American foreign policy.) Von Sternburg's letter went on, "The Venezuelan crisis is causing a considerable stir here in Berlin."

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There seemed to be a similar stir in London, where St. Loe Strachey, well primed by his White House dinner, was railing in the *Spectator* against "one of the most amazing and discreet alliances ever made by Britain with a foreign power." British foreign opinion was generally against shared adventurism. And in the United States, newspaper hostility to Germany rose to such a pitch that von Holleben, conquering his usual fear of annoying the kaiser, sent a concerned cable to the Wilhelmstrasse. Von Bülow passed it on to His Majesty, who scrawled irritatedly in the margin, "Our ambassador is over there to take the pulse of the press and to comment when necessary by administering proper treatment himself." Wilhelm agreed, however, that Germany should refrain

from any more unilateral displays of force. "We will allow our flag to follow the lead of the British," he said.

The ink on his superscription was barely dry when the Royal Navy obliged off Puerto Cabello. The captain of an armored cruiser there, responding to some perceived threat, bombarded the Venezuelan coast, and a German cruiser joined in.

Still, Roosevelt believed that Germany was the really formidable party in the alliance. Arthur Balfour's British government had to find a way out if a promising rapprochement with the United States that had been developing since 1899 was not to be jeopardized. One thing was certain in TR's mind, on the basis of his private sources: if there was any altercation over the Monroe Doctrine in Venezuela, Britain would instantly declare its neutrality and leave Germany to deal with Admiral Dewey.

Sunday, 14 December, dawned gray and bitingly cold in Washington. The White House stood shrouded in weekend quiet, but the countdown to war was continuing. Four more such dawns, and Roosevelt's deadline would expire. Then, unexpectedly, von Holleben asked to see the president. Von Holleben was *ein Diplomat alterer Schule,* a diplomat of the old school. He had a booming laugh, which he used to forestall conversational attack. He preferred to do business in writing, with long delays between dispatch and response. The keystones of his diplomacy were concern about America's rise to world power and what John Hay called his "mortal terror" of the kaiser.

If Roosevelt expected an answer to his ultimatum of 8 December, he was soon disappointed. That Sunday von Holleben seemed interested in talking only about the weather, of all things, and tennis. Losing patience, TR asked if Germany was going to accept President Castro's arbitration proposal transmitted by Secretary of State Hay. The ambassador said no. Controlling his temper, the president replied that Kaiser Wilhelm must understand that he, Roosevelt, was "very definitely" threatening war.[11] Von Holleben declined to be a party to such peremptory language. The president replied that in that case, he must advance his ultimatum by twenty-four hours. Calculating from 8 December, the deadline would fall now on the 17th, rather than the 18th. Von Holleben, shaken, insisted that Wilhelm II would not accept arbitration, and TR let him have the last word.

Secretary Loeb, who was in the adjoining office, saw the ambassador go, but he made no record of his visit. Neither did clerks at the State Department or at the German embassy. It suited everybody concerned that the diplomatic record of this matter be blank from thenceforth; Wilhelm would be free to end the crisis without evidence of having been coerced.

Von Holleben pondered TR's incredible threat. He could transmit it now only as a matter of extreme urgency. He had long been aware of a rise of anti-Germanism in the United States, and he had once summoned up the courage to

warn the kaiser that the Monroe Doctrine, as interpreted by President Roosevelt, was not to be trifled with. Wilhelm had scoffed at his qualms: "We will do whatever is necessary for our Navy, even if it displeases the Yankees. Never fear!"[12] Having been rebuffed once, von Holleben did not want to be dismissed as an alarmist now. What if the president's ultimatum turned out to be mere Rooseveltian bluster? On the other hand, what if the president was serious? Von Holleben decided to consult a German diplomat who knew TR well—the consul-general in New York, Karl Bünz.

That evening, under cloak of a dense snowstorm, von Holleben registered at the Cambridge Hotel in Manhattan. Some time during the next twenty-four hours, Bünz assured him that the president was absolutely not bluffing. Nor was TR's short-term strategy flawed. The kaiser's navy, whatever its worldwide strength, was currently dispersed. Admiral Dewey was, therefore, in a position to deal a brutal blow to German prestige in the Caribbean.

As von Holleben struggled with this frightening information, diplomatic strains were developing between London and Berlin. Lord Lansdowne, the British foreign secretary, found himself in a difficult position—King Edward VII was expressing annoyance at being allied with Germany against a negligible South American power, whereas the German ambassador, Count Paul von Metternich, was insisting that the kaiser would not arbitrate. Lansdowne thought the whole Venezuelan question might best be referred to Washington for arbitration by the president of the United States. But the Wilhelmstrasse would not budge.

It was now Tuesday, 16 December. Fewer than twenty-four hours remained before Roosevelt's deadline. In New York, von Holleben visited Wall Street to check the latest fluctuations of German-American and Latin American opinion. In London, the British cabinet approved Lord Lansdowne's American-arbitration proposal, thus driving a wedge into the alliance. In Washington, the Roosevelt cabinet met in closed session. In San Juan, Puerto Rico, a fast torpedo boat stood ready to rush any emergency orders to Admiral Dewey. Admiral Taylor alerted naval intelligence to communicate with the fleet only in cipher, and he instructed his aides that the Caribbean maneuvers were no longer a proper subject for public discussion. Nevertheless, reporters soon learned that Dewey's battleship squadron was now headed from Culebra for Trinidad, only sixty miles from Venezuela.

By now the German ambassador's absence from Washington was causing comment along Embassy Row. He was scheduled to attend an evening reception at the British embassy, and protocol clearly required that he make an appearance. But when the time came, von Holleben was not to be seen. Neither were his military and naval attachés. They too had slipped out of town, to join him in

New York. From there, before midnight, certain words flashed to Berlin. Roosevelt was never to know exactly in what terms von Holleben transmitted the American threat of war, only that the threat got through—on a night when the transatlantic cable became so electric with communications that even the *Times* of London was denied access. The evidence suggests that von Holleben's cable was burned after reading, in approved German security fashion.

The reaction in Berlin was immediate. On 17 December, the Reichstag decided to accept arbitration, acting secretly and in such haste that urgings from Secretary Hay in Washington and Metternich in London were redundant on receipt. TR's deadline passed in peace.

The Venezuelan episode was not over, and the blockade was not officially to end until a settlement was reached in a protocol signed in February 1903, but a massive release of tension was felt in governments on both sides of the Atlantic.

On 19 December 1902, Germany and Britain formally invited Roosevelt to arbitrate their claims against Venezuela. TR said he would think about it and left town with his children to spend a day or two in the pinewoods of Northern Virginia. His secretary announced that the president had been under great strain, "both mentally and physically . . . in the Venezuela crisis."[13] This was the nearest that Roosevelt ever got to a public acknowledgment that there had indeed been a crisis involving himself.

Theodor von Holleben, for his part, suffered the classic fate of all messengers who convey bad news to autocratic rulers. Roosevelt's triumph was the ambassador's disgrace. He had misjudged a president, misled an emperor, and nearly started a war. His only consolation was that the Wilhelmstrasse could not cite these as reasons for his recall without making its decision to arbitrate seem to have been forced. To save the kaiser's face, it was necessary to save von Holleben's. Discreet cooperation from the White House made both expedients possible. The ambassador remained in New York while arrangements were made to bring him home on permanent "disability" leave. "I am a sick man," he told a reporter. "I cannot answer a single question."[14] He was given just two weeks to wind up his affairs in Washington, and on 5 January 1903 the kaiser canceled his credentials.[15] He left town without saying goodbye to Roosevelt or John Hay, and when he sailed from Hoboken, New Jersey, on the 10th, not a single member of the diplomatic corps or any German official dared to see him off.

But before he died, less than two years later, he would receive a letter of tender regard from the president of the United States.

NOTES

1. See Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2001).
2. Speech to both houses of Congress, 8 January 1790.
3. See the author's "A Few Pregnant Days: Theodore Roosevelt, the American Navy, and the Venezuela Crisis of 1902–1903," *Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal*, Winter 1989.
4. Henry C. Taylor to TR, ca. late November 1902, in Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
5. Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1951–58), vol. 3, p. 98.
6. Roosevelt could claim a wide mix of ethnic identities, and his use of the fact on the campaign was a subject of humor among White House aides. The president was constantly saying, "Are you German? Congratulations! I'm German too." "Are you Scotch-Irish? I'm Scotch-Irish too." In Manhattan's Lower East Side on one occasion, his staff half-expected to hear, "Are you Jewish? Congratulations! I'm Jewish too." Nor was their expectation unreasonable. TR once said, quite seriously, "I wish I had a little Jew in me."
7. Morison, ed., *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 225.
8. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 1108.
9. TR, quoted in Arthur Lee, *A Good Innings: The Private Papers of Viscount Lee of Fareham* (London: J. Murray, 1974), p. 83.
10. Speck von Sternburg to TR, 15 December 1902, Theodore Roosevelt Papers.
11. TR, quoted by William Loeb (witness) to Henry Pringle, 14 April 1930, Henry Pringle Papers, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Mass.
12. Quote in Holger Herwig, *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889–1941* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 69.
13. *Washington Evening Star*, 17 December 1902.
14. Von Holleben, quoted in *New York Tribune*, 10 January 1903.
15. Von Sternburg replaced him on an interim basis, receiving a permanent appointment in February.